Journal of Circular Economy (2026) 4:1, 704-716
https://doi.org/10.55845/joce-2026-41261

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Social Benefits of Furniture Reuse in the Circular Economy

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Received: 9 January 2026 / Accepted: 16 March 2026 / Published: 14 April 2026

Abstract

Furniture is important for the circular economy (CE), given large volumes of resources used in the global furniture industry, and the bulky waste created when furniture is disposed. Innovations to make furniture more circular include new product design and business models, yet the reuse of furniture is often overlooked, and has additional benefits beyond environmental and economic impacts. This study draws on insights from semi-structured interviews undertaken in two separate studies, one pursued in Scotland studying the transition to a CE in the Scottish context, the other based in Chicago (USA), to identify the social impacts of furniture reuse through non-profit organizations. We identify societal benefits of furniture reuse which contribute to people's and society's wellbeing and health, in addition to employment and training opportunities. In bringing together insights from two separate studies centred on furniture reuse we provide empirical evidence of social impacts of the CE experienced at a smaller scale, and highlight the value of working across academic disciplines to bring insights from different perspectives into conversation with contemporary debates in the CE.

Keywords Circular Society · Furniture Reuse · Reuse · Non-profit Organizations · Social Benefit · Cross-disciplinary Research

1. Introduction – Furniture and the Circular Economy

The transition to a circular economy (CE) necessitates increasing the reuse of products and materials more frequently and efficiently to keep resources in circulation for longer. Within CE thinking, re-use is embedded within the 'waste hierarchy', commonly communicated as 'reduce, reuse, recycle' (Kirchherr et al., 2017), as an action close to individuals/consumers, where product lifespans can be extended by reusing rather than disposing of a product, or buying new. Whereas recycling assumes a product has reached its end-of-life, reusing products by selling or donating them to others, or buying second hand, extends product lifespans with no additional work required beyond checks on quality, cleaning, and occasional undertaking of small repairs (Reike et al, 2018). Reuse is discussed within studies of the sharing economy and collaborative consumption, with 'sharing' defined as a type of mutualisation whereby a product 'is sequentially used by different customers' (Ertz, 2020), or as part of 'resource circulation schemes' (Ertz et al., 2019, p. 30), emphasising the role of practices such as donation/charity donation in a system where product ownership is transferred from one person to another. Reuse thus contributes to value maintenance in the CE and the extension of product lifetimes, as well as waste reduction, as a 'short loop' action taken at the individual/consumer level (Reike et al., 2018).

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It is estimated that, in the UK, 22 million items of furniture are discarded every year (HIPPO, 2025) equivalent to 670,000 tonnes of waste, while in the US, almost 11,000,000 tonnes of furniture are discarded annually, of which at least 80% goes to landfill (US EPA, 2024). Dealing with large amounts of bulky waste furniture is a known problem to policymakers and industry (e.g. Furniture News, 2023). Initiatives are underway to encourage the design of goods for easier recycling or remanufacture, or to promote 'product-as-service' rental systems (Kulakovskaya et al., 2024), while policymakers consider options to incentivise producers to change practices.

A CE approach in the furniture industry includes reusable products and diverting waste from landfill (e.g. Cooper et al., 2021). Pursuit of a furniture CE has led to innovations in product design and development (Koszewska & Bielecki, 2020; Oliveira et al., 2018); reconsideration of policy contexts and business ecosystems (Kulakovskaya et al., 2024; Vanacore et al., 2023); and new business models (Schoonover et al., 2021). Enhancing sustainability in the furniture industry, emphasize Pralat et al., (2024: 166), has led to 'ecodesign' to reduce resource use, yet "the domain of reuse beckons further exploration." Barriers to improving the circularity of the furniture industry include policy and regulatory issues, supply chain and market challenges, accessibility to reuse facilities for those without transportation, and concerns about perceptions of quality. While Hubbe (2023: 6737) reflects that 'reuse' is the "forgotten R word" of the CE in regard to furniture, one of the major obstacles is that reuse is something in which furniture companies themselves are not heavily engaged (Silvius et al., 2021). Many of these issues and concerns could be lessened by reusing furniture. Reuse reduces environmental impact by ensuring resources have longer lifespans and fewer materials are lost to landfill. Furthermore, furniture donated for reuse has social impacts ranging from furnishing properties to generating revenue, yet such societal benefits of furniture reuse are often overlooked in CE discourses (Valencia et al., 2023). Drawing on research undertaken in Scotland and the United States, in this paper we demonstrate that reusing furniture has multiple positive societal impacts and suggest that interdisciplinary perspectives exploring reuse can identify social benefits that are otherwise overlooked in the CE.

