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A Social Practice Perspective of Ireland's Lobster Cultural Food Heritage

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Abstract

The research examines integrating the Slow Food Movement (SFM) with Ireland's lobster industry, emphasising preserving local culinary heritage as crucial for Sustainable Food Systems. This heritage includes both tangible elements, like agricultural practices and intangible ones, such as traditional food preparation. Slow food aims to protect these traditions from the homogenisation of food production. Using Social Practice Theory, the research analyses lobster consumption in Ireland, underscoring its symbolic importance in Irish culture to develop a novel framework adapted from the Social Practice Framework. The study combines qualitative interviews and secondary data analysis to explore lobster's role in Irish culinary heritage and its potential for promoting sustainable seafood consumption. Results from the study highlight the critical role of Irish lobster fishing communities in maintaining cultural food heritage, with traditional practices contributing to ecological and economic sustainability. The SFM influences lobster consumption, supporting sustainable and culturally important food practices. This research underscores the intricate link between tradition and sustainability, suggesting a model to balance cultural integrity with sustainable practices, contributing to a more culturally informed and environmentally conscious food consumption approach.

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Introduction

The emerging Slow Food Movement (SFM) as a pivotal ideology, advocating for accessible, healthy food and equitable treatment of producers, resonates deeply with contemporary issues like supply chain dynamics, sustainability, biodiversity, monoculture farming and preserving cultural heritage (Cacciolatti & Lee, 2022). Cultural heritage, encompassing both tangible and intangible elements of a society's legacy, plays a fundamental role in shaping community identity and continuity (Bujdosó *et al.*, 2015; Demetrescu *et al.*, 2020; Olsen, 2022; Vecco, 2010). In Ireland, preserving Cultural Food Heritage (CFH) encounters various challenges stemming from societal and environmental changes, reflecting the country's developing historical, cultural and economic landscape (Adelman, 2017; L. Clarkson & M. Crawford, 2001; L.A. Clarkson & E.M. Crawford, 2001) alongside the impact of globalisation (Agyeman & Simons, 2016; Deleuze, 2012); homogenisation of food cultures (Kelleher *et al.*, 2002); acknowledgment of sustainable agricultural practices (Gafsi & Favreau, 2013; O'Donovan *et al.*, 2012) and the growing trend for buying local produce (Friel *et al.*, 2006; Kazimir *et al.*, 2012; Mulcahy, 2012; Wilson & Whitehead, 2012). Recent trends emphasise artisanal, local, traditional, seasonal and sustainable foods in maintaining and adapting traditional food practices (Mac Con Iomaire & Ó Laoire, 2021; Murphy, 2021).

The array of studies focusing on lobster fishing and sustainability unveils a complex landscape of challenges and strategies pertinent to global lobster fisheries. Phillips and Melville-Smith (2005) offer a critical analysis of the Western Rock Lobster Fishery, underscoring comprehensive management controls and compliance to ensure sustainability. Advocating for sustainable fishing methods, Goodman *et al.* (2021) endorses habitat enhancement and adopting appropriate fishing gear to reduce sea waste. Highlighting the impact of external factors, Greenan *et al.* (2019) examine the socio-economic vulnerabilities of American lobster fisheries to climate change, stressing the precarious balance between environmental health and community livelihood. The research by Ebel *et al.* (2018) in Maine reveals signifying trust in cooperative fisheries research, pointing to needing collaborative efforts in sustaining lobster populations.

Further expanding the sustainability discourse, Barnett (2018) integrates socio-economic factors into fisheries management, using a Nova Scotian case study demonstrating this approach. The innovative study by Conrad and Danoff-Burg (2011) investigates lobster houses as a sustainable fishing alternative, suggesting their potential benefits under specific conditions. On the environmental front, Farmery *et al.* (2014) evaluate the ecological footprint of the Tasmanian southern rock lobster supply, scrutinising the

influence of management decisions on the industry's sustainability. In the Indonesian context, Wardiatno *et al.* (2020) and Reztrianti *et al.* (2023) address the challenges and strategic management approaches necessary for the sustainable operation of lobster fisheries. Steinback *et al.* (2008) conclude with a bio-economic analysis of the American lobster fishery, indicating significant outcomes from modifying fishing efforts. These studies collectively emphasise a nuanced understanding of lobster fishing sustainability, highlighting the need for integrated approaches that consider ecological, economic and social dimensions.

This study, utilising Social Practice Theory (SPT), investigates lobster consumption in Ireland, highlighting its cultural significance and exploring its integration within the SFM and Sustainable Food Systems (SFS). SPT, which views practices as fundamental to social life (Bourdieu, 2020; De Certeau *et al.*, 1980; Giddens, 1987), provides a lens to understand intergenerational knowledge transfer (Kuyken *et al.*, 2018; Murphy, 2012); community identity (Barlocco, 2010; Bennett, 2013) and evolving traditions (Dahlin & Svensson, 2021). In this unique context, the study employs a novel adaptation of the Social Practice Framework (SPF), focusing on the symbolic role of lobster in Irish culture and its potential to promote sustainable seafood consumption. This approach offers new perspectives on the interplay between CFH, SFS and the SFM, contributing distinctly to the field by unravelling the complex relationship between cultural heritage and sustainable food practices. Through this lens, the study aims to enrich the discourse on sustainable fisheries management and policy-making, addressing the intricate dynamics of the Irish lobster industry.

Despite lobster's cultural significance in Irish communities, its consumption is notably low, a trend this research aims to understand. The study investigates the underlying reasons for this resistance to a sustainable food source and assesses the potential for increased lobster consumption in the Irish diet. Central to this enquiry is: *"How do the social practices of Irish lobster fishing communities contribute to preserving cultural food heritage and sustainable lobster consumption?"* (RQ1). Employing a qualitative research design involving interviews with 37 individuals, supplemented by secondary archival research, content analysis and historical data, the study also explores: *"What are the key competences and material elements that shape Irish lobster fishing sustainability practices contributing to the economic viability of coastal communities?"* (RQ2). The research finally examines: *"What role does the Slow Food Movement play in shaping the practices and behaviours of Irish lobster consumers, and how does it contribute to the broader sustainability of the lobster industry?"* (RQ3), highlighting the interplay between lobster consumption, cultural heritage and sustainable practices.

