

## Selling repurposed furniture: An exploratory study into consumer perception

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**Keywords:** Urban Upcycling; Circular Design; Furniture; Aesthetics; Consumer Perception.

**Abstract:** Repurpose is becoming more popular as a circularity strategy. This circularity strategy is specifically promising in the case of furniture. One of the challenges of upscaling repurpose is the negative consumer perception of repurposed products. Studies up to date pertain to consumer perception of refurbished products and products using recycled content. In this study we investigate (1) to which extent the motives mentioned within literature play a role when it comes to consumers' perception of repurposed furniture and (2) to what extent the visibility of past identity of repurposed furniture and storytelling play a role in consumer perception. The result indicate that aesthetic and functional quality are highly valued. Storytelling seems to be a secondary motive for customers to consider a repurposed product. We further identified three categories of repurposed furniture (i.e., visibly repurposed, non-visibly repurposed and unique look) that appeal to different consumer segments. While further research can be done into the demographic profiles, these categories can be used by designers/makers to make repurposed products that better appeal to their envisioned customer base.

### Introduction

As part of the transition towards a circular society, upcycling, a process in which products and materials that are about to be disposed, are instead repaired, refurbished or repurposed or remanufactured in a way that increases their value (Singh et al., 2019), is gaining growing attention of both researchers and practitioners. Out of all the different circularity strategies, repurpose delays recycling or disposal of end-of-life consumer products by using discarded products or their parts in new products with a different function and/or in a different context, thereby retaining value added during previous production and use processes (Potting et al., 2017; van Hees & Oskam, 2021; Lepelaar et al., 2022).

Repurpose is specifically promising in the case of furniture, as annually large volumes of furniture are being discarded and incinerated while these volumes still retain a high residual value (Sung, 2017) and there are opportunities for localized and flexible production in the furniture industry (Hjelmgren et al., 2015).

Even though repurpose deals with some challenges such as streams of discarded materials having varying quality and limited availability (Leede et al., 2021; Lepelaar et al., 2022) this strategy is being embraced

commercially (Sung, 2015) and is seen by scholars as a promising circular business model strategy (Lüdeke-Freund et al., 2018).

Yet, from the different strategies that can be employed to contribute to circularity, repurpose is currently the least explored by scholars (Berglund et al., 2023; de Leede et al., 2021; Lüdeke-Freund et al., 2019).

One of the challenges in upscaling repurpose is the negative perception consumers have about repurposed products e.g., lack of good quality products, high price and limited access (Singh et al., 2019). Yet, a positive image of circular products could contribute to the acceptance of repurposed products (Calvo-Porrà & Lévy-Mangin, 2020). Studies that have looked at motives influencing consumer perception of circular products focus on strategies such as refurbishment (Mugge et al., 2017; Van Weelden et al., 2016), and the use of recycled content in products (Essoussi & Linton, 2010) and to a lesser extend repurpose (Yu & Lee, 2019). Mugge et al. (2017) provide the most comprehensive list of motives including familiarity with the concept of refurbishing, the product category, financial benefit, functional quality, aesthetic quality, warranty, degree to which a product is personal e.g., prescription glasses, and contamination. Apprehension

when it comes to contamination mainly arises due to concerns about hygiene, utility and territory (e.g., this product belongs to someone else) (Baxter et al., 2014).

Yu & Lee (2019) in addition mention social value and emotional value. Essoussi & Linton (2010) conclude that consumers are willing to pay less for products that make use of recycled content as they perceive them to have lower quality due to a higher functional risk. Lack in trust of product performance of circular products negatively influences product perception (Yu & Lee, 2019). Providing consumers with a story about the past identity

of repurposed products can aid in positive consumer perception (Kamleitner et al., 2019). Table 1 gives an overview of the most mentioned motives that influence consumer perception.

Within literature there are no studies looking into consumer perception of repurposed furniture, specifically. Hence, in this study we investigate (1) to which extent the motives mentioned within literature play a role when it comes to the perception of repurposed furniture in practice and (2) to what extent the visibility of past identity of repurposed furniture and storytelling play a role in consumer perception.

