

Filling the Information Gap of House Owners and Technologies: A Design Case Study of a recommender for home energy system

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ABSTRACT

The transition to clean energy and energy-efficient technologies is crucial for reducing carbon emissions and mitigating climate change. However, households lack the sufficient knowledge and guidance on these technologies, including the potential benefits that can be obtained through their adoption. This study aims to fill the information gap and support decision-making on the adoption of clean energy and energy technologies. Design Case Studies will be used as the research framework, and a website software will be developed to provide households with personalised and professional home energy system recommendations and techno-economic assessments. The interfaces will be designed based on the findings from a pre-study conducted through literature review. Real household users will use the intervention and provide feedback through both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. This research will contribute to the HCI community by providing an understanding of how technology can be used to promote the adoption of clean energy and energy technologies in households, and by identifying the effectiveness of personalised recommendations in supporting behaviour change.

Contents

List of Figures	vi
List of Tables	vii
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Background	1
1.1.1 Mitigating climate change through energy transition . .	2
1.1.2 Households in energy transition	3
1.1.3 Technologies for home energy system	3
1.2 Motivations	4
1.3 Research questions and aims	4
1.4 Justification and planning	6
1.4.1 Justification	6
1.4.2 Supervision	6
1.4.3 Time planning	7

2	Methodology	9
3	Pre-study	10
3.1	Academia	10
3.2	Industry	11
3.3	Regulations	11
3.4	The newTRENDS project	11
3.4.1	New societal trends on energy demand	12
3.4.2	The modeling of residential buildings	13
4	Design	17
4.1	Understanding current home energy system	18
4.1.1	Household profiles	18
4.1.2	Decision trees for asking questions	22
4.2	Recommending improvements for home energy system	22
4.2.1	Recommendations	22
4.2.2	Explainability	24
4.3	Interactions	25
4.3.1	Interfaces	25
4.3.2	Data visualisation	26

Appendices	28
Bibliography	28

List of Figures

3.1	FLEX modeling suite	14
3.2	Model structure for individual households	15
4.1	Household profile	19

List of Tables

1.1	Research objectives	7
1.2	Time planning	8
4.1	Input data required by FLEX-Operation	22

Notations and Abbreviations

CO₂ Carbon dioxide. [1](#)

EE Energy efficiency. [11](#)

EU European Union. [2](#), [3](#), [11](#), [29](#)

GHG Greenhouse gas. [1](#)

HP Heat pump. [13](#), [14](#)

NAPE The National Action Plan on Energy Efficiency. [11](#)

PV Photovoltaic. [13–15](#), [18](#), [20](#)

RE Renewable energy. [11](#)

SEMS Smart energy management system. [13](#)

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

Human-induced climate change is causing dangerous and widespread disruption in nature, thereby affecting billions of lives globally [15]. To tackle climate change and its negative impacts, two main strategies are addressed: climate change mitigation and adaptation.

- **Climate change mitigation** refers to the actions taken to reduce or prevent greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and ultimately stabilize the concentration of these gases in the atmosphere to limit global warming and its adverse effects [22]. This goal entails a range of related projects, spanning farming, land use, peatland management, renewable energies, and energy efficiency. Integrated projects that implement climate change mitigation strategies and action plans at regional or national levels are also pertinent [6]. Notably, to curb carbon dioxide

(CO₂) emissions in the energy system, two main approaches are pursued: *(1) reducing energy consumption on the demand side through efficiency improvement and behavioral changes and (2) transitioning to renewable energy sources on the supply side.*

- **Climate change adaptation** encompasses measures to manage the adverse impacts of climate change, such as natural disasters, changes in precipitation patterns, and rising sea levels, among others [22], which includes projects relating to urban adaptation and land-use planning, infrastructure resilience, sustainable water management in drought-prone areas, flood and coastal management, as well as the resilience of the agricultural, forestry, and tourism sectors [6].

The work in this thesis belongs to the category of climate change mitigation.

