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The Role of Consumers in Fostering Circular Economy in Indonesia

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Abstract

Consumers play an important role in transforming the economic system into a circular economy. Some literature highlighted that consumer demand has become an enabler for businesses to adopt circular practices. However, other literature argues that although consumers are aware of environmental sustainability issues, their adoption of circular products and services is still low, which is termed as an "intention–action gap." This "intention–action gap" becomes a socio-cultural barrier for businesses to adopt circular practices. This paper aims to increase knowledge and understanding about the role of consumers perceived by circular start-ups. A qualitative case study approach was employed by conducting in-depth interviews with four circular start-ups. This study is expected to shed light on the role of consumers either as enablers or barriers to the circular economy in Indonesia.

Keywords: circular economy, consumer behavior, circular start-up.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the late 18th century's Industrial Revolution, a linear economy has been the dominant economic paradigm. In a linear economic system, raw materials are processed into products which are then sold to customers, who use them for a certain period before being disposed of. The product will be disposed of in a landfill or incinerated, with little effort to recover the product or raw materials used (Guldmann, 2018).

The linear economic system based on the "take-make-dispose" process has the potential to reduce natural resources (resource depletion), so the economic system that should be carried out is to convert waste into resources, or what is known as a circular economy (Suchek et al., 2022). An important prerequisite of the circular economy is a closed material loop (Mentink, 2014). The term 'closed material loops' refers to the reuse of material, whether as bulk material, products, or components. This requires specific processes such as refurbishment or recycling. The implication of this closed material loop is to reduce the extraction of raw materials from nature and minimize waste emissions into the environment.

A transformation process is needed to change the company's business processes from a linear economy to a circular economy. According to several literatures, transformation to circular economy provides various benefits for businesses, including: saving raw material costs, creating competitive advantage, expanding markets (Rizos et al., 2016), and improving the company's image and sustainability in the long term (Pizzi et al., 2022).

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However, in practice, many companies face several obstacles in implementing the circular economy concept in their business operations. According to Kirchherr, Hekkert et al (2017), these obstacles can be grouped into four aspects: corporate culture, technology, market, and regulatory aspects. Obstacles related to corporate culture include a corporate culture that makes it difficult to make changes, as well as risk avoidance by business leaders (Tan et al., 2022). Obstacles related to technological aspects include a lack of knowledge regarding the relationship between implementing a circular economy and competitive advantage (Melati et al., 2021; Pizzi et al., 2022). Obstacles from the market aspect include the consumer's intention-action gap (White et al., 2019), where consumers prefer new products to recycled products (Ranta et al., 2018).

On the other hand, several companies have succeeded in transforming their business processes towards a circular economy with several driving factors as follows: support from management (Sarja et al., 2021), incentives from the government (Malik et al., 2022), consumers preferences (Rizos et al., 2016; Mehrotra & Jaladi, 2022), the potential to increase the company's brand image (Ormazabal et al., 2018), and the potential to increase the company's financial performance (Lahti et al., 2018).

From the above explanation, it can be seen that there are different arguments regarding the role of consumers in the circular economy. Some literature argues that consumers are an obstacle to the development of a circular economy (White et al., 2019; Tan et al., 2022), while other literature argues that consumers are the enablers of a circular economy (Rizos et al., 2016; Kirchherr, Reike, et al., 2017; and Mehrotra & Jaladi, 2022). This is the gap that will be investigated in this research.

