

# APPLICATION OF CIRCULAR ECONOMY PRINCIPLES IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY: PERCEPTIONS, BENEFITS AND BARRIERS

A. GRANCEA<sup>1</sup> N.A. NEACŞU<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** *This study analyses respondents' perceptions of circular economy implementation in the hotel industry, using a qualitative approach. The research focused on four main dimensions: level of familiarity, perceptions of application, perceived benefits and existing barriers. The results indicate that respondents understand circular economy in relation to the efficient use of resources, waste reduction, recycling and environmental protection. Its implementation is perceived positively, being associated with cost reduction and image improvement. However, implementation is limited by high costs, insufficient information, low interest and organisational difficulties.*

**Key words:** *circular economy; hospitality industry; sustainability; consumer perceptions.*

## 1. Introduction

Concerns about environmental protection and sustainable use of resources have increasingly focused on circular economy, considered an alternative to the traditional linear model of consumption (Nikčević, 2025; Bakır and Aral, 2025). In the hotel industry, this model is relevant through its association with efficient resource management, waste reduction, responsible use of water and energy, and reorganisation of internal processes, aspects that have been highlighted in recent literature (Orfanou et al., 2026; Bekele et al., 2024). At the same time, research shows that circular economy practices can contribute to improving the sustainable performance of hotels and integrating environmental objectives into organisational activity (Elshaer et al., 2025; Herzallah et al., 2025).

However, despite the growing interest in the circular economy in the hotel industry, there is a problem of limited understanding of how these principles are perceived by respondents, particularly in terms of applicability, benefits and barriers in the hotel industry (Mora-Contreras et al., 2025; Velasco-Muñoz et al., 2025; Yong et al., 2026). Existing studies mainly focus on operational practices and sustainable performance,

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<sup>1</sup> Transilvania University of Braşov, [adrian.g.grancea@unitbv.ro](mailto:adrian.g.grancea@unitbv.ro), ORCID ID 0009-0007-7858-376X

<sup>2</sup> Transilvania University of Braşov, [andreea.neacsu@unitbv.ro](mailto:andreea.neacsu@unitbv.ro), ORCID ID 0000-0001-6628-2491

paying less attention to how this concept is interpreted and evaluated by individuals (Hahn et al., 2026; Mestdagh et al., 2025; Barbosa et al., 2025). Therefore, a gap is emerging in the specialised literature, related to the analysis of perceptions on circular economy and its relation to hotel activity (Julião et al., 2025; Filimonau et al., 2023).

Starting from the aforementioned aspects, this research aims to analyse respondents' perceptions of the circular economy in the hotel industry, considering the level of knowledge, applicability, perceived benefits and associated barriers, from a qualitative perspective. The importance of the study lies in its contribution to a better understanding of how the principles of circular economy are interpreted and evaluated in relation to hotel activity. Next, the main theoretical benchmarks, research methodology, results and discussions are presented, followed by the conclusions.

## 2. Literature Review

Circular economy is increasingly discussed in the tourism and hospitality literature, being seen as a sustainable alternative to the linear economic model (Strippoli et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2022; Holmberg and Konttinen, 2023). A recent bibliometric analysis shows that interest in this topic has grown steadily over the last decade, amid concerns about excessive resource consumption, waste generation and the environmental impact of tourism activities. In this context, the tourism and hospitality sector is presented as an area in which circular economy principles can support both resource efficiency and broader sustainability objectives (Şahin et al., 2024). In particular, the hotel industry is described in recent literature as a relevant space for the application of circular economy, precisely because of the intensive consumption of water, energy, materials, and significant amounts of waste generated in daily operating processes (Mdoda et al., 2024; Zaki, 2025). The study by Bittner, Bakker and Long highlights that circular practices in hospitality must be analysed not only through the lens of technical solutions, but also through differences in context, infrastructure, regulation and organisational culture. The authors show that barriers can vary considerably from one context to another, but the lack of applicable information, market pressures, and difficulties in integrating into existing business models remain recurring issues (Bittner et al., 2024). An important dimension of the circular economy in hotels is related to waste management, especially food waste (Ally et al., 2024; Chang et al., 2025). In a systematic review of circular hospitality practices related to food waste, Cardenas, Schivinski, and Brennan show that most studies focus on prevention, reduction, and recycling, and these practices can contribute to both resource conservation and encouraging more sustainable customer behaviour (Cardenas et al., 2024). Moreover, the authors emphasise that current literature indicates the need to better understand what facilitates or hinders consumer involvement in such practices, which supports the relevance of research focused on respondents' perceptions.

