

# Will the Circular Economy Remain Unloved?

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## Abstract

Despite widespread policy attention on the circular economy (CE) transition there is growing evidence of systemic inertia in the consumer context. One recent study suggests a “Titanic effect”, where the current direction of travel is unsustainable and circularity is neither accessible nor desirable to wider audiences. Across academic and grey literature, CE barriers are framed not only as technical or regulatory, but also as behavioural, cultural, and emotional. Trust, confidence, and meaning repeatedly emerge as missing enablers of change, yet policy and scholarship continue to overlook the importance of the role of consumer-brand relationships and emotions in motivating consumers. Drawing on the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) and the marketing construct of Brand Love (BL), this article argues that the CE remains largely unloved with consumers beyond niche innovations such as Repair Cafés and pre-loved clothing. We propose that BL, defined as deep, enduring emotional attachment beyond satisfaction or loyalty, functions as a mediating relational mechanism that enables niche circular innovations to diffuse and overcome CE inertia. BL acts as a soft “relational infrastructure” in consumer–brand relationships, referring to the trust-based relationships and emotional attachments that make collective change possible beyond formal systems and policies. This soft infrastructure supports the diffusion of niche innovations and motivates consumers to switch to circular products and services with confidence. Since existing BL research has been shaped by linear consumption logic, we suggest further academic studies are needed to adapt BL to circular practices and business models.

**Keywords** Brand Love · Circular Economy · Consumer Behaviour · Consumer-Brand Relationships

## 1. Where is the Love?

This Perspective explores how Brand Love (BL) may help address a conceptual gap in circular economy (CE) transitions: the role of consumer–brand relationships across millions of brands in shaping the diffusion, acceptance, and scaling of circular practices (see Figure 1).

For this article, the CE is understood as a socio-technical transition aimed at reducing resource throughput through product circularity strategies such as reuse, repair, refurbishment, and service-based consumption models. The article argues that, despite extensive policy attention, consumers are a low priority in national CE plans (Barrie et al., 2026) and their role poorly understood, and this may explain some of the challenges in engaging with consumers faced by the CE (Bocken et al., 2022; Camacho-Otero et al., 2020; Kirchherr & Hartley, 2025; Tan et al., 2022). While this article is conceptual, the arguments build on established findings from transition studies and research into consumer behaviour.

In the strikingly titled “Circular economy and the Titanic effect”, Braga Gomes Nogueira et al. reviewed 145 case studies of the CE (Braga Gomes Nogueira et al., 2025). The “Titanic effect” is shorthand for systemic inertia even when evidence shows the current course is unsustainable. Root causes include overconfidence in the existing system, entrenched regime structures and investments, and a lack of engagement by governments,

