

Performing the Circular economy: How an ambiguous discourse is managed and maintained through meetings

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ABSTRACT

The circular economy (CE) is seen as a structural solution to society's sustainability problems. But with a large diversity of definitions, CE is also often portrayed as immature or in need of conceptual synthesis. Rather than treating the bemoaned ambiguity as a problem, in this article we analyse its implications on CE practice at the example of meetings aimed at popularising CE to businesspeople. To this end, we build on a grounded theory approach to analyse ethnographic and participant observations of CE meetings in Sweden from a performativity perspective. We identify four major communication norms that are enabled by ambiguity in the observed meetings, and simultaneously manage and maintain this ambiguity. The communication norms consist of implicit standards for how people ought to act, talk, respond, and reflect in the meetings. We contribute to CE scholarship by showing how ambiguity is not a sign of failure or immaturity, but an integral and productive part of CE discourse, as it enables diverse actors to congregate around shared aims. Our findings may help CE practitioners and scholars to make explicit the ambiguity of the CE concept in meetings, and ultimately to navigate in debates about what society and economy we want to live in.

1. Introduction

The discourse of the circular economy (CE) has steadily gained ground over the past decade, being promoted by many academics (e.g. [Stahel, 2016](#)), policymakers (e.g. [European Commission, 2020](#)), consultancies (e.g. [Dobbs et al., 2011](#)), businesses (e.g. [Philips, 2014](#)), think tanks (e.g. [Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013](#)), or NGO activists (e.g. [WWF, 2019](#)). The core idea of the CE is expressed as a move away from an extractive so-called 'take-make-use-dispose' economy, transitioning towards more regenerative and restorative business practices that keep the value of materials for much longer ([Lieder and Rashid, 2016](#)).

While the historical precursors of the CE discourse arguably go back more than 50 years ([Winans et al., 2017](#)), the concept remains contested ([Corvellec et al., 2021b](#); [Calisto Friant et al., 2020](#); [Korhonen et al., 2018](#)) and ambiguous ([Geissdoerfer et al., 2017](#); [Millar et al., 2019](#); [Schögl et al., 2020](#)), being defined in multiple, sometimes contradictory, ways ([Kirchherr et al., 2017](#)). This ambiguity is often understood as an indication that the CE field has not 'matured' yet ([Geisendorf and](#)

[Pietrulla, 2018](#); [Homrich et al., 2018](#); [Kirchherr et al., 2017](#)). Some scholars even worry that continued ambiguity of the CE concept may lead to its "collapse or ... deadlock" ([Kirchherr et al., 2017](#), p. 228) or at least limit its translatability into practice ([Borrello et al., 2020](#)).

This article is concerned with the practical implications of the conceptual ambiguity of the CE. We depart from the assumption that there is, or ought to be, a single or fixed meaning of 'Circular Economy', which would imply that CE can be defined or implemented in one (best) way. Instead, we take a non-essentialist approach (cf. [Corvellec et al., 2021a](#)) and understand CE as a so-called 'floating signifier' ([Corvellec et al., 2020](#); [Niskanen et al., 2020](#); [Valenzuela and Böhm, 2017](#)), which suggests that meaning and signification of the CE concept are understood differently in various contexts and by various involved actors. Thus, CE is inevitably defined and implemented in a variety of ways. 'Floating signifiers' in CE and the sustainability arena have been suggested to depoliticise an issue ([Valenzuela and Böhm, 2017](#)): they increase actors' ability to agree with each other whilst silencing disagreement ([Niskanen et al., 2020](#)), allow for agreeable—but limited—implementation ([Koegl](#)

Abbreviations: CE, circular economy.

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and Kurze, 2013), and enable commitment to an issue despite business-as-usual conduct (Methmann, 2010).

To study the conceptual ambiguity of CE in practical settings, we chose public meetings and seminars in Sweden that were mostly organised by management consultants to promote the concept of CE to businesspeople but were also attended by the wider public. If we assumed that CE had a fixed meaning that can be defined independent of these meetings, we might investigate in how far meeting design and procedure are efficient in transmitting the idea of CE, or evaluate how much change a specific meeting can induce. However, following the idea of CE being a ‘floating signifier’, we, instead, propose that CE is produced and reproduced in communication. That is, the concept is not fixed, but rather emergent and contingent within the meeting, as it is shaped by the context, communicative procedures, and power relations embedded in communication processes between the meeting participants. Accordingly, it is important to study how the concept is used in naturally occurring talk-in-interaction.

In line with previous research on how social structures such as organisations and network meetings are performed through talk-in-interaction (e.g. Lewellyn and Hindmarsh, 2010; Schegloff, 1997; Taylor, 1995), our analysis of these meetings employs an inductive approach, allowing us to conduct an in-depth study of these. Specifically, our analysis of these meetings builds on an approach inspired by grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Furthermore, we make use of a performativity perspective (Diedrich et al., 2013; Gond et al., 2016; Law and Singleton, 2000; Nash, 2000), which allows us to disregard CE as a fixed concept, such as an explicitly set and attainable goal for economic restructuring that comprises definitions and rational decision-making frameworks. Instead, our approach understands CE as a set of discourses and practices that are continuously enacted and re-enacted (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015) in concrete socio-material settings in which the CE is negotiated, filtered, valued and solidified.

Contrary to most CE scholarship, we argue that ambiguity is constitutive of the CE discourse (Leitch and Davenport, 2007; Mény and Surel, 2002), which implies that what is being said and done in such meetings, by whom and how, are important for the way CE is performed in practice. To the CE field we hence contribute the performativity perspective, which shifts the focus of analysis from ‘what is CE’ to ‘how is CE talked about and done’. Concretely, we inquire *how the ambiguity of CE is performed in CE meetings?* In response, we identify four communication norms, which result in the meetings becoming an inclusive, hopeful, and conflict-free environment in which CE is promoted to businesses. We contribute to CE scholarship by showing how ambiguity is a central organising principle within CE discourse, and not a sign of failure or immaturity of the field (see e.g. Kirchherr et al., 2017) and outline the implications of this.

This article now proceeds as follows. First, we review the CE and performativity literatures, constructing our conceptual framework. We will then introduce our methods for studying the performances of CE meetings in Sweden. The Results section will then outline the analytical findings of our study, followed by Discussion and Conclusion sections, which detail our main contributions to CE scholarship.

2. Literature review

2.1. Circular economy: an ambiguous discourse

CE discourses in policy, academia and government have been fast expanding in the last decade. The vast majority of this research is focused on the environmental sciences, engineering, and technological issues to do with resources, waste recovery, remanufacturing, reuse, and recycling (Mahanty et al., 2021). This is because the core idea of the CE is to transition away from the so-called ‘take-make-use-dispose’ economy towards practices that keep the value of materials for much longer (Lieder and Rashid, 2016). Circular approaches such as “zero waste manufacturing” are being promoted to “eliminate waste across entire

value chains to the fullest extent possible” (Kerdlap et al., 2019, p. 2).

The growing, multidisciplinary CE scholarship has engaged with and integrated various precursor concepts, such as industrial symbiosis, industrial ecology, performance economy, natural capitalism, cradle-to-cradle, biomimicry and blue economy (Borrello et al., 2020), and additionally also engages with issues such as policies or business models for a CE (Mahanty et al., 2021). Precisely because of the fractured history, present, and future of the CE concept, it should not be surprising that there is disagreement over what CE actually means and entails. Kirchherr et al. (2017) have identified more than one hundred definitions, offering multiple, sometimes contradictory, ways of conceptualising the CE. This diversity and multiplicity is often seen as a problem, (see Table 1): it has been variously suggested, that the field of CE has not ‘matured’ yet (Geisendorf and Pietrulla, 2018; Homrich et al., 2018; Kirchherr et al., 2017), with the diversity risking deadlock and potentially collapse of the field (Kirchherr et al., 2017), hampering the realisation of CE’s potential (Reike et al., 2018) or impairing its implementation (Borrello et al., 2020). Others, however, treat CE’s ambiguity less as a problem but more as part of CE discourse, for example as an ‘umbrella concept’ (Homrich et al., 2018), implying that there is no absolute need for scholars to agree on one unifying, integrating definition of the CE (Prieto-Sandoval et al., 2018; Reike et al., 2018).

Perhaps, what this conceptual confusion indicates is that CE can be understood as an ‘empty signifier’ or ‘floating signifier’ (Corvellec et al., 2020; Niskanen et al., 2020; Valenzuela and Böhm, 2017), which means that there are ongoing struggles and conflicts over its meaning and practice. This perspective stems from the view that social reality is not pre-given or stable and would consider ambiguity a phenomenon to study and engage with (Corvellec et al., 2020; Niskanen et al., 2020; see again Table 1). In line with constructionist thinking (Burr, 2015), the past, present, and future are seen as something that is constantly re-imagined and recreated in different ways. It implies that there is not one reality of CE, but multiple, and context here matters more than anything, given that in different places different cultural, political, economic and social conditions, and traditions apply. Core to this idea is that ‘the economy’ is embattled and hence a conflictual process,

Table 1

Selection of CE literature engaging with definitions, roots, and the resulting ambiguity.

Authors	analysis of CE	implications for CE’s ambiguity
<i>ambiguity as a problem to solve</i>		
Kirchherr et al. (2017)	identified, coded, and compared 114 definitions of CE along 17 dimensions	heavily different definitions may cause the CE concept to “collapse”
Reike et al. (2018)	using literature reviews: outlining the intellectual trajectory of CE; summarising key developments but also problems	there is paradigmatic ambiguity in definitions of CE; to reach its full potential, CE needs to employ more coherent use of key concepts
Borrello et al. (2020)		CE’s ambiguity was successful for its popularisation but may be an issue in implementation
<i>ambiguity as a phenomenon to study</i>		
Valenzuela and Böhm (2017)	discursive-material analysis of CE discourse looking at CE as a concept connecting different ideas	the CE concept has been filled with meaning by various actors, leaving it to be an uncontested and depoliticised ‘floating signifier’
Corvellec et al. (2020)	editorial interrogating CE as a concept, discourse, rhetorical principle, and field of practice	ambiguity needs to be problematised, and any attempts to clarification should be questioned and interrogated
Niskanen et al. (2020)	analysis of press material on CE from various sides of the political spectrum	ambiguity leads to rhetorical agreement of key actors in the debate, while silencing and disempowering local conflicts around environmental issues; research needs to interrogate how CE is performed

involving a wide array of politics and power relationships (Kennedy, 2016; Ranci ere, 1999).