The literature also highlights that the adoption of the circular economy in hotels is not uniform, but depends on the available resources, the type of organisation, and the relationships with the actors around the company (Puig-Denia et al., 2025; Dey et al.,

2025). In a recent study based on grounded theory, Fonseca and Dias analysed the integration of circular principles in hospitality through the lens of furniture management and found significant differences between high-end and budget hotels. Their results suggest that hotels with greater resources adopt practices such as leasing, refurbishment or buyback programs more easily, while hotels with limited resources mainly face financial and logistical barriers (Fonseca and Dias, 2025). The authors emphasise the role of public policies, financial incentives, and partnerships with suppliers in supporting the transition to circular models. In addition to structural and economic barriers, recent research also brings into question a psychological and behavioural dimension of implementation. Vaculčíková, Ramkissoon and Dey show that, although interest in sustainability is growing, the adoption of the circular economy in hospitality often remains symbolic and limited to low-effort actions. The authors identify behavioural, social, structural and market barriers, suggesting that organisations' declarative intentions do not always translate into deep and consistent practices (Vaculčíková et al., 2025). This perspective is important for the present research, as it helps understand the difference between the theoretical support of circular economy and its real implementation in the hotel industry. Overall, the specialised literature highlights circular economy as a relevant direction for the hotel industry, both through its economic and ecological benefits, as well as through its impact on the way of managing resources and waste (Jacob et al., 2025; Chatzifoti et al., 2025; Gomes et al., 2025; Veloz et al., 2025). Simultaneously, the implementation of this model depends on organisational, economic, educational and behavioural factors, which justifies the analysis of the respondents' perceptions of the associated benefits and barriers (Lagioia et al., 2024; Erdiaw-Kwasie et al., 2023; Guerra-Lombardi et al., 2024).

### 3. Materials and Methods

In this study, the methodology was based primarily on qualitative research, with the main aim of exploring and understanding perceptions regarding the application of circular economy in the hotel industry.

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

- O1** - Highlighting the respondents' degree of familiarity with the concept of circular economy.
- O2** - Analysing respondents' perceptions on the application of circular economy principles in the hotel industry;
- O3** - Identifying the perceived benefits of implementing circular economy in the hotel sector;
- O4** - Highlighting the main barriers to implementing circular economy principles in the hotel industry.

In order to meet the established objectives and to capture the respondents' perceptions as clearly as possible, the following research questions were formulated:

- Q1** – *How is the concept of circular economy interpreted by respondents?*

**Q2** – *How do respondents perceive the application of circular economy principles in the hotel industry?*

**Q3** – *What are the perceived benefits of implementing circular economy in the hotel industry?*

**Q4** – *What are the main perceived barriers to implementing circular economy principles in the hotel industry?*

In order to capture the respondents' perspectives on the analysed topic, the research was built on a qualitative approach, using the pencil-and-paper technique, and in this regard, open-ended questions were formulated. This approach facilitated the collection of more nuanced responses, offering participants the opportunity to express their opinions as freely as possible on the application of circular economy principles in the hotel industry.

In the case of this research, the research instrument was represented by the interview guide, structured in open-ended questions, specific to the study. The participants included in the study were selected through online communication channels, such as WhatsApp and Telegram, from specific groups in which people interested in topics related to consumption, sustainability, and services could be identified. A preliminary questionnaire was used to establish the sample, through which the necessary criteria for inclusion in the study were verified, namely the existence of a minimum level of familiarity with the notion of circular economy, previous experience in using hotel services, as well as recent non-participation in similar research. After identifying eligible people, the research instrument, namely the guide containing open-ended questions, was sent to them by e-mail. Data collection took place between February 5-10, 2026, with answers being provided in writing and returned by e-mail. The study participants were encouraged to provide as detailed and honest answers as possible, in order to allow for the creation of clearer images of perceptions regarding the application of circular economy principles in the hotel industry. This way of working facilitated the obtaining of relevant data for the qualitative analysis.

