

ADDRESSING INSTITUTIONAL AGENCY IN THE  
ACCUMULATION OF SMALL WINS  
A CASE STUDY ON THE CIRCULAR TRANSITION OF THE DUTCH TEXTILE INDUSTRY

Master's Thesis

By

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## ABSTRACT

Small wins are an increasingly popular lens to understand and direct the dynamics of transformational change in the face of daunting societal challenges. Such small wins, though still moderate in importance and impact, can function as seeds of transformative change through achieving concrete successes that deviate from existing dominant practices. The literature on small wins has focused on the activation of a set of propelling mechanisms in order to accelerate the impact of small wins and help them overcome barriers. These barriers are often of institutional nature, as the change promoted by small wins is incongruent with existing institutions. To better understand the agency that small wins actors possess in overcoming such barriers, this thesis introduces the concept of institutional work to the small wins perspective. In doing so, the following research question is addressed:

*How do propelling mechanisms help small wins overcome institutional barriers towards transformational change, and what role does institutional agency play in that process?*

An embedded case study on the implementation of higher R-strategies in the circular transition of the Dutch textile industry was performed, analysing the interaction between institutional work and propelling mechanisms in 11 Dutch small wins. In the context of this case study, the findings indicate that encountered institutional barriers are mainly of normative and cultural nature, while regulative barriers play a diminished role. Theoretically, analysing the accumulation of small wins through the lens of institutional work theory sheds light onto how exactly small wins actors combat the barriers they face. In facing these barriers, a dynamic is observed where propelling mechanism increase the scope and impact of the initiatives as a whole, while institutional work strategies are employed in direct relation to the encountered institutional barriers. When propelling mechanisms are activated successfully, they allow initiatives to engage in institutional work in an increasingly effective manner.

Lastly, the findings suggest implications for policy, as providing the necessary support for small wins could prove beneficial especially in such areas of social innovation like the adoption of higher R-strategies. Small wins actors seem particularly active and successful in the cultural and normative institutional dimensions, while governmental campaigns could potentially encounter more resistance in these dimensions. Support structures for small wins active in these areas might thus be an essential factor in the transition towards a circular economy that pays equal attention to technological and social facets of circularity.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

In innovation sciences as well as innovation policy, there has been an increasing focus on directing transformational change (Schot & Steinmueller, 2018; Wanzenböck et al., 2020). Such change is both in-depth and large-scale, fundamentally deviating from existing norms and practices in the technical and socio-institutional dimensions of society (Termeer et al., 2017; Vermaak, 2013). Directing and accelerating such transformational change has especially garnered attention in the context of sustainability transitions. A growing sense of urgency exists to radically change direction and move away from the economic and industrial systems that deteriorate the natural world around us (Rockström et al., 2009).

However, the socio-technical nature of sustainability transitions limits their pace. Beyond the technical and physical constraints to overhauling existing infrastructure in a short timeframe, there are social constraints to a speedy transition. Technologies do not exist in a vacuum; they co-evolve with formal and informal institutions to form socio-technical 'configurations that work' (Rip & Kemp, 1998; Unruh, 2000). Transitioning to radically different socio-technical configurations then entails not only technological innovation, but also substantial institutional change. In this light, socio-technical transitions can essentially be understood as processes of institutional change, with a particular focus on technologies (Fuenfschilling & Truffer, 2016). This complex embeddedness of sustainability transitions in both the technological and socio-institutional realms often makes progress often hard-earned and hard to discern (Termeer & Dewulf, 2019). Despite impatience, achieving system-wide transformational change in these arenas is thus necessarily a long-winded process (Vermaak, 2013).

A promising approach to nonetheless make progress in these domains is to adopt a governance strategy based on small wins (Bours et al., 2021; Termeer & Dewulf, 2019; Weick, 1984). Small wins are concrete and completed in-depth changes that can help bridge the gap between present reality and the desired situation (Urpelainen, 2013; Weick, 1984). By focusing on small wins rather than big, radical and immediate changes, actors are less likely to be overwhelmed by complex problems, helping them identify controllable opportunities (Weick, 1984). Moreover, the initial moderate size of small wins makes them less threatening to opposition, shielding them somewhat from the antagonism and resistance related to contested problems (Lindblom, 1979; Weick, 1984). When adopting a small wins governance strategy, the role of governments is to focus on stimulating distributed, bottom-up and in-depth change that is already ongoing in society, rather than attempting to design grand, top-down solutions to contested problems (Bours et al., 2021; Termeer & Dewulf, 2019; Termeer & Metze, 2019). Specifically, Termeer & Dewulf (2019) suggest government intervention should focus on activating propelling mechanisms through which small wins can accumulate into transformative change. Based on the small wins and organizational change literature, eight propelling mechanisms have been recognized to date: partnering, stabilizing, embedding, the logic of attraction, professionalization, energizing and replicating (Schagen et al., 2022). Current literature suggests that through virtuous cycles between these mechanisms, small wins can set in motion a sequence of small wins, leading to continuous, transformational change at an increasingly wide scale (Vermaak, 2013; Weick & Quinn, 1999).

Through realizing second-order change, small wins by definition constitute a divergence from existing institutions. Because of this, small wins necessarily have to overcome institutional barriers as they expand beyond their original context (Termeer & Metze, 2019). Indeed, empirical research shows that the accumulation of small wins can be seriously hampered by persistent institutional barriers, limiting their exerted impact on transition processes (Bours et al., 2021; Pleijte & Termeer, 2020). In such instances, it is not immediately clear what small wins actors themselves can undertake to overcome the institutional barriers they face. Through the focus on mechanisms, the agency that involved actors possess in expanding their impact remains underlit. Accordingly, Schagen et al. (2022) call for further research into how involved actors can intervene to influence the dynamics in which small wins initiatives develop. Investigating this agency within the context of small wins is the main focus of this thesis. Directing the focus herein specifically at institutional barriers, the main research question is as follows:

*How do small wins overcome institutional barriers towards transformational change, and what role does institutional agency play in that process?*

To more explicitly consider agency and institutional barriers within the small wins perspective, this thesis builds on institutional work theory. Institutional work refers to *'the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions'* (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 214). While the role of institutional work has become a more prominent area of research in the literature on socio-technical transitions (Hoogstraten et al., 2020), it has so far scarcely been considered in the context of small wins. By studying the interplay between institutional work and propelling mechanisms in this thesis, the aim is to increase understanding of how small wins interact with institutional barriers. To recognize and categorize types of institutional work, the categorization of institutional work strategies in Lawrence & Suddaby (2006) will serve as a basis. Sub-questions 1 and 2 seek to situate these strategies within the small wins perspective:

*SQ1: What institutional barriers do small wins face, and what type of institutional work strategies do they employ in response?*

*SQ2: How do institutional work strategies interact with the propelling mechanisms in the small wins governance framework?*

Empirically, the circular transition of the Dutch textile industry is taken as a case study. In a circular economy, primary resource use and waste streams are minimized through various 'R-strategies', aiming to reduce, reuse and recycle materials in alternative production and consumption processes (Kirchherr et al., 2017). The Dutch government aims for a fully circular economy by 2050, with a 50% reduction in material use as soon as 2030 (Ministerie van Infrastructuur & Waterstaat, 2016). In this context, the textile sector provides a particularly salient case. Through the widespread dominance of linear business models that depend on high throughput of low-quality products – termed fast fashion – textile production and consumption has grown drastically over the last decades (Niinimäki et al., 2020). The environmental effects of this are significant: textile production and consumption contribute severely to primary material extraction, water pollution, global greenhouse gas emissions and waste build-up (EEA, 2019; EPRS, 2019; Niinimäki et al., 2020).

In this thesis, the focus herein is specifically on higher R-strategies that enable an overall production and material reduction through Refusing, Reducing, Rethinking and Repairing (Reike et al., 2018). While all R-strategies are necessary for a successful circular transition, both policy and industry actors have thus far opted to focus primarily on improved recycling and waste management (Calisto Friant et al., 2021; Johansson, 2021; PBL, 2023). This is mirrored in the Dutch textile industry, where the main solution trajectories target recycling and reuse, while strategies aimed at reducing overall material flows have remained underdeveloped (PBL, 2023; Reike et al., 2022). The sheer amount of product throughput in the textile industry however demands a more holistic approach. Furthermore, by deviating from the dominant logic in the industry and advocating transformational change, the small wins studied in this thesis fit well conceptually with the focus of this research on small wins and institutional change. To address the role of small wins in this context, the third sub-question is as follows:

*SQ3: How do small wins contribute to the adoption and diffusion of R-strategies aimed at reducing material flows in the circular transition of the Dutch textile industry?*

To answer these research questions, a qualitative approach was employed, drawing on a combination of a document analysis on 11 small wins contributing to higher R-strategy adoption in the Dutch textile industry, after which 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with involved actors. In answering these research questions, this thesis makes three contributions to the existing literature. Firstly, this thesis adds to a thus far limited pool of empirical research on the small wins governance framework, thus increasing understanding of the non-linear dynamics in which small wins accumulate and attempt to overcome barriers. Secondly, by integrating the concept of institutional work into the framework, this thesis provides insight into the dynamics between small wins and the institutional barriers they face.

Findings show that, rather than merely building on propelling mechanisms to overcome barriers, small wins actors undertake concrete actions targeted specifically at overcoming barriers to transformational change. Lastly, the research provides insights into the implementation of higher R-strategies in practice, thus adding to the literature on circular transitions. The thus far lagging practical adoption of higher R-strategies in the circular transition can benefit from an increased focus of empirical research on those frontrunners in society that are leading the way.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this section, the scientific literature that serves as a basis for this thesis is discussed, starting with the literature on small wins. Thereafter, institutional work theory will be expanded upon, while keeping in mind how it can best be applied as an analytical lens to address agency in accumulating small wins.

### 2.1 SMALL WINS

#### 2.1.1 CONCEPT AND ADVANTAGES

Small wins are ‘*concrete, implemented outcomes of moderate importance*’ (Weick, 1984, p. 43). Facing complex, unmanageable problems, a small wins approach aims to build a chain of attainable, significant and visible results (Weick, 1984), that lead to progressively ‘less small’ wins (Urpelainen, 2013) and eventually to deep, transformational change (Vermaak, 2013). Examples of small wins in the literature stretch a variety of domains, including a ban on free plastic bags in Dutch shops (Termeer & Metze, 2019), a US church providing breakfast to the homeless (Plowman et al., 2007) and the rollout of plastic waste-catching technologies in the Rotterdam harbor (Bours et al., 2021). Due to this varied nature, small wins can be initiated by a variety of actors across the public and private sector (Bours et al., 2021).

To clearly distinguish small wins from other developments despite these versatile possibilities, Termeer & Dewulf (2019) define small wins through a set of characteristics<sup>1</sup>. Firstly, following the definition by Weick (1984), small wins should be concrete outcomes of *moderate importance*, going beyond mere promises or plans towards an objective. Secondly, they must contribute positively to a more or less *shared ambition* (Termeer & Dewulf, 2019). Third, small wins lead to *in-depth change*, meaning they include a change in routines, beliefs or values. In this they distinguish themselves from quick wins, which do not depart from existing practices and thus do not have the potential to lead to transformative change (Termeer & Dewulf, 2019; Vermaak, 2013). Fourth, small wins have to *overcome resistance and barriers*. Lastly, small wins *connect technical and societal change*, rather than being confined to either one domain.

Central to the small wins perspective is a particular perception of transformational change. Rather than episodic and abrupt transformational change, gradual and continuous change is seen as the motor behind eventual transformations (Bryson, 1988; Dolata, 2011; Vermaak, 2013). Such a conceptualization of change and transitions seems at odds with prevalent transition theories, where long periods of regime stability precede periods of abrupt and transformational change (Geels, 2002). Proponents argue however that a continuous view of change is more closely tied to reality. Rather than expecting change that is simultaneously in-depth, system-wide and fast, a continuous transformative change perspective acknowledges the inherent tradeoffs between these three dimensions (Termeer et al., 2017; Vermaak, 2013). While fast and in-depth change is feasible in a confined setting, society-wide change is inhibited by locked-in socio-technical norms through the physical embeddedness of technologies and institutionalization of social life (Fuenfschilling & Truffer, 2016; Geels, 2002). Accordingly, a small wins strategy aims to reach in-depth and fast change, hoping to sow the seeds for truly transformational change long-term (Termeer & Metze, 2019). While single small wins may thus seem unimportant, through achieving concrete, divergent results they can set in motion an accumulation of small wins that can lead to transformational change over a longer time scale.