Motives	Definition (the degree at which the consumer...)	Sources
Familiarity with (circularity) concept	... is familiar or understand the circularity concept being applied	Mugge et al. (2017); Sung (2017)
Financial benefit	... perceives that the price difference between a new and refurbished product is large enough to benefit from	Mugge et al. (2017); Van Weelden et al. (2016)
Functional quality	... perceives the physical performance or functional obsolescence of the product	Mugge et al. (2017); Yu & Lee (2019); Sung (2017); Singh et al. (2019)
Emotional quality	.. perceives the product to be able to arouse feelings (e.g., enjoyment, feeling good)	Yu & Lee (2019); Sung (2017)
Social benefits	... perceives that the product will increase their status or self esteem	Yu & Lee (2019)
Aesthetic quality	... perceives the product to be beautiful	Mugge et al. (2017); Yu & Lee (2019)
Personalization quality	... perceives that the product needs personalization (e.g., prescription glasses) or can be used as form of self-expression	Mugge et al. (2017); Yu & Lee (2019); Park & Lin (2020)
Environmental benefit	... perceives the product to provide an environmental benefit	Van Weelden et al. (2016); Yu & Lee (2019); Sung (2017)
Uniqueness	... perceives the product as one of a kind or innovative	Park & Lin (2020)
Warranty	... product comes with a guarantee that you can bring it back in case it does not function as promised	Mugge et al. (2017)
Contamination	... perceive the product to be contaminated due to previous use	Mugge et al. (2017); Baxter et al. (2014)
Storytelling	providing a story of the past identity of the repurposed product	Kamleitner et al. (2019)

**Table 1 Motives influencing consumer perception of circular products**

## Research paper

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Motives	Sample statements
Aesthetic quality	I did not think the product looked pretty I think the product looked pretty
Storytelling	The storytelling about the product appealed to me
Financial benefit	I think it's too expensive It was cheaper than buying a new item
Functional quality	I'm doubting about the functionality The product offers a functionality that I needed
Warranty	I'm doubting about the warranty
Contamination	I think it's dirty/I did not like the thought that someone else had used (part of) the product previously
Emotional quality	The product that I bought or got repurposed retained emotional value
Environmental benefit	I'm doubting about the product lifetime I value sustainability (I rather do not buy new interior products)
Uniqueness	The product was made from a unique material It's a unique product that is not being made somewhere else

**Table 2 Motives and sample statements**

## Method

### Survey

A survey and in-depth interviews were conducted. The survey was spread through online channels such as LinkedIn and via the partners of the research project Urban Upcycling from the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. The goal of the survey was to get more insights into the motives influencing consumer perception of repurposed furniture. In the survey participants were asked whether they were familiar with the repurpose concept, as familiarity of the circularity concept could influence consumer perception (Mugge et al., 2017). Participants were also asked whether they had bought repurposed furniture and how long ago. Subsequently, participants were presented with statements describing why they did or did not buy repurposed furniture. The statements were based on motives identified

within literature (see table 2). We also provided room for participants to share their own motives. The survey was open for responses from May until November 2023.

### In-depth Interviews

The survey was followed up by in-depth one-on-one interviews with 7 participants. Part of these participants also participated in the survey. We ensured that there was a variety in age and background amongst the participants. With the interviews we aimed to further investigate how the degree of visibility of repurposed material and storytelling played a role in consumer perception of the products. In the interviews, participants were first asked to share more about themselves and their affinity with sustainability and we explained the repurposed concept. Second, participants were presented with 12 products within the product categories: lamps, stool and accessories — four products in each category (see Appendix A). We chose these three categories as these categories include products that all consumers have in their house and that are being purchased a couple of times in a lifetime. We selected products that differed in terms of their visual appearance, specifically how visible the repurposed component and materials were in the product. In the first round, we provided only the images of each of the products. In the second round, as a means of storytelling, we provided the background information of the products i.e., company name, description of the product and what it was made of. We asked the participants to rank the products based on how likely it was that they would buy them in case they had to style them in a completely new space. We did not provide the absolute prices of each product but instead gave an indication using icons as to focus on the visual appearance of the product and storytelling. Table 2 gives an overview of one product per category. Both the survey as well as the interviews were conducted in Dutch. Hence, mainly people who live in the Netherlands and who are speaking Dutch participated in the survey. The interviews were analyzed using the annotated portfolio as described by Sauerwein et al. (2018).

