
7. Organizing for a circular economy: internal activism and organizational boundaries in SMEs

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INTRODUCTION: THE MICRO-FOUNDATIONS OF CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Circular economy (CE) has been an active field of research for over two decades and has been regarded as an antidote to socio-economic challenges such as resource scarcity and negative environmental impacts, and as driving environmentally responsible business behaviour. According to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2015, p. 2), CE is ‘an economy that is restorative and regenerative by design’. Its central objective is to challenge the dominance of unsustainable linear economic models through the design of a closed-looped flow of materials to reduce pollution (Geng and Doberstein 2008; Jawahir and Bradley 2016; Winans et al. 2017). Although theoretical aspects are well documented, a key gap in the literature pertains to practical business circular innovations aiming to facilitate and optimize a CE transition. The system theory paradigm that dominates the CE discourse gives little attention to agency within micro-organizational dynamics (Blomsma and Brennan 2017; Kirchherr et al. 2017; Korhonen et al. 2018). CE research remains ‘superficial and unorganized’ (Korhonen et al. 2018). In particular, we know little about individual struggles and organizational micro-dynamics that foster or discourage the development of circular business models.

We propose to fill this gap by focusing on two intertwined and understudied elements: Firstly, business internal activism which promotes CE principles; and secondly, the redefinition of traditional organizational boundaries. Through the concept of organizational boundaries (Santos and Eisenhardt 2005), our research empirically investigates how these different forms of business activism and conceptions of organizational boundaries can shape firms’ motives for embracing CE principles.

The contribution of this work to existing CE literature is threefold. Firstly, it draws attention to CE’s micro-foundations by looking at agency, i.e. internal activism, in triggering organizational change towards a CE. Secondly, it builds on the body of knowledge on SME strategies which supports firms to translate their varying motivations into different CE organizational boundary conceptions. Finally, it offers a working business support mechanism for policymakers and practitioners, and provides insight that might guide CE transformation processes, particularly for early-stage ventures and SMEs.

ORGANIZATIONAL BOUNDARIES AND AGENCY IN CIRCULAR BUSINESS

The CE literature often mentions that traditional organizational boundaries need to be redefined or even transcended (Haney et al. 2019) to extend value and material flows to an inter-organizational and even societal level (Boons and Lüdeke-Freund 2013; Laasch 2018). However, existing research has taken a very normative approach – stating how CE organizational boundaries ought to be rather than looking at the reality of emerging examples of CE business organizations. As demonstrated by Pieroni et al. (2019), the majority of methods and tools still adopt traditional organizational boundaries, highlighting that ‘future research should explore how to take the inter-organizational or societal boundaries into account’ (p. 210). The literature on organizational boundaries can help to fill this gap.

For the scope of our study, boundaries refer to ‘the demarcation between the organization and the environment’ (Santos and Eisenhardt 2005, p. 491). As such, within organizational boundaries activities operate under a specific logic of identity that shapes how things are done in the organization (Kogut 2000) and how resources possessed by the firm are allocated (Helfat 1997), and this determines the sphere of control of the organization (D’Aveni et al. 2001). From the strategic management and organization theorists’ point of view, the dominant logic of the nature of a firm is linked with the transaction cost economy that tends to conceptualize organizational boundaries as relatively stable and static. However, recent research is rapidly progressing to more contextual and dynamic settings such as nascent markets (Santos and Eisenhardt 2009), business ecosystems (Radziwon and Bogers 2018; Velter et al. 2020), identity-driven business (Santos and Eisenhardt 2009), early-stage ventures (Santos and Eisenhardt 2005), and community-based enterprise (Hertel et al. 2019). In particular, we were inspired by the seminal work of Santos and Eisenhardt (2005, 2009) that developed four boundary conceptions (see Table 7.1) and which can help to shed light on the relationship between CE-based organizations, other organizations and the broader environment in which they operate.

