



High Consumers and the work of being wealthy

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Overview....

- Rationale (what, who, key questions)
- Data analysis (spatial patterns of high consumption)
- Data analysis (stakeholder interviews)
- Introduction to qualitative study
- Institutional ethnography
- Discussion



Rationale...

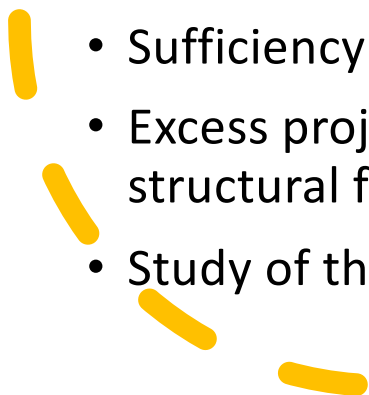
- Backdrop of huge (and growing) carbon inequality at all scales.
- In 2010, the 10% most affluent emitted 34% of global Co₂, compared to 15% for the 50% on lowest incomes (Hubacek *et al.*, 2017)
- This grew to 47% against 7% (Karthi *et al.*, 2020).
- High emitters/consumers set social and material aspirations in society.





Rationale....

- Reducing the footprint of high consumers can aid GHG reduction and curb escalating over-consumption through redefinition of norms.
- But the potential of this contribution, how it might be achieved and how much is too much remain unknown.
- Policy knowledge (how and when to respond) and attention is minimal and academic attention limited.
- Sufficiency gives us a vital framework for understanding how much is too much.
- Excess project: build on exploratory qualitative work by teasing out socio-structural factors
- Study of those who consume insufficiently is well established.



Who are we talking about?

- Those who might be considered to overconsume...
- Not exclusively the super rich
- Those who consume resources beyond what is sufficient for their needs and some wants (Fawcett and Darby, 2019)
- Contributing disproportionately to environmental degradation through...
- Powering large homes, multiple devices, multiple vehicles, frequent flying, meat rich diets and purchase of many consumer goods.
- Not those trapped into above average consumption by health, location etc.





Key questions...

- Why does high consumption continue to be acceptable/aspirational (and grow) despite the environmental crises? Exceptionalism? Lock in?
- What motivates consumption and limits engagement with consumption reduction?
- We avoid normative judgement and instead ask...
- Why is it so hard to consume less? Even if you see the need.
- Even if the dominant norm became low consumption, how easy/costly (emotional, social, cultural) would it be to achieve for high consumers?
- What are the most effective responses and intervention points?
- Addressed via deep qualitative investigation with high consumers.



Introduction to data analysis

- Two stage data collection
- (1) Initial data analysis and spatial mapping of consumption data
 - Exploration of secondary data around energy, transport and food
 - Focused on five geographical areas: Sheffield, London, County Durham (England); Edinburgh (Scotland); and Powys (Wales)
- (2) Expert interviews with academics & practitioners specialising in resource consumption

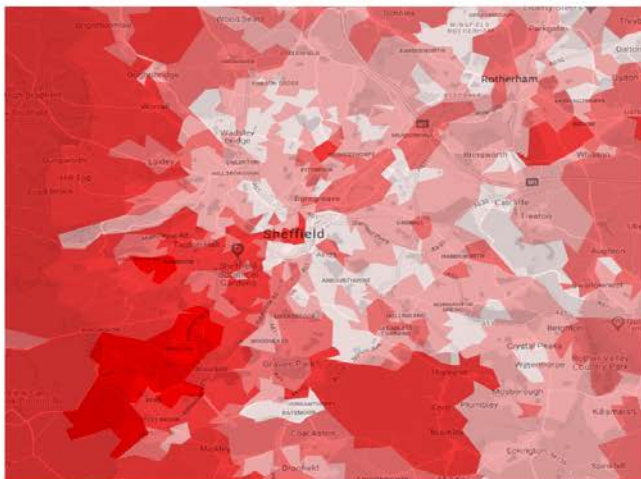


Energy consumption in Sheffield: A city of two halves

Domestic mean gas consumption (kWh per meter)

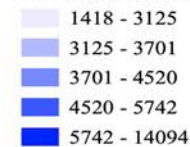


No data



National Statistics for 2019

Domestic mean electricity consumption (kWh per meter)

