Could practices of reduced consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic facilitate transformative change for sustainability? Experiences from Sweden and Ireland

Magnus Boström*, Helena Römmelmann and Lina Sandström

School of Humanities, Education, and Social Sciences, Örebro University, Örebro, Sweden

The COVID-19 pandemic implied a disruption of several consumer practices, which offers an opportunity to explore experiences and possibilities to switch toward more sustainable lifestyles with reduced consumption. This article asks if there is long-term transformative potential toward more sustainable and climate friendly consumption practices embedded in these new experiences. By the use of qualitative interviews, the article explores learning experiences gained by "mainstream" consumers in Sweden and Ireland. A theoretical framework consisting of five themes, also related to previous COVID-19 research, guide the analysis of empirical findings: 1) desired objects; 2) confirmation of social relations by non- or alternative consumption; 3) temporal and spatial aspects; 4) de-normalization of mass consumption; 5) new competences and social support. Findings suggest that the long-term lifestyle transformation possibilities are not vast, but neither are they insignificant. Various positive experiences, with implications for reduced/alternative consumption, can be stored in collective memories even if several consumer practices bounce back to "normal" after the pandemic. Based on the findings, the long-term transformative potential is discussed through the lenses of transformative learning, reflectivity, and adaptative abilities. The study contributes to the literature on sustainable and reduced consumption, including literature on degrowth, sufficiency, and downsizing.

KEYWORDS

adaptation, climate friendly, consumer practices, disruption, lifestyle, reflectivity, transformative learning

Introduction

Humanity exceeds several of the planetary boundaries (Steffen et al., 2015). An important root cause of this problem is the excessive amounts of consumption, particularly in wealthier parts of the globe. In wealthier societies, people in all social classes grow up in a structural and cultural context of mass consumption

(Schor, 2005; Jackson, 2017). Although some citizens voluntarily try to develop new lifestyles with less consumption as goal as a way to cope with the environmental pressures, the prevailing social norm and practice is to consume "more, better, and bigger" (Sahakian, 2017).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted parts of this trend. In several ways, the pandemic implied a disruption of mainstream consumer culture. People's lifestyles have been significantly affected. Whereas some kinds of consumption and consumer activities have been, in periods, impossible or greatly restricted (e.g., air travel, shopping, clothes, restaurants, hotels, visiting amusement parks and public events), others continued as before or increased (food, online shopping, traveling to nearby nature parks, furniture, household articles including services for the household, communication devices) (see Echegaray et al., 2021; Holmberg, 2022). Viewing the pandemic crisis as a "window of opportunity" for transformative change (de Haas et al., 2020; Almeida et al., 2021; Dartnell and Kish, 2021; Orîndaru et al., 2021; Forno et al., 2022; O'Garra and Fouquet, 2022; Schmidt et al., 2022) this disruption to consumer practices offers an interesting opportunity to explore experiences and the potential for "switching actions toward a more responsible, lower footprint way of living", (Echegaray, 2021 p. 568; see also Greene et al., 2022). A key question is if new consumption patterns brought on by the pandemic have the potential to institutionalize, i.e., if they can result in durable change. Even though some consumer practices are returning to a "normal" pattern as seen before the pandemic (Holmberg, 2022), the question is still relevant because the disruption can be seen as a learning period of importance for coming crises and transformation of society.

In this article, we ask if there is long-term transformative potential toward more sustainable and climate friendly consumption practices embedded in these new experiences. The article explores insights and learning experiences gained by consumers, in Sweden and Ireland, from the involuntary disruption of many consumer practices caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose is to contribute knowledge about new experiences and insights that people gained from this disruption, with a particular focus on the long-term transformative possibilities to reduce excessive and high climate impact consumption. Hence, it contributes to the literature on sustainable and reduced consumption, not the least literature focusing on related topics and concepts such as degrowth, sufficiency, downsizing, and voluntary simplicity. The study is based on qualitative methodology and includes interviews with people from Sweden and Ireland.

The next section introduces the theoretical, thematic framework, in which recent research findings about the pandemic experience is also integrated. Then we present the method and methodological reflections. The result section is divided into five parts using the same thematic structure as the theory section. In the final concluding section, we discuss long-term transformative potential through the lenses of transformative learning, ambiguity and reflexivity, as well as adaptative abilities.

Theoretical points of departure and thematic framework

The theoretical framework considers how social practices and relationships in one's social life shape consumer motivations and practices, including attention to both macro/structure and micro/agency. On the one hand, existing lifestyles are deeply shaped by macro-institutional structures and social-material infrastructures in society, including an expansionist economic system (capitalism), industrial/technological development, a global economic geography facilitating production, distribution, and provision of goods for the mass markets, and a political ideology of growth (see Boström, 2020). Taken together, the institutions and infrastructures of mass-consumption have contributed to a far-reaching commoditization in contemporary societies, which in turn make it necessary for people to make marketplace choices in a growing number of areas of everyday life. Moreover, our contemporary societies have become dependent on economic growth and insatiable consumer demand for their social stability (securing welfare and jobs; see Jackson, 2017). Consumer culture accordingly push people toward mass consumption habits (Schor, 2005; Sassatelli, 2007).

On the other hand, people are not just pushed from above, but are themselves active in reproducing mass consumption habits. Our theoretical perspective assumes that agency and meaning are shaped by social relations, both intimate and indirect/distant relations, in their everyday life. This perspective further recognizes how people are born into and naturalize their social lives in their material contexts by developing worldviews, norms, roles, habits, and identities. This naturalization involves taking existing consumer culture for granted (e.g., Schor, 1998; Wilk, 2002; Dittmar, 2008; Miller, 2010). Attention to social agency must be included to understand the reproduction of social structure and culture, as well as to understand conditions for change. We moreover take advantage of the social practice theory, which argues that the thinking, feeling, acting of individuals are embedded in the socio-material environment (Shove, 2010; Spaargaren, 2011; Forno et al., 2022; Hoolohan et al., 2022). The notion of practices offers a lens to consider lifestyle change that involves more than just cognitive aspects such as preferences, values and insights. Social practices include routinized, normalized, and socially embedded habits. We can look at many lifestyle changes that happened during the pandemic as changes of practices, such as working from home, cooking, and online shopping (Ehgartner and Boons, 2020).

As we are interested in reflecting on the potential for long-term change, we need to address an overall temporal dimension (in broader sense than the third theme below). It

is important to reflect on the difference between immediate changes that happened during pandemic and more long-term changes/effects. Even if such distinctions are hard to make, it can nonetheless be reflectively done and informed by some empirical evidence and theoretical arguments. For example, Kirk and Rifkin (2020) distinguish between immediate and more long-term transformative change resulting from the pandemic experience, and refer to three temporal frames: reacting, coping, and adapting. Echegaray et al. (2021) distinguish between accelerated (e.g., digitalization), decelerated (e.g., popularity of dense cities), and unexpected trends (e.g., homebody life) due to the pandemic. They argue there are a variety of practices that may be here to stay, like the sudden acceleration of digital systems and the enjoyment of non-commercialized forms of leisure in outdoor parks (Echegaray et al., 2021; p. 4). Some of these changes will become irreversible, whereas others need encouragement by governments and policy to endure.

