

The decluttering trend could be a good thing for the environment

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Television shows like Marie Kondo's "Tidying Up" have shined a spotlight on minimalism and the potential benefits of decluttering.

In the Netflix series "Tidying Up," Japanese organization specialist and author Marie Kondo helps people pare down clutter and create more orderly spaces. The show has inspired thousands of viewers to rethink how they fold T-shirts and toss belongings that don't "spark joy."

But why is the series so popular, and what does the Kondo movement – and the minimalism trend in general – mean in the grander scheme of things?

In an age of overconsumption, getting rid of unnecessary items can bring people a sense of personal relief and pride, but it can also be part of a larger move to a lifestyle that is more environmentally sustainable, says Sabrina Helm, associate professor of family and [consumer sciences](#) at the University of Arizona.

Consumers need to be careful, though, not to simply fill cleared-out spaces with more stuff, she warns.

Helm, who teaches in the Norton School of Family

and Consumer Sciences in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, talked with UANews about some of the psychological, social and environmental implications of moving toward a simpler lifestyle.

Q: Why do you think Marie Kondo and minimalism are so popular?

A: The minimalist movement taps into several cultural trends and global issues. First, consumers' lives are oversaturated; many houses are filled with "stuff," and as consumers, we have been trained to consume more and more, accumulating cheap stuff we don't really appreciate or value but deem disposable. In addition, interest in reality TV shows is still growing, with shows such as "Hoarders" already running for 10 years. Social media has a dominant role in inspiring and growing new cultural movements, so some influencers, such as "The Minimalists," find fertile ground for spreading new approaches to principally old ideas – namely, that more stuff does not mean more happiness. Amidst all this, there is also a growing movement around sustainability, and many now do realize that buying all that "stuff" wastes scarce planetary resources, leading them to reconsider what is really needed for having a fulfilled life.

Q: Do we see generational differences in who is embracing these ideas?

A: Reasons for embracing a simpler lifestyle are manyfold, and this idea may be appealing for all age groups, as can also be seen when watching "Tidying Up." Downsizing is appealing to many baby boomers, for example. The [social media](#) hype surrounding Marie Kondo indicates that millennials may be more engaged. What would be interesting to research in more detail is if the 2008 recession has left an imprint on consumers who grew up during that time or were hit hard by the economic consequences. I discussed this with my students, and some mentioned that their parents have a hard

time giving things away because of an uncertain future, which may require them to have all that "stuff" again. So, they'd rather hold on to everything. Younger consumers may be more motivated by the green movement and climate change considerations.

Q: Do you have advice for those who struggle to get rid of things?

A: Some may perceive the task of decluttering as overwhelming and are therefore struggling to start the process. Watching instructional videos or witnessing others' success may indeed be helpful, and the Web is full of examples. I personally think it is most important to first ask what is one's main motivation for decluttering. Is this the first step to a new lifestyle with new priorities? Or is this just a one-time housecleaning event, intended to open up new space for new stuff? Being a minimalist in today's consumer society is not an easy choice, although it may appear somewhat glamorous right now. Reflecting on each item one owns, finding ways to get rid of these items in a sustainable manner and scrutinizing every new purchase with regard to its future value to your life is a lot of work. Lastly, we all own items we only keep for the sake of having them in our lives. Some objects acquire meaning beyond practical use, but these are usually just a few items in a household. It is a good strategy to identify these and recognize what they mean to us – celebrate them! This makes it easier to realize how many other items we "hoard" that do not have such meaning.

Q: What are the environmental consequences of decluttering?

A: As much as successful "declutterers" celebrate their successes, it is important to recognize the factors that brought them to accumulate unneeded items in the first place, as well as what the positive and negative consequences of the decluttering process are. Often, consumers who report on their relief and happiness after successful interventions in their crowded homes mention that they feel good about having recycled or donated all their unwanted items, hoping that somebody else will enjoy the things they did not or no longer enjoy. However, recycling is a back-end solution to a vast problem.

For example, we have much more used clothing in our recycling stream than can be reused by others or processed for new uses. It is being transported all over the place causing additional carbon emissions, and a lot of it still ends up in landfills. Recycling and donating items addresses a symptom but does not heal the disease.

Another challenge is that, after a successful decluttering intervention, consumers may find that all that reconquered space in their shelves and home needs to be filled again, so the cluttering starts anew. Interestingly, many [consumers](#) feel a psychological need to fill empty space – think about fridges, for example. For some, decluttering might be like going on a diet – the positive effects of which will only sustain if lifestyle changes.

In order to tackle overconsumption, a main driver of climate change, we need to consume less overall, which means cutting down on buying new things and services. If that were the persistent outcome of the minimalism trend, there indeed is much to celebrate.

Provided by University of Arizona

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