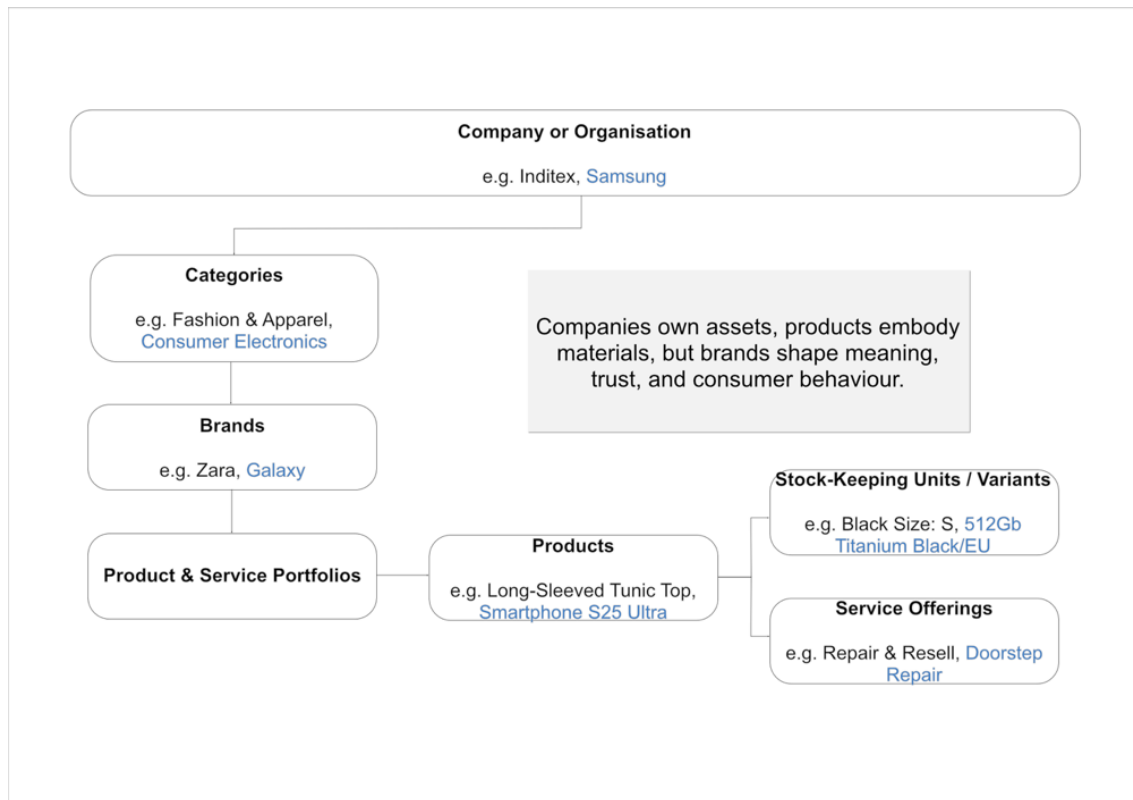
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businesses, and consumers. The result is an inability to translate knowledge into decisive behavioural or structural change.



**Figure 1.** Illustrative hierarchy showing how companies organise categories, brands, products, and services.

This is particularly acute with consumers. The UK-focused 2025 WPI Research report “Normalising the Circular Economy” (WPI Economics Ltd, 2025) suggests that the CE concept is stalling and not “accessible and desirable to the wider population.” Confusing language and poor communication impede meaningful connection between concept and action amongst consumers. A worldwide BSI Group report (BSI Group, 2025) highlights the challenges in changing ingrained habits and attitudes and addressing consumer scepticism (56% concerned over perceived reduced quality for circular goods). These findings reflect our research (Davis & Charter, 2025) that suggesting that the CE concept is not (in the words of the Green Alliance), “cutting through” for consumers and is liked rather than embraced with passion. However, this should not be interpreted as an absence of interest in circularity (Kirchherr & Hartley, 2025). Rather, enthusiasm and engagement is likely stronger in local reuse and repair practices than is visible through formally CE-labelled channels, including everyday but implicitly circular spaces such as charity retail and community exchanges alongside more explicit niches such as Repair Cafés and pre-loved clothing platforms that foster emotional attachment and sustained participation.

## 1.1. Literature review

CE literature is primarily focused on macro system changes, often treating changes in consumer behaviour, such as switching from product ownership to service-based models, as desirable outcomes or barriers. Also, complementary research on sustainability transitions at the meso- and micro-levels, particularly the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP), positions consumers as passive adopters rather than active participants in socio-technical change. Together, these perspectives overlook the extent to which consumers actively shape transitions through their relationships, values, and everyday decisions.

In contrast, the Consumer–Brand Relationships (CBR) literature, especially the construct of Brand Love (BL), views consumers as active decision-makers who shape their behaviour through relationships with brands, rather than simply responding to policy or marketing signals. However, brands remain in the background in

CE and MLP research, where the discussion focuses on organisations, products, services, business models, etc. As a result, the role of identification, attachment, trust, and commitment in shaping consumer behaviour represents an important conceptual gap in the CE context.

**Table 1.** Summary of the role of consumers across the three literature streams that underpin this article: CE, MLP, and CBR/BL.