For our purpose, the notion of transformative learning is interesting to consider. Transformative learning is a perspective stressing a critical, self-reflective dimension of learning; learning that questions basic frames of reference and "habits of mind" (Mezirow, 2009; Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015; Boström et al., 2019). An external crisis such as a pandemic can be an important trigger for reconsidering knowledge and stimulate alternative paradigms (Almeida et al., 2021). With reference to changed lifestyle and practices of reduced consumption, a general process of transformative learning may be needed as people have been so deeply socialized into reproducing mass consumption habits (Boström, 2020). In this context, transformative learning would entail challenging many norms, practices, and taken-for-granted assumptions related to consumption. A study of *voluntary* downsizers showed the importance of transformative learning (Boström, 2022). What we are examining is whether an *involuntary* disruption of consumer practices, such as the one caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, could trigger similar learning processes. Given the forceful economic and political macro-factors addressed above, a process of transformative learning among the public will not alone achieve long-term societal transformation. Nonetheless, we see it as a necessary part of a larger transformative change process.

By taking these general theoretical perspectives as points of departure, our framework moreover consists of five theoretical themes, which guide and structure the subsequent empirical analysis. These themes can be applied to study the possible insights and learning experiences consumers gained from the involuntary disruption of many consumer practices caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first theme is about *desired objects*, which is motivated by a variety of studies of consumer culture showing how vital consumption is for providing *meaning* to the consumer (e.g., Richins, 1994; Schor, 1998, 2005; Wilk, 2002; Belk et al., 2003; Bauman, 2007; Sassatelli, 2007; Dittmar, 2008; Jackson, 2017). Commodities may be valuable to the individual because

of their usefulness, the pleasure they bring, the sense of freedom they bring, the interpersonal ties they represent, for identity formation, or for the social status they symbolize. Given such desires, the pandemic offered an opportunity to ask about experiences during the pandemic disruption regarding temporarily unfeasible but desirable objects/services. What consumer objects/services have people longed for during the disruption? Have these desires been satisfied in other ways, by non-consumption or alternative consumption? Are consumers expecting to enjoy the objects/services (e.g., air travel) and going back to previous practices after the pandemic?

Some previous COVID-19 studies observed that people during the lockdowns, faced with a situation of scarcity of socializing, longed for socializing with relatives and friends rather than for material objects (de Haas et al., 2020; Echegaray, 2021; Moynat et al., 2022). Faced with mobility restrictions they longed for freedom in a spatial sense, and they missed activities that were restricted and the possibility to travel various places (Echegaray, 2021; Strömblad et al., 2021; Moynat et al., 2022). However, physical stuff can also be sought for: the pandemic could stimulate a resurgence of hedonistic attitudes connected with phrases such as "I could die tomorrow" or "You only live once" (Zwanka and Buff, 2020).

The second theme is about *confirming social relations by non- or alternative consumption*. This theme derives from various theories on how consumer culture intersects with everyday rituals and relationship practices. In modern society consumption has become key in various activities that serve to establish and maintain social relations. There is a number of everyday "rituals" or activities that families and friends are doing together to confirm their relations (Rook, 1985; Collins, 2005). These everyday rituals are in many ways tied to consumer objects (fashion, gifts), activities (shopping, dinners, holidays, birthday parties) and settings (the shopping mall, the café) (Miller, 1998; Sassatelli, 2007; Boström, 2021a). For instance, the traveling abroad for the weekend holiday bolsters the family unit or the romantic relationship. These everyday rituals also give rise to (consumption) norms within the social group, which can be difficult to break with.

The pandemic offered interesting opportunities to study to what extent consumers replaced, for example, long-distance tourism and shopping, with other ways of cultivating their social relations. COVID-19 research has shown that people learned to use online platforms for virtual dinner parties, religious services, weddings, and music performances (Kirk and Rifkin, 2020; Sheth, 2020; Echegaray, 2021). The pandemic also gave people a chance to reconnect with one's closest relations and rediscover the importance of family relations with activities such as baking, cooking, gardening, jigsaw puzzling, family games, joint nature walks, outdoor activities, and local tourism (Benjamin et al., 2020; Borsellino et al., 2020; Kirk and Rifkin, 2020; Sofo and Sofo, 2020; Bohman et al., 2021; Echegaray, 2021; Lõhmus et al., 2021; Matacena et al., 2021; Collins and

Welsh, 2022; Hoolohan et al., 2022; Moynat et al., 2022). Such studies indicate the relevance of reflecting on how issues of social relationships intersect with patterns of consumption and resource demanding lifestyles. Cohen (2020) also points to how difficulties of socializing during the pandemic may have resulted in a decline of other drivers connected to excess consumption, such as status consumption (conspicuous consumption). For example, studies have found that the role of fashion, appearance management, fear of social pressure dampened (Esposti et al., 2021; Kempen and Tobias-Mamina, 2022).

The third theme is about temporal and spatial aspects, more precisely aspects related to mobility, remote working, homebody life and different paces of life during the pandemic. Temporal and spatial aspects are key to consider in analysis of mass/excess consumption (Bauman, 2007; Boström, 2020; Rinkinen et al., 2021). For example, high levels of spending relate to the common experiences of work-life unbalance and hurriedness in social life (Schor, 1998; Knight et al., 2013; Greene et al., 2022). In contrast, freeing up time can help nurture alternative practices (see Gojard and Veron, 2018; Boström, 2022). For some segments of the population, the mobility restrictions and teleworking opportunities brought on by the pandemic created a potential for a slower pace of life and improved work-life balance, which in turn could favor the development of slower alternatives to (fast) consumerism, including practices such as repairing, gardening, developing DIY skills, searching for local food and engaging in "slower" cooking and baking (Ehgartner and Boons, 2020; Jribi et al., 2020; Aktar et al., 2021; Babbitt et al., 2021; Cosgrove et al., 2021; Filimonau et al., 2021; Matacena et al., 2021; Strömblad et al., 2021; Forno et al., 2022; Greene et al., 2022; Moynat et al., 2022). However, the blurring of work and other activities in the home could also increase stress (Sheth, 2020; Echegaray et al., 2021), and more time spent in home can be problematic for other reasons, for example in over-crowded domestic environments (De Groot and Lemanski, 2020). People with strong social relations, generous indoor spaces, and access to outdoor natural environments experienced higher levels of wellbeing (Moynat et al., 2022).

A related important topic is the lower demand for transport, which some expected would continue after the pandemic (Kanda and Kivimaa, 2020). For instance, by use of survey data, one study in the British context found substantial expressions of willingness to reduce car use and air travel also on the long term after the pandemic, which related to experiences of more available time and slower everyday life (O'Garra and Fouquet, 2022). Nonetheless, a key worry is continued avoidance of public transportation and preference for individual modes of transport like cars (Bergantino et al., 2021; Bohman et al., 2021; Eisenmann et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). While spending more time at home reduces demand for transport, a more homebody life will likely increase demand for energy and objects related to the home: online shopping, streaming entertainment, procurement of home appliances, as well as more heating or

cooling (Ehgartner and Boons, 2020; Jiang et al., 2021; Monzón-Chavarrías et al., 2021). Yet another mobility aspect relates to new conceptions and visions of tourism and leisure, which may grow as a result of the pandemic. This includes ideas around home-based leisure such as home gardening and more outdoor activities in the local area (Ehgartner and Boons, 2020; Sofo and Sofo, 2020), domestic, slow and small scale tourism (Ateljevic, 2020; Benjamin et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2020), even virtual reality as replacing travel (Zwanka and Buff, 2020).

