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In Pursuit of Happiness: Phenomenological Study of The KonMari Decluttering Method

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ABSTRACT

Examining the phenomenon of KonMari decluttering method, this study explores how objects move through the journey from “possession,” and “organization,” to “dispossession” and the role of happiness in the process. The results suggest personal symbolic classification serves as the primary anchor for consumer happiness rather than the physical objects.

INTRODUCTION

How do consumed objects move through the journey from possession to dispossession? Where do consumers find happiness in this process? Prior research seems to center around the two extreme ends. On one end, happiness can be found in consumption, both in the form of materials and experiences, albeit to a different extent (Nicolao, Irwin, & Goodman, 2009). On the other end, conscious dispossession such as anti-consumption has also proven to influence consumer happiness (Cherrier, 2009). This type of mindful consumer behavior is often thought to be inspired by the reflection of societal overconsumption (Sheth, Sethia, & Srinivas, 2011). The notion of overflowing items in possession has inspired another stream of research on the household organization and the need for tidiness (e.g., Löfgren, 2016). While the process of tidying things up is considered mundane, the domestic order is often linked to consumer tranquility. However, little is known about how these three stages ‘possession,’ ‘organization,’ and ‘dispossession’ work together and how happiness is perceived and influences the decisions during the practices. Focusing on a decluttering approach, KonMari Method (Kondo, 2014), this research aims to yield insights on object-subject relationships beyond what is currently available in the literature. While the prime focus of the method is to organize the domestic mess, it emphasizes on finding the joy sparked by items as the standard to decide whether to possess or discard. This sets a proper context to explore how consumers define happiness in their decision making.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumption, Anti-consumption, and Happiness

Materialism is thought to be the primary social drive for modern consumption. In the context, happiness is defined by the abundance and the capability of acquisition (Richins and Dawson, 1992). Investigating the view of “money can buy happiness,” prior studies illustrate that consumption does lead to contentment. It is common for consumers to use object ownership as a mean to satisfy their psychological (Yu, Jing, Su, Zhou & Nguyen, 2016) and functional needs (Bhardwaj, Park & Kim, 2011), reward oneself (Godey et al., 2012), signal social status (Rege, 2008), reduce negative emotions (Kemp and Kopp, 2011), and consequently, increase happiness. However, many have argued that experiential purchase, in fact, induces more happiness than material purchase (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Dunn, Gilbert & Wilson, 2011; Nicolao, Irwin, Goodman, 2009). In particular, extraordinary experiences tend to result in a higher level of happiness than those ordinary ones (Bhattacharjee & Cassie, 2014). Though the direct relationship between money and happiness is weak, consumption does seem to influence one’s wellbeing.

Parallel to this development, in the past decades, there are several consumer movements against over-consumption. Starting with the notion that excessive consumption makes people unhappy (Lee & Ahn, 2016), consumers may express their resistance toward the

marketplace in various forms, ranging from complaining, boycotting, voluntary simplicity to anti-consumption (Cherrier, 2009). They may engage in these activities driven by intrinsic or extrinsic motivations. Movements such as mindful consumption (Sheth et al., 2011) and collaborative consumption (Albinsson & Perera, 2012) are motivated by concerns for the well-being of the environment. Consumers may find happiness in thinking they are contributing to the greater good. It may also come from the feeling of regaining control of oneself and reduced stress level that is related to the variety and the number of choices offered in the marketplace (Lee & Ahn, 2016).

Symbolic Classification System and Pollution

Owning too many objects and the need to organize have become central in modern consumer life (Cwerner and Metcalfe, 2003). Decluttering has become a widespread practice. It may seem straightforward to remove the items from a collection when an object is losing its value, functional or hedonic. However, consumers often attribute the cause of having “too much” to the overall volume rather than specific objects, which makes it hard to choose what to discard. Also, because of the meaning that the items represent, one may be reluctant to do so. Materiality studies suggest that while objects are non-human entities, consumers may have a psychological and emotional attachment to their possessions. Object-centered thinking views things as having a life and an identity which plays a significant role in the narratives of belonging (e.g., Zwick and Nikhilesh, 2006). This subject-object relation motivates and sustains the ongoing commitment to the labor of possession (Ekerdt & Baker, 2014).

The increasing number of items tends to result in a domestic mess, which is defined as a form of symbolic pollution, that is, items that are misplaced based on a self-identified system. Taking from Douglas (1967) definition of symbolic classification system where everything has its own place, Dion and her colleagues (2014) studied how people manage the mess at home. They found people have their systems defining the proper places and boundaries for objects. Those that are “out of place” are considered untidiness. While messiness is related to positive outcomes such as creativity (Löfgren, 2016), the disorder can create stress and anxiety. It is not the object itself that results in such negative feelings, but rather a disruption in the classification system that the person has created (Dion, Sabri & Guillard, 2014). According to this, knowing where to place an object at home can be both satisfying and endangering consumers’ well-being. While decluttering aims at clearing out the mess, it is also promoted as an act of restoring happiness in the household (Cherrier & Belk, 2015).