## Lamp



From: [The Talk Of The Town design](#)

### Willemsbrug lamp

**MATERIAL** / Made from pieces of **steel construction** from the renovation of the Willemsbrug Rotterdam.

**PRODUCTION PROCESS** / The robust pieces were already on pallets to be disposed of, but TTOTT processed the material into unique lamps. The steel is **blasted**, then **cut into pieces** and repainted in its **original red color**.

**MAKERS** / TTOTT "The Talk of the Town", makes interior items from waste material from **well-known Rotterdam icons**. This material is collected during renovation or demolition. In this way, inhabitants of Rotterdam get a **special piece of their city in their home**.

**PRICE** / €\*\*\*



## Stool



From: Circulair Warenhuis

### Wolkpoefje

**MATERIAL** / Made from **second-hand towels** and reclaimed wood.

**PRODUCTION PROCESS** / Each piece of material is carefully collected and transformed into a luxurious seating surface. The different parts are assembled in a textile workshop to create this beautiful circular pouf chair.

**MAKERS** / Designed by Nienke Hoogvliet in collaboration with Circulair Warenhuis. This company creates new products out of leftovers materials from the thrift store.

**PRICE** / €\*\*\*



## Accessories



From: [Super Local](#)

### Bottle-UP candle holder

**MATERIAL** / Made from **empty glass bottles** from Zanzibar. Zanzibar is not equipped to process or recycle all the glass waste from tourists, so it is thrown away and ends up in nature.

**PRODUCTION PROCESS** / Locally made using cutting, grinding and sandblasting techniques, and combined with local crafts such as woodworking.

**MAKERS** / Super Local (Design Studio with social impact), three other Dutch Design studios and local artisans in Zanzibar.

**PRICE** / €\*\*

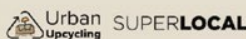


Table 3 Example of the product-images and background information that were shown to participants. See the Appendix for the full set of product-images.

## Results

### Survey

#### Demographic participants

We recorded a total of 231 responses. Four responses were excluded, because the respondent did not agree with the conditions of the survey. In addition, we excluded 65 responses as they did not complete the full survey, leaving us with 162 responses. The ages of the respondents varied from 18 to 65+ (92%). 32% of the participants identified as men and 60% of women and the rest selected other

categories (e.g., non-binary or preferred not to say). 81% of the respondents were academically educated e.g., university of (applies sciences) and lived (67%) and worked (66%) in a city as opposed to a village. Half of the respondents (n=83) shared that they had bought repurposed furniture in the past, of which almost half (46%) bought living room furniture (e.g., a couch, coffee table, lamps or tv cabinet). A ranking of other types of furniture included office (10%), outdoor (10%), bedroom (8%) kitchen (5%). 82% of repurposed products were bought between 2023 and five years prior to that.