Literature Stream	Main Concepts	Perceived Role of Consumers
Circular Economy Key papers: (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017; Kirchherr et al., 2017; Korhonen et al., 2018)	Resource loops and value retention, including reuse, repair, remanufacturing, and recycling to keep products and materials in circulation Circular business models and systems, such as product-service systems, sharing, resale, and take-back schemes Design for circularity, focusing on durability, repairability, modularity, and material recovery	Participants in end-of-life resource flows (sorting, recycling) Users of circular business models within transactional consumption modes Civic actors enacting pro-environmental norms Sources of inertia constraining system-level change
Multi-Level Perspective Key papers: (Geels, 2002, 2011, 2019; Schot & Geels, 2008)	Stratified socio-technical systems in which circular innovations develop within niches and confront entrenched linear regimes under landscape pressures Alignment and reconfiguration processes through which circular practices (e.g., reuse, repair, remanufacturing) gain traction across levels Transition pathways toward circular systems, involving the scaling of circular business models and the reconfiguration of production-consumption regimes	People who continue familiar patterns of consumption and reinforce existing norms Early adopters of niche innovations Participants in experimentation, pilot projects, and social learning Sources of social acceptance and legitimacy for emerging innovations
Consumer-Brand Relationships & Brand Love Key papers: (Aaker, 1997; Aggarwal, 2004; Batra et al., 2012; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Fournier, 1998; Park et al., 2010)	Relational constructs shaping consumer-brand bonds, including identification, attachment, and affective commitment (e.g., Brand Love) Mediating mechanisms translating relationships into behaviour, such as trust, loyalty, and attitudinal resilience Behavioural and market-level outcomes, including switching, advocacy, and adoption of sustainable and circular offerings	Shapers of long-term commitments beyond purely transactional purchases Influencers and advocates for brands with which they identify Diffusers of circular offerings, helping them move beyond niche markets Stewards of product lifecycles through care, reuse, and repair Partners and co-creators in socio-technical transitions

To address this conceptual gap (the role of BL in shaping circular consumer behaviour), the article proceeds in four steps. First, we review behavioural barriers to consumer engagement with circularity. Second, we introduce BL as a missing relational mechanism. Third, we integrate BL with the MLP to explain the scaling of CE innovations. Finally, we show how bringing together CE, MLP, and BL helps clarify the role of consumer-brand relationships in enabling CE adoption and diffusion.

## 2. The need to build trust

A CE transition for organisations, their brands, products, services, suppliers, and individual consumers is generally understood as a gradual socio-technical shift from linearity to circularity (Geels, 2002, 2011), yet public discourse often suggests that radical, systemic action is needed today even where the trust required to support switching to unfamiliar circular options has not yet been established.

At a national level, governments seek to prioritise policies beyond reuse, recycle, and repair, companies are exhorted to change longstanding operational and business models, and ultimately consumers required to switch from familiar products to “circular” ones or accept a rental service rather than purchase a garment or a washing machine. Together with mixed messaging, these pressures introduce uncertainty and so trust becomes a critical enabler of consumer participation and acceptance (Camacho-Otero et al., 2018; Vidal-Ayuso et al., 2023).

