



CIRCULAR ECONOMY IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY:
MAPPING DRIVERS AND BARRIERS THROUGH
A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

Purpose. This study explores how the Circular Economy (CE) is conceptualized and implemented in the tourism sector, a service industry still marginally addressed in academic research on circular transitions.

Design/methodology/approach. Through a systematic literature review and qualitative content analysis of 64 journal articles, the paper identifies drivers and barriers that influence the CE adoption. These factors are classified into three dimensions: governance, stakeholder relations, and innovation.

Findings. While innovation and stakeholder relations are widely discussed in the literature, governance is significantly underexplored. Moreover, only few studies adopt a comprehensive perspective that integrates all three dimensions.

Practical and Social implications. From a managerial standpoint, the study provides insights for aligning internal capabilities with external enablers, especially for SMEs.

Originality of the study. The paper offers an analytical lens for understanding CE practices in service-based industries and stresses the need for more holistic approaches.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the Circular Economy (CE) has emerged as a key paradigm in the transition towards more sustainable economic models of production and consumption. Unlike the traditional linear approach based on “take, make, dispose,” the CE seeks to retain the value of products, materials, and resources within the system for as long as possible, minimizing waste and environmental impacts. While circular principles have been widely applied and studied in manufacturing, their implementation in service sectors – and particularly in the tourism industry – remains underexplored.

The tourism sector plays a vital role in global and local economies, generating employment, wealth, and territorial development. At the same time, it is responsible for significant environmental impacts due to intensive resource consumption, waste generation, and operational complexity (Voukkali et al., 2023). Applying CE principles to tourism may help reduce these impacts, support sustainable practices, and promote a regenerative approach to service design and delivery. However, the application of CE in services differs substantially from that in production: it relies less on physical product loops and more on optimizing and sharing resources, redesigning service processes, and strengthening interactions with users (Sehnm et al., 2019).

Despite the potential benefits, the transition to circularity in tourism is not straightforward. There is a risk that circular initiatives may be reduced to greenwashing or marketing tools, rather than being embedded into core business strategies (Opferkuch et al., 2023). To be effective and long-lasting, circular practices must be strategically designed and integrated with key organizational assets such as governance, stakeholder engagement, and innovation capabilities (Jones and Wynn, 2019).

In this paper, the term “tourism” is adopted as an umbrella concept that includes the hospitality industry, which represents one of its foundational pillars. This integrated view reflects the systemic nature of tourism flows and allows for a more comprehensive understanding of CE practices across the entire tourism ecosystem.

By uncovering how circular strategies are currently framed and implemented, this research aims to offer actionable insights for both scholars and practitioners seeking to align environmental ambitions with coherent business transformation. The findings may inform more effective policy and managerial frameworks, supporting a shift from superficial adoption to deeply rooted organizational change.

Building on this premise, the present review aims to identify and map the key criteria influencing decision-making processes in the implementation of CE practices, and to evaluate whether the existing academic literature presents a fragmented or integrated perspective.

To this end, we first identified the main drivers and barriers to the adoption of CE practices as discussed in the literature. These criteria were subsequently grouped into three foundational pillars – governance, stakeholder relations, and innovation – which, according to prior studies, are essential to supporting a strategic and integrated transition to circularity in the tourism sector.

Based on this approach, the paper aims to examine the extent to which current academic contributions reflect an integrated perspective, specifically investigating whether and how the literature addresses the interconnections among these three dimensions in the context of CE implementation within tourism firms. In particular, the paper will investigate the key criteria (both drivers and barriers) that influence CE decision-making processes in the tourism industry, addressing whether the academic literature adopts a fragmented or integrated perspective.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section presents the literature review as the foundation for the research question. This is followed by the research methodology, which aims to conceptualize the relevance of drivers and barriers associated with circular practices in the tourism sector. Subsequently, the findings and discussion are presented. The final section outlines the theoretical and managerial implications and offers directions for future research.

2. Literature review

The Circular Economy (CE) marks a transition from traditional linear production and consumption models to regenerative systems aimed at decoupling economic growth from resource consumption. This shift has gained urgency considering the growing resource scarcity, environmental degradation, and climate change.

As Homrich et al. (2018) observe, the CE offers a win–win approach to addressing resource scarcity and waste by reframing the potential value inherent in every stage of the value chain. In fact, upstream CE supports the efficient management of resources by enhancing production and consumption productivity, minimizing waste, and preserving the value of products and materials for as long as possible. Downstream, CE focuses on recovering and reintegrating materials with residual or intrinsic value back into the economic cycle, rather than disposing of them in landfills. Together, these upstream and downstream strategies capture the core of CE, enabling the closure of loops within product and material value chains.

Even if the concept of CE was introduced by Pearce and Turner (1990), the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2013) popularized the concept thanks to the so-called “butterfly diagram”. International standards also define

CE as the “economic system (by which a society organizes and allocates resources) that uses a systemic approach to maintain a circular flow of resources, by recovering, retaining or adding to their value, while contributing to sustainable development” (ISO 59010:2024). Even though the idea of circularity appears to be clear, concerns about its definition persist, sparking debate among the 221 existing definitions in academic literature (Kirchherr et al., 2023).

Furthermore, there is still no universally accepted scientific or technical language for the practical application of the CE concept. Starting from the traditional Reduce-Reuse-Recycle strategies, R-strategies vary from 3Rs to 10Rs (Potting et al., 2017). Zorpas’s (2024) research reveals the existence of more than 100 Rs beyond the well-known principles of Reduce-Reuse-Recycle, each serving a unique function in shaping approaches to waste management and promoting circularity in the transition toward a low-carbon society.

While the CE has been extensively discussed in the context of product-based industries, its application in service-oriented sectors remains comparatively underexplored and calls for further studies. Understanding this gap is crucial, given the growing dominance of service economies worldwide. In essence, “service” is the fundamental logic of exchange based on the co-creation of value (Lusch and Vargo, 2014). Much of the current CE literature, in fact, tends to conceptualize services as extensions of tangible products. This perspective is particularly evident in frameworks like Product-as-a-Service (PaaS) and Product-Service Systems (PSS), which primarily focus on delivering physical goods through service-based models. Such an approach risks overlooking the potential of services as standalone contributors to circularity (Fehrer and Vargo, 2023).