The sample consisted of 10 participants, of whom 5 were female and 5 were male. All members included in the sample come from urban areas and have higher education. In terms of age distribution, 4 participants belong to the 26 - 35 age range, 3 participants belong to the 36 - 45 age range, and another 3 participants belong to the 46 - 55 age range. From the perspective of the field of activity, the sample included 3 respondents working in marketing, 2 in hospitality, 2 in sales, and 3 respondents in education. The sample is small, typical of qualitative approaches, but the diversity of the respondents' fields of activity contributed to obtaining varied perspectives on the application of circular economy principles in the hotel industry.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

The research results are presented in correlation with the objectives and research questions formulated, highlighting the main perspectives of the respondents on the

analysed topic.

### **O1 - Highlighting the respondents' degree of familiarity with the concept of circular economy.**

The analysis of the responses shows that respondents generally have a correct and coherent understanding of the circular economy concept, even if the level of detail differs from one participant to another.

In most cases, circular economy is interpreted as a model based on the efficient use of resources, waste reduction, material reuse and recycling, all of which are associated with the idea of environmental protection and sustainability. Respondents do not define the concept in a strictly theoretical manner, but rather in relation to concrete practices and their effects. Thus, circular economy is perceived mainly as a responsible way of using resources, through which excessive consumption and waste are limited.

Another important element is that many respondents associate the concept with the idea of long-term sustainability, which suggests a focus not only on immediate efficiency, but also on future effects on the environment and society. In this sense, circular economy appears in the participants' discourse as an alternative to the traditional consumption model, based on responsibility and resource conservation.

Regarding familiarity with the concept, responses indicate that most respondents consider themselves to be generally or moderately familiar with circular economy practices. Few suggest in-depth knowledge, but most mention having encountered the concept in professional, educational contexts or in broader discussions about sustainability and environmental protection. This suggests that circular economy is already present in the public and professional space, even if it is not always known in depth. The examples provided by respondents also confirm this practical understanding of the concept. Among the most frequently mentioned are recycling, reusing materials, reducing resource consumption, saving water and energy, reducing plastic use and selective waste collection. These examples indicate that respondents associate circular economy with concrete, visible, and easily recognisable actions in everyday life or in organisational activity.

Overall, the results obtained highlight the fact that respondents interpret circular economy in a relatively uniform way, emphasising resource efficiency, waste reduction and environmental protection. Even if the wording differs, the semantic core of the responses is common, which shows the existence of a fairly clear representation of the concept among the participants.

To synthesise the main themes resulting from the analysis of the responses, a schematic representation of how respondents interpret the concept of circular economy was created (Figure 1).

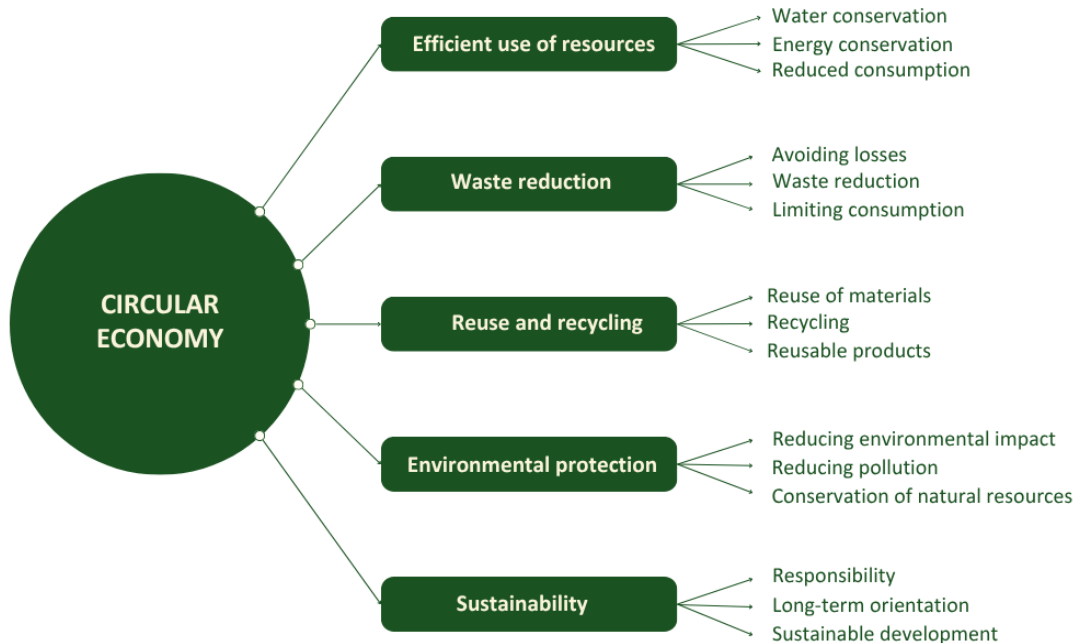


Fig. 1. *Interpretation of the concept of circular economy in the perception of respondents*

As can be seen in Figure 1, respondents associate the concept of circular economy mainly with the efficient use of resources, waste reduction and reuse and recycling practices. These elements are also frequently correlated with environmental protection and sustainability, highlighting the main directions in which this concept is understood.

