

## Q&A circular fashion with Kim Poldner



*Kim Poldner and her daughter posing for the cover of P+ magazine in a dress by couture designer [Ronald van der Kemp](#). Photography: [www.mariececilethijs.com](http://www.mariececilethijs.com)*

Almost every week I receive questions from students for an interview about circular fashion. Of course, I am always delighted that the next generation of changemakers is interested in a topic that is so urgent and as fascinating as when I started studying it as a student myself twenty years ago.

Unfortunately, I lack the time to speak with all of them which is why I thought it would be valuable to compile my answers to frequently asked questions. This Q&A is co-created with the THUAS students who are currently conducting their graduation projects on circular fashion under my supervision.

### **1. What is your definition of circular fashion?**

To me circular fashion originates at the crossroads of sustainable fashion and circular economy, a model that exchanges the typical cycle of make, use, dispose in favour of as much reusing and recycling as possible. 'A circular economy tackles the root causes of global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, while creating opportunities for better growth. It is underpinned by three principles, all led by design: eliminate waste and pollution, keep products and materials in use, and regenerate natural systems. For fashion, it means ensuring that products (apparel, footwear, accessories) are used more, are made to be made again, and are made from safe and recycled or renewable inputs. A circular economy for fashion creates better products and services for customers, contributes to a resilient and thriving fashion industry, and regenerates the environment' ([Ellen McArthur Foundation, 2018](#)).

## 2. What is needed to accelerate the circular fashion transition?

Often, I refer to the [DRIFT transition](#) curve that shows that we need to put more effort in disrupting (instead of optimizing) the current linear system in favour of building a circular fashion system. I would like to see more action from the following stakeholders in the system, but most of all I'd like to see more collaboration between them!

a. *Government legislation* is key in putting pressure on the current linear system. In her '[Beleidsprogramma Circulair Textiel](#)' the Dutch government focuses on three key leverage points: 1. EPR – extended producer responsibility 2. Consumer awareness and 3. Textile recycling. The ambition is to achieve 100% circular textiles in 2050.

b. Develop *the business case for textile recycling* to decrease the textile waste mountain. [This report](#) provides key leverage points to shift the system. My own preference would be to not have to deal with this waste at all any longer as recycling costs a lot of energy and resources. Rather I am curious how novel business models and bio-based materials can contribute to a circular fashion industry. You can learn more about my perspective in this [15-minute video](#) (in Dutch) or in this [25-minute video](#) (in English).

c. *Raise consumer awareness through a focus on R-strategies*: from repair to reduce and reuse. Research shows that secondhand fashion will overtake the market share of fast fashion within the next ten years, but we need to remain mindful of the rebound effect. In the Autumn of 2020, I ran a pop-up secondhand fashion store for three months as an action research lab to experiment with borrowing, swapping and buying secondhand fashion. This study served as a way to better understand consumer behaviour when it comes to the R-strategies. I will soon publish a first article about my findings from this study.

## 3. What is the rebound effect in circular fashion?

The rebound effect, known originally from the energy efficiency literature, occurs when improvements in efficiency or other technological innovations fail to deliver on their environmental promise due to (behavioral) economic mechanisms. In fashion an example of rebound is that people end up using the online trading of secondhand clothes as an excuse to be sustainable. The reality is that their total fashion purchase emits more CO2 emission as when they would buy fewer, new clothes. We published a study about the rebound effect within the Dutch Circular Textile Valley, which you can find [here](#).

## 4. What do you think can be the (dis)advantages of digital fashion?

To me, digital fashion holds great promise to make the fashion industry much more sustainable. The Fabricant works with major brands to design in 3D and to transition to virtual showrooms and virtual designs instead of samples. The impact of the production of 1 digital fashion item is 1/10th of a physical item without even taking into account the environmental damage by consumer use. In our current lockdown reality, I envision switching to different digital fashion outfits as easy as I can already change my virtual background during online meetings. As a lover of the materiality (the fabrics, textures, handwork, craft) of fashion, the disadvantage is that you can never really touch digital fashion – there is no embodied experience.

### **5. Which tool do you usually employ when working with sustainable fashion brands in reshaping their business model?**

In my research group we work a lot with the Business Model Template (BMT) developed by Jan Jonker and Niels Faber. The English translation of the workbook in which this tool is described will be published in September 2021 and will be accompanied by a MOOC so that everyone can learn how to use this tool. As we have noticed that entrepreneurs (and students) often get stuck in the Results phase of this BMT, we have developed a tool that helps to calculate impact and values created. Soon you will be able to access our first publication about this tool.

### **Do you want to learn more about my circular fashion activities?**

Please check out this page to find an [overview of the projects](#) I am currently working on. You can also follow me on social media: on my Instagram account [@kimpoldner](#) I mostly post on sustainable fashion. If you would like to collaborate on this topic, you can reach me directly via [k.a.poldner@hhs.nl](mailto:k.a.poldner@hhs.nl).