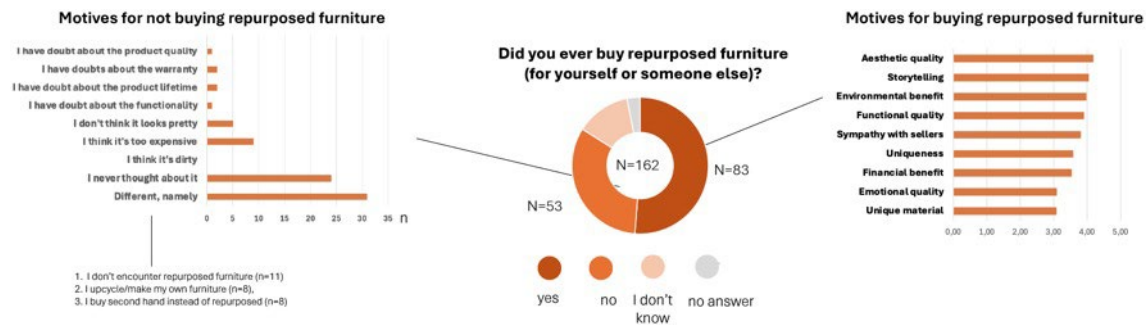


Figure 1 Infographic consumer motives to (not) buy repurposed furniture

### The motives

#### For purchasing repurposed furniture

The respondents who had bought upcycled furniture (n=83, 51%) valued statements about why they would buy repurposed products in the following order: (1) aesthetics, (2) storytelling and (3) sustainability and, (4) functionality. Respondents identified less with the statements related to the origins of the materials, the emotional value connected to the product or sympathizing with the designers of the product, see figure 1.

#### For not purchasing repurposed furniture

Of the respondents who never bought repurposed furniture before (n=53, 33%) indicated that they had never considered buying repurposed furniture (32%), thought it was too expensive (12%) and did not think it was beautiful (7%). Motives related to the life span of the product, warranty, (perceived) product quality and product contamination were chosen to a lesser extent. Next to that, a large

portion (41%) provided their own explanation. These explanations can be categorized as: not encountering repurposed furniture (n=11), upcycling their own furniture (n=8), buying second hand instead of repurposed (n=8), limited offerings (n=5) and logistics hassle to get the furniture from the store to the house (n=1). These respondents provided the following prerequisites to consider buying repurposed furniture in the future: availability at regular (large) stores, improved visibility of repurposed products, more marketing and advertisement, less expensive, improved aesthetic appearance e.g., not so apparently repurposed, and clean products.

#### Repurpose in the future

71% of the respondents indicated that they were open to buying repurposed furniture in the future. Motives given were related to sustainability (e.g., using less resources, better for the environment), unique design of repurposed furniture price and third lower price.



### Visual appearance

During the in-depth interviews, the participants did not rank the products remarkably differently before and after providing the background information (table 3). What seemed to be leading in ranking the products was the aesthetics appeal. The participants mostly mentioned a product's look as reason for ranking the product at a certain place. Positive aesthetic valuations (e.g., this product... looks pretty, fits my interior style, looks unique) equaled high rankings, while negative valuations (e.g., the product looks ugly, cheap, looks contrived or chaotic). While a couple of

the participants perceived the products that visibly looked repurposed as unattractive, there were some participants who valued this look as sustainable (e.g., you can see that materials are being repurposed). In addition, certain product designs seemed to be interpreted as generic and were related to mass produced furniture. Participant 6 said: "This is a certain style that I associate with Leenbakker [explanation: a large furniture store in the Netherlands]. I mean I see this type of furniture more often". In addition, color choice as well as printing on products appealed to varying degrees to the participants.