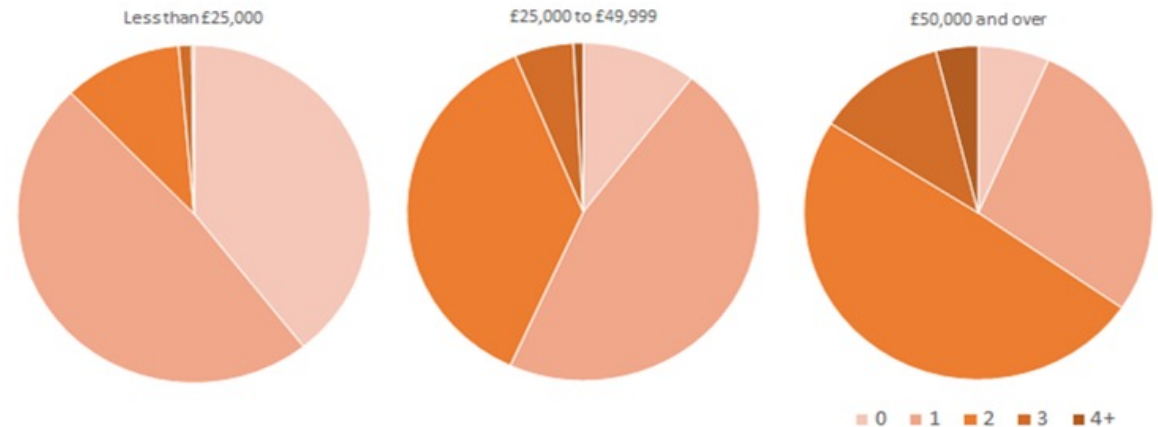


National Statistics data for 2019

Travel consumption

- Two-thirds of households earning over £50,000 have 2+ vehicles, compared to closer to 15% of those earning less than £25,000.
- Problematic because multiple vehicle households travel on average more per person (8508 miles) than those with one vehicle (5866 miles).
- The frequency of flying also increases with income.

Number of household cars or light vans in the UK (including landrover, jeep, minibus etc) by income



Qualitative study

- High-income high consumers are being framed as a 'hard to reach' group, because many existing mechanisms do not reach them (such as financial incentives)
- We seek to understand more about the socio-cultural structures that motivate consumption and limit engagement with consumption reduction.

Key Challenges:

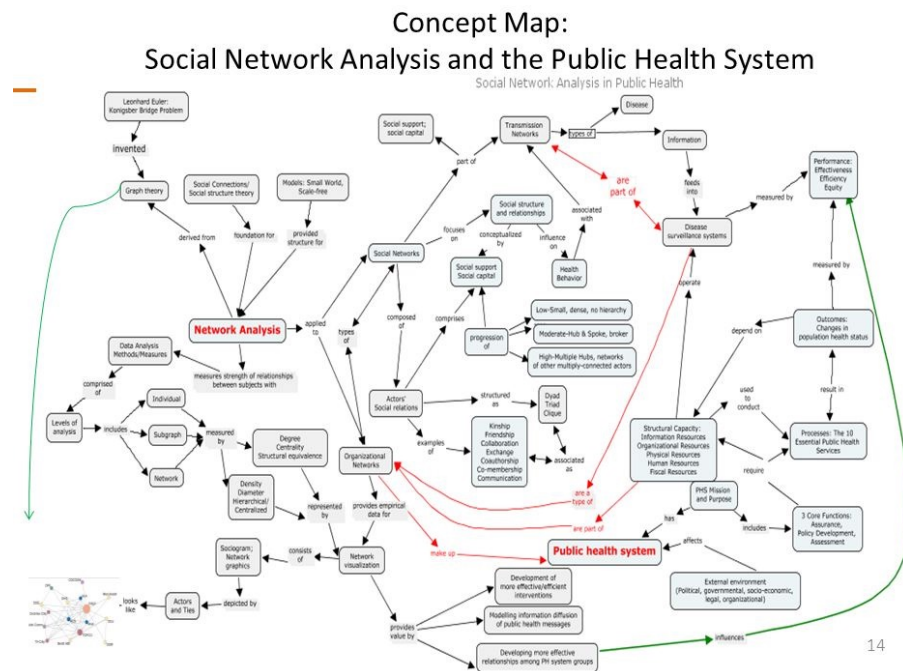
- Access to high-income consumers
- Gaining the trust of participants so that they feel able to discuss their consumption without feeling vulnerable or **judged**.
- Analysing barriers to change in order to identify potential opportunities for change.

Institutional Ethnography

- Institutional Ethnography (IE) is a qualitative research approach developed by Canadian Sociologist Dorothy Smith that is used to explore and understand working practices (Smith, 2005).
- ‘work’ here is defined as anything that is deliberate and routinised, and has been applied to both paid work but also the work of mothers supporting their children through school or managing a chronic medical condition.
- Classifying high-consumer lifestyles as a form of work does two important things; it allows researchers to take a non-judgemental stance, and it starts to shift the framing of these lifestyles away from them being aspirational and desirable.
- Research methods will include ‘work’ shadowing, observation, semi-structured interviews and content analysis.

