(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

Circular economy from the consumer perspective: Evidence from Albania

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Abstract

The circular economy (CE) is increasingly promoted as a strategic response to climate change, resource scarcity and waste generation, yet most research and policy initiatives still focus on firms and public authorities rather than on consumers. In the European Union (EU), only about 12% of material inputs are cycled back into the economy, suggesting that linear consumption patterns remain dominant despite ambitious policy frameworks (Think2030, 2022; Eurostat, 2020). In Western Balkan economies such as Albania, the transition towards circularity is at an even earlier stage, characterised by limited recycling infrastructure, modest separate collection and low public awareness (Kola & Cërpja, 2024; OECD, 2024).

This paper examines circular economy awareness, attitudes, self-reported behaviours and perceptions of consumer rights among Albanian consumers. It uses a descriptive survey of 100 consumers in four cities (Tirana, Elbasan, Shkodra and Korça), complemented by a short literature review on consumer roles in CE. The non-probability sample includes diverse age groups and educational backgrounds. Findings show that only around one third of respondents have heard of the circular economy, and fewer can provide a meaningful definition. Nonetheless, many report practices that are compatible with circularity, such as reusing products, donating clothes and occasionally repairing appliances, although these are generally motivated by thrift and habit rather than by environmental concern.

Respondents report very limited knowledge of formal consumer rights in Albania and express low confidence that authorities or businesses protect them in CE-related domains, such as product durability, repair, safe second-hand markets and transparent waste management. At the same time, the majority indicate that clearer information, monetary incentives and more convenient infrastructure would increase their engagement in reuse and recycling. The results highlight a significant "awareness–behaviour gap," in which circular practices occur without being framed as such, and a parallel "rights–trust gap" in which consumers feel poorly protected in the emerging circular landscape.

The paper concludes that, in Albania, consumer-centred circular economy strategies must combine information campaigns, infrastructure improvements and stronger consumer protection measures. Rather than treating consumers as passive recipients of products and waste services, policy and business models should actively engage them as informed co-producers of circular value.

Keywords: Circular Economy; Consumer Behaviour; Consumer Rights; Albania; Western Balkans; Sustainable Consumption

1. Introduction

The circular economy has become a central policy narrative in Europe, seen as a way to decouple economic growth from resource use and environmental degradation by keeping materials and products in use for longer and designing out waste (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2019; Korhonen et al., 2018). Rather than the linear "take–make–dispose" model,

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CE emphasises reduction, reuse, repair, remanufacturing and high-quality recycling. Yet, despite political momentum, the EU still recirculates less than 12% of its material inputs, and production and consumption of goods remain major contributors to greenhouse gas emissions (Think2030, 2022).

A growing body of research acknowledges that consumers are crucial in this transition, because purchasing decisions, use practices, repair choices and waste-sorting behaviours directly influence the feasibility and scale of circular business models (Lopez & Legardeur, 2024; Pasqualotto et al., 2023). However, consumers are still frequently conceptualised as passive "end-users" rather than as active co-producers of circular value. In practice, the success of repair services, product-as-a-service models, take-back schemes and high-quality recycling systems depends on whether ordinary households find them understandable, accessible and trustworthy.

In Western Balkan economies such as Albania, the circular transition is even more fragile. Existing studies describe the circular economy as being in its infancy in the region, with fragmented policy frameworks, limited waste infrastructure and modest business uptake (Kola & Cërpja, 2024; OECD, 2024). While there is emerging work on firm-level and policy perspectives, empirical research on consumer awareness and behaviour remains scarce. A recent behavioural study on Albania shows that awareness and readiness to engage in circular practices vary significantly across demographic groups and that economic incentives and information are key drivers (Dionizi et al., 2025).

This paper contributes to filling this gap by focusing explicitly on the consumer perspective on circular economy in Albania. The study combines a concise literature review with a descriptive survey of 100 consumers in four Albanian cities. It provides an exploratory, evidence-based snapshot that can inform both public policy and the design of consumer-oriented circular business models.

2. Literature review

Circular economy (CE) has gained strong visibility in recent years in policy, business and academic debates as a response to environmental degradation, climate change and resource insecurity (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2019; Think2030, 2022). In economic terms, CE aims to reduce the use of virgin resources by extending product lifetimes, promoting reuse and recycling, and regenerating natural systems. At the same time, the concept has been criticised for being broad and sometimes vague, bringing together many different ideas under a single label (Korhonen et al., 2018). Some authors warn that CE discussions can underestimate rebound effects, neglect social and distributional aspects and overlook power relations in global value chains. In this paper, circular economy is understood in a pragmatic way as a set of practices and policies that reduce waste, extend product lifetimes and keep materials in productive use, as long as these practices bring environmental and social benefits.

