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Creating Context for Corridors of Consumption: The Case of Ireland

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Abstract

Global consumption levels are significant contributors to detrimental environmental change and the current climate crises. Across the island of Ireland, domestic consumption levels have increased dramatically during the past three decades. Public discourse has focused primarily on minimum levels of consumption, with local and national media outlets frequently reporting on minimum wages and acceptable minimum levels of food, shelter, and healthcare. A dearth of dialogue exists on the concept of maximum levels of consumption. This article proffers that the concept of consumption corridors provides a timely lens to initiate discussion and to critically consider the potential of ascertaining maximum levels of consumption across Ireland. Drawing on analyses of an extensive database of 1,500 households across two policy regions on the island of Ireland (i.e., Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland), we argue that there is no single universally just and ecologically sustainable way of setting limits to consumption. Numerous factors must be considered including scale, policy influences, cultural understandings, and varying expectations of standards of living and quality of life. Specifically, the article reports on participants' perceptions of material items as needs and satisfiers in their everyday lives. Understanding reported needs and characteristics of individuals has the potential to assist in

advancing a methodological application of the consumption corridors concept across Ireland. This study produced valuable evidence highlighting a need for tailored sustainability policies across policy regions, cultural groupings, and life stages.

Keywords: Consumption corridors; satisfiers; needs; scale; sustainable lifestyles, Ireland

Introduction

In western societies, the act of consuming has infiltrated cultural norms forming significant components of an individual's attempt to find meaning, status, social distinction, social cohesion, and identity formation (Jackson 2005a; Princen et al. 2002), as well as facilitating a wide range of complex, deeply engrained, social conversations and social processes (Gatersleben et al. 2012; Smart 2010; Bauman 2007; Jackson 2005a). The reality of our modern "throw-away" culture, with its constant need to satisfy an ever-increasing consumer demand for goods and services, is that excessive consumption levels are exerting immense strain on the global environment (Alfredsson 2018). Furthermore, increasing quantities of space, material, and energy are needed to maintain current increasing levels of consumption (Hubacek et al. 2017; UNEP 2015). Material-intensive consumption is accompanied by escalating quantities of waste, pollution, and carbon-dioxide (CO₂) emissions, with approximately 19 million tons of industrial CO₂ emissions per annum alone being attributed to direct lifestyle and consumption-related activities worldwide (UNEP 2015). A shift toward sustainable consumption is imperative, particularly for those in political arenas where there is a need to alter current consumption patterns in order to merge economic resilience with environmental protection and

social development. This is a key priority if global emission-reduction targets are to be achieved (Jackson 2009).

One critical issue within sustainability debates is the association between the “good life” and consumption. The pursuit of happiness or enhancement of quality of life issues in modern consumer society tends to focus on the rapid appropriation and disposal of material goods and services (Bauman 2007). Many pro-consumption commentators argue that this ability to consume at will permits the satisfaction of consumer wants and needs through the sense of self-fulfilment and enhanced quality of life that the act of consuming permits (Bauman 2007; Smith 1937). Indeed, one common contemporary preconception equates increased consumption with enhanced quality of life and wellbeing (Donovan and Halpern 2003). Critics of consumption challenge this association, arguing that escalating economic growth (and the resulting expansion of consumption rates) has no direct correlation with improved levels of wellbeing or enhanced quality of life (Stutzer and Frey 2010). On the contrary, ever-changing and expanding states of consumption may be linked to higher levels of stress and anxiety in certain instances (Ahuvia 2008). Hence, the current scale of consumption may not only be environmentally damaging, but also psychologically harmful to individuals (Fredrickson et al. 2013; Jackson 2005b). Excessive consumption appears neither to be a factor for attaining the “good life” nor a synonym for a state of happiness.

A certain level of consumption is necessary to address basic human needs. Hence, the distinction between needs and satisfiers is paramount for sustainability debates. Needs tend to be finite, few, and universal, whereas satisfiers are theoretically infinite and can depend on a range of personal, social, and cultural choices (see Max-Neef 1991). The distinction between physiological needs and social or psychological needs is also significant. Material commodities

tend to be effective satisfiers for physiological needs, yet inferior satisfiers of psychological and social needs. Tsang and colleagues (2014) argue that attempting to satisfy psychological and social needs through increased materialistic means is not effective. A growing number of authors argue that sufficiency is an organizing principle with the potential to replace the current growth paradigm (Spangenberg 2018; Lorek and Spangenberg 2014; Gabriel and Nolan 2019). Spengler (2016) posits sufficiency as the antithesis to modern day overconsumption; which implies the need to establish upper limits for resource consumption (Fuchs 2017; Mont 2019). In terms of the implications of these debates for sustainable consumption, a greater understanding of what individuals believe to constitute a good life is necessary.

A radically different vision of growth, success, and development is needed to secure a more equitable and sustainable society (Soper 2009). Until recently, sustainability policy has been largely based on such a refutably objective measure of income and growth using gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (Stutzer and Frey 2010). Although a reliable tool for measuring progress toward the goal of increased economic production, GDP has been critiqued as a poor measure of progress in relation to wellbeing and enhanced quality of life (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009; Oswald and Nattavudh 2007). It tends to overemphasize the importance of monetary gains in relation to wellbeing and happiness, while simultaneously underestimating other factors (such as health, family, and stable employment) (Graham 2012; Easterlin 1974).