While Niskanen et al. (2020) show how CE, as a ‘floating signifier’, leads to ambiguity, which even has strategic purposes, we suggest that it is important to focus on what people in their daily conduct actually do when they engage in CE practices. This practice-based view has gained momentum in recent years, as scholars increasingly focus on how CE is adopted and implemented in organisational settings, studying employees’ and managers’ practices in a variety of different settings (Barreiro-Gen and Lozano, 2020; Cramer, 2020; Hobson et al., 2018; Schulz et al., 2019). More concretely, the emphasis of practices is important as it moves us away from the ambiguity of CE definitions, instead highlighting its social dimension (Murray et al., 2017) and context specificities (Schulz et al., 2019); it thereby responds directly to concerns about stifled potential and hampered implementations in the wake of ambiguous definitions (Borrello et al., 2020; Reike et al., 2018). In other words, CE and its ambiguity is performed. In Table 2, we illustrate the implications of various approaches to engage with the ambiguity of CE; in the following section, we explore the performativity perspective in detail.

2.2. A performativity perspective of circular economy

Following the considerations about the actual doing of circular economy, our article adheres to a performativity perspective. Performativity perspectives in the social sciences take an ontological position where reality—for example in the form of concepts such as CE—is constantly ‘becoming’ (Diedrich et al., 2013). This ‘becoming’ is often understood as an iterative and self-referential process, which draws on whatever has previously been performed (Gond et al., 2016). As such, the performed ‘concept’ is never stable, but, instead, is subject to constant re-enactment that is bound but not determined by materialities that are results of previous enactments (Callon, 2007; Law and Singleton, 2000). In economic sociology, for example, this insight has been used to demonstrate how scholarly thinking, such as in economics, shapes economic reality as such (Callon, 1998).

For Butler (1993), performativity suggests that references to specific

Table 2

Overview of how a selection of social science approaches and perspectives might engage with the asserted ambiguity in CE. The final approach, focusing on performativity, is the starting point for this article.

Approach	Assumptions	Implications for Ambiguity
<i>ambiguity as a problem to solve</i>		
essentialist	CE has intrinsic qualities so that there is only one ‘right’ understanding of CE	ambiguity should not exist (see the critique by Corvellec et al., 2021a)
descriptive	CE can be described differently by different actors; they all refer to an identifiable, ‘right’ CE	different definitions can be identified, counted, and compared; ambiguity should be minimised (e.g. Kirchherr et al., 2017)
<i>ambiguity as a phenomenon to study</i>		
constructionist	CE is not a single, static ‘thing’ but is negotiated and agreed upon by various actors	ambiguity exists and is unavoidable (e.g. Johansson and Henriksson, 2020)
discursive	CE is a concept which builds on and integrates with other ideas and discourses, depending on who uses it and where it is used	ambiguity exists and is identifiable through analysing concept use in context (e.g. Valenzuela and B�ohm, 2017)
practice-based	CE is what people say and do in relation to CE	ambiguity manifests itself in different community-specific practices (e.g. Schulz et al., 2019)
performative	what people say and do in relation to CE creates specific outcomes, which in turn shapes how CE is understood and thus talked about	how CE is talked about, understood, and implemented produces and is produced by ambiguity (<i>the starting point for our article</i>)

things, words or ideas re-enact the entities they point at (so-called *citation*). For this to happen, such an entity needs to be codified—so that it can be identified by others—, referred to, and repetitively re-enacted. This also suggests the possibility that such stabilised entities are remixed, counterfeited, or pretended (Nakassis, 2012). Crucially, it is not only humans who perform (Callon, 2007; Mol, 2002). Instead, performativity should be understood as distributed agency—human, non-human, technical—performing reality in verbal and non-verbal ways. Applied to the example of economics enacting the economy, this suggests that the economy is performed through an interplay of economic language, theories, and measurements (Cochoy et al., 2010).

In the same way, we suggest that CE is not a meaningful framework, discourse, or organising principle of the economy in itself, and neither a static concept, but it is enacted and performed specifically and contextually (see again Table 2). This has two major implications: Firstly, CE is a constructed and enacted entity. It becomes meaningful through its iterative enactment in making, doing, saying, referring, contextualising, and identifying. These enactments may correspond to pre-existing understandings of CE, but may also extend the boundaries of the term, apply it in new contexts, or (ab)use its reputation. Secondly, what is identified as CE is enacted by the whole socio-technical apparatus that defines, regulates, implements, measures and discusses CE. To a significant degree, this includes universities (Nunes et al., 2018) and, of course, also the authors of this article. Given the conceptual ambiguity identified above, it is clear that CE is performed differently in a variety of contexts. Yet, we suggest that such conceptual dilemmas are in themselves productive, and the CE, as concept, should hence be understood ‘in action’ (Chimenti, 2020; Richardson, 2015).

Following concerns in the literature about the role of ambiguity in the implementation, we identified public, business-oriented meetings at one place where CE is performed. Meetings are suggested to synchronise dispersed activities of a community, including organising and mobilising individuals (Haug, 2013). In the meetings we observed, various understandings of CE are explained and popularised by some invited speakers for their audiences, usually businesspeople. As meetings strategically dispose and negotiate individual identities (Clifton and Van De Mierop, 2010), and potentially resulting in collective identities (McComas et al., 2010), we want to draw attention to two professional groups that strongly contribute to the meeting: firstly, consultants, and secondly moderators and facilitators.

Consultants, who are frequent organisers and panellists of the observed meetings, are well-known for their roles in disseminating management knowledge (B ohm, 2006). Hence, it is to be expected that CE ideas are often integrated with, or derived from, traditional management approaches, such as resource efficiency (Fineman, 2001). Scholars have identified that, on the one hand, consultants often focus on rational, reasonable and profitable management approaches, yet, on the other, they also respond to normative, ethical and pragmatic ideals (Berglund and Werr, 2000). The work of consultants also involves storytelling (Clark and Salaman, 1996), whereby a specific and selective present and future is presented (Boje, 1991). In this way, consultants can be seen as ‘promissory organisations’, as they provide definitions, assessments, and visions to be consumed and interpreted by others (Pollock and Williams, 2010).

Moderators and facilitators tend to act as ‘discursive stewards’ of meetings, as they create spaces for participation, align dialogues, manage stories, and ultimately translate outcomes (Escobar, 2019), while also upholding order, as they manage turn-taking and act as gatekeepers of a civilised conversation (Habibi et al., 2020). Since most of the observed meetings happened online, their influence is even larger, making them responsible to “troubleshoot [technical problems], call upon [participants], and move the discussion along” (Earnshaw, 2017, p. 315), as well as to avoid unintended silence, and participants talking over each other (Seuren et al., 2021).

All participants, consultants, moderators, and facilitators as well as their professional identities, interact, coordinate, and converse. Taking

Table 3
Overview of the meetings analysed for this article.

Date	Organiser	Meeting Title ^a	Format	Target Audience ^b	Analysed Sections
21 Mar 2019	A science and media company focusing on the food of the future	Circular food production — utopia or future?	In person event; brief introductions, long panel conversation, ^c and a few plenary questions	“All actors in the food system: producers, processors, distribution, retail, consumers”	All (58 min)
3 Apr 2020	Publicly funded seminar series, organised by a coalition of a agrifood consultancies, regional innovation hub, and the national federation of farmers	To understand and find companies in a circular bioeconomy ^d	Online event; presentations followed by a panel conversation	Those that lead, decide in, or develop businesses and could be interested in CBE; the project of which the seminars are part is concerned with “new business models and innovation in a CBE”	Panel conversation (33 min)
10 Jun 2020	Innovation hub, and the national federation of farmers	How can we create business models that work in a circular bioeconomy (CBE)?	Online event; presentations followed by a group conversations and a plenary conversation		Plenary conversation (28 min)
2 Oct 2020		Innovation in a circular bioeconomy — inspiring examples	Online event; presentations followed by a panel conversation		Panel conversation (43 min)
10 Jun 2020	Regional energy agency	Digital actor conference on circular economy	Whole day online event; presentations in the mornings, group conversations in the afternoon	Those interested in becoming “a part of circular society in [the region]”; discussions with “representatives from the public sector, industry, and academia”	Afternoon group conversations (c. 90 min); analysis based on extensive notes only
14 Sep 2020	Swedish branch of a global environmental NGO	Launch of the WWF’s Baltic Stewardship Initiative ^e	Online event; brief presentations and extensive moderation	Project concerns “actors in the whole food production chain in countries around the Baltic Sea”	All (40 min)
15 Oct 2020	Two Swedish CE networking and consultancy organisations	This is how political parties want to focus [on CE] after COVID-19	Online event; panel conversation, interspersed with brief presentations; this is the only of the analysed meetings in which politicians feature as speakers	Not specified; invitation hints at “an enormous potential for ... a competitive industry in balance with climate and nature”	All (58 min)

^a Translations from Swedish by the authors.

^b Target audience according to the meeting invitation.

^c We use the term panel conversation here, because this is the best equivalent to the Swedish word ‘panelsamtal’ used in the respective meetings. This can be understood as a reference to the consensus norm that will be described later.

^d This title was on the invitation; on YouTube it is titled: “Circular bioeconomy — what, why, and how?”

^e Despite the lack of CE in the title, circularity was a key concept in this meeting.

this starting point, our article is based in a long tradition of investigating social and conversational processes (Heritage, 1998; Schegloff, 1992): As such, we understand meetings as a specific time and place where ideas are discussed. We consider meetings as ritualised spaces (McComas et al., 2010) with implicit and explicit rules, including who is allowed to speak, when, and in response to whom (Larrue and Trognon, 1993). In these, conversations are managed and navigated by all participants through metacommunication, which is communication about communication through non-verbal signals as well as verbal engagement with the communication situation (Craig, 2016). Metacommunication may, for example, indicate when a speech act is concluded (e.g. “I stop here”, by change of tone, by turning the microphone off), or how a speech act is to be interpreted or understood (e.g. “I agree with ...”, “My opinion is ... because I am an expert in this topic”); for more examples, see the some metacommunication observed in our data in Appendix Table A3).

Present in all meetings, metacommunication establishes, displays, and applies locally defined and community-specific communication norms and coordination procedures that shape content and format of the meetings (Angouri, 2012). These communication norms support the creation of shared understanding, socially coherent behaviour, and ultimately collective action, in that they not only influence language use, but also shape what are considered to be valid inferences, interpretations, and perceptions of a situation (Ghosh et al., 2004; Weigand and de Moor, 2003). In this article, we identify communication norms that allow practitioners to manage and maintain the ambiguity of CE.

3. Methodology

A performativity perspective suggests that reality is constantly ‘becoming’ (Diedrich et al., 2013), which means it is enacted by people

in specific contexts, and thereby attains its meaning. Following our discursive, grounded theory approach, we have thus analysed how CE is performed in public, business-oriented meetings, specifically aiming to understand how the CE intended to inform and inspire audiences through the explaining, illustrating, and discussing of the concept. As such, our research builds on a deep engagement of the social sciences with the CE concept (Corvellec et al., 2021b; Hobson et al., 2018; Kovacic et al., 2019). Concretely, we ask the following research question: *How is the ambiguity of CE performed in CE meetings?* To respond to this, we have conducted qualitative research—drawing on ethnographic approaches and participant observation (Gans, 1999; Jorgensen, 2015)—analysing our data through an inductive approach inspired by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Such a methodological approach enables an in-depth analysis of the norms, procedures, and formal and informal rules of these CE meetings, understanding their cultural micro-mechanisms, power relations and everyday practices (Gioia et al., 2013). This grounded approach provides for richer, in-depth understandings that are normally not feasible with a quantitative methodology (Murphy et al., 2017).

