






Article

Can the Circular Economy Unlock Sustainable Business Growth? Insights from Qualitative Research with Specialists in Romania

Ana Alexandra Mocanu , Gabriel Brătucu , Eliza Ciobanu * , Ioana Bianca Chițu  and Anita Cornelia Szakal 

Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Administration, Transilvania University of Brasov, 500068 Braşov, Romania; ana.mocanu@unitbv.ro (A.A.M.); gabriel.bratucu@unitbv.ro (G.B.); ioana.chitu@unitbv.ro (I.B.C.); anita.szakal@unitbv.ro (A.C.S.)

* Correspondence: eliza.nichifor@unitbv.ro

Abstract: Concern for sustainable development and environmental protection has become increasingly important in the business world in recent decades. Looking for business professionals who are currently implementing sustainable development practices and the principles of the circular economy might be the most meaningful approach to the time and the space we are all heading towards in the future. This study seeks to identify the motivations, obstacles, strategies, and perspectives of specialists in the integration of the circular and sustainable economy model in businesses in the Romanian context. It focuses on providing a solid basis for promoting sustainable practices and policies in the business environment, considering theoretical elements and the perspectives and experiences of specialists. In our research, qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted among diverse specialists in Romanian businesses to gain insight. The research findings indicate consistent requests for consumer education and involvement in the circular economy process and for political support and funding sources for investments in assistive technologies. This article presents viewpoints from Romanian experts, entrepreneurs, and business decision-makers on the circular economy and sustainability. Decision-makers prioritize developing and promoting sustainable products and services, emphasizing the use of recycled materials, and using renewable energy for their activities. The presented results highlight the situation in Romania and implicitly make a significant contribution to the scientific knowledge in this field. Although the study's qualitative nature limits its generalizability, it offers valuable insights and suggests potential directions for future research on aspects related to the circular economy and sustainability.

Keywords: circular economy; sustainability; environment; business; Sustainable Development Goals; qualitative research; business specialists



Citation: Mocanu, A.A.; Brătucu, G.; Ciobanu, E.; Chițu, I.B.; Szakal, A.C. Can the Circular Economy Unlock Sustainable Business Growth? Insights from Qualitative Research with Specialists in Romania. *Sustainability* **2024**, *16*, 2031. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16052031>

Academic Editor: Davide Settembre-Blundo

Received: 16 February 2024

Revised: 23 February 2024

Accepted: 23 February 2024

Published: 29 February 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Care for the environment has become a current concern for most of the world's inhabitants, for the business environment, as well as for international organizations and public institutions at the state level, because of the negative effects felt by humanity due to climate change and changes found in the natural environment (biodiversity loss, deforestation, pollution, and resource scarcity). Anthropogenic activities along with technological developments in all fields have led to these changes. It is estimated that a solution that can practically reduce a large part of the total greenhouse gas emissions and all waste from some economic sectors is the circular economy, which would, thus, contribute to protecting the environment and combating climate change [1,2]. The concept of the circular economy first appeared in the literature in the 1990s. It represents an economy that fully respects the interdependencies between the environment and the economy and preserves the fundamental functions of the environment in sustainable development, being a complex subject that has attracted increased attention in recent years, along with sustainability [3].

A circular economy aims to gradually decouple the increase in consumption of non-renewable resources and exhibits the quality of being regenerative by design [4]. Based on

these considerations, many countries have introduced national strategies with the aim of achieving a more circular and sustainable economy [5,6].

Sustainable development is in the specialized literature a term synonymous with sustainability and means the ability to maintain a certain activity and/or entity over time without depleting the productive ecological resources of a country/region on Earth, thereby allowing human development [6].

The connection between sustainable development and the circular economy is that the latter is a system that limits activities that could harm society and the environment, such as the rapid depletion of the planet's resources or the generation of large amounts of waste. The circular economy plays a central role in sustainability debates, as the circular model helps to achieve all dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social, and environmental) [7]. Practically, in achieving the current objectives of sustainability, as adopted by the vast majority of countries in the world, the circular economy is an important tool, as it involves the return of various materials in another production cycle whenever possible by renting or finding new uses for certain objects or appliances, even involving the energy recovery of waste that cannot be recycled, also called fuel waste; all of this is carried out to limit the depletion of the planet's non-renewable natural resources and stop the increasingly present climate changes.

To fight against the changes mentioned above and to become a society in which there are no net greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, more precisely known as a climate-neutral society, the European Union adopted a package of initiatives, the so-called Green Deal, covering the climate and the environment, industries, energy, transport, agriculture, and sustainable finance, all sharing a close connection. Thus, by belonging to the European Union, all member countries have committed to a low-carbon and resource-efficient economy by 2050. Other countries that have committed to being climate-neutral by 2050 are Japan, South Korea, Canada, and New Zealand [8]. Some countries have pledged to do it by the year 2060, such as China, which in approaching the circular economy, the key issue for sustainability, introduced multiple consecutive Five-Year Plans for their development strategy at the national level. In China, promoting the circular economy has been regulated by law since 2009 [5]. However, many countries have not made any official announcement in this regard [5,9].

For the Romanian business environment, the concept of the circular economy has in recent years become a concept of interest due to its popularity in the European Union's policies and also due to the benefits (economic, social, and environmental) it implies.

The study of the circular economy has gained more and more attention, especially since, with the help of the circular economy process, the sustainability objectives assumed for most countries around the globe can be achieved. However, it is necessary to consider internal market factors from each country in the integration of the circular economy's system and the achievement of sustainable development [10,11].

Studies show that in Romania, the circular economy is at the beginning stage [12], although there are still large discrepancies compared to other EU countries in this regard [13]. The waste recycling rate was 11.3% in 2020, meaning that Romania did not achieve the EU objectives (50% by 2020). The circular use of materials decreased in Romania from 1.7% in 2016 to 1.4% in 2021, a very small value compared to the European leverage rate (11.7%) [14]. However, in the long term, there are favourable prospects for improving Romania's performance in adopting the circular economy [15]. Romania has taken significant steps towards a circular economy [16], and this must also be supported through the legislative framework [17]; it is necessary "to involve all stakeholders—governments, industry, communities, and civic organizations" [18]. At the end of 2023, the Romanian government finalized the Action Plan on the Circular Economy, which will include as a result "1.43 billions Euro, 0.5% of GDP and 70 new jobs for every 1000 tons of recycled waste" [19].

In the current study, the objective of the work is to understand from the perspective of specialists from various businesses from Romania what the circular economy and sus-

tainable development mean and how these issues are translated into a business model, in legislation and the lifestyle of consumers. In this sense, qualitative research was carried out based on a series of individual in-depth interviews with people with decision-making power within the businesses they represent. The in-depth interview and semi-structured interview questions were addressed to experts who had something to say in this realm of circularity and sustainability to answer the following research question: “How do businesses perceive, implement, and navigate the principles of the circular economy for sustainable development, considering motivations, barriers, strategies, and perspectives of experts?”.

Regarding the objectives of qualitative in-depth interview marketing research, qualitative research was based on the following main objectives:

Objective 1 (O1). *Evaluate business professionals’ comprehension and awareness of circular economy principles and sustainable development practices within the business landscape.*

Objective 2 (O2). *Explore factors influencing attitudes towards adopting circular economy principles and sustainable development practices in various firms, uncovering the underlying reasons.*

Objective 3 (O3). *Analyze how practitioners’ perceptions of circular economy and sustainable development practices at the firm level influence the adoption and implementation of these practices within their respective businesses.*

Objective 4 (O4). *Identify in which circular business models can be included in the interviewed businesses, based on the solutions they provide in the approaches of circular economy principles and sustainable development practices.*

Since the decisions of specialists regarding the sustainable growth of businesses in Romania are heavily understudied, our research work focuses on these contexts. Studying the circular economy and sustainable development practices in the Romanian business context is a necessity because it offers to the institutional, business, and civic sectors an overview of the progress made so far through the circular economy approach within a general business strategy. Also, this scientific research offers the opportunity to find out at which stage of these processes more stakeholder involvement and auxiliary actions are needed.

The results of the research carried out among the specialists show that considerable financial investments are needed to successfully integrate the circular economy model within a business, including equipment, software programs, marketing campaigns, and other things. Practically, an entire infrastructure is needed to recover and save resources. It is worth noting that some of the decision-makers at the company level have specified the development and promotion of sustainable products and services as practices for the circular economy. The products can be or are already made using recycled or recyclable or biodegradable materials or are replaced by services, thus supporting the business model “Circular consumables”, also known as “From product to service”. Also, another notable result is the need for much more education for this process at the consumer level. Individuals must be attracted and involved in this circular economy mechanism for its successful implementation.

The structure of this paper is as follows. The first section is the introductory one, whereas the second has an exclusively theoretical character. The third one presents the methodology used in the study, the fourth contains the results, and the fifth section describes our main findings. The last section contains the conclusions, the limitations of the analysis, and future research directions.

2. Literature Review

Humanity faces one of its most important and challenging tasks: to effect a sustainable global transformation in terms of society, the environment, and the economy. This transformation requires innovative approaches and creative solutions to be successfully achieved [20]. The emergence and evolution of alternative technologies and industrial fields is a key concern for researchers in the transition to a sustainable, green economy [21].

The linear economy model has existed for a very long time and contributes to irresponsible exploitation and a significant loss of resources [22] that often end up chaotically abandoned in nature. The model is often criticized for emphasizing the exploitation of new raw materials and contributing greatly to waste generation. The circular economy concept contributes to sustainability goals by offering an alternative to the current linear model that always processes new raw materials, which then results in waste [23].

The transition to a circular economy holds high expectations, as sustainable consumption and production are seen as at the heart of major global challenges such as poverty and climate change. Resource consumption has grown faster than population growth, indicating that it is driven not by population growth but by the current model of economic development based on consumerism and mass industrial production. Society's focus on producing and consuming as cheaply as possible has created the linear economy model in which objects are briefly used and then discarded as waste [24]. Transitions should not only be understood as global phenomena, but also as uneven and developments in specific technologies, following different paths in different national and regional contexts and settings over time [25].

Much of the world's environmental pollution is related to the use of materials, and material depletion is a problem. Most materials are lost and dissipated in production and consumption processes [26]. Therefore, efficiency in keeping materials looped is a key aspect of the circular economy [27]. This is the way to stop or decrease the consumption of new raw materials and promote well-being, while reducing environmental burdens [28].

The circular economy is a current topic; politicians, entrepreneurs, CEOs, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and civil society talk about the potential benefits [29] and recognize the need to move away from the dominant model of the linear economy with its polluting production, neglect of limited resources, and waste problem [30]. The adoption of the circular economy as a collective saving formula resulted from the pressures exerted by the global crisis of resource scarcity, population growth, and climate change, felt across the globe. The circular economy aims primarily at achieving economic prosperity while maintaining environmental quality and social fairness to pass on a sustainable world to future generations [31].

In the European Union (EU), the circular economy is the central pillar of the Green Deal and climate neutrality objectives. The EU is working to create a sustainable, competitive, low-carbon, and resource-efficient economy. This provides just one example of this process, but circular economy policy and practices are today at the forefront of environmental policies around the world, "from Chile to Japan, from Beijing to Cape Town". The notion has become dominant largely because it is "conceptualized as a highly rational and cost-effective win-win strategy to reduce waste and pollution levels" and reimagine and reuse discarded materials as resources [32].

