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**Jones, Peter ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9566-9393> and Comfort, Daphne (2020) A Circular Case: The Circular Economy and the Service Industry. *International Journal of Management Cases*, 22 (3). pp. 13-23.**

Official URL: [http://www.ijmc.org/IJMC/Vol\\_22.3.html](http://www.ijmc.org/IJMC/Vol_22.3.html)

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/8614>

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## A CIRCULAR CASE: THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY AND THE SERVICE INDUSTRIES

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### **Abstract**

The concept of the circular economy is gaining momentum in political and business thinking about the transition to a more sustainable future. While some of this thinking has been focused on manufacturing, the service industries, which account for the lion's share of global Gross Domestic product, will have a vital role to play in any transition process. This case study outlines the characteristics of the concept of the circular economy and explores how the retailing and hospitality industries are publicly addressing the circular economy. The case study reveals that the retail industry has, to date, made a greater commitment to the concept of the circular economy, than the hospitality industry, and offers some general reflections on the application of the concept within the service industries.

**Keywords** Circular economy; retail industry; hospitality industry; consumer behaviour; changing economic and political structures

### **Introduction**

The concept of the circular economy is gaining momentum in political and business thinking about the transition to a more sustainable future. The European Commission (2010), for example, launched its new *'Circular Economy Action Plan'* in March 2020, as part of Europe's new agenda for sustainable growth. In affirming its support for the circular economy, the European Commission (2020) claimed *'circularity is an essential part of a wider transformation of industry towards climate-neutrality and long-term competitiveness. It can deliver substantial material savings throughout value chains and production processes, generate extra value and unlock economic opportunities.'* More critically, Gregson et al. (2015), argued that the idea of the circular economy is *'more often celebrated than critically interrogated'* and that *'its actual enactment is limited and fragile.'*

More specifically, the European Commission (2020) claimed *'the circular economy can strengthen the EU's industrial base'* and *'make Europe less dependent on primary materials.'* The UK's Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (2015) suggested the *'circular economy is part of the ongoing narrative on industrial sustainability'* and techUK (2015) argued *'the circular economy has the potential to re-boot the UK's manufacturing sector.'* However, services account for some 70% of the value added to the world's GDP and are seen to be *'increasingly vital to world economic growth'* (Deloitte 2018). Thus it is not surprising that Hayes et al. (2018) argued that *'the service sector has the potential to play an instrumental role in the shift towards circular economy due to its strategic position between manufacturers and end-users.'* With these thoughts in mind, this case study outlines the characteristic features of the concept of the circular economy, explores how the retailing and hospitality industries are publicly addressing the circular economy, and offers some general reflections on the application of the concept within the service industries.

## ***The Concept of the Circular Economy***

While Murray et al. (2015) suggested that the term circular economy has *'been linked with a range of meanings and associations by different authors'* they argued that in its most basic form *'a circular economy can be loosely defined as one which balances economic development with environmental and resource protection.'* The Ellen McArthur Foundation (2017, webpage), which was established in 2010 with the aim of accelerating the transition to a circular economy, argued that *'a circular economy is restorative and regenerative by design, and aims to keep products, components, and materials at their highest utility and value at all times.'* Further the Ellen McArthur Foundation (2017, webpage) suggested that *'the circular economy is a continuous, positive development cycle. It preserves and enhances natural capital, optimises resource yields, and minimises system risks by managing finite stocks and renewable flows.'* As such, the concept of the circular economy is often contrasted with the traditional 'linear economy' which turns raw materials into waste in the production process and which is seen to lead to environmental pollution and the removal of natural capital from the environment.

Essentially the concept of the circular economy embraces all stages of the product life cycle from both the product design and the production process, through marketing and consumption to waste management, recycling, and re-use. Within such an economy an initial focus on designing products that are more resource efficient throughout their life cycles can make products more durable, easier to repair and can enable the recovery of constituent, and potentially still useful, materials from the products when their initial lifespan is over. As long as the majority of environmental costs are borne not by producers but more generally by a potentially wide range of stakeholders then there is limited incentive to introduce more innovative design thinking. The circular economy also demands greater efficiency in production processes and here the focus is on looking to reduce the environmental and social impact of production, for example, through more sustainable sourcing and the promotion of innovative industrial processes.