1. Background

The SFM, a global grassroots initiative, champions the ethos of providing good, clean and fair food for all, emphasising producing delicious, high-quality food that respects both the environment and those who cultivate and prepare it (Chrzan, 2004; Gaytán, 2004; Notaras, 2014). Integral to this philosophy is recognising food selection as a complex behaviour influenced by various factors, including taste and sensory preferences (Aliani *et al.*, 2013a; Forsberg *et al.*, 2022); cultural and social influences (sociodemographic) (Axelson, 1986); nutritional value (Aliani *et al.*, 2013b; Leathwood & Ashley, 1983); convenience and accessibility (foraging) (Hughes, 2013); advertising and marketing (Muñoz-Leiva & Gómez-Carmona, 2019); health concerns and dietary restrictions (Hirakawa, 1997; Penry, 1993) and environmental and ethical factors (Tivadar & Luthar, 2005). Nelson (2013) elucidates that in the contemporary Irish diet, decision-making transcends age, gender or class, often driven by historical cultural influences and challenging conventional health promotion strategies.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable pivot towards a ‘foodie’ culture and healthier, locally sourced foods in Ireland, a shift partly influenced by modernisation, globalisation and the principles of the SFM; yet, access to these healthier options remains disparate across social classes (Deleuze, 2012; Friel *et al.*, 2006; Murphy, 2021). The slow food focus on traditional Celtic cuisine, with its low-fat profile, contrasts with prevailing fast-food trends and holds the potential for promoting healthier eating habits (Campos, 2004; Galli & Degliesposti, 2012; Tam, 2008). Critiques of the SFM highlight perceived mismatches with the realities of modern fast-paced societies and question the movement’s capacity to substantially challenge the dominant fast-food industry (Hsu, 2015; Jones *et al.*, 2003).

Culinary heritage, an essential component of cultural identity, is preserved through traditions, ingredients and cooking practices that significantly contribute to cultural expression and tourism, while also shaping slow food systems (Almansouri *et al.*, 2021; Gyimóthy & Mykletun, 2009). This concept extends to food as an element of intangible cultural heritage, serving as a marker of social identity (Counihan, 2016; Maffei, 2012; Partarakis *et al.*, 2021). The SFM’s exploration of food as a part of local heritage calls for enhanced recognition of the roles of producers and communities (Badii, 2013; Van Esterik, 2006). Understanding Ireland’s dietary evolution necessitates a historical lens; socio-economic factors largely shaped the pre-modern Irish diet, with staple foods like pork and stews prevailing among the lower classes, in contrast to the aristocracy’s more diverse and balanced diet (Flavin, 2022; Gentilcore, 2015; Keenan, 2013; Knapp, 1997). The introduction and subsequent reliance on potatoes, driven by affordability and

ease of cultivation, significantly impacted Irish dietary patterns, particularly during and after the Great Famine, with lasting effects still evident in modern dietary preferences (Adelman, 2017; L.A. Clarkson & E.M. Crawford, 2001; Fitzgerald, 2017; Kee, 1993; Powderly, 2019; Solar, 2015).

Recent scholarly work on lobster fishing and consumption sustainability presents a diverse analysis across socio-economic, environmental and governance spheres. Lowitt *et al.* (2020) emphasise integrating small-scale fisheries into Canada's food system governance, advocating for community-inclusive sustainable policies. Karnad *et al.* (2021) critique India's seafood regulations, proposing a community-centred 'seafood commons' framework for sustainable tropical fisheries. Proposing a shift towards large-scale commercial aquaculture, Jeffs *et al.* (2020) envision it to alleviate the pressures on wild lobster populations. Other scholars draw attention to the significant economic impacts of abandoned fishing gear (Goodman *et al.*, 2021); drawing attention to the need for sustainable business practices (Reztrianti *et al.*, 2023) and collective community actions that can promote lobster industry sustainability (Hai & Speelman, 2020; Priyambodo *et al.*, 2020). A sample of lobster sustainability literature is found in Table 1 below.

Transitioning to a focus on sustainable lobster consumption, Spanier *et al.* (2015) provide insights into the historical context of the commodity, signifying lobsters as a fundamental resource for coastal communities while also highlighting the contemporary challenge of overfishing. Yan and Chen (2015) shift the focus towards exploring the underutilised potential of crustacean shells, given the increasing consumption patterns of shellfish, advocating for adopting more sustainable industry practices. Notably, Charlebois *et al.* (2024) explore the psychographics of Canadian consumers, establishing connections between dietary choices and socio-economic factors. Other scholars advocate for greater sustainability in the industry (Goyert *et al.*, 2010), often because of the challenges brought by tourism consumption behaviours (González, 2019; King, 1997). In terms of perceptions of lobster, Wallace (2005) and Eliot (1915) provide cultural critiques, juxtaposing the symbolism of lobsters across different social classes. A sample of articles evaluating the sustainability of lobster consumption can be found in Table 2 below.

The discourse within this literature review illuminates the multifaceted dimensions of sustainability and practices concerning global lobster consumption, underscoring the necessity for comprehensive academic research. The integration of various geographical contexts, from Canada to Vietnam, highlights the diversity of ecological, economic and cultural factors influencing lobster fisheries and consumption patterns. This global perspective reinforces the need to extend such studies to regions like Ireland, where lobster consumption behaviours remain less explored. Investigating

Table 1 - Sample of Studies Focusing on Lobster Industry Sustainability

Author	Cited*	Sample	Country	Findings Summary
Lowitt <i>et al.</i> (2020)	25	Four Case Studies	Canada	Emphasises on incorporating small-scale fisheries into food system planning and governance, advocating for policies and structures that support sustainable practices and community involvement in decisions.
Karnad <i>et al.</i> (2021)	11	531 Consumers 400 Restaurants	India	Current seafood regulations and certifications have mixed impacts on tropical fisheries, emphasising the need for a 'seafood commons' approach based on community involvement and consumer awareness to enhance sustainable management in the Global South.
Jeffs <i>et al.</i> (2020)	6	Book Chapter	Global	Emerging large-scale commercial aquaculture for marine lobsters in the coming decade is expected to offer an alternate source, potentially easing the fishing strain on wild lobster populations.
Goodman <i>et al.</i> (2021)	49	Secondary Data	Canada	The Nova Scotian lobster industry faces commercial losses of \$175,000 CAD annually from abandoned, lost and discarded fishing gear with five of 15 trapped species were at-risk and 67% were a marketable size.
Reztrianti <i>et al.</i> (2023)	0	15 Interviews	Indonesia	To achieve sustainable business practices, it is essential to enhance employee awareness, improve financial resource allocation and foster strong collaboration among the government, entrepreneurs and local communities.
Hai and Speelman (2020)	39	353 Lobster Farms	Vietnam	Enhancing the efficiency of input use in Vietnam's marine cage lobster farms results in reduced production costs and improved environmental outcomes, which alleviates environmental stress and boosts economic performance.
Priyambodo <i>et al.</i> (2020)	46	2,441 Puerulus Fishers	Indonesia	If fisheries policies are updated and a regulatory framework is put in place, Indonesia's settling puerulus could sustain a lobster aquaculture industry, potentially producing over 12,500 tons of market-size lobsters.
Elsler <i>et al.</i> (2022)	4	99 Small Fishery Co-op	Mexico	In Mexican lobster cooperatives, robust collective efforts lead to sustainable fishing practices and advantages in international trade, all while maintaining healthy lobster populations.