1.1. The societal impact of the CE

The three principles of sustainable development, economic, environmental, and social equity, are often included when defining a CE (Kirchherr et al., 2023), although the social dimension has often been underrepresented in the CE literature (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017; Mies & Gold, 2021). While scholarship about the societal impacts of the CE has often focused on factors relating to concepts of economic growth and the market-based society such as job creation (Clube, 2022), more recent work has sought to redress this imbalance. Discussions about what a 'circular society' (that ensures social sustainability and a 'just transition') might look like highlight the necessity of involving actors across society, including the importance of 'bottom-up social innovation' and 'participatory value creation networks' (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2021, p. 1). Scholars have also argued for consideration of how different cycles and flows are necessary for a circular society, including ideas of 'cycles of care' which are often invisible or un-valued (Calisto Friant et al., 2024). Other studies have outlined concerns about whether the transition to a CE as currently conceptualised is creating a 'just circular economy', given the lack of meaningful engagement with environmental justice, narrow perspectives on labour issues that focus on quantitative measurements such as job creation, and a gender perspective that devalues some contributions such that gender inequalities persist (Pansera et al., 2024).

Although such perspectives present a more holistic approach to a CE and highlight the role of humans and social factors embedded within the transition, they are often conceptual and call for further investigation. As factors such as social cohesion, community wellbeing, and quality of life are being brought to the fore in CE discussions (Mies & Gold, 2021; Padilla-Rivera et al., 2020; Valencia et al., 2023), the need to further explore the social benefits of a CE through empirical research and practical examples from differing everyday contexts represents an opportunity to enhance the otherwise top-down CE models (Pansera et al., 2024).

1.2. The furniture reuse sector: furniture banks and reuse stores

Looking beyond the CE literature, furniture reuse is also discussed in disciplines such as housing studies, social work, and non-profit management (Alexander & Smaje, 2008; Hartwig & Mohamed, 2020; Nubani et al., 2022; Osterley & Williams, 2019). In these contexts, rather than extending product lifespans and avoiding

waste, furniture reuse is understood through a lens relating to housing and poverty reduction and highlight the role of the non-profit/charity sector in reusing furniture. Chamberlain & Johnson (2018), for example, suggest that when transitioning from long-term homelessness into being housed, people can experience 'liminality' partly caused by material limitations such as a lack of furniture, and Boland et al. (2023) stress the importance of 'making a home' in sustaining tenancies following a period of homelessness. In the United States and Canada, furniture banks are nonprofit organizations that provide furniture for reuse to low-income individuals for free or nominal cost, thus contributing to extending product lifespans and preventing resources going to waste.

Although not common in the UK (in our background research we found only one small, community-led non-profit adopting the name 'furniture bank' in Scotland), as of September 2025, the Furniture Bank Network lists around 150 furniture banks operating in North America. They vary in the furniture offered, eligibility requirements for receiving furniture, costs, delivery options, sourcing of furniture, and customizability, yet most offer larger furniture (mattresses, bed frames, tables, etc.), and smaller furnishings (lamps, rugs, curtains, etc.) (Nubani et al., 2022).