China is another major geopolitical player that has adopted comprehensive circular economy policies. The country is among the first emerging economies to aim for peak carbon emissions by 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2060, aligning with commitments for sustainable development made by the EU, United Kingdom (UK), United States of America (US), and others [33]. Despite geopolitical tensions and global competition, China and the US have promised to intensify cooperation in combating climate change. Additionally, China and the EU signed a memorandum of understanding and a comparable partnership on cooperation in the circular economy. Moreover, in its transformation as a sustainable economy, China has recorded the greatest success in reducing the number of people living in poverty, being a country with strong and sustained economic growth [34]. All these aspects point to China's increasing focus on sustainability, particularly in the context of the circular economy and combating climate change [33].

Since the circular economy could promote the development of new industries, create new jobs, minimize greenhouse gas emissions, and improve the efficient use of natural resources, its system has been recognized as a significant commercial opportunity. The advancement of the circular economy has been adopted recently in the industrial sector.

Thus, the textile industry and products with long use are some of the interesting examples where these circular improvements can be observed. Australia, the USA, the Netherlands, France, the UK, Denmark, Germany, Finland, France, Sweden, Norway, and China, along with other advanced countries, have widely accepted and put into practice the circular economy principles. Also, these countries have extensively researched the concept of the circular economy, thus reaching the discovery of solutions and the latest innovations on the idea of reuse and recovery [35]. The concept of the circular economy has emerged as a potential solution to promote sustainability in the market and effectively address environmental and socio-economic issues. To overcome these challenges, nations must shift from linear economic models that follow the take–process–consume–throw away approach to circular and sustainable economies [36].

Circular strategy research has become one of the most popular areas of research in several disciplines and geographical regions, addressing issues such as conceptualization, definition, determinants, measuring performance in terms of sustainability, etc. [37,38]. At the same time, the specialists consider that the study of consumer behavior and the way in which they make their consumption decisions does not receive enough attention, even though consumers are “key actors in the circular loop”, their education being an antecedent to their decision making and their behavior [39,40].

The structure of the circular economy must be seen as a sustainable foundation that enhances economic growth by avoiding waste, conserving natural capital, managing resource scarcity, recycling materials, maximizing energy efficiency, and recirculating resources in the economy [36].

The loop economy or circular economy involves respecting three main basic ideas, namely reduce, reuse, recycle, i.e., the 3R principles, which are found embedded in production and consumption processes, the circulation flow model of the three principles being very common for promoting ecological behavior among the population [41].

The first principle, popularly known as “Reduce”, refers to products that perform several functions, to local shopping and simplified packaging, to avoiding unnecessary roads, to encouraging transport through “green” alternatives, to saving energy or water by cutting off the supply of these resources when they are not actually used, or to introducing modern equipment for use and smart products that do not allow energy or water loss, all this to reduce the total carbon footprint. The principle aims to minimize the input of raw materials, energy, and waste by increasing efficiency in production and consumption by simplifying or compacting everyday products. Reducing by design or abandoning the original function for a new use makes products and manufacturing smarter [42].

Reuse refers to resources or components that can be used again for the purpose for which they were created or for a near or new purpose. The principle refers to the reuse of a product which is in good condition and fulfills the main function for which it was created by other consumers, following a donation or purchase. Reuse aims to extend the life of a product [43].

Recycling is part of the circular model and requires scrap materials to be collected separately so that they can be processed in specialized facilities to obtain higher- or lower-quality materials [44].

In the implementation of the circular economy and the 3R principles, consumer awareness, consumption, and disposal behavior also help. For example, at the level of a country, the decision of consumers not to repair a product or to store it in the household represents a significant economic loss, and in the context of the circular economy, this creates a significant barrier to extending the life of the product and recovering some raw secondary resources [45].

The circular economy model will gain momentum once the use of recycled materials and the reuse of secondary material streams becomes common in most economic systems [46]. There are many competing definitions of the circular economy, most of which focus on economic prosperity and environmental quality, but the essence of the loop model is to decouple economic development from the consumption of finite resources [47].

All actions in a circular economy lead to sustainability; the circular approach contributes to a development whereby meeting the needs of today's consumers does not jeopardize the satisfaction of the needs of generations who will be born and live in the distant future [48]. The circular economy and sustainability sometimes go hand in hand, but sometimes they do not. However, in relation to the Global Sustainability Goals (the 17 SDGs), the circular economy has a major impact on the following seven goals:

- Goal 6: Clean water and sanitation—Water recycling programs reduce the water footprint.
- Goal 7: Affordable and clean energy—Reuse and recycling reduce the energy consumption of the supply chain.
- Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth—Refurbishing objects creates jobs, for example, people with disabilities are also included in the workforce.
- Goal 9: Industry, innovation, and infrastructure—New business models and the design concept “Cradle to Cradle” stimulate innovation.
- Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities—Especially in developing economies, waste management should develop circular solutions instead of conventional solutions to waste potential resources.
- Goal 12: Responsible consumption and production—Circularity of waste, for example, prevents marine litter from polluting the oceans.
- Goal 13: Climate action—The carbon footprint is reduced through reuse and recycling.

Practically, to meet these seven objectives by 2030, a very important role is played by the circular economy model with major changes to be made in production and distribution processes, but also in consumption patterns [49]. Circular business models are those businesses that could provide solutions, including both products and services, that aim to improve the circular economy and respond to resource scarcity, minimizing environmental impact and producing short- and long-term economic benefits [50,51].

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development guidelines (2019) [52], circular business models can be classified into five classes, as follows:

- I. Circular consumables—This business model consists of changing/replacing classical resources with bio resources or recycled materials and using renewable energy.
- II. Resource recovery—The model supports the recovery of surplus materials, factory scrap, and secondary raw materials from production activity and their processing in industry cycles, either by the company that produces them or by competent third-party firms. Once reintroduced into the loop in industry, recycled materials can lead to products with a higher value (“upcycling”) or a lower value (“downcycling”).
- III. Extending the life of products—These business models aim to keep resources flowing if possible. A good example in this chapter includes businesses whose products have a modular design; the parts of the product can be easily dismantled and reassembled, without the intervention of other parts.
- IV. Collaborative economy—This model is based on the connections that are formed between those who are looking for services and those who can offer them. The model is a phenomenon that has grown in the last decade by sharing goods, renting goods such as dishes and decor for a short period, renting spaces for a short period, ride sharing (“ridesharing”), working in common spaces (“coworking”), etc.
- V. From product to service—In this model, the services associated with the physical good are marketed rather than the good itself, eloquent examples for this model being digitized books, movies, gym subscriptions, and so on. The circular economy aims to promote a more sustainable way of life by reducing waste and promoting resource reuse. It is important to note that the circular economy represents a significant opportunity for businesses to reduce their environmental footprint while generating economic benefits, thus incentivizing companies to move towards more sustainable production and consumption models. However, the circular economy also faces financial, organizational, infrastructural, and technological barriers, lack of resources, etc. [53], as well as issues regarding community awareness and lack of government support [54].

By delving deeper into the development of the circular economy and its place within the principles of sustainability at the business level, researchers can have the opportunity to discover and provide valuable insights, as well as identify specific challenges and opportunities in the Romanian market. Thus, the motivation behind writing this article is to shed light on these insights and opportunities. Moreover, this knowledge can be used in the development of personalized policies and strategies to encourage the adoption of circular economy practices among Romanian businesses in the transition to a green, climate-neutral economy. Ultimately, such research can contribute to sustainable economic growth and the competitiveness of businesses in Romania, addressing at the same time concerns related to the environment and the lack of resources. Therefore, these aspects show the relevance of further research in promoting the development of enterprises based on the principles of the circular economy.

So far, capitalist countries have been able to achieve their goal of sustainable development by implementing strict environmental protection regulations, investment in technology and modern industrialization, as well as global transfer based on market mechanisms and legal environments [55]. The circular economy is becoming the new normal and changes in the social mindset are crucial, as well as changes in national legislations to focus on maintaining existing resources in economic cycles whenever possible and at the same time avoiding them becoming waste [56].

3. Materials and Methods

The business environment is one of the main pillars underlying the functioning of a mechanism in which the use of resources is carried out in such a way as not to affect the reserves of resources in the environment for current and future generations [29,41,54,57–59]. Thus, the main objective of the research is to identify the current stage in which the Romanian business environment is positioned regarding the circular economy and the application of practices for sustainable development.

As the literature on topics such as “linkage between circular economy and sustainability” is scant compared to articles on just “sustainability” or on just “circular economy” [10], the researchers opted for adopting a fundamental, theory-driven approach. When the necessity of developing new concepts and revealing deep perspectives and meanings is identified in the literature, this methodology is regarded to be the most appropriate, rather than relying on previous theories [60]. The use of qualitative research methods to collect primary data is required by the exploratory nature of the current study. In line with the suggestions provided by Matthews and Ross, when social phenomena are under-examined in immature study contexts, qualitative research is appropriate [61]. Also, in line with Anand et al., qualitative studies are necessary because they help contextualize phenomena [62].

The researchers initiated the process by starting with inductive data, conducting simultaneous data collection and analysis, coding the data, establishing theoretical categories, and validating these categories with additional data, as recommended [61]. The researchers chose to follow Gioia’s methodology, with an inductive content analysis. Namely, three main stages of Gioia’s methodology were completed (first-order analysis, second-order coding, and aggregate dimensions). The inductive approach assumes these steps, organizing its reasoning starting from the particular to the general. This methodology was chosen because it ensures the rigor and solidity of the study [63].

The qualitative research was carried out among specialists, and by asking questions about general aspects of the circular economy, marketing, and customer engagement, we tried to obtain information based on which to establish the general objectives and hypotheses of a quantitative research. For this study, the researchers claim that the interview questions (Appendix A) answer the different aspects that they have identified in scientifically exploring the circular economy approach and sustainable development for the business sector.

The research of the topic took the form of in-depth interviews, which were based on open questions on the topic of the circular economy and sustainable development,

addressed to qualified staff from business levels in different fields, including specialists such as marketing specialists, directors, and managers. Moving forward, this section is structured in the following manner. In the first part, the empirical framework is detailed, and then the processes developed for data collection are described. Finally, the way in which the data were analyzed is illustrated.

3.1. Empirical Framework

The topic approached is a complex one and refers to the analysis of attitudes and perceptions of specialists from various companies regarding the circular economy and the use of the model for sustainable development. Identifying the opinions and positions related to the circular economy and sustainability of business specialists is essential because they can contribute to the development and implementation of effective practices and policies in this area, influence companies' decisions, and educate and raise awareness of society in general.

For this study, the collection of data from business professionals located in Romania was chosen for several underlying reasons. Firstly, the Romanian business landscape is characterized by diversity in the private sector through different fields of activity, from making 'handmade' products to offering complex services. Another underlying reason is represented by the premises according to which the circular economy model in Romania is at the beginning [12], with significant steps being taken at the national level towards a circular economy [16]. Another reason is the fact that the authors proposed to carry out the research to discover the perspectives from the specific context in Romania for these targeted phenomena. First, with the help of one of the most popular Internet search engines (<https://www.google.com>, accessed on 1 April 2023), the researchers identified the websites of several for-profit organizations from Romania that are involved in circular economy practices to contribute to sustainable development, using descriptions and similar data for the circular economy and sustainability policies and actions according to the scientific literature. The aim of this search was to address a request to receive an interview in this realm of circularity and sustainability from each available enterprise's expert.