Consumers have a vital role to play if there is to be a transition to a more circular economy. In theory much will be expected of consumers, not least in that they need to be prepared to embrace what they may see as radical new buying behaviours and consumption practices. Korhonen et al. (2018), for example, suggested the emergence of a *'new consumption culture'* with *'user groups and communities sharing the use of the function, service and value of physical products.'* Some commentators have suggested that the transition to a circular economy would constitute a dramatic transition in the way in which consumers approach consumption. Korhonen et al. (2018, p. 41), for example, predicted the emergence of a *'new consumption culture'* with *'user groups and communities sharing the use of the function, service and value of physical products.'* Within a circular economy, waste management is no longer seen as a problem, but rather as an opportunity to return as much waste as possible back into productive use. The focus is on the prevention, reuse, and recycling of waste materials rather than their disposal by landfill. Where waste cannot be prevented, reused, or recycled then recovering its energy content is seen preferable to landfill and waste to energy solutions are also seen to be integral to the circular economy. More generally, the circular economic model also looks to investigate and promote new markets for waste materials.

Several factors help to explain the pressure for the transition to a more circular economy. These factors include the continuing depletion of scarce natural resources, the supply problems associated with the increasingly volatile international political situation and the unpredictable events associated with climate change, and the potential price volatility associated with both these factors. At the same time, the increasing introduction of national and international statutory legislative regulation designed to reduce environmental problems, and investment in technological innovations which promote the more efficient use of natural resources are also important drivers for a circular economy. More generally, indications of the emergence of new strategic corporate thinking that recognises that the imperatives of business continuity will encourage the adoption of new and more resilient business models.

### ***The Circular Economy in the Retailing and Hospitality Industries***

Retailing and hospitality are two of the largest, most important, and most visible elements within the service industries and they both have emotional bonds with consumers. As such, their public approach to the concept of the circular economy merits attention. A number of general initiatives and strategic policies can be identified within European retailing. The European Retail Round Table (2016), an organisation which represents European retailers, argued that *'transitioning to a circular economy will allow us to reduce our dependency on virgin materials and improve our exposure to volatile commodity prices.'* Rather ambitiously, EuroCommerce and the European Retail Round Table (2015), claimed that *'Europe is leading the world in this shift'*, that *'retailers are a large contributor to the European Union economy'* and as *'responsible economic operators'* they *'are keen to take a front seat in shaping a circular economy in Europe.'*

More specifically, Eurocommerce and the European Retail Round Table (2018) claimed European retailers were taking several steps to introduce the circular economy into their businesses. These steps included *'working on sustainable sourcing practices that, for example, help regenerate woodlands and find a second life for waste wood; redesigning and redeveloping their products, by using recycled or recyclable materials as much as possible, reducing dependence on virgin materials; gradually removing environmentally damaging chemicals and substances from products to facilitate the recycling of products; 'increasing the amount of energy sourced from renewable sources.'*

Several leading European retailers reported on how they have addressed the circular economy. Kingfisher (2019), for example, reported *'we are integrating circular economy principles into our product design, aiming to use resources more sustainably'* and *'with this goal we will bring our customers quality products that are long-lasting, create less waste and are easy to recycle while protecting resources for the future.'* Further, Kingfisher (2019) reported *'our target is to have 20 product ranges or services that help customers and our business get more from less, reuse, or use longer by 2025.'* Kingfisher (2019) also identified its *'principles for circular product design'*, which included materials that are easily and widely recycled, design for durability, low energy and carbon usage and working conditions in the supply chain. Durability, for example, is seen to be important in that it is deemed to be better for customers and it reduces waste.