Before providing background information					After providing background information				
<b>Lamps</b>									
	#1	#2	#3	#4		#1	#2	#3	#4
	favorite			least favorite		favorite			least favorite
1 Fietslampje (The Upcycle)				7	1 Fietslampje (The Upcycle)			1	6
2 Willemsbrug lamp (The Talk of the Town design)	1	2	4		2 Willemsbrug lamp (The Talk of the Town design)	1	3	3	
3 BALK (Bloey)	3	1	3		3 BALK (Bloey)	3	1	2	1
4 Hook'd (Tolhuys)	3	4			4 Hook'd (Tolhuys)	3	3	1	
<b>Stools</b>									
	#1	#2	#3	#4		#1	#2	#3	#4
	favorite			least favorite		favorite			least favorite
1 Wolkpoefje (Nienke Hoogvliet X Circulair Warenhuis)	1	2	3	1	1 Wolkpoefje (Nienke Hoogvliet X Circulair Warenhuis)	1	1	3	2
2 Bull Kruk (Studio Hamerhaai)	1	2		3	2 Bull Kruk (Studio Hamerhaai)	1	2	1	3
3 BB01 STOOL (Bloey)	2	3	1	2	3 BB01 STOOL (Bloey)	2	2	1	2
4 Reupholstered stool (Meublowski)	3		2	2	4 Reupholstered stool (Meublowski)	3	1	2	1
<b>Accessories</b>									
	#1	#2	#3	#4		#1	#2	#3	#4
	favorite			least favorite		favorite			least favorite
1 Mand (Household Hardware)	3		2	2	1 Mand (Household Hardware)	1		3	3
2 The Grandma's Pillow (Rescued)		1	2	4	2 The Grandma's Pillow (Rescued)		2	3	2
3 Bottle-UP candle holder (SuperLocal)	3	1	3		3 Bottle-UP candle holder (SuperLocal)	3	1	1	1
4 Circulair wandrek FENCY (Tolhuys)	1	3	1	1	4 Circulair wandrek FENCY (Tolhuys)	3	3		1

**Table 4 Ranking of repurposed products before and after storytelling. Best rated (green) – product(s) that was/were cumulatively ranked the highest on place #1 and #2. Worst rated (red) – product(s) that was/were cumulatively ranked the highest on #3 and #4.**

### Functionality

Another motive that was mentioned was functionality. When it comes to functionality specifically, the stools benefitted from perceived (multi)functionality, while the lamps and some of the accessories were assessed based on practical features (e.g., is the cable length of the lamp long enough so it can reach the socket).

### Storytelling

Even though aesthetic quality and functional quality seemed to be leading (e.g., participant: "I primarily make my choice based on looks and secondly based on the story"), some participants valued the history behind the repurposed waste stream. For example, participant 4 got excited after reading about the sourcing of the materials that were used to make the Willemsbrug lamp (see Appendix A). Participant 4: "[the Willems Bridge in Rotterdam] is a real icon for people living in Rotterdam". Participants also valued the products being (hand)made locally in a city they had a connection with. Participant 3: "handmade in Utrecht. And I'm from Utrecht." For one product, the background information negatively affected the ranking. When participants learned that the material was sourced from old German bunkers some of them viewed the product more negatively.

### Contamination and price

Contamination and price were mentioned to a lesser extent. Contamination concerns were only raised when textiles were used e.g., how clean is the textile used to make the product and how dirty will the textile get while it's being used in my house. Last, even though absolute prices were not mentioned, one of the participants mentioned that she could not see herself buying one of the accessories as she imagined it to be more expensive than buying it at the thrift store.

### Discussion

Within literature aesthetic quality (Mugge et al., 2017) is mentioned as one of the motives influencing consumer perception of circular products. Both the survey as well as the interviews showed that in the case of repurposed products consumers highly value the aesthetic quality of a product. When it comes to the aesthetic quality some participants valued visibility of the repurposed

materials as it came across as sustainable to them. Yet, other participants valued a generic look as this looked like mass-produced products being sold in larger furniture stores. This could indicate that consumers might value a level of sophistication in product design and material processing, when it comes to repurposed products. In addition, while storytelling could help establish an extra connection between the consumer and the product through referencing the product's past identity (Kamleitner et al., 2019), the result of the studies indicated that this did not always positively influence the participant's perception. Storytelling only seemed to have a positive influence when the participant already positively aesthetically valued the product and had a connection with the source of waste stream or the location where the product was made. Third, contamination concerns mainly arose when textiles were used. While mentioned within literature, surprisingly warranty was not really indicated as an important factor in consumer perception. This could be because the consumer did not have to make a buying decision and did not see the prices within the study.

From the interviews three categories of repurposed products arose: (1) visibly repurposed products, whereby consumers see which components or materials have been repurposed, (2) non-visibly repurposed products and (3) repurposed products with a unique look in terms of shape. This last category of products can benefit from storytelling when it is made locally, or the materials are sourced from a place that appeals to the consumer base. Further research should investigate demographic segmentation according to applied visibility strategy in product design and the place where the product is sold to the consumer.