A growing body of research examines CE from the perspective of technology, business models and industrial systems, while fewer studies look directly at consumers (Koval et al., 2022; Lopez & Legardeur, 2024; Pasqualotto et al., 2023). Lopez and Legardeur (2024) show that consumer-focused CE studies often analyse purchase intentions for eco-designed products, willingness to participate in sharing schemes or acceptance of refurbished goods. Pasqualotto et al. (2023) organise consumer drivers and barriers along the consumption journey and highlight the role of price, convenience, perceived risk and social norms in shaping behaviour. Behavioural theories are frequently used to interpret these dynamics, especially the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which states that behaviour is influenced by attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991; Dionizi et al., 2025). In a circular economy context, favourable attitudes towards reuse and recycling, supportive social norms and a sense of control over available options can increase the likelihood of circular behaviours. At the same time, structural conditions such as infrastructure, product design and regulatory frameworks can limit what consumers are actually able to do, regardless of their intentions.

Many studies identify a persistent "attitude–behaviour gap" in which people express pro-environmental values but fail to act accordingly in their everyday choices, often because of cost, convenience or low trust in existing systems (Lopez & Legardeur, 2024; Pasqualotto et al., 2023). This gap may be particularly pronounced in emerging economies, where infrastructure and consumer protection mechanisms are still developing. Albania is undergoing economic and institutional transformation and has formally committed to aligning with EU environmental and circular economy policies. The OECD circular economy roadmap for Albania points to important opportunities, but also to structural challenges: high domestic material consumption per unit of GDP, limited separate waste collection and strong reliance on landfilling (OECD, 2024). Municipal waste generation per capita has decreased somewhat, but recycling rates remain low and available data are not always consistent (Kola & Cërpja, 2024; OECD, 2024).

The emerging literature on CE in Albania suggests that the transition is still in an early phase. Kola and Cërpja (2024) document some promising initiatives in waste management, renewable energy and eco-entrepreneurship, but note the absence of a coherent national implementation framework and limited engagement of different stakeholder groups. Dionizi et al. (2025) focus more directly on consumer readiness and find that awareness of circular practices remains modest overall, although certain groups, such as higher-educated, urban and full-time employed individuals, show stronger engagement in sustainable behaviours. However, most of this work concentrates either on macro-level policy or on abstract behavioural models. There is still little empirical evidence on how average consumers in Albania interpret circularity in their everyday purchases, how they perceive issues such as product durability and repair, or whether they feel their rights are protected in relation to second-hand markets, repair guarantees or the quality of waste services.

Consumer rights are central to the acceptance and legitimacy of circular business models. If products are designed to be repaired but repair services are expensive, unreliable or poorly regulated, consumers may feel disadvantaged rather than empowered. Similarly, second-hand markets and sharing platforms require clear rules on safety, liability and data protection. In European policy debates, there is growing attention to the "right to repair" and to the need for transparent information on product durability and environmental performance. Economic instruments can also play a key role. Deposit-refund systems (DRS), for instance, have been shown to significantly influence consumer behaviour, especially for beverage packaging. Evidence from OECD countries indicates that higher deposit levels and convenient return infrastructure are associated with higher return rates and better quality of collected materials (OECD, 2022; Reloop, 2023). Case studies from Greece and other European countries show that consumers are more likely to support DRS when deposits are meaningful, return points are easy to access and communication is clear (Konstantoglou et al., 2023). In Albania, the OECD roadmap discusses the potential use of DRS and pay-as-you-throw tariffs, but these instruments are still at an early stage and not widely implemented (OECD, 2024). Understanding how Albanian consumers would react to different types of incentives, better information and improved infrastructure is therefore important for future circular economy policy design.