Conceptualizing sustainable consumption in terms of “consumption corridors” (Defila and Di Giulio 2020) is an alternative approach that is gaining momentum. This multi-dimensional concept emphasizes the interconnectedness of several domains of living, resulting in a broader scope of focus. The special issue of which this article is a part, posits that the point of departure to define such corridors should be universal needs. The maxima and minima of

consumption should refer to satisfiers (and/or resources) that are essential with a view to satisfying universal needs. In theory, consumption corridors demarcate the space for sustainable consumption by defining minimum and maximum consumption standards that permit individuals to satisfy their needs and to live a life they value without impairing the possibility of a good life for other people. The space between these minimum and maximum standards is what is referred to as corridors of sustainable consumption. Consumption corridors have potential to operationalize and implement strong consumption governance.

Consumption corridors are advantageous in that they address planetary boundaries and issues of both intergenerational and intragenerational justice (Lorek and Fuchs 2019). With a focus on environmental awareness and material finite concerns, consumption corridors may provide a lens to implement the concept of the “double dividend” (see Jackson 2005b; 2008) that is inherent in sustainable consumption discourses¹. Consumption corridors make it possible for individuals to live better by consuming less and reducing their impact on the environment in the process. Maximum consumption limits demarcate the level beyond which an individual’s or group’s consumption may compromise or infringe on another’s ability to meet their needs and achieve minimum consumption (Mont 2019). Maximum consumption standards aim to guarantee access to adequate resources for others to live a life they value, both in the present and in the future, by preventing individual consumption from adversely impacting the ability of current and/or future generations to achieve a good life.

Consumption corridors provide a new framework for governance with potential to provide common ground beyond traditional political divides (Defila and Di Giulio 2020). Translating consumption-corridor concepts into policies may encourage essential changes in consumption without imposing specific lifestyles on individuals and without demonizing

consumption (Defila and Di Giulio 2020). If people are willing to engage with arguments in favor and against the concept of consumption corridors, this opens the lines of communication on sustainability issues. It is a complex undertaking to design consumption corridors. They aim to promote the need for redistribution of global resources. This will be challenged in line with other strong sustainable consumption concepts (Mont 2019).

In the sections that follow, we argue that there is no singular and universally just and ecologically sustainable means of setting limits to consumption. Humans have varying conceptions concerning how their needs should be satisfied, as well as what their entitlements are to live a good life. There are numerous factors that require consideration including different cultural, historical, and personal contexts within which individuals are embedded. Consumption corridors need to be tailored and developed according to these contexts. Underlying principles of nationally defined corridors mean that an objective need, as well as criteria and procedures on how to define such corridors, merit international discussion and debate. Hence, the relationship between sustainable consumption and corridors of consumption requires further investigation that must first be viewed in terms of the importance of identifying upper and lower limits of consumption.

There is a dearth of research on consumption corridors and their necessary upper and lower limit definitions in an Irish context. This article addresses this gap in knowledge and attempts to initiate discourse around establishing minima and maxima levels of consumption using the island of Ireland¹ as a case study. Drawing on extensive analysis of households across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, we report on results of a research study that investigated participants' perceptions of material items in terms of needs and satisfiers in their

¹ For the purposes of this paper, the island of Ireland will be referred to as Ireland.

everyday lives. Perceptions of needs and luxuries are influenced by attitudes, social norms, and habits. These factors are important influences on consumption patterns. Needs are not easily quantified and may mean different things to different people. Understanding the reported needs and characteristics of individuals has the potential to assist in creating consumption corridors. The next section presents our case study location and this is followed with an outline of the methodological approach employed in the research.

Sustainable consumption and the case study of Ireland

Research in the field of sustainable consumption has grown extensively over the past ten years in the Irish context (see Fahy et al. 2019; Lavelle et al. 2015; Davies et al. 2014). Although there is ample evidence of reduced emissions (related to transport and construction sectors experiencing a steady downward trend during the recession in Ireland) and a recent decline in air pollution during the recent COVID-19 pandemic (EPA 2020), domestic consumption levels and subsequent emissions are still growing in line with global trends. Sustainability policy in Ireland has been led predominantly by international initiatives in the environmental field (Pape et al. 2011). For example, the European Union's (EU) Waste Framework Directive 2008 has directly shaped waste-management policy in Ireland and since then the country has had considerable success in achieving national and EU targets for recycling and recovery of waste materials. In addition, the Republic of Ireland adopted its National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS) in 1997. However, two decades after implementation of this strategy, several areas still need to be addressed in terms of sustainable consumption for the island. For example, the Organization for Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2018) identified housing, health, and commuting to work as priority sustainability areas for Ireland. In order to direct attention to these issues, policy

makers have tended to focus on technological solutions, in conjunction with several economic incentives. Commentators posit that consumption behavior is constantly shaped by contextual factors and structural features and pivotal for sustainability policy to recognize and address these factors (Princen et al. 2002; Cohen and Murphy 2001). The role of human choice, which technological approaches tend to overlook, is also important (Princen et al. 2002). While public discourse in Ireland has primarily focused on minimum levels of consumption (with local and national media outlets frequently reporting on minimum wages, acceptable minimum levels of food, shelter, and healthcare), there has been an absence of discussion on the concept of maximum levels of consumption. This article aims to address this dearth of research through the exploration of what individuals consider to be important in terms of satisfiers and needs. The next section describes the methods employed to conduct this study.