Targeting small wins over big wins has several advantages for innovation policy concerning societal challenges. Firstly, dealing with grand societal challenges can be daunting, creating what Weick (1984) refers to as ‘dysfunctional levels of arousal’. The magnitude of ‘wicked’ problems can inhibit the quality of thought and action, as problems are defined in ways that overwhelm their ability to do anything about them (Weick, 1984). Without considering intermediary successes, progress towards the goal seems nonexistent, invoking feelings of hopelessness and ultimately inaction (Termeer & Metze, 2019; Weick, 1984). An approach based on incrementalism, or ‘muddling through’, is thus more likely to activate and engage involved actors (Lindblom, 1979). Secondly, small wins foster less opposition than big wins. For opposing parties, their modest size makes them less threatening than initiatives that proclaim to tear down the system. For neutral parties, the reduced stakes associated with the small size make it easier to initiate

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<sup>1</sup> The original set of characteristics was devised in Termeer & Dewulf (2019). Here, an updated version is used based on Termeer & Metze (2019) and Bours et al. (2021).

action without overanalyzing the situation before making decisions (Lindblom, 1979; Urpelainen, 2013; Weick, 1984). Thirdly, policymakers can have a blind spot for ongoing change processes, suffering from the ‘fallacy of centrality’ (Termeer & Dewulf, 2019; Weick, 2000). By focusing on top-down plans and activities, policymakers may miss opportunities to build on change instigated by small wins, leading to wasted potential for change on a wider scale.

### 2.1.2 SMALL WINS GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

Building on this literature, Termeer & Dewulf (2019) conceptualized a small wins governance framework for stimulating and evaluating the accumulation of bottom-up small wins initiatives, consisting of three steps. Firstly, setting a ‘provocative ambition’ provides directionality to change agents. Provocative ambitions represent a desired future, stretch, challenge and disrupt the status quo and are grounded in processes that are already set in motion (Termeer & Dewulf, 2019). Secondly, governments need to identify and value small wins contributing towards the ambition based on the set of characteristics listed in section 2.1.1. The dispersed and moderate nature of small wins can make identifying small wins challenging, as they tend to fly under the radar of media and conventional governance. Lastly, and centrally policymakers need to analyse whether the right propelling mechanisms are activated, and intervene in order to activate weak or missing mechanisms when necessary (Bours et al., 2021; Termeer & Dewulf, 2019). Propelling mechanisms are defined as ‘chains of events that reinforce themselves through feedback loops with an amplifying effect on an initial small change’ (Termeer & Dewulf, 2019, p. 305). Currently, eight such mechanisms have been recognized in the literature: learning by doing, partnering, stabilizing, embedding, the logic of attraction, professionalization, energizing and replicating (Schagen et al., 2022). Table 1 offers a description of each mechanism.<sup>2</sup>

**TABLE 1: PROPELLING MECHANISMS (ADAPTED FROM SCHAGEN, 2022)**

<b>Propelling mechanism</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<i>Learning by doing</i>	Uncover resources and barriers, provide quick feedback on the effectiveness of strategies, offer immediate insights into system reactions, and encourage reflection on personal and other belief systems
<i>Partnering</i>	The pooling of resources, competences and capacities between different relevant actors, who define shared norms and interests within preferably long-term cooperation Expanding and connecting the level playing field of the initiative
<i>Stabilizing</i>	The advantages of the practices and narrative of an initiative and the disadvantages of the status quo are internalizing in the minds and routines of actors such as members, partners and institutions; making them resilient to resistance and ensuring continuity
<i>Embedding</i>	The adoption and integration of an initiative’s design, approach or outcomes into existing local structures (institutions, regulations, planning, agenda and ambitions) and/or communities of practice
<i>Logic of attraction</i>	Financial and human resources tend to flow toward winners and create the preparedness and goodwill to lower financial or legislative barriers Moreover, positive results discourage the usual opponents and lower existing political and societal resistance
<i>Professionalization</i>	Becoming (formally) recognized as a serious player instead of an outsider or temporary experiment. This is for example reflected in the ability to acquire funding and subsidies or being invited to official meetings

<sup>2</sup> A more in-depth discussion of each mechanism and their interactions can be found in Termeer & Dewulf (2019) and Schagen et al. (2022).



<i>Energizing</i>	Concrete outcomes and visible results provide actors with the excitement that these are attainable, thereby encouraging them to look ahead for the next step. A reassuring process of commitment, optimism and trust in the actors involved and the results
<i>Replicating</i>	The effect when other individuals, companies and organizations start copying the approach or/and practices of an initiative

Through virtuous cycles between these mechanisms, small wins can expand beyond their original context and impact in various ways: initiatives can upscale beyond their original size; they can deepen through intensification and further radicalization of current practices; and they can broaden their impact through incorporating adjacent fields and practices into their activities (Schagen et al., 2022). However, in the absence of one or several mechanisms, the accumulation of small wins can stagnate, in which case the support of policymakers may be required (Bours et al., 2021). To this end, policymakers must continuously adapt the policy process (Termeer & Dewulf, 2019).

### 2.1.3 SMALL WINS AND INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS

Small wins by definition lead to second-order change, meaning they include a change in routines, beliefs or values. Small wins thus involve principles that are incongruent with the existing institutional setting. Due to this, *'each small win inevitably has to circumvent barriers, overcome resistance, alter constraints, or create conditions to tolerate tensions with existing institutions'* (Termeer & Metze, 2019, p.4). Overcoming such barriers is a prerequisite for classifying as a small win; without institutional resistance, the advocated change is not radical. In the small wins framework, overcoming these barriers depends on a virtuous cycle of propelling mechanisms (Termeer & Dewulf, 2019). By providing concrete evidence of progress, small wins can build momentum and support for change. However, the literature is not clear on how exactly these mechanisms can interact with and overcome institutional barriers. It is also not clear what actions small win actors can undertake when facing institutional barriers, leading to a potential gap in the descriptive power of the small wins framework.

To combat this, this thesis proposes to introduce the concept of institutional work into the small wins framework. Due to the institutional incongruency of small wins, successful expansion beyond their initial context must necessarily include institutional work. Including this perspective in the small wins governance framework thus contributes to the empirical assessment of agency in processes of transformational change. While institutional agency and a strategy of small wins have been identified as a fruitful combination in the literature (Reay et al., 2006), a more thorough integration of the two concepts could benefit understanding of bottom-up processes of transformational change. The following section expands on the scientific literature on institutional work and builds towards a fitting integration of the two concepts.

## 2.2 INSTITUTIONAL WORK

Institutional work is defined as ‘*the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions*’ (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 214). The field has its roots in the notion of institutional entrepreneurship, which was introduced to account for agency in processes of institutional change (DiMaggio, 1988). Whereas institutional change scholars initially pointed at external sources like disruptive crises to explain change, institutional entrepreneurship and institutional work research focusses on the agency that embedded actors possess to shape their institutional environment (Lawrence et al., 2009). This institutional environment is largely regarded to consist of three interlinked pillars: regulative (laws and rules), normative (norms and values) and cultural-cognitive (knowledge and taken-for-granted beliefs) institutions (Scott, 2008). Together, institutions determine the ‘rules of the game’, or the resilient formal (regulative) and informal (normative and cultural-cognitive) rules that shape social action in an institutional field (North, 1991). The incompatibility of small wins with either (or all) institutional pillars can lead to a lack of legitimacy, institutional barriers, and ultimately the need to engage in institutional work (Binz et al., 2016).

Many types of institutional work strategies (IW strategies) have been described in the literature. Based on an extensive literature review, Lawrence & Suddaby (2006) have made an influential typology in which they discern a total of eighteen general strategies, grouped according to the aims of creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions. This thesis joins an extensive base of empirical research on transitions in using these strategies to operationalize the concept of institutional work (e.g. Binz et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2013; Närvänen et al., 2021). Table 2 summarizes the different IW strategies.

TABLE 2: TYPES OF INSTITUTIONAL WORK STRATEGIES (ADAPTED FROM LAWRENCE & SUDDABY, 2006)

Type of IW	IW strategy	Definition
Creating	<i>Advocacy</i>	The mobilization of political and regulatory support through direct and deliberate techniques of social suasion.
	<i>Defining</i>	The construction of rule systems that confer status or identity, define boundaries of membership or create status hierarchies within a field
	<i>Vesting</i>	The creation of rule structures that confer property rights
	<i>Constructing identities</i>	Defining the relationship between an actor and the field in which that actor operates
	<i>Changing normative associations</i>	Re-making the connections between sets of practices and the moral and cultural foundations for those practices
	<i>Constructing normative networks</i>	Construction of interorganizational connections through which practices become normatively sanctioned and which form the relevant peer group with respect to compliance, monitoring and evaluation
	<i>Mimicry</i>	Associating new practices with existing sets of taken-for-granted practices, technologies and rules in order to ease adoption
	<i>Theorizing</i>	The development and specification of abstract categories and the elaboration of chains of cause and effect
Maintaining	<i>Educating</i>	The educating of actors in skills and knowledge necessary to support the new institution
	<i>Enabling work</i>	Creating rules that support or reinforce existing institutions, such as creating authorizing agents or redirecting resources.
	<i>Policing</i>	Guaranteeing compliance by actors through activities such as enforcement and monitoring.
	<i>Deterring</i>	The establishment of coercive barriers to change in institutions.
	<i>Valorizing and demonizing</i>	Providing the public with both positive and negative examples that convey the normative foundation of specific institutions.

	<i>Mythologizing</i>	Maintaining the normative underpinnings of institutions by effectively sustaining the myths of its history.
	<i>Embedding and routinizing</i>	Actively incorporating the normative underpinnings of an institution into individual's day-to-day routines and activities.
Disrupting	<i>Disconnecting sanctions</i>	Working through state apparatus to disconnect rewards and sanctions from some set of practices, technologies or rules
	<i>Disassociating moral foundations</i>	Disassociating the practice, rule or technology from its moral foundation as appropriate within a specific cultural context
	<i>Undermining assumptions and beliefs</i>	Decreasing the perceived risks of innovation and differentiation by undermining core assumptions and beliefs

Research on institutional work has to a large extent focused on the 'nearly invisible and often mundane' types of institutional work, 'as in the day-to-day adjustments, adaptations, and compromises' through which actors interact with and change institutions (Lawrence et al., 2009, 2013). This conceptualization of institutional work as something continuous and ordinary is akin to the idea of continuous transformative change that is so central to the small wins perspective.<sup>3</sup> Using institutional work to address agency in small wins accumulation is thus compatible with the theoretical underpinnings of the small wins perspective.

Lastly, the focus of this thesis on small wins begs the question whether such small, bottom-up initiatives are well-positioned to engage in institutional work, and what type of institutional work can reasonably be expected. Battilana et al. (2009) suggests several enabling factors in whether or not actors are likely to engage in divergent change, with an actor's social position in the institutional field being a decisive factor.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, actors in the periphery of a field seem more likely to depart from current institutions than central actors, as they are less embedded and dependent on existing practices (Battilana et al., 2009). Exceptions exist however, and the literature has identified a broad range of actors engaging in institutional work, from government and incumbents to start-ups and NGOs (Binz et al., 2016; Närvänen et al., 2021; Pelzer et al., 2019; Xing et al., 2018). Due to their moderate size, start-ups - which are potentially, though not necessarily also small wins - generally refrain from institutional work aimed at regulations, and instead focus on the normative and cultural-cognitive pillars (Närvänen et al., 2021). However, as small wins can span a wider range of actors, including policymakers (Bours et al., 2021; Termeer & Metze, 2019), both formal and informal institutions are of interest to this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> Early research in the field has received criticism for its depiction of 'overly rational and disembodied' agents that display characteristics not possessed by 'normal' people (Battilana et al., 2009, p. 67). In keeping with the underpinnings of the small wins perspective, this thesis aims to focus on the 'mundane' over the 'supernormal'.