These studies are centred around the sustainability practices and impacts within the lobster industry.

* Google Scholar.

Table 2 - Sample of Studies Focusing on Sustainability AND Lobster Consumption

Author	Cited*	Sample	Country	Findings Summary
Spanier <i>et al.</i> (2015)	44	Overview	Global	Historically, lobsters were a significant food and economic resource for early coastal communities, sustainably harvested before European contact. Overfishing and smaller lobster sizes have since resulted in overexploitation in many regions.
Yan and Chen (2015)	926	Conceptual	N/A	Millions of tonnes of crustacean shells are discarded globally yearly, despite their potential as a sustainable resource for products like animal feed and fertiliser. There is a need for better utilisation and sustainable practices in the seafood industry.
Charlebois <i>et al.</i> (2024)	0	869 cross-national participants	Canada	Factors like vegan diet preference, marital status, past lobster purchases, consumption frequency, price perception and support for the Canadian economy influence consumer preferences for lobster.
Goyert <i>et al.</i> (2010)	107	17 Dealers 59 Harvesters	USA	Enhancing traceability and financial benefits for fishermen in MSC certification could increase consumer interest in sustainable Maine lobster, showing a need for adaptable sustainability-focused differentiation.
King (1997)	30	Undisclosed # of Interviews	Belize	Tourism growth has led to increased harvesting of undersized lobsters, mainly for household use and selling to tourist-focused restaurants. This practice puts a larger strain on the lobster population as tourism expands.
Wallace (2005)	387	Book	N/A	Lobster is often regarded as a hallmark of luxury and opulence.
Eliot (1915)	743	Poetry	N/A	The lobster is depicted as a lower-class commodity, contrasting its modern perception as a luxury, reflecting themes of social status and class.
Barrento <i>et al.</i> (2009)	50	Nutritional Analysis	N/A	The edible parts of both European and American clawed lobsters are rich in protein and essential amino acids; a nutritious and healthy dietary choice.
González (2019)	2	Book Chapter	Nicaragua	Highlights the dangers and management problems in lobster diving driven by tourism consumption behaviours, requiring greater law enforcement.
Townsend (2012)	18	Book	N/A	Evolution of lobster consumption from fertiliser to the dinner plate.

The table presents studies that specifically investigate the intersection of sustainability and lobster consumption.

* Google Scholar.

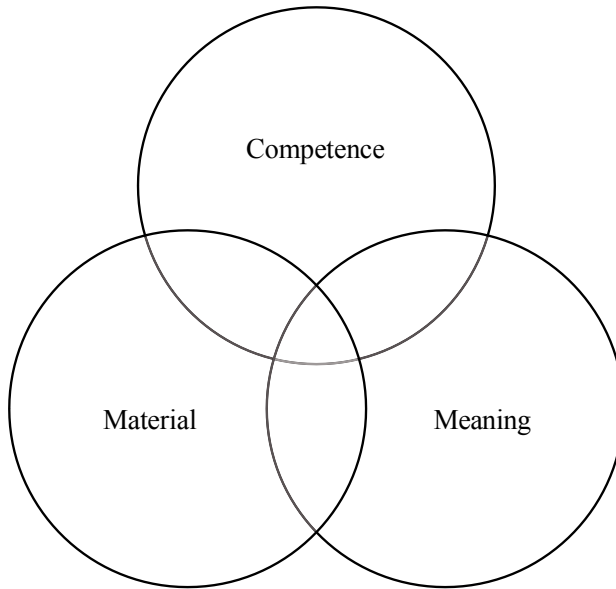
these patterns in Ireland could provide crucial insights because of its unique socio-economic and cultural context, potentially contributing to a more nuanced understanding of global trends. The ability to infer and extrapolate this knowledge to a global scale could aid in formulating more effective, culturally sensitive and sustainable lobster management and consumption strategies worldwide. This approach advocates for a holistic research agenda that not only addresses localised practices and preferences but also considers their global implications and interconnectedness in the realm of sustainable seafood consumption. The rest of this article explores the materials and methods, followed by the results of applying the SPF that culminate with a novel adaptation of the framework and concluding remarks with future research.

2. Materials and methods

The current research takes inspiration from Social Practice Theory (SPT) to reflect the cultural heritage of Irish lobster consumption by using a multilayered analysis approach for a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between historical, cultural and socio-economic factors that have shaped Irish dietary habits and consumer perceptions of lobster. The theory emphasises the interconnectedness of individual actions, collective norms and material culture to aid in analysing everyday practices and their impact on broader social phenomena, such as slow food, quality consumption, environmental respect and support for small producers to connect with consumers (Siniscalchi, 2013; Vaughn, 2012).

The Social Practice Framework (SPF) by Shove *et al.* (2012) models the SPT through the interconnectedness between materials, meanings and competencies (see Figure 1 below). Practice is the act of consumption and culture, deeply rooted in local contexts, where the global distribution of ingredients is shaped by prior practices. The current research employs the SPF, where the categories: materials (e.g., lobster, bait, boat), competencies (fishing, cooking) and meanings (cultural conventions, social beliefs), are mapped to understand cultural heritage and sustainability in the Irish lobster food system. Applying the model to both historical and contemporary datasets presents issues such as differing disparate data formats and the integration of information stemming from diverse sources, such as visual methodologies (Wills *et al.*, 2016) and social practices (Deschambault, 2011; Talmy, 2010). The study addressed these challenges by ensuring methodological compatibility, selecting credible sources (Goel, 2023) and emphasising reliability in qualitative research to provide deeper insights into motivated behaviours (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Strauss, 1987).

Figure 1 - Social Practice Framework



The diagram is a visual representation that illustrates the interplay between three key elements in understanding and analysing social practices: Materiality, Competence and Meaning.

Source: Shove et al. (2012, p. 29).

