

CIRCULAR ECONOMY IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY: A MICRO-MESO-MACRO FRAMEWORK FOR INTER-DISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

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Abstract

This contribution elaborates on the theoretical and practical implications of the circular economy in tourism and hospitality through an inter-disciplinary approach advancing novel possibilities for future research. Acknowledging the literature gap on circular economy in tourism and hospitality as an under-researched and under-theorised area of research, this contribution identifies a set of theoretical lenses that can help to elaborate the notion of circular economy and unpack it through an inter-disciplinary approach for future research. It does so by discussing the notion of circular economy through a micro-meso-macro framework combining practice theory, network theory, complexity theory, and the spatial and mobilities turn in social sciences. The originality of this work lies in its inter-disciplinary approach based on a micro-meso-macro theoretical framework offering novel opportunities to discuss, envision, and operationalize circular regenerative processes in tourism futures in terms of multidimensional, networked, complex, practice-based, and localised processes and operations.

Keywords

Circular Economy in Tourism & Hospitality, Network Theory, Practice Theory, Complexity Theory, Mobilities Turn, Spatial Theory.

Introduction

The idea of an economy operating through cyclic regenerative processes that produce no waste, thus neither harms the ecological nor the socio-economic spheres, dates to the 1970s and is rooted in studies of non-linear systems mimicking living systems (Stahel, 2019). The notion of circular economy is grounded in the ancient archetype of *circularity* that understands our ecosystem and its biological processes in terms of constantly renewing cyclic patterns—e. g. the cycle of the seasons and the carbon cycle of organic materials. Similarly, the archetype of circularity has shaped many rituals and traditions as an ordering principle for a dynamic perduring equilibrium (Bradley, 2012). Yet, the best-known contemporary theorisations and applications of circular economy have focused on the reuse of materials in product-oriented industries. Murray et al. (2017: 369) define circular economy as: “the redesign of processes and cycling of materials”. Similarly,

McDonough and Braungart (2003) propose the circular economy as an eco-effective *cradle-to-cradle* process. Such a process type has two main aims: firstly, to continuously regenerate products and raw materials via *make—use—upcycle* loops; secondly, to redesign products so that the used materials can either be reused with minimum loss of quality or disposed in nature without any negative impact.

During the last decade, the circular economy has been at the centre of a renewed interest both within Europe and globally. Notably, in 2015, the European Commission adopted the *Circular Economy Action Plan* as a policy to accelerate Europe's transition towards a circular economy. This action plan has been renewed in 2020. Likewise, the United Nations identified such action plan as a best practice to prompt the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Nevertheless - despite such growing institutional interest - academics and professionals of the tourism and hospitality sector have remained only partially involved in the discussion. Hence, the implications of a circular economy for the tourism and hospitality sectors are still largely unexplored and under-theorised (Boluk et al., 2019). To stimulate further debate and bridge these knowledge gaps, Tomassini and Cavagnaro (2022a, 2022b, 2023) discussed the potentialities and constraints of the circular economy in the sociological and physical space of tourism and hospitality. More specifically, their work examined the circular economy as a paradigm critically rethinking sustainability in tourism and hospitality (2022a), a model of regenerative *agrowth* and placemaking (2022c), and an *oikonomia* localising and socialising tourism (2023).

By examining a set of different theoretical lenses offering a micro-meso-macro framework, this research note aims to advance the potential of an inter-disciplinary approach to circular economy based on 'micro' practices, 'meso' networks, 'macro' complexities, and the spatial and mobile nature of tourism and hospitality. The micro-meso-macro framework helps to frame sustainability-related issues, such as circular economy (Cavagnaro and Curiel, 2023). The theoretical lenses examined are practice theory (Reckwitz, 2002; Sørensen and Bærenholdt, 2020; Warde, 2005), network theory (Baggio and Fuchs, 2018; Fuchs and Baggio, 2017), complexity theory (Farsari, 2023; Farsari et al., 2011) and the spatial and mobilities turn in social sciences (Massey, 2005; Sheller, 2018; Tomassini and Lamond, 2022).