<sup>4</sup> Actors in this context can mean either individuals or organizations.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 CASE DESCRIPTION AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis employs a qualitative research approach, in order to be able to capture the dynamic and multi-faceted nature of socio-technical transitions (Zolfagharian et al., 2019). Qualitative data is best suited to capture the role of propelling mechanisms and institutional work strategies in the accumulation of small wins, providing more rich and detailed descriptions than quantitative alternatives. Specifically, an embedded case study of the circular transition of the Dutch textile industry is performed, in which four different approaches to the adoption of higher R-strategies served as embedded units of analysis (Gustafsson, 2017). Section 3.2 expands on these different units of analysis. The overarching objective of this design is to provide rich data that aids the theoretical understanding of the relevant mechanisms and their relation to the agency of involved actors (Bryman, 2016).

The scope of the research is limited to small scale initiatives within the Dutch textile industry that explicitly aim to reduce consumption levels and contribute towards product lifetime extension through the (partial) application of higher R-strategies such as Refuse, Reduce, Rethink and Repair. The need for more circular production in the textile industry is apparent. Since 2000, global clothing brands have doubled annual clothing production, with serious effects on primary material extraction, water quality, greenhouse gas emissions and waste production (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Through business models dominated by the fast fashion concept, the textile industry exemplifies the high and linear throughput of material that the concept of the circular economy aims to move away from (Koszewska, 2018). The case study is limited to the Netherlands, which has the ambition to be one of the frontrunners in circular practices and to become fully circular in 2050, with a 50% reduction in primary resource use in 2030 as an intermediary step (Ministerie van Infrastructuur & Waterstaat, 2016). Across policy documents, a holistic approach towards the circular transition involving all R-strategies is proposed, stating the importance of higher R-strategies as well as technological advances in recycling (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2018; Ministerie van Infrastructuur & Waterstaat, 2016; Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2020).

However, hitherto the focus of both policy and practice has overwhelmingly been on the promotion of recycling and waste management as a circular strategy (PBL, 2023). While thus being in line with policy aims, the small wins within the boundaries of the case study can be regarded to remain outside of the currently existing standard practices and institutional logics of the field, making them an interesting subject within the theoretical concepts of small wins accumulation and institutional work. Their placement outside of the institutional order leads to a likely necessity of institutional work, while their concrete implementations of higher strategies on a small scale can potentially spark change towards wider adoption.

The theoretical concepts of small wins and institutional work form the basis of this thesis and guide the empirical research. In combining these two streams of literature, the aim is to provide empirical evidence for the (un)suitability of their integration. To infer such theoretical implications from empirical analysis, abductive analysis is employed (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Abductive analysis refers to the construction of theory through a *'creative inferential process aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence'* (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 1). However, rather than employing a fully inductive approach, abduction depends on an extensive theoretical background that allows for the recognition of relevant and surprising observations. In this case, the literature on propelling mechanisms and institutional work guide the researcher in analysing how small wins interact with and overcome institutional barriers. The case study on the circular transition of the Dutch textile industry then serves to provide empirical grounds on which to compare theory with reality and, if necessary, add to the theory based on empirical findings (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

### 3.2 SAMPLING STRATEGY AND DATA COLLECTION

Criterion sampling is employed as a sampling strategy, in which the aim is to identify all cases that meet a predetermined set of criteria (Palinkas et al., 2015). The boundaries of the case study, together with the characteristics of small wins as defined by Termeer & Metze (2019), are used as criteria for inclusion. To generate an overview of initiatives that fit within the boundaries of the case study, an online keyword search through Google and LexisNexis was performed. As media output might not always explicitly distinguish between R-strategies, this initial keyword search<sup>5</sup> more broadly targeted circular textile initiatives, after which irrelevant initiatives were filtered on an individual basis. Thus, any initiatives focusing solely on recycling advances, or other circular topics irrelevant to the case study, were not considered. This data collection approach limited the possibility of false negatives, that is missing out on potentially relevant initiatives due to an overly narrow initial search. Moreover, the online keyword search was complemented with relevant databases on circular initiatives, notably the Business for Sufficiency database, showcasing businesses that promote sustainable consumption practices (Bocken et al., 2022; Niessen & Bocken, 2022).

To study the impact of propelling mechanisms and IW strategies within these small wins, 10 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with small wins initiatives were held.<sup>6</sup> To complement the data from these interviews, a document analysis was performed on 44 documents, covering news articles on 11 small wins and documents produced by these small wins. An additional 11 documents describing general developments pertaining to the case study, such as trends towards higher R-strategies, or the activities of relevant impact organizations, were also included in document analysis for a total of 55 documents. Through such data triangulation, each initiative, as well as key observed theoretical concepts, were covered by more than one data source. This criterion also caused the exclusion of several initiatives and documents from the analysis, as it proved impossible to plan interviews with these initiatives. One exception was made, in which case the development of the initiative was particularly well-covered in media. Table 3 provides an overview of the data sample.

**TABLE 3: SAMPLE DESCRIPTION**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Description of activities</b>	<b>Main applied R-strategies</b>	<b>Function Interviewee</b>	<b>Documents</b>
E1	Educational initiative focusing on circularity campaigns in primary schools	Rethink, Reduce, Refuse	Founder	D1-5
E2	Educational initiative focusing on DIY textile skills	Repair, Rethink	Founder	D6-7
R1	Repair platform performing repairs through linking local tailors with brands and/or consumers	Repair	Co-founder	D8-13
R2	Repair platform performing repairs through B2B brand partnerships	Repair	Partnership manager	D14-20
B1	Sufficiency-based apparel brand leading both in terms of technical and social circular operations	Recycle, Reduce, Rethink	Founder + CSR manager*	D21-24
B2	Sufficiency-based apparel brand leading both in terms of technical and social circular operations	Recycle, Reduce, Reuse	CSR manager	D25-27
B3	Sufficiency-based circular apparel brand with a focus on social circular operations	Reduce, Repair	Co-founder	D28

<sup>5</sup> ('textiel OR 'kleding') AND ('circulair') yielded 507 results over a 2 year period (01-03-2021 – 01-03-2023) in a LexisNexis search.

<sup>6</sup> In total, 29 initiatives were approached for interviews, resulting in a total of eleven interviews. One interview was omitted after analysis as it did not fit the criteria of small wins.

L1	Local circular production and upcycling	Recycle, Rethink	Founder	D29-32
L2	Local circular production and upcycling	Recycle, Rethink	Co-founder	D33-37
L3	Local recycling through process automation	Recycle, Rethink	Founder	D38
L4	Local circular production and sales through own sufficiency-based circular apparel brand**	Rethink, Reduce	No interview	D39-44
-	General documents relevant to case study	-	-	D45-55

\*B1 organises a monthly webinar for all academic requests, rather than 1-on-1 interviews

\*\*L4's core activities span two categories and will be discussed accordingly in the results section.

With regards to the interviews, initiatives were approached to conduct an interview of 30-45 minutes, with any remaining questions after the interview asked and answered through e-mail correspondence. In reaching out, the aim was to speak to individuals who have spent considerable time with the initiative in an outwardly oriented position, in order to identify key developments for the initiative as well as interactions with the institutional context. Regarding practicalities, the majority of interviews were held through videocalls, as per the preferences of the interviewees. Furthermore, interviews were conducted in English or Dutch, dependent on which language the interviewee was most comfortable in.

The semi-structured interviews were divided into two main sections. Firstly, interviewees were asked to detail the development and expansion of the impact of their initiative. The main focus here is to uncover relevant propelling mechanisms that aided the acceleration of the small wins. In the second part of the interview, the focus was directed at any institutional barriers that the initiative has faced (or is currently facing) in its activities. After uncovering barriers, interviewees were asked to detail any factors, developments and own actions that they deemed important for overcoming each barrier. While the focus was on institutional barriers, any other barriers deemed especially relevant by the interviewee were also inquired about. Similarly, the focus of this thesis on higher R-strategies did not lead to a complete omission of other circular strategies in the interviews. As the implementation of these different strategies are often highly interlinked in practice, such a singular focus would omit relevant dynamics from the data. In conducting the interviews, the aim was to leave questions open-ended so that interviewees can prioritize topics of importance. The interviewer thus aimed to limit biases by not steering towards the inclusion of specific mechanisms and strategies. In general, questions were asked in wording that did not bear any specific link to the theoretical concepts, allowing interviewees to speak freely about the development of the small win and their actions in the face of barriers. Later analysis by the researcher linked the mentioned events and actions to the relevant theoretical concepts. To conclude the interview, snowball sampling was employed to find further potential small wins. The resulting suggestions from this snowball sampling confirmed the (near) exhaustiveness of the initial data collection strategy, as the vast majority of suggestions were known to the researcher. The full interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

A subdivision within the sample was made based on the core activities performed by each initiative. The overarching theme between the initiatives is a shared objective to slow down textile consumption and extend product lifetimes, which is pursued in a variety of complementing ways. Firstly, *educational initiatives* focus mainly on education and raised awareness of textile circularity within their respective target groups, aiming to induce changes in consumption patterns. Secondly, *repair platforms* provide innovative repair services to consumers and brands in order to promote repair practices. Thirdly, *sufficiency-based brands* are defined as businesses that support a 'sufficiency-based circular economy' by employing business strategies that *'make refuse, reduce, and rethink the most feasible, desirable, and viable options for citizens.'* (Bocken et al., 2022, p. 3) In essence, the notion of a sufficiency-based brand simply means conducting business in a way that aligns with higher R-strategies. For Lastly, reshoring initiatives bring small-scale textile production back to the Netherlands, aiming to reconnect consumers with the production process through vastly decreasing the distances and invisibility associated with the conventional textile supply chain. Thus, directly or indirectly, all initiatives promote the adoption of higher R-strategies. The purpose of this categorization serves first and foremost to best discuss the differences in

observed propelling mechanisms and IW strategies in the results, rather than aiming to draw wider conclusions based on a relatively small set of initiatives per category. Figure 1 illustrates the different categories and their shared direction.

Lastly, initiatives across all categories are identified as small wins, conforming to the characteristics of small wins as defined in Termeer & Metze (2019) and Bours et al. (2021). Firstly, through the explicit promotion of higher R-strategies, these initiatives deviate radically from industry norms that gear towards high-frequency buying at low costs, implementing *2<sup>nd</sup> order change* in their own operations, as well as promoting such change amongst their respective audiences. This promotion of higher R-strategies also constitutes the *shared direction* of the different initiatives, who all seek to *'accelerate the transition to a circular economy'* (E1), by *'turning the tide on endless consumption'* (D18) and *'starting a movement in the fashion industry away from fast fashion'* (B1). While *concrete outcomes* in terms of behavioral change are hard to ascertain, most initiatives have been able to expand their reach and impact continuously, thus signaling concrete successes. Other concrete results are achieved outside of the scope of higher R-strategies, for example in the context of technological innovations with regards to recycling (B1, B2, L2, L3) and the improved collection of post-consumer textile waste (E1, L3). *Positive judgement* is indicated for example through the reception of circular awards by several of the small wins (E1, B1, B2, L1, L2) and formal recognition as circular frontrunners (B1, R2, L3) by national and regional government. Nonetheless, initiatives operate largely on a local stage, indicating their *moderate importance*. Lastly, in pursuing their shared direction, the initiatives encounter several *barriers*, which will be discussed in detail in section 4.1.