Research approach

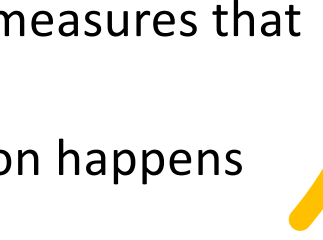
- Recruit research participants through organisations and societies
- Researchers will spend time with participants in their homes, discussing domestic consumption in situ.
- Research participants suggest other people to interview (snowballing)
- For analytical purposes we will map these working practices as complex 'systems' in order to understand how different elements interrelate and where interventions may be most effective.
- This is a process that has been used to good effect when looking for intervention points to improve public health outcomes.



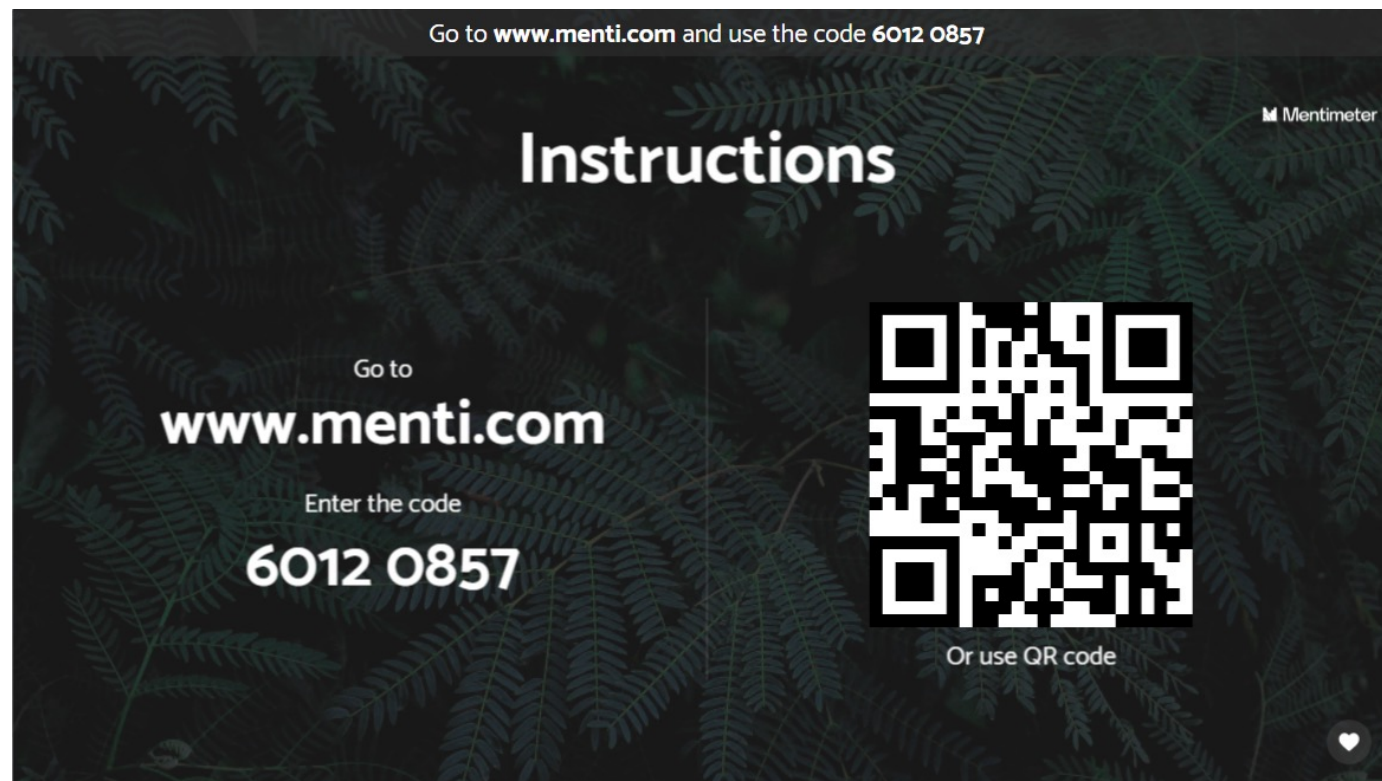
An example of a complex social system map from Pepper, C. Social Network Analysis in Public Health Systems: A Conceptual Analysis <https://slideplayer.com/slide/10753565/>

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Conclusions/next steps

- No clear thesis about why it's so hard to consume less
 - Deep qualitative exploration (UK) of the lived experience of high consumption
 - Unpicking drivers, challenges and the practical and emotional work of living beyond planetary limits.
 - We will not seek to quantify environmental impact, instead focussing on the psychological, social, cultural and structural drivers
 - We aim to inform progressive, well timed interventions that don't rely on fiscal measures that the wealthy can withstand
 - Spatial dimensions- where consumption happens and where its impacts are felt.
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- A series of four yellow curved dashes in the bottom right corner, arranged in a diagonal line from bottom-left to top-right.