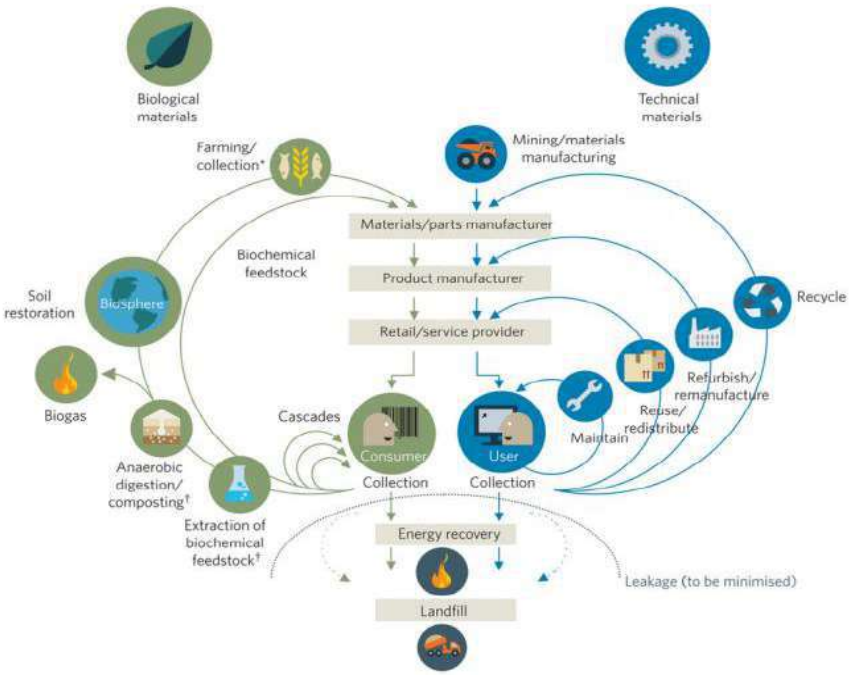
This research interviewed four circular start-ups to explore the role of consumers in the development of the circular economy in Indonesia. According to Henry et al. (2020), a circular start-up is a new business that has an independent legal entity, has generated income even though it may not yet make a profit, and operates the principles of a circular business model. The reason for choosing circular start-ups as informants is that circular start-ups have greater challenges than established companies, where customer acceptance of their products or services will determine their business continuity (Henry et al., 2023). This study contributes to the literature by confirming the role of consumers either as enablers or barriers to the circular economy in Indonesia.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Circular Economy In Indonesia

The circular economy concept that is widely used in literature is the concept from the Ellen McArthur Foundation (EMF), which is represented in the form of a "butterfly diagram" (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Circular Economy Concept



Source: Ellen McArthur Foundation (2013)

In this diagram, the circular economy is divided into two cycles: the biological material cycle (materials consumed) and the technical material cycle (materials used), both consisting of various actors and activities (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013). In the middle of the diagram are consumers for the biological material cycle and users for the technical material cycle. Other stakeholders involved in the diagram are service providers, goods manufacturers, and material producers. This diagram is accompanied by three circular economy principles: preserving and increasing natural resources, using products and materials for longer periods, and reducing waste to landfills.

According to Indonesian Ministry of National Development et al. (2021), circular economy is a closed circular economic system strategy that minimizes the quantity of waste materials that are thrown into landfills by optimizing the usage and value of raw materials, components, and products. The realization of Indonesia's economic transformation is also driven by this economic model, particularly in its support of a green economy built on low-carbon and climate-resilient growth strategies.

There are five circular business models aimed at using the maximum benefit from resources, production cycles, and materials (Camacho-Otero et al., 2018). These five business models can be used in a variety of ways depending on the commercial and industrial operations conducted in the area, the products generated across the supply chain, and the geographical context. The five circular business models are circular inputs, sharing platforms, product as service, product life extension and resource recovery. Using renewable energy, choosing natural materials, or designing recyclable products are practical applications of the circular inputs business model in the industry (Lacy et al., 2020). Through a shared use approach, the sharing business model aims to enhance product usage. Complete products with services for ongoing maintenance are

provided under the product as a service (PSS) business model. The product life extension business model aims to prolong the lifespan of a product by implementing repair, reprocessing, upgrading, and resale strategies. The resource recovery business concept involves extracting resources or energy from waste and converting them into raw materials.

Presently, the Indonesian government is prioritizing the implementation of circular economy principles in five key sectors: food and beverage (F&B), textiles, construction, wholesale and retail commerce, and electronic equipment. The selection of these five industries was based on their significant contribution to Indonesia's GDP and their employment of over 43 million individuals in 2019 (Bappenas, 2022). The implementation of a circular economy is considered to offer significant advantages for Indonesia by 2030, as observed through the lens of the 3P approach: The benefits of this initiative can be categorized into three main areas: economic, environmental, and societal. In economic terms, it is expected to generate an additional GDP of IDR 593–638 trillion. From an environmental perspective, it aims to reduce waste by up to 52% in five priority sectors and decrease emissions by up to 126 million tons, which is equivalent to 9% of the current emissions output level. Lastly, it aims to create 4.4 million new jobs, with 75% of them being specifically for women.

