Review

How Do LCA Studies Support CE? A Systematic Case Study Review

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Abstract

This study explores the integration of Circular Economy (CE) principles within the framework of Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), a foundational methodology in industrial ecology aimed at enhancing product sustainability. With CE offering a roadmap towards ecological sustainability within economic systems, the research examines the extent to which conventional LCA studies align with CE principles across diverse industries classified by the International Standard Industrial Classification (ISIC). Analyzing 282 LCA studies, the investigation identifies a limited incorporation of CE concepts. Most studies inadequately address CE in their goal and scope, lack CEspecific data in inventories, predominantly focus on basic recycling strategies, overlook CE-specific indicators, neglect CE considerations in sensitivity analyses, and omit CE-related recommendations in conclusions. These findings underscore the necessity for a more robust integration of CE principles within LCA methodologies, emphasizing CE measures as pivotal drivers for enhancing product environmental performance across industries.

Keywords: Life Cycle Assessment · Circular Economy · Literature Review

1. INTRODUCTION

Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) and Circular Economy (CE) are two rapidly evolving and growing fields within industrial ecology and environmental economics. The focus of LCA is to analyze the whole life cycle of systems or products covering a broad range of environmental impacts for which it attempts to perform a quantitative assessment. While product refers to a specific item or good that is manufactured and consumed, systems denote more complex or interconnected sets of products, processes, and services. Hauschild et al. (2018) explain that although it observes mainly environmental impacts, it can include both social and economic impacts as well. From an industrial ecology perspective, LCA examines how industrial systems – integrated set of processes and entities – interact with the biosphere, aiming to align them with natural ecosystems (Erkman, 1997). In the perspective of environmental economics, LCA support, for example, the design of policies and regulations by quantifying environmental impacts and establishing limits to be followed in the economy (Erkman, 1997).

In reference to CE, Kirchherr et al. (2023) states it has already evolved into a distinct field of study with a coherent set of shared concepts and practical tools. Succinctly, it aims to accomplish sustainable development by decoupling resource use and environmental impacts from economic prosperity and well-being (Pruhs et al., 2024). Among the various existing CE definitions, the one considered most eminent belongs to Ellen MacArthur Foundation (Kirchherr et al., 2017): "CE is an industrial system that is restorative or regenerative by intention and design. It replaces the 'end-of-life' concept with restoration, shifts towards the use of renewable energy, eliminates the use of toxic chemicals, which impair reuse, and aims for the elimination of waste through the superior design of materials, products, systems, and, within this, business models." Fostering product sustainability requires innovative solutions towards reducing the environmental footprint, as well as critical assessment towards avoiding

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negative trade-offs. The vision of a CE serves as a creative toolbox in order to identify potentials for further improvement, as the objective is to minimize resource input and waste, emissions, and energy leakages by slowing, closing and narrowing material and energy loops (Bocken et al., 2016).

The need to conserve and reuse all vital resources was already a core theme of the earliest works of industrial ecology and ecological economics. Indeed, Boulding (1966) essay "The economics of the coming spaceship earth" summarizes many of the basic ideas of CE. As stated by Lowe & Evans (1995), CE is an essential objective in industrial ecology, aimed at transitioning the product system, i.e., all the processes required to deliver the function of the product (Hauschild et al., 2018), from a linear to a closed-loop model. Simultaneously, CE is a pivotal focus point within environmental economics. Andersen (2007) asserts that environmental economics examines the economic justifications for CE, offering an analytical approach to identify which material streams and circular strategy options, i.e., strategies to achieve CE, provide the greatest returns.

The increasing significance of CE has consequently resulted in its extensive integration within the LCA research domain. CE has been widely used in the LCA research landscape for some time. For example, the use of LCA in the context of CE has been the subject of an LCA Discussion Forum (Haupt & Zschokke, 2017), a position paper by UNEP's Life Cycle Initiative (Peña et al., 2021), and numerous related contributions at scientific conferences such as the Life Cycle Management Conferences (Life Cycle Management Conference, 2021, 2023).