Sampling Procedures

The sample consisted of 37 individuals that produced 52 interview narratives with Irish people associated in varying capacities to the lobster fishing industry. The small sample size, consistent with producing a reliable qualitative study (M. Saunders & K. Townsend, 2016), was purposively selected to ensure consistency, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability to match the aims and objectives of understanding the unique topic of Irish lobster consumption (Campbell *et al.*, 2020; Miles & Huberman, 1994). To begin, 25 individuals (known to be actively engaged with commercial lobster fishing), were identified through the Irish National and Regional Inshore Fisheries Forums and through news articles published by the Bord Iascaigh Mhara, Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority, Seascope Northern Ireland, Lobster Hatcheries and the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation. The remaining 12 individuals were selected from convenience because of their location to seaside communities and association to lobster fishing and/or consumption (Emerson, 2015) and snowball

sampling from the finite association with the lobster industry, including restaurant owners selling lobster (Goodman, 1961).

In exploratory research centred on sustaining lobster consumption, applying targeted sampling methodologies is frequently advocated, particularly given constraints in research resources. This sampling technique is critical in elucidating intricate social-ecological interrelations within lobster fisheries, as exemplified by studies on the Southern California spiny lobster fishery (Partelow & Winkler, 2016). The approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of the socio-economic dimensions influencing sustainable practices in lobster fisheries (Edwarsyah, 2017; Reztrianti *et al.*, 2023). Adopting targeted sampling strategies in cooperative fisheries research, such as in the Maine lobster fishery, has been shown to foster stakeholder trust and enhance data quality, elements essential to sustainable management and conservation efforts (Ebel *et al.*, 2018; Li *et al.*, 2015). Utilising targeted sampling in focused exploratory research is underscored by its efficacy in delivering nuanced insights into the diverse facets influencing lobster fisheries, especially in scenarios marked by limited research resources. Inclusion into the current study required individuals to be Irish, age of consent, speak English and have relevant experience in lobster cultivation and/or consumption.

Primary Data Collection

A pilot study with two Irish families aided in understanding lobster consumption motivations and obstacles, which informed the interview protocol. To ensure fisherman representation (Patton, 2002; Suter, 2011), 20 interviews were purposively conducted in 2019 with 29 participants aged 25 to 73, predominantly men, which is not surprising given the *Irish Seafood National Programme 2007-2013* identified only two women of 4,987 employees were employed in the fisheries (Bord Iascaigh Mhara, 2010).

In the second round of data collection in 2023, greater emphasis on selecting female candidates was necessary because there was a lacking female perspective from fishing families, government and non-government organisations (Britton, 2012). 17 formal interviews were conducted with 20 participants, including three women who preferred to be called 'fishermen'. 37 participant interviews represented 52 narratives, with some participants interviewed in both rounds of data collection. The sample included 32 fishermen, seven government representatives, six non-government organisation members, two restaurant owners and five fishing organisation representatives, providing a diverse and reliable dataset (Mason, 2010; M.N.K. Saunders & K. Townsend, 2016). The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in 2019 and

2023, covering over 5,000 kilometres (primarily coastal communities). Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to maintain data integrity.

Data Analysis

The data analysis employed a four-stage analytical framework, integrating content analysis for initial thematic identification, narrative analysis for cultural context interpretation, comparative historical analysis to discern evolving patterns and credibility enhancement through reliability and peer review. NVivo software served as an integral tool, as it facilitated the categorisation and organisation of diverse archival and newspaper data, laying the groundwork for thematic analysis (Mortelmans, 2019). During the narrative and comparative historical stages, NVivo was instrumental in managing complex narratives, enabling the efficient sorting and linking of themes across various sources and time periods (Trigueros-Cervantes *et al.*, 2018), developing a robust and systematic synthesis of findings and reinforcing the study's reliability in exploratory research (Gioia *et al.*, 2013; Saldaña, 2015).

The first stage of analysis focused on exploring lobster consumption history in Ireland by aggregating archival materials from a variety of Irish institutions, including Irish Government Archives; Bord Iascaigh Mhara; Marine Institute; Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority; National and Regional Inshore Fisheries; Down County Museum; Irish libraries and regional tourism offices (Ventresca & Mohr, 2017). Utilising NVivo software, this stage facilitates the meticulous categorisation and organisation of content, using codes, annotations, linking and querying the data to establish a foundational structure of lobster sustainability perception and understanding (Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2013). A sample of identified nodes included: historical practices (lobster fishing); cultural significance (lobster consumption) and economic impact of the lobster industry. General emergent themes in this stage included sustainability practices; economic aspects; cultural significance; community impact; fishing methods; consumer behaviour; policy and governance; stakeholder perspectives; health and nutrition.

In the second stage, the analysis evaluated individual stories and accounts extracted from the primary interview data, focusing on comprehending the underlying motivations and cultural contexts of the stakeholders involved. Narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), aided in interpreting individuals' stories and understand their motivations and cultural contexts within the social practice of lobster consumption and fishing (Strauss, 1987). This stage concurrently facilitates the refinement of initial themes established in Stage 1, where experiences, such as shifts in fishing practices (travelling

further to sea to catch lobster) and community dynamics (distaste for lobster and fear of cooking the expensive food), while fishing family narratives about lobster culinary traditions highlight its cultural importance. Consumer interviews shed light on sustainable purchasing motivations and narratives from community leaders and policymakers offer insights into the impacts of regulatory policies on the industry. This iterative process of theme refinement ensures that the research captures the complex interplay between individual narratives and wider societal dynamics.

During the third stage of analysis, the research undertook a nuanced comparative and historical analysis. This analytical phase entails a rigorous juxtaposition of thematic elements across varied temporal spans and data sources, thereby elucidating longitudinal patterns and causal dynamics within the historical trajectory of lobster consumption (Layder, 1998; Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003; Thelen, 2003). The comparative analysis scrutinises the influence of economic policies, progress on evolving fishing methods and understanding of fishing consumption sustainability to be compared with other countries. This process illuminates the socio-cultural metamorphosis of lobster from a basic sustenance item to a gastronomic luxury, thereby enriching the research with a comprehensive diachronic perspective that seamlessly integrates historical antecedents with contemporary realities in the Irish lobster fishing and consumption landscape. This approach is substantiated in the extant literature regarding job satisfaction among Caribbean lobster fishers (Monnereau & Pollnac, 2012); lobster utilisation (Spanier *et al.*, 2015); behavioural fishing effort allocation (Béné & Tewfik, 2001) and economics of the Swedish lobster fishery (Eggert & Ulmestrand, 1999).

The fourth and final stage is devoted to enhancing credibility through rigorous validation and dissemination processes, such as peer review and conference presentations. Triangulation in qualitative research is not necessarily to identify an absolute truth, as often sought in quantitative approaches, but to acquire a holistic comprehension of the research query by recognising the multifaceted nature of human experiences and the merit in examining them from diverse perspectives (Denzin, 2017a, 2017b). The utilisation of triangulation in this qualitative research emphasises exploring depth and complexity over mere validation or precision to ensure robustness and reliability in interpretations and enhance credibility (Clark *et al.*, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Symon & Cassell, 2012).

