

SUPPORTING CIRCULAR ECONOMY THROUGH SOCIAL MARKETING IN THE FAST-FOOD INDUSTRY: POLICIES AND DEVELOPMENT DIRECTIONS

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to highlight the role of social marketing in the transition to circular economy in the fast-food industry. Qualitative research was conducted on a sample of 10 participants, which analysed perceptions of sustainability, its benefits and associated barriers. The results show that circular economy is perceived as a necessary model for reducing waste and conserving resources, while social marketing acts as a catalyst for change through transparent communication and education. The conclusions emphasize the importance of collaboration between companies, consumers and decision-makers to implement sustainable policies and strengthen public trust.*

Key words: *circular economy, fast food industry, social marketing, sustainability, consumer behaviour*

1. Introduction

The need for sustainable measures and climate change issues have become increasingly important globally over the recent years. The increasing intensity of climate phenomena, such as heat waves or floods, highlights the need for rapid and concerted action by states, companies and citizens (Abbass et al., 2022). Thus, in this context, circular economy has clearly emerged as an essential solution for reducing the negative impact on the environment and for the efficient use of resources (Yang et al., 2023).

At the heart of these remarkable challenges is the fast-food industry, which is associated with excessive consumption of resources, single-use packaging and significant waste production (Ncube et al., 2020). Consumers are currently putting increasing pressure on industry players, as they have become increasingly aware of the social and environmental impact of companies. This is driving major players in the industry to integrate the principles of circular economy and sustainability into their core strategies. In essence, the lack of such initiatives can lead to loss of public trust and

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migration of market share to competitors that adopt green policies (Henriques et al., 2023). Therefore, it becomes clear that the central role belongs to social marketing, which allows companies to communicate sustainability efforts in a transparent way and stimulate consumer behaviour change (Wei et al., 2021).

Given the above, this study aims to highlight and investigate the role of social marketing in supporting circular economy in the fast-food industry, by identifying development directions, external policies and implications for consumers and the environment.

The fast-food industry is at the heart of these challenges, being associated with both high consumption of resources and disposable packaging, as well as significant waste production. At the same time, pressure from consumers, increasingly attentive to the social and ecological impact of companies, is driving major players in the field to integrate the principles of sustainability and circular economy into their core strategies. A loss of public trust and a shift in market share to rivals who implement green policies could be the result of the absence of such measures.

2. Literature Review

Circular economy has become a mainstay for addressing sustainability in the food industry, especially in the fast-food restaurant sector. Circular economy, unlike the linear economic model, involves a system that is based on reducing food waste, reusing packaging and using recyclable materials. Some studies have highlighted that implementing circular economy principles in the fast-food industry can contribute to creating more sustainable supply chains and reducing environmental impact (Rabbi, Amin 2024; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2019). Therefore, it has been found that public pressure and regulatory policies accelerate the transition to this model.

A key role in supporting circular economy is played by social marketing, because it aims to change people's consumption behaviour in favour of sustainable practices. Through awareness campaigns, promoting environmentally friendly products and transparent communication, companies operating in the fast-food sector can influence people's consumption decisions. Esposito (2024) has highlighted the importance of social media as a communication tool in this process, and Ogiemwonyi (2025) has pointed out that marketing must become an engine of change, not just a simple information channel.

Social media is a central element in promoting sustainability, as it facilitates the transmission of messages about circular economy and offers consumers a possibility to participate in a direct and active dialogue with brands. Examples such as Unilever and Starbucks have shown how companies use social media to present their sustainability policies and to stimulate direct customer involvement (Liu, 2024). Therefore, such initiatives can increase the credibility of environmental measures and the visibility, but also customer loyalty towards sustainable brands.

Moreover, the existing literature to date has shown that consumer psychological factors are quite essential in the adoption of sustainable behaviours. Thus, the attributed responsibility - the perception that humans have an extremely important role

in protecting the environment and the perceived perception, i.e. the sense of moral duty towards environmentally friendly actions, greatly influences consumers' purchasing decisions (Kapoor et al., 2021). Moreover, people's "green values" quite strongly strengthen these effects, and this causes consumers to be more receptive to environmental messages (Keshavarz et al., 2025). Therefore, social marketing becomes a powerful stimulant between the policies that companies have and individual attitudes.