After identifying more businesses to be interviewed, businesses which are from different fields of activity and deal with these realms in different ways, the researchers processed and used the e-mail addresses from the contact section of the website to contact the experts. They sent a message personalized for each enterprise in addition to an invitation to participate in the study to competent, qualified staff who had experience in the realm of the topic. In the e-mail, the purpose of the interview and the reasons for wanting to discuss the topic were explained.

Unfortunately, the response rate to the dozens of invitation e-mails sent was very low. Two weeks after sending the messages, only nine representatives from different cities of the country expressed their intention to grant in-depth interviews, depending on their availability. It should be stated that no financial incentives were used for interview participation.

Fortunately, the answers with the specialists' approval came from businesses that operate in different economic sectors. This aspect, along with territorial diversity, ensures obtaining the most complete picture of the active ways in which the business level from Romania can adopt the sustainable practices of the circular economy with the aim of meeting various Sustainable Development Goals. The overall picture for the Romanian context can be obtained because the criteria of territorial heterogeneity and sectoral heterogeneity are respected.

3.2. Data Gathering

The method chosen by the researchers in this study is in-depth interviews among experts from the business environment in the Romanian context [29,41,57–59]. This method was established because it offers design flexibility so that researchers can modify the interview schedule in a very short time so that the needs of the research are fulfilled, and the participants contribute their answers to the research question and enhance understanding

of the researched phenomenon [64]. It is based on questioning those competent, highly qualified persons who have experience in the field of the topic being researched.

The in-depth personal interview method is one of the most effective ways of qualitative research, as it gives researchers the opportunity to obtain detailed and complex information regarding the perspectives and experiences of the subjects involved in the study. This research method allows researchers to explore the topic in depth, gain relevant information, and better understand the perspectives and opinions of the subjects studied [59].

The research was conducted between April and May 2023. The in-depth interviews were conducted in person by a member of the research team and the dialogues took place in Romanian. Due to the geographical positioning of some of those who accepted the invitation to participate in the interview in relation to the location of the research team, business professionals from certain cities close to the central region of Romania represented the first interviews. Because, in the last two interviews, various answers were received, like those of the previous interviewees in relation to the main topics, the research team considered that they had reached data saturation. Although there are opinions that, in qualitative research, saturation is no longer important and the adequacy of sampling is not something relevant in qualitative studies, several valuable insights and research potential were obtained. Three potential respondents expressed their intention to participate in the interview at a distant date, citing that they had a busy schedule at the moment. Consequently, given this context and the pressure of time, the researchers continued with the data analysis for the obtained interview data.

All the businesses represented by the specialists in the research sample are from cities in different counties of Romania, one business being even from the capital of București (the country's capital), Întorsura Buzăului (Covasna), Târgu Mureș (Mures), Brașov (Brașov), Buzău (Buzău), and Ploiești (Prahova). Furthermore, as can be seen in Table 1, which presents characterizations of the interviews themselves (number, type of participants, etc.), the businesses that are part of the study sample operate in various economic sectors.

Table 1. Interviews characterizing.

Interviewee Code	Job Position	Economic Sectors	Company Profile	Primary Location	Interview Time (min)
#11	Financial Director	Electro-IT Retail	Company that sells electronics, home appliances, IT equipment, and components	București	45
#12	Marketing Specialist	Manufacturing	Company that manufactures and assembles PVC joinery	Întorsura Buzăului	60
#13	Executive Director	Cosmetics Retail	Company that sells cosmetics and beauty products	Târgu Mureș	60
#14	Business Development Manager	Retail of construction and DIY materials	Distributor of auxiliary materials for constructions, renovations, and industry	Brașov	60
#15	Assistant Manager	Finance Sector	Company that offers banking, insurance, and other financial services	Buzău	45
#16	Store Manager	Food Retail Sector	Store selling consumer goods	Ploiești	45

Regarding the structure of the sample, the six business subjects interviewed belong to the following categories of specialists (the field of business activity is also specified): financial director (company that sells electronics, home appliances, IT equipment, and components); marketing specialist (PVC joinery manufacturing company); assistant manager (company in the financial sector); executive director (company selling cosmetics and beauty products); business development manager (construction and DIY company); store manager (company selling consumer goods). The methodology of the present qualitative research was based on interviewing six decision-makers within the business they work for.

Before starting full interviews, the researchers conducted two pilot studies with founders of two non-profit associations focused on environmental education in Romania for narrowing the interview protocol and research focus. Following the interviews that served as the pilot, the researchers made minor changes to the wording of the questions in the interview guide.

Additionally, before interviewing, the participants were assured of complete anonymity and asked for their consent. During the interview, explanations and clarifications were provided where necessary. Moreover, additional documents were requested by members of the research team (activity reports and other internal documents), and various documents were closely consulted and publicly available on official websites to gather as much relevant data as possible about them.

Researchers know that the bias in qualitative research is influenced by the instrument used, based on the fact that the questions from a questionnaire or from an interview guide have the role of guiding the answers of the interviewees. However, the interlocutors recounted their experiences freely and had communicated the information they considered appropriate, based on the interview guide used by researchers. Also, each interview was conducted in a conversational and relaxed manner to encourage the interviewee to share their opinions and ideas openly. During the research, the coordination of in-depth interviews was carried out with the help of the interview guide (Appendix A), which was structured on the following directions:

- I. The current situation of knowledge and development of the circular economy model among private companies in Romania.
- II. The activity of private companies on the circular economy model.
- III. Consumer behavior in the circular economy process.
- IV. The perception of practicing circular economy to support and achieve sustainable development.
- V. Forecasts on the implementation, support, and achievement of the circular economy.

The estimated duration for each interview is 45–60 min, and the discussion was audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees; the data collected from the interviews were transcribed and then analyzed, using qualitative data analysis techniques, more precisely thematic analysis, with the help of which common themes were established for ideas, subjects, and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly.

3.3. Analyzing the Data

At the beginning of data analysis, an overwhelming number of terms, categories of words, and phrases appeared, and researchers began triangulating the data in line with Gioia's methodology [63]. Further, the researchers analyzed the data, going through three stages: (i) first-order analysis, (ii) second-order coding, (iii) aggregate dimensions.

In the initial stage, those sentences from the answers of the specialists considered capable of summarizing how businesses perceive, implement, and navigate the principles of the circular economy for sustainable development were labelled. The reliability of the data analysis was guaranteed by the fact that three of the researchers coded the data separately and later the analyses were combined for forming open codes. According to Lacoste et al., this technique contributes to reducing the bias of a single researcher involved in the whole coding process [65].

Next, in the second-order coding stage, the authors used constant comparison techniques and used abduction in their approach, comparing the newly discovered data with what they consulted from the previously published literature. They reached a final set of themes through repeated cycles, matching data with theory [66]. In this way, the obtained codes were informed by constructs from existing literature and thus emerging themes and dimensions can be linked to previously published literature on the circular economy and sustainability issues.

Finally, the researchers matched theoretically informed, second-order categories and insights from the research. They reiterated this process and interpreted the items with respect to the various responses to consider unpopular opinions, viewpoints, and perspectives of business professionals, but potentially significant for the study.

For rigor in analyzing the data, the researchers always referred to the specialized literature, moving back and forth between the specialized literature and the collected qualitative data.

The general assumptions of qualitative in-depth interview research nominated by the researchers are as follows:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Specialists at the company level have different levels of understanding and awareness of the circular economy and sustainable development practices.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Adoption of circular economy principles and sustainable development practices are influenced by reasons such as business culture, stakeholders' pressure, and financial investment.*

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Perceptions of the circular economy and sustainable development practices affect the adoption of these models within businesses and there may be differences in perceptions between the business professionals interviewed.*

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *The interviewed companies can be placed in at least one of the circular business models considering the major changes they have implemented at the business level.*

For the general hypotheses, the nomination was made by the authors based on several reasons identified throughout the study, including varied educational qualifications and experiences among specialists, industry differences, and legal requirements for H1; leadership influence, external pressures, and the availability of financial resources for H2; cultural and social factors, economic priorities, industry specificity, regulatory environment, and resource availability for H3; the global trend in the transition towards sustainable development, EU legislation and norms that promote the circular economy and sustainability, competitive landscape, and consumer trends for H4.

Next, the data obtained in the individual interviews, which were semi-structured, will be summarized and the general conclusions of the qualitative study will be drawn. These conclusions will be presented in an abstract form since the researchers have maintained an impartial position.

4. Results

To carry out this qualitative marketing research, several topics of discussion were established that were addressed during the in-depth interviews. Each discussion topic included a series of questions addressed to subjects from the selected sample. After collecting the data, they were analyzed thematically using the content matrix method and the results were presented for each discussion topic.

4.1. Understanding of Circular Economy Principles and Sustainable Development Practices

The current situation of knowledge and development of the circular economy model among private companies in Romania

The first topic that was addressed in the qualitative research involved the brief description and evaluation of the main concepts and the current situation in Romania in

terms of knowledge and development of the circular economy model and how sustainable development is seen. The topic aims to determine the degree of implementation of sustainable practices specific to the circular economy at the business level in Romania for understanding the current state and receiving valuable information on the extent to which circular economy principles are perceived, adopted, and followed by businesses in the country.

To the first question related to the current stage of development of actions carried out in the field of the circular economy at the level of private businesses in Romania, all specialists bring into discussion the incipient or transitional phase in which the business environment from Romania is located. The answers that led to this general idea were the multiple mentions made in various forms that essentially describe the same thing, mentions like “stage still at the beginning” (#I1), “the first steps” (#I2), “they became aware” (#I2) or “we act consciously” (#I4), “the stage...varies” (#I5), “early stage” (#I3), “upward trend” (#I3), “transition period” (#I6).

Two of the specialists mentioned in their answers to this question the differences that can exist between different types of businesses. The first specialist interviewed (#I1) specified two categories of businesses, big players, and small players, and the situation in which each is found. This one specified that a large part of the big players on the market, who also have resources, have started to support the circular economy model through various actions and have also allocated marketing budgets in this field, and about the small players he declared that “they to work a lot on the actions they have to do” and that they need funding.

Moreover, in another response, another specialist (#I2) also notes the financial implications here through the “high costs for adopting sustainable practices”. Continuing, the second representative interviewed from the sample specified that there are businesses that have already gained a certain experience in circular economy practices and businesses that are still at the very beginning level, that of understanding and awareness of the model.

It should be noted that only one of the specialists discussed the current legislation in the country in the field of the circular economy and recycling, most likely through the perspective of the company’s field of activity, as he pointed out that:

“We are importers, . . . we are the first hand through that pass the products” and “we can only dispose of the remains as we want”. (#I4)

He specified that there is a national law by which the business he represents is obliged to pay taxes to the Ministry of Environment for all the packaging it puts on the market in Romania because they have no way to recover the packaging from their field of activity from their customers, exemplified by the packaging of a silicone cartridge. This expert also specified the replacement of the conventional car fleet with electric vehicles and the reuse of materials and scraps in the production process as actions practiced by various companies in Romania in the field of the circular economy.