Indonesia has implemented various policies pertaining to the circular economy, which have been introduced by Ministries and government institutions. One such policy is the Green Industry Standard, which requires industrial companies to utilize raw materials and/or auxiliary materials in a manner that is efficient, environmentally friendly, and sustainable. Industrial enterprises can utilize several types of raw materials and auxiliary resources, including those sourced from nature, production outputs, by-products, and recycled products. The other policy is producers' path for reducing waste. The government establishes restrictions to mitigate waste generated by producers in relation to items or product packaging that are not capable of being broken down by natural processes, cannot be recycled, and/or cannot be used again. This includes materials such as plastic, aluminium cans, glass, and paper. Starting from January 1, 2030, there will be an official ban on single-use plastics such as plastic straws and cutlery, styrofoam containers, and single-use plastic bags.

2.2. Circular Consumption Behavior

According to Kirchherr et al. (2017), the circular economy is defined as "an economic system that replaces the 'end-of-life' concept with reducing, alternatively reusing, recycling and recovering materials in production/distribution and consumption processes. It operates at the micro level (products, companies, consumers), meso level (eco-industrial parks), and macro level (city, region, nation, and beyond), with the aim to accomplish sustainable development, thus simultaneously creating environmental quality, economic prosperity, and social equity, to the benefit of current and future generations. It is enabled by novel business models and responsible consumers". From this definition, Kirchherr et al. (2017) explained that consumers are enablers of the circular economy. The role of consumers as enablers of a circular economy can be realized in the form of using circular solutions (Camacho-Otero et al., 2018) or carrying out circular consumption behavior (Camacho-Otero et al., 2020).

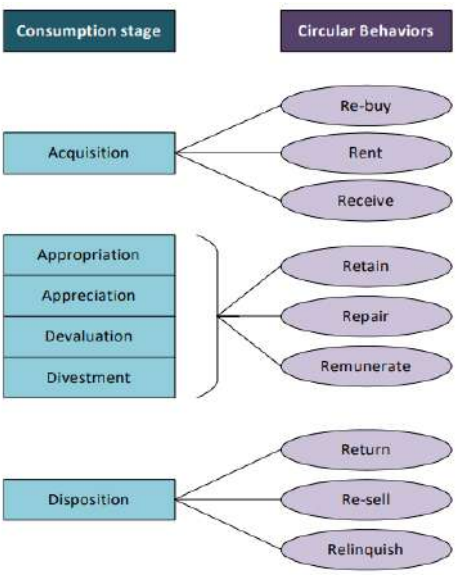
Consumption itself is a complex process. Warde (2005) defines consumption as a process where a person engages in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive, or contemplative purposes, of goods or services, whether purchased or not. In another article, Warde uses the concept of acquisition together

with appropriation and appreciation and suggests that these three dimensions are the 'three fundamental dimensions of consumption' (Warde, 2014). Acquisition refers to the process of exchange and the way people access the goods, services, and experiences they consume. Appropriation is what consumers do with goods and services after they get them. Appreciation is an event where people gain pleasure or satisfaction from the consumption process.

Furthermore, Evans (2019) completes the consumption process into six events (moments): acquisition, appropriation, appreciation, devaluation, divestment, and disposal. Devaluation is the opposite of appreciation, where after needs and wants are met and satisfaction is achieved, the value of the product or service can decrease. Divestment is the opposite of appropriation, which is an event where consumers consider giving up ownership of a product or service. Disposal is the opposite of acquisition, which is an event when a consumer relinquishes ownership of a product or service in various forms, for example, throwing it away, giving it to someone else, or re-selling it.

Referring back to Kirchherr's definition of the circular economy, circular consumption refers to the entire process of acquiring, using, valuing, devaluing, getting rid of, and disposing of products and services in a way that minimizes waste by either reducing, reusing, recycling, or recovering materials (Kirchherr et al., 2017). In a circular economy, consumers are required to engage in a sequence of behaviors that facilitate circular consumption. Figure 2 is a schematic illustrating the specific behaviors or activities that are pertinent to each level of consumption, using the conventions of 'R' models and waste hierarchies.

Figure 2.
Circular consumption behavior



Source: Camacho-Otero et al. (2020)

During the acquisition phase, individuals will either buy back second-hand items, lease them, or obtain them through a barter transaction. During the use phase, consumers have the opportunity to engage in actions that promote prolonged

ownership of the product or its subsequent usage by other consumers, contingent upon the specific business model. Here, it is recommended that individuals have the option to repair, retain, or compensate for things. Engaging in repair activities enables the restoration of many aspects of the product, hence prolonging its lifespan for a specific user. Compensating can empower consumers to obtain greater value. Furthermore, the term "retain" suggests that the product is not discarded prematurely. During the disposal phase, customers engage in activities that facilitate the effective circulation of products, such as returning them to the system, re-selling them to other consumers, or participating in money-free exchanges.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design employed was a preliminary qualitative investigation. Qualitative research is a comprehensive methodology that encompasses the process of exploration and uncovering (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative researchers employ a novel method of investigation that involves gathering data in a genuine environment, taking into account the individuals being studied, and conducting an inductive analysis that identifies patterns or themes (Jayaratne et al., 2019).