H&M (2020) reported *'our ambition is to become a fully circular business within our entire value chain. This means we move from a linear model – take, use, waste – to a circular*

*model where we maximise resource use and reuse, and where nothing is wasted. This circular strategy applies to our products, as well as to our noncommercial goods such as packaging and items used in store interiors, offices, and other buildings.’ More specifically H& M (2020) reported ‘our brands offer customers a variety of fashion, design and services that enable people to be inspired and to express their own personal style, making it easier to live in a more circular way’ and claimed ‘innovation drives our circularity efforts’ in that ‘we’re rethinking how products are made and used, and then reused’ and ‘we are developing new ways to repair, repurpose and recycle goods wherever possible and encouraging our customers to join us on this journey.’*

*Ikea (2020) reported ‘our ambition is to see all IKEA products as raw materials for the future, and to design them all to have circular capabilities that help to prolong their lives. We will extend our relationship with customers throughout a product’s use and end-of-life to enable them to repair, reuse, resell and recycle IKEA products. We will provide and promote services, solutions, and knowledge for circular and sustainable consumption, such as furniture takeback services.’ Further, Ikea (2020) claimed ‘transitioning to a circular business affects every part of our value chain, including how we design our products. Circular products will be designed from the very beginning to be reused, refurbished, remanufactured, and recycled – extending their lifespan for as long as possible. They will also be material banks for the future, meaning we can take them apart when they are no longer working or wanted and reuse the raw materials.’*

*Inditex claimed that the circular economy was one of two core axis of the company’s sustainability strategy. More specifically, Inditex (2019) reported that its ‘commitment to circularity’ was essential in ‘advancing towards decarbonisation of the value chain’, for ‘our programmes for the pre- and post-consumption recycling of fabrics’ and ‘to transform the concept of waste so that it is considered a valuable resource that can be recovered and reintroduced as a raw material in production systems.’ Marks and Spencer (2020) emphasised ‘the need to transition to a circular economy where the value of the materials and energy used in products are kept for as long as possible’ and in outlining its approach to waste, the company claimed ‘we support the transition to a sustainable circular economy and will prioritise business model innovation and put circular ways of working into practice.’*

*Amongst retailers in the US, there seems to be less public enthusiasm for the concept of the circular economy. The Retail Industry Leaders Association (2020a) recognised that ‘the retail industry has an important role to play in creating a more circular economy. In addressing ‘environmental sustainability’, for example, the Retail Industry Leaders Association (2020b), claimed ‘our priorities are increasing efficiency and waste diversion and exploring circular economy innovations for waste’ but there was no presentation of how this priority was to be pursued. That said, the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation, the Sustainability Consortium, and the Retail Industry Leaders Association (2017) jointly published a ‘Circular Economy Toolbox’, to help companies ‘incorporate circularity into their core principles and business practices.’*

*In a similar vein, some of the largest US retailers publicly reported on the circular economy in relation to parts of their overall retail operations but fell short of making any wide-ranging corporate commitments. Under the banner ‘Our Warehouses’, Kroger (2019). for example, reported ‘in 2018, we used more than 160 million reusable plastic containers to*

*ship produce in our distribution network, reducing waste and moving us toward more circular models',* and that its distribution centres *'champion our circular economy initiatives through their deployment of reusable shipping pallets and reusable plastic containers.'* Home Depot (2019) reported that the circular economy was one of the sustainability issues that informed its materiality assessment framework and claimed *'we will embrace circular economy products and packaging as suppliers continue to develop their thinking and capabilities.'* More extensively, Walmart (2019) reported *'increasing global demand is placing unsustainable pressure on the climate and natural ecosystems, challenging us all to shift from a take-make-dispose system of production and consumption to a circular, regenerative approach.'*

Within the hospitality industry public commitments to the concept of the circular economy have been much more limited. While many of the large players within the industry have been pursuing corporate sustainability and social responsibility issues for some time (e. g. Jones et al 2014) there has been little by way of an explicit corporate focus on the circular economy. By way of exceptions to this position, in addressing waste management, Carnival Corporation (2018), for example, reported *'we manage the amount of waste material generated onboard and work with disposal companies to promote a circular economy.'* Hilton (2019), for example, reported *'we're committed to sustainable travel and tourism'* and *'from our operations to our communities and supply chain, we are redefining sustainable travel'* but its only genuflection to the circular economy was committing *'to sending zero hotel soap to landfill.'* The Intercontinental Hotel Group couched its commitment to the circular economy in its decision to bulk-size, rather than individual, bathroom amenities.

