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Further Reading:

Greene, M. (2018) Socio-technical transitions and dynamics of everyday life, *Global Environmental Change*, 52, 1-9.

Greene, M. and Rau, H. (2018) 'Moving across the life course: the potential of a biographic approach to researching dynamics in everyday mobility practices', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 18, 1, 60-82.

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Exploring complex social drivers of (un)sustainable consumption

Rising consumption and the increasing resource intensity of daily living practices are key drivers of environmental change. As a result, individual consumption and the promotion of positive pro-environmental behaviour change have become a key area of attention in European and Irish sustainable development policy. In finding ways in which environmental transitions can be achieved through the prevailing neo-liberal framework, the predominant approaches taken by some western governments to 'nudge' individuals towards more pro-environmental behaviour have focused largely on market-led initiatives. However, increasing evidence is revealing that these measures are not bringing about necessary changes in behaviour with consumption continuing to rise. It is clear that cognitive-psychological insights that emphasis consumer choice and individual deliberation are limited, highlighting a need for greater understanding of complex social drivers of consumption. In response to these gaps, this research advances a contextual approach to explore how individuals' everyday consumption practice is shaped by processes of social and technical change. Departing from concepts and methods characteristic of dominant consumer research, a contextual geographical, qualitative and biographic approach is employed to investigate how individuals' consumption practices evolve over their lives in the context of a changing Irish society.

Results

The findings from this study highlight that rather than being driven solely by individual choice and deliberation, an individual's action is strongly configured by context. Individuals' narratives of change reveal that a multifaceted web of contextual factors has worked to directly and indirectly steer individuals' consumption practice towards increasing resource intensity. It is not only energy and consumption policies that shape demand, but factors including normative contexts, economic conditions, banking policies, technological developments and spatial planning, amongst others, have intersected and interacted in configuring conduct over time.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for policy, suggesting sustainable consumption requires a much more fundamental challenge to social contexts than is recognised by current individualised approaches. A key conclusion is that policy should move beyond approaches that rely on orthodox economic assumptions about consumer rationality to meaningfully address the infrastructural and social dynamics locking individuals into current resource-intensive patterns of energy demand. Findings highlighting the non-linear and often unintended effects of intersecting contextual socio-economic-political factors on demand contradict linear models of intervention characteristic of the neoliberal, individualistic-rationalistic developmental regime. They suggest that a more reflexive approach to sustainable development policy, one which recognises the fluid, situated, interconnected and long-lasting impacts of both intentional and unintentional policies in delimiting individuals' action, is needed to bring about successful change.