14 Different Life Phases and the Limits of Consumption

Opportunities and Barriers

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Introduction

In sustainability and transformation research, concepts of boundaries or limits regularly play a central role. More than half a century ago, the path-breaking book "The limits to growth" of the Club of Rome (Meadows et al., 1972) already highlighted the devastating consequences of an unlimited growth of resource consumption on society worldwide, raising awareness of the necessity of limits. Almost 40 years later, the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU, 2009) identified different approaches to define limits of consumption and production and emphasised the importance of intra- and intergenerational justice in this context. The council proposed a "budget approach" which involved calculating a budget for each country (and downscaled to each citizen) that can be disposed of until an upper limit to emissions is reached. At the same time, a team of international climate scientists proposed the concept of "planetary boundaries" (Rockström et al., 2009), presenting a set of nine boundaries (e.g. climate change, freshwater use, ocean acidification) within which humanity can continue to develop safely. The debate on boundaries is intended to provide a target orientation for political decisions: Should there be a limit to what societies in general and individuals in particular can consume? And how can these limits be defined and measured? Pressure to act accordingly comes from international climate protection movements, such as Fridays for Future, that highlight the necessity to strictly limit individual consumption, especially among the wealthier parts of the global population. This is because politically negotiated limits must not only be accepted by the population, but also translate into everyday practices. Limits on consumption, often interpreted as restrictions, are controversially discussed among societal groups and political parties.[1] However, negotiating and determining limits also poses challenges for consumption research. Inter- and transdisciplinary research is urgently needed to answer questions about potentials and conditions of implementing consumption limits in the context of everyday practices (Rau, 2018). A promising approach in inter- and transdisciplinary research that addresses the question of consumption limits is the concept of "consumption corridors"[2] (Di Giulio & Fuchs, 2014; Fuchs et al., 2021). Consumption corridors are defined 1. by minimum standards of consumption that should enable everyone to live a good life and 2. by maximum standards of individual resource consumption that should enable equal access to natural as well as socio-cultural resources to every person living now and in the future. The authors of this concept clarify that the standards to define the consumption corridor are based on an informed social consensus and are hence dynamic. We would add that consumption corridors also have to reflect the social diversity, i.e., in terms of life situation, age or physical constitution of the concerned group. Against this background, this paper critically examines

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the opportunities and challenges of limits on individual consumption in different phases of life comparing youth, adulthood and later life. Life phases[3] are understood here as social constructions transported in images and beliefs about delineable age groups which are (re)produced in processes of social interaction and socialisation. Each life phase entails challenges and opportunities for the organisation of (everyday) life (i.e. Kohli, 1985) as well as everyday consumption which both might foster or hamper sustainable consumption practices. More generally, each life phase ideally develops different aspirations and needs of consumption – not seldom supported by phase specific advertising efforts in the economy. Though in sociology of ageing (e.g. Rosenmayr, 2001) older age groups are often focused, young age groups are mainly used for contrasting purposes, whereas middle age groups are widely ignored (see van Dyk, 2015). From our perspective, a life phase perspective is useful, since people's aspirations and needs and, by extension, their minimum standards of consumption differ from one life phase to the other. Moreover, life phases are heterogeneous in terms of social composition, and different life situations and related living conditions must be considered depending on socio-economic but also infrastructural circumstances. As is shown below, life phases and life situations not only impact on the minimum standards that need to be met, but also shape people's ability to respond to limitations of consumption options and integrate them into everyday life. We argue that proposals for consumption corridors must consider the specific challenges in different life phases and life situations.[4] Our review of empirical material concentrates on youth and adolescence and later life before comparing these life phases to the apparent 'normality' of adulthood (see conceptual paper of editors).

Initially, the paper introduces the concept of consumption corridors as an approach to social-ecological transformation that combines a needs-oriented perspective on the minima of consumption for establishing a good live with a justice-oriented perspective on the limits of consumption to enable a fair distribution of means for a good live. We will then discuss challenges and opportunities in different life phases. We conclude with a summary of results and some ideas for further research.