Circular regenerative processes in tourism futures: an inter-disciplinary approach

This section discusses a set of different theoretical lenses, which is not meant to be exhaustive, but it aims to illustrate the need for - and potential of - an inter-disciplinary approach to unpack circular economy in tourism and hospitality. According to Aboelela et al., (2007, p. 341), inter-disciplinary research: "is based upon a conceptual model that links or integrates theoretical frameworks from those disciplines, uses study design and methodology that is not limited to any one field, and requires the use of perspectives and skills of the involved disciplines throughout multiple phases of the research process". Drawing on the concept of a micro-meso-macro framework (Bergström and Dekker, 2014; Li, 2012), this research note presents a framework made of 'micro' practices, 'meso' networks, 'macro' complexities covering both the provider and consumer spheres and the

spatial and mobile nature of tourism. As such, it discusses complexity theory, network theory, practice theory, and the spatial and mobilities turn in social sciences, and their potential for an inter-disciplinary approach for future research.

Micro-level: Practice Theory

Tourists are fundamental in co-creating phenomenological tourist experiences through their explicit and implicit choices and behaviors (Campos et al., 2018). Tourists' choices include but are not limited to means of transport, destinations and attractions visited, distances travelled, hospitality types and providers, activities performed, shopping, and acquisition of travel items. Tourists' behaviors also affect their ways of interacting in services and with natural resources and, for example, their use of water and electricity in hotels and their eating and food-waste habits. Tourism circular economy research has focused on provider-side aspects and neglected the role of tourists' behaviors (Sørensen and Bærenholdt, 2021). Yet, focus is needed not only on individual tourism providers' value chains, but also on tourists' value chains, on tourists' practices and on how such practices develop and change (Tomassini and Cavagnaro, 2022c). Technological solutions alone cannot reduce green-house gas emissions from tourism sufficiently as the various studies on 'rebound effects' clearly show; rather, there is a need also for changed tourist practices (Gössling et al., 2023; UNWTO and ITF, 2019).

Practice theory is a sociological framework that can help explain the 'micro' practices of tourists' behaviors, their origins and change (Bispo 2016; Lamers et al. 2017; Sundquist, 2023). It understands peoples' practices as habitual 'doings and sayings' (Reckwitz, 2002) linked with acceptable means, purposes, and beliefs - or 'teleoaffective structures' (Schatzki, 2016). Such practices are 'compound', that is, individual(s) practices are interdependent with other(s) practices in given contexts (Warde, 2005), and sets of social practices and material arrangements are interconnected in 'practice-arrangement bundles' (Schatzki, 2016). Tourists' practices are in this perspective inscribed in typical ways of being tourist. They occur in bundles that connect various practices with material arrangements along tourists' value chains, for example beach or nature tourism holidays, and they form patterns that fulfill certain purposes (e. g. pleasure) through what are perceived as acceptable means. In this perspective, innovation concerns change in practices rather than in products. Pantzar and Shove (2010) suggest that practices develop and become habitual when image (or purpose), skill (know-how), and material (things) combine in new constellations. Current tourists' practices are predominantly based on images of pleasure (associated largely with distant destinations) and on tourists' knowledge about how to gain access to such pleasure within given tourist environments. However, from a Pro-Environmental Behavior (PEB) lens, current tourists' practices focus on hedonic goals and values neglecting values that are more conducive of sustainable choices and practices such as altruistic and biospheric values (Steg et al., 2014).

The development of tourist practices sustaining the transition towards circular economy requires making sustainability-related values more salient to tourists and that sustainability becomes a goal for tourists directing their practices. This entails offering new knowledge and options when choosing, combining, and interacting with holiday-related and mobility-related elements. Currently, dominant tourist practices are rooted in strongly interrelated -

hedonically framed - images, skills, services, and products. Hence, the change of tourists' practices through behavioral interventions (e.g. nudging) should be paired with deeper mental and systemic transformations of the tourism and hospitality sector.

Meso-level: Network Theory

A 'meso' network representation in which actors are portrayed as nodes and their relationships as links has shown to be an effective modelling technique to analyze complex socio-economic arrangements (Baggio, 2017; 2020). It allows a deep understanding of underlying characteristics and of its adaptation when considering dynamic processes occurring due to internal or external influences and the role the nowadays essential digital world can have (Baggio and Fuchs, 2018).

