'Does it Spark Joy?': KonMari Decluttering in the UK.

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Masters by Research

Abstract

'Does it spark joy?': a question put forward by the Japanese tidying up expert Marie Kondo that has attracted attention in the West since her first book was published in English in 2014 (Kondo, 2014). The KonMari method was designed by Kondo to help others declutter and organise their homes by connecting with what brings them joy (Kondo, 2014). This research aims to identify the reasons underpinning KonMari's global popularity through ethnographic fieldwork and analysis of a similar rising trend in the West: minimalism. The anthropological theoretical frameworks of material culture, object biographies, and the economics of emotions will be used to contextualise human relationships with the material, and how Kondo's method may be changing these relationships. Nine female volunteers from KonMari *Facebook* groups were interviewed about their experiences of decluttering their homes, and what *'spark joy'* means to them. Three overarching themes of pride, freedom and peace were identified from the informants' relationships with their homes post-decluttering. Discussing the Japanese influences on the KonMari method, this research concludes by suggesting that where minimalism confines itself within strict boundaries, Kondo's method accepts the ambiguous instead. *'spark joy'* celebrates the emotional power of objects and aims to work alongside them, rather than dismissing them.

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Introduction

Marie Kondo, inventor of the KonMari method, is a Japanese tidying up expert who first appeared in Western media when her book *'The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up'* was translated into English in 2014 (Kondo, 2014). She then particularly rose to fame in 2019 with the release of her Los Angeles- based *Netlifx* show ('*Tidying Up*', 2019). The KonMari method instructs one firstly to discard anything in their home that does not *'spark joy',* and then secondly designate a specific home for each item remaining in the house (Kondo, 2014). Clothing must be put back in drawers folded in a specific way designed by Kondo, now known as 'KonMari folding' (Kondo, 2014). Before asking themselves if an item *'sparks joy',* participants are required to pile up all objects in the category they are sorting first (Kondo, 2014). This causes an element of shock, where one realises how much they own, and aids participants in rethinking where and how they store each item after sorting (Kondo, 2014).

Kondo's friendly and feminine demeanour, mixed with promises of bringing joy to your home, have become woven into Western popular culture (Biana, 2018; Ouellette, 2019). *'spark joy'* has entered the vernacular - appearing across media platforms and being applied in a wide variety of circumstances (Chayka, 2020). With a jovial approach to minimising one's possessions, she is considered a beacon of hope to those suffering under the weight of consumerism (Kondo, 2014; Biana, 2018; Ouellette, 2019). Not only does she provide a simple method to re-organise your life, she also promises that followers of her KonMari Method will hone their discernment and judgment skills, making what they truly want become apparent (Kondo, 2014). Kondo removes the value placed on material objects, and instead places the value on their ability to influence the emotions of the owner (Kondo, 2014, 2017). Her method of decluttering is designed around coaxing out emotional responses from possessions, so that a decision about whether to keep it can be made based not on function, but on feeling (Kondo, 2014, 2017).

I first came across KonMari in 2018, when a YouTuber I'm subscribed to did a series of videos where she filmed herself completing the method. I had discovered minimalism - an emerging trend amongst the Western middle class of owning as few possessions as possible - just the year before this, also through YouTube. It was my interest in minimalist YouTubers that led me on to KonMari.

Despite not particularly wanting to become a minimalist, I remember feeling sick as I sat and looked at the mountain of items I had packed up to move to university for my undergraduate degree. This, combined with a lifelong interest in Japanese culture, meant that Kondo's method immediately appealed to me. Interested, I looked further into who she was. I watched every YouTube video on her I could find, and promptly attempted her method. I did not get any further than the clothes category, however - mostly due to time constraints between university holidays. When Kondo's *Netflix* show was released in 2019, it felt as if the particular corner of the internet I was exploring was revealed to the rest of the world. Suddenly, all my friends knew about Marie Kondo too. Some of them began asking me to teach them how to fold their clothes in the KonMari way.

More and more, I observed a conflation between KonMari and minimalism in the media, and found myself explaining over and over again that Kondo was not a minimalist. The KonMari method is just as much centred around the purposeful nature of objects as minimalism. However, Kondo allows space for the emotional purposes of objects, as well as the practical; minimalism does not (Kondo, 2014; Sasaki, 2017). Minimalism attempts to depart from such emotional connections with objects; advising people to discard any impractical possessions, regardless of their sentimental value (Sasaki, 2017). To Kondo, there is no limit to the number of items one person should own - her only criterion is that every item *'sparks joy'* within the owner (Kondo, 2014, 2017). The KonMari method therefore acts as not just a practise in tidying the physical, but the emotional too (Diebel, 2020). She not only seeks to offer practical solutions to everyday life dealing with the material world, but introduces a new dialogue to our relationship with material culture (Svabo, 2019; Diebel, 2020). She laments the amounts of objects within homes across the world that have been forgotten, lying dormant without purpose or appreciation (Kondo, 2014).

I continued to be fascinated by Kondo's focus on joy for several years, and constantly wondered if her method really was *'sparking joy'* across the world or not. Thinking her fame would come and go, I was surprised at Kondo's persistent presence in the media and finally decided to investigate. This research aims to understand why people across the globe are feeling the need to downsize their possessions, and why the KonMari method is presenting itself as the best method to do so. It addresses the rise of minimalism and popularisation of decluttering advice, and explores their connection to current socio-economic and political climates. It seeks to understand the reasons behind Kondo's consistent popularity across the globe, and discover if she actually is achieving her goal of bringing joy and organisation to the world. Her effect on the Western perception of Japan is debated- questioning if KonMari

is reinforcing or remaking stereotypes of Japanese culture. Above all, the ethnographic fieldwork and analyses in this research seeks to learn: what exactly is *'spark joy'*? And what does it *mean*?

The fieldwork for this research was conducted using several KonMari-support *Facebook* groups. Members volunteered to be interviewed by me over *Zoom* by responding to a post I put out, asking for research participants. All those who volunteered were women. A total of nine volunteers were interviewed in depth about their experiences and thoughts on KonMari, and their stories form the basis of three of the chapters. All names have been changed to protect privacy. Though the KonMari *Facebook* groups included members across the globe, only members who live in the UK were recruited, in order to provide a focus for the demographic.

The use of *Facebook* groups for my fieldwork basis was inspired by Miller's (2011) books *'Tales from Facebook',* in which he applies anthropological analyses to the growing world of social media. Building on this, Miller and Sinanan (2017) co-edited *'Visualing Facebook: A Comparative Perspective'* in which they delved further into the use of photos to convey messages and meanings on *Facebook.* The KonMari *Facebook* groups used in my research were an interesting space in which the visual uses of *Facebook* and it's ability to create a sense of community and friendship- as discussed by Miller (2011; 2017). The *Facebook* groups not only acted as an opportunity for KonMari fans to find each other and encourage each other, but also as a platform in which followers of the method could share their struggles and wins with the method, often accompanied by photographic evidence of problematic or refreshed areas of their home. This provided a sense of reality to the KonMari method that the tidy promotional photos used on Marie Kondo's website and Instagram don't offer. These *Facebook* groups provided the starting point for my fieldwork, by granting me access to communities in which I could find informants to interview, as well as giving me a beginning sense of the typical demographic of KonMari followers, and the success of Kondo's instructions within the UK.

Two KonMari-certified assistants in the UK were also interviewed, as well as curators from the V&A and Brighton museums. Though not referenced in this research, these interviews contributed greatly to my understanding of the KonMari method, our relationships with objects and aesthetics, and the recurring conflation of Japanese culture and minimalism. I also spent two weeks completing the KonMari method on my possessions in order to provide auto-ethnographic data. Though not referenced in this research, completing the method prior to my fieldwork interviews greatly aided my conversations with my

informants, allowing me to relate to some of their experiences and analyse my own relationship with objects.

Spanning from September 2020 to September 2021, the entirety of this research was conducted during the Covid19 pandemic, and stretched across several national lockdowns. This meant that all fieldwork was conducted online, with interviews being held and recorded on *Zoom.* I found throughout this research that the situation of the pandemic actually aided my fieldwork. It meant that not only was I able to interview informants across the UK - unburdened by the need to travel - but informants were much more willing to volunteer. This is due to the fact that many people had grown comfortable with holding social interactions over *Zoom* during the first lockdown in May 2020. There was a serendipity to conducting research about the home via *Zoom*, as it meant that I naturally gained access to participants' homes despite not physically being there. This meant that I was not only able to see each informant interacting with their home without my presence disrupting them, but I was also often willingly taken on virtual tours without my even asking.

As discussed above, there was useful research surrounding the nature and use of *Facebook* groups that aided the very beginning of my research, however, as my research was conducted fairly early on in the Covid19 pandemic, it was difficult to locate academic work that used a methodology like mine that centred around online interviews. However, Howlett's (2021) analyses of the emerging use of *Zoom* as a platform for ethnographic fieldwork during the Covid19 pandemic acted as a useful starting point for me as I considered the benefits and limitations of online semi-structured interviews. Inspired by his discussion on if and how participant observation can still be achieved within the constraints of digital fieldwork, my research aimed to still have a sense of emersion into the lives and experiences of those who formed my ethnographic data base. It was therefore important that all my informants completed our zoom calls within their homes rather than at a remote location such as a café. This was to ensure that the informants felt as closely connected to their home environment as possible whilst I interviewed them about the changes that KonMari had made to that very space. Howlett (2021) brings to attention the flexibility that digital fieldwork offers the informant, who can receive a *Zoom* call wherever there is Wi-Fi available. Had my informants decided to take the *Zoom* call in a space away from their home, this would have prevented the serendipity I previously discussed due to the digital nature of my fieldwork.

Upon reflection, the key reason that my ethnographic data was successfully immersive despite the constraints of it's digital boundaries was due to the fact that it centred around the

home, a space which was dramatically brought into attention because of national lockdowns and working from home. The pandemic has greatly changed how the home is experienced. The roles of many homes have transitioned from a space of rest to a space of work. The KonMari method was implemented by many during the lockdowns, as people had little else to do but pay attention to the state of their home environment. This not only provided me with an additional wave of information and KonMari media coverage, but it meant that discussions on the role of the home were brought out from academic anthropology and into the public's eye.

This thesis begins with a review of literature, explaining the theoretical frameworks within anthropology that underpin this research. There are then three ethnographic chapters detailing the experiences of my informants. These chapters are organised thematically around a key question I asked in every interview: *'What does spark joy mean to you?'.* Informants were grouped by their shared themes of Pride, Freedom, and Peace in relation to *'spark joy'*, and each section begins with their personal description of *'spark joy'.* Finally, there is a concluding chapter discussing the appeal of the KonMari method and its connections to Japanese culture. This research covers many anthropological theories and concepts - there are, of course, many more which could not be referenced within the time limits. Overall, this research provides an insight into how Kondo's work is affecting middle class women within the UK, in the hope that this can act as an indicator for Kondo's wider, global impact. As we begin to emerge from our homes, recovering from the grief and pain of Covid19 we share together across the globe, is Kondo's method delivering on its promise of much needed joy?

Literature Review

Introduction

Over time, the discipline of anthropology has progressed through many evolutions of theoretical analysis in order to explain our position in the home, world, and the socio-economic webs that situate the two (Miller, 2010). To understand the global success of Marie Kondo, a number of these theories can be applied to offer a contextualised frame of analysis. This literature review begins with an overview of the building blocks of economic anthropology - including Marx, exchange and reciprocity, Materialism and Theory of The Home. It then discusses theories key to this research of commodity circulation and valuation, material culture, object biographies. From here, the rise of minimalism and popularity of KonMari is contextualised, with differences between the two discussed through concepts of the economy of emotion. Finally, the review is drawn to a close with an overview of the role of globalisation and Covid19 in the spread of ideas related to decluttering.

Economic Anthropology

At the root of economic anthropology are Marx's (1887) theories on means of production and capitalism (Hann, 2018). Influenced by Louis Henry Morgan's model of social evolution based on material concerns, Marx developed his theories surrounding how societies move from more primitive stages to more civilised (Hann, 2018). Analysing the hunter-gatherer societies throughout history, Marx used his model of primitive communism to describe the gift economies within these societies (Hann, 2018). He introduces his concept of commodity fetishism - the relationship between objects and society (Dant, 1996). He explains that a commodity exists in a dual state: the first being its physical existence and the second being its power over humans and their social relationships (Dant, 1996). The latter state causes the commodity to be fetishized (Dant, 1996).

Malinoswki's (1922) and Mauss' (1954) highly influential work on gift economies in non-industrialised societies demonstrate these concepts at play. In Malinowski's (1922) famous work on the Kula Ring, he describes the power that bracelets and necklaces have in maintaining peaceful social relations as they are circulated and exchanged across the Trobriand Islands. Mauss (1954) expanded on this by highlighting how this system of exchange bound people in obligations and societal expectations. Weiner (1992) also built on Malinoswki's Kula Ring to discuss the role of inalienable possessions. Attributing the concept to Mauss, Weiner explains that the social valuation of particular objects - such as the bracelets and necklaces exchanged in the Kula Ring - causes them to be indispensable and inseparable from the culture (Weiner, 1992). She connects this with social organisation, explaining that the exchange of inalienable possessions is used to simultaneously construct and defeat hierarchy, due to social powers at play within Mauss' theory of reciprocity (Weiner, 1992).

The obverse of this is Marx's theory of alienation - the estrangement of people from aspects of their human nature due to the commodification of their labour (Wendling, 2009). The capitalist mode of production in industrialised societies causes a separation between people and possession, as well as people and their sense of self (Wendling, 2009). Comparison between modern capitalist societies and non-industrialised egalitarian societies contextualises the changes in the human relationship with objects and economic exchange over time (Hann, 2018). Caused by the development of industrialised capitalist systems, this lost meaning of labour is attempted to be found in consumption through commodity fetishism (Hann, 2018).

Anthropology of The Home

In the later 1960s Marxist theory formed the basis for cultural materialism (Harris, 2001). This theory argues that the role of material realities - such as technological and economic factors - is highly influential in shaping societies (DeLanda, 2008). Cultural materialism in anthropology acted as a reaction to theories of cultural relativism and idealism being proposed at the time by Durkheim and Levi-Strauss at the time (Hann, 2018). These theories located culture change in human systems of thought rather than material conditions (Hann, 2018). As critiqued by Harris (2001), these approaches remove culture from its material base and place it solely within the minds of the people. Though this discourse formed apart from Malinowski and Mauss' theories on economy and circulation, it begins to develop a similar attention to the role of the exchange of and objects in building societies

(Peirano, 1998). From here evolved the investigation within anthropology into the influence of the material on society and culture (DeLanda, 2008).

The word ‘economy’ comes from the Greek word *‘oikos’* meaning ‘home’ (Hann, 2018). The interactions between the material and society are observed within the study of the home - a fundamental area of social anthropology (Grinker, 1996). Bourdieu (1970) recognised the power of the home as a space in which a microcosm is created. This microcosm acts as an indicator for how the inhabitants understand the wider world outside their home (Bourdieu, 1970). Bourdieu discusses the opposing social dynamics of the outside world and the hierarchical dynamic of the family within the home that are at play (Bourdieu, 1970). In their overlaps, this microcosm is formed (Bourdieu, 1970). In his analysis of the Berber home, Bourdieu (1970) explains that though the home appears as a feminized space in which only women may reside, whilst men must work and sleep outside, the true presider over the domain are the men. He writes: *‘The orientation of the house is fundamentally defined from the outside, from the point of view of men. It is an empire within an empire, but one which always remains subordinate.’* (Bourdieu, 1970, p.159). Despite its unique quality of existing as a door between worlds, in the case of the Berber home, the home is still formed under the social and political government of the outside (Bourdieu, 1970). Though it is a physically private space away from men, giving the illusion of power, it is still within the men’s domain (Bourdieu, 1970).

Practise and materiality are blended within the home, as the physical space enables and disables certain forms of social interaction (Grinker, 1996). The Berber home highlights the differences between inside and outside practise. These two forms of practise are affected by the differing social expectations within each realm, and separated by the physical constructs of our homes (Bourdieu, 1970).

Agency of Objects and Material Culture

In the 1980s, attention was drawn to the influence of the physical environment on societies and material culture as a theoretical framework emerged (Kilroy-Marac, 2016). Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986) introduced the concept that objects - like people - have ‘social lives’ and biographies. Kopytoff (1986) argues that commodification is a cultural process in which objects are marketed by a definition that is assigned to them. This reveals a moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions (Kopytoff, 1986). This moral economy shifts and changes, as the valuation and identity of an object as a commodity differs over time and across cultural groups (Kopytoff, 1986).

Appadurai (1986) analyses the process of the valuation of objects from the perspective of the commodities being exchanged. He explains: *'Economic exchange creates value. Value is embodied in commodities that are exchanged. Focusing on the things that are exchanged, rather than simply on the forms or functions of exchange, makes it possible to argue that what creates the link between exchange and value is politics, construed broadly.'* (Appadurai, 1986, p.3). This can again be seen within Malinowski's Kula Ring. Examining the biographies of the objects circulated around the islands exposes the wider socio-political relations they maintain.

Some theorists took Appadurai's (1986) empathetic approach to objects further by applying Actor Network Theory (ANT) and discussing the agency of objects (Sayes, 2014). Latour argued that nonhumans were the *'missing masses'* within anthropological theory (Latour, 1992, p.227). Drawing upon ANT, Latour proposed bringing forth the material from its resting place in the apparently neutral infrastructure of our everyday lives (Latour, 1992, p.254).