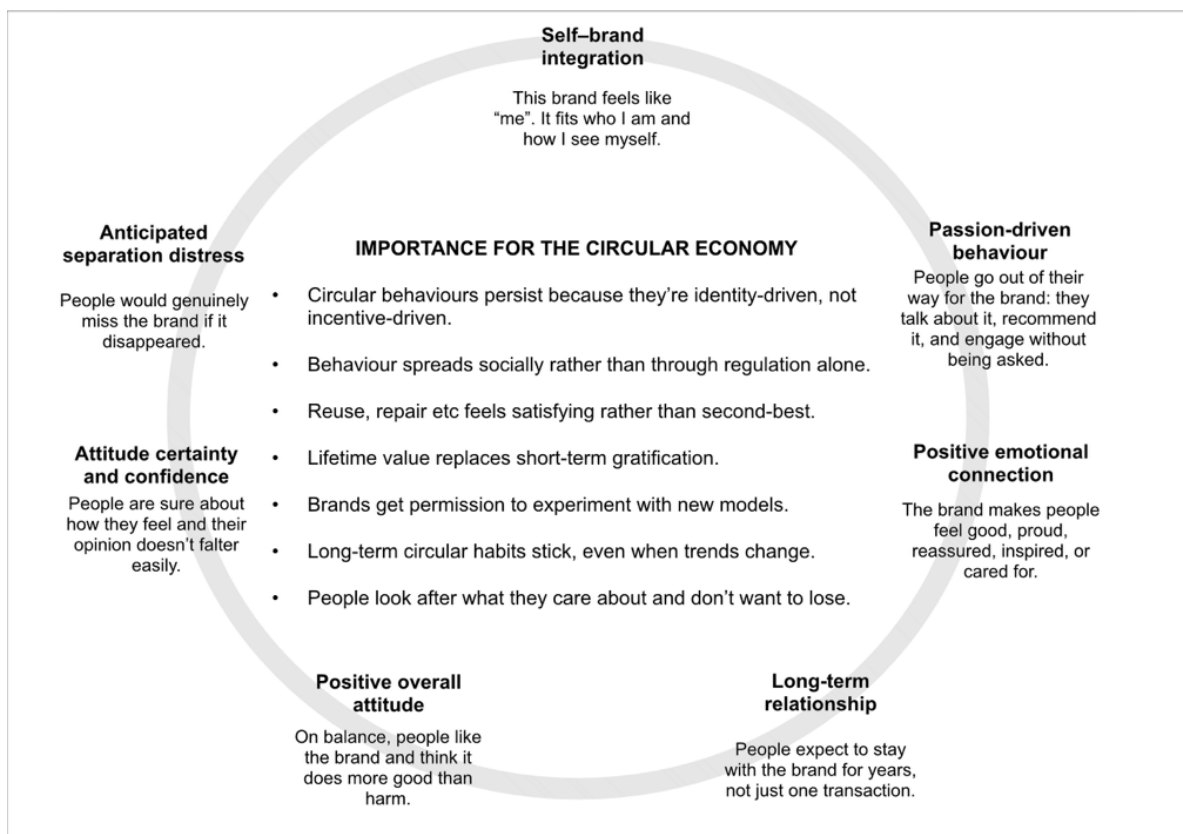
Beyond financial considerations, making any switch requires both trust in the product and the organisation providing it i.e., confidence that the alternative aligns with the consumer’s intentions and priorities (Dinh et

al., 2024; Wilson-Nash et al., 2018). In practice, this means believing that the circular option is reliable, supports everyday needs, and is genuinely better for future generations or the regeneration of nature. Importantly, such trust is strengthened by positive consumer–brand relationships and credible evidence that suppliers of circular products and services are not engaging in greenwashing (Zaid et al., 2025).

Across the scholarly literature, consumer barriers to circularity are framed in terms of behavioural and cultural factors as much as the practicalities of infrastructure, regulation, and standards (Bourdin, 2025; Camacho-Otero et al., 2018; Rohsig Lopez & Legardeur, 2024; Serra & Alfinito, 2025). Yet facts and figures alone are rarely sufficient to persuade consumers, despite this often being the dominant approach in policy and academic discourse. Stories, by contrast, have a powerful role in building trust by make abstract ideas concrete and lowering resistance to change (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). However, a strong narrative alone rarely triggers switching unless reinforced by social prompts and cues, such as local champions and trusted endorsements. Rather, a more effective transition depends on building trust through a deeper integration of what is meant by the CE with individuals' core values so that they understand what is being asked of them and can act with passion. In turn, this requires policy interventions, products, and services anchored in a grounded, evidence-based understanding of the intersection of circularity, brands, emotional attachment, and meaning-making. Without this, the CE may remain unloved beyond the progress made in innovation niches such as Repair Cafés (Bradley & Persson, 2022; Charter et al., 2025; Madon, 2022).

### 3. All you need is love

Brand love (BL) emerged in marketing scholarship in the 2000s to describe the deep, enduring, emotional bonds consumers form with certain brands (and associated products) beyond satisfaction, loyalty, or functional preference (Batra et al., 2012; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). The literature describes BL as mediating between consumer attachment and behavioural outcomes, for example by strengthening loyalty and increasing purchase propensity. The dimensions of the BL construct are illustrated in Figure 2 (adapted from Batra et al. with the authors' modifications and interpretation to reflect relevance to the CE).



**Figure 2.** The seven core dimensions of BL (Batra et al., 2012), with author's insights into the CE context.

BL captures a parasocial (relationship-like) attachment (Fetscherin, 2014) in which identity, meaning, and emotion play central roles. The concept explains why some brands achieve exceptional resilience, advocacy, and willingness-to-pay, even in highly commoditised markets or when they fail to fully live up to their purpose. It explains why a brand like Patagonia can openly discuss its sustainability failings yet sustain deep consumer-brand relationships with environmentally conscious consumers (Michael, 2023; Patagonia, 2025; Singh et al., 2022).