Much of the literature on the social impacts of furniture reuse through furniture banks exists in non-academic publications, from online articles addressing furniture banks' utilization by formerly unhoused individuals, refugees or migrants, to impact and project evaluation reports (e.g. Bakker & Elliott, 2021; SiMPACT, 2020). The multiple individual and social impacts of reused furniture donated via furniture banks to people transitioning into long-term housing after experiencing homelessness described in these venues are echoed in the academic literature. Nubani et al., (2022) for example, found that receiving furniture provided physical comfort (e.g. mattresses contributed to better sleep) and improved the financial situation of low-income individuals as people did not have to buy new furniture. Hartwig and Mohamed (2020) further demonstrate that receiving and reusing furniture led to intangible effects such as helping formerly homeless people create a sense of home. This, in turn, precipitates a host of other impacts because when people feel at home, they are more likely to stay in their apartment, increasing their housing retention, and experience improved mental and physical health, reducing anxiety and depression. The emotional responses to having a furnished home, these studies show, include enhanced self-esteem, motivation to achieve goals, and feelings of pride, autonomy and being respected (Hartwig & Mohamed, 2020; Nubani et al., 2022).

Alongside national operators such as Habitat ReStores or the Salvation Army in the US and, in the UK context, the British Heart Foundation, many small non-profits, often operating on a local scale, take donations of 'gently used' furniture and everyday household goods for resale to the public at low cost, thereby contributing to waste management systems (Alexander & Smaje, 2008). Beyond furniture banks, such furniture reuse stores ('charity shops' or 'thrift stores') are another way society prolongs product lifetimes.

Typically accessible to a wide range of customers, reuse stores typically sell furniture in addition to clothing, books, and sundry household items, using the funds generated through sales to support the parent charity's wider aims (Osterley & Williams, 2019). Frequently, furniture reuse stores in the UK also operate a system whereby, through partnering with social service providers and affordable housing associations, they effectively function as furniture banks, using donated furniture to furnish properties for formerly unhoused individuals and households at low or no cost (Four Square, 2025). Although there are challenges in evidencing the financial value of such contributions to society (Alexander & Smaje, 2008), Osterley & Williams (2019) assert that reuse stores have positive effects on economic, social and environmental factors, through creating employment and volunteering opportunities, combatting social isolation, and helping avoid waste. There is, Curran & Williams maintain (2010: 692), "unquantified positive social value generated by the distribution of previously used bulky household items to disadvantaged groups" which helps avoid landfill waste.

1.3. Research background: Social impacts of the CE - cross-disciplinary perspectives

This article derived from an informal conversation where two of the authors realized they were approaching the issue of furniture reuse from different perspectives: Author 1 investigating the challenges and opportunities for the transition to a CE in Scotland for individuals, households and organizations; and Author 2 undertaking a study in the USA to understand the impact of the Chicago Furniture Bank (CFB) on formerly unhoused individuals. Just as municipal departments often separate environmental and waste management from social services and community development, our different geographical and disciplinary contexts meant perspectives

on reuse were siloed. For each author, it was evident that only part of the story of the impacts of furniture reuse was being told. As such, by drawing on insights from this research, undertaken in different contexts with different research questions, in this article we argue there are multiple ways furniture reuse has societal benefits, and that alongside the environmental impacts through reduced resource use and waste reduction, reusing household furniture increases the social impact of the CE transition in ways that are not traditionally considered in CE studies. By connecting findings from a study investigating the potential benefits of a CE in Scotland, with a study in Chicago focused on furniture reuse that was not based on questions around the CE, we add empirical evidence to support more conceptual studies about the 'social cycles of care' necessary for a circular society (Calisto Friant et al., 2024). We additionally propose that cross-disciplinary research can broaden insights and support arguments for continued action to transition to a CE that benefits people and planet. What follows adds further 'small stories of closing loops' (Hobson, 2020) of the impact of smaller-scale actors in the CE at the local level.

2. Methodology

While it may be unconventional to bring together two studies undertaken independently and deriving from different research imperatives, at the centre of each study was a simple proposition: what are the social impacts of reusing furniture? Indeed, although each study's animating research questions were distinctive, bringing these analyses into conversation led the research teams to identify social impacts of furniture reuse that would not have been revealed by our individual studies alone. Connecting the two studies in this paper thus seeks to inform a more holistic understanding of the social impacts of furniture reuse for the CE than is typically offered through an approach based exclusively on the CE.