One more point to consider concerns how digitalization, lockdown and social distancing have facilitated online shopping, which in literature has been related to time saving and less traveling (Borsellino et al., 2020; Shamshiripour et al., 2020). It is however an open question if this opportunity boost or prevent consumerism. On the one hand it may prevent impulsive buying, as many of the triggers in the physical outlet are removed. On the other, there are 24/7 opportunities for shopping, which may even facilitate opportunities for compulsive buying (Huang et al., 2022).

The fourth theme concerns *de-normalization of mass consumption*. The context is that an individual socialized into mass consumption society tend to perceive contemporary modes and levels of consumption *normal* or *natural*; that is, taken for granted (Schor, 1998; Wilk, 2002; Sassatelli, 2007; Sahakian, 2017; Boström, 2020). As normalization of increased demand is a gradual and unconscious historical process, it is generally gone unnoticed. Indeed, in wealthy societies today, it is seen as perfectly "normal" and "natural" to live a life with ecological footprints that several times exceed the planetary boundaries. Normalization means that existent standards and routines are taken for granted, it prevents consumers' ability to imagine alternatives, such as seeking a happy life with less consumption and lower standards of living. Moreover, deviation from standards (of living) and social norms can result in shame and stigma (Cherrier et al., 2012).

Because things that are taken for granted can be revealed by disruptive events (cf. Kotler, 2020; Sheth, 2020; Tchetchik et al., 2021), the pandemic offered an opportunity to explore possible processes of de-normalization. How and to what extent did the disruption reveal the norms and normality of mass- and excess consumption? COVID-19 research shows that the pandemic provoked some reflexivity (Hoolohan et al., 2022; Moynat et al., 2022), that people started to rethink consumption habits (Aktar et al., 2021; Esposti et al., 2021; Matacena et al., 2021) encouraging mindful consumption and increased attention to health, financial saving, and how the pandemic linked with environmental pressures (Borsellino et al., 2020; Zwanka and Buff, 2020; Echegaray et al., 2021; Orîndaru et al., 2021; Severo et al., 2021; Tchetchik et al., 2021; Schmidt et al., 2022). Such reflections may not cause a general de-normalization of consumer culture, but at least indications of some questioning and increased caution. Ability to distinguish between essential and non-essential consumption have been noticed (Echegaray

et al., 2021; Perkins et al., 2021), and Zwanka and Buff (2020) argue that COVID-19 sensitized us to the fact that individual action may impact on the health of others: "How much 'right' do you have to engage in an activity when it can have harmful effects on others not engaged with you" (Zwanka and Buff, 2020, 65).

The fifth and final theme concerns *new competencies and social support*. The reduction of consumption of commodities will require both cultivation of new individual competences such as making rather than buying, repairing, home cooking, growing own vegetables, and making use of social capital in the local community so people can gather around such skills (Schor and Thompson, 2014; Hagbert and Bradley, 2017). Social capital involves paying analytic attention to the wider social network in the community, to gain symbolic (legitimacy), cognitive (knowledge, ideas, skills), and material/infrastructural resources (platforms for sharing, repairing, etc.). The need to cope with difficulties experienced during the pandemic may hypothetically be a factor for the establishment of new competences and they may activate important aspects of civil society action in terms of mutual helping. What new competencies and broader social support in civil society were activated to facilitate coping with the COVID-19 disruption? Can such or similar support continue after the pandemic, and facilitate a transition toward more sustainable consumption?

Some COVID-19 literature stressed the positive role of new DIY competences in relation to cooking, baking, gardening, repairing and digital technology (Borsellino et al., 2020; Bin et al., 2021; Dartnell and Kish, 2021; Perkins et al., 2021; Forno et al., 2022). Another area is increase of physical activity, which in turn could serve to legitimize more outdoor activities and conservation of nature reserves in the local community (Zwanka and Buff, 2020; Collins and Welsh, 2022), and facilities for biking and bike-sharing (de Haas et al., 2020; Bergantino et al., 2021). Kirk and Rifkin (2020) argue that increased DIY-competences will bolster the feeling of competence and wellbeing thanks to ability to achieve things on one own (see also Sheth, 2020). Moreover, increased frugality competence due to rising economic uncertainty and loss, which involve more saving and redirection of consumption to goods and services, is seen as essential (Echegaray, 2021).

There are also potential negative consequences resulting from the pandemic such as a backlash from collaborative consumption and the sharing of goods and services (de Medeiros et al., 2021). According to Echegaray, because of fear of contagion, there is a "regression toward heightened individualism and giving priority to ownership rather than access" (Echegaray, 2021; p. 569). Perkins et al. (2021) however suggest the pandemic experience may lead to a rejection of "rugged individualism". Rugged individualism is a view of the self as self-reliant, independent, and with capacity to regulate behavior as a result of will and volition, and through the efforts, abilities and decisions of the individual. This was evident in the practice of hoarding, as well as in the hunt for resources

such as ventilators, vaccine, and personal protective equipment. Nonetheless, this idea of the sovereign individual might have been shown increasingly impossible as a way to solve crises, instead favoring a collective responsibility: "the pandemic points to the fact that we must totally redefine what it means to be an individual in relation to others" (Perkins et al., 2021; p. 6). Another positive scenario is pictured by Collins and Welsh (2022) suggesting, by experiences from the UK context, that the pandemic could catalyze a "green recovery" on the local level, including support for more localized economies (see also Dartnell and Kish, 2021; Nemes et al., 2021; Forno et al., 2022). Experience with networks and neighborhood groups providing essential practical and emotional support for the most vulnerable could strengthen local social capital and a sense of care for the local, thus creating a preparedness for future health/environmental crises.

Method and material

This study is based on a total of 33 interviews, 23 with Swedish consumers and 10 with Irish consumers. During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, from March – May 2021, semi structured interviews were conducted with people living in Sweden. Sweden stands out in international comparison as one of very few countries to avoid strict "lockdown" measures. Society has remained relatively open, and the strategy has relied more on voluntary compliance with recommendations than legislation and penalties. To complement the Swedish interviews, ten interviews with Irish participants were conducted between August and November 2021. The study was not designed as a cross-cultural comparison, rather to increase the span of experience among interviewees.

In contrast to Sweden, Ireland has seen some of the harshest COVID-19 restrictions in Europe. At the time of the interviews, the participants had been through three full lockdowns. Measures during these lockdowns included the closing down of all non-essential retail and hospitality, a complete ban on both public and private gatherings, as well as strict limits on non-essential travel. In spring 2020, movement within a 2 km radius of one's home for exercise purposes was permitted, this was later extended to 5 km (Government of Ireland, 2022). Failure to comply with these, and other, measures could result in a fine (An Garda Síochána, 2021). Naturally, these measures meant opportunities for consumption and other activities were far more restricted in Ireland. However, despite the absence of full lockdowns and penalties for non-compliance, everyday life was far from unaffected in Sweden. Shops, bars and restaurants may have remained open but restrictions on opening hours and number of visitors allowed did intensify over time, and the maximum number of participants allowed at public gatherings went as low as eight in November 2020 (Government

Offices of Sweden, 2022). In additions to these measures, all citizens were expected to follow general recommendations to avoid social contact (Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2022). As a result, consumption went down drastically in some areas like traveling, purchase of new cars, hotels/restaurants, and clothes (drop only in Sweden). Household expenditure on goods and service dropped 10% in Ireland 2020[1]. In Sweden, total household consumption in 2020 dropped 4.7% compared with 2019, however according to tentative figures a return to almost previous volumes in 2021 (Holmberg, 2022). The recommendation to work from home if possible was also adhered to in both Ireland and Sweden, with possible knock-on effects on consumption. By the end of 2020, 46% of Irish workers worked at least partially from home (Central Statistics Office, 2021). At the start of 2021, similar figures were reported in Sweden: 42% worked at least partially from home (Statistics Sweden, 2021).