Miller's (2001, 2008, 2010) work on material culture theory aims to understand how societies are influenced by the physical environments, drawing them out of their resting place in this apparent neutral background to daily life. Inspired by Goffman's (1975) *'Frame analysis*' and *'The Sense of Order'* by Gombrich (1979), Miller (2010) named this concept '*The Humility of Things'*. Like a frame for a painting or the stage for a play, the material falls into the background as an unnoticed support structure within which our daily lives can occur (Goffman, 1975; Miller, 2010). Miller aims to scrutinize the material by unveiling them from this humility (Miller, 2010).

Contextualising the role of material culture with modern societies, Miller begins by deconstructing the perceived role of the material in non-industrialised societies (Miller, 2010). Using Hughes-Jones' (1992) research in the Amazon as an example, Miller criticizes his description of shock at the Amazonians' desire to acquire possessions, wishing them not to engage in consumerist culture (Miller, 2010, p.6). He explains that this model of the *'noble, unmaterialistic savage'* is untrue and unhelpful, as it only *'achieves an assumption of loss of purity'* (Miller, 2020, p.6). Drawing on Marxist theory, Miller details that when this model is compared with Western capitalist society around us, it *'makes us feel alienated and polluted simply for being who we are.'* (Miller, 2020, p.6). This application of Marx's concept of alienation to how consumerism, fuelled by capitalist structures, is affecting the relationships between people and the material world, indicates an emerging insecurity in

how much we are consuming. However, Miller exposes the fact that despite this apparent disdain of materialism, capitalism has caused consumerism to grow exponentially across the globe (Miller, 2001).

Consumerism and Identity in the Home

Miller draws our attention to how consumerism is acted out within the home, and how this affects the construction of identities within it (Miller, 2008, 2010). In a similar vein to Bourdieu's explanation of the role of the home in forming one's understanding of the outside society, Miller explains: *'It is the material culture within our homes that appears as both our appropriation of the larger world and often as the representation of that world within our private domain'* (Miller, 2001, p.4). The home is a space which greatly affects one's image of the self, as it draws a boundary between two worlds - the inside and outside, the private and the public (Miller, 2001).

In this chapter *'behind closed doors'* Miller (2001) writes: *'In industrialised societies, the home has become the place where people reflect upon and face up to themselves away from others. For this reason, it is likely that people are paying increasing attention to their relationship to their own home - its structure, decoration and furnishing'* (Miller, 2001, p.4). Porteous (1976) explains the importance of personalisation of the home in establishing a sense of territory and security by comparing middle-class homes within the UK and North America. He argues that like other animals, humans assert exclusive jurisdiction over physical space (Porteous, 1976). Our homes are places within which we become territorial, and to enter another's home requires actions that seek permission to enter - such as knocking on the door (Porteous, 1976). For a distinction of territory to be formed, those within the home must feel a sense of both physical and psychic security (Porteous, 1976). Psychic security it often achieved through personalisation of the home, affirming the identity of those within it (Porteous, 1976). Porteous writes: *'Identity and the individualism the home implies are valued because of the implication of freedom of self-determination.'* (Porteous, 1976, p.384).

Kilroy-Marac (2016) uses Bennett's (2004) theory of *'Thing power'* to discuss the influence of possessions in the home in the formation of self-image. Building on Marxist theory, materialism and the agency of objects, Bennett attempts to describe through *'Thing power'* the '*nonhumanity that flows around and through humans.'* (Bennett, 2004, p.347). Kilroy-Marac draws on this to examine what she describes as: *'the slip-sliding of the us and the it, and the enduring attachments that may grow out of such encounters, and the way*

people may see themselves in or as their stuff' (Kilroy-Marac, 2016, p.441). With her research on Personal Organisers (POs) in North America, Kilroy-Marac (2016) discusses how the sense of self can become intertwined with material possessions, and how POs have an almost anthropological desire to understand and untangle this constructing relationship.

Cooper (1974), in her overview of Western homes in North America and the UK, turned to psychological theory presented in Jung's (1964) work to better understand the construction of identity in the home in capitalist societies. She draws upon Jung's (1964) concept of the inner and outer self to explore the home as an extension of one's inner self. Delving further into the differences between the outside and practises, mediated by the physicality of the home as shown in Bourdieu's Berber home, Cooper (1974) discusses the supposed privacy a home creates. She argues that this supposed privacy allows the inner self to roam free within the house, unburdened by the societal standards outside (Cooper, 1974). This alters relationship with material culture, as the line between the self-perceived and the publicly-perceived is blurred (Cooper, 1974). She then applies this interplay between outside and inside practise to help understand home personalisation, arguing that the decor of the home must fit both with who the owner *feels* they are, and who they wish to *appear* as to others (Cooper, 1974).

Both Cooper (1974) and Clarke (2001) discuss that personalising one's home to reflect one's character is a particular luxury for the middle class - those who are financially stable enough to have ownership over where they live, and the disposable income to spend on decoration. Those who are renting their homes may feel in combat with them, unable to feel the true sense of privacy and security that this space behind closed doors supposedly promises (Cooper, 1974; Clarke, 2001). This in turn affects their sense of identity, as they are withheld from personalising their living space to be consonant with who they are (Cooper, 1974). Clarke (2001) notes home decorating toes the line between reality and fantasy. Home decorating has become an increasingly popular interest in Western media, leading to television shows and magazines dedicated to home renovations and 'make-overs' (Clarke, 2001). The home designs presented in the media create a rift between the 'ideal' and the 'actual' as they create an aspirational hunger for aesthetically pleasing homes (Clarke, 2001). This desire is then obstructed by the reality - the availability of resources that a home renovation requires: finance, time and labour (Clarke, 2001). As Clarke's (2001) ethnographic work in London homes reveals, those attempting to decorate homes live in a constant feeling of disconnect between what they hoped their home and lifestyle would look like (usually mirroring depictions of 'perfect, modern' homes in the media), and what the reality of their home life and aesthetic actually is. This re-emphasises Marx's theory of

alienation, caused by the capitalist field system's urge to consume. Those researched by Cooper (1974) and Clarke (2001) were at a point of disconnect between themselves and their houses due to an inescapable narrative in their society to be constantly reinventing the decor of their homes. Failure to keep up with this consumerist narrative leads to a constant feeling of dissatisfaction not only with their homes, but with their sense of identity, intertwined with the material environment of their house (Clarke, 2001).

Construction of Identity and Object Valuation in the Home

Personalisation of the home requires labour (Cox, 2013). Cox (2013) argues that renovating a home is not only a form of physical labour, but an act of caring labour also. Similar to how parental labour is required to address the needs of children and care for them as they develop, the time and resources poured into attending to the physical needs of a house is a form of caring labour directed at the material (Cox, 2013).

The provision of this labour is tightly intertwined with the social hierarchy and gender roles within the home (Cox, 2013). Cox (2013) examines the effect that hiring handymen to provide labour and skills for home renovation has on gender identities within New Zealand homes. He highlights that decision-making on home decor is an expected role for women in the household to perform, whilst men are looked to for the practical skill to make the design decisions a reality (Cox, 2013). When a handyman is hired to complete a practical task within the home, it is therefore seen as failure for the male member of the house, altering his identity both within his home and within a society that intertwines masculinity with DIY skills (Cox, 2013). Gender identity is re-negotiated when this form of caring labour is commodified (Cox, 2013). Exchange of labour that cares for the physical needs of the home is reciprocated with the creation and maintenance of femininity and masculinity within the domestic sphere (Cox, 2013).

The personalisation of the home centres around altering the objects within the home (Needham, 2015) This is both through the discarding of old objects and the introduction of new ones, and the reorganisation of objects already established with the home (Needham, 2015). This reorganisation of goods rests upon the valuation and exchange of objects (Miller, 2010).

Situated within the capitalist system, the valuation of objects begins with the construct of consumerism (Koytoff, 1986). The market decides the valuation of an object, commodifying it, and then presents it to society through advertising, urging for it to be

consumed (Kopytoff, 1986). Through this process, certain commodities become considered more and more valuable depending on the ease with which they can be obtained (Loewenstein, and Issacharoff, 1994). Appadurai applies his theory of the object biographies here, and explains that we perceive objects which '*resist our desire to possess them'* as valuable (Appadurai, 1986, p.3). This dynamic is held in place by Marx's description of class struggle (Dant, 1996). Those in the lower classes, who have less disposable income, are subjected to consumerist narratives that preach a higher valuation of an object as synonymous with a higher economic price assigned to it (Dant, 1996). Their lower income prevents them from purchasing and obtaining such commodities, causing them to appear even more valuable due to their resisting and unattainable nature (Appadurai, 1986; Dant, 1996).

The valuation of objects also affects the discourse of an object's biography when it is obtained and brought into the home (Richins, 1994). Richins (1994) analyses the position of objects in the home through the process of valuation performed on an object at both a personal and societal level. She explains: '*When a possession is first acquired, its public and private meanings may be reasonably consistent; but over time, private meanings are likely to shift because of personal experiences with the objec*t.' (Richins, 1994, p.518). The public meaning of an object also changes as fashions and trends conducted by consumerism alter the image of the object (Richins, 1994). This move towards a negative view of the object in outside society may cause the owner to feel discomfort at the object's presence in their home (Richins, 1994). Mauss and Weiner's theories on inalienable objects can also be applied here to understand the role of reciprocity and exchange in the private valuation of an object, controlled by a public interaction.

Miller (2010) connects the effects of the public consumerist valuation and marketing of objects to a potential crisis of material overwhelm within the home. He draws upon Simmel's (1978) analysis of the rise of the production of '*stuff'* in the nineteenth century to contextualise the issues Western consumption is causing today (Miller, 2010, p.61). Linking *'stuff'* to the contradictions of the metropolis - a space with more people yet a higher possibility of loneliness - Miller writes about Simmel's concerns: *'If we try to relate to too many things, but have no substantial relationship to any one of them, we can become largely indifferent to the world and to ourselves.'* (Miller, 2010, p.62). People gain a social relationship with objects through their valuation and exchange of them (Miller, 2010). Miller (2010) discusses that an overcrowding of objects affects and obscures the social value of possessions and exchanging objects, and therefore in turn obscures our understanding of ourselves and the world. Driven by capitalism, the economy of the West rides upon

consumerism. Consumerism has caused a rapid increase in production and advertisement; greatly expanding consumer options and heightening the pressure to buy more (Miller, 2010).

The overproduction of consumer goods has caused anxiety within buyers, as they struggle to make 'correct' purchases (Miller, 2010). Todd explains that advertising has become built around the aim of contributing to a sense of self or personal identity for the buyer; '*You are what you buy'* (Todd, 2012, p.48). The home is particularly targeted by this advertising message, due to its intrinsic link with identity (Miller, 2008). The pressure to purchase items which successfully express and represent the consumer caused buyers to question their own taste and preferences, blurring what they feel they *should* buy and what they'd *like* to buy (Miller, 2010). Todd (2012) highlights the rise in interior decorator and personal shopper roles, as people seek for the help of others to decide what to buy. This indicates a disconnect between human and material culture, as people struggle to feel a sense of control, ownership and preference for the items in their homes and on their bodies (Miller, 2010).

Minimalism and Consumerism

Minimalism - a lifestyle built around owning as few possessions as possible - has recently risen in popularity amongst middle-class millennials in the West (Chayka, 2020). In the struggle to find identity among the relentless consumer options, minimalists find their identity in their disregard for a consumer-driven lifestyle (Millburn and Nicodemus, 2014). Minimalists Millburn, Nicodemus (2014) and Sasaki (2017) present their "lifestyle of less" as the answer to the anxieties caused by the growing disconnect between owner and possessions. Social media posts have popularised aesthetically minimalist apartments and philosophies such as *'less things, more experiences'* and *'the more you throw away, the more purpose you find'* (Chayka, 2020, p.6). This indicates a change in values: exchange for material objects is devalued, whilst exchanges for social experiences increase in value (Miller, 2010). Minimalists advise spending one's disposable income on experiences that construct happy memories, rather than acquiring more material possessions (Millburn and Nicodemus, 2014; Sasaki, 2017). They explain that housing decor and clothing are not needed to discover and express one's identity (Millburn and Nicodemus, 2014; Sasaki, 2017). One's identity will naturally emerge in the physical space created by the throwing away of possessions, finally unbound from the pollution of the material (Millburn and Nicodemus, 2014; Sasaki, 2017).

There is a duality at the heart of minimalism (Chayka, 2020). One side of it appears as a visually appealing style: usually characterised by bright, white, clean apartments with a complete absence of clutter (Chayka, 2020). The other is a sad, bleak ache of dissatisfaction with society (Chayka, 2020). The majority of minimalists admit that it was a personal crisis that caused them to turn to this lifestyle of less (Millburn and Nicodemus, 2014; Sasaki, 2017). Unhappy with themselves, their jobs, their lives, their homes and their clothes, Sasaki (2017), Millburn and Nicodemus (2014) sought enlightenment in minimalism. Chayka (2020) analysed the demographic of Western minimalists and created a hypothesis that minimalism is a natural reaction to the experience of growing up in the 2000s, rather than a choice. Real-estate prices have risen exponentially, and fewer people are finding themselves in secure financial positions as more and more turn to full time freelance work (Chayka, 2020). The possibilities for Millennials and Generation Zs to secure a property and a stable, sufficient income are dwindling (Dickerson, 2015). This has led to these generations already preparing for a life of less - whether consciously or not (Dickerson, 2015). This fear can be particularly observed in the growing market for Tiny Houses: compact and often mobile homes fitted with shrewd architecture and design to allow for comfortable living in such a small area (Dickerson, 2015). The popularity of tiny homes indicates the options younger generations have: to own a home despite its small size, or to forever rent one's home and continually experience the alienation that both Cooper's (1974) and Clarke's (2001) research described. Millennials and Generation Z have, in reaction to the current economic climate, devalued notions of owning a home and 'settling down' in order to comfort them as the accessibility of this life fades.

Kirmayer's (2002) research on the use of antidepressants in Japan discusses the formation of mental health problems. He analyses the formation of these problems though addressing the: *'Varieties of depressive experience that unfolded within the surrounding specific cultural worlds and value systems, and the narrative construction of the self'* (Kirmayer, 2002, p.295). This builds upon the concept of alienation caused by a surrounding capitalist structure, and dives deeper into its effects on construction of the self and quality of life (Kirmayer, 2002). Kirmayer presents his theory of *'the good life',* describing an observed marketing strategy of capitalist societies: '*a global monoculture of happiness in which we are all enjoined to work to achieve the good life, which is understood to reside in being pain-free and completely comfortable.'* (Kirmayer, 2002, p.316). He further explains *'the good life'* as being: *'ready and able to acquire and consume the greatest quantity and variety of the newest goods and fashions'* (Kirmayer, 2002, p.316). Kilroy-Marac (2016) connects this theory to the heart of minimalism, by explaining that minimalists retell the narrative of *'the good life'* by instead constructing happiness *'not in terms of one's ability to accumulate but to*

resist - and even reject - accumulation and keep order.' (Kilroy-Marac, 2016, p.447). Referring to Cwerner and Metcalfe's (2003) work on storage in contemporary British homes, Kilroy-Marac (2016) discusses minimalism's identification of the clutter as a contributing factor to poor mental health, and therefore an obstacle to achieving *'the good life'* (Millburn and Nicodemus, 2014). Here, she exposes an image of virtue associated with minimalism, similar to Miller's (2010) critiqued perception of the Amazonian man as noble and virtuous due his lack of excessive material possession. Minimalism not only promotes itself as a new form of *'good life'* due to its supposed mental and emotional benefits, but carries a narcissistic sense of virtue associated with its focus on social pursuits rather than the unsustainable materialistic pursuits (Kilroy-Marac, 2016).

Though presenting itself as anti-consumerist, Kilroy-Marac identifies that minimalism is in fact a turn to *'inconspicuous consumption'* (Kilroy-Marac, 2016, p.317). She defines this as: '*a turn toward spending money on experiences, services, and personal enrichment rather than material goods'* (Kilroy-Marac, 2016, p.317). Minimalism celebrates decoupling consumerism from Kirmayer's *'good life',* but Kilroy-Marac argues that consumption, in actuality, still remains central to minimalism (Kirmayer, 2002; Kilroy-Marac, 2016); the direction of consumption has merely shifted from the acquiring of the material to the acquiring of social connectivity. While apparently rejecting consumerism, minimalism actually simply redirects it.

Here we can begin to analyse Marie Kondo's approach in contrast to minimalisms. Does she hide behind a similar façade in her method and philosophies? How does her method seek to address problems of living in a consumerist society? Does KonMari carry the same sense of disgust towards the material as minimalism? The set of anthropological concepts discussed above, can be applied to aid the process of analysing Kondo's work.

The Economies of the KonMari Method

Marie Kondo has often been conflated with minimalism in Western media (Chayka, 2020). This research will identify and discuss the different aspects and causes of this conflation throughout; however, I begin here by situating KonMari's position within consumerism using the theories discussed. This can be used to contrast Kondo's position with minimalism.

Kondo creates no facade of appearing anti-consumerist, as minimalism does. She instead aims to work within the capitalist system, turning her attention to the circulation of the material rather than the rejection of it (Kondo, 2014). Her books detail advice on managing a consumerist life-style, so that one may continue to shop and acquire possessions whilst maintaining a healthy and sustainable cycle of *'stuff'* (Kondo, 2014). Recognising that clutter in the home is caused by a breakdown in the circulation of possessions, Kondo seeks to address the misalignment of object use and purpose (Kondo, 2014). This can be particularly seen in her advice on tidying paper within the home: *'Be aware of papers that are left in your 'needs attention' box- they mean that you have left things undone in your life that require your attention'* (Kondo, 2014, p.115).