3. Results

This section examines the complexities of the Irish lobster fishing industry and lobster consumption patterns using the SPF model, incorporating

historical insights and current practices. It focuses on the intersection of three key aspects: material (physical elements of lobster fishing and consumption) with competence (knowledge and skills in the industry) and meaning (cultural significance of lobsters in Ireland). This comprehensive analysis aims to understand the interplay of these factors in preserving the environmental health and cultural heritage of the Irish lobster fishing sector and the greater implications within the global context.

Material

The ‘Material’ aspect focuses on the tangible elements critical to lobster consumption practices. This encompasses not only physical artefacts but also economic factors like lobster pricing, reflecting its value and cost in economic exchanges. Traditional Irish lobster fishing methods faced challenges because of the lobsters’ habitats in deep, rocky waters, rendering their capture difficult and costly. This scarcity led to lobsters being a luxury item in Europe, in contrast to their relative abundance and affordability in the Americas. The 20th-century shift towards cheaper, processed foods reduced lobster demand in Ireland, impacting dietary habits and health (Darmon & Drewnowski, 2008; Friel *et al.*, 2006). Historical fluctuations in lobster prices and industry dynamics, including overfishing and market shifts, are noted (Browne *et al.*, 2001; Keenan, 2006). Contemporary market analysis shows that lobsters remain expensive compared to other proteins (see Table 3 below), affecting their accessibility and popularity in modern Irish cuisine, with historical and cultural factors further influencing this trend (Crabtree, 1986; McGarry, 2023).

Table 3 - Comparison of 1kg Meat Prices across Retail Chains in Ireland

Product	SuperValu	Dunnes	Tesco	Aldi	Lowest
Pork (Ham Fillet)	€4.29	€7.19	€6.15	€6.84	€4.29
Beef (Roast)	€6.74	€11.87	€12.00	€9.85	€6.74
Lamb (Leg)	€10.00	€9.56	€17.57	€11.68	€9.56
Chicken	€3.31	€7.98	€3.12	€4.99	€3.12
Lobster	Unavailable	€57.50	€37.50	€32.48	€15.00*

This table compares the prices of 1kg of various meats across four major retail chains in Ireland: SuperValu, Dunnes, Tesco and Aldi.

* €15.00 is the estimated price based on purchasing directly from the fisherman as advised from a participant.

Competence

‘Competence’ encompasses knowledge, skills, abilities and qualifications required to perform tasks effectively, which in Ireland’s well-established education system, paradoxically notes ongoing health issues such as obesity and heart disease despite widespread nutritional awareness (Darmon & Drewnowski, 2015; Donovan & McNulty, 2023; O’Sullivan & Byrne, 2020). Despite Ireland’s abundant coastal resources, the limited consumption of lobster reflects a preference for familiar comfort foods, as evidenced by a fisherman’s remark, “*Ya, we all know how to cook the lobsters, but I don’t know why other people don’t, guess just not familiar with it [know how to prepare and cook lobsters]*”. The national trend favours less healthy options like battered fish, resisting to dietary variety and a challenge in promoting diverse, sustainable seafood (Lyons *et al.*, 2022). Efforts to implement dietary policies are met with historical resistance, underscoring the need for educational initiatives to encourage healthier choices (Dibb & Fitzpatrick, 2014; Tapsell, 2017). One individual reflects on their catch and cook programme,

I think showing folks where our lobsters come from and how to cook them can really help. It’s not just about teaching them; it’s about making everyone feel part of what’s happening down here [pier]. Sure, the tourists love this stuff, but we’ve got to get our own people, right here in our villages, on board too. It’s good for our businesses and supports the community.

Despite the SFM’s advocacy for sustainable practices, high costs hinder its implementation in lobster consumption, necessitating a focus on affordability and cultural suitability (Abood *et al.*, 2003; Timlin *et al.*, 2020). The political dimension within the lobster fishing sector involves navigating complex regulatory landscapes, where government bodies often receive criticism for inadequate support, as indicated by a fisherman’s comment, “*Them in Dublin are feekin’ useless... there’s no support for the inshore fisherman*”. Another fisherman added, “*Nah, we have to do it all ourselves. It’s us moving this forward [sustainable fishing practices like the V-notching programme] or there’ll be nothing left*”. Successful integration of sustainable lobster practices, like the V-notching programme, into the Irish diet (mature landed sizes) requires overcoming challenges related to supply, culinary knowledge and supporting community-driven initiatives like the Kilkeel Visitor Centre and OceanWorld in Dingle. These efforts are jeopardised when organisations vital for research and sustainability, such as Seascope Lobster Hatchery, lose funding. As one person explained, “*Covid was a killer. Everyone but the farmers lost their funding. There’s just no support for the fisherman, but hey, that’s how it’s always been*”.

Meaning

The category 'Meaning' plays a vital role in understanding the symbolic and cultural significance of behaviours within specific contexts. This aspect is relevant in Irish lobster consumption, where historical social class divisions, influenced by the English rule and associated power imbalances, have significantly shaped the dietary patterns and choices in Ireland (Wilson, 1973). For many Irish people, lobster, once seen as a symbol of English aristocracy, evoked social resentment, leading to a preference for traditional foods like whiskey, ale and bread, rather than lobster, which was associated with privilege and power (Gray, 1995; Harrison & Edelen, 1994; O'Sullivan & Downey, 2016; Thirsk, 2007; Tsai *et al.*, 2022). The influence of religious practices, specifically Catholicism, also played a role in shaping food choices, with certain religious teachings potentially discouraging consuming lobster (Levey, 2008; Lorenz, 1979; Meltzer & Musolf, 2002). Contemporary perspectives indicate religious beliefs (Bible outlines in Leviticus 11, 9:12 and Deuteronomy, 14:9 that creatures without fins and scales in the seas and streams are unclean and inedible) were not a primary factor in deterring lobster consumption. One patron commented, "*Aye sure I go to church, but I couldn't be bothered with lobsters because it's too dear [expensive]*".

Meaning & Material

The intertwining of the categories is considered 'social practice,' which provides a much richer understanding of the Irish lobster culinary narrative. Combining meaning with material (as illustrated in Table 4 below), examines the tangible elements, objects and artefacts involved in their symbolic, cultural and social significance. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how material objects and practices carry meaning and influence behaviour, identity and culture within specific contexts. Several themes emerged capturing the essence of Irish lobster fishing and consumption. Material objects in lobster fishing, such as maps and electronic navigational tools, reflected the accumulated knowledge and lore of exploration and fearlessness in the fishing community, which is best represented by the tacit knowledge passed down to younger generations within these fishing families. One fisherman explained,

I wasn't much for school, this [fishing] was my school. I was on the boat at a very young age. My father taught me, whose father taught him and so on. It's different now [fishing] compared to back then [grandfather's era]. Bigger boats, more gear, safety, more to learn. My son and daughter come on board in the summer. They are getting the itch to fish too, but I hope the fishing get's better [laughing].