2.1. Study 1: Furniture reuse in Scotland

The focus of study 1 was the 'everyday' CE, identifying opportunities and barriers to the development of the CE in Scotland, specifically concentrating on goods and items 'close to home,' including furniture. Drawing from a CE perspective looking at smaller-scale actors in the CE (Hobson, 2020; Zavos et al., 2024) and the potential of such actors (whether individuals or smaller-scale organizations) to contribute actively to creating a 'circular society' (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2021), Author 1's team undertook semi-structured interviews with CE practitioners – leaders and managers of 20 organizations engaging in the CE, i.e. people working to improve resource efficiency, increase resource reuse, and reduce waste. Eight of these interviews involved representatives of furniture reuse organizations (5 interviews), or the reuse of commercial furniture from the office and hospitality industries (3 interviews). Other interviews included organizations focused on reusing household electronics and electrical waste and the 'repair' sector. For this paper, our analysis is limited to data created from those organisations involved in furniture reuse; findings from the wider study will be reported separately (currently under review).

These semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. Questions explored how participants and their organizations sought to reduce resource use in the economy, considering barriers and enablers to circularity in their contexts, and questions about the skills and operating context necessary to have a bigger impact in becoming more circular. Participants and their organizations were offered confidentiality, although we have permission to identify one of the biggest organizations we interviewed, Edinburgh Furniture Initiative by FourSquare (hereafter FourSquare). Of the Scottish organizations participating, FourSquare (2025), as a non-profit supporting vulnerable people and families, most closely resembles a furniture bank in its operations. All interviewees were offered, but not all accepted, a small donation to their organization to thank them for participating in the research. All interviews were recorded with permission of the interviewees and transcribed. Utilizing NVivo 12, interviews were coded using both a deductive thematic framework (drawing on insights from Tura et al. (2019) about categories of drivers and barriers to the CE (including e.g. social, economic, organizational factors etc), and coded inductively, identifying additional themes in the transcripts on close reading. Authors 1, 4, 5 and 8 each coded two transcripts, then came together to review codes and coding, before again working individually across the whole dataset.

The team in Scotland then met to review findings and refine additional codes identified during inductive coding. While not part of our original research question framework, the inductive thematic coding process

identified benefits of the CE discussed by participants (often within questions about 'opportunities' for the CE) that included diverse social impacts. Following the informal conversation between authors 1 and 2 outlined in section 1.3, a further round of coding was undertaken by authors 1 and 5, focused on interrogating these data to reveal more detail about social benefits.

2.2. Study 2: Chicago Furniture Bank (CFB)

The CFB seek to "provide dignity, stability and comfort to Chicagoans that face poverty by allowing clients to handpick an entire home's worth of furnishings for free" (Chicago Furniture Bank, 2025). It receives furniture from residence providers (e.g. hotels, on-campus student housing), retailers, and private donations, and delivered its first load of furniture in August 2018. By early 2025 the CFB had furnished over 20,000 homes for over 45,000 people, distributing over 20 million pounds of furniture (9071 tonnes) across locations in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Indiana.

Seeking to assess its impact, the CFB approached Author 2 who collaborated on a project to interview case managers from multiple nonprofit social service providers across Chicago that worked with individuals transiting into housing and referred some of these people to the CFB. As such, Author 2 determined, case managers would be able to consider their clients who had and had not received used furniture from the CFB and compare perceptions of their clients' well-being. Using criterion sampling, a form of purposive sampling, case managers were selected as interviewees based on criteria of i) being a manager of multiple clients; ii) working with the CFB; and, iii) making multiple client referrals to the CFB. Authors 3 and 6 conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty-four case managers, each lasting approximately 30 minutes, asking questions that included, "How do you decide which clients to pair with the services offered by Chicago Furniture Bank?" and "What impact(s) do you notice Chicago Furniture Bank's furnishing program have on your clients?" Twenty interviewees provided consent to be recorded; the other four were interviewed while notes were taken. Participants were not offered compensation for participation.

Transcripts and research notes were analysed in NVivo by Author 3 and an inductive thematic coding process was used that took into account themes from Hartwig & Mohamed (2020) and Nubani et al. (2022). The initial code book was refined several times in discussion between Authors 2 and 3, identifying recurring topics and undertaking a final review focused on construct validity, accuracy and consistency, to ensure coding was representative of the interview transcripts.