Kondo's attention to correcting the circulation of objects in the home addresses Simmel's (1978) concern around material overcrowding. This begins to demonstrate how application of anthropological theory can contribute an understanding of the values underpinning Kondo's method. Observing the alienation between person and home in industrialised societies, KonMari attempts to reconnect people and their sense of identity through encouraging them to look to their physical environment; this echoes Latour's desire to address anthropology's lack of attention to the nonhuman.

The KonMari method also addresses the emotional impact of our possessions, which minimalism also attempts to solve (Kondo, 2014; Sasaki, 2017). Dealing with Cwerner and Metcalfe's (2003) presented problem of clutter and disorder in the home as enablers for poor mental health, Kondo takes a more nuanced and mature approach to addressing this issue. Minimalism presents the discarding of all items bar the absolutely necessary as the answer to emotional distress and toil within the home (Millburn and Nicodemus, 2014). As noted by those who have attempted to become minimalists, this is erroneously presented as a 'quick-fix' - the process of disposing of a house full of possessions is rarely a 'quick' process at all (Chayka, 2020). Kondo instead tackles Cwerner and Metcalfe's (2003) recognition of the element of disorder within the material environment of the home (Kondo, 2014). Her method is two-fold in approach: (i) to remove excess clutter through the use of *'spark joy',* (ii) to maintain the created absence of clutter through systematically assigning 'homes' for each object within the home (Kondo, 2014).

Unlike minimalism, Kondo allows space for the emotional purposes of objects, as well as the practical (Kondo, 2014; Sasaki, 2017). To Kondo, there is no limit to the number of items one person should own - her only criterion is that every item *'Sparks Joy'* within the owner (Kondo, 2014; 2017). Minimalism attempts to depart from such emotional connections

with objects, advising people to discard any impractical possessions, regardless of their sentimental value (Sasaki, 2017). The KonMari method therefore acts as a practise in ordering not just the physical, but the emotional too (Diebel, 2020). She seeks not only to offer practical solutions to everyday life dealing with the material world, but introduces a new dialogue to our relationship with material culture by working alongside the social influences of our possessions, (Svabo, 2019; Diebel, 2020).

The KonMari Method in the Domestic Sphere

Kondo's first book opens with a theory that few people have been properly taught how to tidy; it is something one is assumed to understand through basic common sense (Kondo, 2014). Taking this theory - formed through her own observations of people's tidying habits - Kondo takes up a role similar to that of a Home Economics teacher, with the mission of imparting proper methods to look after a home and all the objects within it (Kondo, 2017). Not only must objects that don't *'spark joy'* be discarded, but jobs or relationships that also do not *'spark joy'* must be terminated (Kondo, 2014; 2017). She provides financial advice for readers, encouraging them to spend less money on buying material possessions and putting their money towards better objectives with more intention (Kondo and Sonenshein, 2020).

The effects of the KonMari Method on decision-making in the home reorders the domestic sphere (Biana, 2018). Delving deeper than the typical cleaning advice from a home economics teacher, Kondo also addresses the emotional economics of the home (Biana, 2018; Ouellette, 2019). As Kondo's method centres around reorganisation, it is no surprise that practising the process causes a reorganization of the identities within the home also (Biana, 2018). Ouellette (2019) draws upon feminist theory to discuss the effects the KonMari method has had on the social expectations of women within the home. She criticises Kondo for enforcing women to engage with *'Compulsory happiness'* as they perform domestic jobs, (Ouellette, 2019, p.536). Ouellette's (2019) research describes several married couples who have had many fights after the wife has attempted to follow the KonMari method but has been belittled or unsupported by her husband in the process. The wife then feels stuck, suddenly aware of the clutter around her, but unable to persuade other family members to join her *'Tidying festival'* (Ouellette, 2019). Here, high hopes of a life filled with only that which *'Sparks Joy'* are dashed in a short amount of time between reading Kondo's books, and attempting the KonMari Method (Ouellette, 2019). This is in great contrast to Kondo's *Netflix* show, in which every family is unanimous in their eagerness to complete the KonMari process, and report nothing but an overwhelming sense of *'spark joy'* at the end of each episode ('*Tidying Up'*, 2019). Deconstructing the appeal of the KonMari

method, Ouellette (2019) highlights its attractiveness for women who desire to conform to societal gender expectations that they are responsible for the cleanliness and order of the home. Promising the exchange of labour for *'spark joy',* women look to Kondo for not only a transformation of their home, but a transformation of their domestic identities as wives and mothers (Ouellette, 2019). They understand the positive reception they would gain from society if they achieved an organised and joyful home, and so take up the method with eagerness (Ouellette, 2019). This again brings forth the complex relationship between society, identity and the home: indicating in this case a feeling of insecurity among women in relation to their home-making responsibilities. For Ouellette (2019), it is this insecurity that has caused Kondo's popularity amongst Western women.

The Aesthetics in The KonMari Method

The KonMari Method's ability to address one's identity echoes Shinto teachings (Deibel, 2020). Deibel (2020) unpacks the influence of Shintosim on Kondo's work: '*The Shinto religion consists of "reverential service to the dead, the gratitude of the present to the past, and the conduct of the individual in relation to the entire household". While the ancestral component does not apply to her teachings, the other two interweave themselves into much of her philosophy.'* (Deibel, 2020, p.2). She explains that the KonMari Method both centres around gratitude and concentrates on a present-focused mindset (Deibel, 2020). This is demonstrated when Kondo writes, in relation to discarding possessions from past romantic partners: '*It is not our memories but the person we have become because of those past experiences'* and *'the space in which we live should be for the person we are becoming now, not for the person we were in the past"* (Kondo, 2014, p.140-141).

Kondo's pursuit of reorganisation in the home echoes a similar attention to the position and purpose of objects shown in Japanese Tea Ceremonies (Keene, 1969; Cox, 2003; Richie, 2007). Counted as one of the classical Japanese arts of refinement, Japanese tea ceremonies are taught to young women as a practise of hospitality (Sadler, 2011; Sakuae and Reid, 2012). They involve a very particular care and attention to each item and specific action or motion used to make tea (Cox, 2003; Sakuae and Reid, 2012). Kondo's method centres around care for objects and careful intention of their placement in the home, as can be observed in her lesser-known companion rule to the *'spark joy'* rule, which is that a 'resting place' for each object in the house must be identified once the discarding phase is complete (Kondo, 2014). In order to keep one's home from becoming cluttered ever again, this rule of returning everything to its designated 'home' once finished with, must be followed with discipline (Kondo, 2014; Kondo, 2017). The huts in which Japanese tea ceremonies are

performed have inspired many architects, designers, and artists over time; they are perhaps the pinnacle of the pre-modern and minimal Japanese aesthetic (Keene, 1969; Chayka, 2020).

Kondo's method, however, is inspired not just by the striking visual appearance of the huts but also by the practice and discipline of the ceremonies within it (Deibel, 2020). Like any hostess of a tea ceremony, Kondo invites others to participate in movements and actions filled with intention, and in doing so she takes care to draw special attention to the objects being used in the practice. Kondo encourages followers of her method to spend time with their possessions, to treat them with respect and cease taking them for granted (Sakuae and Reid, 2012; Kondo, 2014). Similar to the grandeur of a tea ceremony, Kondo also addresses her method as a ceremony, referring to it as a *'Tidying Festival'* throughout her books and recommending readers dress up for tidying their home as if they were celebrating a special event (Kondo, 2014). It is only through treating the process of decluttering the house as a festival that objects can be properly recognised and respected, and a true experience of *'Sparking Joy'* can be achieved, encouraged by the jovial setting (Kondo, 2017). This reflects Kondo's similarity with material culture theory on objects as agents, as her creation of the *'Tidying festival'* shows a reconsidered approach of how one should approach objects; conscious that the approach matters in how the object is dealt with.

Conclusion

The influences of Japanese culture on the KonMari method will continue to be identified and discussed throughout this research, in an aim to discover the different ways in which these practises are translated and adopted across the world. This will allow further examination of the reasons for Kondo's global success, as well as debating the unfolding discourse around its effectiveness.

Similar to the global success of other products from Japan such as *Hello Kitty* and *Pokemon,* KonMari's image and branding can be seen appearing in many places (Yano, 2013; Allison, 2016). One online search of the hashtags *'#sparkjoy'* and '*#konmari'* conjures up thousands of images of neatly folded clothes in drawers and smartly-arranged shelving displays (Chayka, 2020). Social media has connected Kondo fans across the globe, leading to the formation of communities such as the KonMari support *Facebook* groups used for the fieldwork of this research (Ouellette, 2019).

This enthusiasm across the world for KonMari indicates a resonance with what her method offers. Drawing upon the theory discussed above, this resonance with Kondo's promises of achieving a tidy and joyful home can be contextualised within the experiences of industrialized capitalist societies. For people feeling overwhelmed by consumerism and alienated from the material, Kondo's method is an attempt to restore circulation and emotional balance, whilst continuing to subsist within the global reality of consumer culture.

Kondo also attends to emotional circulation. In contrast to minimalists who seek to erase their past by erasing their possessions, Kondo praises the ability of objects to reveal one's past, just as Miller (2008) notes that house decor in London maps the home owner's story. Her infectious enthusiasm and promise of a joyful life is hard to resist for those across the world who simultaneously enjoy their material possessions yet feel overwhelmed by the clutter they cause (Svabo, 2019).

'Spark joy' acts as a glimmer of hope for an alienated world recently afflicted yet also unified by the covid19 pandemic. In a time when people's relationship with the home has been altered so drastically, Kondo's promise of magic and joy seems needed more than ever.

Of the various concepts discussed within this literature review, Daniel Miller's theories surrounding *'Stuff'* will be drawn upon the most. I have found his description and analyses of human relationships with *'Stuff'* to be the most relevant lens to apply to my ethnographic fieldwork, as it best captures the ability for one's possessions to- at times- feel overwhelming and/or meaningless. Miller's identification of the *'humility of things'* pinpoints an issue Kondo has noticed and seeks to address with her method. Fighting against the power objects have to fade into one's everyday background unnoticed, Marie Kondo calls people to reconnect with their possessions and notice their daily impact once more. Miller's use of the word *'Stuff'* when describing material culture lends itself well to the concept of possessions becoming *'clutter'* within the home. His observation of overconsumption of the material leading to weaker relationships between owner and object is an issue that underpins Kondo's concerns for the modern home. As a home is filled with more and more possessions, the unique qualities of each object may be dulled or lost within a sea *'stuff'* in every room. Miller's theoretical analyses of the changes that mindless overconsumption due to capitalist drives have caused to everyday understandings of the material objects we choose to have around us is a relevant explanation for the need for Kondo's method in the West today. Miller documents anxieties of low-to-middle class Londoners in relationship to their home and

fashion aesthetics choices, and their influence on public perceptions of their character and status (Miller, 2010). Very similar anxieties are documented by Kondo in her first books, describing differing reasons that her clients in Japan requested Kondo's help (Kondo, 2014). In these descriptions, where Kondo uses the word *'clutter',* Miller uses the word *'stuff'*. Throughout the analyses of my ethnographic fieldwork, other discussed theories from this review shall be included, however Miller's material culture theory of *'stuff'* shall be relied upon the most consistently, aiding and furthering my analyses of why my informants adopted the KonMari method, and why Kondo's method did indeed help them.

Chapter One:

A Confidence in the Home: Pride and *'Spark'* Joy.

It kinda just makes me feel… fluffy. I don't know how to describe it... it just makes me feel happy to wear it or have it in my wardrobe. There are some clothes that

I'm just really happy to have and feel really excited to have- no matter how long I've had it for. I think it means excitement… It's like 'Wow! Wow!'

Mei

Sitting in a clean, bright room on my screen on *Zoom* was Mei, a student nurse and fan of Marie Kondo. Mei's enthusiasm for the KonMari method began with Kondo herself. When Kondo's Netflix show was released at the beginning of 2019, Mei was overjoyed to see a woman of her ethnicity being praised in Western media. As a fan of Kondo ever since she came across her on Youtube, Mei watched with excitement as Kondo gained popularity and shared pieces of her own culture with the rest of the world. Already a naturally tidy person, Mei was immediately inspired by Kondo's innovative folding methods and quickly emptied her wardrobe, decluttered it and then re-folded all her items alongside the Youtube video tutorials.

Mei was one of the three interviewees that had only watched the *Netflix* show rather than reading any of Kondo's books. She talked of Kondo with admiration:

I just find her adorable. She's just so cute, she's like this really small woman and she's just conquering the world and it's really amazing. I find that really impressive.

Having spent her early years in Japan, Mei found elements of the KonMari method familiar. Kondo's instruction to thank objects before disposing of them echoed teachings Mei learnt from her Japanese parents and grandparents:

I remember that my parents used to say those kinds of things to me as well, like when you're getting rid of things to feel appreciative of what they've done for you, so I've always had that mindset.

Mei explained that instead of throwing things away, she tries to be gentle and respectful in how she discards them. Though Mei- like nearly all the research participants- admitted that she did not verbally thank her items when discarding them, her understanding of the importance of recognition and gratitude towards an item echoed Kondo's books in a way that those who had read the books perhaps missed. This, of course, is most likely because Kondo's philosophies were not new concepts for Mei to understand.

Mei's description of what *'spark joy'* meant to her was also the closest answer to Kondo's explanation. In the debut of her Netflix TV series, Kondo explains that: *"spark joy is like when you hold a puppy…. It is a heart flutter… it is like 'ching!"* (*'Tidying Up: Tidying with Toddlers', 2019,* 18:33). In her first book Kondo writes in depth that '*spark joy*' is an instant

bodily reaction to an object, usually experienced whilst holding the item (Kondo, 2014). To Mei, *'spark joy'* became the name for a *'fluffy'* and *'excited'* feeling that she began to identify within herself as she held objects that she wanted to keep.

The Translation of Spark Joy:

The catchphrase *'spark joy'* proceeds Marie Kondo in fame. It entered into Western vernacular ever since *'The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up'* was translated into English in 2014 (Chayka, 2020). Cathy Hirano, who translated Kondo's first book into English, debated for a long time how to accurately translate the meaning and feeling behind the Japanese phrase '*Tokimeku'* used by Kondo (Richardson, 2019). *'Tokimeku'* can be literally translated as *'to flutter', 'to throb', 'to beat fast'* as it describes the rush one feels in their heart when excited (Austrew, 2019). Hirano explained there were several English versions of this that could be used such as: *'bring pleasure','speak to your heart', 'brighten your world', 'give you a thrill',* and *'make you happy'*, however in the end she felt that *'spark joy'* best encapsulated what Kondo describes (Austrew, 2019; Richardson, 2019).

Kondo's excitable explanation of *'spark joy'* is best encapsulated in the word *'spark'* rather than *'joy'* (Richardson, 2019). The use of *'joy'* in this phrase may therefore be misleading, as this word is not necessarily connected in British culture with the same experience of a rush of emotion that Kondo is describing. *'Joy'* is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as *'A great sense of happiness and satisfaction',* suggesting that the experience of joy is not necessarily seen as a quick *'flutter'* to Britons, but a deeper sense of pleasure (Stevenson, 2010).

As I interviewed Mei on her experiences of following the KonMari method, she was reflective on what *'spark joy'* had taught her. Through mixing *'spark joy'* with her parents' teachings, Mei nurtured her sense of gratitude and found that this not only cultivated a deeper connection with her items, but also her own energy levels:

> *I've found myself becoming more understanding of myself. I've found it very easy to accept… not so good things. For example when I didn't feel very well a few days ago I didn't feel guilty, I felt happy to let myself have a day off… to do what Sparks Joy for me.*

'Spark joy' taught Mei to be grateful of her abilities and aware of her limits, to be understanding of herself. She explained to me that she was proud of herself for learning when she needed to rest and when she was able to work.

The points at which Mei was most animated during our interview was when talking about Marie Kondo herself. For Mei, the initial moment of *'spark joy'* began from Kondo's presence in the media as a role model for young Japanese women. When asked if she was drawn to the KonMari method because Kondo is Japanese, Mei immediately agreed:

Yeah, yes. It was really interesting because you don't really see a lot of Eastern stuff- there's Kpop- but you don't see a lot of stuff in the Western market so I was really surprised when she first became popular. It was really fun to see her representing Japan, or just have someone who is famous from Japan in the Western market.

The KonMari method brought out a pride within Mei for her nationality. She showed her delight that those in the West were finally learning more about the country that she grew up in. For Mei, it was not just the KonMari Method that taught her *'spark joy',* but Kondo's character too.

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I just looked at her and thought 'oh you just look gorgeous and what you're wearing- it's so perfect'. And that's when I went 'OH!' Oh I've got it! That's what spark joy is!'. She just looked so beautiful. And I think it was the fact that she loved them as well. I loved it and she was so happy and so beautiful.

Ellie

Confused at who the strange lady was at the other end of the screen, Ellie's toddler took up most of my laptop screen as she leaned in close to Ellie's phone to size me up. Bewildered at who I was and why her mum was talking to me, Ellie's daughter continued to play in the background as I talked with Ellie about KonMari. As she was between jobs due to covid19, young mother Ellie had used her free time during the national lockdown to complete the KonMari process. She explained to me throughout our conversation how Kondo's books had helped her at crucial time in her life.