Materials and methods

The survey, conducted as part of the CONSENSUS project, was the first quantitative investigation to date to produce a baseline dataset for three case-study locations on the island of Ireland on household consumption and lifestyles (see Lavelle et al. 2016). A cross-border focus on attitudes and behaviors toward consumption and lifestyles aimed to address the challenge of implementation of sustainable consumption policies between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland by developing roadmaps toward more sustainable consumption in both regions based on the generation of up-to-date information (Lavelle and Fahy 2014). Drawing from analysis of OECD's reports (2008) and European Action Programmes (EC 2008), we identified water, transport, food, and energy as priority areas in terms of sustainable consumption for Ireland. Subsequently, the questionnaire instrument (containing predominantly pre-coded questions)

explored sustainable lifestyles and specifically focused on the aforementioned domains.² This research enabled a nuanced investigation of household consumption. We designed our survey using an adapted version of Barr's Framework of Environmental Behaviour (see Barr 2006). The survey included questions that probed into social and environmental concern variables, situational variables (i.e., structural, socio-demographic, knowledge, and experience) and psychological variables (e.g., self-efficacy, perceptions of environmental responsibility, social norms and social-desirability, and intrinsic motivation) (see Lavelle 2014). The instrument – CONSENSUS Lifestyle Survey – was developed, piloted, and implemented to collect large-scale data from 1,500 people using a multi-stage cluster sample. The primary clusters consisted of three counties: Derry/Londonderry, Dublin, and Galway (Lavelle and Fahy 2016).³ The total population was defined as all adults 18 years of age or over residing in domestic households in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The research design and methods employed in this study were not without their limitations. We were conscious of several challenges involving the use of survey methods – particularly a survey instrument – when exploring attitudes and behavioral change. Some researchers such as Hobson (2003) contend that the use of quantitative methods in the study of human behavior is overly deterministic. The administered nature of this methodological design also raises issues of anonymity and confidentiality, which could deter respondents from participating in the study or promote reluctance to divulge personal information (e.g., age or income levels) to the interviewer (Ong and Weiss 2000). This study relied on self-reported data. Such data are susceptible to numerous biases such as recall bias, confidence bias, and/or social desirability bias, which may limit the interpretation and generalization of the study's findings. Although self-report measures utilized on surveys often provide a pragmatic and cost-effective

way to measure pro-environmental behaviors (Fahy and Rau 2013), researchers who attempt to measure and report pro-environmental behaviors through the use of reported behavioral indices on survey instruments must be cautious of inaccurate reporting of “actual behaviors” (Barr and Prillwitz 2013; Gatersleben et al. 2002; Viklund 2004). Another potential weakness related to scale (both in time and space) is inherent when employing this type of methodological approach. Temporally, this research was based on a snapshot of environmental action and attitudes at one point in time and failed to produce longitudinal data. Further, longitudinal research may be necessary to explore how these actions and attitudes change over time.

While acknowledging that surveys are not without their limitations (see Lavelle and Fahy 2014 for in-depth discussion), we assert that analysis of large datasets can facilitate more nuanced and detailed examination of various groups of respondents and their potential propensity toward defining items as satisfiers or needs. The fieldwork for this study was conducted over an eleven-month period and the surveying procedure entailed the individual who answered the door being recruited to participate in the administered survey.⁴ In terms of non-response, the interviewer would make several attempts to contact the selected households at different times of the day and on different days during the week. If the researcher could not contact a household after repeated attempts, then the dwelling on either side of the non-response household was contacted instead. The data were collected with a tablet computer, and a coding system was designed for each question using a spreadsheet to facilitate exportation directly from the Access interface onto SPSS. The analyses conducted for this article are descriptive in nature. Following the analysis of the results, our concluding discussion critically reflects on the potential contribution that the empirical data generated through this study might have on operationalization of the consumption-corridors concept in Ireland.

Results

Characteristics of sample

A total of 1,500 households participated in the study. Table 1 outlines the social and demographic profile of the respondents. Results were compared to census data in the Republic of Ireland (CSO 2011) and Northern Ireland (NISRA 2011).

Table 1: Summary of characteristics of respondents in study

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentages</i>
Gender		
<i>Female</i>	878	59
<i>Male</i>	622	41
Age Categories		
<i>18-33 years old</i>	395	27
<i>34-49 years old</i>	529	36
<i>50-64 years old</i>	363	25
<i>65-79 years old</i>	144	10
<i>80+ years old</i>	21	2
Education		
<i>No formal education/ primary education only</i>	66	5
<i>Second level education</i>	613	41
<i>Third level education</i>	813	54
Housing Tenure status		
<i>Own house without a mortgage</i>	547	37
<i>Own house with a mortgage</i>	527	35
<i>Tenant – paying rent to private landlord</i>	259	18
<i>Tenant – paying rent social/voluntary/municipal housing body</i>	37	3
<i>Accommodation is provided rent free</i>	43	3
<i>Other</i>	63	4
Number of Residents		
<i>Lived alone</i>	131	8
<i>Two-Person Household</i>	429	29
<i>Three-Person Household</i>	335	22
<i>Four-Person Household</i>	356	24
<i>Five-Person Household</i>	205	14
<i>Six+ Person Household</i>	38	3

<i>Average number of people living in a household</i>	3.1 persons	
<i>Household composition</i>		
<i>Family members</i>	898	60
<i>Live alone</i>	124	8
<i>Housemates</i>	104	7
<i>Other</i>	19	1
<i>Spouse or partner</i>	337	23
<i>Owner occupied</i>	6	1