When considering 'circularities' in the tourism domain, a holistic view seems the only feasible way for considering different transformative practices and for attempting to fulfill the objectives discussed above about the achievement of a sustainable and resilient tourism development (Fuchs, 2022, 2023). Given the peculiarities of the tourism phenomenon, the study of supply-chains seems to be a practicable avenue for ensuring circularity. Single actors, in fact, do not necessarily show production cycles in which they can receive and reuse resources and materials for the products and services they offer. In fact, supply-chains are complex 'meso' networks that dynamically react to internal and external influences and develop based on socio-economic and technical interactions between all types of tourism stakeholders. Increasing the regional circularity of supply-chains provides each actor and the society as whole with benefits deriving from the capacity to operate in a well-maintained socio-economic and ecological environment with the result of exceeding the sustainable outcomes that it would have in an unbalanced triple-bottom arrangement.

Network analytical methods provide the analytical outcomes needed to describe the shape of the supply-chains and the flows of materials and information therein. In this way it is possible to reveal potentials to strengthen regional circular economies. For instance, those network topologies characterized as 'strongly connected' and showing 'structural holes' and 'bridging connections' favor the birth and diffusion of creative mind-sets, thus, idea generation (Baggio, 2014; Fuchs & Baggio 2017). Moreover, by applying Input-Output methodologies it is possible to identify tourism sub-sectors that most strongly contribute to the formation of regional circular economies as reflected by low leakage, high degrees of inter-sectoral linkages, and high regional taxation and job multipliers, respectively (Fuchs and Kronenberg, 2023). Inter-sectoral linkages mirrored by regional Input-Output-coefficients can also be studied by network analytical methods to discover clusters of structurally equivalent and strongly inter-linked regional sub-sectors. It is then possible to determine those (non)-tourism players strongly involved in the regional economic production process, thereby strengthening regional circular economies.

Macro-level: Complexity Theory

Complexity theory is increasingly employed within tourism research to address non-linearities, sustainability questions and uncertainty in the tourism system (Farrell et al., 2004; Farsari, 2023; Hartman, 2021). 'Macro' complex adaptive systems invite an

understanding of interconnectedness in socio-ecological systems. The potential for self-organization, adaptation, and the emergence of new dynamic equilibria and more sustainable paths relies on the multiplicity and diversity of these interactions, as well as on agency (Holling, 2021; Westley et al., 2013). Those properties of complex socio-ecological systems make them dynamic and ever changing to external and internal pressures and, thus, difficult to predict and manage (Folke, 2016). Diversity and agency are important in complex adaptive systems, as it also emerges in the multiplicity of views and understandings of sustainability or circularity and the transitions to it. Complexity-based approaches can effectively embrace tensions as well as conflicting views - or practices - by valuing them as a repository of knowledge on adaptations and transformations to explore (Farsari, 2023).

Complexity-based approaches help identify possible divergent paths to development and sustainability (Farsari, et al., 2011). Feedback loops, learning and memory, self-organisation, adaptation, and emergence are used to understand what hinders (path dependence) or advances (path creation) transformations (Crabolu et al., 2023; Meekes et al., 2017; O'Sullivan, 2004). In doing so, complexity approaches at a macro scale enable cross-sectoral and cross-scale analysis (Meekes et al., 2017) by revealing the global scale of sustainability issues concerning to their local dimension. Consequently, they are well-suited to comprehend, for instance, the negative effects of growth as the dominant development paradigm, which may exacerbate the issues it tries to mitigate on a larger scale (Loher and Becken, 2021).

The examination of circular economy in tourism has predominantly focused on technical solutions aimed at reducing resource consumption and waste production, exploring novel business models, service systems, and alternative ownership models such as leasing or sharing economy platforms (Sørensen and Bærenholdt, 2020). Complexity approaches offer valuable insights into understanding the evolving pathways, non-linearities of circularity (Korhonen, 2020), and the interconnections among diverse actors and knowledge sources (Zwiers et al., 2020), as well as exploring leverage points for significant systemic changes. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge their extension beyond the concepts of green growth and ecological modernization (Loehr and Becken, 2021). Although circular economy has been largely discussed as the way to the optimisation of relationships between markets, customers, and natural resources for green growth, this has been criticised as being short-sighted, favouring a pro-growth, weak understanding of sustainability (Corvellec et al., 2020; Vargas-Sánchez, 2018).