3. Methodology

This study uses a descriptive survey design to explore how consumers in Albania understand and practise circular economy principles. The research focuses on four urban centres that represent important economic and cultural hubs: Tirana, Elbasan, Shkodra and Korça. These cities differ in size, socio-economic profile and local waste-management practices, which allows for some variation in consumer experiences and local contexts. The survey was conducted in July 2025 and was administered to 100 respondents, divided equally across the four cities (25 respondents per city). The sample is non-probability and convenience-based, obtained through personal networks, social media sharing and face-to-face recruitment in public places such as cafés and shopping areas. This approach does not permit statistical generalisation to the entire Albanian population, but it provides indicative insights into patterns of awareness and behaviour among urban consumers. Participants represent a broad mix of age groups (approximately 20% aged 18–24 years, 40% aged 25–39 years, 30% aged 40–59 years and 10% aged 60 years or older), have diverse educational backgrounds, and are roughly balanced in terms of gender.

The survey instrument consists of eight close-ended questions grouped into four thematic blocks: (1) awareness and understanding of the circular economy, (2) self-reported consumption and disposal practices, (3) perceptions of consumer rights and protection in relation to circular practices, and (4) preferences for incentives and policy measures. Most questions use simple multiple-choice formats, with some items allowing more than one response. The questionnaire is intentionally concise, reflecting the exploratory nature of the study and the aim of reaching a broad range of respondents with limited response burden. The items collect information on whether participants have heard the term "circular economy" and feel able to explain it; how they assess their own consumption patterns (more linear or more circular); how frequently they engage in behaviours such as repairing, reusing, donating or recycling products; how well they believe they know their consumer rights related to product durability, repair and waste services; the extent to which they trust different institutions (public authorities, businesses, NGOs) to protect those rights; and which types of incentives (information and labels, financial rewards, improved infrastructure, stronger regulation) they would prefer to encourage more circular practices.

Data were entered into a spreadsheet and analysed using basic descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages and simple cross-tabulations by city and age group to identify indicative patterns. Given the small size and non-probability character of the sample, the analysis is explicitly exploratory and does not employ inferential statistical tests; the findings should therefore be interpreted as illustrative rather than representative of all Albanian consumers. The study has several limitations. The convenience sample is restricted to urban residents and may not reflect the views and behaviours of rural populations or specific socio-economic groups. In addition, all measures are based on self-reported data and may be affected by social desirability and recall bias, particularly in relation to environmentally

friendly behaviours. Despite these constraints, the study offers useful exploratory evidence on how Albanian consumers perceive and enact circular practices and how they understand their rights within this emerging policy domain.

4. Results

4.1. Awareness and understanding of circular economy

When asked whether they had heard the term "circular economy", 35% of respondents answered "yes," 40% were "not sure" and 25% said "no." Among those who answered "yes," fewer than half felt able to give a short explanation in their own words, and many associated the term vaguely with "recycling" or "green economy."

Source – Author' survey (July 2025)
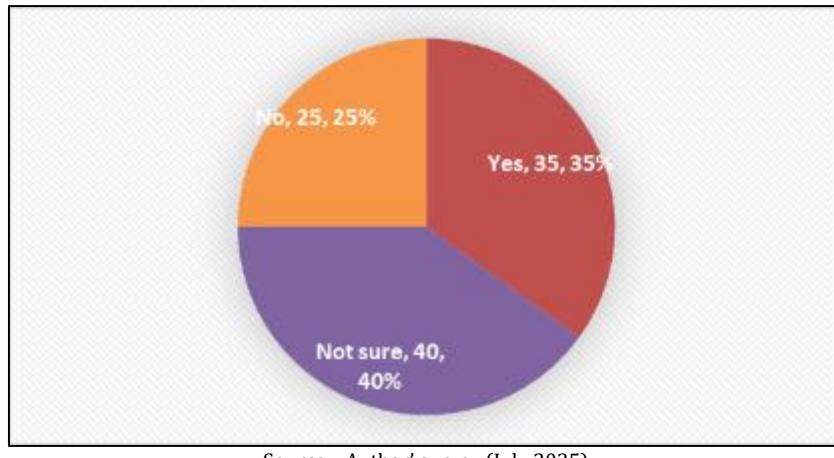
Figure 1 Awareness of "circular economy" among respondents

The relatively high share of "not sure" suggests superficial exposure to the term without clear understanding. This is broadly consistent with earlier findings that awareness of CE terminology in Albania is uneven and often limited beyond specialist circles (Dionizi et al., 2025; Kola & Cërpja, 2024).