Interviewees in both locations were selected purposively, the main criterion being that they were "mainstream consumers" in their own opinion. In total of 23 women and 12 men participated. Two of the Swedish interviews were conducted with couples living together. A few of the Swedish participants were single and some lived in apartments, but most were houseowners with a live-in partner or spouse. The living conditions of the Irish participants were more diverse and also included young adults living with their parents or "housemates". The age of the participants range between mid-twenties and early seventies and the sample includes students, people employed in public and private sector, on sick leave and retirees. The Swedish participants lived mainly in mid-size towns in central Sweden. The Irish participants were mainly concentrated in and around Dublin city. In terms of social class, there is a slight middle-class bias in the Swedish sample whereas around half of the Irish participants have a working-class background.

The interview guide was based on the five themes guiding the study and the same guide was used throughout the study, only with added follow-up questions for a more in-depth interview. Participants were encouraged to elaborate and speak from their own experiences of their consumption patterns during the pandemic, covering the five guiding themes. Interviews lasted about 60 min.

Interviews were mainly conducted online *via* Zoom, however four participants wished for telephone interviews which was granted. Physical meetings were not offered to minimize the risk of Coronavirus transmission during the pandemic.

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and analyzed thematically. To ensure participants' identities

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1 See Available online at: https://www.cso.ie/en/ releasesandpublications/ep/p-elic/economiclifeandcovid-19inireland2020-2021/whatweconsumed/ (accessed May 09, 2022).

remain anonymous, personal details have been left out. For ethical considerations and concerning the GDPR, questions about personal and sensitive matters were excluded from the interviews.

Findings

Desire: Longing for socializing, traveling, and cultural activities

When looking for the most desirable objects among participants' statements, the results show, as also noticed by others (de Haas et al., 2020; Echegaray, 2021; Moynat et al., 2022), that it was not material objects they missed the most. Despite the closure of non-essential retail during the lockdowns in Ireland, none of the participants described this as a major problem as most goods were available to purchase online. In Sweden, which did not enter a state of complete lockdown, material needs could be met by also visiting conventional stores.

What the participants longed for were new experiences to break the everyday routine as well as social relationships. Firstly, the wish to travel seems to be the most desirable area of consumption during the pandemic. Many of the Swedish participants expressed a desire to travel abroad but they also expressed a longing to travel within the country for leisurely weekend trips as well as visiting friends and extended family. Regarding air travel, it was not unusual for participants to fly to other countries in Europe or other parts of the world at least once a year, sometimes more.

However, not all participants were frequent travelers before the pandemic and yet others claimed they did not miss foreign travel as they found plenty to do in their country. Instead of traveling abroad, people traveled within Swedish borders, to the mountains or other typical tourist areas. Some were owners of holiday homes or boats and made more use of this. While at home, participants favored, for example, visiting lakes, biking, hiking and golfing. Outdoor activities with family guided their interests.

In Ireland, the perceived need to travel abroad was emphasized more strongly. Close to all Irish participants brought up international travel as the number one thing that they missed. The restrictions on movement within the country, at least during the lockdowns, may have played a role in this as the option to replace international travel with domestic travel was more limited. To some, it was not travel *per se* that was missed but freedom of movement in a larger sense:

> I was longing for freedom. Because, before the pandemic, I would have went on a few holidays a year to wind down. That was taken away. And for a long time, we couldn't even travel outside 5K without being stopped by the guards. It felt

like there was guarded checkpoints on every corner, and they were questioning where you were going. So I definitely feel like a lot of my freedom was taken away (Interview IE_32).

The second area of consumption missed was going to restaurants and cafés. In Ireland, several participants also brought up the pub as an area of consumption that they missed. However, as we will see in the next section on social relationships, some of the participants actually saw spending less time in the pub as positive aspect of the pandemic.

Thirdly, cultural events, such as concerts, theatrical- and musical plays, were much longed for by some interviewees. As most Irish participants lived in Dublin city these activities usually did not necessitate travel but for the Swedish participants, they were often linked to weekend trips to a bigger city. However, some also mentioned missing the local cultural events such as art exhibitions and the musical life in churches. In addition, others mention sporting events and the missed opportunities to visit the local arena to watch ice-hockey or football.

Travel, going to restaurants, concerts and sporting events are all desires linked to consumption. However, when one delved deeper into the reason why these activities where missed, it was clear that it was not the consumption itself that was missed but rather the social relational aspects of this form of consumption (see also next theme). When looking for long-term transformation possibilities this opens up at least some opportunities for de-emphasizing consumer objects. Many participants described realizing what *truly matters* during the pandemic. In the Swedish case in particular, several participants also expressed a heightened sense of appreciation for the local area. Their leisure activities during the pandemic also show a wide variety of possibilities to spend future holidays closer to home with the benefit of reducing emissions by less travel and the additional consumption connected with traveling[2]. In Ireland, although many saw spending more time outdoors as a positive aspect of the pandemic, this was mainly seen as a benefit to their own sense of wellbeing, and they did not envision reduced air travel abroad in the post-pandemic future. All but two of the Irish interviewees had already been on at least one international flight at the time of the interview. The timing does play a role here, whereas the Swedish interviews were conducted at the height of the pandemic restrictions, the Irish interviews were conducted at a time when societies had opened up somewhat which facilitated more extensive travel.

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2 It is possible that Swedish families, who have lived in Sweden for generations, find it natural to go out in nature due to the Right of Public Access. The Right of Public Access can be seen as part of the Swedish cultural heritage and is a part of the Swedish constitutional rights. Access to a holiday home is also far more common in Sweden than in many other countries, including Ireland.

Confirming social relations by (non)-consumption

As shown in the previous section, social life is closely linked with consumption. Participants valued social relationships higher than before the coronavirus outbreak, and some participants gained new perspectives on the intersection between socializing and consumption.

Common everyday social activities before the pandemic were, for example, meeting for lunches, shopping at lunch time, going to the gym, visiting the shopping center during the weekend, and going on spa weekends. In the Irish interviews, pre-pandemic activities were in some respects clearly gendered. The men interviewed where more inclined to see the pub as central to their social life, whereas several women described regular shopping trips to the UK with friends or family. When the pandemic put all this to a halt, social activities had to take on different forms. As larger gatherings were not allowed, social life circled around seeing perhaps one close friend or only people within the household. For Swedish participants living close to family members and friends, socializing took part mainly outdoors. They met at home in private gardens, went for walks in the local neighborhood or hikes and picnics further afield. Going for walks in the local area was a common pastime in Ireland as well, but during the lockdown visiting other people's gardens was prohibited which limited options even further, as did the 2–5 km restriction on domestic travel.

When unable to meet in person, participants kept in touch over the phone or *via* online video calls. Several Irish participants said online quizzes and games with friends were common at the start of the pandemic, but that this gradually died down as it was not the same as meeting in real life. One 34-year-old man whose Dungeons and Dragons game had moved online said he preferred the in-person game as the flow of conversation was better, but he also saw a benefit to moving online as he had reconnected with friends who had moved abroad and who could now take part in the game. Some other positive side effects were also mentioned, such as sharing meals at home with the spouse, which at other times was not possible due to working hours. Additionally, socializing outdoors felt "healthier" and it was perceived as easier as cooking was not required and the home didn't have to be prepared with extra cleaning. Many expressed a wish to continue with the new habit of spending more time in nature:

The sort of consumption that's not beneficial... it is a short-lived enjoyment, but not important anymore. That will be the biggest change – no more Saturdays in town, wasting time... I much rather spend time in nature with my doggy and people I enjoy being with (Interview SE_20).