"Consumption corridors" as a perspective for social-ecological transformation

The concept of consumption corridors (see Figure 14.1) bridges the gap between the vision of a "good life for all" and the structural, economic, and institutional framework conditions of consumption (Blättel-Mink et al., 2013; Fuchs et al., 2019). It calls for an inclusive, fair and transparent societal debate on the question of "protected" needs that allows for a definition of a minimum standard of consumption – and that provides the possibilities of satisfying them (Di Giulio & Defila, 2020). The concept thus considers it a societal task to negotiate what is "enough" in terms of the relation between subjective wants and individual consumption, thereby relying on "sufficiency" as a concept of sustainable development. During these negotiations, a society needs to agree on these needs as well as on relevant means of satisfying them (satisfiers) so that minimum standards for access to threatened ecological – and societal – resources can be defined. Based on the assumption that all people (now and in the future) have a right to live a good life, maximum standards of consumption need to be defined too, considering existing knowledge of the limits of the resilience of ecological systems (i.e., planetary boundaries) and societal stress limits (such as increasing social inequality). The space between minimum and maximum standards defines the consumption corridor in which all people are free to shape their lives according to their own ideas.[5]

Figure 14.1 Concept of Consumption Corridors
Source: Fuchs et al. (2021, p. 34).

By expanding this perspective to include different life phases and related practices, changes in needs and wants and varying possibilities for satisfying them come into view. For example, following changes in household composition (e.g., the birth of their children), people may feel that their home is now too small, triggering a search for alternative accommodation. Conversely, after the children have moved out, people may view their homes as too big, which may or may not lead to relocation to reduce floor space (and, by extension, the cost of living). Depending on life stage and context, it can thus be easier or more difficult to shape consumption in a way that meets one's own needs, and that is socially and environmentally compatible at the same time. It is also relevant to ask how lower and upper limits of consumption interact with the challenges of consumption in different phases of life. For example, when entering working life, everyday mobility practices may need to be reconfigured, including the possibility of car ownership. This, in turn, has significant implications for resource consumption. It also raises the question whether certain structures, material arrangements, spaces or regulatory frameworks need to be created so that consumption in specific life stages can be made more sustainable. By applying the corridor concept to different life phases, it is possible to gain much more differentiated insights that can inform a societal dialogue on the possibilities and challenges of limits to consumption (see Figure 14.2).

Minimum: The possibility of satisfying needs as a prerequisite for a good life – the necessity of defining minimum standards of consumption.

Maximum: Right of all people to lead a good life and adapt to planetary boundaries – necessity of defining maximum standards of consumption

In between: Free space for the individual organisation of life

Life phases, changing needs, and opportunities for consumption corridors

There is consensus in social sciences that age groups – childhood/youth, adulthood, (old) age – are not biologically determined but socially constructed. Kohli (1985) for example highlighted the social-political production and safeguarding of life phases in his book on the "Institutionalisation of curriculum vitae". In a similar sense, Ehmer (1990, p. 11f) wrote: "the definite caesurae of contemporary life courses […] are socially set" and do not depend

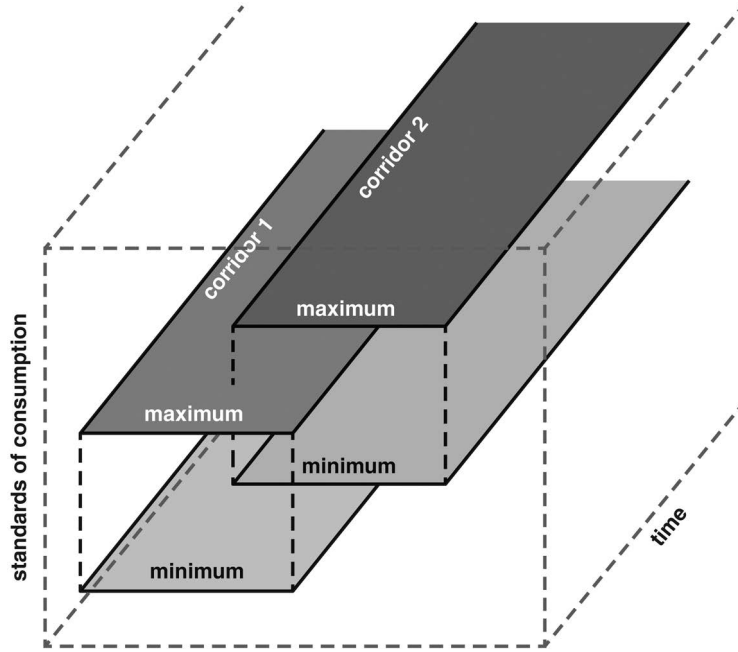

Figure 14.2 Dimensions of Consumption Corridors (Di Giulio & Fuchs, 2014)