Regarding the question related to the concept of the circular economy within the company they represent, all participants in the research believe that the circular process is an opportunity for them; none of them perceive the model as negative and report in their answers how they selectively collect their operational waste or waste from consumers. More precisely, some of the subjects (#I1, #I2, #I3, #I6) answered that the plastic and cardboard waste are baled with the help of special presses and then they reach specialized companies that collect them, while another specialist (#I4) said that they as a company only fulfill their duties at the payment level and that they do not have a very high power of influence on the resource recovery process. One of the participants in the research (#I5) believes that success in this area would depend on the involvement of the entire team in a company.

Some of those interviewed (#I1, #I2, #I3, #I6) stated that at the level of the businesses they work for, objectives related to the adoption of the circular economy were established. One of the specialists said that:

“Our company has embraced this project for some time, we have also imposed quantitative objectives, I think we are one of the biggest recyclers”. (#I1)

Another specialist (#I2) declared that with the help of the circular economy, they fulfill the objective related to the elimination of residual waste. Concretely, the specialist explained how, in the technical process of the company, there remains waste of a certain size from each profile of the products and how this waste is handed over to a collecting company, which treats it and transforms it again into raw material, and thus, the remains are returned to the production process and no resources are lost on the manufacturing line. On the one hand, the specialists (#I1, #I2, #I3) specified in their answers the commitment that consumers can make through the circular economy to protect the environment and resources and to what they will leave as a legacy for their descendants. One of the subjects (#I1) mentioned the rewards program with discounts that customers who “want to splurge” when purchasing a new product can be a part of. On the other hand, another expert said that within the company:

“Recycling activities started precisely to attract consumers, especially the young generation, educated in this field”. (#I3)

This expert also specified that the implementation of the recycling infrastructure was carried out, among other things, with the role of bringing and attracting new customers to the stores, because they do not condition the customers to bring to the collection points only the packaging from the products sold by them, but any packaging that can be brought that falls within the collection conditions, even if they are from competing brands.

Regarding Romania’s achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, all respondents believe that there is still work to be done, both in civil society, institutions, and at the business level. To some extent, all respondents believe that Romania is still in the process of progress. Some of the specialists (#I1, #I6) brought up illegal activities that are still taking place in Romania, such as unauthorized waste storage in nature, uncontrolled waste incineration for the recovery of different types of metal, and others.

Another subject from the interviews made a comparison of the amount of recycled waste on the cosmetics market between Romania and Great Britain based on the information he had from the reports inside the business on whose behalf he was discussing; he pointed out the very large differences in volume between the two markets, even if we take into account the fact that the population of the United Kingdom is approximately 3.5 times larger than that of Romania, mentioning the following:

“In countries like the UK, the amount recycled in a month from the year 2022 was several tons, and in Romania we are only talking about a few tens of kilograms”. (#I3)

This subject, along with two other interviewed specialists (#I2, #I5), admitted that Romania’s position at the end of the ranking can be seen directly in the figures related to this chapter, and another (#I4) brought up the new regulations and directives from “Prepare for 55”, a package that will come from part of the Union until the end of 2023, with the entire framework related to sustainability.

To the question “What is your opinion on sustainability within the business you represent?”, all experts appreciated sustainability as an opportunity because new products, ideas, services, or customers can appear through it at the company level.

One of all specialists (#I1) said that “Sustainability is a challenge, and every challenge must create opportunities”, recalling that, in the business he is a part of, there are costs within the entire infrastructure for the process of collecting customer wrecks, but he assessed that they do this to invest in the future and that their customers appreciate their actions. This one also exemplified in his answer the “Rabla Program for Home Appliances”, found in their business as the “Buy Back Program” and stated that the representatives of the Ministry of the Environment in Romania found a partner in their company, detailing the fact that their business covers the program of collection and delivery waste of electrical

and electronic equipment (known as “WEEE”) to recyclers all over through the year, while the actions of the Ministry cover one or two months a year.

On the other hand, one of the respondents (#I4) considered that this can also be a threat because it determines the increase in the competitiveness of companies on this side, and the producers who will not be able to adapt to the new requirements as quickly as possible will be removed from the market and will be replaced by other businesses. He mentioned in his answer once again that sustainability can be a threat and argued this by the fact that the process can bring with it other heavy processes at the level of declaration, reporting, and documentation in the situation where everything would not be automated.

Another one (#I3) said that sustainability can also be received with a negative connotation because the business he works for also collaborates with other companies that are not engaged in this set of actions and that may still be testing animals (in countries where this is still not prohibited) or they use a lot of packaging or plastic in production to decorate their goods and scandals or accusations may arise as a result of statements related to the sustainability of the brand itself and the association with the actions of business partners.

At the same time, one of the interviewees (#I5) said that sustainability brings more financial stability, risk reduction, and increased employee involvement for the company he works for, while another (#I3) said that sustainability brings “added value to the brand”, arguing that the sustainability process in which they engage determines the growth of the brand’s reputation in the eyes of customers because consumers would rather buy from a company that has an inclination to do something to protect the environment and resources, that is, from them, than make purchases from those who do not apply any measures in this field.

A third subject (#I4) reported that according to the sustainability model, they are trying to remove the use of conventional resources from the business and have installed photovoltaic panels on the buildings to become autonomous from an energy point of view and also stated that they have a strategy to replace the current car fleet with an electric one or even a hydrogen fleet, “if hydrogen-based technology will be developed”.

At the level of the main reasons why businesses are forced to implement circular economy practices, in the opinion of the majority of respondents (#I2, #I3, #I4, #I5, #I6), general reasons are identified as follows: the resources involved and their deficit, cost reduction, the obligation, the legislation, and the regulations that appear in the field, the trends, the interest of investors, the changes that appear among “sensitive” consumer preferences, and much less, reasons related to future generations. One specialist mentioned that:

“It would be interesting to say that only taking care of the future of our children and grandchildren”. (#I1)

He added that the reasons are different and that there will be gratifying results in this field at the business level only if there is a strategy from state institutions, with smart objectives, with increased targets from year to year and financial sanctions.

“If certain objectives are not met, companies must be directly obliged to pay certain amounts depending on the field of activity”. (#I1)

One of the specialists (#I5) specified in his answer related to the main reasons for adopting circular economy practices the fact that the message that is sent to others in this area is a very important one, because through this message, the image of the business can be improved or harmed.

The situation of knowledge and development of the circular economy model for sustainable development varies slightly among private companies in Romania today. The lack of regulatory and financial incentives, as well as the limited availability of circular economy solutions, are some of the challenges facing private companies in Romania. However, there is a growing interest in the circular economy model, an upward trend, and some companies are starting to embrace its principles and explore new business opportunities.

4.2. Integration of Circular Economy and Sustainable Development Principles in Business Models

The activity of private companies on the circular economy model

The reasons why this theme was established are to find out the strategic approaches towards the circular economy system and achieving sustainable development at the business level and to determine the opportunities that can be brought for the business environment by combining the circular economy with specific marketing strategies. Moreover, this topic allows the identification of the various ways in which the business environment can include planning, decision making, and driving the necessary actions to transition towards a sustainable and resource-efficient economy.

For the question “What are the biggest obstacles and/or opportunities in implementing the main sustainability goals for the company you represent?” most of the respondents (#I1, #I2, #I3, #I5, I6) considered it appropriate to report on the obstacles, but there are also specialists (#I1, #I2, #I3, #I5) who, in addition to the obstacles, also brought up the opportunities, and one of the subjects (#I4) appreciated that he could not comment on some or others.

The expert who did not detail either the obstacles or the opportunities talked about his recent visit to the European Parliament and that he cannot express whether what is now being done voluntarily at the level of companies is good or if “it is in vain” and he confessed that he is waiting for the end of 2023, when the complete legislation from the EU, the “Prepare for 55” Package, will arrive. Based on the rules in the package, which Romanian businesses will implicitly take over will be decided, as Romania is a member of the Union, so they will also develop a strategy with current sustainability objectives.

For the opportunities side, respondents expressed their opinion on what they plan to do or what they have already achieved in terms of sustainability goals, namely more of them use energy from renewable resources and green energy.

At the same time, one of the experts (#I2) stated that on the innovation side, they focus on optimizing production to save resources and use a software program that calculates the use of raw materials and materials in such a way as to maintain losses on the production line at a minimum. In addition, he also specified that they use the same accessories and tools in several stages of production to benefit to the maximum.

Through these actions brought into discussion, they refer to Goal 7, established within the United Nations Organization, “Affordable and clean energy”, Goal 9: “Industry, innovation and infrastructure”, and Goal 12: “Responsible consumption and production”.

Regarding obstacles, most business professionals (#I1, #I3, #I5, #I6) mentioned the financial side that must be involved in these efforts, and which does not have a very attractive return in the short term, as well as the lack of education and awareness of people in general. Two of the experts (#I1, #I2) mentioned that the introduction and use of photovoltaic panels to cover their electricity needs involves high costs but represents a long-term investment for them. They believed energy from renewable sources, such as solar energy, is affected and decreases during the winter and thus the cold season represents an obstacle to fulfilling one of the sustainability objectives.

Unexpectedly, one of the specialists (#I3) brought into the discussion a more difficult obstacle to manage, namely the fact that at the level of their business, there is a segment of premium customers, who buy branded and even luxury products, who want products with valuable content, who are not concerned about recycled packaging, or who even want their product not to have passed through the hands of others. This specialist also admitted as another very important obstacle all the logistics (organization, transportation, management, etc.) necessary for the implementation of the main sustainability objectives.

All the experts answered the question related to strategic approaches used to support the circular economy model and sustainable development by saying that they integrated the model by selling sustainable products. They said that either they have developed sustainable products and sold them, or that they have collaborations with manufacturers that make products with a longer useful life, with a reduced impact on the environment or products from recycled or recyclable materials.

For the sale of sustainable products, one of the participants claimed that:

“We make products with a long lifespan, which can be reused, repaired or recycled [...] a sustainable product system, made from 100% recycled materials and production residues”. (#12)

Being a business in the production area, orientation towards adopting a product with circular design is automatically easier.

The financial director who participated in the interview stated on behalf of the business to which he belongs that they purchased equipment to reduce their electricity consumption and that they ended up selling the products to their customers, and the “Buy Back Program” is supported throughout the year and has already created trust with consumers for the products and services sold by them.

As strategies used to support the circular economy model, most of the respondents mention the programs that take place at the level of the companies they represent or provide information about the collaborations they have in this area, some of the respondents being representatives of companies that also intermediate imported products on the Romanian market. Also, according to the interviewed executive director, they “encourage a more efficient use of resources” in this approach, by selling certain services instead of goods, such as offering cosmetics or make-up services instead of certain skincare or make-up products. Two of the subjects (#13, #16) added in their answers that they are based on consumer confidence in strategic decisions related to sustainable sales.