Within this framework, the LCA tool is very useful to evaluate changes in production systems towards circularity. According to Haupt & Zschokke (2017), "LCA should be used to quantify the environmental impacts of the implementation of a circular system". Therefore, LCA can be used to evaluate several options for CE solutions to ensure a positive balance of efforts and benefits in both new product designs and end-of-life treatments. In this regard, CE solutions illustrate how each CE strategy can be implemented, including numerous practical solutions such as upcycling, cascading, or servitisation (Gallego-Schmid et al., 2020).

Although the two concepts share a common goal, which is to foster sustainable development, sometimes they do not necessarily work hand-in-hand, which is mainly based on different perspectives for system optimization. From an LCA perspective, not every activity on closure products material and energy flows results in advantages for the total life cycle balance. Thus, burden-shifting and negative trade-offs can arise by implementing CE strategies, for example, if more energy has to be used for recovery of recycled material than for virgin materials (Schäfer, 2021). Other studies on LCA have also indicated that closed loops may not always be the best option for the environment (Laner & Rechberger, 2007; Humbert et al., 2009; Geyer et al., 2016).

From a CE perspective, LCA studies often derive no or only very simplified recommendations for further CE improvements across the entire life cycle. This is for example the case, if the conclusion of an LCA study is that the EoL stage has no or only very low significance for results. In consequence, little attention is paid to closing loops, i.e., the further use cases of products, components and materials after their first life has expired. Hence, the use of non-circular data in LCA may indicate a systemic limitation to support increased circularity. CE strategies adopting LCA for CE loops raise questions about the appropriate definition of the system boundary and how to allocate flows and impacts. Saidani et al. (2022) note that "modeling and evaluating the end-of-life and/or CE-related pathways (and their associated impacts) is still challenging."

LCA and CE can benefit from each other in the sense of a mutual interest for sustainability, i.e., both are "complementary" to help for "more sustainable decision" (Cilleruelo Palomero et al., 2024). CE fundamentally serves as a pathway towards enhanced ecological and economic sustainability. By incorporating CE principles into LCA and life cycle costing, the prioritization of sustainability is emphasized. Improvement measures can be compared in terms of their circularity, but should be prioritized according to their respective contribution to sustainability. LCA comparisons might arrive at clear recommendations for favorable alternatives, even if the related circularity assessments are questionable due to inconsistent or impractical CE metrics. As described by Saidani et al. (2022), LCA can be employed to evaluate the effects of circularity by assessing impacts throughout the product's life cycle, which includes the impacts of the subsequent 2nd, 3rd, and further life stages. In this sense, LCA facilitates the analysis of the relationship between circularity and sustainability performance, highlighting how sustainability impacts can either strengthen or undermine the case for circular approaches (Corona et al., 2019; Dieterle & Viere, 2022; Saidani et al., 2022).

Hence, this research aims to investigate the coverage and support of CE in LCA studies throughout industries. It is focusing on product-related studies as the most common form of LCA with direct implications in industries (Peña et al., 2021). Corona et al. (2019) argue that the use of LCA at the product level to evaluate circularity is a proper approach due to its considerable potential for addressing all CE goals. In contrast, at other higher levels, such as for cities and countries, alternative methodologies, such as Material Flow Analysis, may be more appropriate. Thus, the application of LCA within product systems reinforces the link between CE and sustainable development (Lei et al., 2021). The industries analyzed were classified according to the International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities (United Nations. Statistical Division., 2008). The macro-level subdivides the spectrum of productive activities into broad groups, specifically into major activities such as manufacturing. The micro-level corresponds to secondary activities, which are subdivisions of the primary activity, as exemplified by the manufacture of lifting and handling equipment.