Accordingly, throughout 2020, we identified business-oriented meetings in Sweden that mentioned CE in their title or invitation text with the help of mailing lists, personal contacts, internet searches, and our membership of CE advocacy organisations. Most meetings were free and open to attend, but some were members-only meetings or paid-for workshops. Many meetings were focused on food systems, sometimes labelled as ‘circular bioeconomy’. As a result of a targeted search on the video platform YouTube, we added one further meeting on the ‘circular bioeconomy’ from 2019 to our corpus.¹ Due to the COVID-19 pandemic

¹ We did not include a number of meetings and presentations which focused on CE but did not do so from an agri-food perspective.

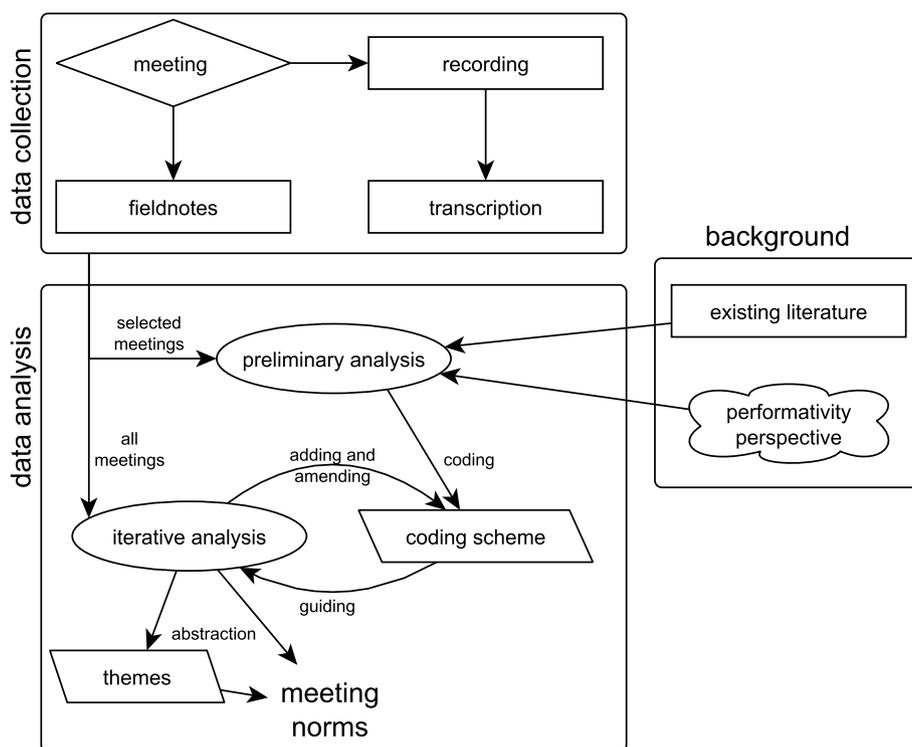


Fig. 1. Overview of the data analysis process.

starting in early 2020, many observed meetings happened online. Most meetings were attended by at least one team member, taking extensive research notes and sensitising ourselves to the CE community of practice.

Overall, we attended 18 meetings with a total duration of around 35.5 h (see Appendix Table A1). Although all attended meetings informed our understanding, we analysed 5.5 h of 7 meetings in more depth, for which we either obtained permission to record, or they were recorded and shared by the organisers, or we made extensive field notes. These analysed parts of meetings stood out because of their interactivity between panellists, speakers and participants. We assumed that interactivity would allow more insights into variations in interpretations of, and negotiations about, the nature and definition of CE. An overview of the meetings analysed is presented in Table 3.

As already mentioned, to analyse our data we employed a data exploration approach broadly inspired by grounded theory. While grounded theory is sometimes critiqued for not being able to uncover causality or establish generalisability (El Hussein et al., 2014), the strength of this approach is its aptness for exploring connections in the data to develop theoretical concepts (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The approach, originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), has become a popular methodological approach in the social sciences (e.g. Gioia et al., 2013; Glaser et al., 2013; Murphy et al., 2017) to formulate theory, particularly using qualitative data. While qualitative data tends to be highly contextual, the thorough process of coding and abstraction enables the researcher to develop higher level concepts that can be transferred to and applied in other contexts. Hence, proponents of grounded theory argue that the approach clearly shows how, grounded in the data, theory was developed and analytical insights derived.

In applying a grounded theory methodology, researchers develop codes inductively based on their data; as they code and review more data, codes are increasingly aggregated and abstracted to form new insights or ‘theory’ (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Specifically, we have performed our analysis as follows (see also Fig. 1): Based on our fieldnotes, methodological assumptions, existing literature, and

in-depth re-watching² of three of the meeting excerpts, we developed codes and thereafter a coding scheme to analyse the meetings, whereby we associated relevant sequences with all matching codes. Using this, we analysed all chosen meeting excerpts in detail, adding and amending our coding as necessary (see Appendix Table A3 for the final codes with examples) whilst continuously discussing emerging insights. Taking advantage of the diverse skills of our research team—including variegated prior experience in analysing the CE, meetings, interaction, or communication more broadly—, we have conducted two stages of abstraction: firstly, each of us individually developed an outline of 3–7 themes in the data. Secondly, through discussion and constant interaction with the data, we abstracted these themes into four overall communication norms of CE performativity in meetings, which are discussed in the next section.

4. Results

A typical CE meeting involves an invitation which is disseminated online via mailing lists, newsletters, or social media, an associated website for further information, and a registration website where one is asked to provide name, organisation, and email address. Meetings are often framed as “inspiration meeting”, “breakfast mingle”, or “trend-spotting” and are said to serve purposes of “networking”, “becoming inspired”, “learning”, or “being informed.” The meetings are all arranged by organisations with a financial or ideological interest in corporate sustainability, and most meetings did not touch upon other concepts related to CE or corporate sustainability, such as industrial symbiosis, cradle-to-cradle, or blue economy. Providers of knowledge services, including but not limited to management consultants, are prominent invited speakers. The meetings we observed are largely industry-focused—many specifically focused on the food industry—with meeting invitations seeming to appeal to businesses (especially small-

² Even though we made transcripts for the meetings, throughout the analysis leading to this article, we stuck as close to the audiovisual recording as possible.

and medium-sized enterprises) as well as public authorities, and universities. The meetings are commonly facilitated by one or two moderators acting impartially; however, in some meetings they³ may appear self-interested or would consider themselves an expert on the topic. Towards the end of the meeting, the moderator usually summarises the meeting. At the end, participants are occasionally asked to join other meetings, a network, a newsletter, or a Facebook group. Official follow-up communication, if any, disseminated links to the recordings or flag up future events. We will now turn to four specific communication norms of CE performativity that we repeatedly identified in the meetings we observed and participated in.

4.1. The circularity norm

Many meetings start by explaining and elaborating the CE concept. Even though audiences may have some subject knowledge, CE is often presented as a unique and transformative idea. This is often done through the variegated use of the terms “circular” and to a lesser extent “circularity” as well as through the use of CE examples. Some of the most peculiar or metaphorical uses of the idea of circularity, we found in an ice-breaker by a moderator professing to have got “a circular haircut” or in a participant’s assertion that circularity could be “tied” like a knot. While certainly an exception, the ubiquitous, sometimes playful and occasionally Kafkaesque engagement with circularity was deconstructed by one participant acknowledging that “one speaks circularity” in these meetings, implying that meeting and participants congregate around this word, regardless of its meaning. Despite the breadth of ideas, we could not observe targeted attempts to bring clarity to the variegated use of “circular” and “circularity.”

In these meetings, “linearity” is always quickly set up as the main enemy. The idea of “linearity” denotes a state of organising the economy that is seen as outdated, but still dominant outside the meeting space. As one panellist noted:

“then [in the industrialisation] cheap food was needed, and then similarly [they] looked at how they could effectivise food production in linear flows, one views everything as linear, that is why we are where we are ... and this is something we have to reckon with.”

Setting up “circularity” as the successor to “linearity” establishes a dichotomy of old and wrong vs. new and right—or to say it in the words of one panellist: “in fact, CE is about doing good”, opposing the destruction attributed to the linear economy. Supported by a sense of urgency and hope (both discussed below), references to systems thinking, actor collaboration, and the responsibility of businesses to be proactive, meeting participants are forged into an identity construction that opposes ‘us’ (circular) and ‘them’ (linear).

“Circularity” is also used to denote a vision that can be created, reached and worked towards, but mostly in an ideal-type, future-scenario way. The concept acts as a target marker that is left undiscussed, and yet often appears to imply by default ‘sustainability’ and a solution to the urgent social and environmental problems faced by the world. Circularity appears not simply as a tweaked version of the current economy with more circular flows but, instead, signals a new and completely rethought economic and social system.

Another use of “circularity” enables speakers to rhetorically measure, compare, or qualify progress. Participants suggest that something can become and should be “more and more circular”; and more than one moderator wondered: “How circular is Sweden today?” Understanding circularity on a scale may blur the aforementioned dichotomy between linearity and circularity. And yet, a scale makes plausible what has been called “encompassing” or “total” circularity by meeting participants,

³ Since gender performativity was not part of our analysis, we use the gender-neutral pronouns they/them/their to refer to any singular person in addition to the use of these as plural pronouns.

suggesting there are different degrees of circularity. Furthermore, this scale acknowledges the progress actors have made on their journey towards the ideal state of circularity. Circularity-as-process thus makes it easy to identify with the ‘we-circular’ identity, even for those who are still more on the “linear” side. In one meeting we attended but not analysed, “linear companies” were allowed to join with the explicit hope that they might become more circular.

Reflecting on the variegated uses of “circular” and “circularity”, we can say that these terms act as ‘floating signifiers’ because they denote different and sometimes incoherent ideas. Yet, they are productive because they are used to bringing different understandings, interpretations, and ideas together, forging shared identities. That is, “circularity” is performed as sufficiently ambiguous, allowing all participants to join the journey, also because there is an implicit assumption that circularity will solve current, urgent problems. Hence, circularity is a future, ideal state, but also something that is situated in the meetings. Talking about circularity in these different registers is thus an identity-forging process.

We suggest that in the meetings the multiple understandings of circularity are integrated through “good examples” for CE, which are frequently used to illustrate the concept (see Appendix Table A2 for a few illustrations). While the ‘butterfly model’, made popular by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, is reproduced and discussed as a framework for circularity-as-state, narrated examples are normally used to acknowledge that things are not quite perfect yet, thus representing circularity-as-process. Thus, in the observed meetings CE is not understood as a monolithic concept, but rather as something that can be flexibly interpreted, exemplified, and illustrated on an unclear scale towards an undefined vision of “total circularity.” Any contribution is accepted as circular and thus potentially meaningful, and all participants are part of a visionary community striving towards circularity, even though they may disagree on the execution and pathways there. An overall hopeful and collaborative atmosphere renders all contributions productive in that they offer an illustration of what circularity might be, whilst simultaneously granting the speaker the status of an active and creative follower of CE and being a source of inspiration for other participants. The next section will deal with this hope norm.

