Exploring key influences on Ireland's perception of Britain

1. Introduction

This dissertation is concerned with the potential differing influence that a rural or urban background may have on Irish perceptions of Britain and the British. It was inspired by my own experiences in rural west Ireland during family holidays and subsequent further study of relating topics.

Figure 1. On holiday in Ireland (Author, 2023)

This research is important as Britain's exit from the European Union plunges the future of Britain's geopolitical relationships into the unknown. Additionally, with the recent 25th anniversary of the 'Good Friday Agreement', geographers should work to better comprehend how Ireland and the world around it perceives Britain. Ireland, one of Britain's closest neighbours with a long intertwined colonial history, is an interesting place to begin.

Throughout this research, many influential variables were discovered that were perhaps more pronounced and/or significant than the rural or urban backgrounds of participants. This was subsequently explored and ultimately demonstrated that the urban and rural labels are perhaps not as significant as they once were.

Table 2. Responses to the question 'What is your opinion of the UK as a political and global power' grouped by variables (Author, 2023)
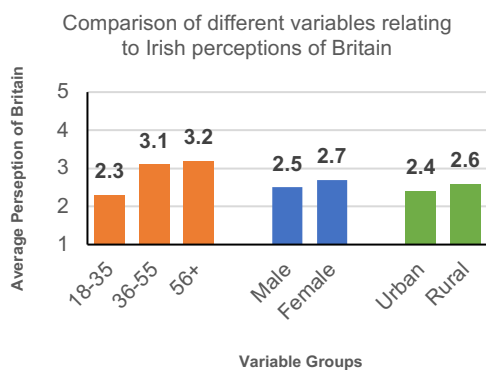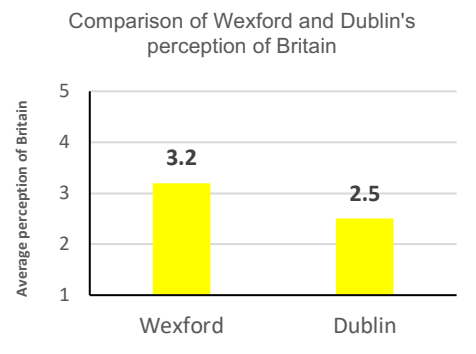

Comparison of different variables relating to Irish perceptions of Britain

Variable Groups	Average Perseption of Britain
18-35	2.3
36-55	3.1
56+	3.2
Male	2.5
Female	2.7
Urban	2.4
Rural	2.6

2. Methods

Initial Survey > Further Interview + Secondary Data = Findings

A preliminary survey was distributed to gather a high volume of responses to obtain an accurate representation of Irish perceptions of Britain and the British (Gomez & Jones, 2010). I utilised my own contacts in Ireland and then used their further contacts, this method is known as 'snowballing'. Beauchamin & Gonzalez-Ferrer's (2011) note that this method can prove ineffective if the trail from an original contact goes dead. To combat this risk and increase the volume of responses, gatekeepers were contacted at University College Dublin and Galway University.

Then, to gain greater detail on the subjects and issues raised, a further interview stage was added using a semi-structured interview technique, thus enabling rich qualitive data to be gathered (Neuman & Robsons, 2014). Secondary data sources were then used to add contextualised depth to the findings and were used in conjunction with the primary data gathered (Kara, 2023). While secondary data is plentiful and easy to data mine, I was cautious to avoid placing undue emphasis on artifacts that may not be reflective of the general population (Trinh, 2018, pg. 163).

Loch Na Fooey

Dublin

Wexford

Table 1. Responses to the question 'What is your opinion of the UK as a political and global power' grouped by city (Author, 2023)

Comparison of Wexford and Dublin's perception of Britain

	Average perception of Britain
Wexford	3.2
Dublin	2.5

3. Results

The results gathered included both qualitive data drawn from the survey questions and interview transcripts as well as some numerical data drawn from one question in the initial survey. This numerical data enabled visual aids to be plotted with ease (see tables 1 and 2). In addition to these, qualitative transcripts from interviewees proved equally as enlightening.

Dublin:

"I've had very interesting experiences of stag parties and groups of brits over, especially in Temple Bar [a central Dublin tourist district, largely made up of pubs]. It's nearly like you could call Temple bar a little Britain, you know, like you hear more English accents than you do Irish accents…but like there's a certain presence that you do feel with the Brits. The Brits take up space. You know when they're on holiday, they can be quite loud…it's like they let loose, and just get a bit kind of burly and a bit, you know, sassy and stuff like that."

Wexford:

"Wales was nearer to us than Dublin and especially in the Summer the town would be flooded with British Holidaymakers, a good percentage of those returned Irish."

"My family have gone on holidays to Wales and the Southwest of UK [sic] many times as it is only a 2-hour boat journey…The number of relatives I have[working] in Britain also influences me."

4. Discussion

Figure 2. Caricature of an Irishman (Leech, 1864)

The results showed that although rural perspectives were marginally more positive than those of the urban, it was apparent that other variables were more influential. Take for example table 2 which demonstrates how age has a far more pronounced impact on how Irish individuals perceive Britain, rather individual geography.

Additionally, the results suggested that a lack of respect on the part of the modern British media had evidently tarnished this respondent's perception of Britain. This disrespect has historic roots. Take figure 2, which depicts an etching taken from Punch, a satirical and pro-empire magazine popular between 1850 and the 1940's with a deeply disrespectful caricature of an Irishman, which was all too common at the time. This dissertation linked the disrespect shown in the dehumanised 'othering' of the Irish in Punch with respondents' suggestions that the Irish are still not taken seriously in modern media. Respondents picked up on prominentIrish figures in British media, namely Louis Walsh and Graham Norton, who embodied the stereotypical 'Irish' traits of adopting the 'funny man' persona, with Graham Norton never being far from a drink.

It became quickly apparent to me that typecasting Irishmen and women in these roles on British television is understandably destructive to the development of a positive and balanced international relationship and no doubt damaging to Irish perceptions of the British. Coupled with a perceived poor general understanding of Irish history, Britain has painting a poor image for itself in the eyes of many Irish, and particularly those of a younger age.

5. Key points

- The rural/urban influence was not as influential as initially expected
- The most influential variable on British/Irish relations was in fact 'Age'
- Results suggested the Irish youth are more anti-British than the older Irish population
- Lack of British understanding on British/Irish history is still damaging Irish perceptions of the British

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