Table 4 - Intertwining of SPF Categories ‘Material’ and ‘Meaning’

Topic	Explanation
Knowledge and Lore	The use of these navigational tools (material) is deeply connected with the lore and traditional knowledge passed down through generations (meaning), illustrating how material artefacts can carry a wealth of cultural and historical information.
Cultural Events	The material aspects of the festivals (decorations, food stalls) are expressions of the community’s pride and cultural heritage (meaning), showing how material elements are integral to the celebration and preservation of cultural identity.
Harbour Infrastructure	The presence and maintenance of harbour infrastructure (material) reflect the community’s dedication to and dependence on the lobster fishing industry (meaning), demonstrating how physical spaces can be emblematic of a community’s way of life.
Fishing Gear	The design and use of lobster traps (material) reflect the community’s expertise and traditions (meaning), illustrating how material elements are integral to the preservation and transmission of cultural practices.
Local Seafood Markets	The presence and function of seafood markets (material) are deeply intertwined with the community’s social and economic life (meaning), highlighting how physical spaces can be central to community identity and cultural practices.
Culinary Ingredient	The use of lobster in cuisine (material) and its cultural and gastronomic significance (meaning) illustrate how food ingredients can be deeply embedded in a community’s cultural fabric.

This table provides a concise exploration of the complex interplay between the Social Practice Framework categories ‘Material’ and ‘Meaning’. It offers valuable insights into the relationship between tangible resources and the meanings attached to these resources, shedding light on the dynamics of social practices across different domains.

Festivals featuring lobster-themed decorations and food stalls that celebrate the cultural significance of lobster fishing were localised to the Irish coasts, particularly in larger towns or cities in 2019 and 2023. For instance, celebrations included the Dalkey Lobster Festival (Dalkey, Co. Dublin); Burren Slow Food Festival (Galway, Co. Galway); Howth Maritime and Seafood Festival (Howth, Co. Dublin), each having a component of sustainability and served as symbols of local identity and tradition. Beyond the festivals, coastal towns celebrated life on the sea, but only a few, such as Dingle, Skerries, Kilkeel (NI) or Howth (through tourism activities) drew attention to lobster consumption. When asked, a restaurant owner in Dingle

(who sold lobster in 2019) claimed that after the global Covid pandemic, tourism was non-existent and there was not enough of a local appetite to keep the regular menu item. When pursuing the topic further, they explained, *“The fisherman eats it [lobster], but again, they cook their own [catch] and not bother coming in here for it”*.

Physical infrastructure like docks and holding tanks plays a vital role in the community's connection to the sea, but few holding tanks exist outside of packing plants because of the immediate export of most lobster. In Kilkeel, one individual recognises the economic benefits of supporting local fishermen and supplying the community with fresh lobster by owning tanks, which exemplified competence in understanding market dynamics. The Visitor Centre in Kilkeel and Dingle OceanWorld also highlight their connection to the sea through displayed materials such as lobster traps used, which showed their design and construction (conservation methods such as conservation sized hatch rings) that represent both a fishing tool and a part of the fishing community's traditional knowledge and ingenuity for sustainable practices.

Seafood markets, crucial for fishermen's livelihoods and reflecting local culture, surprisingly lacked fresh lobster options for sale during the travels in 2019 and 2023. This absence extended from piers to large grocery chains and even to renowned seafood stalls in Cork and Dublin. While lobster symbolises a connection to the sea, local culinary traditions and community pride worldwide, in Ireland, historical factors like British rule and a focus on land agriculture seem to have diminished its perceived value and lifestyle significance.

(In)Competence & Material

The SPF shows a significant interplay between competence and material aspects of lobster fishing and consumption (summarised in Table 5 below). Competence in handling, processing and storing lobsters is crucial for ensuring product quality and safety, especially reliant on physical infrastructure and equipment, which are often exported because of limited local demand. The commonly held belief among the Irish population was that lobster came at a high cost. One seemingly affluent individual at a market reflected on the time of year the consume lobster, *“Every Christmas. It's a tradition that my father and my father's father and so on always did. Not sure why, but it's a tradition, I suppose. A special treat that reminds me of the holidays”*. The quote highlights consuming lobster on special occasions, akin to historical patterns observed among English aristocrats. Only a few restaurants across Ireland during the data collection period offered lobster (special menu item) but was costly, starting at €40 for a 200-gramme lobster tail supper (accompanied with potatoes and vegetables).

Table 5 - Intertwining of SPF Categories Competence and Material

Topic	Explanation
Lobster Processing Storage	The physical infrastructure and equipment form the backdrop against the competence and expertise of individuals. Competence in handling, processing and storing lobsters effectively is essential for ensuring the quality and safety of lobster products, making them marketable and appealing to consumers.
Sustainable Fishing Practices	The shared understanding of sustainability, community values, education and regulatory frameworks connect these two dimensions, reinforcing responsible lobster fishing practices within a broader social and environmental context.
Culinary Practices	The selection and handling of ingredients, cooking methods and the use of traditional tools all depend on the competence and expertise of individuals. The material elements provide the canvas on which the culinary competence is displayed, resulting in creating traditional Irish dishes that are both culturally significant and satisfying to the palate.
Consumer Preferences	Consumer preferences shape the material aspects of seafood consumption and market dynamics. Fishermen's competence in market trends and sustainable practices guides their material decisions and sales strategies. This illustrates a complex interplay between knowledge, decision-making and tangible outcomes within the context of lacking lobster consumption in Ireland.
Fishing Communities	Represents a dynamic relationship between community members' expertise and consumers influencing the tangible outcomes of lobster consumption, including the economic sustainability of fisheries. Competence is both shaped by and shapes the material aspects of fishing, contributing to the sustainability and resilience of these communities in the face of environmental, economic and social challenges, such as tourism and local demand.

This table provides an in-depth examination between the Social Practice Framework categories 'Competence' and 'Material'. It offers valuable insights into how these interwoven categories contributed to shaping human behaviour and societal functions.

The perception that lobster is expensive was tied to a gap in culinary knowledge, particularly among those living far from the coast. The intricate process of preparing and cooking lobster, coupled with the fear of mishandling such a valuable product, acts as a significant deterrent. This issue was magnified because very few non-fishing families had the traditional tools and skills required for lobster preparation and consumption.