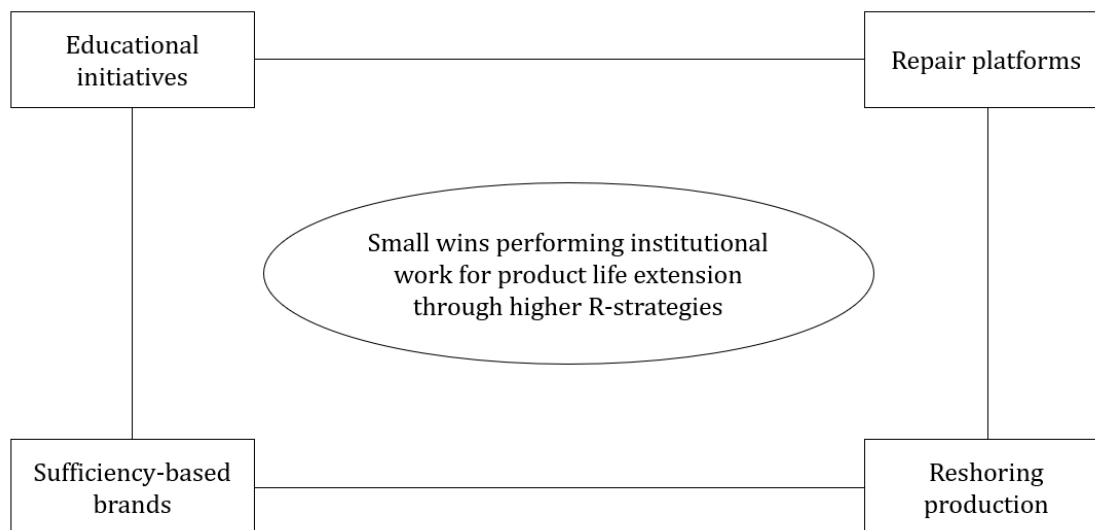


FIGURE 1: SUBCATEGORIES SURROUNDING THE SHARED DIRECTION

### 3.3 OPERATIONALIZATION AND DATA ANALYSIS

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, then coded in NVivo. Both transcribing and coding closely followed after conducting the interview, in order to allow for an iterative process of collecting and analysing data, and a growing understanding of the research as it develops (Bryman, 2016). With regards to propelling mechanisms and IW strategies, coding followed a predefined coding scheme, based on the guided by a coding scheme based on the propelling mechanism and IW strategies described in Tables 1-2. The definitions in Table 2 formed the basis for coding observed activities into IW strategies. Furthermore, in order to code observed events to propelling mechanisms, indicators and definitions from earlier research by Bours et al. (2021) and Schagen et al. (2022) were used.<sup>7</sup> While no codes were forced into any predefined category of propelling mechanisms or institutional work strategies, no additional codes were added during data analysis. With regards to the observed institutional barriers, high-level coding was guided by definitions of regulative, cultural-cognitive and normative institutional pillars as defined in Scott (2008). Within these pillars, coding was done in an open manner, creating descriptive categories of barriers as data collection and -analysis went on. Several barriers were encountered that could not be assigned to any institutional pillar, but these were not mentioned consistently enough to have any bearing on the findings. An overview of all observed barriers, propelling mechanisms and institutional work strategies, including the amount of codes per category, can be found in Appendix B.

The coding process involved examining each line or paragraph of the documents and interview transcripts and assigning codes that captured the essence of the content. This line-by-line coding approach allowed for a detailed examination of participants' responses and ensured that no valuable information was overlooked (Bryman, 2016). The coding process was iterative, meaning that it involved multiple passes through the data, with the aim to remain open to unexpected or novel insights, ensuring a comprehensive analysis. The analysis of the documents and semi-structured interviews aimed to go beyond individual responses and identify broader trends and perspectives. Systematically coding and analyzing the data allowed a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, opinions, and attitudes related to the research topic. The insights obtained from the data analysis and coding were instrumental in answering the research questions and generating valuable findings. The rigorous approach to data analysis ensured the trustworthiness and reliability of the study's conclusions, contributing to the overall validity and significance of the research.

Furthermore, throughout the coding process, memos and reflective notes were maintained to document the thought processes, interpretations, and decision-making. This enabled the researcher to track the evolution of analysis, as well as any potential biases introduced during the analysis. It also provided an audit trail for future reference and evaluation.

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<sup>7</sup> The aims of this research did not include an in-depth analysis of the characteristics of specific propelling mechanisms. While this operationalization was thus used to assign lines to specific propelling mechanisms, lines were not assigned to specific lower-level indicators.



## 4. RESULTS

The results of the research will be presented in the following sections. In line with the main research question, section 4.1 will first discuss the encountered institutional barriers, after which section 4.2 will focus on how the small wins seek to overcome these barriers. As most initiatives indicate overlapping institutional barriers regardless of their categorization, the barriers will be discussed jointly. Subsequently, section 4.2 will discuss separately how each category of initiatives seeks to overcome the barriers, in order to highlight the dynamics between IW strategies and propelling mechanisms that emerged.

### 4.1. INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS

Perhaps unsurprisingly due to the social dimensions of higher R-strategies, the main observed institutional barriers are predominantly cultural-cognitive and normative, rather than regulative. Due to relatedness between observed barriers in the former two, this section will first discuss these informal institutional barriers jointly, after which the remaining regulative, or formal institutional barriers, are briefly touched upon. For an overview of encountered barriers, along with illustrative data as supporting evidence, see Table 4.

#### 4.1.1 INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS

The objectives shared by the small wins in the case study require a certain extent of behavioural change from the Dutch consumer base, as these initiatives break with existing dominant practices in the industry. As brands as well as consumers are used to high-frequency buying at low costs and quality, the **persistence of robust fashion habits** is unsurprisingly seen as a major barrier amongst interviewees (B1, B3, L1, R1, R2). While a part of the Dutch consumer base is willing to pay a premium for high-quality circular products, initiatives experience difficulties in expanding this group, as pricing is often seen as a top priority in acquisition. Additionally, fashion habits are enforced by 'boring and old-fashioned' normative associations with circular practices such as repairing, making consumers less inclined to repair items instead of replacing them (R1, R2). Mirroring this rigid consumer behaviour, businesses in the sector are generally unwilling or unable to prioritize circular choices over **financial considerations** (B2, R1, R2, L1, L4, E1). While circular thinking has gained a foothold even in regime actors, financial departments overrule sustainability departments in terms of decision-making. This rigidity limits the adoption of circular services such as those offered by repair platforms (R1, R2), but also hinders the objectives of leading brands that hope to inspire change in the industry, as the implementation of higher R-strategies clashes with dominant market- and profit-oriented logics (B1, B2, B3).

On the consumer side, difficulties to inspire behavioural changes are further complicated by a general **lack of awareness** about the textile industry's negative effects, as many people do not (fully) understand the need to move away from conventional practices (B1, B3, E2, L1, L3, R2, D39). Intrinsic motivation to change behaviour is non-existent in the absence of such awareness, thus limiting changes in consumption patterns. Lacking awareness also exists in terms of practical knowledge, as people are often not aware of what day-to-day circular options they have (E1, E2, B1, D8, D50). Even when consumers are thus motivated to change behaviour, they do not always have the tools to actualize this motivation. In both these types of lacking awareness, the spreading of **misinformation through greenwashing** contributes severely to the challenge (B1, B3, E1, D52). Greenwashing causes consumers to underestimate the effects of textile production and, relatedly, overconsumption, while also making it harder for circular frontrunners to distinguish themselves. With every brand claiming sustainable practices, it is increasingly hard for consumers to know which truly circular options they have. As circular products and services generally cannot compete with regards to pricing, such knowledge gaps on the consumer side diminish possibilities for the small wins to differentiate themselves in other ways.

Lastly, reshoring initiatives and repair platforms experience more practical knowledge-related barriers in the **lack of local expertise** on textile production processes (L1, L2, B3). Despite a rich Dutch history in textile production, current attempts to re-establish a textile sector locally run into non-existence of local knowledge and skills after decades of offshoring. This inhibits local producers and repair platforms in

growing their activities, causing them to create such educational tracks on their own account (as will be discussed in section 4.2).

TABLE 4: ILLUSTRATIVE DATA INDICATING THE EXISTENCE OF INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS

Type of barrier	Description of Barrier	Exemplary quotes
Informal	Lack of knowledge of negative effects	<p><i>"Fashion is mostly about high quantities at low prices. People have no idea anymore how clothes are made and the process behind them."</i> (D39)</p> <p><i>"it's hard to get customers to understand that the fashion industry is really a rotten industry and that clothing is way too cheap if you buy something today. For consumers it's not easy to see where and what to buy and for what price."</i> (B1)</p>
	Lack of knowledge about circular options (partially due to misinformation)	<p><i>"I think there is also an increasing interest in sustainable fashion, but people don't know exactly how to do that with their own wardrobe. So you do notice that people are trying to find solutions for that."</i> (E2)</p> <p><i>"When we started we noticed that even the brands that we worked for lacked knowledge on sustainable textiles. Sustainability is such an umbrella term, that no-one really realizes what it means."</i> (D34)</p> <p><i>"I think the existence of greenwashing definitely has a negative impact, because it's just hard to differentiate yourself. At least until now, I think it just takes away credibility from the ones that are truly sustainable and it also confuses the consumer because you cannot expect them to be sustainable experts"</i> (B1)</p>
	Robust fast fashion habits	<p><i>There is zero appreciation for the maker and the process behind it. I mean we buy things, but we have no idea.... Most of all it has to be inexpensive. But yeah, how can it be so cheap from the other side of the world with raw materials and with people who have worked on it. (L1)</i></p> <p><i>What's really hard is to ask the true price, what an item should actually cost. People often just see it as another pair of jeans, they don't see the effort put into it, and the fact that we only use the highest quality. So then they focus on the price, and they quickly think it's too high."</i> (B3)</p> <p><i>"Well, so culturally the behaviour of people is challenging. They're not used to doing [repairs], so that's where you have trouble convincing people. Like, it's not that crazy to do that, it's not that dull."</i> (R1)</p>
	Regime actors prioritizing profit	<p><i>"So of course sometimes if you think about sustainability, it's often seen as a pretty big expense within companies. It's something that they need to invest in."</i> (R2)</p> <p><i>"As a company, of course you don't want to be promoting the message that actually we should be buying less. While that is of course what you would want."</i> (E1)</p>
	Insufficient local textile expertise	<p><i>"The biggest challenge [for local production] is of course, how do you get people if you want to grow? There's obviously nobody here who masters this trade anymore. That's the biggest challenge, so we had to train those people ourselves."</i> (B3)</p> <p><i>"I think finding the tailoring talents is one of the main difficult things, and that's also why for example, we are launching the Academy, so we want to educate people ourselves"</i> (R2)</p>

Formal	Lack of stimulating policies for higher R-strategies	<p><i>“There actually aren't the right incentives to encourage this, especially if you look at education and reuse. You would wish there were more stimulating laws and regulations to scale up successful initiatives like ours, because right now there isn't really any party that has an incentive to accomplish that.” (E1)</i></p> <p><i>“The lack of awareness and legislation encouraging the repair of clothing leads consumers to throw used clothing in the trash rather than having it repaired.” (D19)</i></p>
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#### 4.1.2 FORMAL INSTITUTIONS

As mentioned, regulative institutional barriers are less present than soft institutions. Nonetheless, interviewees indicate a general **lack of stimulating regulations** for the implementation of higher R-strategies (E1, R1, R2, L3). While there is little mention of regulations that actively restrict the implementation of higher R-strategies, a need for more stimulation of such practices is expressed, as current policies focus overly on the stimulation of recycling instead of other R-strategies. Illustrative is the recently approved legislation on extended producer responsibility (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2023), which does not (effectively) address higher R-strategies, but rather remains limited to the topic of newly produced items and the stimulation of recycled content. While there are possible ‘trickle-down’ effects on other R-strategies, such as indirect cost savings when reselling a used item (R1), the adoption of higher R-strategies remains underlit.

Notably, local governments provide substantially different levels of support, with the municipality of Amsterdam repeatedly mentioned as a supporting actor in the formation or further development of initiatives (L1, L3, R1, R2, E2). Other municipalities are cited as barely present in the transition, with R1 stating that *“Utrecht is not a good supporter of circular business at all. There's only one FTE working on the circular economy at the municipality, that's nothing. In Rotterdam though, a resale start-up easily got €100.000 to set up a business plan, a location in the Koopgoot [central shopping street] for scraps, all the big local news paid them attention. That gets you a podium, that gets the ball rolling”*. Such regional differences might explain why the presence of regulative barriers is not experienced equally by all initiatives, as one (Amsterdam-based) initiative notes that *‘personally, I've noticed that in recent years, much more than previously, that there are funds and support from the municipality, or maybe also in the whole country’*. (E2).

Lastly, while the focus of data collection was on higher R-strategies, regulative and financial barriers were encountered that are not contained to the domain of higher R-strategies, but are nonetheless very relevant for the success of the small wins. In practice, many initiatives involved in the promotion of higher R-strategies are logically also active in other areas of circularity, such as recycling and other avenues of sustainable production (B1, B2, L2, L3, L4). In these cases, financial barriers especially become much more relevant, due to the higher capital investments associated with novel recycling technologies (B1, L2, L3). The embeddedness of higher R-strategies in broader circular initiatives means that the successful and impactful promotion of higher R-strategies is in part dependent on the successful navigation of barriers in other areas of the circular transition.