Suddenly overwhelmed by the volume of *stuff* in her house, Ellie originally turned to minimalism to help her declutter. However, after downloading some ebooks and joining some minimalist facebook groups, Ellie quickly deduced that minimalism would not work for

her- especially as a mum of a toddler. She recounted her excitement of when she came across the KonMari method and felt that it was the perfect fit for her life:

I downloaded some books about minimalism- I actually still haven't read them. I started one but just couldn't connect with it. Then my dad gave me 'spark joy' and literally when reading the opening bit I thought: 'This is it! This is the in-between minimalism and life that I need!

Ellie fell in love with the lack of aesthetic that the KonMari method had. As a young mother surrounded by garishly-coloured childrens toys, she constantly struggled to connect with the austere home aesthetic that minimalism books came with. She knew that whilst her child was growing up, her home would never be able to look as pristine and blank as the covers of these books. It was therefore a relief for Ellie to read Kondo's books which contained no minimalist images, only written descriptions on tidying. Kondo's words gave Ellie a freedom to reduce her possessions without subjecting herself to matching the provided aesthetic and specific numbers of items that the minimalist books recommended. By the time I spoke to her, Ellie was no longer frustrated at herself for not achieving a minimalist home, but was proud of herself for finding and following the KonMari method:

No I don't have a minimalist house- nobody would walk into my house and say that I was a minimalist. But everything I have here, I love. For example I don't have much cutlery which is quite minimalist, but I do own four coats which is not minimalist at all! But I love them all.

The use of *'spark joy'* in the KonMari method provided a needed angle for Ellie to approach decluttering her home. Fully aware of the chaos that a young child and all their possessions can bring, Ellie was able to put right the negative feelings she had towards her house in a way that celebrated the nature and aesthetic of children's toys and clothing.

Whilst following the method, Ellie was in the rare situation where she had to declutter another's items too. After swiftly sorting her clothes, Ellie attempted to declutter her toddler's clothes. It was at this point that she realised she had not yet grasped the meaning of *'spark joy'*:

> *But when I went through my toddler's clothes I- well I took them all out, started to go through them and then shoved them back. And I did that for about two days, I just couldn't really get what I was supposed to do with them.*

After a few days of confusion, she suddenly had a moment of revelation. When I asked Ellie what *'spark joy'* meant to her, she described this pivotal moment to me- morning she saw her daughter wearing a new set of unicorn pyjamas. Seeing her daughter so happy in her new outfit, inspired *'spark joy'* within Ellie.

'Spark Joy' and a Moment of Revelation:

Perhaps lost in translation between Japanese to English, is the sense of revelation that understanding *'spark joy'* brings. Many KonMari followers, like Mei, ended up understanding *'spark joy'* through developing a relationship of gratitude with their objects- despite the original phrase *'Tokimeku'* bearing no relation to gratitude (Kondo, 2014). Ellie's sudden moment of understanding *'spark soy'* reflects Kondo's intended experience of *'Tokimeku'.* The sense of revelation in *'spark joy'* can be likened to the word *'Epiphany'* used in classic European literature (Perlis, 1980; Palls, 1984; Tigges, 1999;).

In her second book, Kondo describes the *'sparkle'* that objects can emit, and how that '*sparkle'* can fill us with a rush of joy (Kondo, 2017). Virginia Woolf explored epiphany: a sudden moment where something within the self *'clicks'* or '*falls into place'* and suddenly surrounding ordinary objects are really *seen* (Palls, 1984; Tigges, 1999). This concept recognises the power material objects hold in enabling revelation (Perlis, 1980; Tigges, 1999). Kondo harnesses this power in her method, using it to change the relationship with the material.

Ellie's *'spark joy'* epiphany changed how she went about the rest of her KonMari journey, and even the rest of her life. With a sense of pride in herself, she told me:

I think I have less tolerance for people's bullshit honestly. Not that I don't have empathy, but it's like I'm a bit like 'yeah whatever'.

Such a strong realisation of what brought Ellie joy made her suddenly aware of everything that did not bring her joy. Like Mei, Ellie became more understanding of what she did and did not want to do in everyday life. She now uses this realisation to shut down conversations with others that she will be hurtful or unhelpful.

It was evident to me how proud Ellie was of herself and her house since completing the KonMari journey. One of the joys of conducting my research via online interviews was the amount that people showed me around their house. Ellie turned her camera to show me the beautiful displays of children's toys she had made on her shelves with pride. Via *Zoom*, I

saw Ellie interacting with her home in such a comfortable and *normal* manner, that I doubt I would have witnessed had I been physically present in the house with her. By only being present virtually, I little disrupted the rhythm of Ellie's life at home with her daughter, and instead I was invited to join in playful interactions with her toddler and look at Ellie's newly tidy house as if I were a friend and not a stranger.

Ellie explained that she felt Kondo's *Netflix* show did not explain the method in enough depth, however she did enjoy seeing Kondo's caring nature on screen. She appreciated that Kondo never shamed the clients, but accepted them:

She was cute but also very tough. The one bit that really stuck with me when I think of her was the bit with the lady whose husband had died and she wanted to go through his clothes and Marie said 'oh no sentimental items come last' but then it dawned on her and she just thought 'no you're right you need to do this now and we're going to change everything for you now'. I just found that really beautiful how Kondo changed it all for her- that changing everything you do, flipping it all upside down, I had so much respect for that.

This moment in the show had impacted many people I interviewed. The moment showed Kondo putting the clients before her method, trusting their needs more than the order of the process she had designed. *'spark joy'* is designed to be a tool to help people develop their intuition, and it encouraged many KonMari followers that Kondo puts trust in the intuition of her clients, even before they have completed their *'Tidying Festival'.*

Now confident in her home and herself, Ellie interacts with the possessions in her house with the same excitement and love that her toddler does with a new toy. Ellie shops differently and only buys what she knows *'sparks joy'*. For Ellie, that moment of epiphany has led to a life that sparks nearly just as much joy as her daughter.

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Oohh quite tricky... I just think it's something that you feel... pride in and you feel comfort from... I think that's really lovely. If you feel pride and comfort from most of your clothes or your objects... that's lovely. Or if it's something that's essential to you too. But that's quite like either everything is essential or it brings you joy which is really nice.

Sally

Occasional clanging noises off camera, made by Sally's mum cooking, travelled all the way from Sally's home in Dorset to mine across *Zoom.* Home from university, Sally sat at her kitchen table chatting to me about her experiences of the KonMari method, whilst her mum chimed in with her own thoughts.

Sally, like Mei, was one of the three research participants that had not read Marie Kondo's books; only watched her Netflix TV show. Already a fan of organisational and interior shows, Sally binged Kondo's show and was swiftly inspired to declutter her possessions. She explained to me how she felt that Kondo's show was unique:

You know there's a lot of decluttering shows, but I think this one very much drove you to think about how much stuff you own and what things you really do need and don't.

Having recently moved house at the time, watching Kondo's Netflix show was the second time Sally was confronted with the number of possessions she owned:

We'd just moved house and I was just desperate to get rid of some of my stuff, but I didn't know how to start- and I think- what was really good about that was that I just knew that I didn't need all of these clothes.

Sally had questioned herself as she packed up items of clothing from when she was a child and transported them to her new family home. Why did she still own all this clothing? Watching the *Netflix* show in combination with moving house caused a revelation for Sally that she had never properly sorted through her possessions as an adult.

There was certainly a large amount of decluttering that Sally could easily have done by simply throwing away items from her younger years that she no longer needed, however the KonMari method pushed Sally further. Instead of simply asking herself if an item was still in use, Sally decluttered using *'spark joy'*. This question led Sally to not just discarding old clothing, but refining her fashion preferences:

It helped me to step outside of my comfort zone- because I ended up throwing away some of my things that were more basic that I didn't love that much. And so then I started wearing more nice tops that I had because I loved them, and it actually made me be more fashionable or be more adventurous which was nice.

When she began her *'tidying festival'*, Sally was unaware of just how much utilising *'spark joy'* would change her relationship with her possessions and her perception of herself. *'spark joy'* led Sally to become more in touch with not only what *'made her happy'* but what

she felt pride in. Her personal understanding of what *'spark joy'* means became centred around if she felt a sense of pride towards that object.

Forgotten Objects and Guilt:

Kondo explains that she has come to understand with certainty that *'all the things you own share the desire to be of use to you'* (Kondo, 2014, p.222). She believes that the destiny that led one object to come into someone's life is *'just as precious and sacred as the destiny that connected us with the people in our lives'* (Kondo, 2014, p.222). In her books, Kondo recalls that often once she has explained this concept to her clients, they begin to feel guilty at neglecting so many of their items, as if they had been neglecting friends (Kondo, 2014).

Though she did not see her objects as friends, Sally did experience this feeling of guilt over how many items she had forgotten she owned, and how many objects she discarded that were in good condition.

I think now with the sustainability world, you do feel guilty about throwing things away, especially if they are still good quality- like if it doesn't have any holes in you think you should wear it until it's worn out then. But actually, you're not wearing the piece of clothing anyway, it's just collecting dust in your house.

Sally felt that *'spark joy'* was a good rule to help herself let go of items that she knew she did not like, yet kept out of guilt. This then changed her perspective on her consumer habits, as she did not want to experience that guilt of waste again:

I learnt that you don't need to buy as much stuff to have a nice wardrobe. I haven't really bought anything in the past two years. If I have bought something new, I've loved it and worn it to death and I think that's a much more sustainable way to live your life.

Sally developed a sense of empathy with the planet and its resources during decluttering. The KonMari method led her to think about how much stuff she really needed, as well as creating a deeper sense of enjoyment between herself and what she decided to keep.

> *It makes such a big difference, you can see all of your clothes and you can actually wear what you like wearing- I remember that summer when I first did it- every single outfit I put on I really liked. That's never happened before.*

Sally's guilt over her unused and discarded possessions soon melted into accomplished feelings of pride and joy as she enjoyed her newly transformed wardrobe.

These feelings encouraged Sally to help the rest of her family declutter. She helped both her mother and her brother sort through their own clothes. As she told me that she had taught her mother KonMari folding her mother (off camera) exclaimed with pleasure:

And they're still folded like that! It's wonderful, so so good!

Sally managed to not only discover *'spark joy'* for herself, but her family too. After sorting through their wardrobes, Sally and her Mum decluttered their kitchen. Their family was brought together through this *'Tidying festival'*, helping them settle into their new home together.

Eventually, Sally and her family felt they understood *'spark joy'* enough to be able to sort through items belonging to her late father.

We went through my dad's stuff which was really good because we really needed to just get rid of some of it that was… you know… we had to… but it was ok because you can be like 'well that's not necessary anymore, we can have these certain things and then get rid of the rest of it' … and that's really nice.

'Spark joy' had impacted Sally on both a practical level, as well as on a much bigger, personal scale where her family were able to sort through items laden with memories. It was clear that the pride cultivated in Sally was much deeper than feeling good wearing a top she liked. *'spark joy'* had helped Sally and her family as they began a new chapter in their new home, letting go of past possessions that were not meant to stay in this new home.

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These three women were grouped together due to the shared sense of pride that resonated within each of their KonMari journeys. Mei, Ellie and Sally all emerged from the decluttering process with an appreciation not just for their items, but for themselves also. They all discovered that learning to care for their items helped them to care better for themselves.

Each of these women's understanding of '*spark joy'* was connected to a strong emotional experience. For Mei, it was a clear feeling of excitement and wonder. For Ellie, it was her joyous moment of epiphany. For Sally, it was a strong sense of pride and appreciation for each object. Through this research, more subtle accounts of '*spark joy'* will come forth – however, these three informants' relationship with '*spark joy'* left little room for confusion. In a moment of '*Epiphany'*, the biography of an object is revealed, and this in turns reveals something within its owner (Appadurai's,1986). This sense of clarity is an

interesting contrast to the ambiguous nature of '*spark joy'*, as discussed in its translation from '*Tokimeku'*. The essence of '*Tokimeku'* almost breaks down the distinction between human and object, echoing Bennett's (2004) theory of '*Thing power'*, by drawing an equivalence between reactions to people and reactions to objects. This alternative perception of objects connects to theories of material culture and of the agency of objects.

Mei, Ellie and Sally were all younger in age and had all been settling into relatively new homes. The KonMari method gave them all a needed sense of confidence as they established themselves in these new spaces. These experiences reflect Cox's (2013) research on the identities formed within the home through caring labour. As each informant in this chapter practised gratitude and better care with their possessions, their identity within the home was affirmed.

What was interesting to observe was the surprise these three women had over their new organisation skills. They each seemed to enter the method hesitant that they would actually be bettered through the process, and emerged triumphant. Their surprise at this success perhaps explains their emphasised pride. This perhaps points to a current lack of confidence in home-making abilities in young women in the West, which Kondo is potentially addressing. Acting as a role model, teacher, and friend, Kondo is not only helping women to establish control over their homes, but demonstrating that this is possible alongside a flourishing career, as she herself has done.

Chapter Two:

Letting Go of 'Past-Selves': The Freeing Power of *'Spark Joy'*

I don't really have a Sparks Joy...no... I don't even really know how to answer that... I think it's just something where I know if that's something I want. Kondo very much talks about feeling, but I don't really feel something- I just look at things and go 'aw that's a photo of that person that really means a lot to me I really wanna keep

that' or I look at clothes and go 'I wear that all the time I'll keep that and have that in the next chapter of my life.' So mine's very much a practical thing rather than a feeling thing.

Sophie

Rather than swelling with enthusiasm for The KonMari method, Sophie casually described to me over *Zoom* what she had decided to implement from the method after watching the *Netflix* show. She explained that she does not follow the method every day, but instead she uses specific parts of the method whenever she is sorting her possessions.

I was a little bit skeptical actually about how much space it would create but I thought I'd give it a go anyway- and that's how it works for me really. So it's in terms of when I need to do a sort out, I use her methods in order to create more room for myself.

Sophie is the last of the research participants who had only watched Kondo's *Netflix* show, rather than reading her books. She was the most skeptical by far. As she finds organisation satisfying and relaxing, Sophie decided to watch the show when it was first released at the beginning of 2019. Rather unusually, Sophie already tidies like Kondo by piling items from the same category in one place. Where this was often a revolutionary and, at times, overwhelming stage of the KonMari method for others, Sophie was unfazed by this action.

Sophie freely took what she found useful from the KonMari method, and left the rest. Without reading Kondo's books, she lacked the immersive experience within Kondo words, and instead used the contestants on the *Netflix* show as examples for the effectiveness of each part of the method. Where some informants found the *Netflix* show inspired them in their decluttering pursuits, Sophie used it as an opportunity to observe the changes it did or did not make in the lives of others.

Learning to understand what *'Sparks Joy',* and being strongly advised to discard whatever does not, gifted many of my informants a sense of freedom. Freedom from physical clutter, but also from the emotional reasons that objects which do not *'spark joy'* represent. Sophie did not feel that she viewed objects as emotionally provoking as Kondo discusses. This meant that Sophie's personal understanding of *'spark joy'* took a very practical nature. *'spark joy'* to her was not a question of how a possession made her *feel* when she touched it, but

whether the idea of continuing to keep the object brought joy to her. Would she like to continue to own this item?

Sophie incorporated parts of the KonMari method to help her as she prepared to move in with her soon-to-be husband. As she prepared herself for her new life and identity as a wife, she questioned which objects and habits would be beneficial or cumbersome to carry over in this transition.

As a recent history of art graduate, Sophie was visually intrigued by Kondo's folding method, and wanted to try it. Preparing to share her space with her future husband, she was interested to see how efficient the method was.

KonMari Folding:

Alongside her phrase *'spark joy'*, Marie Kondo's folding method caught a lot of attention in the media (Deibel, 2020). Pictures of drawers neatly filled with perfectly folded clothes, arranged in order of colour gradient flooded social media and inspired many to investigate the KonMari method (Chayka, 2020). Referencing origami and the easy-to-fold design of the Kimono, Kondo's details in her second book her thoughts that folding is *'programmed into Japanese DNA'* (Kondo, 2017, p.13). She justifies this generalisation by explaining that folding is a practise ubiquitous in Japan (Kondo, 2017). This connection between her culture and the design of her method is explicitly explained by Kondo, expressing a personal gratitude that she was surrounded by a society that utilises the art of folding (Kondo, 2014).

In a scene from the first episode of her Netflix show, Kondo explained to contestant Rachel Friend that folding laundry should be an enjoyable time where a bond is formed between the owner and the item (*'Tidying Up: Tidying with Toddlers'*, 2019). As animations in the style of origami instructions gently fade onto the screen, indicating through dotted lines and arrows how to fold a T-shirt, Kondo is shown sitting side by side with Rachel on the floor, kneeling with a T-shirt in front of her. *'Folding is not just making your clothes smaller, it is actually an important opportunity to talk to your clothes and thank them'* explains Kondo in English, breaking up the stream of instructions told in Japanese for the translator to communicate (*'Tidying Up: Tidying with Toddlers'*, 2019, 20:43). Brushing past this comment, Rachel finishes her first attempt and exclaims *'Oh my gosh, It's kind of messy but look!'* (*'Tidying Up: Tidying with Toddlers'*, 2019, 21:54). Kondo explains in her books that love is transmitted through the palms of the hands, and so folding your clothing is an

important time to give love and attention to your clothing (Kondo, 2017). Throughout the Netflix show, contestants seem to only nod when Kondo explains the concept of developing a connection with one's clothing, leaving it up to debate how much they believed that philosophy themselves. Sophie commented on this:

> *This sounds a bit horrible but sometimes I do look at the contestants in the show and think 'ok are they smiling at this or are they actually taking this seriously?'. Like how many takes did it take them? Like I respect it and I understand where it comes from, but for me personally I wouldn't do that.*

Sophie found herself debating if the contestants really did understand what Kondo was explaining. As I probed further with my questions, Sophie explained that unless the contestants found the connection side with an object life-changing, then she didn't think they would keep up this ideology. This then led Sophie to be skeptical if Kondo really does have a 100% success rate with her method, as she was unsure of how key this sense of connection with one's possessions was.