Limitations in this study include the limited number of participants of the survey and interviews and the representation of various consumer segments within this small sample. Another limitation is providing participants with a selection of specific repurposed products. While this selection was made carefully, it can be seen as arbitrary as another group of researchers could have come to a different selection. Hence, further research should be

done when it comes to other product categories and samples of other specific products to assess to what extent the findings can be generalized. Furthermore, future research could include looking into how repurpose strategies could meet the consumer's need for aesthetic and functional value and financial benefits.

## Conclusion

Upscaling the practice of selling repurposed furniture proves to be challenging in practice. One of the challenges in upscaling repurpose is the negative perception of consumers of repurposed products. This paper aims to provide insights into motives that influence consumer perception of repurposed furniture. The results show that aesthetic and to a lesser extent functional quality are a prerequisite for consumers to even consider repurposed furniture. Storytelling can be seen as secondary to aesthetic and to functional quality. It further shows that repurposed products can be divided into three larger categories (i.e., visibly repurposed, non-visibly repurposed and unique look) that appeal to different consumer segments. Further research needs to be done to assess the demographic profiles that fit each segment. With this knowledge designers/makers in the field can more strategically design products that better appeal to their envisioned customer base.













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## Appendix A

Lamps		Stools		Accessories	
 Product name: Fietslampje	<b>Company:</b> The Upcycle <b>Waste stream:</b> Old bicycle lamps <b>Picture from:</b> Jeremy Kooyman	 Product name: Wolkpoeffe	<b>Company:</b> Nienke Hoogvliet collaboration with Circulair Warenhuis <b>Waste stream:</b> Old dish cloths <b>Picture from:</b> Circulair Warenhuis (archive)	 Product name: Bottle-Up kaarsenhouder	<b>Company:</b> Super Local <b>Waste stream:</b> Wine bottles <b>Picture from:</b> Jeroen van der Vielen
 Product name: Willembrug lamp (klein)	<b>Company:</b> The Talk of The Town design <b>Waste stream:</b> Old steel parts of the Willembrug in Rotterdam <b>Picture from:</b> <a href="#">TTOTT design</a>	 Product name: Bull kruk	<b>Company:</b> Studio Hamerhaai <b>Waste stream:</b> Picture from: <a href="#">Studio Hamerhaai</a>	 Product name: Autoband mand XL	<b>Company:</b> Household Hardware <b>Waste stream:</b> Old tires <b>Picture from:</b> <a href="#">Household Hardware</a>
 Product name: Balk Lampje	<b>Company:</b> ONZE / Blooey <b>Waste stream:</b> Old road signs <b>Picture from:</b> <a href="#">ONZE</a> , Remko Verhaagen	 Product name: BB01 Stool	<b>Company:</b> ONZE / Blooey <b>Waste stream:</b> Reclaimed construction steel from demolished bunkers / Powder coated steel <b>Picture from:</b> <a href="#">Blooey</a> , Remko Verhaagen	 Product name: Grandma's Pillow	<b>Company:</b> Rescued <b>Waste stream:</b> Old wool blankets <b>Picture from:</b> <a href="#">Rescued</a>
 Product name: Hook'd	<b>Company:</b> Tolhuijs design <b>Waste stream:</b> Powdercoated hooks <b>Picture from:</b> <a href="#">Tolhuijs</a>	 Product Name: Re-upholstered stool	<b>Company:</b> Meublowski <b>Waste stream:</b> Old stool <b>Picture from:</b> <a href="#">Meublowski</a>	 Product name: Fency	<b>Company:</b> Tolhuijs Design <b>Waste stream:</b> Waste material from a fence manufacturer <b>Picture from:</b> <a href="#">Tolhuijs</a>

Tabel 5 Full overview of products shown to the participant during the one-on-one interviews