"on the state of the physical and mental resources of the individual, his preferences and requirements" (translation from German by authors). Life phases in that sense are characterised by collectively shared socio-cultural challenges and expectations – interlinked with images and perceptions around biophysical constitution. Different life phases, and particularly life evens that are considered as characteristic of a certain life phase, have already been studied in their role for (un)sustainable consumption. For example, the expanding field of mobility biographies research – the scientific recording of mobility practices such as transport use, route choice and driving skills – has made major contributions to the advancement of knowledge concerning the influence of critical life events on mobility practices (Müggenburg et al., 2015; Rau & Manton, 2016; Sattlegger & Rau, 2016; Holz-Rau & Scheiner, 2020). Furthermore, there have been significant scientific forays into linking life events and consumption (Davies et al., 2014; Jaeger-Erben & Offenberger, 2012; Schäfer et al., 2012). Life phases in that understanding differ in terms of consumption needs and requirements (e.g. Grömling, 2021; Rose, 2021) and in relation to "windows of opportunity" for sustainable consumption (Onnen, 2022). Furthermore, consumption as part of many, if not most everyday social practices, serves a broader function than just satisfying basic needs. Consumption also is a means of social distinction and in- or exclusion and the performance of social identity (Bauman, 2007; Bourdieu, 1987; Schoenheit, 2009), it also serves as a marker of belonging to a certain age group (Jaeger-Erben & Offenberger, 2012).

As for example Kohli (1985) suggested, we distinguish three life phases: Youth/adolescence, adulthood and later life. Our basic assumption is that each life stage is linked to specific challenges and socially negotiated norms and expectations, which in turn correspond to "typical" consumption practices. Each life phase is linked to particular challenges that demand a response, regardless of whether individuals consciously strive for them or

not (Havighurst, 1963). At the same time, not all people have the same resources at their disposal to respond adequately to the challenges that arise at different life stages. It is thus important to consider additional factors such as gender, socio-economic status, lifestyle, as well as social milieus (compare BMU & UBA, 2019). In their interconnectedness – if not intersectionality-, these factors clearly shape the ways in which these challenges are addressed. They also harbour opportunities and obstacles concerning limits to consumption and related sustainability issues.

Youth and consumption limits

Childhood and adolescence are characterised by identity formation and integration into social groups and hierarchies (Erikson, 1973). At the same people in this life phase are increasingly confronted with the supply side of consumer society (e.g., Baudrillard, 1998). For adolescents, the conflicts involved in finding one's way into an adult identity are particularly important. They must deal with processes of inclusion and exclusion by peers and social institutions as well as with challenges of their educational path (Abels et al., 2008). Due to limited financial resources, the consumption patterns of many young people are still strongly tied to those of their family, which clearly limits influence on their own ecological footprint. However, consumption practices adopted during this life stage often lay the foundation for later consumption practices (Limbourg et al., 2000; Tully & Baier, 2011). For example, growing up in an environment where only a few people consider and use the bicycle as a means of transport often leads to a lack of engagement in cycling in later life (Mahne-Bieder et al. 2020). Additionally, within certain social milieus, preferences for fulfilling consumption wishes can already be recognised among young people, for example regarding clothing, social media and technology, taking brands into account. The representative and biannual study "Environmental Awareness in Germany" identifies significant consumer demand in the area of technology and media, cars, fashion and (long-distance) travelling among people belonging to the social milieu of "young pragmatists" (see e.g. BMU & UBA, 2019, p. 15). However, the study also mentions the consumption-critical attitudes of "critical-creative" and "idealistic" milieus (BMU & UBA, 2019) whose members are more likely to show pro-environmental attitudes and self-reported behaviour, particularly if the peer group supports these.

Young people with more idealistic attitudes and visions of the future also tend to express comparatively positive attitudes to the topic of limits to consumption.[6] Other studies which focus on specific practices such as car ownership and use or sufficiency-oriented sharing and swapping assume a higher level of post-materialist values among Millennials (Heo & Muralidharan, 2017; O'Rourke & Lollo, 2015). These findings can be connected to the support of new social movements such as Fridays for Future, which publicly discuss the urgent need for limits. The new international movement "Last Generation" even goes a step further and designs highly symbolic actions that are explicitly directed at tackling overconsumption. With street blockades, a human barrier is set, so to speak, against excessive or unlimited resource consumption. It thus seems plausible to assume that adolescents who belong to more resource-aware social milieus are potentially open to endorsing the idea of consumption corridors (e.g. Marquardt, 2020). Perceptions of a major threat to their future arising from climate change can promote the adoption of biospheric values among young adolescents, which may in turn encourage the adoption of pro-environmental practices such as recycling, environmentally friendly travelling and purchasing 'green' products and services (see Balundė et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the role of pro-environmental values has some

limits since research shows that these values lose their significance in some product segments, particularly new technologies (Calafell et al., 2019). Here, the systems of provision facilitating a more sustainable consumption for this particular – to a great deal technology-savvy – age group is of greater relevance than individual dispositions.