4.1. Self-reported consumption and disposal practices

Despite low conceptual familiarity, a substantial share of respondents reports practices that align with circular principles. When asked to choose the statement that best describes their usual consumption pattern:

- 18% describe themselves as "often buying new and rarely reusing or repairing,"
- 42% as "trying to reuse and repair when possible, but also buying new,"
- 40% as "careful with purchases, frequently reusing and avoiding waste."

When presented with specific behaviours and asked how often they engage in them, the following patterns emerge:

- *Reusing and donating*: Around 70% report donating clothes or household items at least a few times per year, and 60% say they regularly pass items to family or friends instead of discarding them.
- *Repairing:* Approximately 45% report having repaired an appliance, piece of furniture or electronic device in the last 12 months, while 30% say they rarely repair and prefer replacement.
- *Recycling:* About half of the sample (52%) state that they separate some waste fractions (paper, plastic, glass) "often" or "always" when local infrastructure allows, while 25% do so "sometimes" and 23% "rarely or never."

To facilitate interpretation, these distributions are summarised in Figure 2, which presents the three self-reported consumption profiles alongside the prevalence of the main circular behaviours. This graphical representation makes it easier to compare patterns at a glance and to see how declared consumption styles correspond to reported reuse, repair and recycling practices.

These results indicate that many Albanian consumers already perform behaviours consistent with circularity, although they may not conceptualise them within circular-economy terminology. Prior studies similarly emphasise that in

emerging economies, reuse and repair are often driven by economic necessity and tradition, rather than explicit environmental concern (Dionizi et al., 2025; Pasqualotto et al., 2023).

Source - Author' survey (July 2025)

Figure 2 Regular engagement in selected circular behaviours

4.2. Perceptions of consumer rights

When asked "How well do you know your consumer rights related to product quality, repair and returns?", only 12% of respondents answered "well," 38% "a little" and 50% "not at all." In relation to waste management and recycling services, 60% stated that they "do not know" what rights they have regarding service quality, transparency or complaint mechanisms. These results suggest that, for many respondents, consumer rights in both product and service contexts remain largely opaque.

Trust in different institutions is also limited. Respondents were asked whether they trust various actors to protect their rights in relation to new circular measures such as repair services, take-back schemes or second-hand platforms: 22% expressed "some" or "high" trust in public authorities, 18% in businesses, and 30% in non-governmental organisations or independent initiatives, while the remainder indicated low or no trust across all categories. These patterns are summarised in Figure 3, which visually highlights that NGOs and independent initiatives are perceived as somewhat more trustworthy than public authorities and businesses, yet overall levels of institutional trust remain modest. The figure underlines that only a minority of respondents report any substantive confidence in the actors expected to safeguard their rights in a more circular economy.
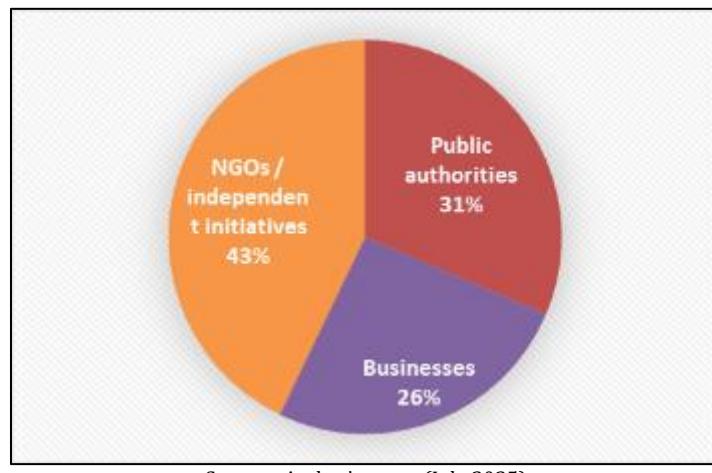
Source - Author' survey (July 2025)

Figure 3 Trust in institutions to protect consumer rights in circular practices

Consumers therefore perceive themselves as relatively unprotected in the emerging circular economy context. This aligns with broader concerns that CE policies may emphasise technical and economic aspects while underplaying issues of justice, accountability and consumer protection (Korhonen et al., 2018; OECD, 2024).

4.3. Incentives and policy preferences

When asked "What would most motivate you to buy more durable products, repair more often or separate waste better?", respondents could choose multiple answers. The most frequently selected options were clear information and labels about product durability, repairability and environmental impact (72%), convenient infrastructure such as accessible collection points for recycling and repair centres (68%), and financial incentives, including lower prices for repair, discounts on durable products or small payments for returned items (65%). In addition, 40% of respondents indicated that stronger regulation and enforcement, for example mandatory guarantees and penalties for misleading claims, would motivate them to change their behaviour.