## 4.2 OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Through analysing the collected data, it becomes apparent that many of the small wins engage in institutional work, often directly targeting the barriers discussed in 4.1. When propelling mechanisms are successfully activated, the data shows a recurring dynamic where IW strategies directly combat the barriers they face, whilst the propelling mechanisms serve to increase the scope of activities, thus putting the small wins in increasingly better positions to effectively combat barriers. To illustrate this dynamic between propelling mechanisms and IW strategies, this section will discuss the four subcases as described in section 3.2 individually, in each case discussing what activities are performed, and whether or not the impact of these grows due to the propelling mechanisms. To demonstrate the empirical basis for the presented findings in each category, illustrative data from both the interviews and documents is presented for each category in Tables 5-8 respectively.

### 4.2.1 EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES

#### Activities and institutional works strategies

The initiatives in this category primarily focus on educational activities surrounding textile circularity. E1 organizes educational campaigns at primary schools, starting with an introduction to circular principles and culminating in textile races where 10 primary schools in a municipality or region compete to perform a variety of circular activities. Such activities might include the collection of old textile in the neighbourhood, organising swapping events, or performing repairs. While initially targeting e-waste, the initiative has since broadened into campaigns for circular textile and energy savings. Similarly, E2 organizes repair classes and workshops, teaching people DIY textile skills, either at their own permanent location, at events, or through workshops with the workforce of several brands and retailers (e.g. Nike, Bijenkorf).

Logically, the main type of institutional work performed by these initiatives is **educating** their respective target audiences about the social and environmental impact of the conventional textile industry, as well as giving people concrete tools to make more circular choices. While both engage in such institutional work, the extent in which they do so differs. E1, realising that the circular transition needs social changes as well as technological advances, consciously set up their initiative in a way that aims to instil a change in mindset and behaviour, not only in the children that are directly engaged, but indirectly also for parents, teachers and other bystanders. In this way, they reach a varied audience, including people who are not generally well-informed about circularity and how they can approach it. In the case of E2, educational activities have mostly been targeted a more homogeneous crowd, who seek out such workshops on their own account and are thus likely to have an interest in textile and/or sustainability.

TABLE 5: ILLUSTRATIVE DATA WITH REGARDS TO EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES

	Description	Exemplary quotes
Central IW strategies	Educating	<p><i>“There are a lot of people in society who don't always know what the options are. So for example, they don't know of the existence of a repair shop, or how to get cool second-hand stuff, so that's really what we're here for, to give them the tools to make sustainability accessible.” (E1)</i></p> <p><i>“I do really notice a difference once people have completed a workshop or class. So, after the first class, they'll make something and very often they'll say ‘wow, I really did not think this would be so much work, you really gain respect for the people who do this daily’.” (E2)</i></p>
Central propelling mechanisms	Learning by doing	<p><i>“In the first year, 2014, I set up a pilot, and we had 3 municipalities as launching customers.” (E1)</i></p> <p><i>“So then I actually started with a pop-up store for a few weeks here in Amsterdam, with a similar idea, teaching people to make their own stuff. And that's kind of how the idea started because I loved having a place like that, and that's where the idea of the repair shop came in.” (E2)</i></p>

Partnering	<p><i>We then chose [to partner with] WEEE NL, because they were a bit more progressive and they wanted to offer e-waste races to the municipalities they did business with. So that caused us to make a big step, cause we could grow along with WEEE NL. (E1)</i></p> <p><i>“First of all, we have started quite a lot of fun collaborations, we are being asked more and more to give workshops for example at an event or at an office. We are now also doing a series of workshops at the headquarters of Nike.” (E2)</i></p>
Energizing	<p><i>“The project really runs on the energy of our team and the goodwill of municipalities that are sympathetic to this. If you look at our results, how big our reach is, how much awareness and behavioral change we trigger, you really want to scale that up more.” (E1)</i></p> <p><i>“I have a really good feeling about that, if we can achieve that bigger scale, I believe we’ll create a really cool place, and that it will make an even bigger difference than right now.” (E2)</i></p>

### **Growing impact due to propelling mechanisms**

From initial modest beginnings, both initiatives have been able to reach an increasingly large audience, thus increasing the effect of their institutional work. To get started, **learning by doing** was activated through a pilot with three launching municipalities (E1) and a temporary pop-up store (E2), giving each small win the chance to test the viability of the concept. For further growth, **partnering** was pivotal in both cases. For E2, partnerships with brands, retailers and event organisers allowed them to organize classes and workshops for a much broader audience. While textile workshops were initially targeted at individuals showing interest on their own account – who were often already thinking in terms of circularity -, such partnerships allowed the initiative to reach the workforce of leading companies in the industry.

For E1, partnering set in motion a virtuous cycle of propelling mechanisms, allowing them to spread their impact across the country. After the initial pilot, a partnership with a producer organization for e-waste collection (WEEE NL) caused rapid growth, as their concept was now offered in all municipalities where WEEE NL was already active. This rapid spreading alongside WEEE NL ensured the **stabilization** of the initiative, as demand for their services multiplied. From their primary focus on e-waste, the initiative then broadened into the domain of circular textile. The lessons learned in the context of e-waste proved sufficient to set up activities in a new context, as finding municipalities willing to join their services proved much easier than before. This is aided by the **logic of attraction** mechanism, as municipalities had already gotten acquainted with their approach and saw the value of supporting the project financially.

Logic of attraction is further showcased through the participation of both initiatives in an accelerator program for circular textile organizations in the Amsterdam Metropole Area, allowing access to high-quality financial, legal and strategic coaching that would otherwise have been unattainable. Co-funded by the municipality, this simultaneously signals some degree of **embedding** of such initiatives in terms of governmental support. Indeed, the active stance of the municipality strengthens E2 in their belief that investors for expansion will be less difficult to come by than in previous years, when less support was available. Lastly, throughout their respective development, the **energizing** mechanism fuelled further growth for each small win. Due to the close proximity and constant feedback of their audiences, both initiatives regularly see the effects of their activities, energizing them to continue and to believe in the effectiveness of their approach.

### *Reflections*

The presence of these propelling mechanisms aids the growth of the initiatives. This increased scale of operations naturally also leads to an increased scale at which the initiatives can perform their institutional work through their educational activities. For E2, a virtuous cycle of propelling mechanisms means they

can more actively reach out to people outside of the likeminded initial customer base, those who actively seek out repair classes by themselves. For E1, the target group remains unchanged, but their spreading means they can reach out to a substantially larger group of primary schools, reaching over 600 primary schools in three countries to date (D2).

#### 4.2.2 REPAIR PLATFORMS

##### **Activities and institutional work**

The core activities for the initiatives in this category relate to performing repairs, largely through other businesses (B2B) rather than directly targeting consumers. Despite repairing as such being a well-established practice - with the majority of circular business in the Netherlands employing 'repair' as a primary circular strategy (PBL, 2023) - these small wins nevertheless innovate within this practice. By providing logistical solutions that allow brands to incorporate repair services into their business models, as well as conforming the reparation process to the expectations of modern consumers, they aim to reinstitute clothing reparations as a common, habitual activity. Both operate in a slightly different manner, as R1 connects brands with existing repair shops dotted around the cities they operate in, while R2 has centralized all repairs in one location and organization.

In response to the encountered barriers in 4.1, both initiatives engage in ample institutional work. There are three main observed approaches in terms of IW strategies (see Table 6 for an overview of observed IW strategies and propelling mechanisms). Firstly, both initiatives aim to **change normative associations**, using several different tactics to do so. In the basis, this revolves around a different presentation and framing of repairing. For example, R2 chooses to set up their workplace in a crowded and trendy location, fully open for visitors to walk in (D41), aiming to associate themselves with creative ateliers rather than regular tailors. Similarly, repairs are not necessarily made invisible, but can rather become fashionable through making an item stand out (D40). Through such everyday changes and actions, R2 aims explicitly 'to make repair the new cool'. For both initiatives, the choice to work with brands is also motivated by the objective to change normative associations with repairs. By offering free repair services through established (and leading) brands, the aim is to normalize repairs more easily than through isolated repair services. With similar objectives, R1 organized campaigns where they repaired items of Dutch celebrities, aiming to normalize repairing practices through celebrity endorsements. As such, **constructing normative networks** is a key part of the overarching aim to change normative associations.

Secondly, sharing a recognition that modern consumers are geared towards ease of use, effort is put into **mimicking** the acquisition process of new items, with R1 stating that *'our frustration was the fact that I can order everything on my phone with a few clicks, but going to a repair shop (...) feels like a trip 30 years back in time'*. Through digitalization and pick-up services, the initiative takes away barriers that people might encounter in initiating a repair process. Similarly, the dopamine rush of ordering new clothes is mimicked through presenting the repaired item in enticing fashion. R2 adopts similar mimicking strategies, promising quick turnaround of repair services to tap into *'the mentality that everything has to happen quick, because if you order something from a webshop it can be delivered on your doorstep the same evening'*.

Lastly, in convincing additional brands and retailers to take up repair services, the initiatives **embed** their circular logics into existing institutional logics of the industry. While launching partners were, in both cases, frontrunners in terms of circularity, increasing impact means convincing brands that *'aren't used to thinking in terms of sustainability, where finances just have to be clear'* (R1). Taking this into consideration, both small wins highlight financial advantages for brands, in terms of increasing customer lifetime value, customer retention and PR value, rather than speaking just in terms of sustainability. By reasoning in terms that resonate with existing institutional logics, the initiatives aim to embed repairing into already established institutions, thus bridging differences between competing institutional logics, similar to previous empirical observations on institutional work (Dahlmann & Grosvold, 2017; Pache & Santos, 2013).

TABLE 6: ILLUSTRATIVE DATA WITH REGARDS TO REPAIR PLATFORMS

	Description	Exemplary quotes
Central IW Strategies	Changing normative associations	<p><i>"We also did a campaign in October in which we worked with Kim Feenstra, among others, so that's kind of nice that we also got into the wardrobes of celebrities, and fixed their items. So then you also get the masses, the mainstream people with you, it creates a better image"</i> (R1)</p> <p><i>"We say we want to make repair the new cool. We really want it to be the norm to say okay, how can I repair this or at least attempt to do that before purchasing something new."</i> (R2)</p>
	Mimicry	<i>"So it should be as easy as buying something new, and also - when you buy something new you have a kind of excitement when the package is coming to your home, you have a kind of dopamine rush. So how it's presented, that's also super important."</i> (R1)
	Embedding	<i>"What brands often lack is the insight into what impact it has on their business. For example a repair service can increase customer loyalty, because a customer likes the fact that such services are included. So you have to be very clear about those kind of benefits to get them to go along with it."</i> (R1)
Central propelling mechanisms	Partnering	<p><i>"So I think we were really lucky with launching with Patagonia, who does have a reputation of really being an industry leader and working on changing a lot of systematic things."</i> (R2)</p> <p><i>"In a way we could very easily just work with B2C you know, we have the repair centre, we could open it up to everybody. But the reason that we really want to work with brands is because we see that if the brands don't change, the big systematic changes don't happen."</i> (R2)</p> <p><i>"[R1]'s mission does not only extend to individual customers, but brands too. Brand partnerships will play a huge role in delivering scalability and impact. R1, in collaboration with a clothing brand, will expand to Amsterdam in the future."</i> (D12)</p>
	Logic of Attraction	<p><i>"We started a little less than a year ago, but yes, we're receiving a lot of attention, also because of MUD Jeans as a customer, that makes sure that a lot of other parties find us, so that's really nice"</i> (R1)</p> <p><i>"A consortium of Dutch impact funders is investing €1.5 million in [R2] to accelerate the transition to an inclusive labour market and a sustainable textile industry."</i> (D20)</p>

### Growing impact due to propelling mechanisms

In both cases, **partnerships** with leading circular brands kickstarted operations and set in motion a virtuous cycle of propelling mechanisms, despite the relatively short timespan since the start of each small win. For R2, the initiative was set up specifically to perform repairs for this initial partner. R2's founders, who set up a local circular design- and production facility previously, broadened their activities into reparations following the brand's desire to set up a local repair facility. The initiative started out dedicated to repairing items from the initial partner, on the condition that this would serve as an open blueprint for other brands seeking to explore repair services (D18), indicating that **replication** was an objective from the start. R1 started out independently, but an early partnership with a circular frontrunner provided a similar boost as for R2. In both cases, the initiatives **stabilized** early due to this secured flow of reparations,

and thus revenue. Moreover, this steady flow of demand helped both initiatives to rapidly uncover existing practical barriers through **learning by doing**. For example, R1 encountered a lack of digital skills amongst tailors, which complicated their digitalized approach to repair services, while R2 quickly encountered a lack of qualified personnel to perform repairs. However, learning by doing also served to uncover additional benefits of their own approach, for example through the collection of repairing data, which quickly becomes an additional selling point toward businesses in both cases. The process of stabilization was further aided through the **logic of attraction** mechanism, as the association with high-profile circular brands quickly established the initiatives as 'winners', garnering media attention as well as interest from other brands. As such, both initiatives were able to make agreements with additional brands rather quickly. The effects of the logic of attraction mechanism are also expressed through securing support for the further expansion of each initiative. R1, like both educational initiatives, was invited to join the accelerator program for circular textile organizations, thus gaining access to impact-increasing services without the associated cost. Similarly, R2 recently raised substantial funds from a consortium of impact investors, in large part aimed at setting up an academy to train future employees (D20). **Professionalization** also plays a role in this phase, as R2 is invited to the House of Representatives, which enables them to advocate for legislative support for repair activities. Such advocacy aims to further stimulate **embedding** of repairing practices through hardcoded regulations. Currently, embedding is only present in terms of support for the initiatives, for example through the previously mentioned accelerator program, which is partially funded by the municipality of Amsterdam.