Some participants testified to consumption being expected together with friends and a few expressed a new insight: they

were now able to get together and have a good relationship without having to consume as much. Again, participants claimed they now cared more about their social relationships than before the pandemic and some expressed that they had connected on a deeper level with friends and family as the pandemic had forced them to spend time together in a more pared down way. A 28-year-old Irish woman described it the following way:

> It is a better thing, being out in nature and being away from other distractions. I mean, the pub could be distracting sometimes – you are there for the wrong reasons. Sometimes you go to a restaurant just because it is a new restaurant and a cool restaurant… You are going there because it is cool and hip and whatever. Whereas your real motivation should be that you want to spend time with that person, and it should not really matter where you go (InterviewIE_24).

A 23-year-old male participant from Ireland also described connecting with his friends in a more meaningful way during the pandemic. Instead of going to the pub they had gone for walks together and he found that away from the "toxic show-offiness" of the pub, he got to see real parts of his friends that he had not seen before.

From a transformative perspective we can see some clear incentives for long term social change on this theme. As social life was taken outdoors it came with several positive side effects such as health benefits, less stress, a more easy-going lifestyle in social life and, in some cases, more meaningful relationships. In both countries, some – albeit far from all – clearly expressed a new insight that they had found a way to socialize without consuming as much. We see this insight as highly important on both an individual level, as well as on a group level. If consumption can no longer be the common ground for interaction and socializing in social life, an appealing alternative must be found.

Temporal and spatial aspects: Slowing down and homebody life

This third theme appeared to be the most significant in our study. The participants' reflections on the changing temporal and spatial aspects of consumption during the pandemic are divided into several aspects.

First, an interesting result is that most participants in both Sweden and Ireland stated they *gained time* during the pandemic. Everyday life on a whole *slowed down*. It is particularly clear among those working remotely, but others too, testify to gaining time even when working away from home (less crowded commuting). Even retirees gained time, for example by not going to the regular exercise class or joining various social activities.

For most people who lived with a family or a partner, gaining time was seen as positive and as stress reducing. While social gatherings were missed, participants described how pleasant it was to slow down, take it easier, and spend time with their family without the expectation to socialize outside of the family. Indulging in more time on their own, the home itself became more important and participants expressed that they valued their everyday life to a greater extent. The pandemic also gave room for other interests: outdoor activities, cooking, bread baking or caring for the home and garden.

The extent to which the slower tempo was perceived to reduced consumption varied a great deal between the participants. Several participants devoted time to clear up among belongings and to some, finally having time to do this led to new insights about their possessions. A 28-year Irish woman described her experiences the following way:

> Before I buy something, I think "would I rather wear what I have at home?" […] I donated 16 bags, over covid, of shoes, clothes, bags, everything. That was a huge change. I got rid of everything that I did not like or that I did not want. I now have like a template of clothes that I love. That I always gravitate toward (Interview IE_24).

For a number of the Swedish and Irish interviewees, like the 28-year-old Irish woman quoted above, the slower tempo led to a greater appreciation for what she already had and a decreased need to buy new clothes. However, shopping is not always about the goods themselves, it can also be an *activity* that fills time. For some participants, shopping was substituted by other activities such as walks in nature with the dog. Others found it more difficult to "fill their time" and expressed that their lives had become dreary, uneventful, and repetitive in parts. This dreariness was in large part attributed to a lack of social connections and some people also described feeling lonely. Among those who perceived life as dull during the pandemic, there seemed to be a tendency toward wanting to return to a previous lifestyle with frequent air travel and consumption patterns related to their social life. These people were also more likely to say consumption, especially online, had increased during the pandemic. Hence, consuming was a way of breaking up the monotony of life during the pandemic. As one 34-year-old Irish man described it: looking forward to concerts or holidays was replaced by the anticipation of waiting for a package to be delivered.

A second aspect concerned *a shift in consumption in terms of buying for the home*. When travel, cultural life, and restaurant dinners were impossible to carry out, consumption shifted toward the home and outdoor equipment. One Swedish family hired a garden architect instead of spending money on travel. Another family bought home décor and equipment for hiking and golfing instead of buying new clothes for parties and a trip to Thailand, a 49-year-old Swedish woman said:

> *Focus has shifted from spending time and money outside of home, home is more important now, so that's where we focus. … "Oh, we need a new chair" or "this room needs a makeover". Consumption has shifted in a way, I think (Interview SE_05).*

Several participants described spending more money on home improvement. They had spare time to do this kind of work and, as most of the participants had not been seriously economically affected by the pandemic, they had money to spend on their homes that they would normally have spent on other things. Some also described how spending more time at home made them see "flaws" in the home context that had not been apparent before. Official statistics confirms this picture of relocation of spending, however with some difference in the Swedish and Irish contexts[3]. Remote working and schooling[4] created additional needs for the home: desks, chairs, computer screens, increased internet capacity. A need for a new kind of home infrastructure occurred as consequence of the pandemic. Even demand for home extensions may result on long term (see Hand et al., 2007), although this was not generally emphasized by interviewees.

Many of the participants appreciated the convenience and flexibility of remote working. They describe saving both time and money working from home. Parents, in particular, expressed that it improved their work-life balance. Work is expected to be more flexible post-pandemic as well and several participants already had arrangements in place to continue working from home at least part of the week. There were a few exceptions, however. One 34-year-old Irish man missed the separation between work and home. Despite saving at least an hour a day not commuting to work, he found that not having a clear end point to the working day made him much less efficient: "it was always a little bit of procrastinating and a little bit of working way too many hours".

Reflections about the climate and environment appeared quite frequently among participants in relation to remote work, everyday commuting and business trips to attend meetings. Both commuting and business trips were perceived to be unnecessary climate change drivers which several participants were happy to abstain from. The participants' willingness to keep working from home part of the time, is a promising sign of societal

change toward sustainable lifestyles as it implies less demand on mobility.

A third aspect concerned a *shift in consumption in terms of buying from the home.* The pandemic not only affected *what* the participants did and did not buy, it also affected *how* and *where* they bought them. Unsurprisingly, following accelerated digitalization (Echegaray et al., 2021), online shopping increased during the pandemic. Most participants were already accustomed to online shopping before the pandemic. Although some said they preferred in-store shopping, the transition to shopping more online seemed to have been relatively smooth for most participants.

Although the advantages (convenience) and disadvantages (unable to touch and try items) were described in similar ways, how the different forms of consumption affected consumption behavior differed. For some, impulsive purchases heavily decreased during the pandemic as they did not frequent regular stores as often. Remote working played a role here because several participants mentioned less opportunities to shop when working from home: possibilities for the spontaneous lunch time shopping sprees at city center were removed. For this group of people, shopping online was more carefully planned, thus minimizing spontaneous impulse buys. For others, impulse buying actually increased during the pandemic. Many spent a lot of time online during the pandemic and online, shopping is easily accessible 24/7. A 23-year-old Irish male described spontaneously buying a jacket at 1:00 AM simply because he wanted it. To a 64-year-old Irish woman, online shopping became a "leisure activity" that staved off the boredom during the pandemic.