1.1.1 Mitigating climate change through energy transition

The Paris Agreement, a historic international agreement, sets long-term goals to substantially reduce global emissions and limit the global temperature increase to 2 degrees Celsius in this century [24]. To achieve this ambitious goal, the world is facing an unprecedented imperative to a rapid transition in the energy sector. The European Union (EU)’s ”Energy 2020. A strategy for competitive, sustainable and secure energy” and ”Energy Roadmap 2050” are key strategy papers guiding energy developments in the EU [18], aiming to lead in global climate action and achieve net-zero emissions by 2050 through a socially-fair and cost-efficient transition [5].

1.1.2 Households in energy transition

Households are a crucial component of the energy transition, as they are responsible for a significant proportion of final energy consumption in the EU, as highlighted by Eurostat’s 2023 report. In fact, in 2020, the residential sector accounted for 27.4% of total final energy consumption or 18.7% of gross inland energy consumption in the EU [7]. Therefore, reducing energy consumption in households through energy-efficient building construction and renovations, as well as digitalisation and smart demand-side management, can have a significant impact on achieving the EU’s energy and climate targets [13]. This underscores the importance of developing and implementing effective policies and strategies to promote energy efficiency and renewable energy use in households to facilitate the energy transition.

1.1.3 Technologies for home energy system

Technologies for home energy systems have rapidly advanced in recent years, with a growing focus on energy efficiency and renewable energy sources. Smart home technologies, such as energy management systems, allow households to optimise their energy consumption and reduce waste. Moreover, rooftop solar panels and home battery storage systems enable households to generate and store their own renewable energy, reducing dependence on the grid and lowering electricity bills. In addition, the integration of electric vehicles with home energy systems can further reduce household carbon emissions and provide a source of backup power. These technologies have the potential to significantly transform the way households consume and generate energy, contributing to a more sustainable and resilient energy system.

1.2 Motivations

Despite the growing availability and accessibility of home energy technologies, there remains a significant information gap regarding their effective utilisation. A survey conducted by Palmer et al. [20] identified a lack of knowledge and guidance among homeowners, preventing them from maximising the benefits of these investments in terms of reducing future energy expenses. Therefore, there is an opportunity in exploring effective ways to educate and inform house owners on the utilisation of home energy technologies.

1.3 Research questions and aims

The following research questions will guide this study:

1. What practice can effectively bridge the information gap for house owners in the adoption of renewable energy and energy-efficient technologies?
2. How to develop effective explanations that build trust for a recommender in supporting households making sustainable decisions?

The aim of this study is to address the information gap and support homeowners in their decision-making process regarding the adoption of clean energy and energy-efficient technologies. The study also seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of such a nudging approach.

The following research objectives will aid in answering the research questions:

- Conduct a thorough review of relevant literature to identify existing gaps and opportunities in the field.
- Develop a user-friendly and accessible interface for providing information about energy-efficient technologies and their benefits to households.
- Design and implement interactive tools that enable households to estimate the costs and benefits of adopting different energy-efficient technologies and renewable energy sources.
- Conduct user studies to evaluate the impact of the developed interventions on households' thoughts of energy-efficient technologies and renewable energy sources, using both quantitative and qualitative methods.
- Analyse the data collected from the user studies to gain insights into the users' needs and preferences, as well as the effectiveness of the interventions.
- Write the thesis that presents the findings, conclusions and recommendations based on the research conducted.

This thesis aims to contribute to the HCI community by exploring the use of technology to fill the information gap in households' knowledge of energy technology and support decision-making on the adoption of clean energy and energy-efficient technologies. It will offer insights into the design and development of personalised and professional home energy system recommendations and their effectiveness in promoting the adoption of those technologies. The study will also provide insights into the user experience of the intervention

and how it can be further improved to support sustainable energy choices. Overall, this thesis seeks to advance the understanding of the role of technology in promoting sustainable energy consumption in households, and its findings can inform the development of future HCI interventions to address environmental challenges.