KonMari Methods

Marie Kondo, a Japanese organizing consultant, and her best-selling book titled “The Life Changing Magic of Tidying up” (Kondo, 2014) has led a movement of decluttering one’s possessions in pursuit of happiness. It has attracted millions of worldwide followers who consider themselves as KonMari converts (Yourgrau, 2015). There are some unique features to this method that may explain its popularity. Kondo advertises her method as a once in a lifetime experience that by completion, people will never have clutter in the house again. The most critical step is to touch each item and ask oneself if it “sparks joy.” Whether an object induces happiness serves as the sole principle whether one should own the item. Specific organizing tips are followed to help find places for every single object at

home. In her view, items are not just objects but things with their arcs and narratives. For all the items that do not spark joy, Kondo suggests the readers to thank it for having served its purpose before throwing it away. When an item ends its journey, no one else should own it. Thus, the items are not for reselling or recycle, as this would indicate the continued attached (monetary) value from the owner. Studying how consumers applied KonMari methods to organize their possessions, this study investigates how people find happiness in the process of moving objects through possession, organization, and dispossession.

METHODOLOGY

To analyze the role and the definition of happiness in the trajectory of objects, the study follows the descriptive phenomenology research approach to describe the reality of the phenomenon of KonMari. This method allows a substantial representation of the subjective experience of the participants (Mick & Demoss, 1990). In-depth interviews were conducted with 11 female adults between the age of 26 and 47 who self-identified as practicing some forms of KonMari methods. The participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling strategies. One critical selection criterion of the participants is that they must have documented their decluttering attempts with pictures, blog articles, diaries or videos. These materials were used to prompt answers and recall their processes. Their experience with the KonMari method ranges from 2 months to 5 years, as the book was first published in Japanese in 2011 and only later translated into different languages around the world. Six of the participants considered themselves as pure KonMari converts who faithfully followed all steps in the method. The rest have given up at a various stage or adjusted it to their preferences. The interview transcripts, the verbal and visual content of the documentaries are analyzed. An initial coding scheme was developed based on the steps identified in the KonMari method as well as the three key stages of possession, organization, and dispossession in the literature. The analysis built on continual comparisons between the data collected from different participants.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

It is an interactive process to redefine the place of an object in one's heart and one's house. While the KonMari steps are linear with a rigid procedure, depending on participants' symbolic classification and how flexible it can be, they may experience a different level of challenges.

Personified Objects

In understanding one's true feelings toward an object, Kondo recommends followers to treat it as a person, to thank it for its service, and to feel the intangible bond with the item. Many, even the converts, found it challenging to comprehend. Many participants rejected the idea of attaching narratives to the items, albeit understanding the logic behind it. Some were more familiar with the exercise because it's natural to them: *"I guess it's a cultural thing. My parents always told me to respect the stuff I have, to take care of them and to appreciate their beings. Granted, I don't normally talk to them... or maybe sometimes I do. It's not that weird"* (Mai, 5 years with KonMari). The attached meanings and personalities do not seem to influence the process of dispossession as anticipated. In some cases, it supports the notion of discarding items: *"Well, I said thank you, and that's that. It's a bit sad, but hey, everything has it's time, right? Every story must come to an end. You can't hold on to things forever. I guess I just spent longer time to say goodbye."* (Mari, 5 years with KonMari).

Joy-Sparking Items

Everyone seemed to have their own interpretation and understanding of joy-sparking. Some were clearly struggling in defining happiness or hedonic value in items: *"I just don't get it, I'm sorry, Only God can spark joy, not stuff!"* (Boudoir, 2 months with KonMari). Even without the religious view, this is still challenging for some when concerning functional items, while others can easily justify happiness provided by the objects as it makes their life easier anyhow. On the other hand, happiness has been interpreted by the participants sometimes purely by the appearance, as in how they are pleasing to look at and that makes them happy. In general, happiness often is tied to their places in the symbolic system. As a participant described: *"I found it hard to feel if something sparks joy, because they are just stuff. So I just judge by if I can imagine their place in the house, or a place in my mind, if I will think about it in the future and put a smile on my face, I think then that's it."* (Karlie, 2 years with KonMari).