Therefore, the current research focuses on the following research question: How do LCA studies support CE assessments at a product level? To answer this question, the study assesses the current status of CE integration within a large sample of LCA studies with particular focus on the ways in which LCA studies address the topic of CE within their goal-setting, scope, inventory process, and subsequent stages of analysis and conclusions. 282 LCA studies from various industries published in academic literature from 2015-2022 were reviewed concerning their inclusion of CE-related measures and activities.

Even though the number of studies involving LCA and CE has increased more recently, it is worth mentioning the existence of a few earlier scientific publications exploring their interplay. For example, Mayers et al. (2005) has used LCA to investigate the possible environmental effects of different end-of-life scenarios, circular or not, based on an example of printer in the United Kingdom. In another example, Mattila et al. (2012) proposed LCA as a general framework for quantifying the environmental performance of by-product exchange in industrial symbiosis.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

To answer this paper's research question empirically, a literature research for product LCA studies was conducted using Web of Science and including all publications in English language across all available categories in this research platform. The research was conducted for the period from 2015 to 2022, with the year 2015 being identified by Teixeira (2020) as a turning point in the publication of studies addressing the intersection of CE and LCA. The closing year of the research in 2022 was chosen considering it as the last year preceding the bibliographic research, which was conducted in 2023.

In a first step all papers were selected for which the following search string matched the publication's title: [*"lca OR "life cycle assessment" OR "carbon footprint" OR "environmental footprint" OR "environmental impact" OR "circular*" OR "recycl*"*]. To ensure that the identified publications cover a whole environmental product life cycle from raw material extraction to end-of-life, the following search strings were applied to the papers' abstracts: [*"cradle to grave" OR "cradle to cradle" OR "full life cycle" OR "entire life cycle" OR "all life cycle stages"*].

The initial search led to a sample of 564 publications throughout several macro and micro industries. The abstract of those publications was scanned for papers that did cover only few stages of a product life cycle, e.g. excluded use and end-of-life stages, and for papers that were of rather conceptual or theoretical nature instead of covering actual LCA applications. These two types of papers were excluded to ensure that the sample includes full life cycleoriented actual case studies only. The exclusion process was conducted by two independent researchers who each analyzed titles and abstracts of all 564 publications and the full manuscript in cases of uncertainty. Studies that were classified as 'relevant' by only one of two researchers were then analyzed jointly and classified as 'relevant' or 'irrelevant'. A total of 284 (50.4%) out of 564 studies were considered 'relevant'.

A final (detailed) examination was carried out on the 284 chosen articles from various industries, focusing on the product system and its system boundaries. The aim was to identify any disparities between the information provided in the abstract and the content presented in the main body of the articles. When such disparities were observed, particularly when the system boundary described in the abstract (typically 'cradle-to-grave') did not align with that presented in the full paper (usually 'only' cradle-to-gate), the decision was made to exclude these studies from the selected set. In summary, these studies were deemed 'out-of-scope'. As a final result, 239 'valid' articles were ultimately chosen for inclusion in the proposed study, out of which two studies had to be excluded due to unavailability of their full texts. The complete list of the 237 articles selected for the study can be found in Appendix A.

Each full text within the final sample of 237 studies was analyzed by at least two of the authors according to eight criteria illustrated in Figure 1. The criteria consider the four main phases of an LCA (goal $\&$ scope, inventory, impact assessment, interpretation of results). Criterion I examines whether CE activities are mentioned and explained in goal & scope. Here, CE activities encompass fundamental process characteristics 9R's strategies from Potting et al. (2017), such as recycling or refurbishment.

Criterion II reviews if CE related data is reported and documented in the study's life cycle inventory. The goal is to identify whether typical activities of CE are included and compiled in the inventory of elementary flows.