1.4 Justification and planning

1.4.1 Justification

The proposed thesis project will combine research and application aspects, which is important because it will allow for a comprehensive understanding of the topic being studied. Conducting a thorough literature review will provide a strong foundation for the research, while the development of software applications will allow for practical implementation of the findings. In addition, interviews with industry professionals and stakeholders will provide valuable insights into the real-world challenges and opportunities in the field. Finally, the evaluation process will involve much data analysis, enabling the research to draw valid and reliable conclusions. Thus, the proposed thesis project will contribute to a well-rounded and informative study, and is believed to be justified for 30 credits.

1.4.2 Supervision

This master thesis project will be supervised by Prof. Dr. Gunnar Stevens (gunnar.stevens@uni-siegen.de) at Siegen University and Dr. Songming Yu

(songmin.yu@isi.fraunhofer.de) from The Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research.

1.4.3 Time planning

The following is the time allocation for the research objectives, which are scheduled to be completed in 26 weeks.

1	Literature review
2	Design interfaces
3	Develop the software tool
4	User studies
5	Analyse data
6	Write thesis

Table 1.1: Research objectives

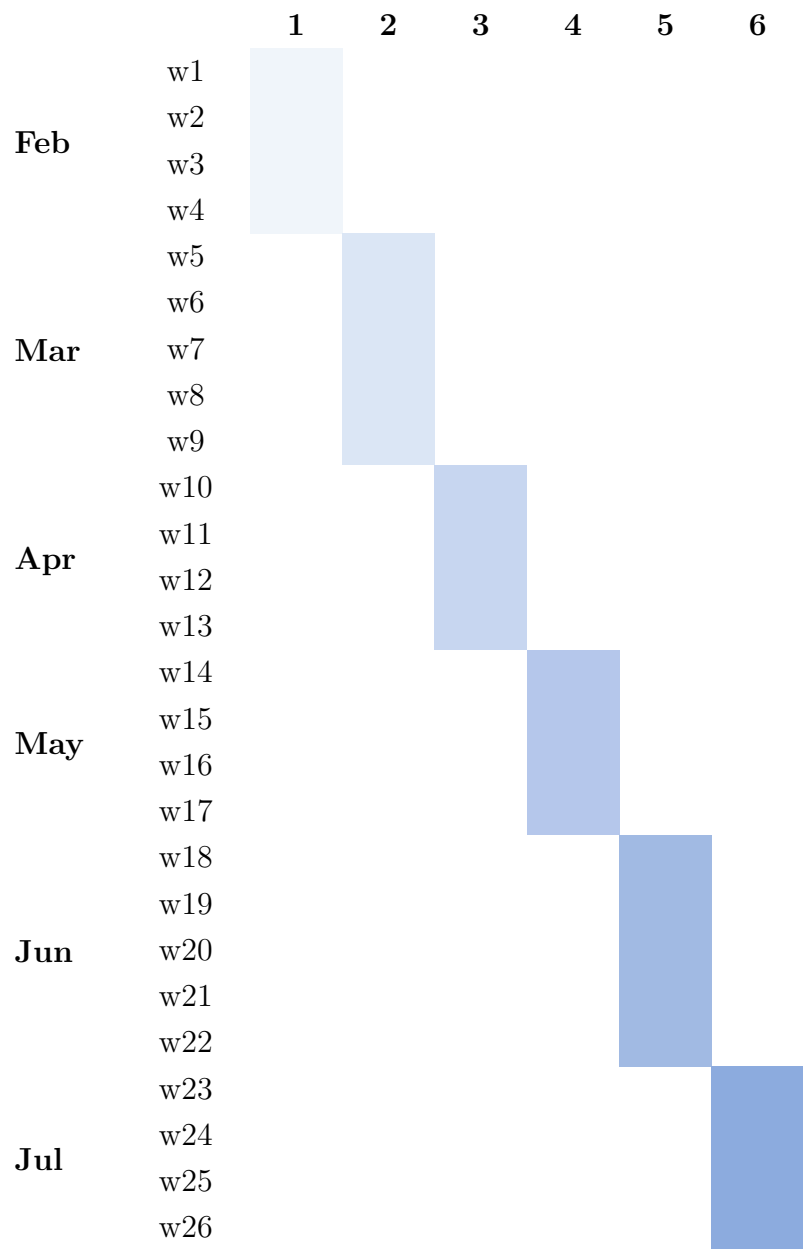


Table 1.2: Time planning

Chapter 2

Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study is based on the Design Case Studies framework. The pre-study phase will begin by conducting a comprehensive review of the literature to identify best practices for providing households with personalised and professional home energy system recommendations, as well as techno-economic assessments. Based on the findings from the pre-study, I will then design the interfaces of the intervention. The interfaces will be developed to provide an intuitive and user-friendly experience that can easily be understood by households. Following the development phase, real users will be invited to use the intervention, and feedback will be collected both qualitatively and quantitatively. The qualitative data will be collected through interviews with participants, while the quantitative data will be collected through surveys. Finally, the collected data will be analysed to evaluate households thoughts about the recommendations and energy technologies. The entire process will be documented and reported in the form of a thesis.

Chapter 3

Pre-study

3.1 Academia

Within the academic community, there exists a concerted effort to address issues related to energy efficiency and the adoption of renewable energy sources. There are numerous research and ongoing projects aimed at establishing a robust social energy infrastructure capable of adapting to the utilization of renewable energy sources. Studies are also investigating the feasibility and practicalities of establishing zero-emission households and buildings. Technological innovations designed to support these goals have also been a focal point in the academic discourse surrounding energy efficiency and the transition to renewable energy.

