

How does messiness affect consumer preference for simplicity?

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A clean desk might not be all it's cracked up to be. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, messiness can lead consumers toward clearer thinking—especially political conservatives.

"Business and government managers often promote 'clean desk' policies to avoid disorganized offices and messy desks, for the purpose of boosting work efficiency and productivity," write authors Jia (Elke) Liu (University of Groningen), Dirk Smeesters (Erasmus University), and Debra Trampe (University of Groningen). "This practice is based on the conventional wisdom that a disorganized and messy environment can clutter one's mind and complicate one's judgments. However, not all evidence supports this conventional link between a messy environment and a messy mind."

In a series of six studies, the authors found that individuals who were reminded of messiness via a language task, worked at disorganized desks, or shopped in a store they perceived as disorganized displayed tendencies toward simplicity in a number of ways. "They categorized products in a simpler manner, were willing to pay more for a t-shirt that depicts a simple-looking picture, and sought less variety in their choices."

The authors found that the messiness effect didn't affect liberals as much as conservatives because liberals were generally less concerned about being disorganized. "Specifically, conservatives, when confronted with a messy environment (compared to a clean environment), were willing to

pay more for a t-shirt with a simple-looking picture. Liberals' willingness to pay for this shirt was not affected by messiness," the authors explain.

The authors' study shows that experiencing messiness decreases consumers' cognitive complexity and induces them to form simple representations of product information (heuristic information processing). "Messy desks may not be as detrimental as they appear to be, as applying heuristic approaches can rather boost work efficiency or enhance employees' creativity in problem solving," the authors conclude.

More information: Jia (Elke) Liu, Dirk Smeesters, and Debra Trampe. "Effects of Messiness on Preferences for Simplicity." *Journal of Consumer Research*: June 2012 (published online October 5, 2011).

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