Criterion III checks whether CE-specific indicators, i.e., materials flow data in the end-of-life and/or CE-related pathways, are used within life cycle impact assessment. Saidani et al. (2022) elucidate the process of environmental impact assessment within the context of circularity, which encompasses evaluating the life cycle impact of subsequent iterations (2nd, 3rd, etc.) of products and materials. Criteria IV to VI all concern the interpretation of results and break down this phase into several categories. Criterion IV assesses whether the results include any statement of the overall relevance of CE activities. Within the obtained results, considerations are drawn regarding the significance of CE cycles for enhancing the environmental performance of the system under investigation. Criterion V, in turn, checks if CE activities are considered in sensitivity and scenario assessments. Criterion VI considers the availability of CE-specific conclusions and recommendations, providing an authentic depiction of the advantages and shortfalls CE strategies in comparison to linear production systems.

Criteria VII and VIII concern all LCA phases. In a CE context, the distinction of different LCA stages such as raw material acquisition, manufacturing, distribution, use, or end-of-life is particular importance, e.g. to understand the impacts of recycling and respective credits for secondary materials or the effects of sharing or reuse strategies within the use phase on the demand for all other phases. Criterion VII therefore checks whether a LCA study clearly differentiates different LCA stages in inventory, impact assessment and results. Finally, criterion VIII asks for the study's relevant CE strategies following the ten "R-strategies" according to Reike et al. (2018) and UNEP (2019).

All criteria were assessed for each study and classified on scales. In essence, an analysis of the diverse studies revealed disparate classification scales corresponding to each criterion, including yes/no-answers (criterion III and VII), graduated scales like no/brief/comprehensive (criterion I, similarly II, IV, V, VI), and simple selection lists (criterion VIII). All details concerning the literature survey including reference of all studies and assessments of all criteria are provided in the electronic supplementary material (ESM) based on MS Excel.

Figure 1. CE Review Criteria for Final Sample of LCA Studies (N=237)

3. RESULTS

To comprehend the economic context of all studies, the studies were categorized according to their macro and micro industries following the United Nations' International Standard Industrial Classification (ISIC) taxonomy (United Nations. Statistical Division., 2008). The 237 LCA case studies considered in this analysis cover different industries, predominantly manufacturing (150 cases), construction (44 cases), electricity/gas/steam/air conditioning supply (31 cases), agriculture/forestry/fishing (6 cases), water supply/sewerage/waste management/remediation activities (4 cases), human health/social work activities (1 case) and administrative and support service (1 case). The smallest three categories are summarized as "Others" in the following. The macro industries can be further broken down to a micro industry view, where within manufacturing electrical equipment, dairy products, motor vehicles, rubber and plastics products, beverages, and machinery and equipment are the largest groups. Figure 2 provides an overview of industries covered in the given studies.

Figure 2. Studies Distribution by Macro and Micro Industry Breakdown

A summary of all results for the different criteria is provided in Figure 3 and further explained discussed below. In Figure 4, an additional method employed to analyze the outcomes is rooted in the assessment of the relative involvement of macro-industrial sectors concerning instances where the articles classification attained the highest possible rating for each criterion analyzed, indicative of the most exemplary CE approach inside LCA available. Figure 4 presents both the categories` values for all industries and the respective averages.

Figure 3. Analysis Results: Coverage and Support of CE in LCA Studies

Figure 4. Studies With Most Advanced CE Coverage With Breakdown by Industry

3.1 CE Activities in Goal and Scope (Criterion I)

The results (see Figure 3) reveal that 84% (200 out of 237) of the LCA studies provide no or only brief information on CE activities within goal and scope. In their study, on beverage bottle, for instance, Benavides et al. (2018) has not fully considered recycling or reuse activities inside the scope, focusing only into the production stage and not including activities for CE looping at the end-of-life. The study considered data on secondary materials, but not the recycling process itself.

In opposition, 16% (37 out of 237) of all LCA studies provide a comprehensive view of CE in goal and scope. For example, Horowitz et al. (2018), in another study on beverage bottles, provide a comprehensive description of CE activities within the goal and scope. The aim of this study is to evaluate three different options for environmentally-friendly beverage bottles. The study considered resource circularity activities throughout the entire life cycle, including the recycling processes and their outcomes. In another example, more specifically concerning the product life cycle of wool carpet, Sim & Prabhu (2018) included a detailed description of the product's remanufacturing activity within the goal and scope phase of the LCA.