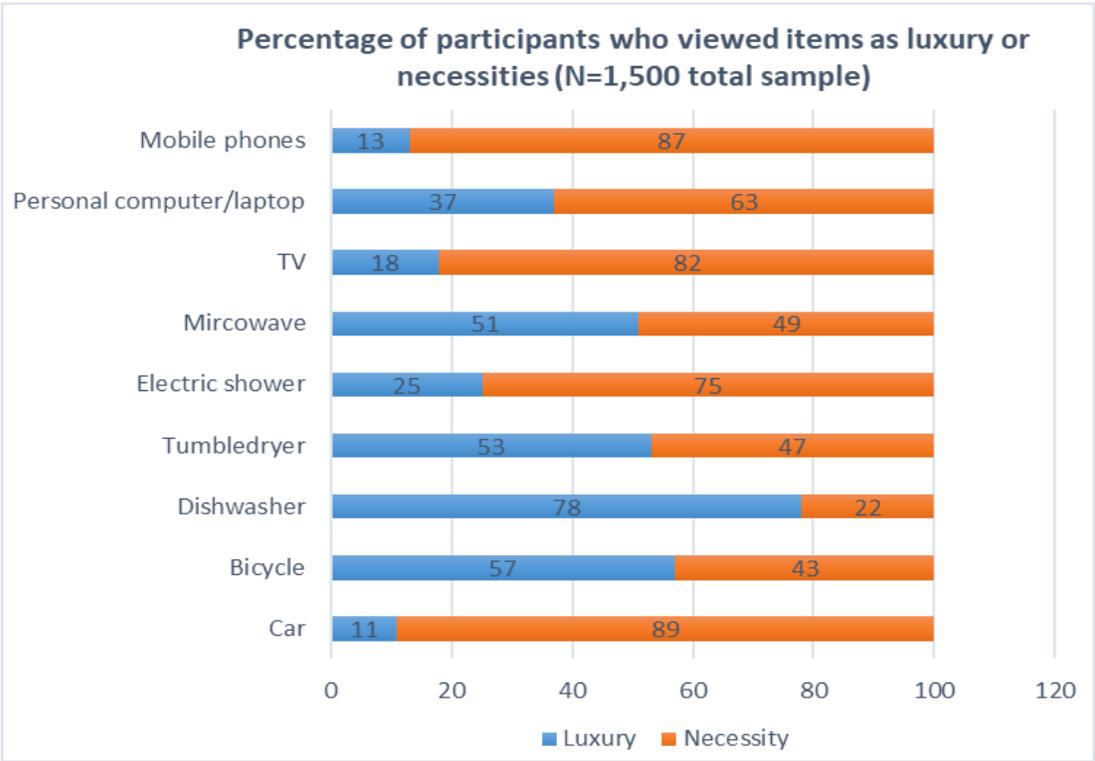
In terms of national averages, the sample comprised a reasonably representative spread of respondents across all age categories. This was reflective of the national demographic profile of the Republic of Ireland. The Republic of Ireland has a relatively young and growing population with over one fifth of the population under 14 years of age (CSO 2011). Over 65s accounted for 12% of the Republic of Ireland's population and 15% of Northern Ireland's population (CSO 2011; NISRA 2011). Respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 93 years, with an average age of 45 years. This mean age is higher than the mean age in Northern Ireland (38 years) and the Republic of Ireland (36 years), respectively. The proportion of women in this study is higher than the Republic of Ireland's and Northern Ireland's population at large (53% and 51% respectively). The proportion of men in this sample (41%) was less than the Republic of Ireland's population (47%) and Northern Ireland's population (49%). The proportion of respondents in our sample who had attained third level education or higher (54%) is higher than in the Republic of Ireland (51%) and Northern Ireland populations (24%) (CSO 2011; NISRA 2011).

Perceptions of luxury and necessity items

Terms such as luxury and necessity are extremely subjective. In this study, we sought to obtain participants' perceptions of material items as needs and satisfiers in their everyday lives with a view to helping to commence a discourse on establishing maximum consumption levels in

Ireland. The CONSENSUS Lifestyle Survey instrument explicitly posed the question: “Do you consider the following household items as a luxury or necessity?” Respondents were provided with a list of nine common household items and indicated whether, or not, they considered that item to be a luxury or necessity item in their daily lives. Figure 1 outlines responses from the total sample to this question, illustrating the percentage of participants that reported items as either luxuries or necessities. Overall, respondents viewed the majority of items listed (e.g., power shower or electric shower, television, car, and mobile phone) to be necessity items.

Figure 1: Percentage of participants that viewed items as luxury or necessities (N=1,500 total sample)



Note: Missing and don't know responses were excluded from analysis.

Sociodemographic variables and need perceptions

The research explored the association between sociodemographic variables and participants' perceptions of luxuries and necessities. Table 2 shows the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the participants in the sample, who reported that the items listed were necessities. Table 3 illustrates the statistically significant associations between respondents across the various socioeconomic and demographic profiles and their agreement that items listed were necessity items.