Wyndham Hotels and Resorts (2019) reported *'we have a deep commitment to preserving our natural resources while developing innovative solutions to mitigate our impact on climate change through linen and towel reuse programs, energy efficient lighting, recycling and water conservation'*, but here again there was no reference to, or recognition of, the concept of the circular economy. In a similar vein, the Marriott International, the Radisson and Best Western hotel groups all emphasised their commitment to recycling but made no formal reference to the circular economy. That said some smaller hotel chains have embraced the circular economy. Martin's Hotels, the Belgian hotel chain, has employed a circular economy model in its purchasing, waste, and renovation projects. In pursuing its purchasing policy, for example, Martin's Hotels looks to give priority to local, natural, recycled, recyclable and seasonal products, to minimise the flow of incoming waste and to maximise the recycling of the waste.

More generally, some tourism organisations have looked to embrace the circular economy. The South Pacific Tourism Organisation (2017), for example, has suggested that the opportunities created by a move towards the circular economy could be important in more effective waste, water, and energy management and in creating employment within the industry. The BLUEISLANDS project (Network of European Regions for a Sustainable and Competitive Tourism Sector 2018) emphasised *'the potential of sustainable tourism as a lever to promote circular economy'* across over 60 islands in the Mediterranean. Here, the focus is on identifying, addressing, and mitigating the effects of the seasonal waste generated by the tourist industry on the islands. The Centre for Regional and Tourism

Research (2017) in Denmark, led a project designed to help *‘transitioning toward a circular economy within the tourism and hospitality sectors in the South Baltic Region.’* Here the aim was to increase the innovativeness of small and medium-sized enterprises within the tourism sector by supporting the integration of circular economy elements into their services, products, and business models.

Despite the limited public enthusiasm for the concept of the circular economy within the hospitality industry, there are suggestions that its time is coming. Lopez (2019), from the Ecole Hôtelière de Lausanne, for example, suggested *‘one of the main and current issues discussed in the media is climate change’* and that *‘to tackle this problem, new ways of thinking the economy appeared since few years, in particular in developed countries, and the circular economy embodies most of them.’* Further, Lopez (2019) argued *‘economically speaking, there are good reasons to believe that firms within the tourism sector have a vested interest to adapt their production process to what I like to name circular tourism.’* In a similar vein, the Dawnvale Group (2019), a company which specialises in bar and restaurant design and installation, claimed *‘the circular economy has been sneaking up on us for years, but it’s now beginning to show signs of infiltrating many other industries, with the hospitality sector being cited as one area which could massively benefit from adopting a circular approach to service provision’* and *‘as more and more organisations operating within the hospitality sector embrace the concept of reusability, it is hoped that the idea of the circular economy could be rolled out through the entirety of the tourism industry.’*

## **Reflections**

While a range of sustainability agendas and programmes have been pursued within both the retailing and the hospitality industries, of the two, the retail industry has, to date, demonstrated greater commitment to the concept of the circular economy. Within the retail industry many of the commitments to the circular economy currently seem to be largely, though not entirely aspirational, and it remains to be seen if such aspirations are realised. Less positively, within the hospitality industry commitments are, at best, to waste management and recycling and the circular economy lacks a formal corporate strategic stamp. That said, both the retailing and hospitality industries might, at best, be seen just embarking on a long circular economic journey, their varying level of commitment to the concept of a circular economy may be best seen as aspirational, and they may well encounter major difficulties along that journey. At the same time, three more general issues, which also have important implications for the retailing and hospitality industries, merit reflection and discussion.

Firstly, there are issues about the concept of the circular economy meaning different things to different players. For Korhonen et al. (2018), for example, saw *‘the circular economy as an essentially contested concept’*, and they suggested that the *‘circular economy seems to be a collection of vague and separate issues from several fields.’* Corvellec et al. (2020) acknowledged that the circular economy *‘allows for a whole range of interpretations and approaches to be bundled together.’* As such this effectively allows companies to define the circular economy to mean what they want it to mean. Many of the leading players within the hospitality industry, for example, couched their public commitment to the circular economy specifically in terms of waste management. However,

while waste management is part of the transition towards a circular economy, it is but one element in the product/service life cycle. Companies who genuinely want to pursue a truly comprehensive approach to the circular economy, which embraces all the product/service life cycle, will surely need to reconfigure their business models. Here in parallel, Urbinati et al. (2017) in parallel, suggested that academics '*within the strategic management field*' are '*struggling with a lack of a framework explaining how companies willing to become circular adapt their existing business model or create new one.*'