Consumption limits in later life

Entering later life requires people to adapt to life after employment that may or may not be filled with care work, in addition to dealing with physical limitations and the finitude of human life. This may also include taking stock and looking back at one's past experiences, achievements, failures and adventures. In addition, changes to one's economic situation can also stimulate new consumption practices in later life. Depending on people's previous lifestyle as well as the possibilities and desires that have arisen during life, this can mean growing old together with others and trying out new forms of living and housing, lowering consumption in the process. In a survey of the so called "LebensRäume" ("living spaces") project, 41 per cent of interviewees in Germany agreed with the statement that they would like to live in a smaller flat or house in old age (Fischer & Stieß, 2019). This opportunity meets several challenges like attachment to one's home and neighbourhood, soaring rents and the resulting need to hang on to an old rental agreement or a lack of credit opportunities for older people. Getting older can also mean to finally treat oneself to something special (e.g. a luxury cruise), with all the associated increases in ecological footprint (Edmondson & Scharf, 2015; Fox et al., 2017; Kuoppamäki et al., 2017). However, it may also be that goals beyond one's lifetime become more important, such as concerns for sound living conditions for future generations (Zaval et al., 2015). Older age could thus also present opportunities for limiting consumption.

Some cross-generational research suggests that older generations, especially those born in the war and early post-war periods (up to about 1950), tend to live and consume more frugally (e.g. Robins 1994). This contrasts with the "baby boomer" generations who were born and grew up in times of mass production and the "American way of life," making them on average more disposed toward material prosperity and resource-intensive lifestyles (see Diprose et al., 2019). These assumptions are mostly based on Ronald Inglehart's (1971) postmodernisation theory which postulates a transformation of basic value orientations in relation to the evolution of the industrial society. However, empirical evidence concerning Inglehart's theory and differences between the 70+-generations and the 'baby boomers' is inconclusive, which suggests that these intergenerational differences as well as the generational homogeneity in values should not be overstated (Hitchings & Day, 2011). However, a study by Diprose et al. (2019) shows that older and younger generations alike find some appeal in a "new thrift" concerning the consumption of resources. Both groups experience(d) the limits of consumption in their youth but in different contexts: Older generations in the war and post-war period and younger generations during the emerging climate crisis.

Adulthood and consumption limits – What happens in between?

Compared to youth/adolescence and older age, adulthood involves a wide range of decisions regarding career paths, partnership and family. The number of necessary consumption decisions thus tends to increase during adulthood. At the same time, the responsibility for the (consumption) needs of others, such as children of different ages or parents in need

of care, increases (Ritch & Schröder, 2012). Decisions during this life phase, for example, where to live and in what type of accommodation, how to be mobile (e.g., by car or public transport) or whether to accept a job that involves a long-distance commute, result in path dependencies that can last for the rest of one's life. Such paths are the result of structural conditions (house in the countryside requires own car) but also reflect individual experiences and preferences. In certain life situations, the social influence on one's own perception and definition of products and services to satisfy needs is particularly intense. For example, parents sometimes tend to purchase many objects before the birth of their first child, which are not needed later (Jaeger-Erben, 2013). The suggestion of supposed satisfiers of needs by the media, marketing and reference groups must therefore be considered, especially during transitions to completely new life situations. Here, experiences in childhood and adolescence influence how people handle these challenges. This said, experiences during adulthood also shape the resource intensity of consumption in later life.

Summary and research outlook

Acknowledging the heterogeneity of socio-economic conditions, lifestyles and (non-) sustainable choices in different life stages opens new and fruitful avenues for examining the notion of consumption corridors and its practical application. At the same time, it makes it difficult to identify particular 'windows of opportunity' regarding the introduction and subsequent successful adoption of consumption corridors. Developing some ideal-typical sustainable consumption biographies could serve as a normative framework for further conceptual debates and empirical work in this direction. Also, systematic comparisons based on longitudinal consumption data collected from different social and age groups could reveal where and why needs are met via non-sustainable options and how and why certain paths taken go beyond socially and ecologically acceptable levels. The achievements to date of mobility biographies research show the enormous potential of such longitudinal research work (cf. Scheiner & Rau, 2020). It would also be possible to show which means and framework conditions can be used to bring about a consumption-related sustainability transformation that either lowers the resource impact of established social practices or promotes the adoption of less resource-intensive ones.