Table 2: Socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of respondents who viewed the items as necessities (percentages)

		Car	Bicycle	Dish-washer	Tumble dryer	Electric/ Power shower	Microwave	Television	Laptop/ computer	Mobile phone
<i>Total</i>	Frequency	1310	493	313	695	1101	701	1211	933	1281
	Percentage	89	43	22	47	75	49	82	63	87
<i>Gender</i>	Male	91	47	25	46	75	50	81	68	87
	Female	87	41	19	49	75	48	83	60	87
<i>Age cohort</i>	18-40 years	86	48	23	50	75	55	82	71	94
	41-65 years	91	41	23	46	75	47	81	63	86
	66+ years	85	35	9	36	68	30	86	32	63
<i>Employment</i>	Employed	91	45	25	50	77	57	82	69	93
	Unemployed	83	30	19	41	69	52	84	65	86
	Student	75	62	25	47	69	60	80	77	94
	Retired	86	38	11	39	70	32	85	38	65
	Other	90	37	21	54	79	51	77	65	87
<i>Location</i>	Rural	94	44	25	43	74	46	80	66	87
	Urban	84	42	18	52	75	51	84	61	87
<i>Housing tenure</i>	Homeowner	92	41	22	49	76	49	84	61	85
	Renter	77	52	15	41	67	48	75	70	91
	Rent-free	81	34	33	40	63	57	86	70	95

	Other	94	54	29	58	81	44	83	65	89
Income	<€37,999	76	39	14	37	72	42	80	51	82
	€38,000-75,999	88	41	17	47	77	50	79	71	90
	€76,000-€113,999	95	48	21	60	80	58	78	81	96
	€114,000	94	43	29	41	71	35	82	82	100
Education	No formal/primary education	79	33	10	27	64	34	76	30	67
	Secondary education only	90	41	23	47	76	51	88	55	85
	Third Level education	87	46	22	50	75	48	78	72	91
County	Galway	88	52	27	54	73	47	79	68	92
	Derry	96	41	28	49	76	51	88	62	85
	Dublin	82	38	10	40	75	49	79	60	84
Policy region	ROI *	85		18				79		
	NI**	96		28				88		

*N=1,000 respondents (Republic of Ireland)

** N=500 respondents (Northern Ireland)

Table 3: Overview of statistically significant associations between participants divided by sociodemographic variables and their agreement that the following household items were necessities

	Car	Bicycle	Dish-washer	Tumble dryer	Electric/ Power shower	Microwave	Television	Laptop/ computer	Mobile Phone
Gender	$\chi^2 = 5.260, df = 1; P < 0.001, P = .022$	$(\chi^2 = 4.877, df = 1; P < 0.001, P = .027);$	$(\chi^2 = 6.619, df = 1, P < 0.01; P = 0.010$	*NSS	NSS	NSS	NSS	$\chi^2 = 70.946, df = 1, P < 0.001; P = 0.005$	NSS
Age cohort	$\chi^2 = 9.928, df = 2, P < 0.001, p = 0.007$	$(\chi^2 = 8.278, df = 2, P < 0.05, p = 0.016);$	$(\chi^2 = 15.604, df = 2, P < 0.001, p = .000$	$\chi^2 = 9.43, 6, df = 2, P < 0.001, p = .009$	NSS	$\chi^2 = 29.395, df = 2, P < 0.001, p = 0.00$	NSS	$\chi^2 = 76.394, df = 2, P < 0.001, p = 0.00$	$\chi^2 = 94.803, df = 24, P < 0.001, p = 0.00$
Location	$\chi^2 = 34.814, df = 1, P < 0.001, P = 0.000$	$(\chi^2 = 12.524, df = 1, P < 0.001, P = 0.000$	NSS	NSS	NSS	NSS	$\chi^2 = 4.261, df = 1, P < 0.05, P = 0.039$	$\chi^2 = 4.958, df = 1, P < 0.05, P = 0.026$	

Housing tenure	$\chi^2 = 54.397a$, df = 3, P < 0.001	$\chi^2 = 13.006a$, df = 3, P < 0.05, P = 0.005	$\chi^2 = 13.443a$, df=3, P<0.05, p=0.004	$\chi^2=9.10$ 1a, df=3, P<0.05, P=0.028	$\chi^2=12.74$ 6a, df=3, P<0.01, P=0.005	NSS	$\chi^2 = 13.299a$, df=3, P<0.01, P=0.004	$\chi^2 = 9.573a$, df=3, P<0.05, P=0.023	$\chi^2=8.688a$, df=3, P<0.05
Education	$\chi^2 = 7.891a$, df = 2, P < 0.05, P = .019	$\chi^2 = 5.980a$, df = 3, P < 0.05, P = 0.050	NSS	$\chi^2 = 12.791$, df = 2, P < 0.01, P = .002	NSS	$\chi^2 = 6.818$, df = 2, P < 0.05, P = .033	NSS	$\chi^2 = 74.352$, df = 2, P < 0.001, P = .000	$\chi^2 = 36.817$ df = 2, P < 0.001, P = .000
Policy region	$\chi^2=43.49$ 4, df=1, P<0.001, P=0.000	NSS	$\chi^2=19.122$, df=1, P<0.001, P=0.000	NSS	NSS	NSS	$\chi^2=16.14$ 9, df=1, P<0.001, P=0.000	NSS	NSS

*NSS: No statistically significant association found to exist between variables.

Gender of respondents

A number of statistically significant associations were found to exist between male and female participants and their perceptions of car, bicycles, dishwashers, and laptops as necessity items. See Table 3 for statistically significant associations. No statistically significant associations were noted between male and female participants and their perceptions of luxury and necessity for the following items: mobile phone, laptop, microwave, electric or power shower, and television.