According to specialists, the differences between marketing based on the circular economy and traditional marketing approaches consist of the following: trying to educate and convince customers to opt for sustainable products, even if they may be more expensive than consumer alternatives (the benefits are presented in the long term of sustainable products, such as energy efficiency and low environmental impact, but also others), using mainly digital and television communication channels and reducing the use of physical materials, promoting the concept of sustainability, and creating an idea of greater awareness among consumers. Another difference noticed by one of the specialists (#13) consists in the targeted market segment. The expert said that he noticed that the young and educated generation tends to be more involved and to buy sustainable products.

To ensure that they are socially and ecologically responsible, most of the research subjects said that they ensure transparency. They mentioned either that they have transparent communication, or that they have transparent practices, or that they send messages to the market and are transparent. They also claimed that they practice this communication so that their clients make choices “in the knowledge of the cause” and because it has become a trend for several years. Some also discussed the fact that they reduced the number of printed materials to save the forests (#11). Others have mentioned that they even intend to obtain some certifications in this regard or that it is based on supervision by state institutions or that they are involved in the promotion of recycling programs from the ministry in the field in Romania (#12).

The period of the COVID pandemic seems to have been a culminating moment from a social point of view, and one of the interviewees (#14) explained that during the pandemic, they sent health messages to consumers.

Another interesting aspect in the answers analyzed is represented by the fact that one of the specialists (#14) stated that at the level of his company, there are collaborations with suppliers “who present ethical and sustainable practices” and another specialist wanted to specify that they do not necessarily take measures in the relationship with partners in this chapter related to social and environmental responsibility (#12). Another specialist (#16) discussed the training given to the employees on this issue, that they own a platform and equipment, that the employees are trained, including in recycling, and that the employees provide feedback for the courses they attend. In fact, two of the respondents (#14, #16), people with decision-making power at the level of the companies, as mentioned earlier in the study, still admitted in the answers given to this chapter of responsibility that some measures are missing or still need to be improved or standardized.

At the level of challenges, as the specialists said, they are at every step. First, most of them stated that the marketing budgets that must be allocated for the circular economy are a real challenge, and this is because the costs of the initial financial investments are very high, and the results will be recorded over a very long period, the investments having a low return in the short term.

Another answer that was often mentioned as a challenge was represented by consumers' reluctance or resistance to change. It should be noted that only one of the specialists (#12) brought up the research and availability of sustainable materials as a challenge, more precisely the fact that apart from the higher costs of some sustainable components, they must be available and be researched and tested scientifically before being used. Only two of the respondents (#13, #15) specified how they approached these challenges, namely, regarding consumer resistance, they tried to involve them in their efforts to protect nature or appealed to education through "storytelling" to convince them. They are trying to grow closer to consumers to cross these barriers.

All the specialists stated that it measures in a certain way the marketing efforts made in the field of the circular economy. Most of those interviewed said that they receive and monitor feedback from consumers and collect data from consumers through satisfaction surveys. The answers given by most of the specialists also specified the measurement of the customer acceptance rate, the number of products sold that have recycled or sustainable materials in their components, as well as the number of products recycled through the programs and initiatives they own. One of the specialists (#12) mentioned that they even monitor their number of followers and interactions on social networks.

To the question related to how circular economy marketing is integrated in the general marketing efforts, all the experts at the company level declared that the two take place together and that the integration comes automatically, naturally. In their answers, statements were found that "there can be no separation between them, they are dependent" (#11), "they are measured as a whole" (#11), "there is clearly a synergy" (#13), "economic marketing broadens the classic" (#13), "the two go hand in hand in hand" (#14), "marketing based on the circular economy increases the horizon" (#15), "the sale of sustainable products takes place together with classic sales" (#12). All these expressions clearly illustrate how interconnected the general marketing efforts are with those in the circular economy. Two of the specialists (#13, #16) wanted to mention that this expansion of marketing to promote sustainability helps to increase the clientele segment, one detailing (#13) with an example—if it is about a follower of an eco-friendly lifestyle in general and their business is being promoted as having eco-friendly products, through Internet search engines, the respective person will automatically receive recommendations for the company's products "fitting in the selection criteria of the respective consumer", the changes being for them to become a customer of the business.

Consumer behavior in the circular economy process

The topic that monitors consumer behavior aims to identify the inclusion of consumers on the Romanian market in the steps related to the implementation of the circular economy and the achievement of sustainability.

The importance of the consumer's role in the circular economy process was a common aspect for all research participants, describing in similar words the position occupied by the consumer segment. They said that it is the most important, decisive, and primary role in the circular economy process.

They put on the consumer the duty to recycle and reduce waste, practically bringing into discussion two of the most important principles of the circular economy. Voluntary or not, it is surprising that none of the specialist respondents mentioned the principle of reuse from the circular economy in their answer. Moreover, none brought into discussion the overproduction that occurs especially in certain more special periods of the year (Easter Holidays, Christmas, New Year, and others) and the waste at the business level, determined by this overproduction.

Among the respondents, several (#I1, #I2, #I3, #I5) also appreciated that a close relationship must be developed between consumers and the companies they represent, to contribute together to the supply and demand that will be found on the market. Two respondents (#I4, #I6) believe that tougher measures would also be needed for consumers who deviate from ethical purchasing and consumption behavior.

At the level of the tactics used to involve consumers in their efforts, as an entity, in the circular economy process, the respondents were divided into two camps: those (#I1, #I2, #I3) who resorted to programs or vouchers for recycling in order to encourage consumers to make these efforts in the field and those (#I4, #I5, #I6) who said that they were limited to informing consumers on different online channels (website, social networks).

For most of the study participants (#I1, #I2, #I3, #I5, #I6), the online environment and tools such as social networks were the most effective channels in delivering sustainable products to customers. In addition to this channel, the specialists (#I4, #I3) also mentioned the network of physical stores, because here the employees can offer consultancy and emphasize the characteristics related to sustainability.

In the chapter related to the impact of awareness campaigns on Romanians due to the lack of resources and sustainable development, some of the company representatives (#I1, #I3, #I5, #I6) stated that to a small extent, they affect consumers. They stated that either there is still a need to educate Romanian consumers, or that Romanians are in the process of education. Based on the principle of Maslow's pyramid of needs, some of the experts (#I2, #I3, #I5) stated that such a campaign for environmental issues has a very small effect on the citizens because, based on the most recent events (COVID pandemic, armed conflicts), the Romanians' resources are limited, the price of sustainable products remains high, and most of the consumers are interested in ensuring their primary needs, from the base of the pyramid, and not the higher ones, related to sustainability issues.

On the other hand, in the responses of the other specialist (#I6), it was found again that the young population is interested and enthusiastic and embraces these initiatives, specifically females. However, the specialists discussed that based on constant, consistent efforts, and good communication on the part of all parties involved, the level of awareness among Romanians will also improve.

When it comes to the question of what makes Romanians adopt the three principles of the circular economy, "Reduce, Reuse, recycle", in the view of all respondents, several factors were identified, such as costs of resources and consumer goods (the most common), coercive measures, and awareness of the negative impact of waste.

4.3. Influences on Adoption and Implementation of the Circular Economy and Sustainable Development Practices within Businesses

The perception of practicing circular economy to support and achieve sustainable development

The fourth topic aimed to reveal from the perspective of professionals the examples of good practices that can be taken as benchmarks or as inspirational sources for the development of other similar initiatives at the level of businesses or local communities and to find out the experiences gained in this field of sustainable practices specific to the circular economy. Also, this topic aimed to identify the opportunities that the circular economy can bring to businesses from Romania.

At the level of lessons learned, some specialists (#I1, #I2, #I3, #I6) believed that a high concentration of resources in the form of time and money, as well as education of all stakeholders and consistency, were needed to be able to collaborate in this area.

As good practices, one of the respondents (#I4) considered it appropriate that "we have decreased the number of printed materials and started using electricity from renewable energy", another (#I2) mentioned that they integrated the principles of sustainable development into the company's management, constantly evaluating marketing efforts in terms of the circular economy, integrated into the overall process of evaluating the company's marketing performance, and another (#I1) reported that today they register a large number

for the quantity of products collected in the recycling program, but also for products with sustainability characteristics, which they have for sale.

So overall, regarding practices, the opinions of specialists at the company level are totally different. It is possible that the differences also result from the fact that they have different sectors of activity.

Regarding increasing their contributions as a private company in the process of the circular economy, some of the respondents (#I1, #I2, #I3) stated that they could add more products with low energy consumption to their offer or implement something to save on natural resources or that they could develop other recycling programs, but when it came to these programs, they also wanted to specify the implementation costs and the low initial profitability and the uncertainty of recognition from the customers. One of the managers (#I4) who gave interviews mentioned that he would consider a recycling program at the level of the business he runs only if he obtained external financing for it.

When asked about the impact of general marketing strategies and policies on the practice of the circular economy, the subjects mentioned that through marketing campaigns, information can be provided to clients to educate them, to encourage them to adopt the three main principles of the circular economy, and that they can make promotions for sustainable products.

In the subsection on new opportunities brought by the circular model, some of the specialists (#I1, #I5) said that new products can be developed, another one said that they could try to extend the duration of use or the life cycle of the products (#I2), and two other experts (#I3, #I4) said that through this model, they can address new customer segments. Moreover, also at the level of opportunities, some of the experts (#I1, #I2, #I3, #I6) said that the implementation of the circular economy could bring cost savings in certain areas and improve the image of a business.

Forecasts on the implementation, support, and achievement of the circular economy

The last topic aims to identify recommendations and changes for promoting and accelerating the adoption of circular economy practices in the Romanian business context.

Regarding the advice that was requested from the interviewees for a start-up business, the recommendations offered as answers are different. One of the experts (#I1) offered advice on investing amounts “they can afford” in the field of the circular economy, this “to be associated in time with the idea of a green, responsible brand”.

Another respondent (#I3) believes that integrating the principles of sustainable development into the management of the company is a good recommendation when starting a business. Another specialist (#I2) believed those who are now starting a business must first consider an uninterrupted flow of resources and look for a balance based on the return of certain resources to their business.

In the view of another respondent (#I4), there is even a philosophical phrase in the form of advice, “to approach everything as a journey rather than a destination”. The rest of the respondents appreciated as advice “Be patient, educate your employees” (#I5) or “Strictly comply with the norms and laws in force” (#I6) by keeping a clear record of the progress made and the measures implemented in order to be able to periodically compare their results.

5. Discussion

The results demonstrate a great interest in the circular economy and sustainable development practices [54] and the fact that processes are well-known among business professionals, as these are frequently discussed and detailed in many answers. It can be considered that many of them are familiar due to the fact that, at the level of the businesses they represent, programs and waste collection initiatives have been implemented, or due to the research and development of sustainable products that are required on the market in the field in which they are active, as a result of either the legal or fiscal obligations that already apply in the direction of pollution in some industries.

Based on the results obtained from those discussed with the professionals during the interviews and on the information checked in various official sources, the researchers were able to delineate for each business what solutions they used to contribute to the integration of the circular economy and sustainable development at the firm level. Further, the researchers indicated the circular business models in which the interviewed companies were matched, based on the five types of headline circular business models presented in the literature review [52].

According to the theoretical section and the five classes identified, the researchers were able to identify which sustainable actions were adopted by each interviewed business and to which circular model from the main five categories they correspond to, moving back and forth between the specialized literature and the collected qualitative data. All these can be found in Figure 1.