## **O2 - Analysis of respondents' perceptions on the application of circular economy principles in the hotel industry.**

The analysis of the responses shows that the respondents' perceptions of the application of circular economy principles in the hotel industry are generally favourable. Most participants believe that these principles can be integrated into the hotel activity through concrete measures, easily associated with the daily operation of accommodation units, such as reducing water and energy consumption, recycling waste, reusing certain products and optimising the use of resources. This aspect suggests that the respondents do not perceive circular economy as an abstract concept, but as a set of practices that are actually applicable in the hotel industry. A common element in the responses is the idea that the application of circular economy principles plays an important role in making hotel activities more efficient. Participants believe that such practices can contribute to a better organisation of resources, reducing unnecessary consumption and, implicitly, increasing operational efficiency. In this sense, circular economy is perceived not only from an ecological perspective but also as a tool with practical and functional value for hotel management. The responses also highlight the fact that respondents associate hotels' involvement in adopting sustainable practices

with a positive image in front of customers. For some participants, hotels that apply such principles are perceived as more responsible, more modern, and better adapted to the new demands of consumers. In particular, respondents working in marketing and sales emphasise that sustainability can become an element of differentiation and brand consolidation in the market. However, the analysis also indicates a certain critical reservation on the part of some respondents. Some participants appreciate that, although the involvement of hotels in this direction is necessary, in some cases sustainable practices are perceived more as image tools than as expressions of real and profound change. This observation is relevant because it suggests the existence of a difference between the theoretical acceptance of the circular economy and its effective implementation in the hotel activity. Another important aspect that emerged from the responses is that the role of the circular economy within the hotel industry is perceived as growing. Many respondents believe that this role will become increasingly important in the future, amid increased interest in sustainability, changing consumer preferences, and pressures from regulations or the environmental context. In this sense, circular economy is seen as a relevant direction for the future development of the hotel industry. Therefore, the results show that respondents have a predominantly positive perception of the application of circular economy principles in the hotel industry. They consider such practices to be useful, necessary, and increasingly relevant, both from the perspective of environmental protection and from the perspective of the organisation of the activity, the hotel's image, and the relationship with customers. At the same time, the answers also highlight the existence of some critical nuances, especially related to the sometimes superficial nature of the implementation.

### **O3 – Identifying the perceived benefits of implementing circular economy in the hotel sector.**

The responses highlight that respondents perceive the application of circular economy principles in the hotel industry as generating multiple benefits, targeting both the economic and environmental dimensions and the relationship with the customer. Overall, participants outline a predominantly positive perspective on these practices, considering that they can contribute to improving the functioning of hotel units and strengthening a responsible image in front of consumers. A first benefit frequently mentioned by respondents is related to cost reduction. Many participants appreciate that more efficient use of resources, reduced water and energy consumption, as well as optimisation of internal processes can lead to long-term savings. In this sense, circular economy is perceived not only as a sustainable option but also as a solution with economic value for hotels, capable of supporting operational efficiency and profitability.

Along with the economic advantages, the responses also highlight the importance of image benefits. A significant part of the respondents believe that hotels that adopt practices associated with circular economy can be perceived more positively by customers, being associated with responsibility, modernity and concern for the environment. Thus, the implementation of such measures is also seen as a

differentiating factor in the market, with the potential to attract consumers who are more attentive to sustainability aspects. In terms of customer experience, most participants believe that the influence of these practices is generally positive. Respondents believe that hotels that adopt circular economy principles can provide a better experience, especially for those customers who value environmental responsibility. At the same time, some responses also introduce an important nuance: the favourable impact on the experience depends on how the measures are implemented, so that they do not affect the comfort or quality of the services offered. Another key benefit identified in the responses is the positive impact on the environment. Participants associate the application of circular economy with reducing pollution, reducing waste, conserving natural resources and using available resources more responsibly. This type of response confirms that, in the perception of respondents, the ecological dimension remains one of the most important justifications for implementing circular economy principles in the hotel industry. It is also noteworthy that the perceived benefits are understood in an interdependent manner. Cost reduction, improving the hotel's image, attracting customers and protecting the environment do not appear as isolated dimensions, but as complementary effects of the same sustainability orientation. In other words, respondents seem to understand that adopting circular economy principles can produce simultaneous advantages, for the organisation, the environment, and the consumer.