In the meantime, Palmer et al. [20] drew attention to the fact that engineering studies have identified various investments in new energy-efficient equipment or building retrofits that would generate savings surpassing their costs in terms of lower future energy expenses. However, homeowners and

businesses lack sufficient knowledge and guidance on how to effectively utilize these opportunities to their advantage.

3.2 Industry

3.3 Regulations

3.4 The newTRENDs project

Renewable energy (RE) and energy efficiency (EE) are two central strategies pursued by the EU and its Member States concerning the energy system. Investments into low-carbon power generation accounted for 15% recently are expected to rise to more than 30% by 2030, corresponding to a quadrupling in absolute volumes [3]. Solar, wind, and the investments for enabling the integration of these technologies to the grid dominate the investments into low-carbon power generation [3]. Measures to increase energy efficiency, including investments in energy savings and the consolidation of consultancy and information services, are promoted by The National Action Plan on Energy Efficiency (NAPE) [8].

Transitioning towards a sustainable energy system necessitates significant effort on both the demand and supply sides. However, previous research has shown that in many areas energy efficiency gains were counteracted by societal trends that increased corresponding activities, leading to much smaller decreases (or even increases) of energy demand than technologically feasible [4]. The aim of newTRENDs is to increase the qualitative and quantita-

tive understanding of impacts of new societal trends on energy consumption and to improve the modelling of energy demand, energy efficiency and policy instruments [10].

3.4.1 New societal trends on energy demand

Researchers believe new societal trends have the potential to shift energy demands between sectors and might reinforce or diminish one another when they occur at the same time [4]. It is therefore important to access current and (foreseeable) future societal trends concerning the impact that they might have on future energy demand [4].

Four arising societal trend clusters that are likely to shape future energy demand in European countries (and worldwide) were established by Brugger et al. [4]: *(1) the digitalization of the economy and of private life; (2) new social and economic models, including the sharing economy and prosumaging (combination of producing, consuming and managing of energy); (3) industrial transformation, including decarbonization of industrial processes and the circular economy (including a stronger focus on material efficiency); (4) quality of life, including health effects, urbanization and regionalization.*

Considering the impact of these new societal trends on energy demand from a closer sectoral perspective, Yu et al. [26] identified four energy sectors:

- industry,
- transport,
- tertiary,

- residential.

This proposed thesis will focus on the residential sector while taking scenarios of “consumers” becoming “prosumers” (with [PV](#)) and “prosumagers” (adding energy storage and [SEMS](#)) [23] into account.