Possession or Dispossession

The KonMari method suggests participants to only keep an item if it makes them happy. Few participants who are possession-oriented believe this is a positive mindset that helps the process. They argued that the method eliminates the guilt feeling and force them to focus on what to keep. However, most participants found it easier to think about what to discard. Many believed the best part of the practice is to throw away items, even though they felt guilty to toss away usable objects. Many described the process as uplifting and refreshing. Some even suggested it being the "best part" or the "happiest moment" in the whole exercise. Depending on ones' symbolic classification and the ideal volume of items that they wish to have, participants would have their preferred approach in thinking about what to possess or what to abandon. People who have a more definite feeling in deciding what makes them happy were also more comfortable with thinking about what to keep. It seemed that the positive feelings and actions are linked together.

Act of Decluttering and Organizing

The method promises the participants that they would only need to do it once and they would be forever freed from the household mess. Only one participant agreed to the notion entirely. It seemed to be a more common idea that the participants experienced frustration once the system has been established. They appeared to restrict themselves to the classification they had created. The objects themselves became less important, but rather their place in the system was of paramount importance. Most participants had difficulties in keeping up with the restored order, and they consistently found themselves decluttering with the same or other methods, after the first practice. The most noticeable impressions from all participants, however, is the change in their perception about tidying up. It transcended from being a mundane activity to an almost enjoyable experience and triggered happiness in the process. The one-off promise seemed to have created happiness by being an "extraordinary" event in the participants' life. The ones who were self-proclaimed organizing enthusiasts experienced the joy in a different way. They thought getting decluttered is their passion and their way of life, where KonMari is just one of the methods used. It is doing what is part of them made them happy.

CONCLUSION

This research examines how consumers declutter their households and explore the role of happiness in the process. While most consumer research focuses on the two extreme ends of consumption

TABLE 1: Results Summary Table

THEMES	CATEGORIES	DATA INSTANCES
Personified Objects	Non-Personified	"I must confess, I have never thank my payslips or my t-shirt for a job well done. I know she said that we should treat all items as if they have feelings and personalities, but I just can't resonate with that, why would payslip have feelings? I understand that we need to show appreciation, but I just can't go that far"
	Personified	"I guess it's a cultural thing. My parents always told me to respect the stuff I have, to take care of them and to appreciate their beings. Granted, I don't normally talk to them...or maybe sometimes I do. It's not that weird"
Joy-Sparking Items	Happiness can't be found in objects	"I just don't get it, I'm sorry, Only God can spark joy, not stuff!"
	Happiness found in objects	"Things that are useful and that you use, whether they look lovely or not, they do spark joy. Because they serve a very useful function and help you do things easier/faster/better, that's a kind of joy isn't it?"
	Happiness found in symbolic system	"I found it hard to feel if something sparks joy, because they are just stuff. So I just judge by if I can imagine their place in the house, or a place on my mind, if I will think about it in the future and put a smile on my face, I think then that's it."
Possession or Dispossession	Possession-oriented	"because it releases you from the guilt of getting rid of things. Plus you're deciding what to keep, not what to get rid of, and I think this will help you declutter more thoroughly."
	Dispossession-oriented	"I just really need a fresh, clean start. I do feel guilty throwing things out, but then it also teaches me that I should stop buying craps. I mean it's not like I'm a hoarder, I just apparently had a tendency of buying random stuff that doesn't make me happy. Not anymore! So I guess like she [Marie Kondo] said they still serve a purpose, even though I threw them away, they taught me a lesson"
Act of Decluttering and Organizing	Creating experience	"I dreaded to start, though I have heard about it for so long. But the week that I finally put myself through it, I was just so happy. I feel like I've done something for myself and now I'm living a happier, less stressful life because of that."

and anti-consumption, consumers' daily life constitutes of constant negotiations where they establish boundaries and make choices. In line with the prior study, our results suggest that the object-subject relations seem to be an essential element in defining consumer happiness (Dion, Sabri & Guillard, 2014). The symbolic classification system serves as the primary anchor for consumers' decision in possession and dispossession, along with the organization of objects. In some cases, material consumption and the objects themselves do bring happiness, especially for those consumers who personify the objects and attach a hedonic value to items. However, this alone is not enough to sustain the object-subject relations. The things must be organized into the symbolic classification system. Only when an item has a place, it is considered serving a purpose and fulfilling its role in enriching the subjects' life. Consumers are often bounded by the system, and once the objects are in the system, the cause of happiness and unhappiness is attributed to the system rather than the objects themselves. This highlights the importance of maintaining the order of the system. Contrary to the previous belief that organizing can be daunting and tedious, the setup of the KonMari method creates an extraordinary experience that often results in a high level of happiness (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014). This suggests that the dynamic process of establishing a symbolic system is also critical to the consumer happiness. Other than gaining control and feeling relieved, a sudden shock in the object-subject relation also seems to generate new feelings and revitalize the relationships which move objects through the cycle of possession, origination, and dispossession. This process, to a larger extent, is beneficial for consumer well-being.

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