Sophie had not looked much into Japanese culture, and so merely assumed that Kondo's concept of connection with inanimate objects was something of a cultural barrier which she felt she did not need to cross. To her, *'spark joy'* was not an embodied reaction to a physical item, but a tool of discernment; a practical question to be asked when attempting to reduce one's possessions.

She took this practical understanding of *'spark joy'* and used it to boost her confidence in her organisational skills and become more efficient with her space. She felt that this was a necessary skill to hone through using parts of the KonMari method, especially as she would soon be sharing her space closely with another.

The KonMari method therefore came into Sophie's life at a moment of liminality, as she prepared to move from a state of independence to interdependence. Drawn in by the visual appeal of Kondo's neatness, the introduction of a new method of organising was what *'Sparked Joy'* for Sophie. The method facilitated a way for Sophie to reassess *her* space and *her* needs as she prepared for *her* life to change. Though she did not adopt Kondo's ideas of connection with objects, Sophie still developed her sense of intuition with herself and her preferences through what she decided to adopt from the KonMari method and what to leave out.

Sophie's understanding of KonMari caused a reinforcement of an individualistic perspective that helped preserve autonomy and independence. This protection and preservation of the self was key to her preparation to cohabitate. Though Kondo explains that *'spark joy'* was designed to develop one's personal intuition, her method advocates a sense of harmony with one's surroundings and possessions, rather than an active separation. This could indicate an extremist translation of Kondo's desire to help followers make better decisions not just with their possessions, but in their lives also.

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> *I think it goes down to meaning. Do I project myself within that? Does that fit with who I am? This 'spark joy' means that if you can look around you and are happy with everything you have- It's not about who you are or who you want to be, it's about who you want to be in your heart. What I like about it is that it frees you from judgment from other people. It's about what is it that I need and what is it that is me- that's very different.*

Amelia

Amelia sat in her bright blue office with books piled around her in tall stacks and lining the large shelves in the background of her setting on *Zoom.* Where most people had backgrounds that showed their decluttered, organised homes behind them, Amelia's background was clearly in the middle of the KonMari chaos.

Amelia was one of the most reflective research participants I interviewed, and she incorporated a lot of her knowledge on economics into the reflections she shared with me. From the beginning of following the KonMari method, Amelia was under no illusion that it would provide her with a minimalist house at the end:

> *We take from Kondo what fits our needs. And that's the beauty of it, it can be re-interpreted. Lots of people will tell you that she is a minimalist, and she herself might be but her method is not. Our houses will not look the same, but we have both done the method.*

The books piled behind her as she told me about her organised kitchen gave away the fact that Amelia was moulding the KonMari method to fit with her preferences, rather

than following the strict order of categories exactly. Though she had read that sorting books must come before tackling the '*komono'* category (in which kitchen items fall into), she knew that decluttering the books that filled every room of her house would have to come later. Taking in the KonMari method and ideology, Amelia came to understand the personal nature of Kondo's approach to decluttering and that everybody's *'tidying festivals'* would look different. She explained: '*I think that's why people like the method a lot because it's very liberating. It's about you and not someone else.'.* For Amelia, two of the key facets to the method were its malleable nature, and its power to bring liberation. She understood the question: *'Does is spark joy'* as a method to expose both physical and physiological things that one does not wish to associate with themselves anymore:

> *It also allows you to see what you thought was you was not you. There's a question of identity. Whether it's expensive or not, you have this question of whether you like it or not. If you like it it's because it's you. It becomes a a question of power. When you see it all in front of you, and you ask: 'is it who I am?' - you realise that you are more powerful without this stuff.*

Identity and clothing:

Kondo explains that the *'life changing magic'* of her method is the power of *'spark joy'* (Kondo, 2014). She believes that the concept of *'spark joy'* causes people to not only organise their homes into a fashion which suits them, but their lives as well (Kondo, 2014).

Miller (2010) explains the loss of self amongst the overwhelming opportunities to consume items such as clothing and home decor. In areas such as London, there is a strong emphasis on using to express oneself and to communicate to the world who you are (Miller, 2010, p.34). Despite this drive to share one's fashion preferences and personality, Miller found that Londonders not only felt at a loss on how to use clothing to communicate what they wanted about themselves, but they struggled to even understand what it was about themselves that they wanted to communicate to the world (Miller, 2010, p.38). Kondo hopes to set people free from this dilemma, by asking them a question that cuts through all the possessions they own and sets them free from wondering what each item *'says about them'*, and instead focus on if they receive joy from that item (Kondo, 2017, p.82).

'Spark joy' also attempts to prevent the influence of comparisons over one's life- especially in one's decisions to discard an item (Kondo, 2014). The women I interviewed found that comparison greatly affected their relationship with their clothing. They not only

compared their fashion taste with their friends and those in the media, they also compared their current bodies to past versions of themselves- such as when they were younger or before they had children. Sasaki (2017) describes how much happier he became after throwing away nearly all of his possessions, as it prevented his ability to compare himself with others. Throwing away possessions that do not *'spark joy'* can do away with comparison, as one's intuition is turned toward discernment over buying or keeping an item, rather than influence from another external source- such as a friend or advertising (Kondo, 2014).

Amelia found herself realising the power clothing has over the social aspects of her life as she decluttered her wardrobe:

> *I wear only black- I have since I was nineteen because I was broke and black went with everything and I still like wearing black- but people are always surprised when they come to my home and see my bright coloured walls. People make a judgement about you from your clothes, so they just don't reflect who you want to be. I think it's easier to go through books and CDs because that's more personal and you can decide what you want to show off, but with clothes it is very much about what you are projecting to the world.*

Beginning the KonMari method with clothing had caused Amelia to understand the layers of communication with herself and the world that her clothing navigates. Like many women I interviewed, weight and body image also played a significant role in decluttering clothing. Amelia explained that she had gained weight but was now slowly losing it, so she was unsure what size clothes to keep. Several women I interviewed throughout this research shared with me the freedom that *'spark joy'* had brought them, as they finally gained the courage to discard items of clothing that were too small for them. Keeping certain small items of clothing *'just in case I lose the weight one day'* did not *'spark joy'* for any of the women I interviewed, and so the KonMari process became a journey of acceptance for the current state of their bodies. This showed that, as intended by Kondo, the KonMari method contributed to re-shaping one's relationship with the self. Other 'possible selves' that were constructed from social expectations were let go of; failing to *'spark joy'*.

Sorting through her clothing caused Amelia to feel a sense of power as she confidently declared what she did and did not want to keep. Amelia enjoyed the freedom of discarding clothes that she did not like- even if they did fit well- and the freedom of keeping clothes that *'Sparked Joy'* for her, though they no longer fit:

I really liked that Marie talked about the history you have with items. I have kept my first two Dolce and Gabbana dresses because I have so many good memories with them. I won't ever be able to wear them again, but I love seeing them in my closet and remembering how amazing I felt in them and how accomplished I felt when I had enough money to buy them. Maybe one day I will be ready to let them go, but for now I like them still being there.

The KonMari process is designed to help followers face their past consumer decisions, and hopefully make them realise how many unwise purchases they may have made without thinking of the consequences of welcoming that item into their life (Kondo, 2017). When faced with the guilt of discarding unworn clothing, Kondo hopes that once followers of her method have had to push through the reluctant feeling of throwing away so much, they will reconsider how they shop and consume in the future. This encouragement for a sustainable lifestyle appealed to Amelia's daughters when they watched the *Netflix* show with her.

Though she was first mocked by her family for adopting the Konmari method, *'spark joy'* quickly spread across Amelia's household. Requesting to have priority use of the TV for a few days, Amelia made time to sit down and watch Kondo's *Netflix* show when it was released, intrigued after reading the books. Her husband and youngest two children joined her to watch through the series and to Amelia's surprise, they all became inspired to declutter themselves. The show acted as a wake-up call to how much stuff they all owned, and if they still wanted to keep everything they owned. Amelia explained that she has observed how much more environmentally conscious her children are compared to people of her generation, and that the Konmari method seemed to fit very well with their aims to consume less:

For my daughters- everything is on their computers- they don't need books or CDs and they are happy to inherit clothes- they say 'why would I go and buy something?' and instead they recycle my old clothing. Even now I'd rather buy something new because I like better quality, but my daughters are fine wearing old things they find, it's cool for them and they don't care. Environmental issues have been drilled into this generation.

As she explained to me how overwhelming doing the KonMari method is, Amelia had great faith that this would not be as much of a daunting problem for those of younger

generations. To her, younger generations seemed to accumulate less. She talked openly of the stress that possessions can cause, and the anxiety wrapped up in them, and so was hopeful that Kondo is waking people up to the long term burden of their consumer habits.

> *On the TV show, you see the mountains of stuff people have in front of them. But then seeing people like this, you realise you have all this stuff and you know it weighs on you. The Kondo method is emotional because it speaks to your consciousness of 'what are you doing to yourself?'.*

Amelia witnessed not only herself become struck by this realisation from the KonMari method, but her husband also. After watching the whole *Netflix* series with her, Amelia's husband was instantly inspired to declutter:

> *The next day after watching the show, my husband went and sorted through his clothes. He's never done this before and we've been together for eighteen years. And he did the question and he took everything out, and he even bought separators for the drawers. He's not interested in cleaning or sorting, but he found a resonance with this.*

Amelia's husband had rarely done a clear out of his possessions before watching *'Tidying Up with Marie Kondo'*. When I asked her why she thought that he had suddenly found the desire to do it, Amelia replied with two answers. The first reason Amelia shared was that a little while ago her husband had had a near death experience, and she felt that this had made him realise how many possessions he would be leaving behind if he had died. The second was that she wondered if watching men complete the Konmari process on the TV show had shown him that he should and could *'do his share'* when it came to caring for the home.

Though not a prominent reason for following the KonMari method for anyone I interviewed, the fear of leaving behind mountains of clutter after death was an issue that subtly came in and out of a few conversations. It was clear throughout my research that the Konmari method was certainly acquainting people with the durable nature of objects, and their ability to out-last us. This includes out-lasting versions of our 'past-selves' too.The KonMari method provided a revelation for many that a quick decision to buy one item may continue to affect us for the rest of our lives, and the lives of our families after.

Overall, though not finished with the Konmari method at the time of our interview, Amelia had found that *'spark joy'* was slowly liberating her from the burden of clutter and the social consequences of her possessions. *'spark joy'* made a space of liberation for each of her family members, where they could learn what was truly necessary and unnecessary to them together, guilt-free.

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> *I think it's just… having the things I like and having the space to do them and enjoy them. Things that aren't cramped into cupboards or whatever. So say for clothes for example, you can open your drawers and everything you see you think 'ah'- you know it's hard to choose what to wear maybe- you've got a lot less clothes but you like them all.. rather than just opening your drawer and going 'ergh guess I'll put the same old t-shirt on again'. I suppose it just makes life... easier.*

Anna

'Look!' Anna's young son held up a toy to the screen that he'd put together with cardboard and rubber bands. Anna helped demonstrate to me how the toy works, and we both smiled as he showed us over and over again. Yet again, though on *Zoom*, it felt as if I was in the living room with Anna and her son, chatting through how she'd found following the Konmari method since she read Kondo's first book about two years prior.

Anna had seen Kondo's first book on *Amazon* and had added it to her wishlist. Amused that she'd liked a book about tidying, Anna's partner bought the book for her birthday. Like many of the informants, Anna described how much the book inspired her:

> *So I got it and read it really quickly and found it really interesting. You know you look at stuff about decluttering but you never really do much about it- you throw a few things away and then that's it. You pop it all back in the cupboard for another six months or a year.*

After reading the books, Anna managed to sort through her house within the space of two to three months despite having a toddler to look after at the time. She identified the feeling of *'spark joy'* quickly, and this propelled her into action.

It didn't take me long to work it out, it really struck a chord in me. I think I did think about it more critically rather than spiritually- more like 'Do I like this? Why have I kept it?' and then feeling the permission to go 'No I don't want it' and to get rid of it.

Similar to Amelia's family, Anna found a resonance with Kondo's words. The key aspect of the method that enabled her to delve into this resonance was the permission to discard items that were not bringing her joy.

The Freedom to Discard:

Reflecting Mauss' (1954) theory on gift exchange, Anna discovered for herself the social weight of gifts. Before learning about the Konmari method, Anna had struggled to discard gifts that she didn't like. She felt she must keep them out of obligation and politeness. Kondo aims to deal with this break in the circulation of gifts and emotions: *'But surely the person who gave it to you doesn't want you to put it away without ever using it, or to feel guilty everytime you see it. When you throw it away, do so for the sake of the giver too.'* (Kondo, 2014, p.128). Kondo's method attempts to change how objects laced with social expectation are approached (Kondo, 2014). Where some may feel that the social function of gifts continues after the moment of exchange, Kondo argues: *'the true purpose of a present is to be received. Presents are not 'things' but a means for conveying someone's feelings.'* (Kondo, 2014, p.128).

Anna felt a similar responsibility over most objects in her home- not just gifts. This sense of duty to keep items caused tensions as she attempted to declutter her home. However Kondo's reframing of objects as bringers of joy changed her perspective:

I didn't really get into the spiritual side of it and talking to your belongings and stuff- that just felt a bit… silly? But I felt like it gave you permission to get rid of stuff and it just changed my mindset because I would just keep stuff because you feel like you should, and I wouldn't give it much more thought than that. But it changed the way I thought about things and think 'Well actually why am I putting this back in the cupboard? What joy is it actually bringing me?'

Kondo uses her philosophy of thanking items to help people discard the difficult (Kondo, 2014). Few of those I interviewed felt that verbally thanking their items would only make them feel uncomfortable. However, many expressed that Kondo's explanation of the purpose of gifts gave them the understanding they needed to peacefully discard what they previously kept out of social convention. Though the KonMari method awoke people to the

durability of our possessions, it also exposed the opposite for past-versions of ourselves. Like Amelia discovered as she sorted her clothes, Anna discovered as she sorted gifts that who she felt she was had changed and evolved:

I learnt that someone buys you a gift, but then that gift doesn't suit you anymore five years down the line- the things that are important to you change over the years. Things change and we change and at some point you just have to get rid of it because it doesn't fit in your life anymore.

The KonMari method helped Anna to realise that her possessions will not always be required or needed and therefore must be let go. Her relationship with *'spark joy'* was intrinsically linked with a practical sense of what was right to keep in her home and what was not. Anna discussed giving away several pairs of high heels she had worn when she was at university, as she understood that the need for them in her life had ended years ago. This sense of what was 'right' or 'wrong' to keep was caused by Anna's recognition of past versions of herself which no longer existed. Realising that these 'past-selves' had already left, Anna understood that the possessions connected to those times must go also.

Interestingly for Anna, a past version of herself was also rediscovered through decluttering. Though Anna had done an environmental based degree, she admitted to me that she had little thought of her personal impact on the planet. Following the KonMari method had caused Anna to re-think her consumption habits, and this had ignited a passion for living a zero-waste lifestyle:

It was when I cleared out the plastic bottles in my bathroom that I realised I wanted to keep it aesthetically pleasing- and that meant not having loads of plastic bottles! So that lead me on to all this zero-waste and less plastic stuff.

Sorting through her home had not only given Anna permission to have full control over what items were in her home- but full control over who she wanted to be too. As she sorted through her past consumer decisions, she also sorted through the different past versions of herself, and reorganised her priorities in life according to who she felt she is now.

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The KonMari journeys of these three women are characterised by a sense of individuality and freedom. They each approached the method with a casual air, and only took from Kondo's advice what they felt best applied to their personal lives.

The method acted as a process of letting go of 'past-selves' for each woman, helping them better situate themselves in their present lives. This demonstrates Kilroy-Marac's (2016) and Bennett's (2014) discussion of *'Thing Power',* and the permeable nature of the relationship between the material and the self. Objects entangled in - now obsolete - versions of the self were identified through *'spark joy'* and discarded.

This discarding of 'past-selves' manifested for Sophie as a form of preparation for a new phase of life, whereas for Amelia and Anna, it was linked to a decision to discard specific clothing items. They felt that these items no longer represented who they were. This draws upon Richins' (1994) analysis of the interplay between the public and private valuations of objects. As recognised through Amelia's story, clothing items straddle between the public and private worlds and are therefore constantly being interacted with from opposing sides. This leads to Miller's (2010) description of anxiety in Londoners who are at a loss on how to negotiate and represent their identity through the language of their clothes. The reinforcement of individuality that KonMari had for each of these women aided this negotiation.

All three of these women noted the importance of Kondo's permission to discard. Reflecting the social implications of objects discussed by Mauss (1954), it seemed as though the KonMari method provided a long-awaited over-powerment of these implications for Sophie, Amelia and Anna that liberated them from difficult objects. This gave them a greater sense of control over their homes, inspiring them to rethink their consumption habits. It was this that caused Anna in particular to re-evaluate what she enjoys having in her surrounding environment, causing her to seek a plastic-free lifestyle.

The experiences summarised in this chapter speak to the blurred boundary between the material and the self, owner and possession. They showcase the confusing experience of navigating this dynamic as one changes through growing older and journeying through different phases of life.