Importantly, our research for this article reveals that there are life stages during which people show a greater openness towards consumption limits. Especially in (post-)adolescence, young people in certain milieus may endorse more sustainable practices and ways of living and, by extension, a voluntary limitation of their own consumption. This implies that educational and recreational institutions can be important change agents that encourage young people to adopt less resource-intensive practices. Similarly, the transition to retirement can serve as an opportunity space for a shift towards more sustainable consumption 'within limits'. Those who look back on a long life may develop a greater sensitivity towards questions about the future or "the meaning of life" than before, resulting in the adoption of new practices and related aspects of consumption. At the same time, a short-term orientation that questions the meaning of medium- and long-term consumer goods, such as cars, can also be a way of dealing with one's own finitude. In all phases of life, specific challenges of reshaping everyday consumption have to be mastered, for which sustainable options are not always easily available. Particular attention should be paid to the possible path dependencies that result from decisions in the transition between life phases. So far there has been a lack of awareness among decision-makers in politics and civil society concerning the need

for targeted measures that take seriously variations in demand and resource consumption of different stages of life.

The concept of consumption corridors envisages a broad and fair societal debate on minimum and maximum standards of consumption, to make them just, legitimate, and dynamic. From our point of view, a promising approach is to discuss these standards and to clarify questions about needs, the good life and maximum permissible resource consumption as part of a wider intergenerational dialogue about sustainability in a climate-constraint world. A Linking Ages-perspective seems very fruitful to inform such a dialogue. It facilitates a focus on opportunities and challenges concerning sustainable limits to consumption that can be applied to different life phases, not only looking at differences and contrast but also at complementarities and links. For us as social scientists working on sustainability, a Linking-ages perspective enables a more systematic consideration of the challenges of adhering to consumption limits created by each life phases. It can add to a framework for societal debate and critical reflection: What contextual factors, systems of provision, political decisions, regulatory frameworks and societal norms will make it easier to stay within consumption corridors in different phases of life, bearing in mind the variations in consumption that affect different social groups at different stages of their lives? Is it possible and indeed desirable to require young people to "save up" for their increased resource consumption during adulthood? How can older generations be supported to compensate for earlier excesses of maximum standards after retirement? Evidently, opportunities for living within a sustainable consumption corridor may open or close depending on the phase of life. This presents both challenges and opportunity for societal dialogue. Moreover, comparing different phases of life can help to better understand the everyday relevance of limits and corridors, especially if the heterogeneity of life situations across the entire biography is considered. Measures should be taken to encourage the adoption of less resource-intensive practices for example by assisting older people without dependent children or relatives to relocate to a smaller flat within the same neighbourhood, to avoid them having to deal with the vagaries and uncertainties of a volatile real estate market where they are confronted with much higher costs for accommodation. Similarly, young adults who start their working lives could be encouraged to adopt novel notions of success in work that do not depend on excessive and/or conspicuous consumption. It is also important to examine opportunities for the adoption of limits 'from below'. According to Kallis (2019), limits need not only be perceived as restrictions, but can also serve as opportunities for liberating oneself from the 'shackles of consumption'. However, this needs to be politically actively facilitated, for example through basic security systems, the promotion of social innovation and opportunities for participation in the development of alternative consumption infrastructures. In dealing with this topic, social scientists have looked at it largely from a distance. Future research that puts life phases centre stage could facilitate a much more dynamic approach to limiting consumption. This research should be inter- and transdisciplinary, enabling scientists from diverse disciplinary backgrounds as well as decision-makers, citizens and practitioners to collaborate, with a view to advancing the society-wide adoption of sustainable consumption corridors.

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Notes

1 It is worth remembering, for example, the idea of a "veggie day" in Germany introduced by BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN in 2013.
2 The concept has been developed in the context of the research programme "From Knowledge to Action. New Paths to Sustainable Consumption", which was funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Blättel-Mink et al., 2013). It has since been further developed in lectures and publications (Di Giulio & Fuchs 2014; Fuchs 2017; Fuchs et al., 2021) and applied in an empirical study in Switzerland, regarding the acceptance of the concept among the population (Defila & Di Giulio, 2020).
3 Even though in literature the term "life stages" seems to be more widely used as scientific concept (see Fries Rader 1979), we prefer the term "life phases" for its less static connotation.
4 The article links the authors' previous scientific preliminary work with a literature study on the topic of consumption in different life phases as well as with the results of an expert group discussion on transformation corridors for sustainable consumption in different life phases in April 2019, which was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).
5 The concept of consumption corridors shares the focus on upper and lower limits with other corridor approaches in sustainability research, such as the doughnut economy (Raworth, 2017) or "transformation corridors" (WBGU, 2016).
6 According to the study Environmental Awareness in Germany, around five per cent of young people belong to this group. Critical-creative milieus, which include younger people under 30, make up 13 per cent of the total population (BMU & UBA, 2019, p. 14).

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