R-strategies, on the other hand, can be applied not only to physical products but also to service sectors like tourism, IT, education, and healthcare. However, the intrinsic immateriality that characterizes services encounters several significant challenges, such as difficulties in defining and quantifying circularity, the absence of standardized frameworks for implementing circular practices, and the imperative to develop innovative business models (OECD, 2019). In addition – and even more in the service sector – the consumer plays a central role for the effectiveness of R-strategies. According to Zimmermann et al. (2024), consumer behavior can impact on circular performance in two main ways: the correct use of products during their use and at the end of their life cycle, and the willingness to consume products derived from circular processes and sources.

Among service industries, the tourism sector plays a key role, contributing approximately 3% to global GDP in 2023, with an estimated \$8.6 trillion in traveler outlays in 2024 and 357 million jobs worldwide (UNWTO, 2024; McKinsey, 2024).

The tourism industry – consisting of activities involving the travel of individuals to locations beyond their everyday surroundings for different purposes – includes a broad range of economic and social activities that operate on a global scale, spanning multiple sectors and involving both goods and services. Within this framework, the hospitality industry holds a central role, serving as one of the key pillars upon which tourism relies. It plays a significant part in supporting tourism’s contribution to the economy by offering essential services such as lodging, dining, transport, and leisure activities that are integral to the tourist experience (Sampaio et al., 2024).

The tourism sector emerges as a particularly relevant field for CE applications, due to its significant environmental footprint and its complex resource flows. Tourism is a global economic driver but also a significant source of waste, resource depletion, and environmental impact. This is due to the same definition of tourism that is the travel of individuals to destinations outside their usual place of residence, where they temporarily stay in unfamiliar natural, social, and cultural environments for leisure, business, or other purposes (WTO, 1995). Tourist transportation contributes to air pollution on a global scale, primarily through CO₂ emissions from energy use, also leading to significant local air quality issues. In regions with dense tourist activity and popular natural attractions, waste disposal poses a significant challenge. Approximately 80% of tourists choose coastal destinations, contributing to the over 8 million tons of plastic that enter the oceans annually (UNEP, 2023). Furthermore, when the number of tourists exceeds a destination capacity the phenomenon of over-tourism occurs, that is, the excessive impact of tourism on a destination affecting the perceived quality of life of residents and /or the quality of visitor experiences in a negative way. According to a McKinsey report, approximately 80% of travelers visit just 10% of the world’s tourist destinations. This concentration results in overcrowding, strained infrastructure, and environmental degradation in these areas (McKinsey, 2024). Moreover, short-term rentals account for about 25% of tourist accommodations in the EU, generating social issues such as an increase in rental prices for residents and workers.

Implementing the CE principles in the tourism industry can play a key role for the transition to a more sustainable world. Addressing these challenges through CE principles offers a promising pathway to mitigate tourism’s environmental impacts while fostering more sustainable and regenerative travel practices. In fact, this sector is in the middle of multiple flows of resources, assets and commodities (as food, transport, and building sectors) being an enabler of value creation in multiple value chains and contributing to the preservation of natural resources and social development (Einarsson and Sorin, 2020). CE can play a central role also in the guest-host relationship, offering a way to involve and engage guests in ways that are not only

environmentally meaningful but also enhance their experience by allowing them to contribute. In fact, tourists actively shape their experiences by selecting and combining various tourism products, services, activities, and attractions, as well as engaging with and interacting with them (Sørensen and Bærenholdt, 2020). However, despite growing recognition that resources are finite and the linear model is unsustainable, literature on CE in tourism is scarce and the tourism industry has yet to demonstrate a clear and decisive shift toward a more circular model (Alharethi et al., 2024).

Research by Costa et al. (2024) on the Portuguese hotel industry reveals that hotels prioritize the 3Rs and Repair as the core of their environmental strategies. Also, Strippoli et al. (2024) found that within the R-strategies, the main ones adopted in the tourism sector center around Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, and Recover. These approaches offer both environmental and economic benefits, including reduced greenhouse gas emissions, waste, and costs, as well as increased revenue and more sustainable resource management. According to the research by Li et al. (2024), which examines CE practices in the Chinese and European tourism industries, the most commonly adopted strategies relate to reducing energy consumption, sustainable water use, and waste management: namely, practices aligned with reduce and recycle principles. Following an extensive literature review, Kaszás et al. (2022) found that the interpretation and implementation of CE principles in the tourism industry primarily center on issues such as food waste, energy and water consumption, CO₂ emissions, climate change, and global warming. These results confirmed the findings of previous research such as that of Maines da Silva et al. (2021), which showed that hotel chains' main strategies are Reduction, Recycling, and Reuse, indicating that there is a need to reduce food waste, reuse water, work with waste recycling alternatives at tourist destinations, and develop solutions that take into account the CE model as a self-regenerating system. Also, research by Arzoumanidis et al. (2020) revealed that the scientific literature offers varied interpretations of the concept of CE in the tourism industry, with no consensus on a clear definition, but a common focus on solutions related to waste and resource management, as well as energy and transport efficiency.

While most studies and tourism industry practices focus on the 3Rs, there is growing discussion around more innovative strategies such as Rethink (e.g., using unused areas of hotels for regenerative actions), Redesign (e.g., installing modular blocks as room furniture), and Repurpose (e.g., using organic waste to produce cleaning products) (Kaszás et al., 2022; Vardopoulos et al., 2023). Thus, implementing CE principles helps minimize waste and optimize resources, while delivering high-quality services and promoting a more sustainable tourist experience.

However, the transition to this new service model is not straightforward. While there is a lot of academic literature about drivers and barriers

in CE initiatives (Bassi and Dias, 2019; Falcone, 2019; Kirchherr et al., 2018; Rizos et al., 2017; Scipioni, 2021), the tourism sector has received limited attention in this regard, highlighting the need for further research (Alharethi et al., 2024; Del Chiappa and Fotiadis, 2019).

Furthermore, approximately 80% of all tourism businesses are Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) (Kukanja et al., 2020). This situation represents a major challenge in the transition to the CE, as it requires leveraging enabling factors while also acknowledging critical issues that may act as barriers. In particular, SMEs encounter distinct challenges in adopting CE practices, primarily due to constraints in resources and specialized expertise (Ahmadov et al., 2025; Salvioni et al., 2022). Previous research on SMEs revealed that these organizations can also benefit from adopting an integrated perspective on the transition to a CE, abandoning a fragmented approach which considers drivers and barriers as individual facilitating or obstructive elements, rather than as decision-support criteria related to the foundational pillars that the organization should oversee for a strategic transition to the CE. The long-term benefits and success of circular practices, in fact, require a strategic business approach based on the main assets of governance, relations with stakeholders, and innovation (Gennari, 2023). Previous studies on the CE in the context of SMEs have largely lacked such an integrated approach (Zhu et al., 2022), but recent studies tend to emphasize these elements as founding pillars for a transition towards more sustainable production and consumption models, also in small and medium enterprises.