### *Reflections*

In this category of initiatives, more interaction can be observed between propelling mechanisms and IW strategies. Where partnerships previously served mainly to grow the small win, and thus the audience for institutional work activities, in both these cases the propelling mechanisms, and partnerships in particular, are integral *to* the institutional work. Both platforms explicitly prioritize B2B repairs over B2C, in order to embed repair services into brands' business models and thus instil more systemic change. Additionally, partnerships are used to change the normative associations of repairing, through repairing campaigns involving celebrities as well as through the existing reputations of collaborating brands. Lastly, the institutional work aimed at embedding repair practices performed by the initiatives benefit from learning by doing, as the initiatives continuously adjust and improve their sales pitch, finding novel advantages to repairing (e.g. data collection) as well as finding new frames (e.g. customer lifetime maximization) to embed reparation into the existing institutional logics of the fashion industry. Without learning by doing, these platforms would not be able to engage in institutional work with the same level of effectiveness.

Conversely, several situations display a dynamic similar to what's previously been described. For example, the professionalization mechanism – becoming recognized as a serious actor – seems a necessary prerequisite for a small win to effectively engage in advocacy. This relation is observed in R2's invitation to the roundtable conversation at the House of Representatives, where they were able to advocate for more regulatory stimulation of reparation (D19). Moreover, when faced with a lack of skilled textile workers needed to scale up operations, R2 engages in institutional work by setting up a repair academy to train such workers themselves. The logic of attraction mechanism puts them in a position to do this on a sufficiently large scale, providing the funding needed for the educational tracks (D20). In these cases, it is again the institutional work strategy that actively engages with existing barriers, while activated propelling mechanisms provide the opportunity to do so effectively.



#### 4.2.3 RESHORING INITIATIVES

##### Activities and institutional work

Initiatives in this category have all set up local textile production facilities in the Netherlands, contributing to increased visibility of textile production. The exact approach to this differs: L3 focusses on technological innovation to allow for local production and recycling on a larger scale; L1 is largely a social initiative, mainly motivated to provide decent job opportunities for migrants and status holders; and L2 and L4 combine both social and technical dimensions in their activities. All share a commitment to circularity, and look to reassess consumption patterns that have negative effects elsewhere in the world, either focussing on the supply chain for newly produced products (L2, L4) or on the effects of ever-growing Western textile waste streams in predominantly African countries (L3). Believing that the complexity of the global textile supply chain, as well as the pervasiveness of bad social and environmental practices, makes it near impossible to circumvent such negative effects, local production is seen as a means to remove these effects from the production of textile (L1, L2, L3, L4).

Moreover, local production naturally brings the production of apparel closer to the end user, providing possibilities to let consumers revalue the process and labour that goes into their items. Through visible and transparent production, without complex supply chains, local producers can more effectively **educate** consumers about what goes into their products. For example, L4 invites its customers to visit their production facility, where they provide workshops about textile production and generally educate visitors on circularity principles (D40, D41). By creating direct contact points between user and producer, they aim to make production visible and transparent, thus reconnecting consumers with the value of their products. Similarly, L1 and L2 remove anonymity by emphasizing specifically which employees worked on which production lines. This draws comparisons to the repair platforms in their communication of which exact tailor is repairing the customer’s item. Through spotlighting textile production and textile workers in this way, these initiatives **valorize** the production process and the resulting products, framing it as something that deserves to be treated with respect. Moreover, local production allows for experimentation with new circular business models, with L1 working on a made-to-order basis, where products are only manufactured based on actual needs, combatting the large volumes of unsold stock that’s wasted in the industry. Such innovative approaches are made possible due to the flexibility and short communication lines that come with local production, mirroring the sustainable business model innovation that sufficiency-based brands (see section 4.2.4) engage in.

TABLE 7: ILLUSTRATIVE DATA WITH REGARDS TO RESHORING INITIATIVES

	<b>Description</b>	<b>Exemplary quotes</b>
Central IW strategies	<b>Valorizing/ Educating</b>	<p><i>People have no idea anymore how clothing is made and the process behind it. We want to change that with clothing that is made locally and is circular’ (D39)</i></p> <p><i>The impact of the made-to-order model goes much beyond eradicating the production of surplus stock, it grows consumer-consciousness, creating impactful change in how we relate to the clothes we wear and how we relate to who makes them.” (L1)</i></p> <p><i>When we started we noticed that even the brands that we worked for lacked knowledge on sustainable textiles, (...) that’s why we organize training sessions too now. Like that, we can increase our impact by explaining what sustainability really is, and how you can work sustainably” (L2)</i></p>
Central propelling mechanisms	<b>Logic of attraction</b>	<p><i>“We’re in an accelerator program by the Impact Hub, which the municipality [of Amsterdam] also funds, where we were chosen with 9 other textile organizations. It’s set up pretty well, with a lot of help both legally and financially, and also a little bit of impact strategy, how to write that and figure that out.” (L1)</i></p>

*"We won the innovation prize of the Foodvalley region. And I think, by winning such an award and all the publicity that it generates, that of course helps enormously. You get asked to give interviews for all kinds of newspapers and things like that, and that keeps floating around somewhere on the Internet, and that's how clients find you." (L2)*

**Stabilizing**

*"On the other hand, so in terms of customers, it was not difficult at all. There was no obstacle there at all, they were basically lining up from the beginning." (L2)*

*"We are also clearly being consciously sought out by brands that indeed want to do that upcycling, or want to do made-to-order. So with that it turned out that we actually pretty quickly found a kind of niche, so that was kind of the start." (L1)*

*"We're not cheap, that would not even be possible, but we do notice that there is a group that thinks it's worth it. They rather have an item that is guaranteed quality and lasts a while than buying fast fashion" (D43)*

**Partnering**

*"The workplaces of L1 and Pantar are being merged. [L1] will take care of the organization of work, clients and assignments, while Pantar will provide production facilities and the deployment of employees. [L1] thus achieves a scale that contributes to its continuity as a circular pioneer." (L1)*

*"You also notice that in the Netherlands, craftsmanship is really not present, so you immediately end up with status holders because there are simply no people who have mastered the profession. And then, of course, you immediately come into contact with all kinds of municipalities, so we work together with many municipalities." (L2)*

**Growing impact due to propelling mechanisms**

Due to apparent demand for local production facilities, and the relative uniqueness of them, the small-scale initiatives **stabilized** relatively easily and early in their development. Citing several practical advantages, such as short communication lines in the production process and increased flexibility, their customers quickly see the advantages of utilizing local production in certain contexts, where large production quantities are not required. This early stabilization is strengthened through **logic of attraction**, with both L1 and L2 winning circular awards and accompanying media attention, spurring a new round of demand. For L1, logic of attraction is furthermore visible through the invitation to join the aforementioned accelerator program, while L4 receives ample media attention as a newly emerged frontrunner. Furthermore, as each initiative thus far has remained modest in size, **replication** plays a role in the growing impact that these type of initiatives can have. Indeed, a proliferation of local production facilities is observed (D35), although it is difficult to assess whether replication, in the sense of copying initiatives within the data sample, is the at the root cause of this development.

Despite this growing amount of initiatives, **partnering** with like-minded actors is not observed as frequently in this category, with L2 noticing a distinct lack of partnerships in the sector, with many 'isolated islands' finding their own, isolated solutions. Instead, Partnering takes a different role in this category, where initiatives mainly engage in partnership to overcome a central barrier to their activities, namely the lack of qualified employees. All depend on close collaboration with municipalities, as status holders from countries with an active textile industry are the main supply of knowledge and skills in the contemporary

Dutch landscape. Similarly, L1 has recently partnered up with a workspace for people with a distance to the labour market, helping them achieve the necessary scale for further impact. In this context, partnering thus does not serve to merely propel the impact of IW strategies forward, but serves to directly tackle barriers faced by the initiatives.

### *Reflections*

Overall, it can be noted that growth for these initiatives is thus far somewhat limited. Although they have been able to stabilize and find a niche, propelling mechanisms have not yet activated to the extent that substantial growing impact can be observed. Nonetheless, the dynamic observed, though less successful, is similar to other categories, as IW strategies serve as the main instrument to tackle barriers, while propelling mechanisms mainly stimulate the scope and impact of them.

Regarding the lack of substantial growth, a potential explanation is the costs that come with producing locally, amongst others in terms of labour costs. While a niche group is clearly willing to pay a premium, as is exemplified by the near immediate stabilization of these initiatives, this is a practical obstacle that makes production at more distant location more attractive to many. In line with this possible explanation, L1 states: *“I think there was a desire to do some things locally again. Maybe on a small scale, because of course the industry didn’t leave the Netherlands without a reason, that’s simply because it’s too expensive, especially because there’s very cheap labour everywhere in the world. So then you have to make sure to really distinguish yourself.”*

#### 4.2.4 SUFFICIENCY-BASED BRANDS

##### **Activities and institutional work**

Being brands first and foremost, the core activities of the initiatives in this category revolve around sales and business operations. However, through implementing a business model emphasizing sufficiency rather than profit maximization, these brands show that it is possible to successfully run a business while adhering to (higher) circular principles. Unlike other categories, the core activities do not necessarily target higher R-strategies. Higher R-strategies are embedded in the full range of activities that the brands perform, with B1 and B2 especially being frontrunners in terms of recycling too.

Initiatives in this category primarily perform institutional work through **undermining assumptions and beliefs** regarding normal and feasible business operations in the fashion industry. Through leading by example, the brands show that profit maximization is not set in stone, and that sufficiency-based approaches do not necessarily endanger the health of the company. Several business choices by these brands exemplify such undermining of existing practices, starting with the active promotion of sustainable consumption amongst their customers. All three initiatives go against fast fashion standards through timeless designs and the promotion of long-term use of individual items. This is supported by designing for durability and several business choices that further stimulate sustainable consumption. B3 offers lifelong free repair services on their own account, while B1 has recently partnered up with R1 to offer reparations on all of their items (R1, D8). Likewise, B1 was one of the first to implement a lease business model in which they maintained ownership of the materials, thus further incentivizing themselves to design for durability (D21, D24). Additionally, through keeping never-out-of-stock collections and abandoning sale season, B2 removes incentives for repeated acquisitions from its customers. The successful implementation of such business choices, commonly perceived to be incompatible with business interests, removes perceived associated risks for other actors in the field.

Secondly, brands use **education** to promote awareness of the necessity for circular fashion. The extent of this varies across the different initiatives, with B1 and B2 - both well-recognized frontrunners in circular fashion - being much more active than B3, which is much smaller and less well known. In the case of B1, educational activities have become increasingly professional, leading to a 5-part ‘sustainable fashion’ online course in collaboration with several NGOs and knowledge institutes, while B2 focusses on expressing educational content mostly through blogs and social media posts.