3.4.2 The modeling of residential buildings

The FLEX models of the newTRENDS project are referred to as “RC models”, that calculate (simulate or optimize) the building energy demand at the hourly resolution, considering the trends of prosumaging households and energy communities, which significantly supports the analysis of relevant policies promoting the diffusion of heat pumps ([HP](#)), [PV](#), batteries, and [SEMS](#) [26].

The figure [3.1](#) shows how FLEX interacts with other bottom-up models involved in the newTRENDS project.

INVERT/EE-Lab and FORECAST-Appliance

INVERT/EE-Lab and FORECAST-Appliance are the two models that can cover the energy consumption of residential buildings. The two models complement each other and cover the total energy consumption of households. However, both INVERT/EE-Lab and FORECAST-Appliance calculate the energy consumption at the annual resolution and cannot model the prosumaging behavior and energy community, which requires an hourly resolution to consider the impact of household behavior, [PV](#) generation, and energy

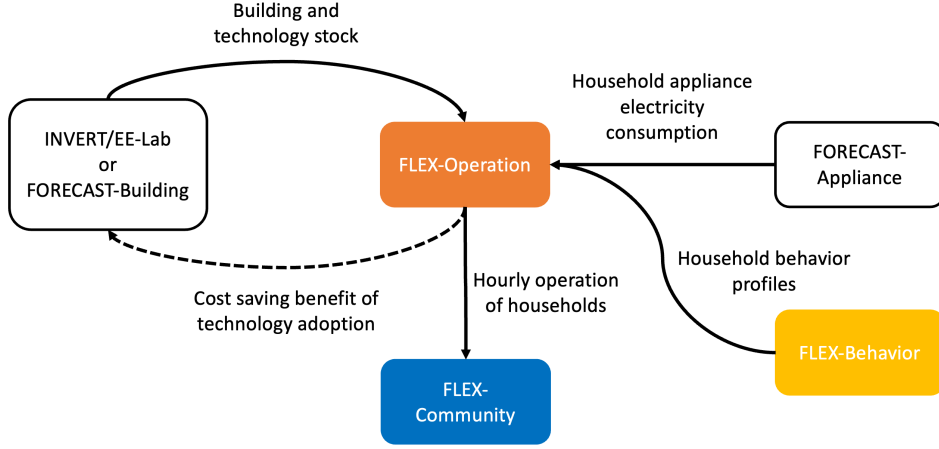


Figure 3.1: FLEX modeling suite

storage (thermal and battery) on energy consumption. In this regard, the FLEX-Operation and FLEX-Community models were developed to improve the building modeling suite and support relevant policy analysis [26].

FLEX-Operation

FLEX-Operation models the energy system operation of an individual household in hourly resolution. It can be used to calculate the energy consumption of each representative building, including operation of technologies (e.g., battery, PV, HP, etc.) and load profiles in hourly resolution. Furthermore, FLEX-Operation can also provide implications for investment decisions, i.e., the energy-saving benefit of technology adoption [26].

As shown in figure 3.2, FLEX-Operation considers following five energy services [26]:

1. electric appliances, e.g., television, refrigerator, lighting, etc.;