4.2. The hope norm

Throughout the meetings, participants variously express attitudes of optimism about the present and hope for the future. Such expressions are central to not only the interpretation, negotiation, and shared meaning-making of CE. We argue that this manifests in a hope norm: it sets a standard for how people ought to act, talk, respond, and reflect in the meetings. Just like with norms in general, this is never explicitly expressed or pronounced by anyone in the meetings, but still aligned with, with few exceptions.

A hope norm is invoked, for example, when collaboration is argued to be crucial in achieving the CE. Collaboration is frequently argued to be essential for the progress of businesses, particularly those that are struggling due to legislations and standards that are “lagging behind”, and consequently “prevents circular business models from being implemented.” Through phrases such as “doing things together”, “joining arms”, and “helping each other out”, actors are suggested to be able to overcome obstacles, creating a sense of community and solidarity. One of the observed meetings was closed by the moderator saying: “so, in conclusion, we will do this *together*.” Yet, this collaborating community also remains unspecified. Participants argue that “we must collaborate for real”, “not just talk”, “not create just another project”, and that collaboration should result in something that is beneficial for all parties. Furthermore, collaboration should be authentic, building on mutual trust, talking, and also listening and mutual understanding. The hope norm thus creates expectations of change for the better, not only for economy and environment but also the actual workings of businesses.

The aforementioned “good examples” of CE initiatives also contribute to the construction of the hope norm. One example of this is a “circular project” as described in a brief talk, where fish is produced using insects that are reared on food waste. After the stages of production are described in detail, it is emphasised that in comparison to normally-fed fish, expert chefs gave it “a tremendously good taste evaluation, there was more wild-fish-taste and better texture in the insect-fish.” The moderator concludes that the project is “undeniably exciting to follow”—a metacommunicative phrase that we observed several times in our corpus of meetings—, and that the presenter will come back with more “exciting projects.” This affirmation implies that positive outcomes can be expected and there is reason to be hopeful about the potential of this (and other) circular projects.

In addition to being marked as exciting, “good examples” are also referred to as sources of inspiration that spur others into action. Yet, they present a wide variety of circularity approaches, and their feasibility and potential for inspiration is rather assumed. Here, CE appears as if it could be achieved in multiple and even contrasting ways; for example, while one panellist mentions technical solutions, such as to “create food out of thin air”, another panellist in a different meeting emphasises the need “to go back to basics”, applying the same thinking as in “the old peasant society.” Both, the absence of explicit counterexamples and the affirmation of nearly all mentioned examples by the moderator or other meeting participants, support the idea of the hope norm which renders circularity attainable, possible for everyone to achieve. The underlying critical question whether all these separate solutions are enough to reach sustainability is however not raised.

The hope norm can also be observed in claims or promises about the issues that CE is said to be able to address. These issues include several global and local issues simultaneously, such as environmental sustainability, waste management and the struggle of smaller agricultural businesses to be profitable. One moderator, for example, describes circular food production as a “triple-win”, an upgrade of the cultural expression of a win-win situation. Here, the three “wins” are suggested to be increased food production, “great” benefits for the environment, and the opportunity to make profit from waste. This list is followed by a question to the panel: “why haven’t we always done this [circular food production]?” The following silence is then met with lauding the ideas as this “seems to be so great”, and an attempted response by a panellist is interrupted by the moderator with a rhetorical question “why doesn’t everyone do this?” Hence, CE is construed as a hopeful solution to multiple crises, which renders CE as a desirable, obvious, and probably inevitable solution.

Furthering the performed ability of CE meetings to draw hope from dire situations, the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused many meetings to be held online, is described as devastating in many ways, yet several examples of positive changes are provided, including an improvement in air quality, reduction of climate impact, and “new lifestyles at the individual level.” Especially stockpiling and worries of supply chain disruptions in the beginning of the pandemic in spring 2020 lead “insights to sink in for us all” that without food we cannot survive, thus strengthening the case for more resilient, local or national food systems. The strong expectation of a positive post-pandemic recovery, the ability to “rearrange society very quickly” in the face of existential threats, also contributes to the construction of a hope norm. In line with this, one meeting was titled “this is how political parties want to implement [the CE] after COVID-19”, suggesting that the question is not whether CE is a meaningful solution but how to get there. This focus on consensus will be elaborated next.

4.3. The consensus norm

CE meeting participants tend to agree with each other, with few exceptions. This specifically concerns the norm of being hopeful, as described in the previous section, but can also be seen in the lack of challenges towards CE and its positive framing. This is done by all types

of participants: moderators, speakers, and people participating in discussions or commenting on what has been said. Therefore, we argue that a norm of consensus is enacted.

As part of this norm, participants are inclusive when relating to CE. The invitations often express that the meeting is open for everyone to join and aims for participants to “be inspired” by whatever they will encounter in the meeting. In that way, there is a missionary ambition pronounced to get more people on board. Whether the participants share the exact same idea of what CE means is not made clear, but they nevertheless co-construct the standpoint that CE is something desirable without emphasising potentially problematic differences. All understandings, even potentially conflicting ones, appear to be actively embraced and thus add to a rich and variegated picture of what CE means, for example, when in one meeting the panellists are asked to describe what CE “means to you.” This firstly acknowledges that there can be several ways of understanding CE without making this a problem, and secondly renders viewpoints subjective and thus preemptively disarms challenges from other participants. In this way, CE is purposefully left to be a ‘floating signifier’, with audiences that feel included in their own understandings of CE.

We find that metacommunication is fundamental for creating the consensus norm. Here, the moderator often acknowledges what has been said by indicating the end of the contribution by thanking the contributor, and addressing and assessing the contribution, which is usually done by providing a positive evaluation or agreement to it (see also the previous section). These usually consist of a short “thank you”, or an affirmative “interesting” or “exciting.” A rather long example from a moderator consisted of four such statements: “Thanks. Very good presentation, I think. To me it was crystal clear. Fantastic.” Such positive assessments function as a transition between what has been and the next activity or speaker. Especially in open or panel conversations, speakers acknowledge the previous speaker by agreement, signalling that they align with the statement, but without expanding or concretising what they agree with. Indeed, as mentioned before, the CE examples provided by different speakers often contradict each other. Nevertheless, agreement with other speakers is still professed. The expression “I agree” thus seems to fill a more general metacommunicative function in showing that what is said or will be said is connected to what has previously been said. We interpret this as another example of how the participants align with the consensus norm: being positive, showing appreciation, and emphasising that everyone is on the same page to such an extent that it overshadows potentially relevant differences.

One noteworthy exception can be found in a debate where a panellist challenges whether CE really differs so much from the closed-loop thinking of the late 20th century (swedish: *kretslopp*, see quote below), expressing pessimism about how previous and current efforts are able to address the aforementioned global problems. The panellist here violates the norm of not questioning CE. By surrounding their contribution with assertions of being “the cranky” one, the panellist acknowledges they are doing something unappreciated in this situation, as they break with the consensus norm:

“I’ll probably be a little cranky here today and sit here and be such an old man who has already seen everything, and I often wonder [...] how many of you remember how revolutionary the *kretslopp* delegation became in your lives and for Swedish concerns [...] so when politicians get tired of an old concept like waste then they create a new concept and then think “shit, this feels fresh and energising” [...] So there is reason to be a little bit cranky and sad in the face of all delegations.”

The panellist then goes on to say that “you can shut off my mic.” In doing so, the dominance of the consensus norm—and also the hope norm—are acknowledged as the way in which panellists are supposed to communicate. By making the transgression and potential sanctions explicit, the panellist emphasises that they are aware of these norms as implicit yet overarching meeting rules. Slightly later, another panellist

openly expresses their disagreement to this view, reiterating that CE is indeed a new concept. We believe that this unusual disagreement is made with the purpose of justifying CE and thus re-establishing the positive attitude to it. So, the consensus norm is temporarily suspended in order to reassert that CE is something positive:

“I want to say this with circular economy and kretslopp, some say that this has existed for 30 years, I don’t really agree with the analogy there and [...] the difference between circular economy and kretslopp thinking is that one has taken in the economic aspect, this is after all called circular economy and there is a tendency to forget this.”

This statement serves to repair the hope and consensus norms, which have been temporarily violated by one of the participants. The focus on the economy and profitability is what the next section is concerned with.

4.4. The business norm

Despite the consensus norm discussed above, it was self-evident in the meetings that many businesspeople were happy that, finally, a sustainability management approach emerged with business at its centre, as the last-quoted panellist emphasises. As most observed meetings focus on businesspeople, their self-conceptions and expectations shape another norm of these meetings, which was clearly focused on identifying businesses as both responsible for solving societal problems and creating profitability (Berglund and Werr, 2000). Together, responsibility and profitability act as the main norm and boundaries, within which meeting participants can and do voice their thoughts.

Recognising the multiple, complex and accelerating crises the world is facing, in the meetings a collective duty for businesses is identified. In order to achieve this, external stakeholders, such as universities, are drawn upon to legitimize an argument or a speaker’s attendance. For example, Wageningen University and Research is “one of the world’s best agricultural universities, if not the best, and they have several ongoing projects about circular food production.” Aligning with this understanding of collective duty, many participants introduce themselves with their organisational affiliation and what they are “already doing” about CE. Conversely, consumers are—if mentioned at all—reduced to trends, numbers, and passive actors that need to be convinced of something, even though one researcher-panellist questions “how much information can really create change for consumption.” Only in the politicians’ debate are actors outside or beyond the economy seriously considered to be able to contribute to solutions. In other debates, laws or municipalities are often called for to enable and support specific aspects of a CE, specifically by deregulating or re-regulating, as well as by providing funding and “match making” for businesses. There is a rhetoric limitation of agency for public and civil society actors, which follows and affirms longer-term developments in Swedish sustainability approaches, which have shifted from a government-led closed-loop economy (swedish: *kretsloppsekonomi*) in the late 20th century towards the business-led CE more recently (Johansson and Henriksson, 2020). Meeting participants thus render their own and other businesses as those responsible for tackling these issues, suggesting a normative responsibility for action in which business conduct becomes an opportunity for society, providing a fertile space for (unchallenged) calls for de- and re-regulation.

Recognising this normative responsibility is, however, not sufficient for action. We observed a normative expectation of CE’s profitability, whose fulfilment is assumed to be a precondition to make businesses act. This profitability is often conceptualised as improved resource efficiency which “makes more from less”, leading to double, “triple” or “multiple wins”—not only to businesses but also to environment and society (see above), thereby suggesting that sustainability will be automatically achieved through CE. Emphasising this norm, some meeting participants voice their frustration that their efforts for building a circular business have not been acknowledged by financial gains. For example, a

Table 4
Summary of the identified norms and their observed implications for the meeting.