BL also explains why specific niches thrive more than the system concept. For example, Repair Cafés exhibit several hallmarks of BL (identity alignment, positive emotional connection, and sustained commitment): participation as volunteers or customers delivers high levels of satisfaction as it aligns with personal values such as care, thrift, competence, and responsibility. Repair Cafés also highlight that attachment can be directed toward a specific product (e.g., a much-loved jacket, or a long-lived toaster). While product attachment may support product longevity and repair, BL has the potential to shape wider behavioural patterns such as participation in repair, refurbishment, take-back, and service-based circular models.

We propose BL should be viewed not only as a relational outcome within consumer–brand relationships but also as a design principle for circular policies, products, and services. In this sense, circular interventions should be developed to foster trust, identity fit, emotional reward, and long-term attachment, thereby making repair, refurbishment, take-back, leasing, and other circular models more attractive, credible, and durable in practice. For example, a repair policy backed by legal rights may enable repair, but a loved brand can make repair desirable by presenting it as care, continuity, and proof of quality. Likewise, a leasing model may be economically efficient, but it is more likely to succeed when consumers trust the provider and feel that participation fits their values and self-image.

However, historically, CE research has focused on waste, production, and business models, and there is little scholarly examination of the intersection of brands, BL, and circularity. A scan of the last decade of marketing and sustainability literature found no mentions of papers with “brand love” and “circular” in titles, but there is relevant BL literature with a focus on green branding, eco-business, environmental and social governance (ESG), etc (see Table 2). Also, while annual lists of “most loved brands” are published (Newsweek, 2025) they vary in method and rigour (Bagozzi et al., 2017), and offer no direct connection with circularity.

**Table 2.** Authors' analysis of the major areas of research in BL relevant to the CE.

Major Research Areas	Illustrative Papers
How sustainability at both brand/product level (green attributes) and firm level (ESG performance) builds brand equity through emotional attachment.	“The Effects of Sustainability Perceptions on Perceived Values and Brand Love for Outdoor versus Fast Fashion Apparel Brands”, (Hicks et al., 2020) “Sustainability matters: Unravelling the power of ESG in fostering brand love and loyalty across generations”, (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2023)
The influence of emotional attachment to brands on consumers' sustainable behaviour (purchase, loyalty, reuse, advocacy, reduced consumption).	“The mediating role of brand love in predicting green purchase behaviour of organic cosmetic products”, (Daud et al., 2018) “How Green Brand Love Mediates Green Brand Loyalty in Eco-Friendly Cosmetics?”, (Purwianti et al., 2025)
Understanding ethical consumption based on moral identity, values, and emotional attachment to brands positioned as eco/green/sustainable.	“Impact of emotion in the choice of eco-luxury brands: The multiple mediation role of brand love and brand trust”, (Platania et al., 2019) “Environmental concerns in brand love and hate: an emerging market's purview of masstige consumers”, (Singh & Wagner, 2024)

Typically, BL research adopts linear consumption thinking, such as a focus on repeated purchase, increased consumption, and expanding share of wallet. Studies rarely examine whether BL predicts actions such as repairing, returning, leasing, or engaging in product–service systems, or whether national policies for green claims and labelling affect BL. BL research has focused on acquisition and usage phases but rarely on long-term stewardship, end-of-life actions, or participation in circular platforms. Hence, the current BL construct is theoretically and empirically optimised for buy-more relationships, not for where value is created through repair, reuse, longevity, or reduced consumption. There is a clear need to test behavioural mechanisms such as trust, commitment, and identity signalling in a circular context.