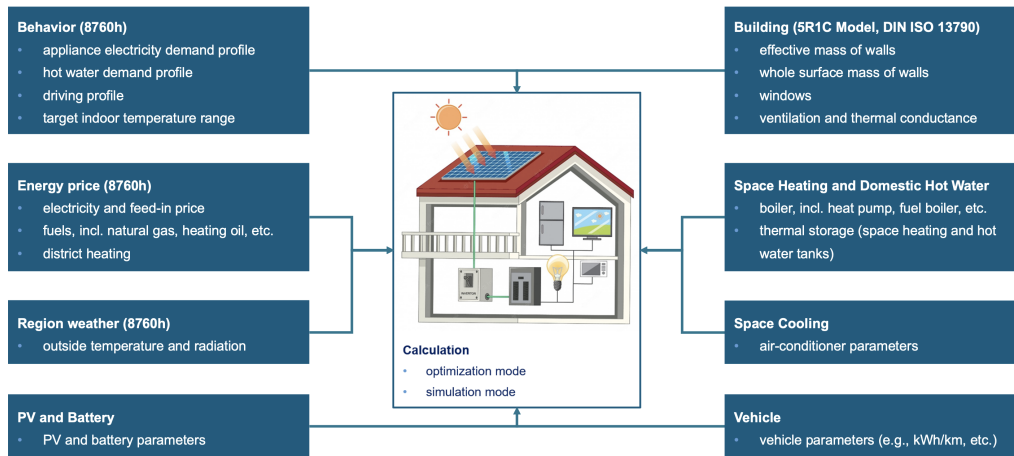


Figure 3.2: Model structure for individual households

2. space heating;
3. domestic hot water;
4. space cooling;
5. vehicle.

FLEX-Community

FLEX-Community models the operation of an energy community, i.e., household interaction, aggregator optimisation. It can be applied to support the aggregators designing and evaluating business models, as well as making investment decisions, for example, the self-owned battery, [PV](#) panels, etc. [26].

FLEX-Behavior

FLEX-Behavior models the behavior (activity profile) of households' and corresponding load profiles. It generates the hourly activity and energy demand

profile of a pre-defined individual household [26]. The results include [26]:

1. appliance electricity demand,
2. domestic hot water demand,
3. driving profile, and
4. building occupation.

Chapter 4

Design

In order to bridge the information gap regarding energy-efficient technologies, this study aims to provide households with knowledge of available technologies in the market. To address the potential issue of information overload, the study proposes a smart home energy recommender to present households with a tailored selection of technologies that better fit their unique home situations, such as by learning the location of the house, in order to estimate the amount of sunlight it is likely to receive over the course of a year, to evaluate whether installing a [PV](#) system would be a viable and effective way for the household. The learning theory suggests that individuals learn new knowledge by connecting it with existing knowledge and experiences, as this helps to create a framework for understanding and retention of the new information. Therefore, by focusing on personalised recommendations, the study hypothesises that households may be more receptive to learning about energy-efficient technologies. Additionally, with the intention of nudging house owners towards making informed decisions.

4.1 Understanding current home energy system

4.1.1 Household profiles

The concept of household profile has been developed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the energy consumption patterns of residential buildings. This approach takes into account a range of factors, including the external environment, building materials, energy consumption behaviors, and home energy systems. The aim of creating such a profile is to gain insights into the energy demand and supply dynamics of households. This comprehensive analysis also offers insights into the specific factors that contribute to household energy consumption and highlights potential opportunities for tailored improvements to home energy systems.

Input data by FLEX-Operation model

In order to accurately anticipate household's energy costs, the FLEX-Operation model takes a set of variables into account, and they can be divided into following 15 categories: *behaviour profile, battery, behaviour, boiler, building, energy price, heating element, hot water tank, PV, region, space cooling technology, space heating tank, vehicle, energy price, region weather.*

Furthermore, the specific data required within each category is shown in table 4.1.