Age cohorts

A number of statistically significant associations were found to exist between participants from different age cohorts and their agreement with the statement that the following items were necessities: car for personal use, bicycle, dishwasher, tumble dryer, microwave, computer and/ or laptop, and mobile phone (see Table 3). Younger participants were more likely to report that a microwave, power shower and/or electric shower, personal computer, or laptop and mobile

phone were necessities, in comparison to respondents in older cohorts. The television was the exception to this rule with respondents in the older cohort (66 years and older) more likely to perceive the television as a necessity compared to the youngest age group.

Housing tenure

Housing tenure was found to be an important factor in terms of participants' perceptions of luxury and necessity items. Statistically significant relationships were found to exist between participants in different housing-tenure status and their assessment of the following items as a necessity: tumble dryer; electric shower/power shower; television; personal computer and/or laptop and mobile phone (see Table 3). A greater number of homeowners (92%) (in comparison to renters (72%) or those whose accommodation was described as rent-free (81%)) viewed a car as a necessity. This difference was found to be statistically significant. In contrast, a greater number of renters (52%) and participants whose accommodation was categorized as rent-free (34%) or other (54%) viewed a bicycle as a necessity, in comparison to 41% of homeowners. This difference was found to be statistically significant. Renters were least likely to view dishwashers as necessity items, in comparison to other housing tenure categories.

Educational attainment

Educational status was found to be another important factor in terms of participants' perceptions of luxury and necessity items. Statistically significant relationships were found to exist between participants' perception of cars as necessity items and their educational attainment. For example, third-level (i.e., university-educated) participants were less likely to report a car as a necessity item, yet more likely to report bicycles as necessity items (compared to participants

who attained secondary-level education. Statistically significant relationships were also found to exist between participants' education status and their perception of the following items as a necessity item: tumble dryers, microwaves, personal computers and/or laptops and mobile phones.

Rural and urban locations

Several statistically significant associations were found to exist between a person's residential location (that is whether they resided in a rural or urban electoral district in Ireland) and their agreement with the statement that the following items were necessities: cars; dishwashers; televisions and laptops. More respondents residing in rural locations, in contrast to those residing in urban locations, reported that they viewed the following items as necessity items: cars, dishwashers, televisions and laptops and /or personal computers as necessity items (see Table 2 and 3).

Different policy regions

Residing in various policy region locations appeared to play a role in participants' perception of necessities and luxuries. Several statistically significant associations were found to exist between a person's residential location (i.e., whether they resided in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland) and their agreement with the statement that the following household items were necessities: cars; dishwashers; and televisions (see Table 3). More respondents living in Northern Ireland, in comparison to those residing in the Republic of Ireland, reported that these items were necessity items. No statistically significant differences were noted between participants in the Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and their perceptions of luxury

and necessity for the following items: mobile phone, laptop, microwave, power shower, and bicycle.

In the concluding sections, we argue that the responses to the survey questions are important to the discourse surrounding the construction of consumption corridors. They explore what respondents might be willing to do with regard to changing behavior. This has implications for the construction of corridors of consumption and defining minimum and maximum thresholds. We also reflect on the methodological approach adopted in this study and propose recommendations for future research. Specifically, there is a need for more holistic policies and initiatives to incorporate the concept of consumption corridors.

Discussion

As the literature reviewed earlier indicates, the concept of satisfiers and needs are increasingly regarded as important issues in terms of sustainability discourse and policy. We propose that consumption corridors facilitate a timely consideration of the potential of developing maximum levels of consumption across Ireland. The CONSENSUS Lifestyle Survey explored various aspects of consumption in Ireland including respondents' perceptions of a wide array of household items as luxury or necessity items. In other words, perceptions of needs and satisfiers were unpacked in terms of everyday products.

Results demonstrate that the majority of items (in particular, recent digital innovations and technologies such as laptops, televisions, and mobile phones) were considered to be necessity items rather than luxury items by respondents in this study. This would imply a more utilitarian focus – as well as the attribution of a purposeful rationale and functional value to such products. In contrast, luxury goods are often conducive to comfort and these goods frequently

encompass physical, social and psychological values to individuals (Shukla and Purani 2012; Wiedmann, Hennigs and Siebels 2009). This finding is in line with other research that demonstrates that public attitudes on luxury or necessity questions have migrated toward “necessity”, and for most items these changes have taken place at a similar pace among all age groups (Taylor et al. 2006).

The link between a number of sociodemographic variables and participants’ perceptions of luxury and necessity items is evident from the findings. On one hand, men were more likely to view the majority of the items (e.g., cars, dishwashers, bicycles, and computer and/or laptops) as necessities. On the other hand, women were more inclined to view tumble dryers and televisions in such terms. Researchers often attribute these disparities to gendered practices in the home and workplace (Lennon et al. 2020). Such an explanation does not appear to explain the findings in this research.

We found significant differences across gender and generational lines (in terms of patterns of online media use) for children and adults and what they perceived as satisfiers (luxury items) and needs (necessities) (see Perrin 2015; Rideout, Foehner and Roberts 2010; Kayany and Yelsma 2000). In the literature pertaining specifically to energy consumption, there are significant differences in energy consumption between men and women, and studies indicate that men consume more energy than women due to differences in disposable income, leisure time and ownership and use of electronic devices (Pueyo and Maestre, 2019). This may provide some context for the gender differences in this research that showed a larger proportion of men reporting laptops and/or personal computers to be necessities. Furthermore, gender differences in broader environmental behaviors may have an impact on what men and women view as necessities in daily life. For instance, sociodemographic variables and undertaking of

environmental behaviors have been found to be important (De Oliver 1999) with women and men found to reduce environmental sustainability in “different proportions” (CAP-NET 2006, 13). Such gender differences in broader environmental behaviors may have an impact on what men and women view as necessity and luxury products.