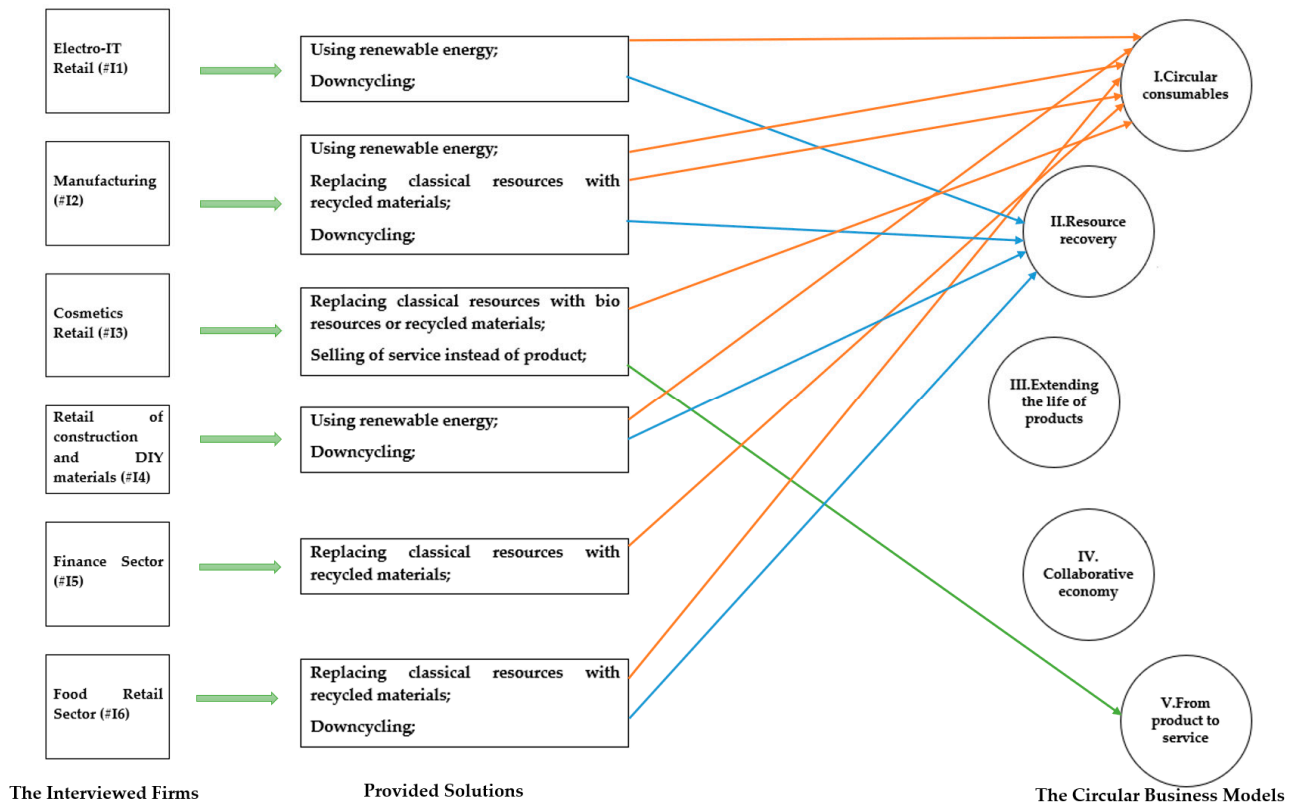


Figure 1. Flow diagram of the circular activities of the interviewed firms. Authors' data.

As can be seen in the previous figure, among the companies interviewed, the flow of circular activities is most concentrated at the level of the "Circular Consumables" and "Resources recovery" models, being a single activity related to the "From product to service" model. The different colors differentiate each of the circular business models.

On the other hand, the "Extending the life of products" model was mentioned in the in-depth interviews in an indirect way. Business representatives scored it either as an attempt in the past, or as a sustainable solution implemented by those with whom they collaborate in various areas of activity. Moreover, for the "Collaborative economy" model, no solutions were identified among those interviewed. This aspect can be explained by the nature of the activities of the interviewed companies, which do not correspond to the concept of the sharing economy.

The authors organized the objectives, hypotheses, and key findings of the qualitative in-depth interview marketing research on the circular economy and sustainable development practices, offering a structured overview of the research outcomes (Figure 2).



Figure 2. The overall image of the study. Authors' data.

The results of the in-depth interviews highlight the need for an approach based primarily on three main elements, education, technology, and finance, for the circular economy to unlock sustainable business growth.

According to insights from specialists, these elements represent key components in the process of adopting the circular economy to achieve sustainable development in the context of Romania. The educational component must be oriented towards educating consumers about what, how, and why to adopt a sustainable lifestyle, the technological component must ensure the know-how and infrastructure necessary to carry out the activity in a sustainable way, and the financing component must ensure fair opportunities for the business environment to adapt to the requirements related to sustainable development.

From the analysis of the specialists' answers, it appears that in the transition towards truly sustainable development, the transition costs are not calculated. Most of the time, they do not have the necessary resources in terms of suitable technologies or sources of financing for them to respond to the demands of the market through the circular economy system. To integrate the practices of the circular economy and the principles of sustainable development at the level of their businesses, they need the support of appropriate government policies and financing for the specifics of their businesses, established in a strict regulatory framework to overcome unfair competition.

The political decision-makers and the targeted state institutions should get involved and contribute to a much greater extent in supporting the practices of the circular economy by adopting effective and just policies and legislation, as these have the greatest force to support the transition to the much-desired green economy [57,58].

The specialists participating in the research revealed that the underlying reasons for adopting circular economy principles and sustainable development practices are represented by the mandatory decisions that come from the state apparatus, by the pressures from those involved in environmental issues, but also the demand from consumers and the scarcity of primary resources.

Following the analysis of the answers from the in-depth interviews given by business professionals, several significant barriers were identified that they face in achieving circu-

larity and sustainability, such as poor education and low interest of consumers in this field, very large initial financial investments that must be allocated for an infrastructure suitable for the circular model and for the development of new products that are sustainable, and the lack of political will to be actively involved in the strict control of the way of implementing the economy in the loop that can lead to the fulfilment of the assumed sustainability objectives nationally [53,67,68]. However, among the experts, there are subjects who stated that marketing budgets have been allocated to their businesses to encourage the circular economy or that they have already developed a series of products and services in this field, practically overcoming these barriers.

In addition, the specialists interviewed in this research appreciate the circular economy as an opportunity in a business model [54], because through its mechanism, different types of waste are collected and materials are returned to the circuit, and this leads to the recovery of resources at the component level and savings. They are considerate that recycling systems can be a challenge because now there is no one standard to ensure that the packs have the best chance of being recycled. At the same time, the circular economy offers the opportunity to create new products or services [69], and with its help, closer connections are created with consumers through their involvement in this system of circularity of the waste.

6. Conclusions

One of the results obtained, like the results of other research, is the need for education and awareness among consumers to implement the practices of the circular economy [70–74]. There are still many opportunities to increase their level of education and involvement in the circular economy field, because this process requires changes in consumer behavior [75].

The rational use of resources has begun to be practiced, using materials recycled, especially in the production process, through using energy from renewable sources and through the selective collection of the company's own waste or consumers' waste. More exactly, the Reduce and Recycle principles are the most common basic principles of the circular economy at the business level that were part of the research, with similar findings to those of other researchers [76,77].

In the evaluation of the "state of fact" of the circular economy and sustainability at the country level, experts, entrepreneurs, specialists, and those who have decision-making power at the level of a business are the ones whose answers can bring clarity, and this article highlights their point of view. Specialists at the company level are increasingly aware of the impact of waste on the environment and want to take measures to reduce this impact. Therefore, circular economy principles can be perceived as solutions to this problem because these can help reduce waste and protect the environment.

Unlike other similar research disseminated scientifically [15,17], through this paper and the research that was its basis, it was possible to establish how the circular economy model has been embraced so far as a solution for sustainable development among the business environment in Romania.

From the results of the research carried out, first, it was found that in the field of the circular economy, there is a need to educate consumers for the mechanism of the circular economy to work. Even if individuals have the intention to reduce their consumption of different resources or to consume selectively, this intention will be in vain if they do not receive a minimum of information in order to understand of all processes' stages. Thus, a first recommendation to the business environment can be formulated, namely the request for educational programs or projects for citizens, from the competent institutions of the state apparatus, to improve the level of education of Romanians vis-à-vis the circular economy model.

Because of this result, a recommendation can also be formulated for the academic environment. The recommendation requires the manifestation of a reaction from the academic level and a much more pronounced involvement to change this result, for example, by carrying out information caravans around the country to provide the citizens with the basic

information of the circular economy process. People are more receptive in our country when they receive the information from some approved persons. Also, at the academic level, they can resort to the organization of short visits to various points of interest, i.e., on the spot, for students, regardless of specialization, to see what major impact their decisions have on sustainability.

The lack of an infrastructure suitable for the circular economy model at the business level represented another significant result of the research, this absence being caused either by the very high initial investment costs, or by the very low profitability in the short term. From here, another recommendation can be formulated for the representatives of the business environment, more precisely, the request for financing or incentive measures from the competent institutions of the country's government to support the circular economy model within businesses.

The subject related to the situation of the development of the circular economy in Romania can be deepened, and the researchers in the field could submit a comprehensive analysis regarding the introduction of new government policies in this research area or regarding the recent introduction of the Guarantee–Return System (SGR) in Romania, both at the level of specialists as well as at the level of final consumers, especially since this deposit–refund system affects consumers' finances.

On the part of the government, a closer collaboration with all interested parties on these topics of circularity and sustainable development is necessary. Furthermore, a practical recommendation can be provided for the government. This would involve the development of a national governmental program, based on three orientation components in approaching the principles of the circular economy for sustainable development. More precisely, the program supported by the government should be based on the three key elements identified through this research: education, technology, and financing. The educational component of the program would aim for citizens to acquire much more knowledge regarding the topics of circularity and sustainability and to apply them in everyday life. Also, this direction could target the accountability of all parties involved, such as political decision-makers, business representatives, NGO representatives, and consumers. The second component related to technology could follow within the program, that is, the facilitation of access to certain software applications and technologies. For example, pooling of these technological tools could be required (for business cases, where feasible). Also, supporting the exchange brings with it financial implications, so that financing directions should be established for businesses that are adapted to the real needs of the Romanian market and that present clear eligibility criteria to avoid unfair competition.

Additionally, the present study has some limitations. One of the first limitations of qualitative individual in-depth interview marketing research is related to the researcher's uncertainty about the participants' sincerity. This limitation is caused by the high sensitivity of the research topic and the in-depth nature of the questions asked of the participants. In addition, another important limitation of qualitative research is the impossibility of extrapolating the results obtained to a larger sample or the general population, since qualitative research focuses on deep understanding of a small number of subjects and not on obtaining generalizable results.