Anchored in the concept of bottom-up forces within an organization, we contend that CE organizational boundaries are shaped by the agency of internal activists that use their resources and views to ‘induce change’ (Walker 2012, p. 582) and shape the application of CE principles and embed it within organizational goals. According to Davis et al. (2008, p. 391), ‘Organizations are places where social life happens and, as such, can be the location of strug-

Table 7.1 Four conceptions of organizational boundaries

Efficiency	Linked to the transaction cost theory of the firm revolving around make and buy choice. Decision-making based on cost minimization.
Power	Draws attention to collaborative and coordinative strategic relationship that firms establish as control mechanisms over multiple stakeholders.
Competence	Linked to resource-based view and dynamic capacity theory of firms that emphasize the (re)configuration of resources for competitive advantage. Growth is central to decision-making. Product development and process innovation are typical initiatives in the organization.
Identity	Linked to the cognitive view of the firm that manifests through an ongoing defining process of ‘who we are’. The central goal is to align the organizational activities with organizational identity. According to this view, ‘cognitive boundaries exist at the perimeter of aspects of identity, and these boundaries can vary in permeability’ (Kreiner et al. 2006, p. 1322).

gles over broader issues of social justice. [...] Thus the stakes of wider social struggles are often enacted within firms.’

There is an emerging scholarship on the way that activist entrepreneurs induce change. According to Geiger and Gross (2018), market ‘misfire’ accelerates the adoption and diffusion of innovations or new values that are incubated by incumbents or challengers. In this context, various types of corporate activism (Corvellec and Stål 2019; Skoglund and Böhm, 2020) have been discussed by organizational scholars, insofar as researchers have increasingly tried to reconcile the domains of activism and markets. Specifically, the focus has been on CEO activists (Chatterji and Toffel 2019); social intrapreneurs (Davis and White 2015); institutional entrepreneurs (Battilana et al. 2009); organizational entrepreneurs (Courpasson et al. 2016); grassroots activists (Scully and Segal 2002); and tempered radicals (Meyerson and Tompkins 2007). These individuals usually speak out on a specific social or sustainable issue and are devoted to solving it within their organization.

Drawing on the above different forms of internal activism, we argue that internal activists have more knowledge of their organization and resources, which helps induce change, shaping a CE-focused business identity. They could be regarded as CE field’s gatekeepers, aligning the organizational goal with external opportunities, particularly if these internal activists hold a managerial role. From the cognitive management perspective, Helfat and Peteraf (2015) demonstrate the link between managerial cognitive process (i.e. sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring) and enterprise-level capabilities. They stated that top managers could affect strategic change in organizations via their information structure and mental processes. In other words, they will sense CE as an opportunity from the external environment, i.e. their motivation for embracing the CE and mobilizing and deploying organizational resources into a CE-based organizational logic. In association with the notion of the organizational boundary, the organizational goal directs the scope of business and how the boundary is defined. The interplay of internal activism and organizational boundary is typically formed at the early stage of the transition process with a focus on the entrepreneurial and self-defining process. Hence, this research adopts a multiple-case design, focusing on SMEs where the CE initiatives were induced by manager or founder. Then, we investigate how their motivation and mobilization process lead to different types of boundary interfaces in CE activism.

METHODS

Research Context

This study is a spin-off from a larger programme called Tevi (tevi.co.uk), funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which aims to support economic and environmental growth in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, one of the UK most economically deprived regions. The programme started in 2018 and is set to run until 2022.

So far, Tevi has supported over 250 SMEs to grow whilst at the same time contributing to strategic regional goals around environmental growth and a CE transition. Environmental growth, which broadly aligns with national ‘net gain’ priorities, is enshrined in a long-term strategy at the county council level. A transition to a more CE is a regional priority, designing waste out of the economy and building resilience across communities with historically low

rates of productivity and innovation. Through national and international partnerships, Tevi is also facilitating the transfer of best practice knowledge into Cornwall.

The Tevi programme is delivered by academics and knowledge exchange specialists at the University of Exeter's campus in Penryn, Cornwall, in partnership with Cornwall Wildlife Trust, Cornwall Council and Cornwall Development Company. All registered SMEs receive bespoke one-to-one support, ranging from product development research to land or waste management plans to strategic advice around growth. Tevi also dispenses a capital grant fund for equipment, consultancy or other services that specifically contribute to increasing an SME's contribution to environmental growth or the CE. Over a thousand participants have thus far attended Tevi events and workshops which brought SMEs together to receive a crash course in how to apply CE methods to their product and service development. In this context, our cases were selected from SMEs who were part of Tevi's business network.