In industry relative terms (see Figure 4), the sector exhibiting the most substantial share of cases achieving a comprehensive view of CE in goal and scope is the construction industry with 25%, while the energy sector (electricity, gas steam and air conditioning supply) shows the lowest contribution (10%). Considering all economic macro sectors, the average among them remained at 16,5%. Evaluating the sectors against the obtained average, it is possible to see that only the agricultural (Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing) and construction sectors achieved a final result above the overall average, indicating a higher prevalence of CE activities in the goal and scope of these respective sectors.

3.2 CE Data in Life Cycle Inventory (Criterion II)

Only 20% of the analyzed studies provide advanced documentation of LCI data in terms of CE (47 out of 237 studies, see Figure 3). Advanced documentation means that exists detailed LCI description, including transparent and reproducible (absolute) values on CE activities. A good example for such advanced documentation is provided by Khan et al. (2021), who incorporated the numbers related to the inventory for all CE activities (Reuse, Repair, Recycle, Recover) defined within the scope of a specific study on composite pallets. The final inventory results, containing the numbers for CE activities, were made available in a file, along with the study, for consultation. On the contrary, the majority of studies (80%, 190 out of 237) features only basic or no documentation.

In terms of industry representation, the manufacturing (22%) and construction (21%) sectors exhibit above average values (17%) for advanced documentation, with the energy sector (10%) featuring lowest contribution again.

3.3 CE In Life Cycle Impact Assessment (Criterion III)

The results in Figure 3 indicate that only 8% of all studies (19 out of 237) use specific CE indicators, i.e., metrics designed to evaluate various aspects of circularity (see e.g. ISO 59020), in their final assessment. One example would be the study from Meyer & Katz (2016), who conducts an LCA analysis for bamboo-based laptops enclosure using different base materials options, aluminum, polycarbonate-acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (PC-ABS), or polylactic acid (PLA), and considered landfilling, recycling, or energy production during end-of-life. In this case, the impacts of the different CE activities were quantified and examined through mid-point impact calculation, such as global warming. Another evidenced is provided by Lee et al. (2021) in their comparative study of single-use surgical and embedded filtration layer (EFL) reusable face masks. During the LCA, the authors assessed the environmental impacts associated with the reuse stage, i.e., the washing process of the mask.

There is no significant variance across the different industries (see Figure 4). The average of studies with specific CE indicators remained at 9%, which is relatively low compared to other categories. No positive cases were identified for the agricultural and other sectors (Utilities, Human Health, Administrative Services).

3.4 CE in Life Cycle Interpretation (Criterion IV to VI)

3.4.1 Interpretation-Results (Criterion IV)

According to the category IV in Figure 4, only 20% (48 out of 237 reviewed studies) state a high relevance on CE activities within final interpretation stage of the reviewed LCA studies. Among these studies, there is Liu et al. (2021), who conducted an LCA on power batteries used in electric bicycles in China. In this study, results included relevant statements about end-of-life activities for CE, specifically recycling rates and recycling technologies. These considerations were important for identifying promising opportunities to reduce the environmental impacts of different investigated batteries.

In another study, this time by Lee et al. (2021), the significance of CE in the LCA outcomes is evidenced by the emphasis placed on the lesser impacts incurred through the reuse process of EFL masks compared to single-use masks. There is a discernible concern in demonstrating the benefits of environmental impact reduction.

Still within category IV, the manufacturing sector exhibits the highest incidence of favorable cases, accounting for 15% (35 out of 237) in absolute terms. In terms of relative industry performance, it also demonstrates the most robust performance, encompassing 23% of all studies within its sector. The construction sector exhibits the least robust performance (14%), while the industry-wide average stands at 17%. The manufacturing sector was the only one to remain above the average obtained across all sectors.