Therefore, the results obtained highlight that the perceived benefits of implementing circular economy in the hotel sector are varied, but converge around a few major directions: economic efficiency, environmental protection, image improvement, and increased attractiveness for customers. This convergence suggests that respondents view circular economy as a real opportunity for responsible and competitive development for the hotel industry.

#### **O4 – Highlighting the main barriers to implementing circular economy principles in the hotel industry.**

The responses provided by the participants highlight that the implementation of circular economy principles in the hotel industry is perceived to be influenced by a series of economic, informational, organisational, and behavioural barriers.

Although the respondents recognise the usefulness and relevance of these practices, their responses suggest that effective application is often hampered by factors that limit the wider adoption of circular economy principles in the hotel industry. The most frequently cited barrier is represented by high initial costs. Several respondents consider that the investments required to implement sustainable practices, adapt infrastructure or change the way of operating can be a significant obstacle for hotels. In this sense, circular economy is perceived as beneficial in the long term, but difficult to adopt in the initial phase, especially in the absence of sufficient financial resources.

Another important category of barriers is related to the lack of information and education. Participants repeatedly point out that both customers and hotel staff or

management may have a low level of knowledge about the significance and usefulness of these practices. From this perspective, the difficulty lies not only in implementation, but also in understanding the real value of circular economy.

The lack of information thus appears as a transversal obstacle, affecting both the acceptance and the concrete application of sustainable measures. The responses also highlight a lack of interest or engagement from relevant stakeholders. Some respondents believe that neither economic operators nor customers always give sufficient importance to these aspects. On the part of hotels, this lack of interest can lead to superficial or delayed implementations, while on the part of consumers, it can appear as indifference to the benefits associated with circular economy.

In addition to these aspects, barriers related to organisational implementation are also noted, such as the lack of clear strategies, well-defined policies or regulations to support the adoption of these practices. Some participants mention that the absence of a coherent direction means that circular economy measures are applied fragmentarily or only at a declarative level. In this context, the difficulty is not only financial, but also planning and coordination.

From the customer perspective, respondents indicate as important obstacles a lack of interest, a low level of information and, in some cases, the perception that such services might be more expensive or might affect comfort. Some participants note that certain sustainable measures can be viewed negatively if they are interpreted as restrictions on comfort or quality of services. This suggests that the success of implementation also depends on how these practices are communicated and integrated into the customer experience.

Several respondents also refer to resistance to change, manifested either at the management or staff level. This barrier indicates that adopting circular economy does not only require technical changes, but also transformations of mentality and organisational culture. Without openness to change, even beneficial measures may encounter difficulties in implementation. Thus, the results obtained show that the barriers perceived by respondents are diverse, but converge around a few major dimensions: costs, lack of information, low interest, implementation difficulties, and customer perceptions.

These findings suggest that the application of circular economy principles in the hotel industry does not depend exclusively on the availability of technical solutions, but also on educational, organisational, and communication factors.

The main barriers identified from the analysis, according to the respondents, are summarised in a schematic representation. This highlights the factors limiting the implementation of circular economy in the hotel industry (Figure 2).