Public policies and regulations play an essential role in the transition to a circular economy. In relation to the fast-food industry, these focus in particular on plastic reduction, food waste management and the use of biodegradable packaging. Di Vaio et al. (2023) showed that both corporate responsibility and transparency are essential conditions for the success of these policies, and international sustainability standards and reporting strengthen the trust of stakeholders and consumers. However, even if regulations and public policies establish the necessary framework for the transition to circular economy, the success of such measures depends mainly on how companies manage to communicate their sustainability commitments and practices to consumers (Agarwal et al., 2025). Essentially, the lack of effective communication, green initiatives risk remaining perceived as simple obligations imposed from the outside, without providing real behavioural changes (Wu and Yu, 2025). Accordingly, social marketing and communication strategies become fundamental tools, as they can create a strong sense of shared responsibility between the brand and consumers, while encouraging them to adopt certain eco-conscious behaviours (Coman et al., 2025). However, the success of social marketing and various communication strategies cannot be analysed in isolation from the broader context of various institutional pressures. According to Institutional Theory, organizations do not adopt certain sustainable practices on their own initiative, but they do so in response to multiple forms of external constraints and expectations, and here we can obviously mention public policies, social norms and consumer demands (Berthod, 2018; Arena et al., 2019).

Therefore, companies operating in the fast-food industry resort to sustainability as a legitimization strategy. They integrate ecological values and specific objectives aligned with international standards, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), into their public discourse. The various coercive pressures of legislation contribute significantly to the standardization of practices and the consolidation of sustainable marketing as a necessary tool for long-term survival (Lubowiecki-Vikuk et al., 2020).

3. Material and Methods

To carry out this study, the methodological approach was based on qualitative research focused on the analysis of social marketing policies and strategies used in the fast-food industry to promote circular economy. The main purpose of the study is to highlight how these policies and strategies can support the transition to a circular economy in the fast-food industry. This is achieved by investigating the level of understanding of consumer perceptions, identifying existing benefits and barriers, as well as highlighting actions and ways in which companies in the field can demonstrate their commitment to sustainability.

In order to achieve this goal, the following objectives were formulated:

- O1** – Identifying the level of understanding of the circular economy concept by participants;
- O2** – Assessing perceptions regarding the benefits of circular economy for communities and society as a whole;
- O3** – Identifying the main barriers to the implementation of circular economy practices by companies in the fast-food industry;
- O4** – Identifying ways in which fast-food companies can demonstrate their commitment to circular economy practices;
- O5** – Identifying concrete actions that fast-food companies should take to promote circular economy;

In order to respond to the formulated purpose and objectives, the qualitative research focused on certain research questions, designed to explore perceptions, knowledge and barriers related to the circular economy in the fast food industry. These are summarized in the following research questions:

- Q1** – *What types of concrete initiatives are perceived by consumers as effective in promoting the circular economy in the fast food industry?*
- Q2** – *How do consumers understand the concept of circular economy in relation to waste reduction and the effective use of resources?*
- Q3** – *What are the benefits for society and the community associated with circular economy?*
- Q4** – *What are the main perceived barriers to adopting circular economy practices in the fast-food industry?*
- Q5** – *Through what actions could companies operating in the fast-food industry demonstrate their commitment to sustainability?*

For a deeper understanding of the investigated topic, the research was based on a qualitative marketing research study, focused on the pencil-and-paper technique with open-ended questions. This method allowed an investigation of the participants' opinions and perceptions regarding circular economy and marketing strategies in the fast-food industry, giving them the freedom to respond freely in a framework without constraints.

The data collection tool was the interview guide, which was structured in open-ended questions, adapted to the context of the study. The participants in the study were recruited through social networks (WhatsApp, Telegram), in groups dedicated to relevant topics. The selection of participants was carried out based on a preliminary questionnaire, the criteria directly targeting knowledge of the concept of circular economy, consumption of fast-food products and lack of previous participation in similar research. Participants who met the inclusion criteria in the sample were then contacted by e-mail, where they received the interview guide. The responses were collected between January 8-10, 2025, by completing them in writing and returning them by e-mail. It is noted that participants were encouraged to provide honest and detailed answers. This approach allowed for the obtaining of correct and relevant data, substantiating the analysis in a rigorous methodological framework.

The sample was made up of 10 participants, of which 4 were male and 6 were female,

all coming from urban areas and having completed higher education. In terms of age distribution, 5 participants fall within the 18-25 age range, 2 in the 26-36 age range, another 2 in the 36-45 age range, and one participant is between 46-55 years old. From a professional point of view, 5 respondents work in the field of marketing, 1 in sales, 1 in market research and 3 in the food industry. This distribution allowed for a combination of applied and theoretical perspectives. Also, the diversity of age and professions directly contributed to obtaining different and varied opinions, strengthening the relevance of the research results.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

The data that were analysed led to the emergence of central themes. These themes are organized in direct relation to the initially formulated objectives. Therefore, they capture the perspectives of the participants and contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon studied.

The concept and benefits of circular economy.