Chapter Three:
Supported by your Possessions: *'Spark Joy'* and Peace.

I guess it's… giving your soul a lift? It's like where you look at something and it makes you smile momentarily- almost involuntarily- because you're like 'I'm glad I have that thing in my life'. It's all those little moments, they're meant to be quite powerful. I have this mug here (She holds up a mug to the screen) *and my friend gave it to me, and I just think of her everytime I look at it. And I look at a lot during the day- like when is use it or do the washing up. And it's kind of like tons of tiny reminders and they're positive. If you find the joy in your possessions it makes you kind of buoyant through the rest of the day, and kind of maybe for the rest of your life.*

Hattie

Hattie's warm smile met me on the other side of my screen, ready to gush about her hero Marie Kondo. Hattie discovered Kondo around five years prior to this interview, when she had just moved into a small London flat with her husband. Feeling burnt out by London life, Hattie was in search of something to revive her and help her struggles to combine two people's worth of possessions in one small home.

I was quite stressed with work because I was in a new job so I was grapelling around for books to find something to help, and so that's when I found Marie Kondo. You know when you can just feel this wave coming on of overwhelm and stress and you just think 'I need something to fix this!'.

Hattie found Kondo's first book true to its title: '*Life changing'* (Kondo, 2014). Addressing her struggles to accommodate for the lack of space in her new flat, her anxiety around feeling disorganised, and her *'pet peeve'* of losing items- the KonMari seemed the perfect solution. She found Kondo's rule of designating a home for each item in her house particularly helpful:

I was just looking for what stress in my life I could control. Just thinking- wouldn't it be great if I could always find something quickly? One of the best things from KonMari is always knowing where something is- and that is my life now!

The KonMari method created a sense of order not only for Hattie's possessions, but her mind too. Once safe within her newly tidy home, Hattie felt that she could relax more, even when she began her overwhelming new job. When I asked her how she felt after completing the KonMari method, Hattie enthusiastically replied:

So good. Like a weight had been lifted. And just really happy and just really in control. That feeling when you're finally organised- it just clears your mind doesn't it?

Being buried in the stress of adult life after university, the KonMari method helped Hattie to re-find herself, and what kind of person she wanted to grow into:

And the method unearths stuff doesn't it? Like you do think 'ah yes have this and I love it!' and you just feel more inspired to use it because you know where to put it back when you're done!

In such a transitional time in Hattie's life- the beginning of a new career and beginning of living with her partner- the KonMari method's ability to refocus Hattie on what she loved was invaluable.

The KonMari method greatly changed Hattie's relationship with her possessions. It created a connection, filled with gratitude, between her and the items in her home. Hattie explained to me that this change greatly affected her standards for what she now brings into her home:

I realised I could just shut down and focus on what it is just between me and my items. You know it's almost a little bit sacred whether or not something comes into your home- it's a big deal you know? You're gonna have to store it and it's gonna need a home and you're gonna have to look after it, and it just sort of has to be good enough.

After discovering *'spark joy',* Hattie found that she now never wants anything in her home that does not bring her joy. Items have to now be worthy enough to enter her home:

Now, I'm a lot more in tune with if something sparks joy or not before I bring it into my home. I think there's like this boundary between what is in my home and what is out of my home- because I'm like 'well there's a strict criteria, and it must spark joy, and if it doesn't then it can't come in'. So now I find it a lot easier to not buy stuff, and therefore I have more possessions that I am more pleased about.

KonMari and the *Uchi* and *Soto*:

Kondo discusses in her books how important it is to have a tidy entryway in one's home. Her advice is inspired by the presence of the *Genkan* in Japanese homes. Within

Japanese culture is the concept of *Uchi and Soto*- the inside and outside of the home (Hendry, 2013). Learned in the home from an early age, Japanese children are taught the distinction between the outside and inside and what belongs to each world: those who live within their household are considered *Uchi*, and the public are considered the *Soto* (Hendry, 2013). *Uchi* and *Soto* are also heavily connected to ideas on cleanliness - the inside of the home being regarded as a clean space, free from the dirt that is part of the outside world. The *Genkan* is the entryway into Japanese homes and it acts as the gate between the inside and outside worlds, in which processes occur that help a person enter or exit the differing spaces properly (Ohnuki-Tierney and Emiko, 1984). For example, shoes are taken off in the *Genkan* before entering a house so that outside dirt is not brought in, and greeting phrases are said upon arrival home (Ohnuki-Tierney and Emiko, 1984; Hendry, 2013). Western homes do not contain the same strict boundary between the inside and the outside of the home, and so Kondo's particular attention to the cleanliness of the entryway in her books is perhaps lost on Western readers.

Hattie did develop a greater sense of distinction between the special nature of her home and the outside world through following the KonMari method. Though Hattie was not placing particular importance on the entryway of her home as the boundary, she began to feel a strong sense of protecting the inside of her home from the 'dirt' of the outside world. Her version of 'dirt' was that which does not *'spark joy'.*

Hattie had grown a particular awareness of the surrounding consumer narrative that was constantly being pressed upon her. Following the Konmari method had caused her to question how much she had bought in the past because she liked it, or because she was told to:

> *I do wonder how much crap I would have accumulated if I didn't know about this because that was the path of life I was on, and you know it's this materialistic society of accumulation and 'buy this' and 'well if it's on offer' and I think I was just not very seriously accumulating things that just didn't spark joy.*

When I asked Hattie if she had ever experienced *'spark joy'* in her life before KonMari, her description was the antithesis to her perception of consumer culture:

It's quite subtle isn't it- spark joy- and I'm not sure... it's probably like seeing my parents cat or something. It's sort of like stroking her in the sun. It's not like excitable, it's calm and it's like everything's in order and everything's gonna be alright and you know it just makes you a little happy. Like in a calm way.

Kondo's method acquainted Hattie with not just joy- but subtly and peace. This was a dramatic change to the loud narrative she felt that advertising had trapped her in. She discovered a reassuring relationship with the items she owned that replaced the pressure to buy more. She explained to me that when she began her new job, it was organising her desk drawers in her new office that calmed her nerves. Hattie had learnt to look to her objects for support.

Hattie made several jokes throughout the interview about if objects have personalities or not. She explained to me that though she struggled with the way that Kondo would speak of objects as if they had a personality, she certainly had developed a deep gratitude for the roles that her possessions play in her life. When I asked her if she thanked her items, she explained:

> *I don't, but I do think in my head 'I like this thing' more than I used to. I used to not be very connected to my stuff because I didn't even know if it sparked joy or not. But now I appreciate them a lot more. Like I'll get sad when they… aha I was gonna make a joke and say 'when they get lonely'- no- when they're not being used I do look and think 'aw that's a shame'.*

Hattie explained to me that she struggled with how Kondo referred to objects as if they were living, yet mocked herself for picking up parts of this concept:

> *For example- with the sock thing- when I first read it I was… if I'm honest I was still a bit unsure. When Kondo's talking about the sock and the 'life of the socks' and the 'socks has feelings'- I did think 'hmm, ok Marie you've gone a bit too far, I'm not sure I can get on board with the idea'. I think I was rebelling a bit because I've always balled my socks and she doesn't like that. But I have to say- Ok I'm still not sure about socks having their own little life- but I do actually always fold my socks now! And you know it does make me happy to look at them in the drawer. It's nice to feel that I am looking after them better now.*

Hattie laughed at herself for becoming such a fan of the KonMari method that she ended up following it quite so closely. She felt that the method developed a sense of duty to care better for her possessions.

Despite not openly taking on Kondo's empathetic relationship with objects, Hattie came to cherish the fact that her objects were now more than just physical possessions to her. When I asked Hattie what *'spark joy'* meant to her, she explained to me that she felt

'spark joy' was about recognising the joyful meanings and memories held within objects. Hattie believed that it was the connection with the joyful thoughts that objects hold that supports us through our lives, if we let it.

Hattie was a person brimming with joy. She smiled and laughed her way through the interview whilst also sharing deep insights into how her perception of the material has changed since KonMari. She had truly opened herself up to the idea of her possessions supporting her and providing joy for her, and she had resolved to protect this joy in her home by learning a strict boundary to what she let enter her house. Though *'spark joy'* was as much of a new concept to her than everyone else I interviewed, Hattie was one of the few that seemed to feel that it had always existed; she had just not identified it before. Now, Hattie has come to know *'spark joy'* very well, and she enthusiastically hopes that others can come to know the same joy and sense of support and calm that our possessions can bring.

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For me, when you spark soy it's- that's related to an item that Sparks Joy. From the items that make me really happy, from having a clean and tidy space… it provides me with a very functional space. But the sparking joy for me is when everything is neat and functional and practical, but also away. So for me, like if I put on a top that does spark joy am I like 'oh I really like this top'? Yes. But also I would say the Sparking Joy is its effect on the space rather than like 'oh gosh I'm so happy' -it's having everything clean and tidy and the knock on effect that has on everything else- that's Sparks Joy.

Kelly

My *Zoom* call with Kelly was on a dark winter evening, and as the light faded more and more outside my window, our conversation felt more and more cosy and focussed. Kelly had a confident air to her and spoke strongly and enthusiastically about the benefits she still experiences from KonMari, six years after discovering it.

Kelly's relationship with *'spark joy'* was similar to Sophie's practical nature. Where most informants felt that KonMari deepened their connection with possessions, it had the opposite effect for Kelly. To her, one of the key takeaways of the method was the revelation that *'stuff is just stuff'.*

It just really changed my perception on stuff- it's just stuff. Whereas before... I wouldn't say I was materialistic, but I did put attachments on stuff.

Kondo's method had helped Kelly to see her possessions as less important rather than more important. She used to be very sentimental about her items, and it wasn't until she learnt the art of discarding that she became less attached to objects:

> *It's not that I don't have sentimentality now, but I realised when I read a post on one of the facebook groups about someone saying that they have a lot of earthquakes where they live, so they keep all their precious items in a bag by the front door, and I realised that if my house burnt down- yes it would be absolutely horrendous, but so long as me and my mum and my dog are out it's fine. Stuff is replaceable.*

Before discovering the KonMari method, Kelly had been a keen storage user and would make sure that her items were put away properly. Where many of my informants found Kondo's advice on giving everything a home revolutionary, Kelly found that the advice she crucially needed was the *how* and *why* she should reduce the amount she owned. She felt that she would not have gained this advice had she just watched the *Netflix* show:

In the book she explains why, but you don't get that in the TV show. You're just presented with this neat quiet woman and you think she has a perfect life, and you think 'oh she's like that because she's Japanese' but it's not like that at all. But in the book you see that there is this whole process that she's really thought about and thought about why it works. I think people who don't read the book don't understand. It's just really different and it's harder. They think it's just a decluttering show and it's not.

Where *'spark joy'* seemed to transform the majority of my informants emotionally, Kelly had the most practical transformation. She found that the practising of regularly discarding, tidying, and buying less through the use of the *'spark joy'* criteria transformed her day-to-day and made her life much easier. Though many other informants also experienced this, they tended to come away from the KonMari method with a pivotal moment where they understood their own connection with their items. For Kelly, previously burden by an over-attachment to her possessions, she contrastingly learnt that she did not have to have such a deep personal connection with them.

Kelly explained she felt that Kondo's *Netflix* show unhelpfully contributed to an image that she was tidy because she was Japanese. She explained that she does not know much about Japanese culture, but did go on to read another book written by Japanese authors who lived with very few possessions after KonMari:

I read a book about tidying written by like monks in Japan or something and they basically live with nothing and it explains what they're grateful for and it was really interesting. But in terms of Japanese culture… it just seems really quite nice, because it's not materialistic at all and she places a real value- what I took from the book- is that she places all this value on this tidying stuff so that she has time to do other things. But it is true- you do have more time because organising takes much less time.

KonMari and Reorganizing the Day-to-Day:

Kelly found a resonance with Kondo's concept that organising your home through a *'tidying festival'* allows more time in the future to be spent on family, friends and hobbies. Kondo seeks to remove the stress of clutter and endless need to tidy up, so that we can enjoy our lives in and out of our homes. This is similar to thoughts shared by Sasaki in his book: *'Listen, life is short. It's a shame to waste it because of some material object.'* (Sasaki, 2017, p.159). Sasaki (2017) dedicates an entire chapter to outlining the ways in which having less possessions saves time, and makes one happier. Unlike Kondo, he does not talk about forming a connection with one's possessions, but takes a similar approach to Kelly in that he sees material things as merely material things (Sasaki, 2017). This further highlights the interesting balance Kondo aims to achieve between being materialistic and not. She teaches that the value of objects should be gratefully recognised, not obsessed over (Kondo, 2014).

Kelly struggled to thank her items, especially as her definition of *'spark joy'* was not connected to each object, but the wider act of organising them. When I asked her if she thanked her items, she replied:

> *No. Categorically no. I think it was different because it wasn't a house it was just my room I was doing, but I didn't. I thought if I'm gonna do it, I'm gonna do it quick because for me, the gratification was when I bagged it up and got rid of it. It was being able to see my space after.*

Where many found decluttering useful as it seemed to unveil their lost sense of personal taste, Kelly was different in that she did not need KonMari to help her understand what she liked and didn't like. This perhaps was another reason why she connected *'spark joy'* to the overall effect of a clean space, as Kelly already knew what life she wanted to live, she just needed her space to be sorted accordingly. This assurance in who she is was

particularly shown when I asked her about how closely she followed the method. When I asked if she greeted her house as Kondo does, Kelly replied:

> *No no never never! I don't think it's a very British thing. I think people feel very silly doing it. And the people in the TV show- like that woman that was always breastfeeding- she was like gripping her stuff and being so 'oh my god we must thank everything!' and I just thought no- like of an evening I sit in my house and think how grateful I am for it and how fortunate I am- but I'm not gonna get on my knees and say thank you because that's not me.*

Though a true fan of Kondo's book, Kelly did not follow the method exactly. She molded it to fit herself. She took what she knew she needed, and applied only those parts. Kelly was not seeking to change herself through following the method, but just to change her physical space to fit herself better.

> *I just feel like I never stress over stuff- I know that sounds really knobby- but like I never stress about mess because there isn't any. I'm never worried about people coming over. I could say to literally anyone- like literally a stranger- 'oh if you need that go up to my room it's in the second drawer down'- and I'm not embarrassed or anything. It makes you much more confident because it feels like you have your shit together.*

Noticing the positive effects of Kelly's decluttering, her mother was intrigued. She found a book on Swedish Death Cleaning which made her think differently about how much stuff she owned. Swedish Death Cleaning is the art of reducing and organising one's possessions before they die to lessen the emotional burden left for your loved ones (Magnussen, 2019). It was after reading this book that Kelly's mother turned to the KonMari method to help her follow a process to reduce her possessions. She realised that when she died, her children would not know what items were precious to her and so they would not know how to sort through the house.

Kelly briefly shared that this had sadly already happened to her and her family, when she suddenly lost her father a few years prior to this interview. She explained how difficult it was to sort through his possessions that were left, as each item held such emotional weight:

> *I lost my dad really suddenly a few years ago, and his stuff... I feel really weird about because you can't control it. Like his shirts are different, but his stuff… KonMari made it….not easier because we had to go through it… but it helped me to realise that it is just stuff. It's not going to bring him back or anything, it is just stuff. But my sister*

really struggled actually. My brother was suddenly really sentimental about stuff, but it just affects people differently. It's nice having the sentimental category because you can sit and go through it all.

Having a sentimental category at the end of the KonMari process meant that Kelly was supported and ready when she came to dealing with these emotional items. Here, she was particularly aided by the less emotionally-centered relationship she developed with material objects during KonMari as it meant that she could make her way through them all with enough clarity.

Where most informants felt supported by their possessions due to their new sense of gratitude for them, Kelly was supported by her possessions to a much wider effect. Kondo's method brought out the practical ways in which her possessions could best support her day to day life. Kelly received her joy from feeling at peace within her tidy environment that was organised to the best standard possible. She took what she knew she needed from the KonMari method whilst holding a high respect for Kondo and recognition for the process behind her method. *'spark joy'* for Kelly is lived out everyday when she leaves quickly from her tidy home each morning, and returns back to it each evening after work. The KonMari process ordered her possessions in such a way that she never feels unorganised, behind or stressed, and it supported her through difficult times when she needed reminding on the role of the material in our lives.

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I think it's just something where you can't sort of resist something really. It's... it's something where you just feel comfortable with a thing, and you wouldn't want to lose it. Some things just have a resonance about them, so you choose those ones. Everything has its own energy, so somethings don't have you know the right resonance so you're not really that bothered about keeping them- I mean they obviously have to have a practical level but if there was two objects and they did the same function, I'd pick the one that felt nice, that felt better with me. You know it's intangible, you can't really describe it. It's a vibe, it's a sort of sense here (She holds her hand to her heart) *that it has for some reason."*

Wendy

Perhaps it was the fact that we both sat cradling a cup of tea, or the motherly feel that Wendy had to her, that made this interview feel so homely. During our conversation, Wendy spoke in a candid manner about her beliefs surrounding the energies items have; that there is more to material objects than meets the eye. Quoting William Morris, Wendy explained to tell me:

An object has to be either useful or beautiful in some way- maybe not just visually but in the sense of it's being.