Norm	Brief description	Implications on the meeting
circularity norm	Variegated use of the words “circular” and “circularity”, enacted as ‘floating signifiers’. They are flexibly interpreted; contrasted against “linear” and “linearity” but not specified further.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● any initiative can be considered circular and as adhering to CE principles ● definitions of CE are not touched upon, limiting the possibility of (sharp) boundaries between circularity and linearity ● creation of an inclusive CE community is foregrounded as definitions, implementation, and pathways are not discussed
hope norm	Expressions of optimism about the present and hope for the future. They shift focus from the negative to the positive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● creates a preference for expressions of hope ● positivity and hope expressed at these meetings fosters a sense of community and of shared identity among the participants ● the norm makes it difficult to point towards and actively solve uncertainties and challenges, with the implication of a lack of discussions of the sufficiency of proposed solutions
consensus norm	An aim for consensus and inclusiveness through the avoidance of disagreement and of potentially difficult topics, among others limiting critical discussion about CE itself.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● normalises expressions of agreement and the avoidance of disagreement ● enables motivating action without clearly describing what such action entails ● violating the norm requires explanations and excuses as to why the norm is being violated to avoid sanctions ● limits negotiation and the exploration of disagreement, tensions, uncertainties and challenges concerning the CE
business norm	Businesses and business opportunities as the central focus of the meetings. Profitability is assumed to be a precondition for businesses to transition to a CE.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● creates an assumption that participants have the same aim and objective of profitability ● participants assign themselves responsibility for a societal transition to a CE ● limits serious contributions of non-business actors, e.g. consumers as trends not as active participants

participant bemoans that the CE activities they have engaged in over the last 10 years are still not profitable.

And yet, while there is agreement on why CE should be implemented and what it should deliver, it is less clear how exactly CE is to be implemented. The “good examples” are a common way to talk about this within narratives, but more generalised claims about what is missing or needed for a transition to a CE are absent. For example, one moderator noted that “we speak quite a lot about technology in all areas, [but] we hardly speak about this in this transformation [to CE].” Nonetheless, technological development appears to serve particular speakers’ business interests or their futuristic fantasies. For example, in response to the above remark, a panellist mentions as an “immensely exciting” example the possibility to use fungi as biomass or to “create food out of thin air.”

However, innovation and progress are also understood to be about how things are done and not what is done, which often refer to assumptions of increased coordination and collaboration among diverse actors (as discussed above), as well as by invoking a systems perspective. While remaining vague, an invocation of either of these appears to mark speakers’ understanding of themselves as a potential collaborator with deep insight into the problem. This is also sometimes accompanied by a strong normative call that “something needs to be done differently”,

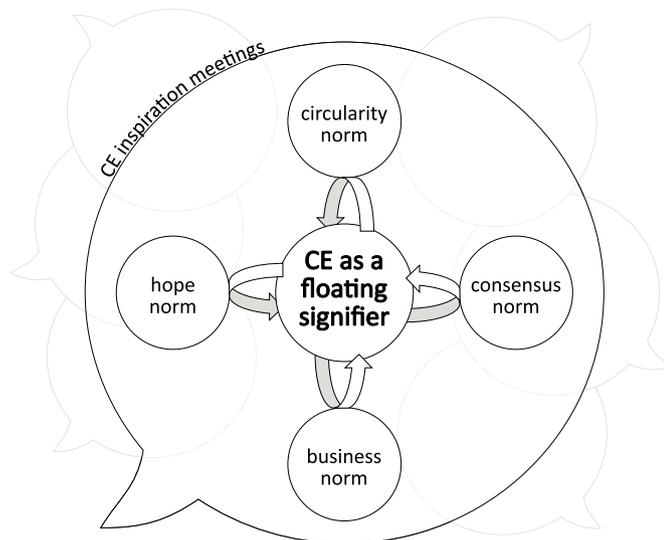


Fig. 2. In CE inspiration meetings, the concept CE appears as a floating signifier interacting with four communication norms. These communication norms enable and are enabled by the ambiguity of the CE discourse.

which reinforces the aforementioned identity-forming opposition to the linear economy in favour of more circularity.

5. Discussion

In this research, we have asked our corpus how the ambiguity of CE is performed in CE meetings. To this end, we identified four communication norms (summarised in Table 4) that prescribe (a) variegated understandings of “circularity”; (b) a preference for hopeful and optimistic expressions; (c) consensus and inclusiveness; and (d) an emphasis on both business responsibility and profitability within a CE. While they are usually not made explicit by meeting participants, they shape interactions as whatever is brought into CE inspiration meetings, such as initiative, knowledge, suggestions, themes, examples, or interests, tends to adhere to these norms and is understood to do so. This shapes what a CE meeting and in turn CE is understood to be. We contend that within CE meetings, these four communication norms simultaneously enable and are enabled by the ambiguity of CE⁴ as illustrated in Fig. 2.

The identified communication norms allow conducting the CE meetings in a way that virtually no identity or contribution is challenged or disregarded because it is outside the scope of the meeting or the CE. Accordingly, features of meetings that may be expected from their informational, inspirational, or networking-oriented framing and in light of the asserted ambiguity are not necessarily achieved: there is a stunning lack of clarifications of the terminology, guidelines on how to implement CE, and attempts to increase the general action capacity and motivation of relevant actors. Instead, the observed meetings—just like any other meeting (Angouri, 2012)—primarily perform themselves: What is done and considered by participants in these meetings is mainly motivated by the goal to successfully perform the meeting and to follow the norms and procedures which indicate a successful meeting. Here, ‘success’ is mainly defined by the identified communication norms: forming an inclusive group of meeting participants working towards circularity, giving participants enthusiasm to continue their exploration, not alienating anyone through disagreement or open conflict, and highlighting business responsibility and profitability.

Interaction, meeting culture, and the identified communication

⁴ Establishing causality is not possible within a performativity perspective. The concepts thus remain in a dialectic relationship where ambiguity and communication norms are mutually constituted by each other.

norms establish and draw on a shared interpretative repertoire (cf. Charlebois, 2015), constituting that CE is to be understood as a collective project of all interested businesses. Within this context, the identified communication norms reduce resistance in the meeting procedure, as they avoid discussion of disagreement and misunderstanding—including what CE is or is not—and thus shape, direct, and constrain participation towards achieving the meeting outcomes: a successful performance of the meeting. The thereby enabled participation makes sure that everyone has been able to contribute or to receive something aligned with the promises of the meeting.

In the concrete contexts of the meetings, the identified communication norms thus mirror and reproduce what others have suggested about CE: the ambiguity makes it agreeable (Valenzuela and Böhm, 2017), conflict-free (Niskanen et al., 2020), and enables popularisation (Borrello et al., 2020). Concretely, the observed meetings offer a collective identity (McComas et al., 2010) as they enable all participants to consider themselves as part of a bigger ‘movement’—even if they have only just started or are merely curious about engaging more with CE. Enabled, managed, and maintained by metacommunication by the moderators, the positivity and hope expressed at these meetings creates a sense of shared identity, which is also enabled by the ‘we-circular’ vs. ‘them-linear’ dichotomy. Building on our observation, this CE ‘movement’ is trusting and inclusive: trust is, for example, expressed by the rather generous atmosphere of sharing examples, attitudes and approaches by invited speakers, panellists, and participants. This means, that there are few, if any, signs of competition or business secrets that stand in the way of the sharing economy performed in the meetings. And the emphasis of the “circularity” of Sweden—and not, for example, its economy or businesses—suggests a collective and inclusive target, which fuels an understanding that CE can be achieved better when more businesses align with it.

Such sharing and, to some extent, egalitarian spirit is only occasionally interrupted when consultancy services are offered in response to participants pitching business ideas. These offers signal, or possibly remind, participants that there still are key competences potentially needed to push for CE, which are not for free. The understanding that consultants are key elements of many observed meetings—either as organisers or as panellists—makes CE sometimes appear like a ‘management fashion’, or like a ‘knowledge product’ to be promoted, sold, and made enticing by drawing on traditional ideas of organisational management, such as resource efficiency (see e.g. Fineman, 2001; Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005). However, moderators and facilitators, with their responsibility of moving the discussion along (Earnshaw, 2017) appear to make sure that this rather instrumental aspect does not take over the general meeting procedure, not allowing to interrupt the wider meeting culture that is built on sharing, trust, hope, and consensus.

Our analysis, hence, strongly suggests that expressions of shared motivation and identity deriving from successful meeting participation are central to the performance of CE meetings. Within these meetings, it becomes difficult to express disagreement without violating the hope and consensus norms. Instead, the inconsistent and sometimes playful uses of “circular” and “circularity” are creating, seemingly deliberately, a ‘floating signifier’ (Niskanen et al., 2020). Definitional arguments, sharp boundaries between circularity and linearity, or the questioning of the use and purpose of CE would constrain the fluidity of CE as a ‘floating signifier’.

The CE literature appears to share similar observations to ours in variegated contexts: CE policy discourse was shown to exhibit such hopeful, collaborative, and consensus-oriented features (Kovacic et al., 2019). Equally, newspaper discourse about CE appears to be inclusive and conflict-avoiding (Niskanen et al., 2020). These are indications leading us to propose that the identified communication norms may be applicable beyond the context of the collected empirical material. Instead, it is plausible that these communication norms are symptomatic for CE discourse, and merely re-enact this ‘floating signifier’ in the

Table 5
Limitations of meetings imposed by the identified communication norms, and some ideas for experimentation by meeting organisers based on our observations of the meetings.

Norm	Limits the meeting by ...	Ideas for experimentation by meeting organisers and moderators
circularity norm	... hiding debates about wider economic and social desirability of proposed developments and visions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● highlighting the difference between the ideal state of a circular economy and isolated circular material flows or businesses within the existing economy ● expanding business responsibility towards holistic engagement with environmental and social systems
hope norm	... making it difficult to point towards and actively solve uncertainties and challenges, which also leads to misapprehension of the actual sufficiency of proposed solutions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● questioning the extent to which proposed solutions are sufficient for system change ● providing guidance on how to collaborate meaningfully towards a CE, including a need to actively agree on procedures
consensus norm	... denying the ability to negotiation, correction, disagreement, and conflict about aspects of any of the other communication norms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● inviting speakers from organisations underrepresented in these meetings, such as public authorities and NGOs ● emphasise that there is disagreement within the community or across different actors, and that this may also be mirrored in the meeting
business norm	... prohibiting serious contributions of non-business actors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● inviting speakers and contributions from non-business actors ● questioning the suitability of self-regulation and non-binding targets

context of the observed meetings.