3.4.2 Interpretation-Sensitivity (Criterion V)

Following to the category V on interpretation, it shows that approximately three out of ten LCA studies (around 29%) did a quantitative sensitivity analysis on CE activities (68 out of 237 studies). Consulting again the work from Liu et al. (2021), it provides, for instance, a scenario analysis on the "promotion of battery recycling", displaying the changes in LCA results under low and high recycling rates scenarios. In the work by Lee et al. (2021), a quantitative sensitivity analysis was conducted for the two surgical mask options under study, considering the CE strategy reuse.

The manufacturing sector leads in terms of cases demonstrating superior performance, constituting 21% (49 out of 237) in absolute terms, whereas the sector others has supremacy in relative terms by industry (33%). The crossindustry average stays at 25%, concurrently with the agricultural sector displaying the weakest performance (17%). Three sectors exhibited relatively superior performance compared to the sector average, namely manufacturing, energy, and other sectors.

3.4.3 Interpretation-Outlook (Criterion VI)

With respect to the outlook category VI, only around 7% of the reviewed studies (17 out of 237) derive comprehensive recommendations for further action in terms of CE. In this case, "comprehensive recommendations" comprise specific and detailed suggestions for improving CE, including methods for implementation. For example, Meyer & Katz (2016) provides comprehensive insights within the context of CE while assisting in the selection of renewable and circular materials for laptop enclosures, such as the use of bio-based plastics. The authors draw attention to the tangible environmental benefits obtained through the utilization of materials containing higher levels of post-consumer recycled content.

The manufacturing sector exhibits the most favorable performance at 5% (11 out of 237), albeit modest in absolute terms. In the relative industry analysis, the agricultural sector attains the most substantial share with 33%. The average for "comprehensive" results within the category amounts to 13%. Only the agricultural sector achieved results above the average among the other sectors, potentially indicating a greater emphasis on applicable solutions in support of CE. The construction sector records the poorest performance among all industries, registering a mere 2%.

3.5 CE Across All Stages of the LCA

3.5.1 Life Cycle Stage Differentiation (Criterion VII)

In almost all studies, reproducibility and transparency (category VII) in terms of documenting LCA results is lacking, as credits within end-of-life were not documented separately from environmental impacts for treatment within end-of-life, as it is for example recommended by the Product Environmental Footprint (PEF-Initiative of the European Commission). The LCA conducted by Shu et al. (2021), focused on the analysis of two common alternatives for car batteries, is an example where the LCA results are categorized and quantified according to the product life cycle stages, namely the production phase, the use phase, the recycling phase, and the transportation phase.

The manufacturing sector obtained a final value of only 3% (7 out of 237) in absolute terms. Concerning the relative industry performance, the agricultural sector exhibited superior results, encompassing 17% of sector studies. The sector with the lowest performance is the construction sector, which attained a mere 5%, whereas the industry-wide average stood at 8%. Once again, only the agricultural sector achieved a result above the average among the other sectors.

3.5.2 CE Strategies (Criterion VIII)

According to the research, 91% of the reviewed articles are related to one or more of the CE strategies. Recycling is the most widely used CE strategy, mentioned in over 78% (184 out of 237) of the studies, followed by "Recover" and "Reuse", each mentioned in approximately 25% of the studies. The "Reduce" is mentioned in 28 times, or 12% of the studies. Following, there is the strategy "Repair", that accounts for 9% of the studies (21 out of 237). Results for remanufacturing and refurbishing strategies are negligible in absolute terms (8 and 2 cases, out of 237).

In the context of recycling, manufacturing takes the lead with 64% (117 out of 237), followed by construction at 16% and energy at 10%. The subsequent strategy, reuse, exhibits manufacturing as the most proficient sector, constituting 17% of cases. The recover option appears more notably in the manufacturing sector with 17% of the cases, followed by construction and energy with 3% each. In terms of repair, both manufacturing (6%) and construction (3%) emerge as leaders, albeit with limited success. Lastly, the reduce strategy prominently figures in the manufacturing sector, representing 8% of cases.