Lastly, brands actively aim to **change normative associations** consumers have with clothing as a disposable item. For example, B3 frames jeans worn over an extended period of time as ‘*pieces of art*’, that

becomes more personal and more characteristic over time, seeking to stimulate people to stick to one pair of durable jeans rather than multiple of lower quality. Other expressions of such institutional work include campaigns against normalized practices in the industry, such as the stimulation of overconsumption. For example, both B1 and B2 actively campaign against Black Friday, either through shutting down the online store or through donating (part) of the revenue to good causes yearly. Through such campaigns, the initiatives encourage a rethinking of accepted practices.

**TABLE 8: ILLUSTRATIVE DATA WITH REGARDS TO SUFFICIENCY-BASED BRANDS\***

	<b>Description</b>	<b>Exemplary quotes</b>
Central IW Strategies	Undermining assumptions and beliefs	<p><i>‘My dream was to be able to counter this and to show that as a company you can do things differently and to start make a whole movement in the fashion industry where people would follow this, and some things are getting better’ (B1)</i></p> <p><i>“We work very hard to perfect our goods and make them as timeless and durable as possible. We only launch them when they’re ready for it, and we keep them in our collection as long as people wear them with love. This isn’t always easy because our industry demands the opposite.” (D11)</i></p>
	Changing normative associations	<p><i>“Right before the prices are about to drop low, let’s think twice if we really need it or if it’s just the discount rush. This Black Friday weekend 20% of our revenue will go to our local Food Bank in Utrecht.” (B2)</i></p> <p><i>If you wear jeans like that in properly, they just get cooler and cooler over time, you know, jeans like that tell a story. I really think that when you have jeans worn in with all the repairs and god knows what, then I think that’s really a piece of art. (B3)</i></p>
	Education	<p><i>“[B1] has designed this online certificate programme, to provide tomorrow’s generation with the tools to make an impact today. This online course will illuminate the true face of fast fashion and how [B1] seeks to do things differently.” (D23)</i></p> <p><i>“So we also do that by sharing approachable, sustainable information through blogs, and then breaking that down into smaller bites for social media, to slowly create a more aware consumer basically.” (B2)</i></p>
Observed propelling mechanisms*	Logic of attraction	<i>“Luckily we have a strong story and we win prizes and we have a lot of press people following us and talk about us which helps us a lot” (B1)</i>
	Learning by doing	<i>“So setting such a [recommerce] business model, that’s a real search process in terms of, how are we going to approach this, how can we make it feasible financially, what are the logistics like. You figure that out along the way” (B2)</i>

\* Due to gaps in data collection with regards to the development in this category, no claim is made regarding the centrality of the observed propelling mechanisms

### **Growing impact due to propelling mechanisms**

As stated, these initiatives do not centrally target higher R-strategies, but perform activities across the board that target the circular production and -sales of apparel. This has as an effect that the growth of the brands is propelled forward by mechanisms (partially) outside of the scope of higher R-strategies.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, several activated propelling mechanisms were observed that indicate the existence of a dynamic similar to the overarching theme, both inside and outside of the scope of higher R-strategies. For example, B3 gained increased traction after **partnering** with a well-known denim brand for a limited edition collaboration. B1 and B2, being recognized as frontrunners in sustainable fashion, experience **stabilization** and **logic of attraction** due to this reputation, with B1 stating that *“luckily we have a strong story and we win prizes and we have a lot of press people following us and talk about us which helps us a lot”*. Furthermore, propelling mechanisms can be observed in the rollout of specific programs or campaigns targeting higher R-strategies. For B2 for example, **learning by doing** is observed in a pilot for a recommerce business model, supported by a circular impact organization. The pilot quickly resulted in new insights with regards to the difficulties to set this up independently, which were eventually resolved through partnering up with an organization with more relevant expertise. Similar learning by doing was experienced by B1 in setting up leasing as a business model (D21, D24). At the technological front, B1 positions itself as an innovation lab for potential partners by continuously testing the merits of promising sustainable solutions, for instance with regards to recycling or dying techniques (D24). By being an early adopter in both technological and social circular practices, these initiatives continually confirm their aforementioned circular reputation, further solidifying the stabilization effects.

In other cases, the implementation of higher R-strategies is not necessarily affected by propelling mechanisms at all, as they come down to relatively isolated, internal decision-making processes. For example, for B2, the decision to end sales did not involve any virtuous cycles of activated propelling mechanisms, but was rather the one-sided decision of a new CEO.

### *Reflections*

As the initiatives grow in name and scope, this allows them to promote their implementation of higher R-strategies on a bigger stage. Naturally, the undermining of assumptions becomes more visible and potent as the brands grow, as they show the ability to grow ever more successful while adhering to principles of sufficiency. Other IW strategies also increase in scope as the initiatives grow. For example, the educational activities of B1 grew in scope and professionalism, as they were able to set up a recognized ‘sustainable fashion course’ together with knowledge institutes and NGOs (D23), whereas educational activities previously were contained to blog posts and other media outlets (D21). Contrastingly, B3, operating on a much smaller scale, expresses difficulties in bringing such information across effectively.

Interestingly, the embeddedness of higher R-strategies into broader initiatives means that propelling mechanisms not necessarily related to higher R-strategies can nonetheless contribute to the adoption of them. For example, the partnership between B3 and a much larger denim brand increase their brand awareness, which in turn gives them a larger platform to engage in their IW strategies and voice their sufficiency-based philosophy. Thus, these brands can be perceived as ambassadors of higher R-strategies, meaning that any positive development, regardless of their direct linkage to higher R-strategies, has a potentially positive effect on the adoption of higher R-strategies.

To conclude, while the chosen approach to data collection does not allow a full recount of role propelling mechanisms played in the growth of initiatives in this category, the available findings cautiously point towards the generally observed dynamic, where IW strategies become more potent and successful due to the activation of propelling mechanisms.

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<sup>8</sup> However, as data collection for this research did not target developments of the initiatives in its entirety, but rather focussed on the development and rollout of higher R-strategies, the collected data contains certain gaps in the development and growing impact of some of these initiatives, making a complete recount of the effect of propelling mechanisms infeasible.

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This thesis studied offers several theoretical contributions for the existing literature on small wins. Firstly, this thesis increases understanding of the acceleration of small wins, through its focus on how small wins (attempt to) overcome institutional barriers. Previous studies pointed towards virtuous cycles of propelling mechanisms as the explanation for small wins' ability to overcome barriers (Bours et al., 2021; Termeer & Metze, 2019). While the findings in this thesis indeed show that such cycles are important in overcoming barriers, it seems this does not tell the whole story. The observed cases in this research show the relevance of institutional work, as the observed propelling mechanisms are supported by a set of IW strategies. These can be understood as the concrete actions through which small wins directly interact with, and potentially overcome, the barriers they face. Propelling mechanisms then serve to increase the scope and reach of the initiatives in their entirety, making the institutional work strategies they perform grow ever more impactful. This thesis thus argues that the combined lenses of propelling mechanisms and institutional work provide a more detailed insight into how small wins might challenge institutional barriers.

This understanding of institutional work in small wins has further implications for the role that small wins can have in broader transition trajectories. As radical and transformational changes require institutional changes to diffuse widely, it is important for transition studies to recognize (groups of) actors that can potentially act as instigators of such institutional change (Fuenfschilling & Truffer, 2016; Hoogstraten et al., 2020). The active stance of small wins in this research with regards to changing institutions could potentially point towards small wins as one such group. This is further supported by the inherent characteristics of small wins as moderately important promoters of 2<sup>nd</sup> order change (Termeer & Metze, 2019), being in line with the notion of peripheral actors as potential institutional entrepreneurs (Battilana et al., 2009). More specifically, small wins are suggested to have a potentially influential role in changing normative and cultural-cognitive institutions. In line with earlier research on institutional work performed by startups (Närvänen et al., 2021), small wins within the case study were shown mainly to be actively challenging normative and cultural-cognitive institutions<sup>9</sup>, with education, changing normative associations, embedding, undermining assumptions and beliefs and valorizing highlighted as recurring IW strategies in this case study. In applying these strategies, the small wins work towards the normalization and institutionalization of new practices at an ever-increasing scale. This thesis thus further adds to the notion of small wins as seeds of expanding, in-depth change (Vermaak, 2013).

Thirdly, with regards to propelling mechanisms, this thesis adds to a thus far limited pool of empirical evidence on propelling mechanisms in the context of small wins. In the discussion of four different categories of initiatives, propelling mechanisms were shown to increase the impact that small wins have on stimulating transformational change. The extent of this differed on a case-by-case basis, leading to pronounced differences in increasing impact. For example it can be noted that repair platforms see a strong activation of a wide array of propelling mechanisms, corresponding with fast-increasing scope and impact. In contrast, reshoring initiatives exhibit strong stabilization, but limited propelling mechanisms that lead to a further accumulation of wins from this initial, stable point. This observed correlation between observed propelling mechanisms and observed growth and impact of the initiatives is consistent with previous research on the importance of propelling mechanisms for small wins accumulation (Bours et al., 2021; Schagen et al., 2022; Termeer & Metze, 2019).

Lastly, the empirical focus on concrete implementations of higher R-strategies adds to the literature on circular transitions. In particular, the centrality of informal institutional barriers in this context was highlighted, in line with previous research on barriers to sufficiency transitions (Sandberg, 2021). However, the findings also indicate that barriers to higher R-strategy adoption cannot be isolated

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<sup>9</sup> it should be noted that, due to the informal nature of the encountered institutional barriers, it is unclear whether small wins would be similarly well-positioned to challenge regulative institutions.

completely from broader barriers to the circular economy. For many small wins, particularly those in reshoring or sufficiency-based brands, objectives towards higher R-strategies are embedded in a holistic approach to circular practices, which includes recycling, and selling (partially) recycled apparel. In order for such small wins to affect institutional configurations, many depend on the success of their more technological circular advances, as discussed in Section 4.2.4. Therefore, barriers that they encounter in such areas might be equally relevant for the adoption of higher R-strategies as the barriers discussed within this research. In researching the adoption of higher R-strategies, a broad understanding of intertwining barriers to circularity, like presented in Kirchherr et al. (2018), is suggested to be more accurate than a narrow view on sufficiency-related barriers.

## 5.2 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This thesis mainly looked to increase understanding of the processes that stimulate or curb the acceleration of small wins. Nonetheless, implications for policy are drawn from the findings of this research. The small wins governance framework suggests that policymakers can best stimulate transformational change through activating propelling mechanisms that allow small wins to accumulate (Termeer & Metze, 2019). As such, policymakers can make use of change processes that are already ongoing in society.

The findings in this thesis support this approach, doubly so in contexts where informal institutional barriers play central roles, as was the case in this research. The results showed the potential for small wins to engage in institutional work and promote informal institutional changes through a variety of strategies. As argued in section 5.1, this active stance of the small wins in this case study could potentially be true more generally, based on the inherent characteristics of small wins as peripheral promoters of 2<sup>nd</sup> order change. Knowing this, the most fruitful approach for policymakers to impact transformational change processes could likely be to create the necessary support structures for such change agents. Devising such support structures is expected to encounter less resistance than regulatory interventions aimed at, in this case, reduced consumption (Lindblom, 1979; Weick, 1984). Rather than actively breaking down existing institutions, policy then aims to support those bottom-up actors that gradually normalize and institutionalize novel social practices to the extent that existing institutions become overshadowed.

Empirical observations in this thesis show the indirect impact that (regional) governments can have in this regard. For example, as discussed in section 4.1.2, the municipality of Rotterdam granting a resale initiative a central shopping location, providing them with immediate traction in terms of visibility and media attention. Another empirical example is the accelerator program for circular textile businesses in the Amsterdam Metropole Area that four initiatives in the data sample were involved in, partially funded by the municipality of Amsterdam. While the recency of this program make the long-term effects as of yet unknown, the financial, legal and strategic support that these initiatives receive, as well as the stimulation of further partnering amongst them, is likely to push their development in a more impactful right direction.

Creating the right support structures for promising small wins requires policymakers to be aware of existing and developing small wins in society, and tailor support structures to their specific needs. As such, in line with the provided empirical examples, local government seems best equipped to stimulate such change, favoured by (the potential for) better understanding of local context and developments (Wanzenböck & Frenken, 2020). In short, while aligning with existing literature on the governance of small wins, the findings in this thesis further emphasize the importance of stimulating small wins for regional policymakers, especially in areas of social innovation such as the adoption of higher R-strategies.