These preferences are summarised in Figure 4, which presents the four main incentives as a simple bar chart. The figure shows that informational measures, better infrastructure and financial incentives are all prioritised by a clear majority of respondents, while stricter regulation, although still supported by a considerable share, is mentioned less often. Visually, it underlines that respondents favour practical and immediate forms of support that reduce effort and cost, rather than relying solely on regulatory pressure.

These patterns are consistent with international evidence that consumer engagement in deposit-refund systems, reuse schemes and recycling greatly depends on a combination of infrastructure, monetary incentives and trust-building communication (Konstantoglou et al., 2023; OECD, 2022; Reloop, 2023).

Source - Author' survey (July 2025)
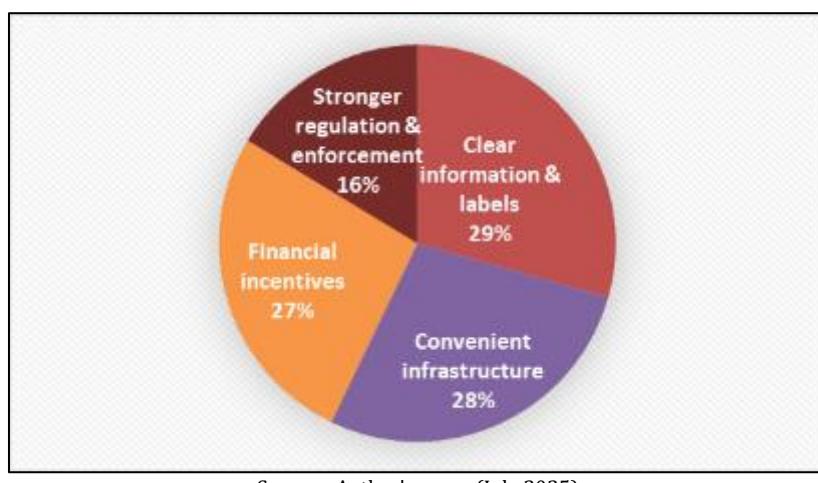
Figure 4 Motivations to adopt more circular practices

4.4. Differences across cities and age groups

Descriptive breakdowns suggest some variation between cities and age groups, although sample size limits strong conclusions. Tirana respondents report slightly higher awareness of CE terminology and more frequent recycling, which may reflect greater exposure to campaigns and better access to infrastructure. Shkodra and Korça respondents mention stronger traditions of reuse and repair within families, while Elbasan shows mixed patterns.

By age, younger respondents (18–24) and those aged 25–39 are more familiar with sustainability language but also report high levels of online shopping and fast-fashion consumption. Older respondents (40+) report more systematic reuse and repair, often linked to habits formed during earlier economic conditions, but have lower familiarity with digital platforms or new circular business models. These patterns suggest that policy interventions must be tailored to both infrastructural realities and generational differences in habits and values, in line with behavioural research on CE in emerging economies (Dionizi et al., 2025).

5. Discussion

The findings point to two interconnected gaps that are highly relevant for the circular economy transition in Albania: a gap between awareness and behaviour, and a gap between formal or aspirational rights and perceived protection and trust. Many respondents report behaviours that are consistent with circular economy principles, such as reusing, repairing or donating products, even though relatively few recognise or use the term "circular economy" itself. This pattern reflects a broader tendency described in the literature, where sustainable practices may exist independently of formal policy language, particularly in societies with traditions of thrift and resourcefulness (Lopez & Legardeur, 2024; Pasqualotto et al., 2023). From a policy perspective, this can be seen in two ways. On the one hand, everyday practices of reuse and repair provide a cultural foundation for circular strategies. On the other hand, limited conceptual understanding may slow the adoption of new circular business models and policy instruments that depend on informed participation, such as service-based offers, sharing schemes or incentive programmes.