Governance plays a central role in guiding decisions related to sustainable development and their implementation (Kirchherr et al., 2018), positioning it as a key driver of a holistic transition toward circularity. The implementation of corporate governance in SMEs can be challenging due to the absence of standardized business structures, variations in board composition, and limited strategic planning processes (Singh and Pillai, 2022). Furthermore, owners or managers of SMEs may hold varying perceptions of risk: high levels of risk aversion can impede the adoption of CE practices, considering the difficulty in the assessment of future benefits (Rizos et al., 2017). Nevertheless, governance would enable the CE performance of SMEs thanks to management and leadership engaged in establishing a circular culture and a strategic approach (Ahmadov et al., 2025).

Stakeholder expectations play a crucial role in shaping a successful strategy: activating relationships with stakeholders is necessary for joining forces and sharing the availability of different types of resources to effectively implement CE strategies and close the loop (Oberholzer and Sachs, 2023; Rizos et al., 2017; Salvioni and Almici, 2020). Different stakeholder groups play a critical role in influencing the adoption of CE within SMEs. Active engagement with these stakeholders not only supports the imple-

mentation of circular practices but also contributes to increasing stakeholder satisfaction and strengthening the firm's environmental legitimacy (Baah et al., 2021).

Innovation is both a cornerstone and a catalyst for CE, driven by disruptive technologies that have introduced transformations in products, processes, business models, and relationship management once unimaginable just a few decades ago (Skare et al., 2024; Suchek et al., 2021). Researchers (Saunila, 2020) emphasize the capacity to innovate of SMEs and the importance of multiple factors (e.g., leadership and organizational culture, owner characteristics, network integration, resources availability, market dynamics).

Tourism literature about SMEs cites these pillars as factors affecting firms' competitiveness, giving a different emphasis to them. Some studies focus primarily on leadership (Cong and Thu, 2021), relations and collaboration networks (Maziliauske, 2024), and innovation (Nguyen et al., 2021; Shi and Xiao, 2024). However, without a holistic and integrated vision of the pillars that must be jointly addressed for a strategic transition — one centered on long-term value creation — there is a risk that CE initiatives may be reduced to sporadic actions driven by external pressures, short-term needs, or immediate goals, or even result in greenwashing practices.

This research answers the call for a comprehensive understanding of the approach that the tourism sector has towards CE. In this context, this paper attempts to answer these research questions:

RQ1: What key criteria influence decision-making processes regarding the adoption of CE practices in the tourism industry, considering both drivers and barriers?

RQ2: Does the academic literature on CE in tourism adopt a fragmented or integrated perspective?

In order to address these research questions, a methodological approach that allows for a comprehensive exploration of governance, stakeholder relations, and innovation factors was deemed necessary. Given the fragmented and diverse nature of the existing literature, a systematic literature review combined with qualitative content analysis was chosen. This approach enables the identification of emerging patterns, contradictions, and gaps, and supports the conceptualization of a more integrated framework for CE adoption in the tourism sector.

3. Methodology

To address the research questions, we adopted a four-stage approach. First, a systematic literature review was conducted following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses)

protocol, ensuring transparency and replicability in the identification and selection of relevant studies. Second, the emerging criteria identified through the literature analysis were described and systematized. Third, these criteria were coded in three analytical pillars – governance, stakeholder relations, and innovation – thus enabling an analytical mapping. Finally, a comparative synthesis was carried out to assess the extent to which the literature provides an integrated and holistic view of CE adoption in tourism, identifying whether individual articles simultaneously address drivers and barriers across all three pillars.

3.1 PRISMA analysis

In order to investigate the main drivers and barriers influencing the adoption of CE practices in the tourism industry, we conducted a systematic literature review following the PRISMA protocol (Page et al., 2021).

The research was based on a systematic search carried out on the Scopus database, selected for its comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed publications in relevant disciplines. The search was performed in January 2024, using specific keyword combinations: “circular economy” AND “tourism”, “circular economy” AND “hospitality” applied to the title, abstract and keywords. Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria guided the selection process. Filters were applied to include only peer-reviewed journal articles available at the date of data extraction, written in English, and categorized under the subject areas of Business, Management and Accounting; Social Sciences; and Economics, Econometrics and Finance. Conversely, abstracts, editorials, book reviews, articles not accessible in full-text, and publications in languages other than English were excluded.

The selection of articles was conducted through a three-step process. First, an initial screening was performed to exclude articles without full-text availability. Second, titles and abstracts were reviewed to eliminate works that were clearly irrelevant to the research objectives. Third, the full texts of the remaining studies were examined in detail to assess their relevance more accurately. This process was documented through a PRISMA flow diagram.

From each selected study, relevant information was systematically extracted, including the authors, year of publication, type of study (framework and conceptual model, review, case study, business models), level of analysis (macro, meso – network and supply chain – micro), geographical focus, and research method adopted (qualitative, quantitative, mixed). This dataset provided the basis for identifying, categorizing, and analyzing the criteria according to the research questions guiding the study.

To ensure conceptual clarity and sectoral consistency, the scope of the

review was limited to studies addressing private-sector tourism businesses, with a specific focus on the hospitality and accommodation subsector. While the term “tourism” encompasses a wide range of activities and organizations — including public bodies, cultural institutions, and destination management organizations — this study deliberately excluded those entities in order to focus on firm-level CE strategies within private enterprises.

This choice is not merely taxonomical but responds to the profound differences between public and private actors in how they approach circular economy initiatives. Private tourism businesses typically pursue CE practices as tools to enhance operational efficiency, reduce costs, and gain a competitive advantage by appealing to environmentally conscious consumers. In contrast, public institutions tend to embrace CE logics as part of broader efforts to promote systemic change, protect vulnerable ecosystems, and ensure long-term public welfare. Decision-making processes also differ substantially: private firms enjoy greater strategic and operational flexibility, while public organizations are often constrained by bureaucratic procedures, political accountability, and stakeholder pluralism.