Overall, we found the younger respondents to be more likely to view digital technologies and home appliances (that offer convenience and comfort) (e.g., power shower, laptop, mobile phone, dishwasher) as necessity items, with the exception of the car and the television. Research shows that people in various age cohorts may employ different lenses and mental schemata to deduce luxury or necessity calculations (Taylor et al. 2006). The significant differences found in terms of patterns of online media use for children and adults (Perrin 2015; Rideout, Foehner and Roberts 2010) may contextualize why younger participants in this study reported that personal computer and/or laptops and mobile phones were necessity items in comparison to the older participants.

Although this study did not explore the rationale behind why items were viewed as necessity or luxury items, the survey did examine participants’ willingness to sacrifice some personal comforts in the home in order to save energy. The majority of respondents (70%, n = 1,038) stated that they would be willing to give up some personal household comforts to reduce their energy use. More homeowners (57%) than renters (52%) and respondents living rent free (37%) reported being willing to accept cuts in their standards of living.

In terms of educational attainment, the greater number of years of schooling a respondent reported the more likely he or she was to identify a car, bicycle, tumble dryer, personal computer, and/or laptop and mobile phone as necessity items. There were slight variations among tertiary- and secondary-level educated respondents reporting items as necessities. For

example, marginally more respondents who reported attaining secondary-level education (as opposed to tertiary-level education) indicated the following items as necessities: car, dishwasher, electric or power shower, microwave, and television. These findings may be related to higher educational status and housing tenure, which are often correlated with higher income. The study further found that, in general, the more income a person has the more likely they are to view items as necessities. This is particularly the case for certain information-era items such as laptops and/or computers and mobile phones, but also includes cars and dishwashers. This finding is in line with another study (see Taylor et al. 2006) that reported a steady acceleration of participants maintaining similar views.

Spatially, this research was conducted across two policy regions comprising the island of Ireland. Several statistically significant differences were found to exist between a person's residential location (i.e., whether they resided in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland) and their agreement with the statement that the following household items were necessities: car, dishwasher, and television. The sampling strategy also differentiated between rural and urban households. Urban residents were more likely to identify items such as a tumble dryer, microwave, and television as necessities. Equal percentages of urban and rural respondents reported a mobile phone to be a necessity item.

The concept of consumption corridors holds immense promise for operationalizing strong sustainable consumption governance. However, designing and implementing consumption corridors are complex and challenging tasks (Mont 2019). We argue that asking 1,500 participants to reflect on – and to identify – the material needs and satisfiers in their lives could provide a first step in developing a bottom-up approach for advancing the application of the consumption-corridors concept across the island of Ireland. Echoing results from another

international study (Schäfer et al. 2010), differences across respondents' consumption patterns cannot be explained merely by differences in regions with differing policy contexts but also need to be interpreted from the standpoint of social stratification (such as levels of income, education, and profession) or variables like age and gender. Humans maintain varying conceptions about entitlements to live a *good life*. It is crucial to acknowledge these different understandings of needs and how they should be satisfied in order to permit people to live a life they value without impairing the possibility of a good life for others.

We recommend the formulation of policies to endorse and extend the concept of consumption corridors in terms of enhancement of quality of living aspects. For example, in the case of domestic energy use in Ireland and calls to shift towards more sustainable energy use, the predominate approach to date has been a national energy campaign with a focus on two main areas, encouraging retrofitting of homes and increasing energy awareness (see Goggins et al. 2019). Organized by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, the last two decades have seen over 375,000 homes receive government grants for energy efficiency improvements (Goggins et al. 2019). However, to avail of these grants you need to own the property. This requirement excludes those who rent public or private accommodation. Indeed schemes (such as the Better Energy Homes Scheme), which were established with the goal of supporting householders who receive fuel allowance or those who receive job seekers benefits, are only available to homeowners (Lavelle et al. 2015). Apart from ensuring that these grants and schemes are tailored to benefit their target audiences, we argue that these economic 'fixes' need to be accompanied with an agenda which supports changing practices and lifestyles that use less energy and factors in quality of life considerations (such as expectations of comfort) when considering home

heating. Such an agenda would support discussions around maximum levels of energy use in homes.

We argue that policy messages with a focus on quality of life may have cultural salience for many people and hence be more likely to promote favorable conditions for advancing the corridors concept. Political shifts are taking place internationally and this is reflected in different policy goals such as the OECD's policy series of "better policies for better lives" (OECD 2011; OECD 2020) or the Enquete Commission established in Germany to explore the links between growth, prosperity and quality of life and their links to sustainable economic activity and social progress in the Social Market Economy (Strunk 2015). Similarly, the Well-being Programme of the UK Office for National Statistics (2020) (which was specifically established to measure national well-being) reflects this political shift in thinking. Greater critical engagement – from policy makers, businesses, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and consumers – is essential in order to link issues pertaining to quality of life and wellbeing with consumption corridors. We believe that these groups should emphasize how sustainable living and consumption corridors could improve a person's quality of life and lead toward "the good life." The common misconception is that an individual's quality of life will decrease if sustainable consumption policies are implemented, which has been found not to be the case (see Godin et al. 2020).