Following the analysis of the participants' responses on the concept of circular economy, a diversity of perspectives was observed. Some participants mentioned that circular economy represents a regenerative economic model, which focuses on maximizing the reuse of materials and minimizing waste. It was noted that this vision was complemented by other participants, who emphasized the practical reuse of resources, highlighting the importance of not throwing things away and using them for as long as possible. There was also a more pragmatic perspective, which recognized the practical difficulties of achieving a fully circular model under current conditions. Paradoxically, other participants emphasized the role of innovation and technology in facilitating the transition to a circular economy, particularly the importance of transforming waste into valuable resources through innovative methods.

When it came to the benefits of circular economy, most participants agreed that it has the potential to reduce carbon emissions, conserve natural resources and stimulate the creation of new jobs. It should be highlighted that some talked about innovations in product design and resource efficiency, while others focused on cost savings and pollution reduction at the community level. Social and community benefits were also highlighted, including increased social solidarity and supporting local economies by promoting responsible consumption. At the same time, direct economic benefits were also highlighted, such as lower prices for consumers and increased profits for companies due to efficient reuse and recycling.

The analysis revealed a diverse range of perspectives and interpretations on the circular economy. These actually reflected the complexity of the concept. It was also found that circular economy was approached not just as a series of practices or policies, but as a philosophy that has the potential to reshape the way societies and economies function at a fundamental level.

Circular economy implementation and corporate commitment.

The study participants offered different strategies through which fast-food companies can demonstrate their commitment to circular economy. Some subjects mentioned that they can adopt zero waste policies and implement recycling systems. Other subjects proposed customer awareness campaigns and the use of recyclable materials. In contrast, one subject emphasized the importance of deeply integrating these practices into the corporate philosophy, as accusations of greenwashing can be avoided in this way. The subjects also discussed the adoption of more advanced technologies for optimizing resources and developing products that are easy to recycle. The subjects highlighted how circular economy can support companies' sustainable development strategies. Thus, the subjects discussed reducing production costs and minimizing dependence on raw resources, while other subjects emphasized gaining respect from environmentally conscious customers and financial savings. At the same time, other subjects added that adopting circular economy practices can strengthen ties with the local community, improving customer loyalty and public image. Paradoxically, other subjects discussed resilience to resource price fluctuations and attracting investments from funds that prioritize sustainability.

Education, awareness and communication.

From an educational point of view, the subjects emphasized the importance of integrating it into the educational system and information campaigns, through a method that combines traditional and modern elements. Specifically, some subjects reported that education about circular economy could be introduced into formal curricula and programs. Also, other subjects in the study discussed the need to introduce specific modules on circular economy and sustainability in school programs. They proposed organizing interactive workshops and information campaigns, through which the benefits of recycling and reusing resources can be highlighted, showing how these practices can be integrated into everyday life. On the other hand, other subjects placed particular emphasis on education from an early age, reporting that changing mentalities and behaviours begins with teaching children about the importance of recycling and efficient use of resources. In this case, the subjects proposed educational programs and activities that would help children understand from a young age how their actions can influence the environment and develop sustainable habits.

Other subjects mentioned the need for a more realistic education, which would not be limited to ideals, but would also highlight the challenges, costs and complexity of the transition to a circular economic model. These subjects advocated an education that would help people understand how to manage the difficulties encountered in implementing circular economy, ultimately helping them develop the skills necessary to overcome them. At the same time, they also highlighted the need for simplified and accessible communication that could reach a diverse audience. They proposed the use of clear and visually attractive messages in awareness campaigns, to demonstrate the real benefits of circular economy.

This approach proposed by the subjects aims to make the principles of circular economy easy to understand for all segments of the population. In this case, a broader

and more active participation in the transition to circular economy is encouraged.

The diversity of perspectives and suggestions reflects the understanding that educating and informing the population about circular economy is essential for the success and sustainability of this model. By combining formal education methods with informal awareness and communication initiatives, they can generate attitudes and behaviours that support a more sustainable future.

Circular economy initiatives, barriers to implementation and resource optimization.

The subjects suggested that, in order to promote circular economy in the fast-food industry, it is essential to adopt more specific initiatives. Thus, certain subjects recommended the use of disposable packaging and the introduction of recycling programs. Other subjects who participated in the study reported that customers should be encouraged to bring their own containers. They also discussed the use of biodegradable packaging and the adjustment of menus to reduce food waste. At the same time, they also discussed the implementation of technological solutions to optimize the supply chain and reduce waste.

The analysis of the subjects' responses on the barriers to implementing circular economy showed that they ranged from financial aspects to cultural aspects. Thus, certain subjects stated that the lack of recycling infrastructure and initial costs are the main obstacles, while other subjects discussed the difficulty of changing consumer perceptions and habits.