Resource allocation and stakeholder engagement strategies further reflect these distinctions. Private actors have autonomy in deploying their resources and primarily target end customers, whereas public institutions must justify expenditures to political bodies and taxpayers, and engage with a broader range of stakeholders, including local communities and NGOs. Finally, public bodies both operate within and shape the regulatory environment, and their CE agendas may shift in response to political cycles, while private enterprises are more agile but also more exposed to market fluctuations.

3.2 Emerging criteria

After selecting the final sample of studies, the second stage of the methodology focused on answering RQ1. To address this question, a detailed analysis of each article was conducted to identify all criteria explicitly or implicitly mentioned as influencing the adoption of CE practices. Both drivers (i.e., enabling factors) and barriers (i.e., obstacles) were considered, regardless of whether they were discussed at an organizational, sectoral, or broader systemic level.

The analysis followed an inductive approach, allowing the criteria to emerge directly from the literature without imposing any predefined categorization. Each article was carefully reviewed in its entirety, and relevant elements were extracted manually. Particular attention was paid to capturing the authors’ original wording and contextual nuances, to ensure an accurate and faithful representation of the identified factors.

The extracted criteria were initially described individually, with a focus on their definition, the mechanisms through which they influence decision-making, and their specific relevance within the hospitality industry context. Where similar or overlapping concepts were identified across different studies, they were grouped together through a process of thematic clustering, aiming to synthesize the information without losing the diversity of perspectives found in the literature.

This process resulted in a comprehensive and systematized list of key criteria, providing the foundation for the subsequent phases of the analysis. In the subsequent step of the research, the identified criteria were aggregated to develop an analytical mapping and structured categorization of the factors influencing the adoption of CE practices in the tourism industry, thereby enabling a more systematic interpretation of the findings.

3.3 Comparative synthesis

To address RQ2, a comparative synthesis of the classified criteria was carried out. This phase aimed to assess the extent to which individual studies offered a comprehensive and holistic approach to CE adoption, or whether they focused narrowly on specific dimensions.

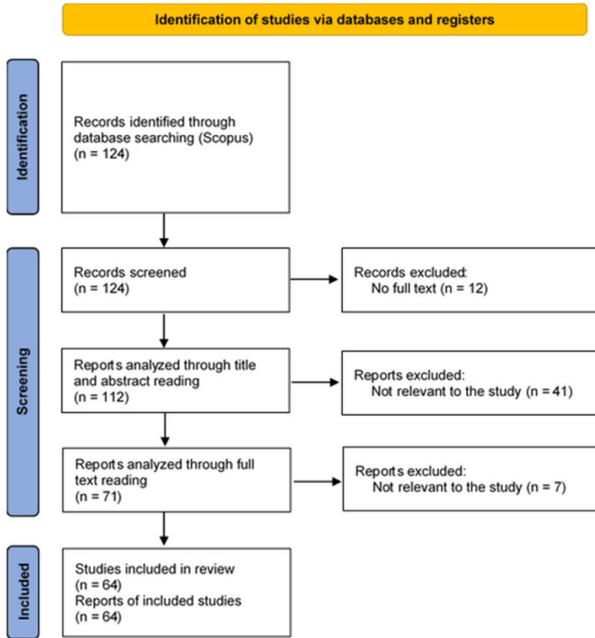
For each of the 64 articles included in the review, we examined whether the criteria discussed were associated with all three analytical pillars (governance, stakeholder relations, and innovation) or concentrated predominantly on one or two of them. Particular attention was paid to identifying whether a single article addressed multiple criteria simultaneously across the three dimensions, thus demonstrating an integrated understanding of the interdependencies involved in CE adoption processes.

Findings and discussion

4.1. Descriptive analysis

The systematic literature review initially considered 124 articles, selected according to the described methodology. A first screening was conducted to identify articles without full-text or not accessible through the Scopus database. In this phase, 12 articles were excluded. A second screening, based on titles and abstracts, enabled us to eliminate 41 articles, which were not relevant to our study. Finally, an in-depth analysis of the remaining full-text articles revealed that 7 were not specifically focused on the topics of the research project. For this reason, they were excluded from the systematic literature review (Fig. 1).

Fig.1. Identification of studies to include in the SLR according to PRISMA



Source: Authors' elaboration.

Therefore, the systematic literature review was performed on 64 articles, which covered a nine-year period, from 2016 to 2024 (Annex 1). However, most articles have appeared since 2019, indicating a relatively recent interest of scholars in the implementation of the CE by private businesses operating within the tourism industry. More exactly, 61 articles (95.3%) were published between 2019 and 2024, achieving a peak of 17 in 2022, while only 3 papers (4.7%) dated back to 2016-2018. The greater attention that circularity in tourism has raised in the current decade is probably due to the proliferation of laws, regulations, standards and guidelines on the CE at the global level, which can have a significant impact on firms.

As concerns the types of research adopted to analyze how the tourism industry addresses the CE, the systematic literature review showed a clear prevalence of the case study method, used in 30 articles (46.9%). This choice may be explained by the need to develop a genuine understanding of how hospitality and accommodation firms deal with a fairly new concept such as the CE. The literature review also emphasized the existence of frameworks and conceptual models aimed at explaining the role, characteristics and functioning of the CE in the tourism private sector. This approach was

identified in 15 articles (23.4%), which tried to formalize the interactions between circularity and other relevant aspects for tourism firms. 11 review articles (17.2%) were also found, while 8 papers (12.5%) focused on circular business models in tourism.

Consistently with the high percentage of case studies emerging from the review, the majority of the articles (34, equal to 53.1%) presented micro-level analyses focused on specific firms. Only 12 studies (18.8%) contained meso-level analyses of networks and supply chains. The remaining 18 papers (28.1%) described the results of studies carried out at macro-level. Furthermore, 26 papers (40.6%) investigated the implementation of CE practices in the hospitality industry of a specific geographic area, such as a country.

According to the prevalence of case studies, most articles adopted a qualitative research methodology (44, equal to 68.8%), whereas a quantitative one was implemented in 17 studies (26.6%). Finally, 3 papers used a mixed methodology (4.7%).

4.2 *Content analysis*

The following presents the criteria identified in the literature, grouped according to whether they represent drivers, barriers, or take a mixed approach to the implementation of CE practices in the hospitality and accommodation subsector.

The main factors that act as drivers in decisions concerning the EC can be traced back mainly to: the mental attitude of the subjects involved, the search for economic convenience thanks to a more effective management of resources and activities, and the will to cooperate, with particular regard to situations of disadvantage and geographical isolation of the companies that offer the tourist service.