Case Selection

The case selection process was purposive. All the authors are directly or indirectly involved in the Tevi project and our study emerged from a reflection on this common experience and daily conversations with local business representatives involved in CE activities. First, we began by selecting out of all the 200+ SMEs involved in the Tevi project. We clustered companies linked to the same ownership and deleted others that are no longer in business. Second, the initial number was further reduced to 82 companies based on their clear commitment to CE principles and nominations from the Tevi team members. Third, through the discussion with Tevi members and substantive information from Tevi archival documents, for the scope of this chapter, we selected a sample of 12 organizations which represent each boundary conception (see Table 7.2).

Table 7.2 Key information on the relevant cases

Firm	Size	Industry	CE initiative	Conception
ID1	Micro	Manufacturing	Products made by recycled food waste	Identity
ID2	Micro	Wholesale/Retail	A plastic-free wholefood shop	
ID3	Micro	Manufacturing	Making zero-waste product	
EF1	Micro	Manufacturing	Develop B2B products to reduce the waste	Efficiency
EF2	Medium	Manufacturing	Production process with 3R* principles	
EF3	Medium	Wholesale/Retail	Production process with 3R principles	
PW1	Micro	Manufacturing	Products reconfigured by reused material	Power
PW2	Small	Mining	Business model with 3R principles	
PW3	Micro	Manufacturing	Products made by recycled waste	
CP1	Small	Manufacturing	Products made by recycled plastic waste	Competence
CP2	Micro	Manufacturing	Products made by recycled plastic waste	
CP3	Micro	High Tech	A platform to share surplus material	

Note: *3R = reduce, reuse, recycle.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Our research project started in May 2019. Data were collected from the following sources: (1) Tevi archival documents (e.g. an open-question-based questionnaire filled out by SMEs, initial

interview transcripts, and minutes of meeting and emails); (2) publicly available secondary data (e.g. SME's website); (c) semi-structured interviews.

We conducted 12 semi-structured interviews, three with Tevi team members who co-worked with the local businesses and nine with SMEs (owners, managers or senior employees involved in the Tevi project). The former were asked about their own experience in working with SMEs, in particular, the main drivers of SMEs' involvement in CE initiatives as part of the Tevi project. Tevi interviews were used for 12 cases selection based on four boundary conceptions. The latter comprised preliminary interviews with five companies identified as CE champions and four additional interviews with the owners or managers (ID1, EF3, PW2, and CP3).

As for data analysis, we decided to deploy Santos and Eisenhardt (2005) as our analytical framework (i.e. efficiency-, identity-, power-, and competence-driven). Pedalling back and forth between the raw data, our preliminary research questions and the literature (Denzin and Lincoln 2005) helped us to identify major themes, pertaining to internal activism and organizational boundaries. Through the above sources and processes, we soon realized that their motivation for embracing a CE model was linked to a limited number of recurrent patterns. Thus, we decided to explore more in details and systematically this phenomenon, focusing in particular on the business motives for becoming more circular and their conceptions of the environment in which they operate. After that, an additional four interviews were conducted to validate our preliminary findings. Then we separately analysed the raw data and then discussed together our analyses based on our emerging analytical framework.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Our findings highlight four distinct conceptions of organizational boundaries that are recurrent in the CE-engaged companies (see Table 7.3). It is worth underlining that we understand the different conceptions as ideal types that can provide insights into the micro-dynamics of business engagement with the transition towards more circular approaches. In a Weberian sense, ideal types are analytical constructs for use as yardsticks for measuring the similarity and difference between concrete phenomena and case studies (Kvist 2007). In reality, the large majority of the companies that we have studied are characterized by a combination of the four conceptions of CE organizational boundaries and business activism, although one conception might be more pronounced than the others.

Efficiency-Driven CE Organizational Boundaries and Business Activism

The first conception is broadly characterized by the opportunity for lowering the cost of products/services by embracing elements of CE business. It emerged that circularity is instrumentally adopted to the extent that it allows the company to 'better run' and 'have lower costs'. For instance, both EF2 and EF3 adopted a CE approach to save time and money by minimizing waste:

We use a lot of cardboard boxes which we will then collect back. We reuse them whenever we can. And if not, then we've got plastic and cardboard recycling and bins [...] We also collect wasted cooking oil that we sell from our customers, which is obviously an issue that they have to get rid of. We store it and then we have a local guy that comes around once a week and picks everything up that we've collected and reuse it. (EF3)