Despite a genuine desire to savour lobster's exquisite flavour and texture, many people opted for more familiar and budget-friendly seafood options.

As one community member commented, “*If it ain't feckin' battered, no one is gonna eat it [lobsters and seafood in general]*”. In Irish culinary heritage, they traditionally concentrated the knowledge of lobster preparation within fishing families or Irish slaves for English aristocrats, with few outsiders possessing a comprehensive understanding of lobster anatomy. Some individuals were also averse to cooking live lobsters. As one community member commented, “*It's just wrong cooking the poor wee thing live*”. Fishing families have preserved and passed down the expertise in lobster preparation through generations, enriching culinary traditions and safeguarding this aspect of Irish CFH, emphasising intergenerational knowledge and skills in preserving these culinary practices.

The tension between fishermen and government organisations in the lobster fishery has significant implications for sustainable food systems and cultural heritage because it highlights the need to align competence, which includes knowledge, skills, values and community values. When considering material aspects like fishing methods and regulations, promoting responsible fishing practices in a broader social and environmental context is essential for sustainable lobster fishing. It also emphasises how consumer preferences impact competence and material outcomes, affecting the economic sustainability of fisheries. The relationship between competence and materiality underscores the role of fishing communities in building resilience. However, challenges in enforcing sustainability initiatives and catch limits, given the vast Irish coastline, show a need for more effective regulatory mechanisms.

(In)Competence & Meaning

In Irish coastal communities, the interplay between the SPF categories meaning and competence is crucial for preserving cherished traditions, particularly lobster fishing (see Table 6 for a summary of categories). The connection between these categories underscores the need to safeguard both the cultural heritage, and the expertise required for sustainable lobster fishing. A concerning trend involves an ageing fishing fleet prioritising exporting their catch over local lobster consumption, which restricts sustainable food options and youth exposure to career prospectives.

Competence also plays a role in environmental stewardship, translating sustainability values into actions. Fishermen acknowledged that climate change and rising water temperatures are affecting lobster migration patterns, requiring larger boats with increased operational costs, exemplified in the quote,

Aye, we all see it. The sea's warming up, so the lobsters are swimming off deeper for the colder waters. We've to sail farther now, burning more fuel, and then there's the big trawlers in our way. Between losin' our gear to the big boats and burning fuel, there's hardly any money in it now.

Table 6 - Intertwining of SPF Categories 'Meaning' and 'Competence'

Topic	Explanation
Cultural Significance	Underscores preserving both the cultural heritage and the competence required to sustain it. Nurturing and reconnecting these elements are essential to ensure that lobster retains its deep cultural meaning and significance within Irish food culture.
Environmental Stewardship	Proficiency ensures that the essence of environmental stewardship is converted into measures that protect the cultural importance of lobster while ensuring conserving the natural environment for forthcoming generations. This interwoven connection emphasises signifying sustainability in upholding the authenticity of Irish food heritage.
Fishing Culture	Showcases how cultural significance is preserved and enriched through the knowledge, skills and practices of fishermen. Competence ensures that lobster fishing remains a vibrant and sustainable part of Irish cultural heritage, strengthening the connection between the cultural meaning of lobster fishing and the tangible actions taken to uphold it.
Tourism Cultural Exchange	Competence ensures that lobster, as an Irish cultural symbol, is presented authentically to tourists while aligning with the cultural and ecological values of sustainable food systems. This synergy enriches the experience and supports the cultural worth of lobster within the broader context of Irish food heritage.
Community Identity	Lobster fishing competence endures more than just an economic endeavour; it also serves as a cultural tradition that encapsulates the principles, past and essence of these coastal communities. The expertise transmitted across generations, solidifying its place within their cultural legacy. strengthened and enhanced the significance of their bond with lobster fishing.

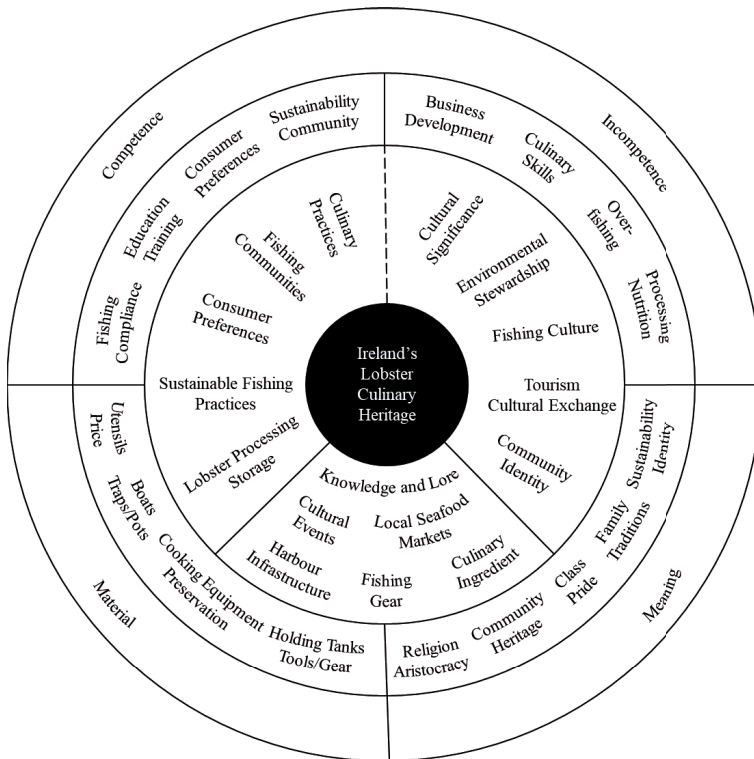
This table presents an analysis of the intricate relationship between the Social Practice Framework categories 'Meaning' and 'Competence' within various contexts. The table offers insights into how these categories jointly contribute to the dynamics of social practices in Irish lobster culture.

The quote highlights the associative costs, financially, environmentally and safety impacting Irish lobster fisherman that consequently increase the lobster prices and limit food access. Comprehending the significance of sustainability in safeguarding Irish food heritage and its extensive implications for local food affordability is vital for informed contemplation.