To date, sustainable consumption policies in Ireland have tended to overlook the implementation of tailored or focused initiatives, instead opting for a "one-size-fits-all" approach to behavior change, which is evident in the environmental awareness campaigns disseminated by

television and print media at the national level since 2000 (Goggins et al. 2019; Lavelle et al. 2015; Scott, 2009).

Upon critical reflection, the data gathered through our survey were limited as they did not derive from a deliberative process for consensus building around needs or satisfiers to meet those needs. Within sustainability research, the deployment of large-scale attitudinal surveys is often critiqued for their tendency to provide a superficial identification of consumption issues rather than a deep investigation into the underlying rationale behind the responses and detailed exploration of such actions. While surveys are not without their limitations, it is still important to acknowledge the significance of large data sets for critically inspired and progressively orientated research agendas (Fahy and Rau 2013). This methodological approach is important, and its merits are widely recognized. Advocates (see, for example, Barr 2006 and Motherway et al. 2003) argue that surveys permit the identification and examination of trends in attitudes and behaviors. We proffer that analysis of large datasets can facilitate nuanced and detailed consideration of various groups of respondents and their potential propensity toward defining items as satisfiers or needs.

We posit that our results provide a useful starting point to examine potential trends when exploring initial establishment of minimum and maximum levels of consumption. However, for those undertaking future work on operationalizing consumption corridors we would advocate strongly for other more collaborative approaches to establish minimum and maximum consumption levels. This article aims to add to the consumption corridors literature by exploring the ways in which identification of the needs and characteristics of individuals might assist in creating consumption corridors. This exploratory investigation and its data findings are culturally specific to the island of Ireland. There is a need for research to be reproduced in other cultural contexts and countries and to explore what encompasses a need for individuals and communities,

as well as to examine what are suitable satisfiers for those needs relevant to their context. Given that our study indicates that it is important to consider perceptions of necessity and luxury items from a comfort and convenience perspective, future researchers interested in the creation of consumption corridors may wish to consider incorporating an alternative practice theoretical perspective (see Jensen et al. 2019; Sahakian 2019; Godin et al. 2020), which may better enable a critical in-depth exploration of existing expectations around the notions of comfort and convenience.

Conclusion

Our study proffers interesting insights that may be useful when attempting to establish minimum and maximum consumption levels across Ireland. Results indicate that it is important to consider perceptions of necessity and luxury items from the perspective of comfort and convenience. Although culture and policy are crucial factors to considering behavior differences and variations, there is clearly a need for more multifaceted and holistic approaches to understanding sustainable consumption. We posit that consumption corridors need to be developed according to specific political, cultural, and social contexts.

Results of this research indicate that a more customized policy approach to different groups of individuals may be more successful than general policy interventions for all. The policy relevance of the findings presented in this study cannot be overestimated. There is a need for all policy actors to recognize the complex, multi-layered nature of needs and satisfiers. Given the urgency of many current sustainability challenges, and the limited effectiveness of many policy initiatives to date, our efforts to promote a more nuanced understanding of needs and

satisfiers (especially in key consumption sectors such as energy, water, and mobility) seem timely.

In summary, the concept of consumption corridors recognizes that while there is a need for absolute minimum and maximum consumption, these thresholds will differ across contexts. If the construction of corridors is largely insensitive to sociodemographic differences, including disparities in income, educational status, and housing tenure, resultant policy initiatives are likely to prove inadequate and to leave unaddressed – or potentially exacerbate – social inequalities and societal injustices. We suggest that by focusing on tailoring the construction of corridors could provide a first step in operationalizing a bottom-up approach for advancing a methodological application of the consumption corridors concept across Ireland. The ultimate goal of the concept (to create a space where sustainable consumption is possible within planetary boundaries) could and should be a galvanizing idea at the national level. A collaborative approach to the construction of consumption corridors is required to foster a genuine cooperative and deliberative process at every level of scale. The research upon which this article is based produced valuable evidence that highlights a need to customize minimum and maximum consumption levels in accordance with differences across policy regions and cultural groupings, as well as different life stages. However, exploring trends in data are only a starting point. We acknowledge the need for more research, specifically more in-depth qualitative work, to assist in establishing minimum and maximum consumption levels. These data have the potential to act as a crucial step forward in the further development of consumption corridors.

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NA

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Figure and Table Captions

Figure 1: Percentage of participants who reported items as luxury or necessities

Table 1: Summary of characteristics of respondents in sample

Table 2: Socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of respondents who viewed the items as necessities (percentages)

Table 3: Overview of statistically significant associations between participants divided by socio-demographic variables and their agreement that the following household items were necessities

Notes

¹ Within sustainable consumption literature claims that a reduction in consumption can not only benefit the environment, but also make people happier, are often referred to as the ‘double dividend’.

² The questions were constructed utilising previous surveys including several studies conducted on general attitudes towards the environment in an Irish context (see Drury, 2000; Motherway et al., 2003). Many of these studies explored the Republic of Ireland in isolation.

³ Thirty Electoral Districts (EDs) were selected for sampling based on varying social, economic and demographic characteristics, as well as their varying geographical locations. Electoral Divisions are defined as the smallest administrative area for which population statistics are published. In rural areas each Electoral Division consists of an aggregation of entire townlands. There are 3,440 Electoral Divisions.

⁴ The fieldwork for this study was conducted from June 2010 to April 2011.