Table 7.3 Four conceptions of CE organizational boundaries and business activism

	Efficiency	Identity	Power	Competence
CE organizational boundaries	<p>Conception: Conventional organizational boundaries based on whether a transaction should be governed by market or organization.</p> <p>Central goal: <i>Cost minimization</i> by minimizing the resource use and waste resulting from transactions undertaken within and outside the organization.</p>	<p>Conception: Organizational boundaries based on shared values and norms used as cognitive frames that reduce ambiguity, facilitate decision-making and enhance internal coherence.</p> <p>Central goal: <i>Address social problems</i> by aligning organizational activism in the community with organizational identity.</p>	<p>Conception: Boundaries are defined by the sphere of influence that facilitates coordination to reduce dependence and uncertainty and exercise power.</p> <p>Central goal: <i>Increased autonomy</i> by maximizing control over strategic relationships and wielding market power.</p>	<p>Conception: Boundaries defined by a unique resource bundle, dynamically determined by matching organizational resources needs with environmental opportunities.</p> <p>Central goal: <i>Maximize value</i> by coevolving resource configurations with market opportunities.</p>
Motivation for embracing CE	<p>Instrumental: Embrace CE based on its 'business case'. CE is seen as a win-win situation that can create financial benefits as well as social and environmental.</p>	<p>Issue-based: Use business as a vehicle to spur collective awareness/commitment to tackle specific issues (e.g. plastics).</p>	<p>Resilience: CE allows to exert greater influence over supply chain and stakeholders and to enjoy resilience.</p>	<p>Performance: Maximizing the remaining value of waste/materials through innovations and optimizations that change the market or consuming behaviour.</p>
Form of CE business internal activism	<p>Strength: Incremental</p> <p>Scope: organization and supply chain</p> <p>Forms: Tempered radicals</p>	<p>Strength: Holistic</p> <p>Scope: local or community</p> <p>Forms: Social entrepreneurs; grassroots activists; community-based enterprise</p>	<p>Strength: Institutional</p> <p>Scope: Industry, market, or regional</p> <p>Forms: institutional entrepreneurs</p>	<p>Strength: Innovative</p> <p>Scope: Product and market</p> <p>Forms: Organizational entrepreneurs; social intrapreneurs.</p>

Besides this, EF2 is interested in improving ‘internal monitoring and how to reduce the amount of plastic with food which can be recycled’. EF1 offers another slightly different example in that it provides other businesses solutions to become more efficient. Although EF1 embraces a CE approach, their services are presented as aimed at fostering efficiency rather than circularity per se. All these companies incidentally mention that this is ‘also a general right thing to do’ (EF3). This suggests that addressing environmental and social issues remains a nice to have add-on to becoming more efficient, not their main driver.

Overall, CE in efficiency-driven firms is perfectly compatible with a business-as-usual approach based on transaction governance. Because their central goal is to maximize revenues and lower costs, business internal activism typically promotes incremental changes using the ‘business case’ for CE to portray organizational changes as a ‘win-win’ situation, i.e. ‘doing well, by doing good’ (Kotler and Lee 2008; Urbinati et al. 2017). For example, EF3 highlights the importance of being cost-effective: ‘if somebody developed a type of universal reusable packaging that is not going to break the bank [...] cost-wise, then that would be the game-changer.’

The concept of ‘tempered radicals’ (Meyerson and Tompkins 2007) applies to this form of business internal activism which comes to terms with the status quo and works towards transformational ends through incremental changes. In doing so, internal activism struggles to balance their personal values and concerns with building careers in companies that are more concerned with profits than social and environmental issues.

Identity-Driven CE Organizational Boundaries and Business Activism

This conception is driven by the opportunity for adopting CE principles and practices to promote social and environmental causes. The main difference with efficiency-driven organizations lies in the relationship with the external environment. While the former did not aim at changing their customers and suppliers’ behaviour (transactional relationships), identity-driven firms are committed to transforming the context in which they operate. Thus, identity-driven organizations have much more blurred inter-organizational or societal boundaries as compared to traditional businesses. Because of their holistic approach, they tend to become part of the local community and often their central goal is to deal with localized concerns and issues (Hertel et al. 2019). For instance, ID1 is a micro enterprise that deals with wasted fruits:

And then you get more of the community involved. It’s quite interesting to see that sort of impact: how people are prepared to commit that much to stopping waste [...] and what you’ll then become is a reference point for anybody looking for fruits that are going wasted. (ID1)

Other examples we came across include a zero-waste shop (ID2) that ‘was born on a 500 mile plastic-free hike’ undertaken to raise money for an NGO in which the business founder visited ‘islands filled with plastic pollution’ and became determined to raise awareness of the issue and ‘prove that people can live without producing waste’. The shop has become a ‘hub’ of like-minded sustainable businesses and individuals in Cornwall: a platform for collective action and commitment. Yet another example is a surfboard producer that uses upcycled or locally sourced wood and no packaging. This organization offers people from all over the world two- to four-week mental health workshops based on the process of making handcrafted surfboards, combining social and environmental CE principles (ID3).