Table 1. Summary of the studies presented in this paper

	Study 1: Scotland	**Study 2: Chicago**
Research Participants	Circular economy practitioners & leaders of reuse organizations which include furniture in their operations	Case managers whose clients have received donations of reused furniture
Sampling approach	Purposive sampling	Purposive sampling (criterion sampling)
Interview focus	Barriers and opportunities for a circular economy; discussion of additional impacts	Impacts of donated furniture on clients
Rationale for participant selection	Professional experience; operational knowledge of small scale CE enterprises & non-profits	Professional experience; insights from multiple clients; participant recruitment; protection of vulnerable population
Research approach	Qualitative – semi-structured interviews	Qualitative – semi-structured interviews
Sample size	n=8 interviews in furniture/furniture reuse organizations	n=24 case manager interviews
Interview length	Approx. 60 mins	Approx. 30 mins
Disciplinary lens	Environmental social science, behavioral science	Social policy, social work, housing studies

Our paper thus draws from research with different starting points – study one looking at how furniture reuse contributes to the CE from the perspective of CE practitioners; study two exploring the social benefits of furniture reuse through feedback to case managers from people who have received donated furniture. Our different approaches reveal a range of social impacts of furniture reuse, and suggests that the challenges of

working within disciplinary siloes can prevent wider understanding of the impacts of such initiatives. In bringing our two studies together we gain a broader perspective on furniture reuse, in particular, emphasizing the social aspects of furniture reuse currently often overlooked in the CE literature. As the approaches and questions asked resulted in different types of social impacts being identified during analysis, our findings are presented sequentially from Scotland (study 1) and Chicago (study 2). We conclude by bringing the studies together in our discussion section.

3. Findings

3.1. Study 1 – furniture reuse in Scotland

3.1.1. Employment, work experience and employability skills From our Scottish study, interviewees identified employment, job training and skills development opportunities created through the operations of furniture reuse stores as additional social benefits of their reuse activity. Interviewees described how furniture reuse provides employment and volunteering opportunities – both directly dealing with the reused furniture items, as well as leadership opportunities, and roles requiring IT skills, administrative skills, human resources support, etc. Work experience and training in retail, forklift truck driving (and certification), the furniture removal industry, and behind-the-scenes experience such as logistics and planning, were all mentioned by interviewees as important training or employment opportunities available through reuse stores.

An interviewee representing FourSquare, described the wide range of social impacts of their reuse work:

There's so many more social impact benefits […] [re-used furniture] furnishes all our offices and all our accommodation services, it provides additional costs which go to fund our central services, but it also provides training and job opportunities for people. We have social work students that work in the shop for a while [...] and then they bring people from our services that might not have the confidence … They're maybe a young person that's seventeen, homeless, and is living in one of our buildings: they'll go and collect them and bring them here and then eventually they'll get enough confidence that they can come themselves and then maybe they'll get a job out of it, or they'll go and apply for a job somewhere else. Its value is much more than just the reuse, it's almost like the reuse isn't just the stuff, it's the money and it's the skills and everything; almost every part of it is used.

On the day Authors 1 and 4 visited FourSquare for the interview, a group of high school students were pursuing a work experience week where they had been exposed to retail, stock control, customer service and other employment skills. Another interviewee in study one described how they offer student placements for students "that find school a bit more challenging and prefer learning outwith [outside of] the classroom," while a further Scotland-based interviewee identified that many of their paid staff originally came through placement schemes. The workplace support provided through the organization's reuse operations benefited social health and wellbeing by helping people build confidence in the workplace: "we have an awful lot of people who perhaps would have struggled to get into the workforce, but only because of maybe anxiety or confidence. Very able people, our best members of staff now."

3.1.2. Funds to support additional services Interviewees in study one also identified how revenue from the resale of furniture creates income that service providers can use to pursue their missions. The interviewee from FourSquare explained that income received through furniture reuse and resale to the public created funds to support free access to counselling services for their service users; it also enables FourSquare to invest in opportunities for service users to work towards qualifications. Another interviewee in study one indicated their organization does not directly provide additional support services, but donates funds annually to other non-profits, to enable the provision of those services. "The return on investment," explained the interviewee from FourSquare "it's huge in terms of every pound (GBP) that's spent there: what it generates, and what it means,

and what it avoids." The revenue from the furniture reuse store creates wide-ranging social benefits: everything from "making people feel good about their homes to paying for another support worker to help young people out of homelessness."

