Minimalism, Motherhood, and Marie Kondo: The Appeal of a Japanese Aesthetic for American Moms

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Abstract
Since the English translation of Marie Kondo's book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing* (Ten Speed Press, 2014), many Americans have been fascinated by the promise of being able to sort through all their things in a way that returns control of their living space to them. This dream is especially appealing to mothers, who carry the burden of managing household stuff: the accumulation of family needs and interests and the avalanche of children's toys and clothes. Simultaneously, there is a cultural narrative insisting that mothers are responsible for giving children an idyllic childhood and curating photos and mementos for the future. While parents of any gender might feel these social expectations, women are more likely to have internalized them. American women, even those working full time outside the home, are socialized to assume that housework is their responsibility. Many women also feel pressure to curate previously private domestic spaces and display them on social media platforms. Tension exists between the dream of a largely empty white room and the reality of life with active children, and this creates space for marketing ways to manage that tension to American mothers. Some women have monetized their own experiences by building online businesses that promise physical and psychological transformation. For many mothers, asserting control over household space and maintaining that control through the permanent removal of objects can be just as valuable as any time saved from cleaning.

Keywords: Decluttering, Homemaking, Marie Kondo, Minimalism, Motherhood, Women's Studies

Introduction

Since the 2014 English translation of Marie Kondo's book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing,* many Americans have been fascinated by the promise of being able to sort through all their things *en masse* in a way that "sparks joy" and returns control of their living space to them. This dream is especially appealing to mothers, who frequently carry the heaviest burden of managing household stuff —not only their own things, but also the accumulation of family needs and interests and the avalanche of children's toys, clothes, and everything else. Simultaneously, there is a strong cultural narrative insisting that mothers are responsible for giving children an idyllic childhood and curating photos and mementos for the future. While parents of any gender might feel these social pressures and expectations, women are more likely to have internalized them. This paper mostly refers to mothers, with the understanding that other parents may be in the same position.

House Work

The Pew Research Center recently published a study reporting that women in all types of heterosexual marriages do at least an hour more housework per week than husbands do (Fry et al., 2023). In marriages where the wife earns the only income, she still does an average of 5.2 hours of housework and 4.1 hours of caregiving, with husbands without an income averaging 4 hours on housework and 6.1 hours on caregiving. In egalitarian marriages with children, where both spouses make roughly the same incomes, mothers do 5.1 hours per week of housework and 12.2 hours per week of childcare. Fathers do 2.2 hours of housework and 9 hours of childcare. The gap is largest in families where the husband earns all or most of the household income: wives do 7.3-10.5 hours of housework and husbands averaged 1.4. Wives did 9.4-14.1 hours of caregiving and husbands did 4.5. A Gallup survey in 2019 showed that women are more likely to take primary responsibility to "mak[ing] decisions about furniture and decorations" (62%, 33% equally), "doing the laundry (58%,[28% equally]), cleaning the house (51%, [37 % equally]) and preparing meals (51%, [32% equally])" (Brenan, 2020). These findings show that 83-95% of women in domestic partnerships in the U.S. believe that they have the primary or equal responsibility for all of these homemaking tasks.

In 2014-2015, Marie Kondo's book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing* caught the American imagination, especially that of mothers. Many families already have piles of stuff, and the thought of deliberately making piles in order to get rid of most of the stuff, with the promise of the piles never coming back, was intoxicating. This trend connects in powerful ways to pre-existing American ideas about Japanese aesthetics and Zen Buddhism, and to newer anxieties about consumerism and climate change. The American interest in and adaptation of Zen aesthetics grew in the 1950s and 60s, and expanded again in the 2000s. Helen Tworkov suggests that "the affiliation between Zen and the refined arts of calligraphy, ceramics, tea ceremony, and flower arranging" drew women in during the first period of expansion (1989, 15). American images of Zen included rock gardens, tea ceremonies, and monks meditating in empty rooms (Kennedy, 2015). Also in the 2000s, ideas of decluttering and minimalism attracted more and more interest as a way to counter the pain and disgust that some people were feeling about consumerism and materialism (Fuji, n.d.). Minimalism as a way of life in the American context really came to maturity following the financial crisis of 2008. So many people lost their homes, or lost their jobs and weren't able to buy houses or had to sell their houses. Suddenly, hundreds of thousands of people questioned the standard "American Dream" of