In terms of CE business activism, we cannot find the tensions and conflicts that ‘tempered radicals’ are purported to face. On the contrary, businesses are vehicles for expressing the values and personal motivations of their founders and employees. Focusing on the question of ‘who we are’ rather than ‘who I am’, these individuals share purpose and perceptions of the value of wasted resources that are conventionally treated as worthless, distinguishing themselves from our ‘waste culture’ (Hawkins and Muecke 2002). We can find echoes of this type of activism in the vast literature on social enterprises (Mair and Marti 2006) and more recently in research on ‘community-based enterprises’ (Hertel et al. 2019). As noted by ID1, ‘the biggest driver is that people hate seeing them [fruit] wasted’. The way ID1 responds to this issue has been to establish a business model where the wasted fruit is supplied by voluntary donation from the community. Overall, these examples suggest that identity-driven entrepreneurs are grassroots activists that have transformed the workplace into a locus of activism (Scully and Segal 2002).

Power-Driven CE Organizational Boundaries and Business Activism

We found that some CE activities were driven by the opportunity for gaining greater resilience and control over their supply chain and strategic partnerships. For instance, PW1, a small furniture making company, contended that its central goal is to ‘create a locally and sustainably produced alternative to IKEA’. They locally source their wood appealing to individuals seeking to return to a simpler, more sustainable and traditional lifestyle.

The shift away from a linear business model to greater circularity here is framed as an opportunity for ‘taking back control’ of supply markets that have become increasingly complex and globalized. According to our interviews, this idea of sourcing, producing, and selling local products to local people has become ever more relevant in the current COVID-19 pandemic context. However, this is also attractive, and it has currency in the current political climate that emphasizes localism and renewed economic protectionism. For example, PW2, a local mining company, aims to reclassify and reuse waste and highlights the benefits of local extraction plans for the British economy:

The government is very interested in capturing some of that value back over in the UK. And I think the government is also very interested to see whether we can produce some of the [anonymized] that the UK is going to need over the next few years from domestic sources. (PW2)

Thus, we found that this power-driven boundary is based on the opportunity of reducing dependency on external forces or exerting greater control over them. Organizational boundaries are used defensively but also offensively to improve network positioning and enhance the sphere of influence of the organization. Thus, from the perspective of power-driven organizations, CE also becomes a chance for exercising influence on the market, industry and region in which they operate. For instance, PW3 which produces reusable cups uses the currency and acceptance of CE principles as a source of market power and competitive advantage. Their website emphatically states that ‘The Future is Circular’ and stresses the power of their CE products that have saved ‘187 million single-use caps from contaminating our environment’ (PW3).

In terms of CE business activism, the power-driven entrepreneurs we have studied are institutional entrepreneurs often located at the periphery of the economic and institutional field and are engaged in recreating and transforming it (Battilana et al. 2009). As noted by PW2:

It's kind of a disruptive model for the mining industry. Everything is kind of geared towards that bigger goal [...] We're trying to make that link, especially to people in government, if you want to have the clean energy transition in the UK [...] and we are already engaging with other stakeholders in the supply chain about what they think they might want in five or ten years time rather than what they use right now.

These examples demonstrate that they will exercise influence on the existing institutional environment through their ability to coordinate collective change, collaborate with larger corporate players (Veleva and Bodkin 2018), and build a wider and cohesive network.