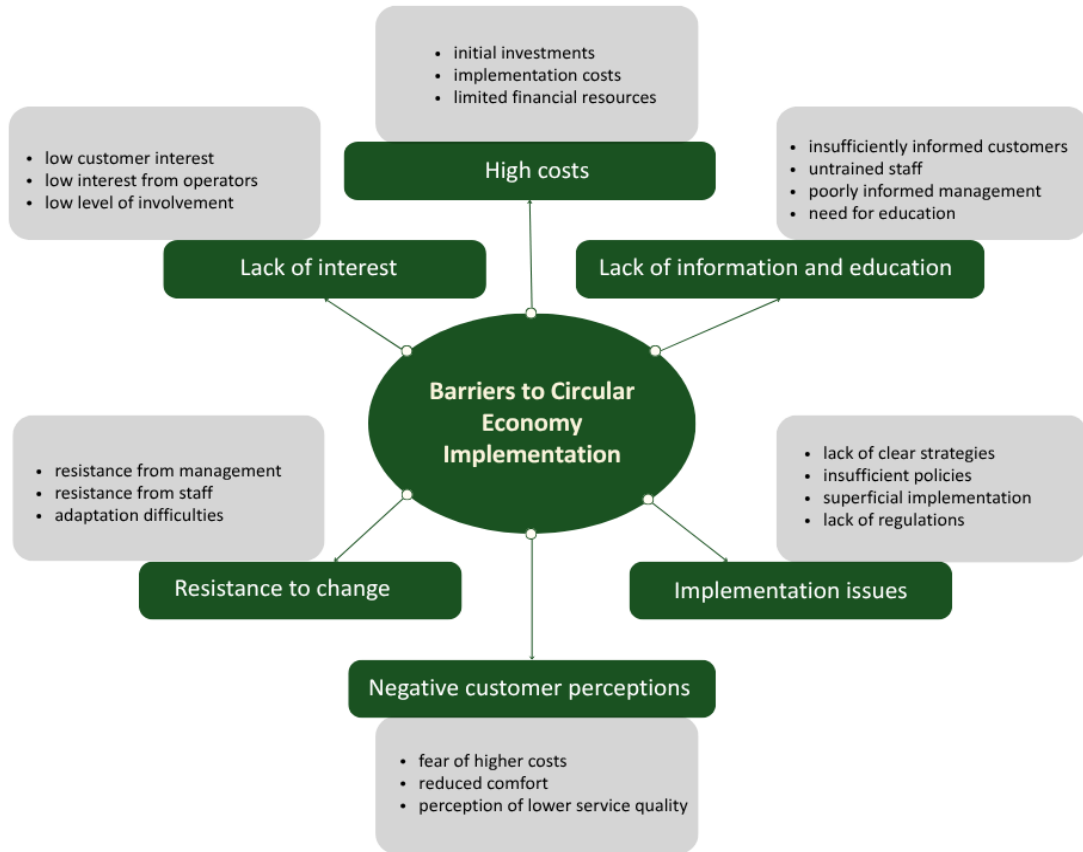


Fig. 2. *The main barriers to implementing circular economy in the hotel industry, as perceived by respondents*

As can be seen in Figure 2, the barriers highlighted by respondents are centred around costs, lack of information, and low interest in these practices. At the same time, the scheme also captures implementation difficulties, customer perceptions and resistance to change, outlining the complexity of the circular economy adoption process in the hotel industry. Overall, the research results highlight both the level of understanding of the circular economy concept, as well as the perceptions, benefits, and barriers associated with its implementation in the hotel industry.

## 5. Conclusion

This study aimed to analyse the level of knowledge, perceptions, benefits, and barriers associated with the implementation of the circular economy in the hotel industry. The results highlight that respondents generally have a correct understanding of the concept, associating it with the efficient use of resources, reducing waste, recycling, and environmental protection. Although the level of in-depth understanding varies, a

common and coherent representation of circular economy is noticeable. Perceptions regarding the application of this model in the hotel industry are predominantly favourable, with respondents considering that the principles can be integrated through concrete measures, such as optimising resource consumption and product reuse. The circular economy is perceived both as an ecological necessity and as a useful tool for increasing efficiency and improving the image of hotels, although some responses suggest a sometimes superficial implementation.

As for the benefits, they are mainly associated with cost reduction, increased efficiency, improved image and positive environmental impact. At the same time, customer experience is favourably influenced, especially among those concerned about sustainability, provided that the level of comfort is maintained. However, the implementation of the circular economy is limited by several barriers, such as high initial costs, lack of information and education, low interest, implementation difficulties, and certain negative customer perceptions.

These aspects highlight the need for integrated measures targeting both the economic, educational, and organisational dimensions. Overall, the circular economy is perceived as a relevant direction for the development of the hotel industry, but its effective application depends on resources, information, and openness to change.

The research has certain limitations, determined by the qualitative nature of the approach and the small sample size, aspects that restrict the generalizability of the results. In addition, the responses have a subjective nature, being influenced by the experience and individual perspective of the participants. In this context, future research could deepen the analysis by using larger samples and by complementing the qualitative approach with quantitative methods.

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