3.2. Study 2 – Chicago Furniture Bank

3.2.1. Better sleep and physical health benefits The CFB provides beds, mattresses, couches, chairs and tables that have been donated for reuse. When received by individuals and families on low incomes, or who have previously experienced homelessness, case managers described observing how this reused furniture generated emotional responses and positively impacted their clients' wellbeing in several ways. Almost all the case managers interviewed reported that furniture improves an individual's sense of comfort in their new home which, in turn, improved people's sleep and physical health. One case manager stated that their client told them: "my kids are happy, they have beds, they each are happy they have their own bed. I'm not in the bed with them. They're just happy." Receiving reused bed frames and mattresses from the CFB, a second case manager told us, meant that their clients went from, "sleeping on a hardwood floor or sleeping out of bed, or even …sleeping on a couch," and that the reused furniture, "definitely is a huge improvement… it helps people just, I think, live with dignity a little bit better." A third Chicago case manager shared a story of a client who told them, "I need furniture because I can't sleep on the floor, I'm on dialysis. I'm too sick, so if I keep sleeping on the floor, I sometimes can't even get up from the floor." Reusing furniture thus helped this individual with a chronic health condition better manage their symptoms.

3.2.2. Improved social health & wellbeing Reusing furniture also promotes better social health for formerly homeless individuals. One case manager stated that reused furniture allowed their clients to be "more involved and inviting family members over for maybe a special event or something like that." Others reported how receiving furniture gave their clients a sense of pride about their space, which case managers said translated into how people they felt about themselves. One interviewee discussed how furniture "boosts [individual clients'] confidence and probably their social interaction, which is good for overall mental health." Others noted reused furniture promotes more frequent and higher quality interactions between recipients, family members, and social service providers, because when clients have a place they feel comfortable in and proud of, they are more willing to invite others into their space. One case manager said of the CFB, "I mean they're taking a load off of us and the therapists because they [clients] feel better; they're more welcoming. 'Come on in, I have some chairs, where you wanna sit at?' And they're really pleasant and really friendly." Another account retold during an interview was how receiving reused furniture indirectly helped reduce a client's substance use, through having a furnished home:

There was one client at the shelter who used all the time, all day, every day. Treatment centers weren't an option for him... A lot of things happened, but he got in a house, he's been employed for six months now and is totally clean and he always tells me what having his own apartment and furniture [means]—it's like 'there are so many other things that I want to achieve now'.

3.2.3. Housing retention, education and employment impacts Furniture from furniture banks can improve other factors with interviewees highlighting housing retention, employment, and education. A case manager in Chicago noted:

I definitely think housing retention is big when people have a decent place, and they feel good about the way their apartment looks and their comfort level. It has an impact on housing retention, which then has an impact on other things.

A further impact of furniture was on a child's education: an interviewee recalled how "one lady called me and told me that her child's grades went up in school because they started sitting down at the dining room table versus sitting on the floor eating food."

Case managers we interviewed also identified that previously unhoused individuals have a variety of employment statuses: some are unemployed and able to work; others are unemployed but unable to work, and often on Social Security or Disability Insurance; others are already employed. Despite this variation in employment status, a general consensus among our interviewees was that having reused furniture can indirectly impact on a recipient's employment, "because it's just such a part of a bigger thing, coming home to a place that's cozy or at least has stuff on the walls, a bed—people aren't sleeping on the floor." Another case manager commented, "I think the furniture helps with overall stability of clients and them being able to feel like they've got things in order to be able to look for things like employment." Overall, as reported by on Chicago interviewee, reused furniture "makes for an easier, more comfortable life for people that have already been through a significant trauma… until the furniture bank, to my knowledge, that was something that was kind of a blind spot."