Where the process of tidying can become merely an aesthetic concern- such as Kondo's lengthy advice on removing garish labels from cleaning bottles to soothe one's eyes- Wendy's decluttering journey sought to accommodate more than her visual preferences (Kondo, 2017). To Wendy, objects have an energy and a character to them, of which she sought to be mindful of as she travelled through the KonMari process. She explained to me how she would recognise that there was more to an object than it's purpose or visual appeal, but that this hidden depth to the object did affect its overall visual appeal. Wendy's understanding of *'spark joy'* was rooted in this awareness she had for the energy and *feel* of the object.

> *You can walk past one thing and ignore it, but then you walk past another thing and turn around and look at it again… and I don't know what it is, but it just speaks to you and you go back to it and you want to look at it again. Some things just draw you to them, It's not even sometimes something I want but just something that speaks to you.*

Where *'spark joy'* became a useful tool for learning how to discern one's personal preferences and tastes, Wendy was one of the few informants that already had a deep understanding of how personal one's relationship with an object can be. Perhaps this level of wisdom was due to her age, or her interest in the spiritual, or both. She pondered as she spoke to me:

> *As you get older you get more spiritual I think, and you go more into that sort of realm, and you become less about the material and you, you can pull yourself away from that munisable web of needing things.*

Wendy had an understanding that different objects spoke differently to different people. This sense of unique, personal connection with an object was something many

interviewees learnt to discover as they progressed through the KonMari method, however for Wendy it slotted well into her pre-existing philosophy.

Kondo explains that it is her prioritisation of one's feelings in her decluttering method that separates KonMari from other decluttering methods (Kondo, 2014). Where most discarding advice revolves around pairing down your possessions to a specific amount, Kondo asserts no numerical guidance on how many items one should own- only that they all individually bring a feeling of joy to the owner (Kondo, 2014). It is the consideration for her client's feelings surrounding their possessions that she believes prevents rebound into a cluttered lifestyle after her method (Kondo, 2014). Kondo recognises the emotional impact objects can have: *'The act of picking up and choosing objects is extremely personal. To avoid rebound, you need to create your own tidying method with your own standards'* (Kondo, 2014, p.147). Most interviewees recounted how surprised they were at what an emotional journey decluttering was, however Wendy understood this before entering into the process.

The KonMari method aided Wendy at a very difficult stage in her life. Abruptly finding herself in the middle of a divorce and swiftly needing to move out of the house she had lived in for many years, she had no choice but to greatly reduce her possessions and do so at an emotionally turbulent time.

> *I haven't done all the photos, but I initially had to go through loads to separate them from the ones I wanted and to leave the rest for if he wanted them. But it's hard because there were two things going on at once. I think it must have been easier if we were still there together then we could have gone through our stuff together and seen how we feel about each one you know. It's difficult.*

Kondo talks often in her books that she believes that our items are there to support us in life, however the laborious process of discarding a great amount of objects seems to show nothing but how inconvenient possessions can be (Kondo, 2014). For Wendy, I'm unsure how supported she truly felt by her possessions when decluttering. They suddenly demanded sorting through, and they were all heavy laden with memories of an era now ended.

And there isn't anything about that in the books. This stuff just assumes that you're living either on your own or in a steady environment or marriage or a steady couple or family situation and everything is just ticking along. I mean maybe it's not something one

should do when you're in the middle of some massive life crisis or something or lifestyle change.

The Sadness of Discarding:

Kondo and other decluttering and minimalist gurus seem to only present the pairing down of one's possessions as a glamorous and positive affair. They gloss over the fact that numerous situations that require reducing one's possessions are inflicted upon people without choice (Chayka, 2020). A marriage ending, a loss of or struggle to find income, a death, are all heart-breaking situations in which possessions must be sorted through and discarded. Decluttering gurus only seem to offer their advice in a cheery manner, explaining that if you are unfortunate enough to experience any of these situations- then they shall be less traumatic for you if you have already decluttered (Chayka, 2020). It causes one to wonder- why then, has no one been bold enough to prescribe decluttering advice to those already in these sadly common situations? Writings on minimalism seem to lack tact and awareness in this sense: where Steve Jobs is praised for living in such a trendy and empty home, George in Miller's (2008) opening chapter of *'The Comfort of Things'* and his minimalist- but not by choice- house present a confusingly sad angle on owning less (Chayka, 2020). Where the cover of Sasaki's (2017) book- picturing a corner of his minimalist japanese apartment- brings a soothing sense of calm to onlookers, Miller describes George's dwelling with the sentence: *'There is a violence to such emptiness'* (Miller, 2008, p.8).

Kondo bases her method solely around finding joy, making it an interesting process to put oneself through when in a bleak situation. As referenced above, Wendy felt a lack of representation for her situation within Kondo's books, despite her being in a position where she most needed decluttering advice. Though admitting she perhaps wasn't coming into the KonMari process in quite the right state, it seemed perplexing to both Wendy and myself that Kondo had not thought to offer her advice to someone in Wendy's situation. The one comfort that Kondo did offer, however, was the recognition of the emotional impact of objects. Where other gurus try to explain at length that material things are just material things, Kondo discusses the memories and feelings that objects can provoke (Kondo, 2014). All those I interviewed recounted how emotionally disruptive their decluttering journeys were at points, and most were tackling the method without a divorce in tandem.

Kondo attempts to arm followers in the emotional moments through the inclusion of compulsory gratitude (Kondo, 2014; Ouellette, 2019). Every item being discarded must be

thanked for its service and purpose- and this is as such for the benefit of the person discarding than the item being tossed (Kondo, 2014). Formally thanking an item before getting rid of it acts as a facilitator in which the owner can come to terms with the fact that they are discarding it. Many I interviewed explained that though they felt uncomfortable thanking an item out loud, understanding their gratitude towards it did give them the power they needed to throw out emotionally provoking items.

Wendy is still coming to terms with the dramatic change in her life, however she mentioned to me that she had found some sense of gratitude amongst the physical and emotional mess of her situation:

> *It's just made me think that actually I have to be thankful. You know for a longtime I had a particular life and lifestyle and I shared that with one person but that's all... that's gone. But you know, there's no point hanging on.*

Whether this gratitude came from Kondo's advice or Wendy's pre-existing philosophy on life is unclear, what is certain is that Kondo's advice complimented the awareness Wendy already had for the service of the possessions in her life. When I asked if she thanked her items, Wendy was the only interviewee that answered confidently and positively:

Yes I do, I do. I think about how much use I've had from them and maybe the occasions that I wore them or used them and things like that and then, then I give them away.

Wendy did not verbally thank all of her objects, but quietly recognised the part they had played in her life before discarding them. She likened this to when she takes a moment to thank any animal she is about to eat:

> *When I have bought meat- even if it's a chicken or something- I do always thank it for what it's given and it's life that it's given- not willingly! But I do always say thank you before we do anything with it, because I do think about it- how was it's life? And I just thank it for it's sacrifice really- I mean people probably think I'm mad!*

KonMari and *Kami*:

To Wendy, applying the same gratitude for the life of an animal to an inanimate object did not feel too much of a difference. Kondo often talks about objects as if they have feelings and consciousness, confusing many Western readers who found this a perplexing idea. This can be connected with the Shinto concept of *Kami*: the belief that nature and

objects have spirits/energy residing within them that possess certain characteristics and quirks (Ono and Woodard, 2011). The word '*Kami'* directly translates as the Japanese word for '*God'* or '*Supreme Being'*, however this translation does not capture the size and ambiguity of the term, making it difficult to translate into English (Ono and Woodard, 2011). Ouellette (2019) proposes that Kondo drew from her background of serving in a Shinto shrine as a teenager, and applied spiritual concepts to her work with people's possessions.

Kondo's language around objects contrasts to the common approach in Western culture- to see material goods as nothing more than material, physical objects. There is a lack of explicit explanation in Kondo's books to her spiritual beliefs surrounding objects. This lack could either indicate that Kondo's relationship with objects is seen as normal within Japanese culture, or simply normal personally to her. Either way, the choice to leave out any specific explanation certainly caused many I interviewed to jump to sweeping conclusions about the spirituality of Japanese culture.

Describing to me her personal interest in anthropology, it was clear that Wendy's mind had long been open to different ways of living. When reading Kondo's books, she did not take the instructions at face value, but weighed and pondered them before implementing them. Rather than being surprised at how KonMari changed her relationship with possessions, Wendy approached the method *expecting* her view on the material to change.

Wendy's relationship with *'spark joy'* was the most ambiguous out of all those I interviewed. Yet rather than this contrasting with Kondo's books, it seemed to highlight Kondo's own ambiguous relationship with objects and joy. Her understanding of *'spark joy'* brought forth that there is more to our possessions than meets the eye.

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The journeys of the three women in this chapter illustrate that objects can both support us and burden us. They each entered into KonMari during times of personal grief and overwhelm. Sorting through their possessions resulted in them appreciating the calming effect that having one's physical space in order can cause.

Appadurai's (1986) theory of object biographies can be observed throughout the experiences of these three women. Hattie's understanding of *'spark joy'* rested upon a resonance she felt with objects that had been gifted to her by loved ones, as they acted as a reminder of a happy exchange. Kelly's example of sorting her late father's possessions, and Wendy's decluttering post-divorce highlight the memories represented by, and held within, objects.

As discussed in Wendy's story, the act of paring down one's possessions is not always a joyful occasion. Decluttering gurus could even be viewed as unusual for their celebration of what is commonly a sorrowful process caused by a tragic event. Sorting through possessions in one's home merely to make life easier or to house more aesthetically pleasing is a privilege. As highlighted by the amount of people only able to take up KonMari due to Covid19 lockdowns, having the time to declutter is also a privilege. Affected by the growing difficulty of being able to afford a spacious home, Hattie had to declutter when she moved into a smaller flat with her partner. After the death of her father, Kelly had to sort through the possessions he left behind. Thrust suddenly into a divorce, Wendy had to separate her possessions from her ex-husband's in their home, and take them to a much smaller flat. There was a sadness and experience of loss to the KonMari journeys of all the women.

This demonstrated privilege to declutter supports Kilroy-Marac's discussion of the*'inconspicuous consumption'* promoted by decluttering gurus and minimalists (Kilroy-Marac, 2016, p.317). It also indicates that though one must be in a relatively economically affluent position to adopt KonMari, there is no prerequisite for the emotional affluence of one beginning the method. A range of emotional reasons for practising KonMari has been presented across the participants in this research, and none - positive or negative - seems to have hindered completion of the process. This indicates a potential reason for Kondo's global success, as her method welcomes followers of all emotional capabilities with a 'come as you are' attitude.

The overwhelming situation of each woman highlights the importance of Kondo's method leaving space for emotion. As brought forth by Wendy's story, the KonMari method has an ambiguity to it that complements the complex form in which emotions manifest. Centring her method around an emotion means that Kondo attends to the order and control over not just the physical, but psychological too. As they reached the ends of their *'tidying festivals',* Hattie, Kelly, and Wendy all reflected that their attitude to life now often felt as organised as their possessions. This sense of peace formed through the ordering process of KonMari echoes Cwerner and Metcalfe's (2003) analysis of material disorder as indices of mental and emotional disorder.

Hattie, Kelly and Wendy all, by the end of the KonMari method, had a nuanced understanding that life is not found in their objects, but in what events and experiences occur with the support of objects. This demonstrates an interesting balance formed between both an awareness of and conscious interaction with the material, yet also the release - post-decluttering - back into the background of everyday life, as described in Miller's (2010)

'Humility of things'. A new sense of normal is established within the home in the wake of the *'tidying festival'.* As explained by these three women, their daily lives feel much more enjoyable now that they are in a harmonious rhythm with them; upheld both functionally and emotionally by the support of their newly-ordered homes.

Chapter 4:
Befriending Ambiguity.

A longing for less. A longing for Japan?

'I just had too much stuff' was a comment I heard many times throughout my research, as my informants described their life pre-KonMari to me. *'I just have so much, and I don't need all of it'* is another similar expression I recognised from many YouTube KonMari decluttering videos, and episodes of Kondo's *Netflix* show. This research has encapsulated

the pride, freedom and peace that following the Konmari method brought several British women. As the weight of *stuff* was lifted, joy was unveiled.

Summed up perfectly in the title of his recent book, Chayka (2020) discusses that across the West there appears to currently be a *'Longing for Less'.* In his final chapter: *'Shadow'*, Chayka attempts to place his finger on much of what this research has explored: why, then, is Japanese culture seen as the answer to this problem of clutter?

He begins by discussing that minimalism is easily perceived as something foreign to the natural excess lifestyle of the West (Chayka, 2020). Connecting this foreign feeling with Japanese culture, he writes: *'A culture with what appeared to be a heritage of spare, precious, quiet, sensitive aesthetics is a ready-made solution and contrast to problematic excess'* (Chayka, 2020, p.170).

During my research, I encountered many brief comments from my informants that seemed to point to this over-simplified perception of Japanese culture. The majority of these perceptions stemmed from what my informants had seen about small Japanese apartments:

> *But in Japan they're minimalist because they don't have big properties. They all have little flats and so they don't really have the space anyway*.

> *Japanese minimalism- they don't think about it, they are trained in it. They have probably done it for centuries because their stuff always gets damaged by earthquakes.*

Then there were also comments about 'Japanese' design, and the 'Japanese' relationship with objects:

> *Everything the Japanese do is pretty, isn't it? They don't do anything ugly if they can avoid it, although they do accept imperfection - like Kintsugi.*

> *We don't have the Japanese things of believing stuff has souls or trying to make everything pretty.*

It was evident that my informants understood minimalism as synonymous with Japanese culture. Despite reading her books, they seemed not to have recognised that Kondo's work began not in taking a 'natural' Japanese practice of tidying to Westerners (as presented in the *Netflix* shows) but in helping Japanese people address their own clutter and

disorganisation (Kondo, 2014). To them, KonMari was indeed the perfect 'other' that represented everything the overcrowded aesthetics of the West didn't. This connection between Japanese culture and minimalism has meant that Japan is being viewed by some in the West as the answer to the ailments of the West (Cox, 2013). Those who are becoming burdened by the volume of their possessions are turning not just to a life of less for help, but to promises of an unfamiliar culture and way of life. In this final chapter, I seek to explore Kondo's place amongst this western longing for a 'Japanese' way of life.

KonMari and Japanese Branding

Days before I began writing this final chapter, Kondo's new *Netflix* show *'spark joy'* (2021) was released. The first episode opens with the haunting sound of Kondo striking a tuning fork with a crystal ('*Spark Joy: The Joy of Family'*, 2021). A camera shot of incense burning in her simple, warmly decorated Japanese home is shown. Kondo is sat in her living room, moving the tuning fork in a sweeping motion over her head, her eyes closed. She explains: *'In the Japanese way of thinking: We believe every object has a soul, an energy flowing through it.'* ('*Spark Joy: The Joy of Family*', 2021, 0:39). Following shots show her knelt on the floor of her house with her head bowed and eyes closed, and then her playing with her two young daughters whilst her husband prepares some salmon for dinner. Unlike the austere white and grey aesthetic of her Instagram, Kondo's home is surprisingly warm. Decorated mostly with wooden and wicker furniture, warm yellow lighting, and the odd carefully-placed crystal, her home appears far more inviting and comfortable than one would perhaps expect.

The official KonMari online shop includes a section named *'Japanese Heritage'* which include objects such as: a pair of sasawashi slippers, a matcha hand-whisk, and the tuning fork and crystal used by Kondo on screen (Shop.KonMari, 2021). It is clear from this shop, her *Netflix* show, and throughout her books that Kondo is proud of her Japanese nationality (Kondo, 2014; 2017) - either this, or she has realised its commercial benefit (Deibel, 2020).

Throughout this research I have highlighted various aspects of Japanese culture which are echoed in Kondo's method and philosophy - such as Japanese tea ceremonies and the concept of the *Genkan*. Just like the products sold in her shop, Kondo and her method can be considered as products from Japan. Similar to *Hello Kitty, Pokémon,* and even sushi, the popularity of the KonMari method and Kondo herself rests upon the novelty of their *'Japaneseness'* (Yano, 2013; Allison, 2016). This is especially demonstrated through her screen presence in her *Netflix* show; the fact that, for the majority of her time with the contestants, Kondo requires a translator clearly differentiates her from regular American

makeover shows. Clips of her pronouncing English phrases with her strong accent are replayed over and over at the beginning of each episode; certain 'foreign' actions of hers - such as greeting the home – are also given prominent screen time. The design of the *Netflix* show appears to place particular emphasis on the aspects of Kondo's character which contrast with the usual American TV presence, constantly exoticising her.

This exoticisation of Kondo and her brand therefore continues a narrative that everything related to her method and brand has a sense of *'otherness'.* Rather than adopting and welcoming what she offers into Western society, the KonMari method is persistently posed as an outsider. When Kondo's method is indulged in, it is done so cautiously, with many aspects left aside. Westerners are hesitant to thank their items, quickly dismissing the concept that they could choose to see objects as companions, just as Kondo does. This immediately fractures the KonMari method, separating the practical instructions from the mental/spiritual/emotional. This is most clearly seen in the contrast between the amount of information Kondo put into her books about her personal journey with objects and decluttering, and her personal convictions about the material world, to the notable lack of this information in her *Netflix* show. Instead, viewers are given much less of Kondo's *why* behind her method, and the *how* is instead emphasised. As remarked on by my informants who had read her books, the *Netflix* show therefore felt misleading in its representation of Kondo's intentions.

Though her first *Netlfix* show included much emotional counselling with the contestants as they fought through the overwhelm that decluttering ensured, the unique emotional-aesthetic of Kondo's method was underrepresented. Compressed into the classic makeover TV show narrative in each episode, the nuances and subtle beauties of the KonMari method are brushed past. Though some of my informants shared similar experiences to the TV show contestants, all of their accounts of their decluttering were much messier than the slick "before and after" stories presented on the show. Of course, there is a commercial necessity for this format in the TV show - however, this research argues that the joy of the KonMari method is within this mess, not the impressively sudden banishment of it.