Reducing the ambiguity of the CE concept—as has been called for extensively (e.g. Kirchherr et al., 2017)—would require precision and detail which emphasises differences between interpretations. This would demand a communicative capacity to acknowledge, deal with, and contain disagreement and doubts. We have not seen this capacity being expressed in the observed meetings. Instead, keeping CE vague and ‘floating’ serves the purpose of allowing broad perspectives and backgrounds to participate in the CE discourse. While it may be argued that such integrating capacity now hampers the ability of professionals and scholars to make use of the full potential of CE (Borrello et al., 2020; Kirchherr et al., 2017; Reike et al., 2018), in the observed meetings the otherwise bemoaned ambiguity is essential to grow the constituency of CE. From this perspective, the ambiguity of CE is not only managed and maintained through meetings by the identified communication norms, but it is also productive.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we analysed the ambiguity of the CE concept in practice by studying CE meetings and seminars in Sweden that largely targeted businesspeople. We found that these meetings adhere to existing business norms of recognising potential for action and profitability, and expressing hope that CE is the solution to society’s sustainability challenges. The meetings we observed were driven by consensus and avoidance of difficult topics. Equally, “circularity” is expressed as a future state and vision of an economy to come, creating a shared identity amongst meeting participants and motivating action, without clearly outlining what such action would look like. This emphasis on positive messages, consensus and hope masks a clear ambiguity in terms of what CE actually entails and what precise pathways are needed to implement

it.

Our findings provide a counterargument to existing academic literature, which often finds it problematic that CE is such a variegated concept (Geisendorf and Pietrulla, 2018; Homrich et al., 2018; Kirchherr et al., 2017). Instead, our findings suggest that within the meetings we observed, the ambiguity around the CE concept was productive and performative. By keeping things fairly vague, but, at the same time, highlighting its hopeful nature, feasibility, desirability and profitability, the CE concept enabled the establishment of a shared vision of an economy to come, and offered a shared identity for those working towards this vision. CE was hence presented and performed as a very diverse and inclusive concept, while clearly positioning it as a positive, ‘business friendly’ approach that can help solve the grand challenges we face on this planet. This has led us to conceptualising the definitional ambiguity of the CE as a ‘floating signifier’. This contributes to CE scholarship by showing that the concept’s ambiguity is performative and constitutive. Since results appear mirrored in other CE contexts, we proposed that ambiguity is part of CE discourse. Nevertheless, while within the observed meetings this appeared desirable, we can not reject claims that for established CE scholars or professionals less ambiguity may be even more productive (Borrello et al., 2020).

While we have shown that ambiguity is productive in the context studied, we do not intend to answer the question whether unifying definitions, embrace and maintain ambiguity, or emphasise disagreement is to be preferred if the goal is to create a better society with less negative environmental impact. This is a normative question. What we can, however, conclude is that the way CE meetings are run, who is allowed to speak, and what debates are given room really matters, as all these have implications on how CE is understood. CE meeting organisers and participants should be conscious about these dynamics.

Accordingly, the insights from this research can be usefully adapted for CE meetings: Based on our observations relating to the identified communication norms, in Table 5 we outline ideas for experimentation, especially for meeting organisers and moderators but also for other interested CE practitioners and scholars who wish to address ambiguity. We hope that these ideas may encourage a critical engagement with the communication norms and reflections about the limitations they impose on meetings and on CE—regardless of what perspective on CE is taken. For example, in the meetings we found entirely missing questions about the overall desirability of a business-led change towards CE, and despite plentiful talk about collaboration we could not observe concrete guidelines for implementation. Providing responses to either of these questions necessitates open, reflexive, and sometimes uncomfortable debates as well as disagreements about what society and economy we want to live in, and how we can get there.

Apart from these practical implications, our analysis raises a number of further academic questions. We suggest, for example, that our research could be replicated in different cultural, social, economic and technological contexts, providing opportunities for comparison, which includes differences between online and offline meetings, between Sweden and another country, or between CE in the agri-food industry and other economic sectors. Equally, going beyond our focus on meetings, one could explore how other CE practices are performed. The role of management consultants and other CE experts, including activists, could be analysed in more detail. A focus on boundary work could be of interest, given that CE is seldom performed within one firm or institution alone. More in-depth explorations of how metacommunication construes identities and consensus within the CE context would also be valuable. Lastly, we suggest further exploration of the hope and the consensus norm, as well as the need to better understand what the practical discourses of “circular” and “circularity” enable and conceal.

CRedit statement

All Authors: Methodology, Writing – Original Draft. In addition: Malte Rödl: Conceptualisation, Formal Analysis, Data Curation, Writing

– Review & Editing; Therese Åhlvik: Formal Analysis, Investigation, Data Curation; Hanna Bergeå: Conceptualisation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Data Curation, Project Administration, Funding Acquisition; Lars Hallgren: Conceptualisation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Data Curation, Funding Acquisition; Steffen Böhm: Conceptualisation, Writing – Review & Editing, Funding Acquisition.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence

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Appendix

Table A.1

Overview of the meetings observed during our fieldwork including those that were part of the fieldwork.

Date	Duration	Organiser	Title	Meeting Type and Availability
21 Mar 2019	01:02:22	a science and media company focusing on the food of the future	Circular food production — utopia or future?	in-person; youtube: Fm nQ4HxLLDg
6 Mar 2020	c. 1.5h	publicly funded seminar series organised by a coalition of a agrifood consultancies, regional innovation hub, and the national federation of farmers	Breakfast Seminar: Possibilities and barriers for a circular bioeconomy	in-person; field notes
3 Apr 2020	02:04:45		To understand and make business in a circular bioeconomy	online; youtube: Um0Qgcm c3HA
2 Jun 2020	c. 2h		Breakfast Seminar: Possibilities and barriers for a circular bioeconomy (same title as the meeting on 6 March)	online; field notes
10 Jun 2020	01:56:19		How can we create business models that work in a circular bioeconomy?	online; youtube: zl WV227JD40
18 Sep 2020	c. 1.3h		Breakfast Seminar: Circular Bioeconomy – Bio-active Substances	online; field notes
2 Oct 2020	02:38:00		Innovation in a circular bioeconomy — inspiring examples	online; youtube: ot A0THzxVxw
27 Nov 2020	c. 1.5h		Breakfast Seminar: Profitability and efficiency	online; field notes
14 Sep 2020	00:40:23	Swedish branch of a global environmental NGO	Launch of the WWF's Baltic Stewardship Initiative	online; recorded by the organiser, not public
15 Oct 2020	00:57:57	two Swedish CE networking and consultancy organisations	Parties in parliament are going to set on circular economy this way after covid-19	online; youtube: HU mkeCJCEw
10 Jun 2020	04:31:51	regional energy agency	Digital actor conference on circular economy	online; field notes
26 Feb 2020	02:12:25	a circular economy networking organisation and consultancy (A, not the same as the one called B below)	Member's Forum Live 2020 Malmö	in-person; recorded with permission
4 Mar 2020	02:15:33		Member's Forum Live 2020 Stockholm	in-person; recorded with permission
5 Mar 2020	c. 2h		Member's Forum Live 2020 Västerås	in-person; notes
1 Apr 2020	02:08:22		Member's Forum Live 2020	online; recorded with permission
16 Sep 2020	04:06:03		Academy and Training: Circular Business Model Canvas	online; recorded with permission
3 Jun 2020	c. 1.5h	a circular economy networking organisation and consultancy (B, not the same as the one called A above)	Member's Meeting on Circular Design	online; field notes
11 Dec 2020	00:36:56		How can we accelerate the transition to the CE?	online; youtube: 1z A_w5cjTMQ

Table A.2

An illustrative selection of some “good examples” mentioned in the observed meetings.

Speaker	Situation/Context	What is the example?
invited presenter; participant	A virtual guided tour of an example, which is picked up by a participant in a plenary discussion.	‘ReTuna’ is Eskiltuna municipality’s recycling- and upcycling-only shopping mall; it is picked up again with a participant noticing that what has been successful here is that a business model was connected with the extension of product life spans, and was concluded with “but this is just one example.”
presenter affiliated with the organiser	A brief presentation introducing a few “circular projects”; commented on by the moderator as “undeniably exciting to follow” and that the presenter will return with more “exciting projects”	A research-supported project where fish is fed with insects; the insects are reared using vegetable and bread waste; the production stages are described in detail, and it is emphasised that in a taste test trial the insect-fed fish was evaluated more positively than conventionally farmed fish by an expert panel.
panellist	In a panel conversation on CBE, the moderator notes that “we speak quite a lot about technology in all areas, [but] we hardly speak about this in this transformation [to CE]”; the example is concluded by the moderator with an “Interesting!”	A Swedish company working with mycoprotein (protein from fungal fermentation) which can use “waste flows”, and through mutation of the fungi can the applied biomass be increased significantly; this is concluded with “This is one such an example.” The panellist then mentions “another [example]”, a Finnish company that “imagines that they could create food out of the thin air; but with solar

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Table A.2 (continued)

Speaker	Situation/Context	What is the example?
panellist	The moderator asks a lengthy and difficult to comprehend question about innovation and its implementation for a CBE with the illustrative metaphor of letting “a thousand flowers bloom.” Both responding panellists call this a difficult question. Their answers highlight the role of methods of implementation and coordination, including dialogue, but there is no clear recipe for success.	energy” which so far exists only on a lab-scale. The speaker concludes that “this is mind boggling; new technology; but immensely exciting” whereas they do “not believe artificial intelligence and similar is important.” The example concerns the role of each speaker’s own experiences of identifying useful methods and procedures to make implementation of and collaboration within CE projects successful. The first responding panellist suggests to enter “close dialogue”, to “lift those residual flows”, and to identify opportunities for using those. The answer remains quite vague and is exclusively based on the respondent’s own business activity: “I just want to say spontaneously, that we have a perhaps not exact answer to the question of how we do it. It is a very complex and quite difficult topic. This is something we have identified, but what I think is the most important thing to solve, is to work together on that issue. If you just look at our entire supplier side, for example, to have a close dialogue with them and also to actually lift up these residual flows and see opportunities within them. What products can this lead to? How do we take care of this so that it is not just thrown away, and so on, and to constantly have a close dialogue and together simply create methods to start somewhere too, I think. This is a bit of a broad answer perhaps. But we must work together on that issue, it really is about knowledge as well.” Shortly thereafter, another panellist takes this forward by illustrating a similar response, again based on an example from their own business activity: “We do not know what—it is difficult to say, what is the solution, I would say. We have a project now that is based on one of our companies that I have worked with ... I do not think we will find the solution but I think we will find a solution maybe that we can pilot test and work on. Therefore, I think it’s about finding a method to let a thousand flowers bloom. That’s what it’s about, I would say.”
participant; panellist	In the chat function of the video conferencing software, a participant mentions their own business activity with industrial hemp production, which is then taken up by a panellist in the conversation.	The participant writes in the chat: “Industrial hemp contains 30–50 [percent] plant-based protein, and the cold-pressed hemp seed oil contains omega 3, omega 6, omega 9. The peeled seeds also contain fiber, protein, iron, zinc etc I’m very curious about [this panellist]’s view of industrial hemp as a “stakeholder” in what they work with?” A few minutes later the panellist remarks: “I want to make an addition to what [the participant] has put in the chat about industrial hemp. And this is something that I think is an incredibly interesting product that can give us fibre, that can give us protein, that can give us a lot of products for different areas, both in food and industry. I think it is a super unused product that we can produce in Sweden, that can replace a lot of cotton fabrics fantastically. That I wanted to take the opportunity and say.”