Some also expressed that their shopping choices had become more strategic during the pandemic. A few of the Swedish participants used to be frequent e-shoppers but because of the pandemic's negative effect on conventional stores they chose to make conscious purchases in physical shops to support the local economy. Supporting the local economy was also brought up as important in Ireland and some participants showed concern that online shopping was turning Dublin into a "ghost town".

As regards transformative potential, above reflections on slower tempo of life, less demand for mobility, shifting consumption, experience of less impulsive buying (among some), and support of local economy, are interesting even though not always motivated by sustainability concerns. Even if the possible sustainability gains due to shifts in consumption are difficult to assess, a greater focus on the home environment may stimulate more durable ways of consumption at least if it reduces demand on (fast) mobility. Indeed, it has been found that the reduction in travel outweighed the increase in household energy consumption (Yao, 2022). In each country, some of the interviewees linked their experiences to environmental benefits, thus indicating a learning experience toward mindful consumption (Echegaray et al., 2021). To be sure, if new workweek habits and the home environment can be realized

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3   Spending for communication increased in both countries, whereas more spending related to the home (furniture, household appliances) is clearer in the Swedish context (see Holmberg, 2022), and for Ireland see https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-elic/economiclifeandcovid-19inireland2020-2021/whatweconsumed/ (accessed May 09, 2022).

4   In Ireland, schools for all age groups were closed intermittently. In Sweden, it was primarily upper secondary schools that were affected.

as a crucial factor to achieve work-life balances, which in turn lead to less consumption and more careful use of resources, this opportunity will have to be facilitated by a range of other policy and infrastructural factors in the local and national context.

Little de-normalization of mass consumption, some ambivalence and reflexivity

The main question in this section is if the effects of the pandemic contributed to discovering and de-normalizing patterns of mass/excess consumption. We do not see much basic questioning of consumer culture in the material but we do see some ambivalence and reflexivity, which may open up some doors for later transformations.

To begin with, and related to above themes, a few participants did describe that the pandemic had led to reflections on the climate crisis in a wider sense. With more spare time to take part of news and reading books, some of these people had started a process to change their lifestyle toward sustainability. One example is a 36-year-old participant who decided to leave work in a restaurant for a career in horticulture, a long-lived dream that the pandemic left room for. In this case, it was not only about consuming less, but in addition, developing new skills and learning to grow food and plants.

In most interviews, however, the normality of mass consumption and air travel was never truly questioned. For instance, the possibility of long-distance vacation travel at least once a year was taken for granted, as well as winter vacations at ski resorts. Shopping trips to the mall or downtown were perceived as a natural part of everyday life, as was gift shopping for birthdays and Christmas. Casually expressing that "one has too many things" without questioning the lifestyle, occurs among participants. A few Irish participants did reflect on the amount of waste they created during the lockdowns, both from eating at home and from excess packaging from online shopping. This, however, was mainly framed as an inconvenience and did not lead to much reflection about mass/excess consumption society.

Although it was not always framed as a questioning of the normality of mass-consumption, some experiences discussed in the previous themes indicate the pandemic did have some impact on the way we perceive our lives. These are indicating some *ambivalence toward consumption*. For instance, the slower pace of life and the chance to reflect on what is important had led several participants to take stock of what they really *need*. As the home became more central in peoples' lives, belongings were experienced in a different way. Some cleared away unnecessary belongings by selling, donating or throwing excess belongings. Even though many participants identified a need for refurbishing and wished to buy new things for their

home, others stated that they were satisfied with what they had and felt less need to exchange the old with something new:

> *The desire to get new things must be set aside because there's something bigger going on. You value what you've got. You can cherish being healthy… The realization is that what I've got is good enough. I don't need to buy new things, my belongings have a value that I didn't see before (Interview SE_08).*

Some said they valued their health more than before, others emphasized putting more value on their relationships. One 40-year-old women from Ireland described coming to a such a realization around the time of her daughter's birthday. Before the event, she had been worried that the celebrations would not live up to the daughter's expectations. All the toyshops were closed and, unlikely most other participants, she avoided online shopping as she found it technically difficult. The daughter had also been promised a pirate themed birthday party at play center with her friends but that had to be canceled due to the restrictions. In the end, they ended up celebrating the birthday at home as a family and with a few small gifts from a local shop. Her daughter's reaction was an eye-opener:

> *She still says to this day, "you know mum, that birthday was brilliant" […] So people have it in their heads that they have to buy expensive stuff or really nice brand names. When all the child wanted was to have the day with you painting porcelain (Interview IE_33).*

The woman quoted above says the slower tempo during the pandemic had made her think more about her consumption and what she really needs and values. However, she also stated that as Irish society was starting to open up again, she found herself starting to slip back into old habits. This idea of an outside force pulling you toward consuming was also described by other participants, such as this 27-year-old Swedish man:

> *[…] even though I'm satisfied there's a feeling that maybe I should get something new. It is as if someone is pulling my arms – "remember, what you've got is good enough, but wouldn't it be fun to have something else?". Despite all things happening, there's a pull in the opposite direction saying one should go out and buy something new (Interview SE_08).*

The ambivalence expressed by this person is recurring in several interviews. However, reflectivity is infrequent, and interviewees also express contradictory aspirations. For example, one Swedish person described a wish for a minimalist lifestyle, owning fewer things, yet expressed how cozy it is to go shopping and that a variety of shopping activities is a way of making time with friends.

In the Irish interviews in particular, there is also a clear distinction between how the participants discuss their needs

regarding possession of goods, especially clothing, and their needs for travel. Whilst many had come to some realization that it was wasteful to have more clothes than they would ever wear, few were willing to reduce their travel abroad. This applied even to some of the younger participants who expressed a greater awareness of the negative climate impacts of air travel. One 25-year-old man said "I always envisioned my 20s as the time to see different places. To see different things. Meet new people". The pandemic had put a halt to this, and he was eager to start traveling again. At the same time, he said:

> *I'm very aware of the negative impacts of airline travel. I am trying to offset my emissions and things like that. Yeah, I'm probably going to go on another couple of trips this year, just small trips. After that, hopefully I'll start to become a little bit more conscious again of, I don't know, I guess contributing to the amount of emissions of CO2 (Interview IE28).*

Consumption is intrinsically linked to how much money one can spend. As a result, it is not surprising that the participants whose economic circumstances had changed said that this change had a bigger impact on consumption patterns than the Covid-restrictions. One participant, for example, had recently retired which led to a reduced income. Another had lived with her grandmother, but as this arrangement felt unsafe during the pandemic she moved out, resulting in much higher living costs. With the socially limiting effect of the pandemic, some found new leisure activities and several participants stated that they spent money in new areas of consumption (see above section), but it was also quite common that participants brought up saving money during the pandemic. In the Irish interviews in particular, this was often seen as one of the main benefits of reducing one's consumption and those that did reflect more on how their consumption had changed during the pandemic often framed it in terms of spending their money more wisely now. It was also common in both Ireland and Sweden that people brought up the savings made by working from home as workdays in town are costly with regards to transport, parking fees, lunches, shopping, and a need for more of a variety of clothes, make-up and hair products.