A second important result concerns the relationship between consumer rights and trust. Respondents show low awareness of their rights in relation to product quality, repair guarantees, safe second-hand markets and transparent waste services, and they express limited confidence that public authorities or businesses will effectively protect these rights in a circular context. This "rights–trust gap" is problematic for several reasons. First, circular economy initiatives often involve more complex and long-lasting relationships between consumers and providers (for example, product-as-a-service models, shared ownership, extended warranties and take-back schemes). If rights and responsibilities are unclear, consumers may feel exposed or uncertain. Second, collective arrangements such as separate waste collection, deposit-refund systems or community repair initiatives rely heavily on trust: people are more likely to participate when they believe that rules are fair, that their effort is recognised and that systems are well managed (OECD, 2022; Reloop, 2023). Third, if consumers associate circular practices with additional risk, inconvenience or hidden costs, they may continue to prefer linear patterns of buying new products and discarding old ones. In line with the Theory of Planned Behavior, low perceived control and weak subjective norms are likely to persist if consumers neither understand their rights nor believe that institutions will enforce them (Ajzen, 1991; Dionizi et al., 2025).

The results also underline the central role of infrastructure, incentives and communication. Both the survey and international experience suggest that consumers are more willing to repair products and separate waste when relevant services and collection points are accessible, when financial incentives reward their effort and when information is clear and trustworthy (Konstantoglou et al., 2023; OECD, 2022; Reloop, 2023). For Albania, this implies that circular economy strategies should combine investment in local infrastructure (for separate collection, repair services and reuse centres, including in secondary cities) with carefully designed economic instruments, such as pilot deposit-refund schemes for selected product streams, adapted to local administrative capacity and consumer habits (OECD, 2022; OECD, 2024). Communication policies should connect existing everyday practices like repair, sharing and donation to circular-economy narratives, so that people recognise their contribution rather than seeing circularity as something distant or abstract. In parallel, strengthening consumer-protection frameworks and enforcement capacities is important so that citizens observe tangible examples of rights being upheld in practice, for instance in relation to guarantees, misleading environmental claims or unsafe second-hand goods.

These findings have implications for both research and policy. From a research perspective, they highlight the need to integrate consumer-centred indicators into circular economy monitoring. Current metrics, such as circular material use rates or municipal recycling percentages, are essential but do not capture attitudes, perceived barriers, trust levels or rights awareness (Eurostat, 2020; OECD, 2024). Future work in Albania and the wider Western Balkan region could build on this exploratory survey by using larger samples, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews and focus groups, and testing specific policy instruments or communication strategies through experiments or pilot projects. At the policy level, the results support the argument that circular economy roadmaps should explicitly include a consumer-rights dimension, going beyond traditional product-safety and warranty rules. This could encompass rights related to repair and access to spare parts, transparency of information on product durability and environmental performance, fair conditions in sharing and rental services, and clear responsibilities for digital platforms involved in repair and resale. Embedding such elements in Albania's circular economy roadmap would be consistent with broader EU debates on the right to repair and sustainable consumption, while responding directly to the concerns and expectations of consumers identified in this study.

6. Conclusions

This paper has examined the circular economy from the perspective of Albanian consumers, using a descriptive survey of 100 respondents in four urban centres. The findings show that awareness of circular economy terminology is

relatively low, even among urban residents, yet many participants already engage in practices such as reuse, donation and occasional repair. At the same time, respondents report very limited knowledge of their rights in relation to product durability, repair options, second-hand markets and waste services, and they express low levels of trust in institutions to protect those rights. When asked what would motivate them to act more circularly, consumers emphasise three main enablers: clear and accessible information, convenient infrastructure for repair and separate collection, and financial incentives that make circular choices more attractive. Generational and city-level differences suggest that circular-economy policies cannot rely on one-size-fits-all solutions, but should instead be tailored to different local contexts, existing cultural practices and infrastructural constraints.

The Albanian case points to a broader challenge for circular-economy strategies: there is a tendency to focus on technical solutions and business innovation, while underestimating the everyday realities, perceptions and rights of consumers. If citizens are to be treated as active co-producers of circular value, they need not only better information but also credible, tangible guarantees that their efforts will be recognised, facilitated and protected. This includes robust consumer-rights frameworks, visible enforcement, and mechanisms that reduce the perceived risk of engaging with repair, reuse and sharing schemes.

Future research could build on this exploratory study by working with larger and more representative samples, as well as by using longitudinal and mixed-methods designs to capture changes over time and the reasons behind them. It would also be valuable to test specific policy prototypes in practice, such as local deposit-refund schemes, municipal repair vouchers or digital platforms for reuse, and to assess how these instruments shape consumer attitudes, trust and actual behaviours in the Albanian and wider Western Balkan context.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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