For businesses in the hospitality industry, the success of CE strategies largely depends on guests' cultural readiness to embrace and actively engage with them. In this regard, a key element is the clients' mindset change, with a growing demand for sustainable tourism options such as eco-mobility, low-impact accommodations, and culturally authentic experiences either provided or supported by hotels and other accommodations (Annex 1: articles 7, 9, 10, 17, 27, 31, 32, 39, 41, 42, 46, 55, 59, 60, 64). On the supply side, eco-design plays a crucial role in boosting circularity by introducing reusable, recyclable, and easy-to-repair solutions — such as modular bricks or adaptable furnishings — into hotel facilities (Annex 1: articles 3, 4, 22, 33, 38, 44, 58). This ties directly into the driver of economic convenience, as circular practices often generate significant cost savings, an objective typically pursued by private firms. Improved energy efficiency, optimized resource use, and better waste management help reduce opera-

tional costs, while creative reuse of materials — such as upcycled or recycled furniture sourced from local households — adds both value and local identity (Annex 1: articles 1, 4, 7, 11, 14, 24, 31, 38, 39). A less visible but equally important factor is the employees' mindset change, which can be achieved through cross-functional training in sustainability practices and by rethinking traditional hierarchical structures in favor of new, participatory and incentive-based approaches (Annex 1: articles 7, 48, 61). At the operational level, energy management becomes a key enabler of circularity, focusing on reducing consumption through efficient technologies — like motion sensors, LED lighting, and solar heating systems — and increasing reliance on renewable energy sources such as wind power (Annex 1: articles 8, 17, 18, 29, 30, 33, 37, 42, 50, 55). Strategic procurement practices also play a role: changing hotels' purchasing behavior by prioritizing biodegradable, modular, repairable, and reusable products is essential (Annex 1: articles 3, 19, 30, 33). Lastly, in insular contexts, interisland cooperation emerges as a valuable strategy. By fostering collaboration between hotels located in islands that face similar environmental and logistical challenges — especially in transportation — CE initiatives can be more effectively implemented at the local level (Annex 1: article 59).

Despite the increasing attention to sustainability, the transition toward CE in the hospitality sector faces significant barriers, which form an interconnected system involving market dynamics, cost structures, regulatory gaps, supply chain complexity, and organizational culture.

On the demand side, a persistent obstacle is the consumers' low willingness to pay for CE offerings. While tourists express interest in sustainability, most are reluctant to spend more on circular products due to limited awareness of the impacts, high price sensitivity, and resistance to changing their habits (Annex 1: articles 9, 24, 27, 31, 39, 55, 57). These tendencies are reinforced by only niche markets for CE offerings, where demand remains too limited to scale up circular models. Closely tied to consumer behavior is the issue of perceived quality. Many tourism operators face a trade-off between sustainability and service quality, as guests may see circular practices — such as reduced water pressure from eco-showers — as service downgrades. This creates tension between offering environmentally responsible options and maintaining guest satisfaction (Annex 1: articles 9, 11, 16), which obviously remains a priority for all private businesses.

Economically, the cost structure of CE models represents a major hurdle. High initial investments, labor-intensive processes like waste treatment, and insufficient economies of scale make circular solutions financially burdensome (Annex 1: articles 1, 4, 7, 11, 14, 24, 31, 38, 39). Additionally, reverse logistics costs, associated with the return and processing of materials, further deter firms from adopting resource recovery systems (Annex 1: articles 19, 38, 44).

From a strategic perspective, businesses often lack the tools and information necessary to assess CE feasibility. The estimation of costs and benefits related to circular initiatives is complex and resource intensive. Even tools like Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), though valuable, are difficult to apply in practice, especially for small and medium enterprises (Annex 1: articles 2, 5, 11, 16, 27, 27, 39, 44). This is compounded by the inadequacy of existing technologies to support CE, which are often expensive, not user-friendly, or incompatible with heritage buildings and safety standards (Annex 1: articles 22, 31, 39, 60).

These economic and technological constraints are amplified by systemic weaknesses in governance. Many destinations suffer from limited government assistance (Annex 1: articles 5, 13, 34, 39), with limited financial incentives, CE policies, or training programs specifically tailored to tourism (Annex 1: articles 11, 13, 22, 28, 39, 43). Even when such measures exist, they are hampered by inefficient governmental structures, excessive bureaucracy, and fragmented regulations (Annex 1: article 39). A particularly critical area for hotels and other accommodations is the lack of government support in waste disposal, where poor enforcement and administrative burdens undermine proper circular waste management (Annex 1: articles 7).

Within the supply chain, the difficulty to empower the supply chain / value chain remains a persistent issue. The fragmented nature of the tourism sector, lack of certified suppliers, and weak collaboration mechanisms prevent the alignment of circular objectives across stakeholders (Annex 1: articles 2, 4, 20, 31, 39, 40, 54, 62, 63). This lack of coordination also results in poor transparency in the value chain, where the absence of traceability tools and information-sharing platforms makes circular planning nearly impossible (Annex 1: articles 22, 31, 39, 43, 54, 55).

On the human capital side, the lack of experts in CE to hire and the limited number of CE training opportunities prevent organizations from building the internal competencies needed to adopt and scale circular practices. At the same time, there is widespread resistance to organizational change (Annex 1: article 39). Hotel managers often operate under time pressure, within rigid hierarchies, with a mindset focused on short-term metrics like customer ratings, which discourages long-term strategic planning (Annex 1: articles 15, 27, 35, 39, 45). Similarly, shareholders' mindset induces owners and investors — especially under franchising models — to prioritize short-term returns over long-term sustainability (Annex 1: article 39).

The transition of hotels and other accommodations toward a CE is also shaped by a complex interplay of enabling drivers and persistent barriers which, as evidenced by the reviewed studies, often interact closely and are deeply interconnected across technological, environmental, organizational, and socio-political domains.

From a technological standpoint, access to advanced technology plays a key role in facilitating circular practices. Digital platforms, mobile apps, and other smart tools can promote reuse, upcycling, and sustainable behavior among tourists. However, these technologies are often employed to meet short-term needs and not integrated into long-term circular strategies (Annex 1: articles 9, 20, 22, 38, 52, 54, 61). To overcome this, technological support by experts becomes essential, especially as hospitality firms are typically end-users rather than developers of such technologies. Expert guidance enables more effective use of innovations like solar panels and wastewater treatment systems (Annex 1: articles 1, 4, 7, 36, 61, 62).