This paper shows an analysis of the qualitative data from the answers of the interviewed specialists, the analysis being carried out on the topics of discussion established before the actual and effective research. A future direction of research can be represented by the exploration of the social aspect, the third dimension of sustainability after environmental and economic aspects. Of course, the analysis can also have future research directions represented by an even broader content analysis of the researched aspects or other aspects related to the circular economy, such as measures to reduce carbon emissions, measures in research and innovation, and others.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.A.M., G.B., E.C., I.B.C. and A.C.S.; methodology, A.A.M.; investigation, A.A.M., G.B. and E.C.; resources, A.A.M. and I.B.C.; writing—original draft preparation, A.A.M. and I.B.C.; writing—review and editing, A.A.M., E.C., I.B.C., G.B. and A.C.S.; visualization, E.C.; supervision, G.B.; project administration, G.B.; funding acquisition, G.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The APC was funded by Transilvania University of Brasov.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical approval was waived by the local Faculty Council from 23 February 2023 in view of the retrospective nature of the study and all the procedures being performed were according to the methodology.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

Interview guide for in-depth individual interviews

The general theme of qualitative marketing research: “The perspectives, beliefs, and understandings of specialists at the organizational level regarding the circular economy and practicing the model for sustainable development”

- I. The current situation of knowledge and development of the circular economy model among private companies in Romania
 1. What do you consider to be the current stage of development of the actions carried out in the field of circular economy at the level of private businesses in Romania?
 2. How is the concept of circular economy perceived within the company you represent?
 3. What stage do you think Romania is at in terms of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, also considering the circular economy process?
 4. What is your opinion on sustainability within your business?
 5. What are, in your view, the main reasons why businesses need to implement circular economy practices?
- II. The activity of private companies on the circular economy model
 6. What are the biggest obstacles and/or opportunities in implementing the main sustainability goals for the company you represent?
 7. What strategies do you use to support the circular economy model and/or the sale of sustainable products/services?
 8. How does circular economy marketing differ from traditional marketing approaches?
 9. What measures are you taking to ensure that circular economy marketing is socially and environmentally responsible?
 10. What challenges have you faced in circular economy marketing and how have you addressed them?
 11. How do you measure the success of your circular economy marketing efforts?
 12. How do you ensure circular economy marketing is integrated with your company’s other marketing efforts?
- III. Consumer behaviour in the circular economy process
 13. What do you see as the role of consumers in the circular economy process?
 14. What tactics have you used to engage consumers in your circular economy marketing efforts?
 15. What channels do you think are most effective for placing sustainable products to customers?

16. To what extent do you think awareness campaigns about resources and sustainability influence Romanian consumers?
17. What do you think determines Romanians to adopt the three main principles of circular economy: “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle”?
- IV. The perception of circular economy practice to support and achieve sustainable development
 18. What have been the key lessons learned in circular economy marketing and what best practices do you recommend?
 19. How do you think you could increase your contribution as a private company to the circular economy process?
 20. How do you think marketing policies and strategies can contribute to circular economy practice?
 21. What new opportunities do you perceive regarding the implementation of circular economy practices within your company?
- V. Forecasts on the implementation, support, and achievement of the circular economy
 22. What advice can you formulate, in the field of circular economy, for a company that is just starting out?
 23. What changes in the company’s business chain do you consider necessary for the circular economy by 2030?
 24. In what direction, sustainable or unsustainable, do you think the private business environment in Romania is heading?
 25. Please complete the sentence: The transition from a joint business to a sustainable business in the same industry is characterized by...

References

1. Careddu, N. Dimension Stones in the Circular Economy World. *Resour. Policy* **2019**, *60*, 243–245. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
2. Honoré, M.N.; Belmonte-Ureña, L.J.; Navarro-Velasco, A.; Camacho-Ferre, F. The Production and Quality of Different Varieties of Papaya Grown under Greenhouse in Short Cycle in Continental Europe. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* **2019**, *16*, 1789. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
3. Kasztelan, A. How Circular Are the European Economies? A Taxonomic Analysis Based on the INEC (Index of National Economies’ Circularity). *Sustainability* **2020**, *12*, 7613. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
4. Bril, H.; Kell, G.; Rasche, A. *Sustainability, Technology, and Finance*; Routledge: London, UK, 2022; ISBN 9781003262039.
5. Tenuta, P.; Cambrea, D.R. *Corporate Sustainability*; Springer International Publishing: Cham, Switzerland, 2022; ISBN 978-3-031-11490-8.
6. Garbuz, V.; Petelca, O.; Beşliu, I. Abordarea Sustenabilității Prin Prisma Obiectivelor de Dezvoltare Durabilă. In Proceedings of the Tradiție și Inovare în Cercetarea Științifică, Bălți, Moldova, 8 October 2021; pp. 221–227.
7. Boar, A.; Bastida, R.; Marimon, F. A Systematic Literature Review. Relationships between the Sharing Economy, Sustainability and Sustainable Development Goals. *Sustainability* **2020**, *12*, 6744. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
8. Bäckstrand, K. Towards a Climate-Neutral Union by 2050? The European Green Deal, Climate Law, and Green Recovery. In *Routes to a Resilient European Union*; Springer International Publishing: Cham, Switzerland, 2022; pp. 39–61.
9. Arens, M.; Åhman, M.; Vogl, V. Which Countries Are Prepared to Green Their Coal-Based Steel Industry with Electricity?—Reviewing Climate and Energy Policy as Well as the Implementation of Renewable Electricity. *Renew. Sustain. Energy Rev.* **2021**, *143*, 110938. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
10. Hysa, E.; Kruja, A.; Rehman, N.U.; Laurenti, R. Circular Economy Innovation and Environmental Sustainability Impact on Economic Growth: An Integrated Model for Sustainable Development. *Sustainability* **2020**, *12*, 4831. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
11. Modoi, O.-C.; Mihai, F.-C. E-Waste and End-of-Life Vehicles Management and Circular Economy Initiatives in Romania. *Energies* **2022**, *15*, 1120. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
12. Albastroiu Nastase, I.; Negrutiu, C.; Felea, M.; Acatrinei, C.; Cepoi, A.; Istrate, A. Toward a Circular Economy in the Toy Industry: The Business Model of a Romanian Company. *Sustainability* **2021**, *14*, 22. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
13. Škrinjaric, T. Empirical Assessment of the Circular Economy of Selected European Countries. *J. Clean. Prod.* **2020**, *255*, 120246. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
14. Comisia Europeana. *Raportul de Țară Din 2023 Privind România*; Comisia Europeana: Bruxelles, Brussels, 2023.
15. Dobre-Baron, O.; Nițescu, A.; Niță, D.; Mitran, C. Romania’s Perspectives on the Transition to the Circular Economy in an EU Context. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 5324. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
16. Topliceanu, L.; Puiu, P.G.; Drob, C.; Topliceanu, V.V. Analysis Regarding the Implementation of the Circular Economy in Romania. *Sustainability* **2022**, *15*, 333. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

17. Barna, C.; Zbucea, A.; Stănescu, S.M. Social Economy Enterprises Contributing to the Circular Economy and the Green Transition in Romania. *CIRIEC-España Rev. Econ. Pública Soc. Coop.* **2023**, *107*, 47–69. [[CrossRef](#)]
18. Nica, I.; Chiriță, N.; Delcea, C. Towards a Sustainable Future: Economic Cybernetics in Analyzing Romania's Circular Economy. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 14433. [[CrossRef](#)]
19. Guvernul Romaniei. *România Are Cea Mai Mică Rată de Circularitate Din UE, Dar Printr-Un Plan de Acțiune Și o Strategie Națională Încearcă Să Dezvolte Economia Circulară Până La Un Impact Pozitiv de 1.43 Miliarde de Euro*; Guvernul Romaniei: Bucuresti, Romania, 2023.
20. World Bank. *Atlas of Sustainable Development Goals 2017: From World Development Indicators*; World Bank: Washington, DC, USA, 2017.
21. Bradu, P.; Biswas, A.; Nair, C.; Sreevalsakumar, S.; Patil, M.; Kannampuzha, S.; Mukherjee, A.G.; Wanjari, U.R.; Renu, K.; Vellingiri, B.; et al. Recent Advances in Green Technology and Industrial Revolution 4.0 for a Sustainable Future. *Environ. Sci. Pollut. Res.* **2022**, *30*, 124488–124519. [[CrossRef](#)]
22. Özkan, P.; Karataş Yücel, E. *Linear Economy to Circular Economy*; IGI Global: Hershey, PA, USA, 2020; pp. 61–86.
23. Esposito, M.; Tse, T.; Soufani, K. Is the Circular Economy a New Fast-Expanding Market? *Thunderbird Int. Bus. Rev.* **2017**, *59*, 9–14. [[CrossRef](#)]
24. Voulvoulis, N. Transitioning to a Sustainable Circular Economy: The Transformation Required to Decouple Growth from Environmental Degradation. *Front. Sustain.* **2022**, *3*, 859896. [[CrossRef](#)]
25. Lauttamäki, V.; Hyysalo, S. Empirical Application of the Multi-Level Perspective: Tracing the History of Ground-Source Heat Pumps Systems in Finland. *Sustain. Sci. Pract. Policy* **2019**, *15*, 82–103. [[CrossRef](#)]
26. Velenturf, A.P.M.; Purnell, P.; Macaskie, L.E.; Mayes, W.M.; Sapsford, D.J. *A New Perspective on a Global Circular Economy. Resource Recovery from Wastes: Towards a Circular Economy*; Royal Society of Chemistry: London, UK, 2019; pp. 1–22.
27. Shlomo, D. *CCS for Incinerators? An Expensive Distraction to a Circular Economy*; Zero Waste Europe: Brussels, Belgium, 2021.
28. Govindan, K.; Hasanagic, M. A Systematic Review on Drivers, Barriers, and Practices towards Circular Economy: A Supply Chain Perspective. *Int. J. Prod. Res.* **2018**, *56*, 278–311. [[CrossRef](#)]
29. Tura, N.; Hanski, J.; Ahola, T.; Stähle, M.; Piiparinen, S.; Valkokari, P. Unlocking Circular Business: A Framework of Barriers and Drivers. *J. Clean. Prod.* **2019**, *212*, 90–98. [[CrossRef](#)]
30. van Tilburg, M.; Krikke, H.; Lambrechts, W. Supply Chain Relationships in Circular Business Models: Supplier Tactics at Royal Smit Transformers. *Logistics* **2022**, *6*, 77. [[CrossRef](#)]
31. Kirzherr, J.; Reike, D.; Hekkert, M. Conceptualizing the Circular Economy: An Analysis of 114 Definitions. *Resour. Conserv. Recycl.* **2017**, *127*, 221–232. [[CrossRef](#)]
32. Isenhour, C.; Berry, B.; Victor, E. Circular Economy Disclaimers: Rethinking Property Relations at the End of Cheap Nature. *Front. Sustain.* **2023**, *3*, 1007802. [[CrossRef](#)]
33. Bleischwitz, R.; Yang, M.; Huang, B.; XU, X.; Zhou, J.; McDowall, W.; Andrews-Speed, P.; Liu, Z.; Yong, G. The Circular Economy in China: Achievements, Challenges and Potential Implications for Decarbonisation. *Resour. Conserv. Recycl.* **2022**, *183*, 106350. [[CrossRef](#)]
34. Al-Housani, M.I.; Koç, M.; Al-Sada, M.S. Investigations on Entrepreneurship Needs, Challenges, and Models for Countries in Transition to Sustainable Development from Resource-Based Economy—Qatar as a Case. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 7537. [[CrossRef](#)]
35. Halog, A.; Anieke, S. A Review of Circular Economy Studies in Developed Countries and Its Potential Adoption in Developing Countries. *Circ. Econ. Sustain.* **2021**, *1*, 209–230. [[CrossRef](#)]
36. Ghazanfari, A. An Analysis of Circular Economy Literature at the Macro Level, with a Particular Focus on Energy Markets. *Energies* **2023**, *16*, 1779. [[CrossRef](#)]
37. Arekrans, J.; Ritzén, S.; Laurenti, R. The Role of Radical Innovation in Circular Strategy Deployment. *Bus. Strategy Environ.* **2023**, *32*, 1085–1105. [[CrossRef](#)]
38. Abu-Bakar, H.; Charnley, F.; Hopkinson, P.; Morasae, E.K. Towards a Typological Framework for Circular Economy Roadmaps: A Comprehensive Analysis of Global Adoption Strategies. *J. Clean. Prod.* **2024**, *434*, 140066. [[CrossRef](#)]
39. Vidal-Ayuso, F.; Akhmedova, A.; Jaca, C. The Circular Economy and Consumer Behaviour: Literature Review and Research Directions. *J. Clean. Prod.* **2023**, *418*, 137824. [[CrossRef](#)]
40. Islam, M.T.; Huda, N.; Baumber, A.; Shumon, R.; Zaman, A.; Ali, F.; Hossain, R.; Sahajwalla, V. A Global Review of Consumer Behavior towards E-Waste and Implications for the Circular Economy. *J. Clean. Prod.* **2021**, *316*, 128297. [[CrossRef](#)]
41. Barbaritano, M.; Bravi, L.; Savelli, E. Sustainability and Quality Management in the Italian Luxury Furniture Sector: A Circular Economy Perspective. *Sustainability* **2019**, *11*, 3089. [[CrossRef](#)]
42. Gallego-Schmid, A.; Chen, H.-M.; Sharmina, M.; Mendoza, J.M.F. Links between Circular Economy and Climate Change Mitigation in the Built Environment. *J. Clean. Prod.* **2020**, *260*, 121115. [[CrossRef](#)]
43. Lopes de Sousa Jabbour, A.B.; Jabbour, C.J.C.; Godinho Filho, M.; Roubaud, D. Industry 4.0 and the Circular Economy: A Proposed Research Agenda and Original Roadmap for Sustainable Operations. *Ann. Oper. Res.* **2018**, *270*, 273–286. [[CrossRef](#)]
44. Lamba, H.K.; Kumar, N.S.; Dhir, S. Circular Economy and Sustainable Development: A Review and Research Agenda. *Int. J. Product. Perform. Manag.* **2023**, *73*, 497–522. [[CrossRef](#)]
45. Islam, M.T.; Dias, P.; Huda, N. Waste Mobile Phones: A Survey and Analysis of the Awareness, Consumption and Disposal Behavior of Consumers in Australia. *J. Environ. Manag.* **2020**, *275*, 111111. [[CrossRef](#)]