Consumption guilty habits mentimeter



Go to www.menti.com and use the code 6012 0857

which areas of your own consumption would you most like to reduce?

Mentimeter



Go to www.menti.com and use the code 6012 0857

What are the barriers that prevent you from reducing your own consumption (please rank)

Mentimeter

1st

Structural (eg condition of home, availability / affordability of local food)

2nd

Cultural / Normative (eg what is normal and culturally acceptable)

3rd

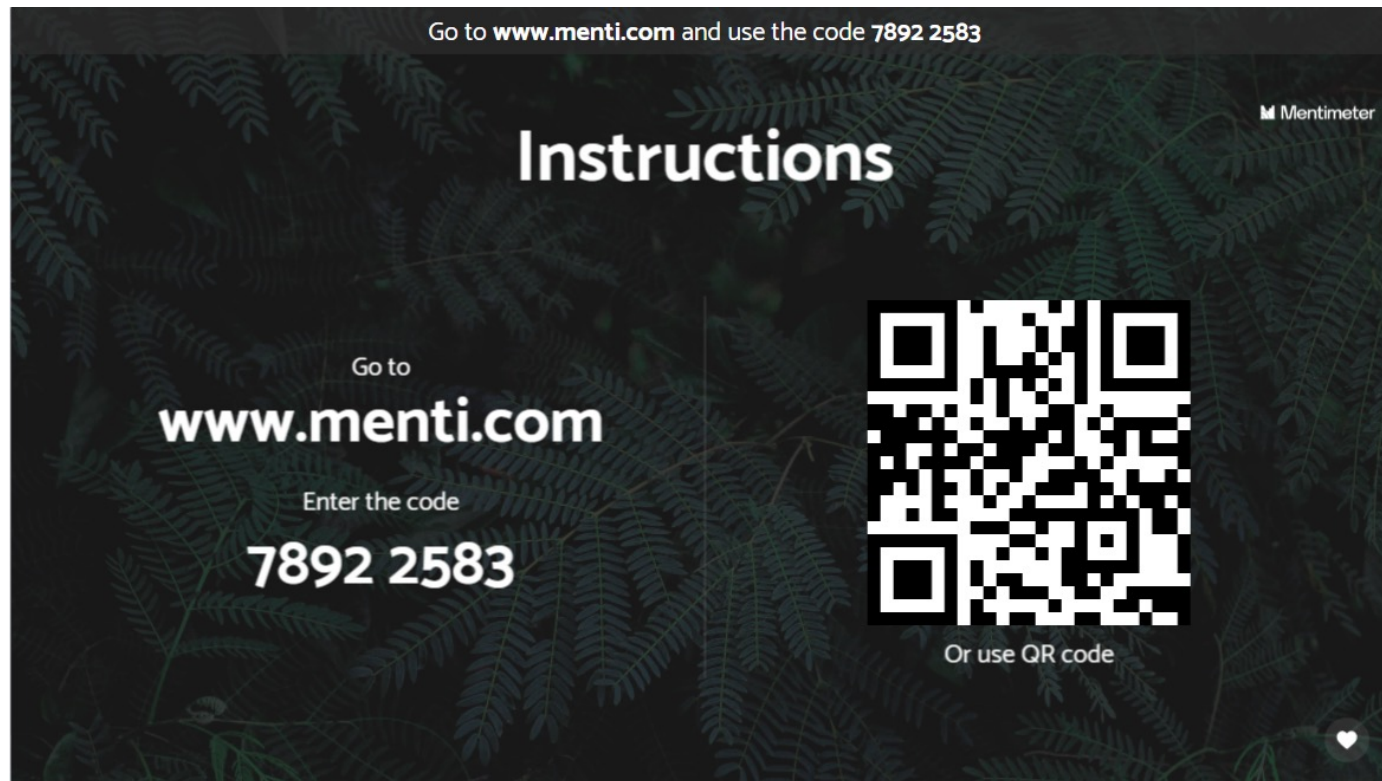
Individual / personal / emotional (eg reluctance to change or lack of willpower)

4th


None of the above



Approaches to consumption reduction menti



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 Mentimeter

Multiple Choice

1st | Financial Incentives

2nd | Legislation


3rd | Persuasion /
Education

4th | Rationing



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How would you reduce consumption in high income groups?

 Mentimeter