Resistance to change and legislative challenges were also highlighted, as was the need to educate and motivate consumers to actively participate in circular economy initiatives. The subjects proposed various measures to reduce food waste in the fast-food industry. Accordingly, they suggested implementing inventory management systems and donating unsold food, and moreover, they recommended adjusting portions and collaborating with charitable organizations.

At the same time, they also talked about the use of technologies to optimize food preparation and reduce waste. Government policies that promote recycling technologies and subsidies related to campaigns that reduce waste were also mentioned by the subjects.

4.2 Discussion

In order to achieve the objectives of circular economy on a large scale, participants considered it essential to integrate it across sectors and at different levels. Participants highlighted the need to adopt a systemic approach, allowing for the adaptation and scalability of circular principles. This was described as involving not only companies and consumers, but also urban planners, policy makers and community leaders, who should collaborate to create infrastructure and policies that support a continuous cycle of resource use and reuse. The transformation of large urban centers into circular economy models was also mentioned as an example and potential stimulant for wider regions.

Another important perspective that emerged from the participants' responses was the need to tailor the implementation of circular economy to reflect local realities and needs. Each community was described as having cultural, economic and natural

particularities that need to be taken into account to ensure effective and sustainable solutions in the long term. This highlighted the importance of continuous research and open dialogue between different actors, to identify best practices and to adjust strategies according to local specificities.

Looking ahead, circular economy was not perceived as just a trend, but as a clear necessity to ensure a sustainable balance between economic development and environmental conservation. Innovations in design, technology and business strategies, combined with a strong commitment to education and community participation, were considered essential for the evolution of this model. In the context of global challenges, such as climate change and resource depletion, the circular economy was seen as a promising way to rebuild, reimagine and revitalize productive systems in ways that benefit both people and the planet.

5. Conclusion

This study highlighted that circular economy is a complex concept, perceived by participants as a set of concrete practices, as well as a philosophy of sustainable development. It is also stated that the qualitative analysis carried out highlighted distinct levels of understanding, but also a general recognition of the benefits that this model brings to the environment, society and the economy. Preserving natural resources, reducing carbon emissions, supporting local communities and stimulating innovation are just a few advantages of the circular economic model that were highlighted by the study participants.

The results of this study also showed that the transition to a circular model in the fast-food industry is hampered by multiple barriers. These include the lack of adequate infrastructure, initial costs, the difficulty of changing consumer consumption habits and resistance to change. At the same time, it was quite clearly highlighted that a superficial implementation risks can be perceived as greenwashing, which can significantly damage public trust.

To overcome these obstacles, the study participants focused on a series of elementary actions, as follows: the use of recyclable or biodegradable materials, optimizing supply chains, adopting waste reduction policies, introducing educational programs and awareness campaigns. Therefore, the introduction of these measures into the corporate philosophy, along with effective communication and transparency, can constitute a relevant and real proof of companies' commitment to sustainability.

Simultaneously, the study also highlighted the importance of education and collective awareness as central elements for the success of circular economy. The study participants placed particular emphasis on the role of training from an early age, but also on clear and obvious communication, which makes the principles of circular economy meaningful for all segments of the population.

Thus, this study showed that, in order to ensure the most efficient transition to circular economy, a collaborative and systematic approach is needed, involving consumers, companies, decision-makers, educational institutions and local communities.

The circular economy in the fast-food industry is not just a strategic option, but a necessity to respond to the current challenges related to climate change and resource depletion. Therefore, success may depend on the capacity of the actors involved in the process to cooperate, innovate and establish a sustainable framework, adapted to the current needs of contemporary society.

This study has certain limitations, and these must be mentioned. Essentially, as it is a qualitative research, based on a sample of 10 participants, the results cannot be extrapolated to the entire population. The results capture individual experiences and perceptions, providing a deep understanding of the phenomenon that was studied, but not a statistically representative picture. Therefore, taking into account the aforementioned, the conclusions of the study should be interpreted as exploratory benchmarks, useful for outlining directions of action, but not as definitive generalizations.

The profile of the participants represents another limitation. The participants come entirely from urban areas and have completed higher education. This reduces the socio-demographic diversity of the sample. In this case, homogeneity may influence the way in which opinions related to the circular economy are perceived and formulated. Last but not least, the method that was used, "pencil-paper", allowed for free expression, but rather limited the possibility of deepening certain aspects.

Finally, this study must be seen as an exploratory approach, which lays the foundation for a more diverse and in-depth future research, capable of confirming or disproving the current findings.

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