KonMari and Ambiguity

Where Kondo's aesthetic and branding may have captured the attention of aspiring minimalists, it was something more interesting that caused them to stay within her words and complete the method. This was the flexible and ambiguous nature of *'spark joy'.* As highlighted through the differing stories that emerged from this research, the beauty of the KonMari method was that it could be moulded and adapted to suit each person. Where

minimalist gurus offer black and white rules on the amount one can own to be considered a minimalist, the KonMari method embraces a much more ambiguous approach.

Tanizaki (2001) celebrated the harnessing of shadows in historic Japanese design, lamenting the sterile and harsh designs of the West. In his famous piece: *'In Praise of Shadows'* he romantically describes the ambiguity of darkness, and the sense of peace the inclusion of shadows brings (Tanizaki, 2001). The term *'Wabi Sabi'* became popular amongst the gift sections in many UK bookstores, as authors like Kempton sought to explain the Japanese art of appreciating imperfection (Kempton 2018; Chayka, 2020). Kintsugi, the art of mending of broken pottery using gold to highlight the broken edges, is the most famous demonstration of this difficult-to-translate philosophy (Buetow and Wallis, 2019). *'Mono no aware': 'the pathos of things'* is a similar untranslatable concept (Chambers, 2013). Each spring, Japanese people embrace *'mono no aware'* by celebrating the fleeting beauty of the cherry blossom through Hanami, reminding themselves that nothing lasts and so should be appreciated whilst it can (Chambers, 2013). Kuki wrote about '*Iki'*: a traditional form of Japanese aesthetic and style that he felt was being lost in the modernisation of Japan, similar to Tanizaki and his shadows (Chayka, 2020). Discussing *iki,* Chayka writes: '*Iki is important because it provides a space of reconciliation. Its sense of beauty is not about decluttering or cleanliness, but instead about arriving at a resting point, an acceptance of uncertainty.'* (Chayka 2020, p.208).

All these writers worked to wrap words around an appreciation of the vague and ambiguous within Japanese culture. As one seeks to enjoy each subtle flavour in a cup poured at a tea ceremony, or sits and gazes out at the graceful curves of the rocks in a zen garden, one is partaking in historic actions that befriend the imperfect (Cox, 2013; Kempton, 2018). There is an awareness of time within all these concepts: the changing of shadows throughout the day, the weathering of materials through time appreciated within *wabi sabi*, and the melancholic pondering evoked by *mono no aware* (Cox, 2013). Ikebana - the Japanese art of flower arranging - carries a similar consideration for time (Chayka, 2020). Nishitani wrote of the transient state each flower is held in in ikebana: *'freezing the moment when the flower is cut, it is poised in death'* (Nishitani, 1991, cited in Chayka, 2020, p.216). Chayka notes the contrast between these slow-paced concepts, which underpin what we understand as 'Japanese minimalism', and the brutal, rigid hunger for less in Western minimalism (Chayka, 2020). He observed: *'Japanese art accesses eternity by embracing time'* (Chayka, 2020, p.217). Though minimalism is so often connected with Japanese culture, much of these philosophies behind the *'less is more'* approach is not recognised by Western minimalism. To pick up the reference to '*In Praise of Shadows'*, Western minimalist

approaches seem to concentrate on clear distinctions and separations, where the aesthetic outlined by Tanizaki (2001) is one with an embrace of shades of light with less clearly defined boundaries. I argue that to define Japanese culture as 'minimalist' is to mis-apply a Western cultural category – but an extremely common misapplication.

One only needs to explore a commercial European city for a short time before a *Uniqulo* or *Muji* store is located (Usui, Kotabe and Murray, 2017). Filled with plain, simplistic designs in muted colours, these two brands have promoted and benefited from a popularised version of 'Japanese' aesthetics. Inge Daniels (2001) laments the misrepresentation of the Japanese home in her chapter *'The 'Untidy' Japanese House'*. Describing the homes of two different Japanese families, Daniels dismantles the over-simplified perception of the Japanese house and connects this Western perception with a romanticised image of traditional houses from the Tokugawa period instead (Daniels, 2001). Daniels argues that the perception of Japanese culture as minimalist is simply inaccurate and that the reality of Japanese material culture is much more complex, varied and ambiguous (Daniels, 2001). In my interviews there was a clear perception that Japanese people all behave in an instinctively "KonMari" way – without noticing that KonMari was developed by a Japanese woman to deal with the reality to which Daniels points, the untidy Japanese home (Daniels, 2001). As noted above, many of those I interviewed did not seem to have registered that Kondo's work was established not with the tidying of Western homes but with applying her methods to Japanese homes (Kondo, 2014). The reality of Japanese material culture is much more undefined and varied than this common perception of "minimalist" Japanese homes – and the KonMari approach seems to have struck a chord by engaging with this reality, a point of clear meeting between Western and Japanese people caught up in the global realities of capitalism and consumption.

KonMari and the Material world

As one reads Kondo's books, and follows her method themselves, it becomes true that the KonMari method dwells within the same opaque position as many of the Japanese philosophies and practices mentioned above. She does not provide rigid advice on *how much* one should own, only that it *all* must *'spark joy'* (Kondo, 2014; 2017). Centring the method around *'spark joy'* creates not a physical home aesthetic, but an emotional-aesthetic for one's entire lifestyle. Your home *looking* beautiful is only an incidental desire of Kondo; her main wish is for people's homes to *feel* beautiful (Kondo, 2014; 2017). As she explains her personal take on *feng sui*, she admits that she does not fully believe that tidying by the energy flow of objects brings good fortune, but she does believe that opening a neatly

organised drawer of only clothing you adore can (Kondo, 2014, p.229). All of my informants developed emotionally through their KonMari journeys, and it was these changes in their feelings towards themselves, their lives, and their possessions that I have tried to capture. Though I was shown around some of their homes virtually, I reflected on how it was not actually important for me to see their homes to understand how they felt about them after tidying. The fact that some willingly showed me their homes through the screen without me asking certainly revealed much about the pride they felt over their new environment.

Many of my informants began following the KonMari method hoping that it would lead them on to becoming a minimalist; however, none of them seemed to feel that they were - or that they wanted to be - after they completed their '*tidying festival'.* This is because they were no longer seeking to live a physically empty life, but instead an emotionally full one. As Kondo explains, she begins her method with decluttering because the objects that do *'spark joy'* are then able to stand out more (Kondo, 2014; 2017). One informant reflected during our interview:

I almost think it's harmful to you to get rid of things that do spark joy for you - and the minimalist method is a bit like that isn't it - if it's not useful to you then it doesn't mean anything so you must bin it. So I always check if something Sparks Joy because… I think it's just a much better way of living your life.

Hattie learned through the Konmari method that there are two manifestations of being materialistic. One is to be too heavily concerned with the material – its value and what it implies about the status of its owner, and the other is to be grateful, respectful and loving towards one's material possessions. In an episode of her second *Netflix* series, Kondo explains that she aims to teach her children to respect and care for their items ('*Spark Joy: The Joy of Balance'*, 2021. Kelly, who was a full-time nanny, remarked in my interview with her that:

There's a severe lack of respect for stuff. There's no 'oh I should be careful with this' because there's no consequence for anything. Because they can just replace it - and that's a societal thing. And so I think the fact that Kondo is trying to engage with children is great because it gives them a sense of respect and independence too.

Kondo introduces a new path of relationship with our objects. Where some of my interviewees explained that they feel that Japanese culture believes that *'everything has a soul',* some did discuss how they understood Buddhism - which they heavily associate with all Eastern countries - as a religion against materiality. Glassman notes that: *'One commonly held assumption is that Buddhism is "anti-materialistic": deeply suspicious of and*

antagonistic to the world of things' (Glassman, 2008, p.405). Western minimalism at times draws upon this over-simplified Buddhist narrative, that the material is nothing but a burden on our lives, preventing us from enlightenment (Glassman, 2008). Many of my informants previously knew that Japanese culture has a strong connection with nature, however they assumed that this meant that man-made *'stuff'* was therefore perceived as less desirable. It was then interesting for them to read Kondo's books and see her apply this spiritual relationship to everyday objects. In contrast to 'anti-materialistic' minimalists, Kondo's method echoes the more complex attitude of Japanese Buddhism and Shintoism towards the material (Deibel, 2020). She places emphasis on understanding the energy of objects and advocates learning to treat possessions as though they are living, as this will reveal patterns within nature that are beneficial to abide with (Kondo, 2014). This can also be linked with Shinto beliefs of *Kami* and Japanese folklore tales about *tsukumogami* (Yanagita, 1955; Lillehoj, 1995; Breen and Teeuwen, 2013).

Though her method reflects so much of her culture, the KonMari method was first developed for and through Kondo's clients in Japan (Kondo, 2014). Accounts of Kondo teaching her clueless Japanese clients indicate that it cannot be assumed that the KonMari method is something natural for Japanese people. This is perhaps forgotten whilst one watches Kondo's TV show; lost in the sensation that the KonMari method is a product from Japanese culture, not specifically from Marie Kondo (Deibel, 2020). Just as it cannot be assumed that every Japanese person cares about *Pokémon,* it certainly cannot be assumed that all Japanese people treat their objects as companions.

As Yano (2013) identifies in her book *'Pink Globalization'*, image and aesthetic are key to successful branding and communication. *Hello Kitty* owes much of her success to her iconic yet simple design (Yano, 2013). The perfect balance of cute - feminine and yet also vacant - *Hello Kitty's* image is a winning recipe worldwide (Yano, 2013). Kondo's image and branding act in a similar way (Deibel, 2020). Her Instagram feed and website mimic the white, empty aesthetic of Western minimalism, and just the correct amount of Japanese objects are included to continue the association between this image and Japanese culture. As Chayka comments, her branding causes her to appear as the *'The only most obvious import'* when discussing the conflation between Japanese culture and minimalism (Chayka, 2020, p.170). Though Kondo's philosophy sits closer to the vague Japanese philosophies of appreciation and respect - even for that which is imperfect - her austere branding seems to suggest a rigidity closer to Western minimalism (Chayka, 2020). This, in combination with Kondo's association with cleanliness and tidying, perhaps conveys a much more severe message than her method actually seeks to communicate. This mistranslation is then

perhaps built upon and emphasised through western media. Her new *Netlifx* series then provides an interesting contrast to this, as viewers are allowed to see into Kondo's home and discover it to be a warm, inviting space ('*Spark Joy: The Joy of Family'*, 2021). As expected, it is free from clutter, yet it does not echo at all what Miller discusses about minimal places: '*There is a violence to such emptiness'* (Miller, 2008, p.8).

The assumption that Kondo is a minimalist is a mis-translation caused by an over-emphasis on the discarding section of her method, and a branding seemingly designed to appeal to Western minimalism. Despite this also being brushed over in her first TV show, those whom I interviewed testified that the key aspects of the KonMari method were not the focus on discarding, but the focus on a personal and grateful relationship with one's possessions. The famed *'magic'* of Kondo's method is not the art of owning less, but the art of discerning what *'Sparks Joy'* (Kondo, 2014). The KonMari method is not designed to be a forever time-consuming practise, but a once in a lifetime *'tidying festival'* that causes one to refocus one's life on what is important (Kondo, 2014). As the overwhelming problem of clutter and mess is removed, one can finally have both physical and mental space to enjoy time with one's families and friends; to work on one's passions.

Kondo wages war on the common conception that tidying is a chore or punishment. She instead recognises that it is an inescapable necessity to life, and so seeks to uncover joy within this daily action. Again demonstrating the art of befriending the imperfect, Kondo does not attempt to banish the problem of tidying but decides to work with it. No matter how minimalist one is, one will still have at least a few possessions that require care and tidying. Kondo's message is simple: she does not want people to fear or escape their possessions, their clutter, or their 'chore' of tidying up. She instead wants people to discover how they can enjoy their possessions and enjoy the daily act of using them and then putting them away. Our possessions, like people, will always require attention and care. It is therefore of no consequence to Kondo how many possessions one owns, so long as each possession is respected rather than regarded as merely stress-inducing 'clutter'. Though her question of *'Does it spark joy?'* seems overly simplistic - a 'one-size fits all' - this question leads to many consequences. Once it is realised that an item does *'spark joy',* then it can never be unseen as such again. Like *'epiphany',* the owner is in that moment changed and must therefore change how they treat that object. *'spark joy'* is not just a method of decluttering, but a new regime for one's home and lifestyle. Just as one may learn the ways of *wabi sabi, iki,* or *mono no aware,* Kondo asks us to adopt a new philosophy in life. A philosophy centred on joy.

Conclusion

I contend that the idea that Western culture is caught up in a ‘longing for less’ is too simplistic and that Kondo’s popularity illustrates this. While often characterised as tied up with an arguably misplaced conception of Japanese ‘minimalist’ design and lifestyle, the KonMari method connects with different (and possibly more contemporary and authentic) themes in Japanese material culture. Its core is not the art of discarding to create more space. It is not achieving an aesthetically pleasing, clutter free, *Muji*-like home. It is the art of understanding what is controllable, and what is not. Kondo shows us that it is entirely possible for us to properly control how much we own, despite the relentless drive of consumerism. She also shows us that it is entirely possible to organise all that we own, and to learn how to instinctively keep a tidy home. She does not promise us that we will never have to clean up our homes again, but instead teaches us to find this necessary aspect of life enjoyable. Where some may feel that a perfect life would never include tidying and

instead only include time spent relaxing with friends and family, Kondo encourages us to see the time we spend with our possessions as just as valuable and nourishing for us. Kondo has befriended an aspect of life that Western minimalists, in particular, seem to be running away from - spending time with one's possessions. Kondo herself found that when she learnt about minimalism, the material became a sickly plague to her life. Yet she struggled to rid herself of all her possessions. After many years of developing her method, she is now offering to all an option for a new relationship with the material world. Understanding that our lives and relationships are never black and white, she instead draws upon her culture for inspiration of practices that dwell in the greys. She has developed a practise that simultaneously heals the burden of mess in the home, as well as the unattainable standards of minimalism. The KonMari method is an ideal balance of clarity and ambiguity. The instructions of *'spark joy'* and identifying a home for each object are clear, yet they still allow space for the complexities of emotions and memories that objects evoke. Kondo does not ask you to tidy your home with a ruthless elimination of emotion, but instead affirms your feelings and celebrates and harnesses the power our objects have over our emotions.

Every person I interviewed for this research was female. The majority of those in the KonMari Facebook groups were female. Throughout my fieldwork, it was an honour to have my informants share the emotional journeys that following the KonMari method had taken them on. They all remarked at times on how surprised they were at how emotional they had found decluttering. The majority of books I have discovered about minimalism were written by men. Through this research, it has become more evident to me how special Kondo's work is for women – where Ouellette (2019) critiques Kondo for reinforcing gender stereotypes and male power, my own research highlighted an approach by a woman that seemed to resonate specifically with women. Typically more emotionally motivated than men, many of the women I interviewed struggled to relate to the male-driven discussions of minimalism; finding them too practical and emotionless. The KonMari method and its friendship with emotion has therefore been the long-awaited answer for those who are more emotionally articulate. Many of my informants explained that the episode of Kondo's TV show where she helped a woman whose husband had died tidy struck a deep chord with them. This is because in this episode, Kondo sits with Maggie as she cries over her late husband's shirts ('*Tidying Up: Sparking Joy After Loss'*, 2019). She decides at that moment to change the order of her method to accommodate Maggie's emotional needs - prioritising her over the careful flow of KonMari ('*Tidying Up'*, 2019). Marie Kondo is not scared of physical or emotional mess. She enters clients' homes without judgment and wants nothing but joy and order for that home. She understands that our possessions are much more than material objects. Unphased, she sat with Maggie as she held the items that now represented both joy

and loss, life and death. The KonMari method has a sympathy to it that minimalism seems to lack. Though centring an entire method and lifestyle around joy can seem naive, Kondo's method carries a sophisticated understanding of the uncertainties we experience on a daily basis. I contend that this provides a nuanced balance between clarity and complexity, an ability to feel at ease when we discover a blurred edge, which is distinct and different from the clean lines and lack of emotional engagement in western minimalism. Just as Tanazaki celebrates the ambiguity of shadows, Kondo celebrates the ambiguity of emotions and memories captured in our possessions.

There is no doubt that we seek to find and express ourselves through the possessions we own. We are also attempting to do this in a consumerist society that constantly pressurises us to buy more, and therefore *be* more. Instead of trying to cast off imperfections in ourselves as we cast out items from our houses, Kondo asks us to reconcile what we consume and who we are. Rather than encouraging minimalisms disgust at the material and desire to distance from it, she instead invites us to close the gaps between us and objects and embrace the act of becoming emotionally entwined with them. As she leads us into this new familiarity with the material, she uses *'spark joy'* to ensure there is always a positive centre to the relationship, protecting us from developing an irritable connection to our possessions again.

Coaxing out a reaction of joy from within each person who follows the KonMari method, Kondo invites us to not only be kind to our possessions, but ourselves also. Where one could criticise themself in despair over how many possessions they have needlessly acquired, Kondo seeks to provide us with the tools to travel through the journeys that our past consumer habits take us on. The promise of KonMari is that our journeys might end in a place filled with *'spark joy'*; peaceful that we are finally at one with our homes. Perhaps even ourselves too.

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