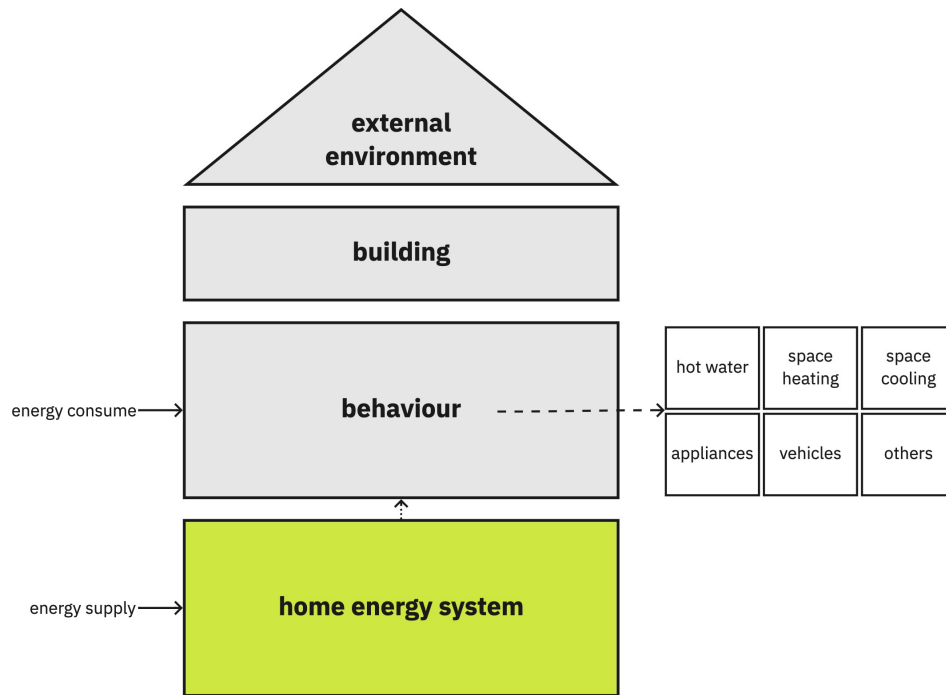


Figure 4.1: Household profile

Category	Data
Behaviour profile	id_hour, people_at_home_profile_1, hot_water_demand_profile_1, appliance_electricity_demand_profile_1, vehicle_at_home_profile_1, vehicle_distance_profile_1.
Battery	ID_Battery, capacity, capacity_unit, charge_efficiency, charge_power_max, charge_power_max_unit, discharge_efficiency, discharge_power_max, discharge_power_max_unit.
Continued on next page	

Table 4.1 – continued from previous page

Category	Data
Behaviour	ID_Behavior, id_people_at_home_profile, target_temperature_at_home_max, target_temperature_at_home_min, target_temperature_not_at_home_max, target_temperature_not_at_home_min, shading_solar_reduction_rate, shading_threshold_temperature, temperature_unit, id_hot_water_demand_profile, hot_water_demand_annual, hot_water_demand_unit, id_appliance_electricity_demand_profile, appliance_electricity_demand_annual, appliance_electricity_demand_unit, id_vehicle_at_home_profile, id_vehicle_distance_profile.
Boiler	ID_Boiler, type, power_max, power_max_unit, carnot_efficiency_factor.
Building	ID_Building, type, construction_period_start, construction_period_end, person_num, Af, Hop, Htr_w, Hve, CM_factor, Am_factor, internal_gains, effective_window_area_west_east, effective_window_area_south, effective_window_area_north, grid_power_max, supply_temperature.
Energy price	ID_EnergyPrice, id_electricity, id_electricity_feed_in, id_gases, price_unit.
Heating element	ID_HeatingElement, power, power_unit, efficiency.
Continued on next page	

Table 4.1 – continued from previous page

Category	Data
Hot water tank	ID_HotWaterTank, size, size_unit, surface_area, surface_area_unit, loss, loss_unit, temperature_start, temperature_max, temperature_min, temperature_surrounding, temperature_unit.
PV	ID_PV, size, size_unit.
Region	ID_Region, code, year, norm_outside_temperature.
Space cooling technology	ID_SpaceCoolingTechnology, efficiency, power, power_unit.
Space heating tank	ID_SpaceHeatingTank, size, size_unit, surface_area, surface_area_unit, loss, loss_unit, temperature_start, temperature_max, temperature_min, temperature_surrounding, temperature_unit.
Vehicle	ID_Vehicle, type, capacity, capacity_unit, consumption_rate, consumption_rate_unit, charge_efficiency, charge_power_max, charge_power_max_unit, discharge_efficiency, discharge_power_max, discharge_power_max_unit, charge_bidirectional.
Energy price	Region, year, id_hour, electricity_1, electricity_2, electricity_feed_in_1, gases_1.
Continued on next page	

Table 4.1 – continued from previous page

Category	Data
Region weather	region, year, id_hour, pv_generation, pv_generation_unit, temperature, temperature_unit, radiation_south, radiation_east, radiation_west, radiation_north, radiation_unit.