buying bigger and bigger houses to build wealth and display social status. Suddenly, owning a big house could lead to bankruptcy. Many people had to downsize; other people chose to downsize. Two other social factors contributing to this shift were the entrance of the baby-boom generation into retirement age, moving into smaller houses or retirement communities, and the increasing interest on the part of young adults to move into apartments or small row houses in revitalizing (or gentrifying) urban neighborhoods. Websites like Apartment Therapy and The Minimalists became popular. This combination of a trend towards minimalism and the rise of the so-called "mommy blogger" started to come together around 2010.

Therefore, Americans—mothers in particular—were prepared to receive Marie Kondo's message about the transformative power of deep decluttering and organizing when the English translation was published in 2014. Two things that made the KonMari method different from earlier books about decluttering and home organizing was that it taught people how to organize by category instead of by room, and it discusses the spiritual life that we attribute to objects. It recommends thanking objects and saying goodbye to them. It treats tidying and cleaning almost as a meditative practice, emphasizing quietness, touching each object and observing each moment. Kondo is very clear that she does not see her method as simple decluttering or even truly minimalism. In her website essay "KonMari Is Not Minimalism," she writes that her method "encourages living among items you truly cherish. The first step in my tidying method is to imagine your ideal lifestyle. For some, this vision might be to surround yourself with the bare essentials; for others, it could mean living in a home teeming with beloved art, books, collections and heirlooms" (2023). These are careful distinctions, and it makes the KonMari method even more appealing and achievable for mothers who aren't interested in or able to get rid of everything that's not essential. The KonMari website and two television series on Netflix (*Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* in 2019 and *Sparking Joy with Marie Kondo* in 2021) have expanded her influence even further. Recently, she attracted attention again when she admitted that tidying is a lot harder with young children around now that she has three (Koncius, 2023). People may have laughed after the interview discussing this in the Washington Post, but they also appreciated her honesty and recognition of stages of life. They felt even more connection to her (Moore, 2023).

Minimalism

While decluttering is an action, minimalism is an aesthetic and a philosophy that guides lifestyle choices. *A Monk's Guide to a Clean House and Mind* (2018) is fascinating because the author Shoukei Matsumoto includes information about Zen Buddhism in his introduction while being a monk in a different Japanese Buddhist tradition, Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha, which began in the 13th century. He writes, "The Zen sect of Buddhism is greatly renowned for the cleaning practices of its monks, but cleaning is greatly valued in Japanese Buddhism in general as a way of 'cultivating the mind.'" (Introduction). Joshua Becker takes another explicitly religious approach to minimalism. He heard about minimalism from a neighbor while he was cleaning out his garage instead of playing with his young children; he saw the light, chose his children over stuff, and embraced a minimalist lifestyle. Becker is a Christian minister, and he tells this story as a conversion narrative. Now he writes books, websites, magazines, does public speaking, offers an online course, and runs a nonprofit organization to improve the treatment of orphans around the world. He very strongly connects minimalism to spirituality, integrity, and contentment.

Goodbye Things: The New Japanese Minimalism by Fumio Sasaki, published in English in 2017, has not had the same level of American cultural impact as Marie Kondo's books, even though it has the same basic philosophy and the same cover aesthetics. This relative lack of success is partly because when it was published, the first massive wave of Konmari enthusiasm had crashed, but more because it doesn't appeal broadly to millions of American mothers. The author self-identifies as a 35-year-old single man, the only person living in his space, he lionizes Steve Jobs, and he tells stories about his bachelor lifestyle from before he saw the light of minimalism. His writing is still interesting and engaging, but much less relevant to American moms than Kondo's writing about living in family spaces, first her family of birth and then her married home, and her clients, a mix of different family configurations including singles. Kondo's Netflix series focused on helping families not just declutter but also to think about their relationships – to possessions and to each other – in different ways, and this theme demonstrated the core of her appeal to American moms.