The main source of data comprises semi-structured interviews with four circular start-up founders to explore consumer behavior related to their businesses. The profile of each circular start-up is shown in Table 1. The interview was conducted in July 2023. Each founder was interviewed for about 1 hour. The interview questions included: What is the background of founding the circular start-up? What are the challenges in implementing the circular business model? What circular consumption behavior have consumers done in your business? How do you perceive consumers in the circular economy? Do you think consumers are an enabler or barrier to a circular economy? What role can consumers play in supporting your business as well as the circular economy? How do you educate consumers about circular consumption behavior?

Table 1.
Profile of circular start-ups

o	Name of Start-Up	Business Description	Age of Start-up (Years)	Location
	Alner (Alternative Container)	Providing household products (liquid soap, shampoo, dishwashing soap, cooking oil, etc) in reusable packaging	5	Jakarta
	Cantuka Kreatif	Recycling disposable diapers into creative items	5	East Java
	Boolet	Recycling used chopsticks and skewers into creative items (coasters, cell phone coasters, table top)	3	West Java
	Urban Compost	Processing organic waste from restaurants and households into compost with a subscription system	4	Bali

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis, utilizing NVIVO software for data analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytical approach used to find, analyze, and describe patterns or themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It meticulously arranges and elucidates a collection of data, providing

comprehensive information that facilitates the analysis of many facets of the research. This research employed an inductive approach, where themes were derived directly from the data. The analysis process adhered to specific steps. The researchers began by acquainting themselves with the data through multiple readings of the in-depth interview scripts. Next, the researcher created basic codes and examined patterns of concerns or sub-themes during the initial analysis phase. During the subsequent phase, the researcher examined the sub-themes and then identified and labeled broader topics. The results incorporated the emerging discoveries with existing literature, so improving the internal validity, generalizability, and theoretical depth (Eisenhardt, 1989). The interviews were conducted until the point of theoretical saturation was reached (Lim, 2016). The concept of theoretical saturation refers to the researcher's practice of collecting additional examples until no new theoretical insights can be derived from the data.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Circular start-up founders identified that consumers in Indonesia are aware of the circular economy, and some of them have done circular consumption behavior. Overall, all circular start-up founders perceived consumers as an enabler to circular economy. A set of themes emerged after analysis, reflecting the role of consumers in fostering circular economy in Indonesia.

4.1. Theme 1: Consumers in Indonesia have been actively involved in the circular economy

Material loops are the core idea of the circular economy. This idea assumes that products, their components, and/or materials can be reused, remanufactured, or recycled, which requires prior collecting back from the consumer and reverse logistics (Lewandowski, 2016). This process requires active consumer involvement (Henry et al., 2020). An example of reverse logistics was revealed by the founder of Boolet:

> A surprising fact is that we receive a lot of donations of used chopsticks from outside the city. Maybe around 30 to 50 people a month, per person around 300 to 500 grams of used chopsticks are sent via logistics to us. This depicts a consumer who truly cares. They are even willing to pay money to send used chopsticks to us.

In Boolet's case, consumers participate in sending raw materials in the form of used chopsticks to producers (Boolet) to be recycled into coasters, table tops, and other creative items.

In Alner's case, consumers are involved in returning household product packaging that has been used up so that the packaging can be reused.

> We will sterilize product packaging in the form of glass bottles or plastic bottles so that they can be reused. We provide incentives in the form of cashback to consumers every time they return the packaging of after-use product. Currently the bottle return rate is around 70%.

Active consumer involvement can also be done by providing knowledge sharing between consumers about circular economy practices. This can be practiced in communities such as waste banks (Teufer & Grabner-Kräuter, 2023). The founder of Cantuka Kreatif initiated a community called Diaper Bank, where she trained the community members to sterilize diapers to be the raw materials for slippers, wallets, or bags.