To sum up, even if this material shows little evidence of de-normalization of mass consumption, some *transformative potential* can be linked to experience of ambivalence as well as reflectivity related to earlier themes as well as to feelings of contentment (with what one has) and financial savings. A small minority of participants even made a conscious choice to live more sustainably in a more holistic sense. This minority already had an interest in environmental issues prior to the pandemic, but the pandemic strengthened their concerns and provided a window of opportunity to realize plans. Apart from this minority, there is little to suggest that the pandemic had led to a heightened concern for environmental issues. Even so, the other types of insights related to tempo, relationships, saving, etc.

could make a good platform for social transformation. Perhaps most promising is the fact that a few participants did reflect upon the time consumed at work and about people working too much in general in our societies. This potentially shows a willingness to reduce working hours, with reduced household income and level of consumption as a result, in order to gain time to be spent with friends and family.

New competencies and social support: Sticking with individualized adaptation

In the new situation following the pandemic, what we can observe from the material is the mainly individualized adaptation to the societal crisis. We are not suggesting a kind of "rugged individualism" (Perkins et al., 2021) as discussed earlier, rather an approach characterized by business as usual. Problems were usually solved within existing institutions: the market. There was an open and available market for most needs to be met, either by online purchases or conventional purchases. In general, people managed on their own and cared for their family by, for example, grocery shopping for older parents who couldn't go to the store themselves due to restrictions. In Ireland, helping the elderly was in some cases more community based and one participant said she helped elderly neighbors with their shopping. The same participant, a 40-year-old woman, also mentioned that they had arranged street bingo on their street as many older people missed going to the bingo hall and she said the sense of community had strengthened during the pandemic. Utterances like these were rare, however.

Home refurbishing, home decorating projects and car repairs could continue as usual, although some chose to postpone these activities. After all, when perceived necessary, it was possible to carry out. This can be a contributing factor to why thoughts about a sharing economy or circular economy do not appear among participants and do not seem to have caught on during the pandemic. Additionally, in case people wished to borrow, rent, or buy second-hand goods etc., the risk for virus transmission was a natural hinderance. In the Irish case, who one was even *allowed* to let into one's home was heavily restricted at times.

There were a few examples of people repairing things themselves that they probably would not have under other circumstances. For example, one young Irish man said he had become "techier" and learnt to repair some electronic himself and a 62-year-old Irish woman had managed to fix a leaking washing machine herself. Generally speaking, these types of stories were rare and it is possible that central elements of a circular economy, such as repairing or buying used goods, are connected to an idea of lower quality in life. In some cases, participants even showed amusement when asked if they had learned to repair something, perhaps because people are so used

to services for practical help or buying new whenever we want. Repairing belongings used to be a sign you could not afford to buy new. Nowadays, many in both Sweden and Ireland are financially much better off than the previous generation and many positive emotions, as well as social status, can be linked to buying what you wish for. As one of the participants in their 70's expressed:

> Clothes were expensive in relation to the pay, which resulted in mending things, so that they lasted longer, and it was worth it. When the zipper broke, the item itself was perhaps still good, because it had better quality. It was the same with appliances – they were better. It was worth fixing. And it was expensive buying new compared to repairing (Interview SE_20).

Except for the general economic development, it was mentioned that things used to be of higher quality. Some of the participants who want to reduce their consumption intended to buy clothes of better quality to be able to keep them longer. One Swedish participant mentioned a wish for businesses where you can drop off things for repair, and a 23-year-old Irish participant had actually had clothes taken in by a tailor as he had lost a lot of weight during the pandemic. He was himself surprised he had taken this action and did not think it would have happened without the pandemic. His main motivation for doing this was to support a local business, showing that this can indeed lead to more sustainable choices at times.

There are some additional examples of changes during the pandemic. Several participants learnt to cut their own or family members hair. In one household, more time was devoted to gardening and learning to reduce household waste by composting. One person planned for self-sufficiency simply because it was fun to be able to do as much as possible on her own. Yet another person, who had gained more free time, went out to pick wild berries and gave it away as gifts. It is interesting and noteworthy that many of these activities are described as positive outcomes of the crisis. It was not linked to poor finances, rather, it related to an increased quality of life and something they wished to continue as it was very rewarding on a personal level. It is mainly there we found most positive signs of learning and transformative potential.

Concluding discussion: Any long-term lifestyle transformation possibilities?

This study stems from knowledge about man exceeding the planetary boundaries. Part of the problem is mass/excess consumption. Mass/excess consumption can be difficult to discover in wealthy societies like Sweden and Ireland, where people regardless of social class, grow up in a context where it

is viewed as normal. Some groups try to develop new lifestyles with less consumption, but the norm is that we are supposed to overconsume to keep the economy spinning.

As a consequence of changed weather resulting in floods, wildfires, hurricanes, heat waves, and drought in Europe and other parts of the world during the summer of 2021 and 2022, people lost their homes, belongings and lives. News headlines and broadcasts are now describing what researchers have long claimed; climate change will have severe effects and changes to our society and a transformation of our lifestyle is necessary. Given such circumstances, the discrepancy between the interviewees' limited reflections upon their personal responsibility and the larger picture is quite remarkable.

This study has captured a variety of individual experiences during a time of involuntary disruption of consumption patterns and looked for tendencies, or at least possible readiness, for a transformation toward sustainable lifestyles. What possible long-term lifestyle transformation can we detect by interpreting and analyzing these experiences? In relation to theme one, it is noteworthy that people did not generally long for material objects: they missed meeting people, cultural/sports events, traveling and freedom of movement (see also de Haas et al., 2020; Echegaray, 2021; Moynat et al., 2022). There is learning potential contained here: relations and experiences are most important. The exceptional desire for traveling abroad, which for most interviewees implied flying, does present an obstacle to climate change mitigation. However, several interviewees also came to recognize the value of domestic destinations. This opening – or perhaps rediscovering of the country and local place – of a new alternative is important (Ateljevic, 2020; Benjamin et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2020).

Quite connected, a long-term possibility with findings related to the second theme is that people have discovered new activities at home as well as in outdoor life, and that it is possible to enjoy time spent with relatives, neighbors, and friends doing rather mundane activities such as taking a walk, biking, or making daytrips to lakes and beaches. Several interviewees spoke about positive win-win experiences and insights connected to this: health issues, more easygoing and caring ways of socializing without having to rely on so much consumption.

The greatest long-term possibilities may be connected to the third theme, which encouraged rich responses among the interviewees. That people have become accustomed to and generally appreciated – although far from unanimously – a slower pace of life is an important dimension of wellbeing (Echegaray et al., 2021; Moynat et al., 2022), and it could be an important component to confronting consumerism (Greene et al., 2022). To be sure, the relatively stress-free pandemic existence described by the participants is not representative for all, frontline workers would be the most obvious counter example, and it was not always the case that freeing up time and spending more of it at home led to less consumption. Some participants consumed out of boredom, and some spent more

on goods and services for the home than before. Nonetheless, freed time could stimulate the cultivation of alternatives to consumption: time to reflect, slower and more sustainable options (food, mobility), educating for lifestyle change.