Table A.3

Overview of the codes and illustrative examples. Most sequences including those listed as examples were identified to belong to several codes.

Code	Brief Summary	Examples with descriptions and/or quotes
agreement	Covers sequences where speakers express that firstly, they agree with another specific or previous speaker, a specific statement, or a more general idea; secondly, that they hope, believe, or assume that other participants or a general but unidentified group agree with what the speaker has said; or thirdly they make a general statement on the importance of agreeing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A moderator thanks a speaker through agreement, such as “Very good, thanks!” or “Agreed, super important really.” ● A participant reports back from their group conversation: “But it’s probably a bit of the same thing that we’ve all concluded here.” ● A moderator concludes a participant’s statement: “Great, thank you. So to find common denominators is what we take out of this.” ● A panellist agreeing with a previous one: “No, so I agree with that there is a big problem.” ● A moderator moves the discussion along by asking for agreement: “[name] and [name], do you agree with this now, is it so that ...”
circular	Covers all speech that relates to ‘cirkulär’ (en. circular) or ‘linjär’ (en. linear), their inflections, and related nouns; we could not find related verbs. Linearity is usually referred to as the past or previous means of production or organising the economy, but can also be attached to “mindsets.” Circularity is acknowledged as a word, concept, or metaphor, as part of a change process (e.g. building circularity, or becoming more circular), and as a future state.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● One of the hosts leaves the word to their co-moderator to discuss more about the background and motivation of the meeting by saying: “But [name], how circular is Sweden today then in relation to Covid-19?” ● Talking about sustainable consumption and things that need to change in relation to food beyond the economy, one panellist finds that “I also think highly of this place-based circularity and that partly you also have to see [this] in your own household. What can I use instead of dumping, or what can you do if someone else has a benefit from what I have in my hand.” Briefly afterwards, another speaker appeals to the same topics as “Think of it like any new circular concept. It is not enough for future generations, and we have to solve the social problems here and now.” ● Talking about transition pathways one politician-panellist suggests that to stay within the planet’s boundaries “we have to reduce consumption and we have to set up all possible means of control to change from the linear to the circular.”
Collaboration		

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Table A.3 (continued)

Code	Brief Summary	Examples with descriptions and/or quotes
	Covers when collaboration is mentioned or, more often, implied in an utterance. This includes similar words such as dialogue, teamwork, or joint work. However, they talk very superficially about what collaboration actually is or means.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A moderator introduces the meeting and the organiser's role in this: "And we need to increase the dialogue between the different parts of the system. We believe that together we can make a difference and meet those challenges ahead." ● A plenary conversation is summarised by a moderator: "There were a few words that came back and they were system perspective, collaboration, communication, resource management with examples of phosphorus and other resources. The need for security, forecasting, profitability, need for trust." ● A panellist when asked for their closing statement: "Again, hook your arms with those who can [do what you need]. You can not know everything." ● A moderator concludes: "That is the core of [our project], and our idea is then, again, that we can achieve much more if we hook arms in with each other. It is both about what we can do in our own industry, but also how we can influence the political field. And not the least, be inspired and learn from each other."
Consumption	Covers instances where consumption, consumers, customers, or similar are mentioned. This includes among others what consumers should do, what they need to learn or misunderstand, but also consumption trends, and that current consumption levels are unsustainable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● An audience question interpreted by the moderator: "that is, which consumer trends are driving this [transition to CBE]?" ● A politician panellist: "Politicians will never be the best ones to drive this type of development. ... then a great deal of consumer power is needed as well" ● A panellist: "we have a project ... which deals with circularity and for us this is from soil to soil and all have to be part of this and therefore we have to work with everyone; that includes the municipalities because one has to take care of residual flows and this includes knowledge because one has to educate consumers."
Coordination	Covers sequences that discuss how to work together, especially the practicalities of teamwork between different partners. This includes for example dialogue, meeting places or platforms, brokers and intermediaries, or shared visions. The utterances largely focus on why coordination is important, or how coordination can be enhanced or fostered.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● An invited speaker talks about where to find contacts: "We also have Sweden food arena which is a kind of meeting place for companies in Swedish food innovation." ● A moderator considers coordination mechanisms within risk and innovation in the food value chain: "Then the question is whether you experience risks in relation to innovations and develop them, because it is heavy on smaller players or individuals. How can the risks, economic risks be spread or shared throughout the food value chain?" ● A politician panellist wonders about what a successful transformation could mean: "I also think it is important that we stick to some form of common picture of what is this circular society that we want to achieve. What do we mean when we talk about a successful circular society? I think we need a better consensus on that so that we can set clear goals for getting there."
despair	Covers talk about problems or obstacles, either for CE transition or sustainability in general, often with some emotion associated with it. Some of these sequences seem to be characterised by hopelessness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The moderator summarises the message of a panellist saying: "Time is ticking, [the panellist] claims!" ● A politician panellist: "We cannot continue to increase the material consumption decade after decade." ● A panellist talking about the challenges for new and small companies in the food industry: "... but it is more about getting small investment to be able to test the market as soon as possible, to get out and learn as fast as possible. There is no solution and there seems to be no way out. ... I cannot define the way out but it depends on the challenge."
Disagreement	Covers sequences in which the speakers explicitly or more often implicitly express that they disagree with someone about something, as well as statements or expressions of doubt about general ideas, suggestions, goals or validity claims.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● An invited speaker explicitly disagrees with the meeting host: "When it comes to the beginning, [the moderator] said in the beginning, said that we have become a little more circular, I doubt it." ● A panellist is not quite happy with what has been said and in recognition of some hypothetical counterposition 'sharpens' an argument: "I think that I build on, that I agree with what has been said and then sharpen it a bit further, for me it is not innovation, innovation if there is no application. Then it is only a discovery. So far it is only when it reaches an application that it is an innovation, and then I think what comes is exciting." ● A politician recognises and disagrees with an external position: "It is no secret that we want the forest to phase out fossils and I think that is part of this. But it is clear that we need a holistic view, even if the resources end up in the right place. What I think is very dangerous is if we go in and say that product X or Y must not be used from forest resources, I think that would be a dead end."
emotion	Covers verbal expressions of emotions or emotional states, including feelings, trust, security, courage, worries, or related metaphors. This is often accompanied by displays of affect.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A panellist discusses a 'feeling' in the industry that something is changing: "I can only agree with what has been [mentioned] that there is change happening, the feeling that the industry or some industries actually want to do something different." ● A politician panellist calls for reassessing responsibility: "Producers need to take greater responsibility for the products on the market, that, I think, is important. It feels like we are starting to slip a bit away from that which I find worrying ..." ● A panellist reflects on the opportunities of exploiting solar energy better for food production: "I just don't believe, maybe, that right now this is what's going to save us or what we should say from some dramatic perspective."
Hope	Covers when something is implicitly or explicitly voicing hope in the situation, often in relation to CE. This can relate to opportunities and that we	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Generic interjection: "I hope so!" ● An invited speaker connects their thoughts with the project whose event

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Table A.3 (continued)

Code	Brief Summary	Examples with descriptions and/or quotes
	already see positive changes. This includes talk about making “real” changes and that we are “stronger together.”	they have been invited to speak at: “But there are very clear connections from this larger scale to how to implement this, which I hope that this project can contribute to.” ● A panellist talks about the promises and hopeful nature of the CE: “Circular economy is actually about doing good, and it is not that ... so that the aspect that makes this get a spin, that there is an economic pitch in circular business models, that makes businesses see that this has an economic value in that there is a business case, as it is called in business language, around this. And that is what can be the key to this actually becoming a reality.” ● An invited speaker identifies some hope in the collaborative aspect: “Even if we have slightly different starting points to these issues, when we work together then we get common problems ... and that I should say is a prerequisite for actually moving forward with this.”
identity	Covers statements in which identities are expressed, either of the speaker, or of other persons or stereotypical groups. One important identity construction in these meetings appears to be the construction of ‘us-circular’ and ‘them-linear’. There are also occasions in which identity constructions are used to differentiate the speaker from some other participants or the meeting in general. When identities are constructed using ‘we’, then this can mean a lot of different things such as referring to all participants, all those caring about CE, or all those interested in food and agriculture. With the exception of the politicians’ debate, identities in the meeting are seldom opposed but opposed identities refer to non-present others.	● A panellist construing the company’s identity in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic and the ‘consumer’ as a third identity: “When it comes to Covid-19, I want to share the insights we have made [at my workplace]. We have done quite a lot of insight work on how it affects us in large and small. We are an industry that is doing quite well in a crisis. Everyone needs food more or less but just this with customer needs and change.” ● A moderator identifies the Swedish delegation for circular economy and suggests that both moderators are part of the reference group: “The delegation for circular economy is the government’s advisory body with the task to be a knowledge centre and coordination force for the industry’s transformation to circular economy. ... there are both [the other moderator] and I in the reference group.” ● A moderator inserts a comment prior to the upcoming statement of a politician: “I also want to say that you are from the [party].” ● A panellist creating a rhetoric identity: “We others who are engaged in circular food production ...”
innovation	Covers emic mentions of ‘innovation’ (usually technological), or speech where new things (technological or organisational) are discussed. This includes both, calls for more innovation, but also that there is already enough good technology, and instead how things are done has to change.	● The moderator in a panel discussion moves a thought further: “Another thought ... is about needs versus product service ..., how does a need match, is the need large or small in the customer group? And often I start an idea based on a need in someone else. It is an idea that exists among them that creates ideas. And Henry Ford said a rather interesting thing when it comes to this: if we had asked the consumer what they wanted, everyone would have said a faster horse carriage.” ● An invited speaker reflects upon what CE needs: “From a technological perspective, we can find many solutions available and it is tremendously much about getting the economic incentives right so that it becomes profitable for those who will implement the changes to the measures.” ● A panellist on regional contexts in relation to CBE: “If we look at the industry in Sweden, you need to know more about what is suitable for the Swedish or Nordic conditions so that [you know what] technological development is needed.”
inspiration	Covers when we consider that a speaker voices their own excitement or being inspired, or when the speaker aims at making others feel inspired or excited. This was motivated by many of the invitations using the word inspiration, but the word was less common in the actual meetings.	● A generic interjection: “Exciting! That is something we bring from this, everyone.” ● The moderator summarises the panel conversation: “Herewith, I want to thank the panel both for very good and inspiring presentations during the day, or in the morning, and thank you for a very good panel conversation with you!” ● A panellist suggests where to find opportunities for engagement: “Because here [in collaboration across the value chain] is an opportunity to get involved and find these solutions that we know exist.” ● The moderator introduces a panellist: “You will be a leader in Europe in circular food production, [name]!”, whereupon the person replies “Yes, absolutely!”
‘kretslopp’	Covers all mentions of the Swedish word ‘kretslopp’ (closed-loop thinking), which is a Swedish sustainability policy approach of the late 20th century with very different assumptions to the CE (Johansson & Henriksson, 2020). However, in the analysed meetings, ‘kretslopp’ is in most cases used in its more colloquial use as any ‘circular flow’ within the CE, as opposed to a contrasting concept.	● An expert colleague of the moderator replies to an inquiry that “you also do something exciting with fish and kretslopp” — “Yes, we do that because the kretslopp has to be closed, we have to really start with circular productions, we have to be more resource efficient.” ● A panellist refers to the long history of ‘kretslopp’ in Sweden and that existing knowledge seems to be not appreciated in the CE: “And this here is problematic concerning kretslopp, that we don’t get any respect for our kretslopp-knowledge, whether it is called kretslopp or CE or innovative blah, it is always called so different things and I am here with a 30 year old definition then what the cycles are ...”
Legitimation	Covers the mentioning of third parties to legitimise among others, statements, the speaker’s presence, or CE. These third parties include research institutions, organisations such as the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, individual persons, nature, money, companies, but also concepts, reports, governments, or other companies.	● Legitimatising the need to talk more about CE, a presenter invokes efforts outside of Sweden: “They [Wageningen UR] are one of the world’s best agricultural universities if not the very best, and they have several projects underway with circular food production. And the Netherlands, where Wageningen is located, they are in fact something of a pioneering country when it comes to CE and circularity. Their government set a goal, in 2016 they set it, that by 2050 they will have a predominant share of CE.” ● An invited speaker integrates their own biography into their statement: “I have actually worked with what I usually call the metabolism in the body of society, the material flows, for very very many years. The Rome Club came