Secondly, the transition to a circular economy would both drive, and demand, major changes in consumer behaviour and consumption patterns. Within retailing, for example, the very least, retailers may need to look to have a greater focus on providing consumers with clearer information on the environmental impacts of their buying behaviour and on more general and sustained educational and public awareness initiatives designed to promote more responsible environmental attitudes to consumption. More fundamentally, the transition to a circular economy would certainly constitute a dramatic change in the ways in which consumers approach consumption and arguably see the emergence of a '*new consumption culture*' (Korhonen et al. 2018). Indeed, the emergence of such a new culture of consumption with '*user groups and communities sharing the use of the function, service and value of physical products*' (Korhonen et al. 2015) and where the focus would be on co-operative endeavour, is arguably central to the circular economy.

Such a transition towards a circular economy, would surely be seen to challenge the current social value which consumers ascribe to many of the products and services they buy, which may in turn, make it difficult for large numbers of consumers to buy into second hand, or reusable. patterns of consumption. In some ways, the hospitality experiences people enjoy may be seen to be important in defining their identity. At one level, an individual's identity may, in part, be forged by regular ocean cruises, which are often perceived to visit exotic locations and unique environments, and at another level, identities may be shaped by performance prowess in simple games in cafes, bars and public houses. As such, a move to a new culture of consumption, could seem to run counter to the current ethos and business models of the leading players within the retailing and hospitality industries. More generally, it remains to be seen how enthusiastically consumers will embrace the realities of the circular economy not least because it might be seen by many as '*a reverse of progress towards a better life*' that involved '*a sacrifice of our current, tangible needs and desires, in the name of a better but uncertain future*' (European Commission).

A transition to a circular economy is certainly bound up with the thorny and elusive issue of sustainable consumption, described by Cohen (2005) as '*the most obdurate challenge for the sustainable development agenda.*' GreenBiz (2015) argued '*entrenched patterns of overconsumption present a massive hurdle to clear before circular economic models can achieve any sort of scale.*' In many ways what some commentators see as the continuing and unrestrained pursuit of unsustainable consumption, described by the European Environment Agency (2012) as '*the mother of all environmental issues*', lies close to the heart of this dilemma. Korhonen et al. (2018), for example, suggested that '*the most important question for the circular economy in terms of long-term sustainable development of global society, is how can the saved resources and money generated by the circular economy idea be directed to sustainable consumption practices. If the current consumption*



*culture will not change, circular economy will remain as a technical tool that does not change the course of the current unsustainable economic paradigm.'*

Thirdly, there are more fundamental, and more contentious, issues about the relationship between the emergence of, and transition to, a circular economy and existing economic and political structures. Gregson et al. (2015), for example, argued that a circular economy *'would require radical transformations to the economic order, including fundamental recasting of manufacture, retail, consumption and property rights.'* Such transformations would certainly challenge traditional business models, particularly those in the retail and hospitality industries, and concerns have been expressed that the concept of the circular economy might be captured by corporate interests, and more specifically by corporate capitalism. Valenzuela and Bohm (2017), for example, suggested that *'given the all too obvious consequences environmental crises associated with out-of-bounds growth capitalism, the circular economy has been one of the main references for rebuilding and reforming a political economy of sustainable growth.'* However, Valenzuela and Bohm (2017) further argued that the terms circular economy and sustainability were effectively being *'captured by politic-economic elites claiming that rapid economic growth can be achieved in a way that manages to remain responsible to environment and society.'*

## **Conclusion**

The retailing and hospitality industries are beginning, albeit in different measure, to turn their attention to the concept of the circular economy, but they are at the start of what may be a long journey to an uncertain destination. That said, at the present time, many of the commitments to the circular economy within the retailing and hospitality industries might be seen to be aspirational. As such, it remains to be seen how far the major players within these industries will choose to pursue these aspirations as a contribution of the wider transition to a more sustainable future and, more widely, whether or not the circular economy can become a workable and realistic business model within the service industries. If the retailing and hospitality industries' commitments to a more circular economy are to become a reality then they will not only need to effect a radical change in their current business models, but any such a change will also need to be accompanied by fundamental changes in consumers' consumption behaviour.

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