In relative terms within each industry, the recycling strategy is most prominently featured within the construction sector, accounting for 84% of the studies, followed by manufacturing (78%) and energy (74%). In the context of the recovery strategy, the agricultural and other sector holds a significant lead, representing 33% of the cases. Moving to the remanufacturing strategy, the construction sector exhibits the most favorable results at 7%, despite generally modest scores across all sectors. Negligible results were observed for the refurbishing strategy, with no sector achieving noticeable outcomes. Regarding the repair strategy, construction leads the way with 16% of the studies referencing this approach. The reuse strategy yields more substantial results, with the manufacturing and construction sector accounting for 27% of cases. Finally, the last strategy, reduce, is more prominently mentioned within the manufacturing and other sector, comprising approximately 13 % of references.

4. DISCUSSION

There is a leadership of the manufacturing sector in terms of the number of LCA studies involving CE activities. This leadership may indicate a higher penetration of the CE theme in this sector, with a stronger focus on the electronics, automotive, and plastics industries. Two other sectors with a higher number of publications involving CE would be the construction sector and the energy sector. Besides potentially indicating a greater penetration of the CE theme in these sectors, the results may also be a consequence of a higher production of LCA studies for these sectors. This opinion is supported by the work of Moutik et al. (2023), who conducted a bibliometric analysis of LCA studies from 1991 to 2022.

Considering the evolution of the quantity of LCA studies focusing on CE over time, an increase in the number of studies has been identified. Between 2015 and 2018, 87 studies were published, while between 2019 and 2022, 148 studies were published, representing a 70% increase over time. This growing interest in integrating the topic of CE into LCA studies indicates a trend for the future as well, given that CE is progressively gaining more significance in business, governmental, and academic spheres as a driver for sustainable development.

Results within both categories I and II (introduction/goal and scope, inventory analysis) exhibited a notable degree of similarity, characterized by closely calculated averages (16.5% and 17.1%, respectively) and relatively similar ranking of industries. This observation suggests an enhanced propensity for the availability of LCI data for CE activities when their definitions are comprehensively elaborated upon during the study's preliminary phase. Among the most commonly encountered secondary and tertiary activities in the articles, recycling and recovery stand out, jointly holding a supremacy over the others, followed by reuse. One reason for the absence of greater diversity in circular strategies within LCA studies likely stems from the more linear nature of the data used and the present absence of more precise methods and standards to incorporate additional cycles of CE into LCA studies. This view is shared by Cilleruelo Palomero et al. (2024), who argue about the current existence of LCA databases mostly tailored for linear systems.

Although a low presence of CE indicators in LCA studies (category III) was observed (8%), activities related to CE and their impact are indirectly addressed in the various analyzed studies by means of the statement of relevance (category IV), with high intensity (20 %), medium (4%), or low (38%). The existence of statements of relevance for CE activities in LCAs, in a higher proportion than those with specific CE indicators, demonstrates a potential future for the increasing incorporation of new CE indicators. The work by Saidani et al. (2022) also addresses this trend of greater inclusion of typical CE indicators in LCA studies, although it is yet unclear which metrics or methods are appropriate to evaluate circularity.

Additionally, there were a predominance of recycling (78%) and recovery (25%) over other more interesting options from a product integrity and consequent added value preservation perspective. The supremacy of recycling and recovery strategies demonstrates a potential disconnect between LCA studies and cutting-edge circularity initiatives.

Although the social aspects were not considered in the study, it is recognized that the implementation of CE strategies and circular business models inevitably will produce social implications (Padilla-Rivera et al., 2020). For instance, certain sectors, countries, and professions (e.g. related to raw material extraction or waste disposal) might lose revenues and employment. At the same time, the social acceptance and social norms and values will have a large effect on the actual success of circular solutions and determine the use phase of respective LCA studies. Future research might further include these considerations and integrate social LCA consideration into integrative CE and LCA approaches.