46. Baicu, C.G.; Oehles-Sincai, I.M.; State, O.; Popescu, D. Bioeconomy and Social Responsibility in The Sustainable Hotel Industry. *Amfiteatru Economic. Amfiteatru Econ.* **2019**, *21*, 639–653. [CrossRef]
47. Parrique, T.; Barth, J.; Briens, F.C.; Kerschner, K.-P.A.; Kuokkanen, A.; Spangenberg, J.H. *Decoupling Debunked: Evidence and Arguments against Green Growth as a Sole Strategy for Sustainability*; European Environmental Bureau: Brussels, Belgium, 2019.
48. European Environmental Agency. Emerging Waste Streams: Opportunities and Challenges of the Clean-Energy Transition from a Circular Economy Perspective. Available online: <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/emerging-waste-streamsopportunities-and> (accessed on 15 November 2023).
49. Krikke, H. *Value Creation in a Circular Economy: An Interdisciplinary Approach*; Springer: Cham, Switzerland, 2021; pp. 1107–1122.
50. Loiseau, E.; Saikku, L.; Antikainen, R.; Droste, N.; Hansjürgens, B.; Pitkänen, K.; Leskinen, P.; Kuikman, P.; Thomsen, M. Green Economy and Related Concepts: An Overview. *J. Clean. Prod.* **2016**, *139*, 361–371. [CrossRef]
51. Lieder, M.; Rashid, A. Towards Circular Economy Implementation: A Comprehensive Review in Context of Manufacturing Industry. *J. Clean. Prod.* **2016**, *115*, 36–51. [CrossRef]
52. OECD. *Business Models for the Circular Economy Opportunities and Challenges for Policy*; OECD: Paris, France, 2019.
53. Hina, M.; Chauhan, C.; Kaur, P.; Kraus, S.; Dhir, A. Drivers and Barriers of Circular Economy Business Models: Where We Are Now, and Where We Are Heading. *J. Clean. Prod.* **2022**, *333*, 130049. [CrossRef]
54. Awan, U.; Sroufe, R. Sustainability in the Circular Economy: Insights and Dynamics of Designing Circular Business Models. *Appl. Sci.* **2022**, *12*, 1521. [CrossRef]
55. Xu, J.; Yang, Y.; Jia, Z.; Chang, G.; Zhang, Y.; Zhao, M.; Wang, W. A Systematic Government-Driven Green Development Transformation Strategy with Chinese Characteristics: The Case Study of the Xining Metropolitan Area. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* **2023**, *20*, 1321. [CrossRef]
56. Cudečka-Puriņa, N.; Atstāja, D.; Koval, V.; Purviņš, M.; Nesenenko, P.; Tkach, O. Achievement of Sustainable Development Goals through the Implementation of Circular Economy and Developing Regional Cooperation. *Energies* **2022**, *15*, 4072. [CrossRef]
57. Persson, O.; Hinton, J.B. Second-Hand Clothing Markets and a Just Circular Economy? Exploring the Role of Business Forms and Profit. *J. Clean. Prod.* **2023**, *390*, 136139. [CrossRef]
58. Droege, H.; Kirchherr, J.; Raggi, A.; Ramos, T.B. Towards a Circular Disruption: On the Pivotal Role of Circular Economy Policy Entrepreneurs. *Bus. Strategy Environ.* **2023**, *32*, 1142–1158. [CrossRef]
59. Mays, N.; Pope, C. Quality in Qualitative Research. In *Qualitative Research in Health Care*; Wiley: Hoboken, NJ, USA, 2020; pp. 211–233.
60. Silverman, D. *Qualitative Research*; Sage Publications Ltd.: London, UK, 2020.
61. Matthews, B.; Ross, L. *Research Methods*; Pearson Higher: London, UK, 2014.
62. Anand, A.; Argade, P.; Barkemeyer, R.; Salignac, F. Trends and Patterns in Sustainable Entrepreneurship Research: A Bibliometric Review and Research Agenda. *J. Bus. Ventur.* **2021**, *36*, 106092. [CrossRef]
63. Gioia, D.A.; Corley, K.G.; Hamilton, A.L. Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research. *Organ. Res. Methods* **2013**, *16*, 15–31. [CrossRef]
64. Sargeant, J. Qualitative Research Part II: Participants, Analysis, and Quality Assurance. *J. Grad. Med. Educ.* **2012**, *4*, 1–3. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
65. Lacoste, S.; Zidani, K.; Cuevas, J.M. Lateral Collaboration and Boundary-Spanning from a Global Leadership Perspective: The Case of Global Account Managers. *J. World Bus.* **2022**, *57*, 101288. [CrossRef]
66. Braun, V.; Clarke, V. To Saturate or Not to Saturate? Questioning Data Saturation as a Useful Concept for Thematic Analysis and Sample-Size Rationales. *Qual. Res. Sport Exerc. Health* **2021**, *13*, 201–216. [CrossRef]
67. Khan, S.A.; Mubarik, M.S.; Paul, S.K. Analyzing Cause and Effect Relationships among Drivers and Barriers to Circular Economy Implementation in the Context of an Emerging Economy. *J. Clean. Prod.* **2022**, *364*, 132618. [CrossRef]
68. Badhotiya, G.K.; Avikal, S.; Soni, G.; Sengar, N. Analyzing Barriers for the Adoption of Circular Economy in the Manufacturing Sector. *Int. J. Product. Perform. Manag.* **2022**, *71*, 912–931. [CrossRef]
69. Pinheiro, M.A.P.; Jugend, D.; Lopes de Sousa Jabbour, A.B.; Chiappetta Jabbour, C.J.; Latan, H. Circular Economy-based New Products and Company Performance: The Role of Stakeholders and Industry 4.0 Technologies. *Bus. Strategy Environ.* **2022**, *31*, 483–499. [CrossRef]
70. Khatami, F.; Vilamová, Š.; Cagno, E.; De Bernardi, P.; Neri, A.; Cantino, V. Efficiency of Consumer Behaviour and Digital Ecosystem in the Generation of the Plastic Waste toward the Circular Economy. *J. Environ. Manag.* **2023**, *325*, 116555. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
71. Kostakis, I.; Tsagarakis, K.P. Social and Economic Determinants of Materials Recycling and Circularity in Europe: An Empirical Investigation. *Ann. Reg. Sci.* **2022**, *68*, 263–281. [CrossRef]
72. Knäble, D.; de Quevedo Puente, E.; Pérez-Cornejo, C.; Baumgärtler, T. The Impact of the Circular Economy on Sustainable Development: A European Panel Data Approach. *Sustain. Prod. Consum.* **2022**, *34*, 233–243. [CrossRef]
73. Owojori, O.M.; Mulaudzi, R.; Edokpayi, J.N. Student’s Knowledge, Attitude, and Perception (KAP) to Solid Waste Management: A Survey towards a More Circular Economy from a Rural-Based Tertiary Institution in South Africa. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 1310. [CrossRef]
74. Qu, D.; Shevchenko, T.; Xia, Y.; Yan, X. Education and Instruction for Circular Economy: A Review on Drivers and Barriers in Circular Economy Implementation in China. *Int. J. Instr.* **2022**, *15*, 1–22. [CrossRef]

75. Khan, S.; Haleem, A. Investigation of Circular Economy Practices in the Context of Emerging Economies: A CoCoSo Approach. *Int. J. Sustain. Eng.* **2021**, *14*, 357–367. [[CrossRef](#)]
76. Amudjie, J.; Agyekum, K.; Adinyira, E.; Amos-Abanyie, S.; Kumah, V.M.A. Awareness and Practice of the Principles of Circular Economy among Built Environment Professionals. *Built. Environ. Proj. Asset. Manag.* **2023**, *13*, 140–156. [[CrossRef](#)]
77. Nowicki, P.; Kafel, P. Circular Economy Aspects in Official Statements of Selected Polish Organizations Operating on the Polish Stock Market. In Proceedings of the 2021 IEEE International Conference on Technology and Entrepreneurship (ICTE), Kaunas, Lithuania, 24–27 August 2021; IEEE: New York City, NY, USA, 2021; pp. 1–6.

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.