## 4. Unlocking action at Scale

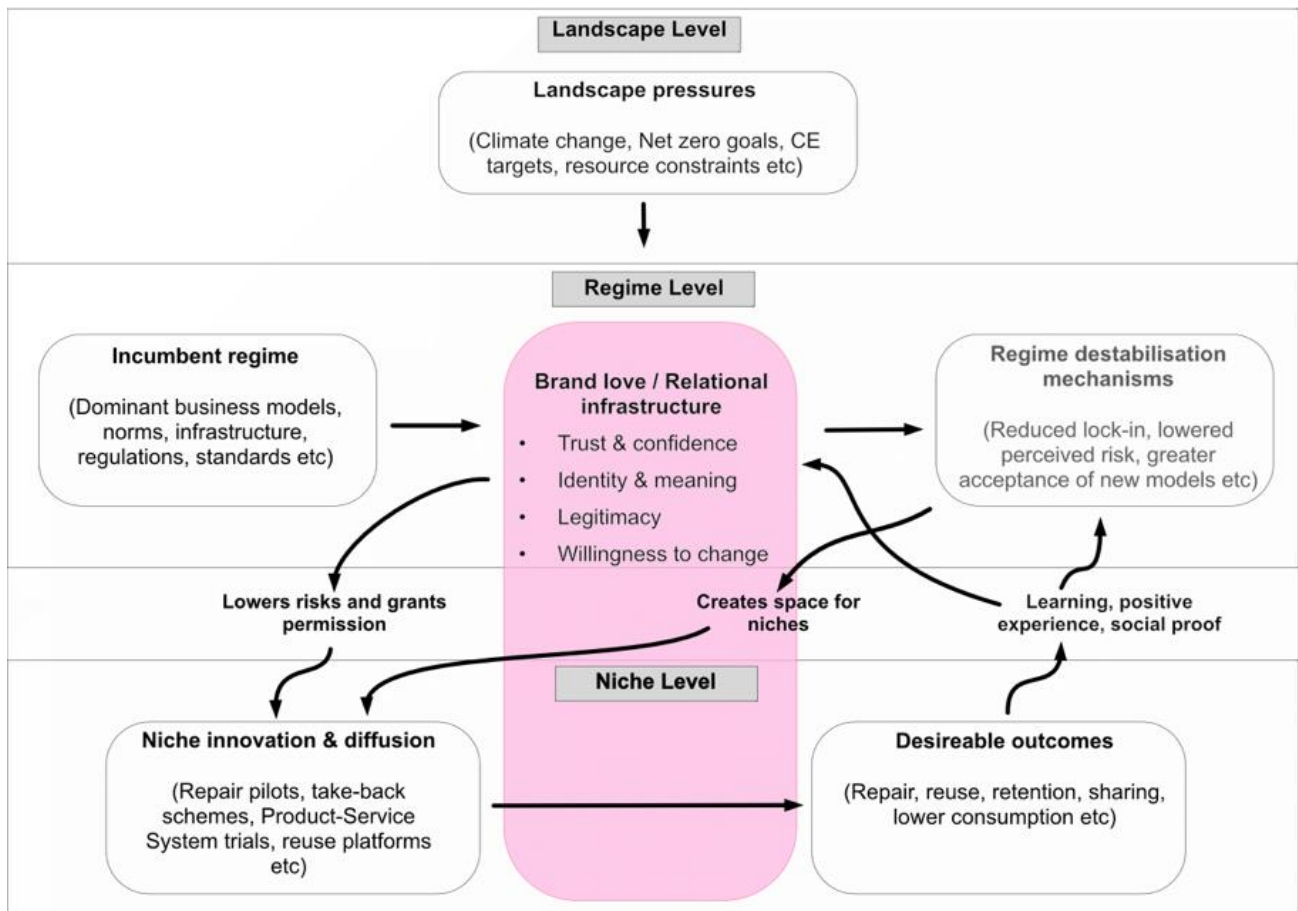
A major challenge in the CE is not only generating innovation but scaling successful niche practices beyond early consumer adoption. Prior research identifies legitimacy, sustained consumer acceptance, regime lock-in, and weak market formation as persistent barriers to scale-up (Geissdoerfer et al., 2023; Susur & Engwall, 2023). To understand how consumers and their brand relationships can help overcome these barriers, BL must be situated within a wider transition framework such as the MLP, which explains how innovations diffuse from niches into established socio-technical regimes under broader landscape pressures. While transition studies highlight social acceptance, expectations, and cultural meaning, the role of brands and consumer–brand relationships in shaping these processes has received little explicit attention.