Hence, circular economy should embrace a regenerative approach, viewing socio-economic systems within the biosphere and ecological framework (Corvellec et al., 2020; Schröder et al., 2019; Tomassini and Cavagnaro, 2022c). Prideaux and Pabel (2020) propose that coupling circularity with degrowth and regenerative concepts can incite necessary disruptions for nonlinear and transformative changes. We assert that employing complexity approaches aids in comprehending the nonlinear transformative pathways of circularity within the biosphere. Additionally, these approaches facilitate the exploration of diverse forms of agency present in both natural and human realms, delineating complex interactions in cycles of adaptation and emergence. Embracing complexity in studying circular economy captures its emergent and disruptive nature (Tomassini and Cavagnaro,

2022c), inherently present in its evolving contested meaning and tensions (Corvellec et al., 2020).

The spatial and mobile nature of tourism and hospitality

The sociological space of tourism and tourism practices are essentially the product of modern Western culture and the production systems of neoliberal capitalism (Bianchi, 2018; Fuchs, 2023). Drawing on the spatial turn and mobilities turn in social sciences (Sheller, 2018), circular economy can be examined and questioned as a disruptive paradigm able to enact local regenerative processes for places, natural assets, and living creatures through a multiplicity of novel relations, connections, and networks among stakeholders (Tomassini and Cavagnaro, 2022b). Exploring the paradigm of circular economy through the lens of the spatial and mobilities turn in social sciences entails reflecting on Massey's (2005) spatial theory and its three major propositions on space. These three propositions focus on conceiving space as the product of interrelations, as the sphere of a contemporaneous plurality and multiplicity, and as always under construction (Massey, 2005). Massey's work inspired a mobilities turn in sociology by conveying ideas of mobile sociology, theorisations of spaces as flow and network (Sheller, 2018), and an increasing interest in studies of place as the product of socio-spatial relations (Tomassini and Lamond, 2022). Hence, the approach proposed in this viewpoint is grounded in a conceptualisation of space as a lively, heterogeneous, political response to global capitalism, social inequalities, and the power geometries it generates (i. e. space is imbued with - and a product of - relations of power that have their own geography) (Massey, 2005).

Exploring circular economy in the physical and sociological space of tourism and hospitality could mean envisioning porous networks of relations that are local and context related. As such, circular regenerative processes can emerge by networks of local stakeholders activating multiple and different relationships. This could mean conceiving circular processes (e. g. plastic upcycling, farmland regeneration, food waste upcycling, initiatives of social inclusiveness) where all the different stakeholders (e. g. host community, visitors, supply chain representatives, local authorities) go beyond their own expected - or pre-assigned - roles and functions. Hence, stakeholders could operate and position themselves as active members of a highly responsive community that is entangled in a local space. As such, this local space can be positively changed by the community that inhabit it and by the one that travel through it. Understanding circular economy as a paradigm that aims at a perduring dynamic equilibrium grounded in *agrowth*, means envisioning novel multiple heterogeneous relationships among different stakeholders sharing the same physical and sociological space. It also means localising circular regenerative processes in a context-related space by acknowledging and valuing its own characteristics, specificities, ethics, opportunities, and constraints that can - or cannot - allow and welcome the qualitative growth of the tourism and hospitality industry.

Moving forward

This research note offers an inter-disciplinary approach to circular economy in hospitality and tourism based on a micro-meso-macro framework of theoretical lenses. In doing so, it unpacks and discusses circular regenerative processes in terms of multidimensional, networked, complex, practice-based, and localised processes. As such, this research note prompts further research by positing:

- The interconnected nature of human and non-human entities and resources in the circular economy, which needs to be made tangible and operational within 'macro' complex socioecological systems and 'meso' networks.
- The necessity for an inter-disciplinary approach to the spatial and mobile nature of tourism and hospitality envisioning an a-growthism made of a dynamic regenerative equilibrium.
- The imperative to view tourists as interconnected actors with agency in promoting circularity via 'micro' practices and behaviours.

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