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Table A.3 (continued)

Code	Brief Summary	Examples with descriptions and/or quotes
metacommunication	Covers sequences in which the speaker(s) address(es) the current communication situation, a previous or anticipated statement or the role or behavior of a participant in the current conversation, i.e. when features in the current conversation and its participants become the topic of the conversation. Since metacommunication is present in all kinds of communication situations it is ubiquitous and not specific for these meetings, but may be different across cultures or different communities of practice. Metacommunication can be instructions and explanations of what is going to happen related to both the format and the content of the conversation.	<p>out with a report as early as 1972 which actually said one thing: We cannot increase our footprint year after year, decade after decade and we have unfortunately done so. I'm sitting in something called the Global Resources, International Resource Panel. We came up with a large report Global Resources Outlook 2019 where we show how fast material demand has gone and is going."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Moderators ending or summarising a contribution, such as: "Thanks. Very good presentation, I think. To me it was crystal clear. Fantastic." ● Any sort of agreement with previous speakers which may not necessarily signal concrete agreement but also conclude a previous thought and connect them to the flow of the meeting. ● Any sort of positioning of the speaker in relation to the conversation or more generally, such as "I spontaneously only wish to say", or "I will build on what has been said and I agree and will sharpen it even more ..." ● Positioning statements about an ongoing contribution, especially after the statement when participants finalise their thoughts with "I stop there", informing the participants that the speaker could continue in the same direction but that they chose to temporarily take a break. ● Pre-emptive positioning both about the statement and about the self, such as: "I will only make a short comment, I will try to avoid being a middle-aged man consuming all air ..." ● Non-verbal/visual metacommunication, for example raising the hand in a conversation to be addressed as the next speaker. This may then be verbally acknowledged, for example by the moderator: "Now we see one hand that is raised." ● Positioning statements about professional identities, such as in a plenary discussion to underline one's credibility: "Now I happen to be a researcher in food technology ..." (see also the code <i>identity</i>)
normative/ pragmatic	Covers when activities or decisions are deemed, proposed, or acclaimed to be necessary or must be done (inspired by Berglund & Werr, 2000). This often creates an urgency or an implicit requirement to act, because of a looming catastrophe or hypothetical crisis scenario, or because other entities are already doing this or are expecting this.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A panelist muses on the possibility of economies to change: "That we can be ready for an everyday life in peace and tranquility that may allow us companies to produce for large markets; but it must be possible to switch to smaller markets ... or to a more local market in the event of crisis and war." ● A moderator motivates sustainability action in relation to the Baltic Sea: "It is a unique inland sea that we have, not only the world's youngest sea but also unfortunately the world's, or one of the world's most polluted seas." ● Referencing the need to talk more about CE, a presenter invokes other countries' efforts: "Their [the Dutch] government set a goal, in 2016 they set it, that by 2050 they will have a predominant share of CE. So there they are frontrunners." ● A moderator asks their panellists about the learning of the corona crisis for CBE: "How can the resource mobilisation of the corona crisis and changes and insights be used to benefit a circular bioeconomy. What are we learning now?" Two panellists respond with both a sense of urgency and popular wisdom: "We live well [like] a little alarm clock because we need to think more about how we feel about food and livelihood." — "... Food production is a means for life. It is absolutely vital to really get that insight to sink in with all of us, and that we can live smaller lives but have a greater experience." ● A participant in a plenary discussion considers the problems of buying a farm: "It is very difficult to take over or buy a farm, especially with the large investments that may then disappear in a bad harvest because you can not really control the weather." ● The moderator wonders in addressing a researcher panellist what sort of problems there might be: "What does the research situation say then? Has there been a knowledge gap with authorities etc, what does your crowd say, what are the latest research findings in this, that you can then give to responsible authorities?" ● Discussing with the politicians, the moderator wonders about the relevance of measuring circularity: "One question is how can you assess the level of circularity when you barely know what it is and how it should be measured, is a question. Does anyone want to answer it? ..." upon which one politician addresses and nuances the problem: "Yes, but just when it comes to measuring circular economy, I think that you should really not measure in general, but you need to go into different prioritised streams, for example materials but also different services, and also the specific streams that need to be measured such as innovation-critical minerals. Because then it becomes very clear but overall I think that it is actually quite difficult."
Problem	Covers all utterances that can be considered to mention or elaborate on problems. These are distinguished from the code <i>despair</i> , as the <i>problem</i> focuses more on the content and less on the emotions. Problems are often, but not always presented together with solutions. Problems are among others identified to be global issues of society and environment, a lack of circularity, a lack of consideration for systems perspectives, waste or leakage in the agri-food chain, running a profitable agri-business, or the difficulty of collaboration.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A participant reporting back from a group discussion: "We talked about this with the business model and conditions for profitability. What does this organisational model look like, who takes part, who is responsible, and what does the distribution of profit and loss look like if a larger circular bioeconomy is set up?" ● In an introduction statement, a moderator highlights the importance of profitability: "In addition to our goals to save the Baltic Sea and manage plant nutrition wisely, our focus will be on the economic sustainability of this. We see this as a decisive factor for us to really achieve the goals we have set. It
Profitability	A specific manifestation of the code <i>rationality</i> . Covers talk about added value, surplus value, profitability and related terminology or thinking. Largely concerned with either the inherent profitability of CE or the need for CE to add value to business operations to be successful.	

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Table A.3 (continued)

Code	Brief Summary	Examples with descriptions and/or quotes
rationality	Covers when activities or decisions are deemed, proposed, or acclaimed to be 'rational' or because they align with profit-oriented business conduct (inspired by Berglund & Werr, 2000).	<p>must be financially profitable even in the short term if we are to really speed up this work again. The economic driving force will be important to us."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A moderator summarises what they understand as the advantages of the CBE after a panellist has spoken: "It seems like there is a triple win when we can produce more food with less resources ... Why have we not always done this then? Why has it not been implemented to a greater extent?" ● A panellist reflecting on the future of food: "If we look at the development ahead, the plant-based will be cheaper than the animal-based and then that component will come in the price and then it will take off much more."
resource efficiency	A specific manifestation of the code <i>rationality</i> . Covers everything related to resource efficiency as an emic concept, as well as references to for example reduce waste or utilise waste flows. Often this refers to efficient production (in agricultural and biological processes) and process efficiency (utilisation of agricultural products, including byproducts).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In an introduction, the moderator narrates: "In January 2019 Stefan Löfven [Swedish prime minister] said during a government declaration that Sweden should develop a resource-efficient CE." ● Talking about global food production, a panellist notes that "we produce ... nearly twice as much food as we consume. ... As everyone knows, we have started importing a lot of food and produce only half, in the order of magnitude, today, but quite a lot of our land even in Sweden is used for fodder [production] ... but there we will have a tremendous potential to start eating cereals directly or even protein." ● A participant discusses their thoughts on the change of existing systems after break-out room conversations: "This is probably where CBE can capture the low-hanging fruit, that is, how can you with cycling up [reduce] this system leakage in waste that arises with these nutrients, or the material that you can benefit from or better use in a better way so that you do not lose sight that incremental or gradual modification of existing systems can create from a resource perspective, large-scale effects." ● A panellist concludes their statement: "So it can be such types of changes. To be able to feed more people with less resources, that is the challenge."
Solution	Covers utterances where solutions are discussed. This includes where CE is expressed as the solution to an identified problem, where what is needed for CE is listed, or more generally solutions to various problems mentioned in the data.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A consultant panellist on how they identify solutions: "... We identify the challenge and then we work with the solution, so to speak, backwards." ● A participant in a plenary discussion: "We have long had large-scale solutions, [but] a circular bioeconomy requires small-scale and innovative solutions. There seems to be a lot of thinking of small-scale solutions and local solutions to move forward." ● A moderator summarises the meeting in relation to how a CE can be achieved: "And finally I think it's important that we help each other here, do not see each other as competitors." ● A panellist answering a question about the role of technology: "Of course, all technology can be useful to us. At the same time, I think if you go to small-scale, ... industrial symbiosis, location-based circularity, I think one should [do that]. It's just my personal thought that one maybe should not believe what technology can solve in some cases; maybe it's so far away from technology and [we have to] go back to something that may seem a little more old-fashioned, but is more adapted to the small-scale context. But it is only my personal reflections that I was asked about."
System	Covers any mentioning of the term 'system'. The system is referred to in practical ways within which a business operates, as something to be observed or monitored, or as some concept for planning and thinking. Systems may also be described to be not functioning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A participant wondering about the system: "I think many of us agree that we will need to see the stimulus of new structures that may grow in parallel with structures that exist today; but that we should not be afraid to question the systems and conditions for the systems we have today." ● Another participant in the same meeting reflecting on the current system: "Existing food systems are dominated by a certain type of logic: We can call it maybe the production economy producing large volumes and then lowering the cost." ● A researcher as part of a panel suggests that not all research and activities will lead to system change: "The critical research I should say points out that this may not lead to systems changes but only perhaps styling systems at the edges."

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