Yet, the effective deployment of technology must be supported by appropriate skills. A major barrier remains the lack of knowledge and expertise, including limited training in waste management, confusion around CE definitions, and inconsistent use of tools like LCA (Annex 1: articles 9, 16, 24, 27, 31, 44, 60). On the other hand, personal empowerment by managers, when present, enhances CE adoption by equipping decision-makers with a deeper understanding of key principles (Annex 1: article 7). This is closely tied to managers' environmental personal concern, where ecological awareness translates into more committed leadership (Annex 1: articles 6, 7, 14, 26, 27).

Organizational and stakeholder dynamics are another critical area that may either impede or facilitate the implementation of CE practices in private-sector tourism firms. The adoption of CE is often slowed by difficulties in establishing key partnerships and a multi-stakeholder approach, due to fragmented responsibilities and limited trust. Nevertheless, successful collaboration — such as between universities and businesses — can spark innovation and resilience (Annex 1: articles 2, 20, 27, 36, 39, 54, 62). Similarly, private–public cooperation fosters the integration of CE principles by aligning policy objectives with local business needs (Annex 1: articles 16, 20, 54, 55), while transparency in both corporate sustainability and financial practices builds trust and promotes accountability (Annex 1: articles 3, 9, 16, 43).

Local engagement is particularly important. The local community as a key actor is indispensable in creating socially inclusive and culturally embedded circular tourism, thus reinforcing the continuity of business operations in hospitality. Models such as ecovillages show how inclusion, shared decision-making, and co-creation can drive sustainability (Annex 1: articles 2, 7, 20, 21, 24, 27, 31, 33, 38, 42, 51, 52, 54, 58). Moreover, raising customers' awareness in waste management — through initiatives like doggy bags, responsible ordering, or shared platforms — helps tourists become active participants in CE (Annex 1: articles 11, 42, 55). Supporting this behavioral shift also involves promoting sustainable recognition (reputation) through certifications and heritage projects, which improve both image and impact (Annex 1: articles 2, 20, 22, 47, 56, 58).

Environmental management represents another major area of opportunity. Effective waste management is essential to circular tourism, involving sorting, reuse, upcycling, and adaptive reuse of buildings (Annex 1: articles 1, 12, 18, 19, 26, 30, 37, 38, 58, 60). Complementing this, water management measures such as low-flow appliances, rainwater harvesting, and sustainable treatment systems help reduce consumption and waste (Annex 1: articles 18, 23, 25, 30, 37, 44, 50, 53, 58). Likewise, the adoption of sustainable products — local, low-impact, and resource-efficient — enhances circularity while integrating cultural authenticity into the tourist experience (Annex 1: articles 9, 22, 24).

However, these strategies are often hampered by economic and structural concerns. Perceptions of financial risks deter investment in circular models, as these often involve high upfront costs and delayed returns (Annex 1: articles 16, 24, 39, 43, 60). At the same time, the economic damage perception linked to environmental degradation in tourist destinations should act as a warning, reinforcing the need for protection and restoration strategies (Annex 1: articles 22, 43, 54).

While circular investments may be risky, they can be incentivized through targeted policies that motivate hotels to adapt their behavior in view of potential cost savings or enhanced contributions to environmental preservation. For example, waste tariff policy — such as pay-as-you-throw schemes — can encourage hotels to reduce and sort waste (Annex 1: article 19). Broader public transport strengthening also supports CE by facilitating access to tourism services while reducing environmental pressure, particularly in remote or vulnerable destinations (Annex 1: article 59). Mobility and logistics are also critical levers. Promoting sustainable mobility through bike-sharing, e-shuttles, and electric vehicle services reduces resource use and supports cleaner travel (Annex 1: articles 3, 17, 49).

Ultimately, overcoming the barriers and leveraging the drivers of CE in tourism requires a coordinated, long-term commitment involving institutions, firms, local communities, and tourists. Building capacity, fostering cooperation, and aligning values are fundamental to achieving a truly circular, sustainable tourism model.

4.3 Mapping criteria and discussion

In order to examine the level of integration among the three elements identified as key pillars for a transition towards more sustainable production and consumption patterns, the criteria emerging from the literature review were assigned to the pillars based on the underlying mechanisms through which each enabling or hindering factor operated (Fig. 2). Specifically, the governance pillar encompasses criteria related to decision-making structures, public policies, regulatory mechanisms, and institutional

coordination frameworks. This includes, for example, the presence of clear strategies, political support, and the establishment of guidelines or incentives that steer CE adoption at a systemic level (Kirchherr et al., 2018). The stakeholder relations pillar refers to the capacity of involved actors – such as businesses, local communities, institutions, customers, and other stakeholders – to collaborate, build mutual trust, align objectives, and coordinate actions. Criteria associated with this pillar include levels of participation, interorganizational dialogue, and the activation of collaborative networks (Freeman, 1994). Finally, the innovation pillar comprises factors linked to the development or implementation of new solutions, technologies, business models, or operational practices that support the transition toward circularity. This includes, for instance, digitalization, the experimentation of regenerative models, and the integration of sustainable practices into tourism operations (Skare et al., 2024).

Fig. 2. Mapping of criteria emerging from the literature analysis to the three pillars

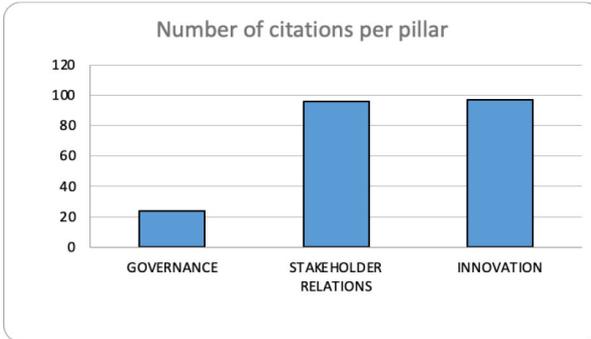
| GOVERNANCE | STAKEHOLDER RELATIONS | INNOVATION |
|---|--|---|
| 1. Government support | 1. Personal empowerment by managers | 1. Economic convenience |
| 2. Government support in waste disposal | 2. Managers' environmental personal concern | 2. Cost structure |
| 3. Lack of CE support by the government | 3. Clients' mindset change | 3. Estimation of costs and benefits |
| 4. Inefficient governmental structures | 4. Employees' mindset change | 4. Trade-off between sustainability and service quality |
| 5. Waste tariff policy | 5. Shareholders' mindset change | 5. Inadequacy of existing technologies to support CE |
| 6. Private – public cooperation | 6. Managers' mindset change | 6. Technological support by experts |
| 7. Public transport strengthening | 7. Lack of experts on CE to hire and CE training offerings | 7. Hotels' purchasing behavior and leasing solutions |
| 8. Interisland cooperation | 8. Local community as a key actor | 8. Energy management |
| | 9. Key partners & multi-stakeholder approach | 9. Water management |
| | 10. Economic damage perception | 10. Waste management |
| | 11. Financial risks | 11. Eco-design |
| | 12. Transparency | 12. Sustainable mobility |
| | 13. Transparency in the value chain | 13. Access to advanced technology |
| | 14. Raising customers' awareness in waste management | 14. Reverse logistics costs |
| | 15. Sustainable recognition (reputation) | 15. Empower supply chain / value chain |
| | 16. Only niche markets for CE offerings | 16. Sustainable products |
| | 17. Consumers' low willingness to pay for CE offerings | |
| | 18. (Lack of) knowledge and expertise | |