4. Discussion

In the CE literature, social inclusion is the second-most mentioned positive societal impact of the CE (after employment) and yet, Padilla-Rivera et al. (2020) assess, that literature is inconclusive about *how* the CE will promote social equity or advance social inclusion. Although determining some sort of 'measure' of social inclusion feels necessary before making any general claims in this regard, the studies from Scotland and Chicago do present empirical evidence about how furniture reuse contributes to social inclusion in the CE through positive impacts on physical and social health and wellbeing. Indeed, albeit derived from different starting points and undertaken in different contexts, the focus of these two studies on furniture reuse contribute to the empirical work addressing the CE at the everyday, local scale that Hobson (2020), Zavos et al. (2024) and others contend is often overlooked and missing from the wider CE literature. In their own ways, Studies 1 and 2 affirm recognized social impacts of the CE, from employment opportunities and job creation (Clube, 2022; Geissdoerfer et al., 2017; Mies & Gold, 2021), to generating funding and support for additional social services (Osterley & Williams, 2019), and offer insights about how CE practices such as furniture reuse could be part of the social cycles of care described by Calisto Friant et al. (2024).

In presenting wellbeing and quality of life benefits often claimed, but not easily measurable, in a CE (Valencia et al., 2023), the two studies provide some empirical support for the functioning of a circular society (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2021). Study 1's engagement with organizations coordinating the reuse of furniture in Scotland found that they offered skills training, placements and volunteering opportunities, and created spaces where people who might struggle to engage with conventional employment can gain experience as they acquire, manage, and distribute used furniture inventories. Indeed, although not central to Study 2, the CFB also provides direct employment in warehouse and furniture pickup and delivery operations for "young adults affected by gang violence, homelessness, and trauma, that have limited opportunities in the workforce" (Chicago Furniture Bank, 2025). Importantly for consideration of what skills are necessary for the CE, practitioners in Scotland emphasized that the skillsets required to facilitate furniture reuse at the local level extended beyond manual labour to administrative abilities (finance, human resources expertise) that are applicable in multiple contexts.

In turn, Study 2's interviews of case managers who saw the impact of reused furniture on their clients, illustrated different social aspects in the CE. Reused furniture engendered positive emotional and personal reactions, alongside positive impacts on physical and social health, that interviewees observed in people who received items. Indeed, although furniture is only one part of a "bundle of *on-going practices* that make a place 'feel like home'," others being the ability to manage relationships with family, friends, landlords and support services (Ambrose et al., 2016, ii), the CFB's provision of reused furniture to individuals who had previously experienced homelessness, the case managers told us, enhanced housing retention (c.f. Boland et al., 2023), improved of peoples' ability to engage with employment, educational or other goals (c.f. Nubani et al., 2022), and contributed to creating a sense of home (c.f. Hartwig & Mohamed, 2020).

Drawing from their Swedish case studies, Bradley and Persson (2022: 1) emphasize how *repair* initiatives can be important for enabling people, particularly marginalized groups, "to participate and live well in a low-impact future." Our study emphasizes another "R imperative" of the circular economy: *reuse*. It provides qualitative evidence of the CE in practice, highlighting that beyond extending the lifespans of material products and reducing waste, reusing furniture can lead to skills training and job opportunities for people who might

struggle with more mainstream employment, and benefit physical and social health and wellbeing through things many of us take for granted, such as having a bed and mattress to sleep on or a table to eat at. These social impacts of furniture reuse in the CE are important societal contributions that can be hard to identify or measure within more conventional metrics of 'impact' often assessed within the CE and although recognizing, as Deutz et al. (2024) identify, that some distributional aspects of the CE are short-loop processes (including reuse) which do not directly overcome longer term factors of the market-driven economy. By drawing on insights from different contexts and independently devised projects, our analysis has shown that there are evident social benefits of furniture reuse at a local scale. While studies that engaged furniture banks and reuse stores might be expected to find societal benefits, we suggest the contribution of such evidence to debates about the CE are underrepresented. Recent research is demonstrating how community-based organisations such as those in our study are contributing to the CE in a way that generates social benefits that exceed conventional CE framings (Healy et al., 2026). We contribute to this literature, demonstrating how such actors are engaging and delivering social impact.