Landscape pressures, policy, and regulation create enabling conditions for change, but they seldom generate personal emotional connections directly. Policies in areas such as consumer rights and demand-side consumption, backed by clear communication, signal to consumers (and brand owners) that circular choices are aligned with their interests. Also, as a recent stocktake of national CE policy frameworks shows, these are critical policy gaps, e.g., worker and consumer rights are only mentioned in 0.5% of over 100 frameworks (Barrie et al., 2026).

Within the MLP, emotionally engaging niche practices such as Repair Cafés provide early experimentation spaces. BL provides emotional attachment and functions as a soft “relational infrastructure” that stabilises new practices, helping them gain legitimacy and so accelerating diffusion into established regimes (see Figure 3). As a mediating variable, BL helps explain why some circular practices move beyond early adopters and become normalised consumer behaviour. By reducing perceived risk and creating psychological permission to experiment, BL encourages consumers to trial novel products, services, and business models.

Through consumer–brand relationships that build trust, emotional connection, and meaning, this relational infrastructure lowers resistance to change and supports learning and persistence. For individual consumers, BL creates confidence that they will not regret making a switch to circularity through brands focusing on emotional benefits (control, familiarity, reassurance, identity) as they introduce circular products and service-based models.

This relationship infrastructure is most visible where individuals and communities have direct, meaningful experiences. It is often grounded in place-based practices such as Repair Cafés, reuse hubs, surplus food distribution networks, car boot sales, and clothing swaps, where trust, shared values, and social participation are built through lived experience. Brands can also develop similar forms of meaning and attachment through the new consumer touchpoints created by service-based and product-oriented circular models, including certified refurbished product programmes, branded resale platforms, repair and care services, membership-based lending services, and take-back or upgrade schemes. In these settings, circular transition depends less on promoting the CE as an abstract economic concept and more on fostering trusted relationships that make circular practices feel familiar, worthwhile, and lasting.



**Figure 3.** The authors' interpretation of the enabling role of BL as emotional infrastructure within the Multi-Level Perspective (Geels, 2024).

## 5. Conclusion

Consumer-brand relationships are central to increasing the pace towards more circular products, services, and business models. Building BL offers a pathway to overcoming CE inertia by supporting the diffusion of niche innovations into established regimes. BL is most visible at the niche level in emotionally engaging circular practices, and at the regime level as trust and confidence in established brands and their owners. However, more intersectional research is required to understand the precise mechanisms in the CE context and close gaps in understanding.

To overcome inertia, those leading CE transitions should integrate BL as the emotional foundation for a course change. Bairrada et al. (Bairrada et al., 2018) show that BL is shaped both by utilitarian qualities, particularly satisfaction and trust in the performance of circular offerings, and symbolic qualities such as self-identification, repeated positive experiences, and long-term relationship development (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Accordingly, circular policy, products, and services should be designed around the progress people seek and their emotional needs (their “Jobs to Be Done” in marketing language) rather than relying on communicating abstract concepts or compliance arguments.

Also, clearer and more consistent definitions of the CE and related terms are needed so that consumers know what they are being asked to trust and adopt (Sanchez Moreno & Charter, 2025). Hence, there is a role for policymakers in requiring unambiguous labelling, standards, and consumer safeguards that make circular claims credible, reduce uncertainty in the minds of consumers, and contribute to a trusted environment in which BL can grow.

Consistent with Fogg's persuasive behaviour model, (Fogg, 2009), CE transitions are more likely to succeed with consumers when motivation, strengthened by BL, ability (skills and knowledge), and enabling interventions, including policy instruments, brand cues, and confidence-building mechanisms (warranties,

guarantees, labels etc), align. This also depends on consumers recognising that extending product life through repair, reuse, and refurbishment can reduce CO<sub>2</sub>e emissions and support climate change mitigation.

In this framing, CE stakeholders, such as governments, brand-owners, and influencers, play different roles in cultivating BL, helping niche practices scale, reducing resistance to change, and enabling regime reconfiguration and changing the course of the CE.

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**Data availability** This study did not involve the generation or analysis of primary datasets. All information used is derived from publicly available sources cited in the manuscript. Therefore, data sharing is not applicable

## Declarations

**Competing interests** Author Trevor Davis is employed by the company Trevor Davis & Associates Ltd. Martin Charter declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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