Competence-Driven CE Organizational Boundaries and Business Activism

The last conception is based on the opportunity for using CE to enable new products and processes. The boundaries of competence-driven organizations are dynamically determined by the match between organizational resources and environmental opportunities. The central goal is to develop high-performance CE product or process innovations that recombine material or/and human resources to exploit a business opportunity. For example, CP1 is strongly committed to re-innovating their product from recycled plastics and eliminating all single-use plastic packaging to contribute to tackling marine pollution. However, it must make sure that the recycled materials will maintain the high performance of its products. This situation creates an interesting conundrum that requires CE dynamic capabilities and innovation to be addressed. Thus, CP1's inter-organizational or societal boundaries dynamically evolve in response to its resource configuration. CP3 is another example which provides an innovative solution for local businesses' unwanted packaging:

I think that once we had the idea, all the other justifications for it sort of came out of that [...] we wanted to work out how to connect this business with his packaging to this other business that needed packaging. [...] I feel like I've got something really great to offer. [...] That is going to save you money. It is good for the environment. It will get more people into your premises. (CP3)

Thus, competence-driven businesses differ from the other conceptions because they are built around the opportunity for exploiting a CE business idea for better products and services. At the same time, they have elements of efficiency ('saving money') and identity-driven organizations ('good for the environment'). Another example is CP2 which offers a product innovation based on recycled fishing nets. The product innovation process includes cross-industrial collaborations between high-tech manufacturing and the fish industry which sees it 'as a great way of recycling the old netting and ensuring the recycled material is put to good use' (CP2).

In terms of activism, the main focus of their action is the CE innovation per se rather than solely addressing social problems, saving costs, or increasing resilience. As illustrated by the example of CP3, the business idea and value proposition come first. And then, business activism is gathered on the basis of their skills and the business innovation process. This can be seen in relation with the emergent literature on 'social intrapreneurs', who are change-agents working in for-profit organizations to advance socially oriented innovations that may range

from ‘not-for-loss’ to market penetration (Davis and White 2015). Another stream of research related to this is ‘organizational entrepreneurs’ (Courpasson et al. 2016). This body of literature highlights how R&D teams can create spaces for creativity and entrepreneurship within an organizational space that challenge established structures, practices and strategies. This suggests that competence-based CE activism may indirectly impact consumer behaviour by linking CE innovations with intrinsic attributes of human behaviour such as values, ethics, or social and psychological factors (Parajuly et al. 2020; Singh and Giacosa 2019).

DISCUSSION, CONTRIBUTION, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our findings suggest that the organizational boundaries literature and the work of Santos and Eisenhardt (2005) can help shed light on the relationship between CE organizations and the environment in which they operate. Contrary to idealized approaches to CE, our analysis found various organizational boundary conceptions linked to different motivations and forms of CE business internal activism. Our conceptions range from efficiency-driven incremental approaches aligned with conventional business to identity-driven conceptions that are radically opposed to ‘business-as-usual’ transactional approaches. There are also power-driven and competence-driven conceptions that extend the current focus of CE debates on sustainability and economic efficiency to consider also control and resource configuration. Our conjecture – that will need further empirical research – is that this wide range of approaches to organizational boundaries is related to distinct forms of business internal activism that can open new avenues for future research.

Our findings have the potential to drive change in business support mechanisms such as the notion of transition broker (Cramer 2020), making them more impactful, contextually sensitive and better aligned with enterprise growth strategies. For example, programmes like Tevi could pinpoint CE indicators within the enterprises they work with by identifying internal activist characteristics and organizational boundary conceptions. Our conceptual framework gives business support practitioners additional tools for delivering bespoke services, co-created around enterprise needs. This work builds on burgeoning research on effective knowledge transfer between experts and practitioners, highlighting opportunities for academic research co-designed with practitioners. We hope that our preliminary and exploratory study could inspire several avenues for future research. First, we suggest further expanding on our typology by considering the synergies between the four conceptions of CE business organizational boundaries that we do not understand as mutually exclusive. For instance, a company could be primarily driven by cost minimization (efficiency) but also aim at achieving greater autonomy (power). Second, we suggest investigating the implication of organizational scale. We found prominence of efficiency-driven businesses in larger enterprises while many identity-driven CE companies are relatively small. We suggest that future scholars expand on this insight to understand how the size of firms influence CE drivers and organizational boundaries, particularly in relation to the challenge of scaling-up (André and Pache 2016). Lastly, most of our CE SMEs have developed a strong relationship with local communities and organizations. A more contextualized approach to CE research could be particularly fruitful. For instance, in line with our exploration of CE internal activism, future research could focus on the role of regional networks of CE activism (e.g. local government and civil society organization) in driving business collective action towards a more circular economic model (Rousseau et al. 2019).

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