Kondo also has a training program for KonMari certification for becoming a consultant, an online course, and a store on her website with items ranging from useful, decorative, and metaphysical (KonMari, 2023). The Very Important Papers Vault ($57) clearly supports the tidying mission, and the handmade ceramic tea ceremony matcha bowl ($45) and tenugui cloth ($25) offer traditional Japanese aesthetics and an aspect of Zen ritual. A stainless steel pot made in Japan ($55) is useful, but its provenance is what evokes a sense of Zen minimalism. In contrast, the Tuning Fork and Quartz Crystal Set ($80) either has a metaphysical value or a negative value as clutter. People can follow KonMari minimalism and still display social status through their objects.

Minimalism in the American context has a strong connection to wealth and social status. It takes financial confidence to get rid of things that your family might need again, and when there are fewer objects, each one is more subject to scrutiny and display. Renee O'Shanassy points out that a real limitation of minimalism is that it is only "the privileged who have comfort in discarding their unwanted goods" (2018). Kate Washington also identifies connections between this trend and systems of gender-based and economic oppression as women are expected to give up things, food, and time to reach and maintain unrealistic levels of both household minimalism and physical thinness (2018). She sees a familiar ideological undercurrent: "Decluttering gets advertised as self-actualizing and soothing—a form of self-care—but, when scaled up, this standard reads as little more than a stylish, stripped-down reboot of old-fashioned urgings that women stick to the domestic sphere, at the expense of broader political and social action, a new twist on the old angel-in-the-house conundrum." Washington argues that what we need to focus on is not how much stuff a household has, but instead to recognize how much women's work and value is diverted into the household and the personal instead of engaging with issues in the larger world. O'Shanassy would agree, but also insist that the unfulfilled promise of minimalism would be "to question where products come from, what resources were used or who was doing the work (and in what conditions, for what pay). Minimalism, if it leads people towards asking themselves these questions has the potential to transform our world, with greater demand on businesses to bring better made, repairable products, that serve the needs of people over the life cycle." In contrast, Charlie Brown argues that "Dismissing minimalism as being a movement too obsessed with *things*, essentially dismisses a key source of discontent and stress for women" (2022). Brown compares the ease of her life maintaining a minimalist home to the stress her mother experienced managing a house full of (other people's) stuff. What Brown mentions in passing but doesn't interrogate, however, is how instrumental a male partner's resistance or cooperation is. Her father collected stuff; her own partner concurs in their minimalist

lifestyle. What Washington looks past is how much decluttering can in fact reduce daily chronic stress for many women. The important point in these articles is that minimalism is most helpful as a tool, not as a goal in itself.

Entrepreneurship

The biggest business opportunity since the KonMari wave has been for the "mompreneur," Inspired by Kondo, a household industry of small businesses focused on decluttering has emerged—mothers who start self-help businesses, advertising through social media. These entrepreneurs use their identities as mothers to justify and authorize their businesses. Ironically, this movement is consumerist in its own way, by selling self-help products and inviting people to value the things they keep even more. Many of the women who want to monetize their enthusiasm for coaching, decluttering, and parenting advice advertise on Facebook. They also organize Facebook groups to keep people engaged and reaching out. Blogs and YouTube video series sometimes turn into books. There are strong visual similarities of the covers: a curved brush stroke, an empty white interior, a few neutral colored modernist pieces of furniture, a single flower or a flowering branch. Most of these books very clearly address women with families.

The rhetoric of domestic minimalism re-emphasizes family, even as it promises time for vague other activities. Jessica Sakura is a third-generation Japanese American who published *Organization: 2nd Edition: Cleaning, Organizing, Tidying Up - The Japanese Art of Organizing Your Life* in 2015. The book is very similar to Kondo's and references her several times. There is less specific practical advice, but organizes the book according to American home patterns, room by room, instead of by type of item. Sakura assumes that houses will have a garage or basement to be the collection area for discards after being cleaned out itself. The book also sounds a note that matches Washington's concern, reminding the reader to "Enjoy your family with all the extra time that this allows you in cleaning time. When your home is organized it only takes minimal cleaning, and that means enjoying life within the walls of your home, rather than becoming a slave to housework and chores." (loc. 80/83) Less time needed for cleaning means more time for home and family—but that promise is remarkably similar to the trap Betty Friedan described in *The Feminine Mystique* sixty years ago.