Table 4.1: Input data required by FLEX-Operation

4.1.2 Decision trees for asking questions

A total of 18 questions were raised to collect all the relevant information necessary for the household profile analysis. In order to optimize the user experience, a decision tree approach was employed, allowing users to navigate through the questionnaire without the need to answer all the questions.

4.2 Recommending improvements for home energy system

4.2.1 Recommendations

An effective home energy system should prioritize minimizing energy waste, reducing dependence on non-renewable fossil fuels, and lowering overall en-

ergy costs. Our recommendations are aligned with these fundamental principles and aim to promote sustainable energy practices while also reducing household energy expenditures.

The objectives of the recommendation system are multi-fold. Firstly, the system aims to support homeowners in making informed decisions regarding investments in home energy systems. Additionally, the system intends to encourage behavior change among homeowners by promoting the utilization of renewable energy sources. Finally, the recommendation system seeks to continuously refine and improve the accuracy of its predictive model, ensuring that the recommendations provided are up-to-date and effective. By providing users with tailored recommendations, the system aims to facilitate the adoption of energy technologies, ultimately leading to reduced energy demand and associated costs.

As noted by Karen Palmer et al. [20], financial considerations are of primary importance to homeowners when making decisions about energy investments. In line with this understanding, the recommendation system places a strong emphasis on providing transparent cost estimates for energy bills as well as recommended home energy system configurations. Additionally, the system seeks to encourage behavior change by providing information and education on climate change and renewable energy sources, aimed at increasing user awareness and understanding of the benefits of sustainable energy practices. To facilitate ongoing improvement and refinement of the recommendation system, a feedback survey button will be incorporated, allowing users to provide both short-term and long-term feedback on the system's performance and recommendations.

4.2.2 Explainability

In order to provide more comprehensive and understandable recommendations, we have chosen to explain our recommendations from multiple perspectives beyond just cost estimates. Specifically, we have identified 4 key objectives, including *trust*, *effectiveness*, *education*, and *debugging*, as key aspects to incorporate into our explanations. *Trust*, we build trust with our users by using reliable data sources and providing transparent services. *Effectiveness*, we strive to enhance the effectiveness of our service by offering recommendations that could actually benefit users economically. *Education*, we seek to educate our users on the importance of environmental protection by sharing relevant knowledge and insights. *De-bugging*, we value user feedback as an important tool for identifying and resolving any issues or bugs in our system, allowing us to continuously improve and refine our service. The reasons for offering such explanations are to familiarise users with these technologies, establish accountability in the decision-making process, and encourage a shift towards environmentally conscious behaviour. By incorporating these concepts into our explanations, we aim to provide recommendations that are transparent, trustworthy, understandable, and user-centred.

Our recommendation system employs a three-level explainability framework to enhance user understanding of the recommended home energy system configurations. At the first level, the system provides an explanation in terms of the expected energy bill for the household. At the second level, the system offers a behavioural explanation of energy consumption patterns and the factors driving them. Finally, at the third level, the system aims to increase users' awareness and understanding of renewable energy and environmental protection.

Furthermore, the explanation is divided into three layers. At the first layer, users are provided with a comprehensive summary of their current energy consumption patterns. At the second layer, users are introduced to the various functionalities and benefits of the recommended energy technologies, including cost-saving potential and environmental impact. Finally, at the last layer, users are presented with simulated energy demand and supply data, allowing them to see the potential energy savings that could result from adopting the recommended configurations.

Through the implementation of a comprehensive approach to explainability, our objective is to offer users an overview of energy technologies, enabling them to gain insight into their energy consumption patterns and to recognize the advantages of shifting towards more sustainable energy systems.

4.3 Interactions

4.3.1 Interfaces

To facilitate user understanding of the recommended home energy system configurations and associated costs, our recommendation system will employ a visual and natural language explanation interface. Specifically, an interactive visualization tool will be implemented to enable users to explore and compare different energy system configurations in terms of energy consumption patterns and costs. Additionally, natural language explanations will be provided to further enhance user understanding and engagement with the recommended configurations.

4.3.2 Data visualisation

Appendices

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