Regeneration is an important aspect and strategy of CE. Certain LCA studies evaluate regenerative strategies, contributing to restoring, renewing, or revitalizing natural resources and system. For instance, Seghetta et al. (2016)used LCA to verify the feasibility of a biorefinery that utilizes offshore cultivated seaweed to provide regeneration services. In this case, LCA results has shown the system was able to contribute to climate change mitigation by substitution of gasoline and soybean proteins, while returning excess atmospheric and marine carbon (HCO3). While this study subordinated regenerative CE strategies to the logic of the (ten) R-strategies, future studies could pay particular attention to regenerative strategies and biological cycles in the interplay between CE and LCA.

5. CONCLUSION & OUTLOOK

The results of this study reveal that CE activities are generally not regarded as a hot spot in product LCA studies, with only 20 % of the reviewed studies attributing a high relevance to CE activities across all industries considered. Secondly, it highlights the inadequate attention afforded to CE within the different stages of an LCA. Inside goal and scope definition more than 70 % of the reviewed studies provide little to no information on CE; in the inventory analysis only 7 % of the reviewed LCA studies provide advanced documentation of LCI data pertaining to CE activities; within impact assessment, specific CE indicators were scarcely encountered; and merely 14 % of the reviewed studies conducted a sensitivity analysis on CE in the interpretation phase. Building upon these results, this review exposes a notable deficiency in the extent of coverage and support for CE within contemporary LCA studies.

According to the results of this review study, different recommendations for further action can be derived for all industries considered. First of all, activities to foster CE need to be described in more detail in goal and scope as well as in inventory analysis. During impact assessment, specific CE indicators should be considered, e.g. by applying concepts such as Material Circularity Indicator (EMF, 2019), Circular Performance Indicator (Huysman et al., 2017), Circular Economy Index (Di Maio & Rem, 2015) or the identification of Life Cycle Gaps (Dieterle et al., 2018). As part of the interpretation stage, different perspectives need to be considered and sensitivity analysis of different CE scenarios is recommended.

The findings of this study reinforce and encourage research on the interplay of CE and LCA, concerning, for instance, the integration and proper representation of secondary, tertiary and further CE cycles into LCA studies. Furthermore, it would be worth finding out whether the comprehensive consideration of CE within LCA studies would significantly change the results and recommendations of existing LCA studies - such as those considered in this study. It should be emphasized and reiterated that CE is an important component for achieving ecological and economic sustainability of products and companies and that a comprehensive and systematic consideration and classification of CE in the LCA methodology is of vital importance for practice and research alike.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Juliano Bezerra de Araujo: Writing – original draft, developing of graphs and figures, drawing conclusions. **Michael Dieterle:** Conception and design of study, writing – original draft, reviewing literature, drawing

conclusions, validation of the study.

Luis Schell: Reviewing literature.

Tayla Herrmann: Reviewing literature.

Marina Haug: Reviewing literature.

Tobias Viere: Conception and design of study, writing – original draft & reviewing, drawing conclusions, validation of the study.

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DECLARATIONS

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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APPENDIX A

Further detailed information on the review of the identified LCA studies can be found in the attached electronic supplementary material (ESM). To find a fullsize table click [here.](http://circulareconomyjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Araujo_et_al_How-Do-LCA-Studies-Support-CE-A-Systematic-Case-Study-Review-Appendix-A.pdf)

To find a full-size table go to [http://circulareconomyjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Araujo_et_al_How-Do-LCA-Studies-Support-CE-A-](http://circulareconomyjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Araujo_et_al_How-Do-LCA-Studies-Support-CE-A-Systematic-Case-Study-Review-Appendix-A.pdf)[Systematic-Case-Study-Review-Appendix-A.pdf](http://circulareconomyjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Araujo_et_al_How-Do-LCA-Studies-Support-CE-A-Systematic-Case-Study-Review-Appendix-A.pdf)

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