Some writers use the term "minimalism" without actually meaning it. Cozy Minimalism is an increasingly popular website and podcast that emphasizes mindful home decorating, and *Minimalista: Your Step-By-Step Guide to a Better Home, Wardrobe, and Life,* written by Shira Gill in 2021, is full of beautiful photos full of stuff. The rooms aren't cluttered—they're beautifully arranged —but they're not minimalist by any stretch of the imagination. Other softenings of the concept of minimalism are *Minimalism for Families: Practical Minimalist Living Strategies to Simplify Your Home and Life* (2017) by Zoe Kim. It emerged from and continues on Kim's website Raising Simple. She also posts videos on Instagram. In 2020, her family (with 4 children) built a "minimalist modern farmhouse" with space, dark wood floors, big windows, simple furniture, and white walls everywhere, inside and out. It's the amount of light, empty space, and white interiors that really conveys an Americanized Zen aesthetic. Rachel Jones writes the Nourishing Minimalism website, hosts a Facebook group, and posts YouTube videos (2012-present). She's also a divorced single mother of six children, which adds to her credibility, her responsibilities, and her authority in her household. These women model how to adapt parts of minimalism rather than adopting it entirely.

Two women who have been especially successful at building companies in this niche are Allie Casazza and Marissa Zen. Allie Casazza says, “I create online programs that will help you live a peaceful, abundant motherhood” (2023). She has seven online courses and ongoing support groups, including *Your Uncluttered Home* and *Unburdened*. Her book *Declutter Like a Mother* has a guide for book clubs. She’s also written a decluttering guide for children and teens, *Be the Boss of Your Stuff*. Her business earns millions of dollars a year. Marissa Zen, whose website is AtoZen Life, started posting video blogs on YouTube when she started decluttering the family home. She and her husband have two young children, and at the beginning she also had a house full of belongings from her deceased parents and grandparents. Decluttering was as much a way to finally work through her grief as it was a way to find more space. This is on a larger scale, but entirely consistent with Kondo’s teaching “By handling each sentimental item and deciding what to discard, you process your past” (2014, 116). She really embraced minimalism when her family decided to move to Germany to be near her husband’s mother. They only took what they could pack in their baggage allowance, 2 suitcases per person, 8 total. She was inspired by the Konmari method and adapted it to her needs. Now, according to Star Stat, Marissa Zen makes over $100,000 a year from her YouTube channel alone. Entrepreneurs like these are finding ways to monetize their homes and lives through YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. The successful efforts add to the rapidly increasing pressure to curate previously private domestic spaces and display them on social media, even though they often share a stated purpose of freeing women from these expectations.

An emerging area of concern is how to deal with intangible clutter. A lot of minimalist advice recommends taking digital photos of objects to be discarded, especially children’s artwork. This practice usually leads to an overwhelming number of disorganized photos, adding stress if a mom is trying to put together a scrapbook or printed photo book, in addition to making it hard to find photos for sharing on social media or even in text messages to family and friends. People are writing books and blogposts now about how to declutter digital media (Sebastian, 2019). Here the problem modern parents encounter is not an issue of physical space (even massive numbers of photos and videos can be saved on tiny computer chips or on data farms far away) but of mental space, the effort to remember what’s there and the time and attention to find it without getting distracted by other things along the way.

Conclusion

Much of the appeal of minimalism is simply the obvious idea that cleaning could take less time if there’s less stuff. American women, even those working fulltime outside the home, are socialized to assume that housework is their responsibility. This can be a particularly fraught issue for employed women, who have to prove that their commitment to home and family hasn’t been compromised by outside demands. Many mothers are seeking a sense of control over some part of their lives; they often don’t even control their own time. Being able to assert control over physical space and have the chance of maintaining that control through the permanent removal of objects can be just as valuable as the time saved by not having to clean the extra stuff. Deep tension exists between the dream of a largely empty white room and the reality of life with active children. This paradox creates opportunities for marketing ways to manage that tension to American mothers, especially by other mothers using social networks to build their businesses.

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