Source: Authors' elaboration.

This classification allowed for the organization and coherence of a multitude of heterogeneous elements, facilitating the interpretation of the underlying dynamics and providing an analytical foundation useful for assessing the degree of integration of the criteria present in the reviewed literature.

By analyzing the research findings, it emerges how literature does not adopt an integrated approach with reference to the main drivers and barriers across governance, stakeholder relations and innovation pillars (Fig. 3). In particular, the findings show a clear focus on the stakeholder relations and innovation pillars, which are the main dimensions where the circular economy topic has been addressed by the selected actors (private tourism firms); indeed, these two pillars have been investigated by scholars respectively 96 and 97 times, by citing some of the criteria explained in the findings' section.

Fig. 3. The CE criteria across the selected pillars



Source: Authors' elaboration.

In this regard, the literature mainly focuses on two dimensions – innovation and stakeholder relations – where firms and tourists play a relevant role in order to stimulate the diffusion of CE principles in tourism, by promoting innovation and the change of relevant stakeholders' mindset. The selected literature has demonstrated that tourist firms are aware that the diffusion of CE practices can be boosted by innovation and stakeholder relations. Innovation involves several aspects such as products, processes, business models and strategic thinking that should be continuously revised in order to achieve the competitive advantage, especially through disruptive innovations modifying the existing business models (Skare et al., 2024; Suchek et al., 2021). The development of innovative processes refers to the need – typical of private firms (specifically hotels and hospitality actors) – of creating a durable competitive advantage, in order to improve performance. Innovation is a driver for long-term success, facilitating the introduction of new services-products, the reduction of costs and the ability to ensure the continuous fulfilment of customers' expectations. The analyzed literature underlines the need for private tourism firms to integrate in their strategies the innovation goal, in order to acquire new markets and achieve high profitability according to sustainability conditions.

In this regard, tourist firms are required to create strategic alliances engaging all relevant parties and implementing eco-innovation principles; in this context, incremental innovation – which is typical of SMEs – should be replaced by radical innovation which makes the transition process shorter (Suchek et al., 2021). Innovation has been recognized as a typical SME's capability, contributing to create sustainable value, by revising the traditional business models, the operational processes and the firm's offering and by developing open-innovation initiatives engaging multiple partners to create high returns on research and development investments (Robayo-Acuña and Chams-Anturi, 2025; Saunila, 2020). In particular, open-innovation is

strongly linked to the second pillar (stakeholder relations) as it is generally developed through a participatory process of social actors, in order to introduce new tourism products, according to CE principles.

Similarly, the effective transition from the linear model to the circular one requires the establishment of long-term relationships with the key-stakeholders, to obtain the resources needed and to effectively orient customers' behaviors towards CE principles (Oberholzer and Sachs, 2023; Rizos et al., 2017). To reach this goal, it is required to create value for all the relevant stakeholders, according to engagement, collaboration and continuous dialogue. In this context, hotels and hospitality actors play a relevant role, considering their autonomy and flexibility to decide how to invest the available resources for the establishment of long-lasting relationships with the relevant stakeholders. In particular, the possibility of selecting the ways and the resources to establish relationships with the stakeholders enables the exploitation of the contribution that the tourists' practices provide to the development of CE. Indeed, tourists are important co-producers of tourism experiences, as they can actively contribute to create the tourist's services (Sørensen and Baerenholdt, 2020). Thus, the implementation of effective CE strategies requires the establishment of a virtual loop between tourist firms and stakeholders, positively affecting the way of thinking, behaving and the availability of needed resources.

The above-stated evidence is also demonstrated by the limited number of articles (in total, only 11) where there is a cross-cutting attention for all the three selected pillars, but the highest emphasis is given to the innovation and stakeholder relations' dimensions. With reference to these pillars, the literature identifies the key-variables affecting – on a voluntary basis – the firms' and tourists' behaviors, according to conditions of increasing circularity and awareness.

By contrast, the governance – which mainly refers to external variables – is significantly neglected; the selected articles cite the criteria related to this pillar only 24 times. These findings demonstrate that literature neglects the importance of the role played by the governance in the development of CE good practices by hotels and hospitality actors. This evidence underlies, on the one hand, a limitation in terms of conceptual framework and, on the other hand, the need to develop a more integrated perspective, based on the recognition of the relevance of political and decision-making structures and regulatory framework. Indeed, the diffusion of best CE practices in the touristic industry cannot disregard the support that the public administration may provide, mainly in terms of economic incentives to the firms, training, cooperation between public and private, improvement of the infrastructures, reduction of inefficiencies and bureaucratic burden. This component plays a relevant role in enabling firms to develop successful innovative processes and orient the relations with stakeholders toward an

effective safeguard of the ecosystem and the available natural resources. The findings related to the governance pillar are likely to be affected by the firm's size; indeed, the most of the private tourism firms are SMEs generally focused on the operational processes and the establishment of effective networks among the key-actors, neglecting, by contrast, the governance dimension which usually plays a relevant role in large companies to achieve sustainable development conditions (Rizos et al., 2017). There are several reasons underlying the low attention of SMEs to governance, including the lack of a strategic integrated perspective, the low-risk exposure, the weak board's circular culture, the limited enforcement of CG practices, and the lack of skilled boards (Singh and Pillai, 2022). SMEs are usually run by individual owners, without establishing formal corporate governance bodies and relying on family financial resources, in order to minimize risks (Romano et al., 2001).

