

Trouble cleaning out your closet? Why product 'purgatories' can help clear clutter

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Researchers from Seattle University's Albers School of Business and Economics, and the Indian School of Business have published a report that provides novel insights about how consumers make decisions about

keeping or disposing of possessions they no longer need.

The article, "Bracing for the sting of disposal: Product purgatories encourage mental simulation of the disposal process," recently published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, is authored by Matthew S. Isaac, and Poornima Vinoo.

Spring cleaning, moving homes and decluttering closets can be fraught with difficult decisions about what to keep and what to discard. Marie Kondo, a famous tidying consultant recommends keeping an item only if it sparks joy—easier said than done for many people.

"It's not just clinical hoarders who end up with too much stuff," the authors write. "Even otherwise well-functioning adults have the tendency to retain products that have outlived their usefulness."

The research team offer a strategy to help consumers avoid the accumulation trap and finally jettison no-longer-needed items. The researchers found that moving an item to a "purgatory" or transitional space, such as a storage unit or a basement, facilitates the process of disposal.

In one behavioral experiment, the researchers asked participants to think of an infrequently used item in their kitchen. One set of participants sent researchers a photo of the item in its current location. The other group was asked to move the item to a [storage space](#) or basement and send a photo of the item in this new location. When researchers then offered to connect all participants with an organization that would help them dispose of the product, participants who had moved the item to a purgatory were much more likely to dispose of the item than those who had not.

In two additional studies, the authors found that moving an item to a

transitional space led consumers to mentally envision its permanent removal, which made it easier to ultimately let go. In other words, imagining disposal allowed consumers to psychologically brace themselves for the eventuality of parting with the item forever.

Previous research explored ways to make product owners feel less attached to their items so that they would be more open to giving them up. This new work offers another way to move from mentally envisioning disposal to making it a reality.

The authors conclude that "by helping them declutter, product purgatories might even be able to improve consumers' psychological well-being and spark their joy."

More information: Mathew S. Isaac et al, Bracing for the sting of disposal: Product purgatories encourage mental simulation of the disposal process, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1342](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1342)

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