Results connected to the fourth and fifth themes were less promising looking from the perspective of long-term transformative possibilities. Few people in the sample have started to fundamentally question consumer culture. The pandemic seems to have created an enhanced interest for the environment and global climate change among those who already cared for the environment before the pandemic (see also Forno et al., 2022; O'Garra and Fouquet, 2022; Schmidt et al., 2022), but there is little sign of mass consumption being denormalized among the more "mainstream" consumers. This may not be very surprising as they live in contexts where macro-forces (economy, politics, culture) continue to steer the public toward mass consumption patterns. Nevertheless, even among this category of consumers, the COVID-19 pandemic stimulated some consumer reflectivity, which connected more to personal issues like that of financial saving, health matters, unnecessary possessions as well as issues related to above themes: time and relationships (see also Matacena et al., 2021; Moynat et al., 2022). Some reflections were also stimulated by the ambiguities surrounding the experience/understanding of freedom. While people suffered when their freedom of movement was restricted (e.g., purchasing a flight abroad), the restrictions could at the same time open the field of view for other dimensions of freedom (e.g., freeing up time, alternative ways of moving). Such experienced ambiguities could provide important cues for a wider critique of narrow neo-liberal framings that equates freedom to consumer choice and the ability to choose among a larger span of commodities for sale on a market (including traveling options).

The fifth theme was the one with least signs of transformative potential. Perhaps unsurprisingly – community life was after all restricted – there were few examples of collective ways of helping each other. Even if people expressed that the pandemic had facilitated a care for others in their thoughts and by some action, they, like before, employed individual (commoditized) solutions when practical problems appeared. There are examples shown in the interviews about making repairs, borrowing things, growing own food, and improved DIY-competence. These examples are, however, exceptions and thoughts about a sharing economy, circular economy and similar concepts do not appear to have spread among participants. Buying new is still the norm.

Seen together, these long-term lifestyle transformation possibilities are perhaps not overly impressive, but neither are they insignificant or irrelevant. Some practices in relation to eating, mobility, shopping, leisure, and work will likely stay (online shopping/entertainment/socializing, homebody practices, see e.g., Ehgartner and Boons, 2020; Shamshiripour et al., 2020; Echegaray, 2021; Perkins et al., 2021; Pomponi

et al., 2021). Because the pandemic has lasted a long time, new practices get sufficient time to bolster, and once you have changed practices there is a resistance to change back again (de Haas et al., 2020). Other practices, fueled by the pre-existing and very forceful macro-institutional structures of mass consumption, have already "bounced back to normal" (see Boström, 2021b), since the restrictions were removed. Clearly in these cases there would be a need for several system-level changes in order to sustain temporary changes of habits. Nonetheless, the impetus for system change could rely on some important learning experiences among the public. Even though people expected return to normal as regards consumption, the everyday experiences around what the disruption caused will sustain in collective memories. Such a *collective memory* offers an opportunity for politics, policy, civil society, social movements, and new economies to think differently and try out alternatives and remind about what was once possible. For the purpose here, we narrow down the topic to address two types of responses that open up some possibilities, first some embryonic transformative learning gained by experiences of ambiguity and reflexivity and second the fostering of adaptative abilities.

First, sustainable consumer practices will arguably require a deeper, more demanding and long-term process of self-learning of lifestyle practices. We here get back to the concept of transformative learning that was introduced in the theory section. There is not much evidence of fundamental challenging of frames of references and "habits of mind" in the material among this sample of mainstream consumers. Hence, we cannot see plenty of transformative learning in the interview material. Nevertheless, some of the experiences and new insights (around personal consumption, slower pace of life, freeing up time, the importance of social relations, financial saving, satisfaction of what one has) can provide initial learning points that paves ground for more basic questioning of "habits of mind". Experiences of ambiguities, even inner contradictions, may lead to feelings of uneasiness, and such dissonance can in turn be a constructive force behind change (Ojala, 2016). There are some expressions of contradictions and ambivalence in relation to consumption among the participants, for example an awareness that new purchases are often unnecessary and damaging, but when you live in a social context where consumption is central, you buy, regardless. Change will certainly not happen automatically from the individual but require a large dose of external incitements: carrots, sticks, norms, reference groups, social and community support, and better coverage of the problem of mass consumption in news media.

Second, an important observation with huge policy-implications is that around adaptative abilities (Strömblad et al., 2021; Hoolohan et al., 2022). The interviews indeed reveal that people relatively easy adapted to the situation during the pandemic with covid-related restrictions. Noteworthy is also that they generally legitimized the restrictions, hence top-down governance. Based on this observation, we can argue there is a

possibility that people have expressed and fostered an adaptive ability, not totally unlike the kind that might be needed for ecological and climate adapted lifestyles. If things turn worse, people have shown they can adapt as well as accept restrictions. On the individual level, some households saved money during the pandemic when they reduced their consumption, sometimes with an aim to bolster individual resilience. Also, we must not forget how above-mentioned positive experiences and the reconceptualizing of wellbeing can facilitate adaptive abilities. This topic is an important area for further research, particularly such using qualitative methodology and longitudinal design to capture how experiences, learning, and practices of various groups of people/communities evolve over time (see Boström, 2022 for an example).

Acceptance of restricting measures may rely on the expected time frame; that is, seeing the disruption as temporary or permanent. The COVID-19 crisis shows that in a crisis situation, governments can mandate deep lifestyle changes, with the assumption that this was for a limited period of time (Echegaray et al., 2021). The pandemic was seen as an urgent, fast threat for all social segments in society causing immediate motivation to act whereas climate change tends to be considered an abstract, slow, future-distant threat (Lidskog et al., 2020; Heyd, 2021). In face of expected climate change, privileged groups/societies may perceive they have available resources to gradually adapt to changing circumstances without the need of macro-structural change. If we want to see structural changes, the threat needs to be perceived as immediate, also among the more already privileged groups in society. The alternative must appear (more) attractive (than the existing crisis) and give people a sense of wellbeing. Although we are still far from a situation in which the general public, motivated by climate change arguments, is ready to accept and adapt to very significant restrictions and further de-normalizing consumer society, we should not rule out the possibilities of a gradually increased public readiness to legitimize such restrictions, particularly if various types of crises (disruptions) return with increased regularity. In a Dutch study it was found that more than 90% of respondents thought the pandemic crisis will have large, long-term impacts on society (de Haas et al., 2020). The very existence of such beliefs – and now people add the Russian war on Ukraine, high inflation, and ever-recurring climate-related crises like the drought and forest fires in Central and Southern Europe summer of 2022 to the bank of experience – could mean that people adapt to a presumed long-term scenario, making the scenario becoming real exactly because of this adaptation. Studying if such broader legitimacy evolves is an important area of longitudinal research.

At the end of the day, while some changed practices at the time of the pandemic will likely remain (like blurring of home and work), there are other temporary changes during the pandemic that will need much external encouragement if changed practices are to continue, including material/technological/infrastructural support by governments and other collective actors (Echegaray et al., 2021; Forno et al., 2022; Hoolohan et al., 2022), including measures such as workweek reduction and the role of workplace as time-ordering institutions (Boström, 2021b; Greene et al., 2022). For instance, one of the conditions for long term adaptation to transformed lifestyles and smaller ecological footprints is to create infrastructures (for energy, transportation, food provision, housing, workhours) that enable people to live sustainable while also enjoying quality of life. Here are also important roles for civil society, for example to stimulate activities and spread ideas and skills in the areas of gardening, sharing, repairing, and local recreation. There is certainly no lack of research opportunities as regards the problem how society, community, policy, and lifestyle dynamics can fruitfully interact to achieve the kind of transformative change that human societies urgently need to be able to survive and live well on the planet.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

MB designed the study, conducted and wrote the theoretical framework including literature review, wrote the introduction and concluding section, and contributed to the other sections. HR conducted the Swedish interviews, wrote parts of the method and empirical analysis section, and contributed to the other sections. LS conducted the Irish interviews, wrote parts of the method and empirical analysis section, and contributed to the other sections. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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