Indeed, it has been observed how the adoption of CE practices by SMEs is generally slower and partial as compared to large corporations, which are facilitated by the availability of needed resources and are characterized by a more developed cultural system (Jain et al., 2024).

The lack of an integrated approach is also demonstrated by the different extent of the scholars' attention on the most investigated pillars; with reference to innovation and stakeholder relations, the number of citations of criteria are usually discordant with each other, underlying a perspective substantially focused only on a specific pillar (i.e., either innovation or stakeholder relations).

The findings obtained by analyzing the literature demonstrate the lack of a holistic and integrated perspective, which is needed for the transition toward the CE, in favor of a fragmented approach, facilitating the development of ineffective initiatives for the value creation over the long run. The creation of sustainable value requires the firms – referring to the hospitality sector – to develop integrated initiatives aimed at combining innovation, stakeholder engagement and decision-making processes.

Findings also demonstrate that the transition of private tourism businesses from linear to circular economy is gradual and not fast (Siegel et al., 2019); it requires a step-by-step process that mainly involves, at the beginning, the innovation and the stakeholder relations' pillars. The focus on the above-stated dimensions demonstrates how private tourism firms pay attention to efficiency, the improvement of profitability and the achievement of competitive advantage, by stimulating environmentally responsible consumers' behaviors.

These results also depend on the investigated tourist businesses' size, which is generally small or medium; indeed, SMEs are typically characterized by limited financial resources (Antony et al., 2016), and they usually neglect the corporate governance dimension (Kukanja et al., 2020). How-

ever, it has been underlined how SMEs are the key-actors for the effective transition from the linear economy model to the circular one. Thus, there is the urgent need that private tourism firms develop the needed capabilities and obtain the resources required to enable this shift by exploiting the well-known SMEs' attitude to develop sustainability practices (Ahmadov et al., 2025). However, the selected literature has underlined that the main efforts mainly refer to: the innovation of processes and business models in order to take advantage of the new opportunities to achieve competitive advantage; to develop long-lasting relationships with the key-stakeholders. In this regard, corporate culture is lacking mainly in terms of awareness that governance identifies a fundamental driver for taking decisions, facilitating the achievement of sustainable development conditions and circular economy principles. This aspect characterizes the SMEs, which are not always aware of the opportunities provided by CE transition (Gennari, 2023).

Hence, the transition process is still in progress, and it could be further improved in order to develop an integrated and cross-cutting perspective involving all three selected pillars, in order to transform the potential barriers into opportunities for creating value for the community. Only a holistic and aware approach addressing all three relevant pillars can facilitate the transition of tourism businesses - operating in the hospitality sector - from the linear model to the circular one, transforming the way of doing business and mitigating the related impact on environmental and social dimensions (Gennari, 2023).

5. Conclusion, limitations and future research directions

This study contributes to the academic debate on CE in the tourism sector. By conducting a systematic literature review and a qualitative synthesis of peer-reviewed articles, the paper moves beyond descriptive accounts of circular practices to uncover the mechanisms that shape decision-making processes within tourism firms. Through the classification of enabling and hindering factors along three key dimensions — governance, stakeholder relations, and innovation — this study highlights not only the multiplicity of elements involved but also the significant asymmetry in how they are treated within the literature. While innovation and stakeholder engagement are well-represented and thoroughly discussed, governance emerges as a notably underexplored domain. This gap is theoretically meaningful: it reflects a persistent bias toward firm-centric and behaviorally oriented analyses, which tend to overlook the structural and institutional conditions that enable circular transformation (Kirchherr et al., 2018). Such an imbalance risks reducing CE to a set of voluntary, market-driven initiatives rather than recognizing it as a systemic transition requiring coordinated and multi-level action across the public and private spheres.

The analytical lens proposed in this paper provides a contribution for future research aimed at building more integrated models of CE implementation in service-based industries. It reinforces the view that circularity should be understood not as a singular intervention or technical fix, but as a multidimensional transition, where governance mechanisms, stakeholder collaboration, and innovation dynamics are mutually reinforcing and must be activated in parallel. This perspective aligns with broader scholarly discussions on sustainability transitions, institutional change, and the co-evolution of business and policy systems (Markard et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the review responds to recent calls in the literature for a move away from fragmented and ad hoc interpretations of CE, toward more holistic and theory-informed approaches (Merli et al., 2018). It encourages scholars to revisit the conceptual underpinnings of circularity in tourism by drawing on insights from strategic management, organizational theory, and public governance. In particular, the findings suggest that advancing CE in this sector will require reframing it not only as an operational or managerial shift, but as a governance challenge — one that demands legitimacy, long-term vision, and cross-sectoral coordination.

Ultimately, this study offers both a diagnostic and a foundation: a map of the existing gaps in literature, and a call for more integrative frameworks that reflect the complexity and ambition of circular economy transitions in the tourism ecosystem.

From a managerial perspective, the findings highlight the importance of aligning internal capabilities (such as innovation and stakeholder engagement) with external enabling conditions (such as public incentives, regulatory clarity, and infrastructure support). For tourism firms — especially SMEs — this means recognizing that the success of CE practices depends not only on operational or technological improvements, but also on the ability to navigate and influence institutional frameworks. Managers are encouraged to adopt a more strategic approach that integrates circularity into core business models, cultivates collaborative networks, and engages with local communities.

Despite its contributions, the study presents several limitations. First, it is based on a literature sample retrieved in early 2024 and exclusively from the Scopus database, which, while comprehensive, may exclude relevant studies indexed elsewhere or published in other languages. Second, the analysis focuses only on peer-reviewed journal articles, potentially overlooking practical insights from industry reports, grey literature, or policy documents. Third, the classification of criteria into the three pillars — although grounded in theoretical reasoning — inevitably involves a degree of interpretative subjectivity.

Future studies should aim to deepen the exploration of governance-related factors in CE implementation, particularly in tourism. This includes

examining how policy design, institutional arrangements, and multilevel governance models can enable or hinder circular strategies. Considering that the present research focuses its analysis on private companies in the tourism sector, a future area of research could adopt a more holistic approach to the contextual environment — from sectoral, political-legislative, social, economic, and technological perspectives — in which these companies operate. Such factors can significantly influence the type and extent of governance, stakeholder relationships, and innovation, especially when it comes to implementing a CE business approach in a given territory.

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