### 5.3 LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The study acknowledges several limitations and highlights the need for further research to validate and expand upon its findings. One limitation relates to the data sample, both in terms of size and completeness. First and foremost, the limited number of initiatives available for interviews warrants cautious interpretation of the presented findings in this research. Furthermore, the focus on higher R-strategies during data collection may have resulted in missing information from larger initiatives that incorporate a broader range of strategies, as was discussed in section 4.2.4. Consequently, in these cases the analysis of propelling mechanisms' role in the growing impact of the initiative remains inconclusive and requires additional evidence. A final remark about the nature of the data sample relates to the inclusion of four initiatives enrolled in the accelerator program for circular businesses in the Amsterdam Metropole Area. As there are only 10 initiatives in this program in total, the importance of this program for the general transition towards higher R-strategies is likely overstated within the sample. For these reasons, future research should aim to gather a more comprehensive data sample to enhance the robustness of the conclusions drawn in this study.

A second limitation relates to the skewedness of the case study towards informal institutional barrier, limiting the possibility to analyse the interaction of small wins with formal barriers. This makes it unclear whether small wins are better positioned to challenge informal institutions, or whether this is symptomatic of the specifics of the case study. To develop a more comprehensive understanding of the institutional contexts in which small wins can effectively engage in institutional work, future research should investigate institutional dynamics in a field where barriers are distributed more evenly across various institutional dimensions.

Thirdly, while data analysis pointed towards four categories of core activities within the data sample of this research, it is not claimed that these categories are necessarily representative for circular transitions in general, as other types of actors could conceivably play a role in the adoption of higher R-strategies. Until further evidence is gathered for the exhaustiveness of these categories, they should thus purely be seen as units of analysis within the context of this case study. Nonetheless, the activities performed by these initiatives do provide insight into how the adoption of higher R-strategies can be promoted by different actors in society.

Fourthly, It is important to acknowledge that qualitative research and semi-structured interviews come with their own set of biases and limitations, despite best efforts to remedy this. There is a risk of researcher bias, where the perspectives and interpretations of the researcher may influence the findings. To address this potential bias, several measures were taken in this study. First, rigorous data collection and analysis techniques were employed to minimize subjectivity, as described in the methodology. Furthermore, in conducting interviews, an effort was made to avoid steering the interviewee into a desired direction, through neutral question formulations. Nonetheless, the fact that coding and interviews were both performed by a single researcher introduces the risk that certain subjective interpretations remain.

Lastly, the limitations of generalizability and transferability should be recognized, as this research focused on in-depth understanding of one specific (embedded) case-study. In translating these findings to other context, the deeply cultural and normative nature of the performed case study should be considered. This means that findings are more likely to be replicated to settings where such factors play a central role, as has for example been shown to be the case in food system transitions (Bulah et al., 2023; Närvänen et al., 2021). Furthermore, the importance of cultural factors in this case study calls for caution in translating the findings to other national and/or cultural settings.



## 6. CONCLUSION

Small wins are an increasingly popular lens to understand and direct the dynamics of transformational change in the face of daunting societal challenges. Such small wins, though still moderate in importance and impact, can function as seeds of transformative change through achieving concrete successes that deviate from existing dominant practices (Termeer & Dewulf, 2019; Weick, 1984). The literature on small wins has thus far focused on the activation of a set of propelling mechanisms in order to accelerate the impact of small wins and help them overcome barriers (Bours et al., 2021; Schagen et al., 2022; Termeer & Metze, 2019). These barriers are often of institutional nature, as the change promoted by small wins is incongruent with existing institutions. To better understand the agency that small wins actors possess in overcoming such barriers, this thesis introduced the concept of institutional work to the small wins perspective. In doing so, the following research question was addressed:

*How do small wins overcome institutional barriers towards transformational change, and what role does institutional agency play in that process?*

Splitting this research question up further, three sub-questions address, respectively, the *encountered institutional barriers*, the *type of institutional work* that small wins engage in as well as the *interaction between such institutional work and propelling mechanisms* in the accumulation of small wins, and lastly *the impact of small wins* on the adoption and diffusion of higher R-strategies in the circular transition of the Dutch textile industry. In order to answer these research questions, a qualitative research strategy was employed, conducting an embedded case study on the adoption of higher R-strategies by 11 small wins in the circular transition of the Dutch textile industry, based on a combination of data from semi-structured interviews and a document analysis.

Regarding the first sub-question, the encountered institutional barriers in this case study are largely of normative and cultural nature, discussed in this thesis jointly as informal institutions. Firstly, barriers regarding a lack of awareness on the consumer side inhibit the adoption of higher R-strategies. Consumers lack such awareness in terms of the necessity to adopt circular practices, but also in terms of which choices they can make on a daily basis that aid the circular transition. Secondly, robust fashion habits make behavioral change challenging, even when awareness of necessity and options is present. Brands as well as consumers are used to high-frequency buying at low costs and quality, while circular practices such as repairing are seen as 'old-fashioned and dull'. The persistence of such habits is inherently incompatible with the adoption of higher R-strategies. Such consumer-side barriers are strengthened by barriers internal to the industry, through the prioritization of profit over circular practices, which holds back adoption of sufficiency-based business models, as well as the adoption of circular services offered by repair platforms. Furthermore, greenwashing stimulates the aforementioned lack of awareness on the consumer side as negative social and environmental effects of textile production are hidden, making it harder for consumers to distinguish truly sustainable choices. Comparatively, the small wins indicate a less pronounced role for formal barriers, with few obstructive regulations inhibiting the increased adoption of higher R-strategies. Nonetheless, a lack of stimulating policies for initiatives such as their own is observed in some cases. The prominence of informal institutional barriers highlights the need to understand and attend to the social and cultural aspects of the circular transition, and sustainability transitions in general.

Regarding the second sub-question, institutional work strategies were employed extensively by the small wins as a response to the barriers they faced. Corresponding to the cultural and normative nature of the encountered barriers, institutional work strategies largely targeted change in these areas, with education, changing normative associations, embedding, undermining assumptions and beliefs and valorizing highlighted as recurring IW strategies in this case study. In facing the described barriers, a dynamic is observed where these institutional work strategies are employed in direct relation to the encountered institutional barriers, while propelling mechanism increase the scope and impact of the initiatives as a whole. When propelling mechanisms are thus activated successfully, they allow initiatives to engage in institutional work in an increasingly effective manner. This observed dynamic has both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, these findings increase understanding of the active role that small

wins take up in overcoming institutional barriers. Furthermore, the activity and success that small wins display in challenging informal institutional barriers highlights the role for small wins as seeds of transformative change, through continually promoting 2<sup>nd</sup> order change to an ever-growing audience. It is thus proposed that small wins could be well-positioned to play an influential role in attending to the previously mentioned social and cultural aspects of sustainability transitions. Practically, this reinforces the importance of policymakers and other supporting actors to activate weak propelling mechanisms surrounding promising small wins.

To answer the third sub-question, a distinction was made between four different kinds of small wins, each performing distinct core activities. *Educational initiatives* stick exclusively to the spreading of awareness the necessity of and options for textile circularity amongst their respective audiences. Closely related in terms of their contributions to higher R-strategies are *reshoring initiatives*, who increase the visibility of textile production, thus educating consumers and valorizing textile production and textile products. These categories of small wins thus contribute higher R-strategy adoption mainly in an indirect manner, through combatting the lack of awareness that hinders such adoption. Contrastingly, the remaining two categories, *repair platforms* and *sufficiency-based brands*, contribute to higher R-strategy adoption more directly. Repair platforms do so by providing repair services, increasing the ease of reparations for both brands and consumers. Lastly, sufficiency-based brands implement higher R-strategies in their business operations, showing that the adoption of such business practices can co-exist with running a commercial business. Thus, through a diversity of actors and activities, in each case accompanied with the necessary institutional work to promote 2<sup>nd</sup> order change, these small wins potentially constitute the beginning of a broader transformation towards the adoption and diffusion of higher R-strategies.

Taken together, the insights from this thesis create a clearer picture of how small wins challenge institutional barriers. The employment of institutional work strategies that match directly the encountered institutional barriers highlights the institutional agency possessed by small wins actors. While it remains to be seen whether other types of institutional barriers can be challenged by small wins in a similar manner, the findings show that small wins are well-positioned to instigate small-scale, deep changes that contribute towards overcoming normative and cognitive cultural institutional barriers. The dynamic described in sub-question two, where propelling mechanisms continuously increase the scope of the small wins, and thus the impact they can make, seems vital in this regard. Without strong propelling mechanisms, the institutional agency of small wins actors is likewise diminished. Thus, creating support structures that activate propelling mechanisms for potential small wins seems critical for policymakers aiming to realize a transition towards a circular economy that pays equal attention to technological and social facets of circularity.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

### Introduction

First of all, thanks for taking the time to do this interview. I'm Paul Schmidt and I'm currently writing my thesis for the Masters' programme Innovation Sciences at the University of Utrecht. In my thesis, I am focussing on how circular initiatives in the textile industry manage to grow and build a movement that diverges from the status quo. Specifically, I look at initiatives that include overall reduced textile consumption as an aim. The interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes, and with permission I would like to record the conversation for later analysis.

Broadly speaking, the interview is divided into two parts: firstly, I would like to focus on the general context and history of the initiative, and how it has grown over time. After that, we will discuss any barriers that you have encountered in your activities aimed at reducing overall textile consumption, discussing each barrier one by one to understand the dynamics and efforts made to resolve them.

Any questions before we start?

### Part 1: History of the initiative

- 1) Can you briefly introduce yourself and your role in the initiative, as well as the general activities of the initiative?
- 2) How did the initiative get started?
  - a) Was it inspired by anything (e.g. event or other initiative) specifically?
  - b) What was the goal or ambition of the initiative?
- 3) How did the initiative grow from its beginnings?
  - a) Were there any particular events or activities that were crucial to the growth?
  - b) Did any new activities come up that weren't part of the initial proposition?
- 4) Could you specify further what the initiative does in order to promote reduced overall textile consumption?
  - a) When and how did these activities become part of the initiative's activities?
  - b) What concrete results has the initiative achieved in this regard?

### Part 2: Barriers and responses

- 5) What barriers has the initiative encountered in its activities aimed at reduced textile consumption?

Per listed barrier:

- 6) Can you describe what makes this barrier so difficult to overcome?
- 7) Were you eventually able to overcome it?
- 8) Can you indicate what exactly was attempted to overcome this barrier?
- 9) Were there any external or internal developments that brought you closer to overcoming the barrier?
- 10) What do you think is still needed to overcome it?

### Wrap-up

That was all, thanks for taking the time out of your day. As a final question, I would like to know whether you think anyone else within or outside of your organisation could provide me with more relevant insights. Would it be okay to contact them and mention your reference?

## APPENDIX B: CODING SCHEME

Category	Code	Files	References
Barriers	Formal barriers	10	16
	Legislative barriers	10	16
	Limited legislation promoting higher R-strategies	9	14
	Restrictions on importing worn apparel	1	2
	Informal Barriers	20	79
	Cultural-cognitive barriers	17	58
	Greenwashing	5	7
	Lack of knowledge about circular options	10	16
	Lack of knowledge about manufacturing process	9	12
	Lack of skilled textile workers	4	9
	Robust fashion habits	8	14
	Normative barriers	9	21
	Companies prioritizing profit margin	7	11
	Old-fashioned image of repairing	5	10
Institutional Work Strategies	Advocacy	3	3
	Changing normative associations	13	16
	Constructing normative	10	10
	Educating	21	39
	Embedding	4	7
	Enabling Work	1	1
	Mimicry	6	9
	Mythologizing	1	2
	Undermining assumptions and beliefs	6	10
	Valorizing	7	10
Propelling mechanisms	Embedding	10	14
	Energizing	11	14
	Learning by doing	17	23
	Logic of attraction	15	19
	Partnering	27	40
	Professionalization	10	12
	Replicating	9	14



	Stabilizing	12	20
Small Wins Characteristics	2nd order change	12	15
	Concrete Successes	8	9
	Moderate Importance	4	5
	Overcoming barriers	2	2
	Positive judgement	9	10
	Shared direction	14	14