There are of course limitations to our study. Firstly, our interviews were held with managers of reuse organisations (study 1) and case managers whose clients received reused furniture (study 2). While many of our interviewees have ongoing relationships with people in receipt of reused furniture or skills training, our approaches were chosen given the initial framings of our respective studies. Thus, there is additional insight to be gained in hearing from people throughout the CE of reused furniture, from those who have volunteered at or been employed by a reuse store despite experiencing challenges in the conventional employment market, through to people utilizing the reused furniture, not only extending its lifespan, but furnishing a home and the benefits that result. Secondly, our studies were pursued separately and not based on the same initial research questions. This, we acknowledge, might lead to confusion, but our intention here has been to present the two studies undertaken from different perspectives to highlight the benefit of drawing from across disciplinary perspectives to benefit CE scholarship. Another avenue for future research, therefore, would be to establish a study focused on furniture reuse more holistically at the outset, developing an interdisciplinary research design that incorporates environmental, economic, and social equity impacts, thereby enabling a more comparative analysis. Indeed, despite previous studies highlighting the substantial contribution that the non-profit sector makes to waste reduction (e.g. Dolphin et al., 2023; Osterley & Williams, 2019), our case studies did not seek to address the environmental impacts of furniture reuse. In sum, bringing together data from the social, economic, and environmental impacts of furniture reuse would be beneficial.

5. Conclusion

The CE literature has largely developed from seeking to solve environmental problems, namely the unsustainable use of resources. It recognizes that for the CE to become a model for the three pillars of sustainable development (Kirchherr et al., 2023), integrating economic and social benefits are both desirable and possible. Yet having the starting point of resource use means that addressing material flows on a large scale comprises much of the story of the CE, an approach often critiqued as being too technocratic (Casson & Welch, 2021). Thus, in this paper, we brought together data from two studies, one completed in Scotland, the other in Chicago, and focused on the social impacts of furniture reuse at the local scale to enhance our understanding of the multifaceted potential of the CE. Our analyses demonstrate how insights from different contexts and academic disciplines can help identify societal impacts that are important in the CE, but are often overlooked in CE discussions that typically prioritise more quantitative or traditional economic indicators.

Given that the two studies were undertaken in very different political contexts, it is hard to make any specific policy recommendations. We do suggest, however, that given their wide social contributions, more attention should be given to the role of non-traditional actors including the non-profit in the CE. Indeed, as efforts continue to bring about a transition to a CE, the benefits provided by actions of smaller-scale organisations will be critical in ensuring a just circular society. Additionally, our study has shown that understanding the reuse of furniture in the CE context can be enhanced by drawing on insights from people looking at the same products and materials (furniture that is no longer wanted but remains in good condition) and asking different questions. We have thus described how understanding the social impacts of reuse in the CE furniture sector can be enhanced through interdisciplinary conversation, and in doing so suggest another

way that the smaller stories of closing loops (Hobson, 2020) within the circular economy can benefit the environment and society.

Acknowledgements The authors would like to thank everyone who contributed to this study for sharing their time and expertise.

Author contributions Alice Hague (conceptualisation, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, project administration, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing), Euan Hague (conceptualisation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing), Kelby Bosma (formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing), Tami Wooldridge (formal analysis, investigation), Laura Kolar (investigation), Fiona Bender (formal analysis, investigation), Kathyn Colley (funding acquisition, project administration, writing – review & editing), Phoebe Somervail (formal analysis, investigation), Tony Craig (Funding acquisition; project administration)

Funding Authors from The James Hutton Institute acknowledge funding from the 2022-2027 Strategic Research Programme of the Scottish Government Rural and Environmental Services Analytical Division (project ID: JHI-C4-1).

Data availabilty Data created for the study based in Scotland are available on request from the lead author. Data created for the study based in Chicago is confidential. The project OSF website is https://osf.io/9bv7n/

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics statement The research for this paper was reviewed by the DePaul University Institutional Review Board (refs LK091619SPS and IRB-2024-1499) and The James Hutton Institute Research Ethics Committee (ID: 0127). All participants gave their informed consent to participate in the research, and the privacy and confidentiality of participants has been protected.

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