The development of social media also helps consumers to obtain information about circular economy solutions. According to the founder of Urban Compost:

> We informed consumers about Urban Compost through social media. Initially our target market was B2B, namely restaurants or cafes, but in reality, there are more household

> consumers who want to subscribe to Urban Compost. Currently, Urban Compost's household customers are 4x more than business customers.

With this analysis, consumers in Indonesia have been actively involved in circular economy either by returning use product, providing materials to the producer, or adopting circular economy solution.

4.2. Theme 2: Businesses should understand the factors that foster consumer acceptance of the circular solution

According to Camacho-Otero et al. (2018), there are seven major themes when identifying factors that drive or prevents consumer from acquiring or participating in circular solutions. Those seven major themes are: personal characteristics, product and service offering, knowledge and understanding, experience and social aspects, risks and uncertainty, benefits, and other psychological factors.

One aspect of the personal characteristics that have been explored in the literature is the need for uniqueness. In comparison, two aspects of the product and service offering include product quality and product longevity. Understanding those aspects will foster consumer acceptance of our product, as stated by the founder of Cantuka Kreatif:

> When I joined an exhibition, I asked consumers why they chose sandals from recycled diapers. They answered: This is a unique product; I don't have it yet. Apart from that, when I tried it, the quality was good, and the price was the same as sandals made from synthetic leather or batik cloth.

In terms of benefits, price is one of the barriers consumers face when adopting circular products because circular products tend to have premium prices. However, when producers can explain what value is obtained from this price, then premium prices will not be a barrier (Sheth et al., 2011; White et al., 2019). The founder of Urban Compost explains:

> If a business targets the right segment, then consumers will become enablers for the business. Initially, Urban Compost targeted the B2B market, such as cafes in Bali which promote the concept of sustainability. They certainly understand that there is a price that needs to be paid to manage organic waste. However, it turns out that many individual consumers already sort waste, and even though the price of subscribing to Urban Compost is two times higher than paying waste pickers, they still want to subscribe to Urban Compost because they understand the value they get from paying that price. They will get a bucket for organic waste, and every six months, they will get compost.

4.3. Theme 3: The role of consumers to foster circular economy

According to Kircherr et al. (2017), consumers can be an enabler of a circular economy. The role of consumers as an enabler of the circular economy can be realized by using products and services based on a circular economy (Camacho-Otero et al., 2018) or by carrying out circular consumption behavior (Camacho-Otero et al., 2020), for example, buying back used products (re-buy), extending the life of the product by repairs, or selling products that are no longer used to other consumers (re-sell).

According to data analysis, consumers can also play some roles, such as :

1. Telling a story about circular solution

The development of social media makes it easier for consumers to access information about circular solutions. For example, Mohammad et al., (2020) explain the role of eWOM to increase purchases of second-hand clothing. A consumer telling a story about a new circular solution can increase customer awareness about the circular economy. As stated by the founder of Boolet:

> I hope consumers tell others that chopsticks can now be recycled. It shows that they care for society and the environment. I prefer getting consumers who tell the story compared to consumers who buy our products. For me, the challenge is how to increase

consumer's awareness about what we are doing, and eventually, one consumer will tell the story to other consumers.

2. Providing feedback to the circular producer

Recent consumer research acknowledges that the consumer is an active participant in the creation process of a business (Biraghi et al., 2018). Since the circular business model requires active consumer involvement, such as providing materials to producers for value recovery (Henry et al., 2020), Lewandowski (2016) argues that a circular economy may provide advantages for companies in terms of customer loyalty and feedback. The founder of Urban Compost stated:

> Consumers may become our controllers; they provide feedback to us so that we understand their needs. For example, in our case, we provide buckets to the consumer for collecting their organic waste. Some of our consumers request for bigger size of bucket, so now we provide two sizes of bucket, the small one and the bigger one.

V. CONCLUSION

Consumers are starting to become aware of the circular economy because the government has issued policies related to the circular economy. As stated by the founder of Urban Compost, local government supports waste management so that their business activities receive support from residents. The emergence of circular start-ups that offer various circular economy solutions also helps consumers to adopt circular consumption behavior.

The roles of consumers in fostering the circular economy in Indonesia are: (1) providing materials to the producers for value recovery, (2) returning packaging of used products for packaging reuse, (3) providing knowledge sharing between consumers about circular economy practices, (4) telling a story about circular solution, (5) providing feedback to circular producer. Future research can explore how consumers can be motivated to engage in circular consumption behavior.

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