In tourism and cultural exchange, competence is central to presenting lobster as an Irish cultural symbol, especially in areas like Galway, Dingle, Cork, Howth and Kilkeel. Sustainable fishing initiatives reinforce lobster's cultural worth within Irish food heritage. However, challenges like poaching threaten

both livelihoods and community identity, emphasising the deep connection between lobster fishing and the cultural legacy of Irish coastal communities. Fishing is not merely a vocation, it is a way of life, a passion deeply ingrained in their being. A fisherman reflected on this notion, “*I don't know what it is, it's just me. It's who I am, and I don't know no different. Without the sea, I'm nothing*”. This poignant quote encapsulates the profound connection that Irish lobster fishermen have with their craft and the sea, reflecting a way of life and a love for their heritage that they are determined to pass on to future generations. By applying the SPF, the results within shed light on the intricate relationship between meaning, competence and material aspects in Irish lobster fishing and consumption. Figure 2 below reflects the novel adaptation of the framework to underscore the urgent need to preserve both the cultural heritage associated with lobster fishing and the expertise needed to sustain it.

Figure 2 - A Social Practice Framework: Ireland's Lobster Culinary Heritage



This figure provides a visual representation of the interconnection between fishing and consumption in Irish communities. The quadrants are sectioned by category, with the third level divided in thirds: top-left (in/competence and material); top-right (in/competence and meaning); bottom (material and meaning).

Implications on the Global Literature

Global literature on lobster consumption and sustainability is diverse, where studies have examined historical usage (Spanier *et al.*, 2015); consumer trends (Wang *et al.*, 2021); economic aspects (Jefferies *et al.*, 2020) and environmental impacts (Boavida-Portugal *et al.*, 2018). These reveal the dynamic nature of lobster fisheries worldwide, focusing on consumer preferences, economic viability and ecological sustainability amid global and local challenges. In contrast, this research, using the SPF, provides a distinct perspective on Ireland's lobster industry, reflecting on cultural, historical and material aspects of consumption. While regions like Australia, North America and China view lobster as a luxury (Phillips & Melville-Smith, 2005; Wang *et al.*, 2021), the Irish context shows avoidance because of high costs and cultural factors, offering a unique viewpoint compared to the general global narrative. This study emphasises the cultural and historical dimensions in Ireland, differing from global discussions that often prioritise economic and environmental sustainability.

Exploring competence, especially in culinary knowledge, aligns with global concerns on sustainability practices, such as in Vietnam demonstrating innovative approaches to meeting global demand while potentially alleviating pressure on wild populations (Jefferies *et al.*, 2020). Irish narratives of lobster consumption, influenced by historical and cultural factors like British rule and culinary conservatism, contrast with global perspectives that typically focus on economic and environmental sustainability. This differs from studies like Madigan *et al.* (2018) and Baki *et al.* (2018), which concentrate on environmental health risks as contaminants in lobsters. Research by Wahle *et al.* (2020) on the economic and management aspects of global lobster fisheries complements the Irish case by highlighting the worldwide economic significance and management complexities of lobster fishing, including market dynamics and the industry's viability. This provides a contrasting yet comprehensive view of the challenges and approaches to managing lobster fisheries globally.

The current investigation into integrating the SFM within Ireland's lobster industry, though replete with profound insights, grapples with several limitations and areas of uncertainty. Its small sample size, suitable for detailed qualitative analysis, may not fully represent broader trends. The reliance on qualitative methods could introduce interpretative bias and its historical focus, while rich in context, might not capture the evolving dynamics of the lobster industry, such as changing consumer behaviours and environmental factors. Emphasis on the cultural aspects of lobster consumption risks overlooking economic, regulatory and environmental sustainability challenges. The theoretical framework employed may

oversimplify the complex interactions within the lobster sector, where applying the findings is subject to unpredictable changes in consumer patterns, market shifts and environmental conditions, influencing the practical implementation of SFM principles in Ireland's lobster industry.

Conclusions

This research on Irish lobster fishing deftly intertwines cultural heritage, sustainability and history, highlighting lobsters as symbols of deep-sea connections and enduring coastal traditions. The study, guided by the Social Practice Framework, unveils the complex synergy between expertise, material factors and cultural values, signifying social practices in lobster fishing communities for preserving cultural food heritage and transferring essential traditional knowledge and skills. Competence in sustainable lobster harvesting and its cultural value are central to reinforcing community identity, with material components like equipment and regulations being critical for ecological and economic sustainability.

The results offer several pragmatic applications for stakeholders in the lobster fishing industry, policymakers and the sustainable fisheries management community. For industry stakeholders, the study's insights into traditional fishing practices and the cultural significance of lobster can inform marketing strategies and product development, potentially enhancing the appeal of lobster products in both local and broader markets. Marketing campaigns could highlight the heritage and traditional methods of lobster fishing in Ireland, creating a premium brand image. This approach could attract consumers who value authenticity and sustainability, opening new market opportunities domestically and internationally. The research can guide developing value-added lobster products that reflect traditional Irish culinary heritage, potentially creating a niche market.

Policymakers can formulate regulations that integrate sustainably developing the lobster industry with preserving its cultural heritage, drawing insights from recent research. These regulations could entail the adoption of sustainable fishing methods congruent with traditional practices, consequently protecting lobster populations and the historical essence of fishing communities. The establishment of additional marine protected areas for lobster regeneration, coupled with the revision of fishing quotas and seasonal limits based on scientific evidence, is advised. Implementing traceability and labelling systems could enhance consumer awareness and appreciation of the distinct cultural and culinary significance of Irish lobsters. These strategies should involve the active participation of local fishing communities in policymaking, as well as investment in research, especially in

areas concerning sustainable lobster aquaculture and the impacts of climate change. Educational initiatives aimed at both fishermen and consumers are vital in encouraging sustainable practices and culinary innovation, potentially increasing the demand for sustainably sourced lobster. Rigorous regulatory enforcement is essential to uphold these sustainability standards. Offering subsidies or incentives to fishermen who adhere to traditional, sustainable fishing methods could be considered to balance ecological conservation with the support of local economies.

The focus on maintaining traditional practices within contemporary sustainability tenets is congruent with the ethos of the SFM community. This approach advocates for initiatives incorporating community-based projects that recognise and appreciate the indigenous knowledge and practices of local communities. SFM can engender a more comprehensive strategy in fisheries management, characterised by community-driven conservation endeavours and local monitoring schemes. Such efforts are aimed at bolstering ecological sustainability, simultaneously augmenting community participation and proprietorship in conservation initiatives.

Future research on the SFM's impact in Ireland can employ the PLACE framework (Brenton & Slawinski, 2023; Slawinski *et al.*, 2023; Slawinski *et al.*, 2021), focusing on principles like community leadership, diverse perspectives, local capacities, engaging storytelling and holistic thinking. This approach aims to identify opportunities to promote sustainable and equitable food systems by considering policy, availability, affordability, convenience and ethics. Community leaders, bridging divides, leveraging local strengths and sharing interesting narratives can foster a deeper understanding of Irish dietary shifts and the potential impact of the SFM.

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