

This paper considers the relationships between clutter, hoarding, and sentimental value. Interwoven personal vignettes and analytical research relate my essential question: why do we keep things?

My Aunt lives in a small house in Coral Springs, near Fort Lauderdale, Florida. She and her husband don't have any kids together, but she makes up for her lack of children with cats. Her house is filled with them, and every time one of them dies, she just so happens to come across a new cat to bring home. Her house itself is very crowded, twelve plus cats and all. These cats are a way for her to give love to something. She is their mother, and her cats hold a large amount of sentimental value to her. But so do her objects. Other than being filled with around twelve cats at all times, my Aunt's home is also filled with kitsch and tchotchkes from all sorts of places. She has an affinity for themed, festive things, and decorates her home for her favorite holidays. She has so many kitschy knick-knacks that her decorative efforts are overcrowded with tchotchke after tchotchke.

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My Aunt is not alone in her desire to acquire, and cherish, hordes of objects. What makes objects so valuable to *us*? Sentimental value, as explicitly defined, is the value that an object holds in regards to emotions and memories rather than material worth. Sentimental value, in an abundance of cases, dictates we keep things and it is normal for the average person to keep items with which they have an emotional connection. However, this is taken to extremes by those who keep an inordinate number of objects—hoarders. According to Scott Lilienfeld, author of *Clutter, Clutter Everywhere*, “Hoarding disorder appears to afflict 2 to 5 percent of the population, making it more prevalent than schizophrenia” (Lilienfeld 69). Diagnosed hoarders lack the ability to get rid of all the stuff they collect. The question is, why? One theory is that people often value their possessions as extensions of themselves, which is the reason why some struggle with getting rid of unnecessary items in their lives. As members of a materialistic society, we purchase objects that we believe reflect our personal values. We decorate our homes and spaces that we inhabit with articles that project our *supposed* “best selves.” We collect matter to remind ourselves of our past experiences, but if not cultivated correctly, these collections can spiral and grow out of hand.

On the other hand, sentimental value and having a hoarding disorder are not the only reasons why we are so compelled to collect things. In today's society, owning more means you are worth more. Materialistic and consumerist messages are promoted through different media platforms. For instance, platforms like Instagram and Facebook tailor advertisements based on your *likes, follows*, and internet searches to sell you as much as you can buy. And, Amazon and other website-to-doorstep sites make it dangerously easy to accumulate things with just one click. Even with large amounts of space, physical and digital, people still find ways to fill their lives with clutter. Oftentimes, food, toys, and other unnecessary purchases exceed the confines of homes and spill into garages. A 2015 survey from Gladiator® GarageWorks states, “1 in 4 Americans say their garage is too cluttered to fit their car.” This statistic seems unbelievable but ultimately proves that people hold onto belongings they do not really need. Clutter surrounds us throughout our day-to-day lives, and more information from this study shows that this clutter might negatively affect our moods. The 2015 survey states that, “While 92% of homeowners surveyed described their home as somewhat or very organized, one-fourth of them admitted embarrassment with the garage and nearly one-third said they keep their garage door shut so others won't see the mess,” further stating that “one out of five homeowners [argue] with their

spouse about the organizational state of their garage.” Along with embarrassment and anger, clutter brings out a multitude of other negative emotions. It creates a feeling of forced confinement, which can lead to feeling intensely claustrophobic inside one’s home.

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I grew up surrounded by toys. I was and still am extremely lucky to have been brought up the way I was. I have fond memories of these times—I enjoyed this surplus and I spent hours formulating intricate tea parties for my dolls and stuffed animals. My mom was always eager to join in on these frequent occurrences. She loved being able to channel her inner child, and continued to encourage me to do so well past the early stages of my childhood. While I may not play with these toys anymore, they remain in the house, ostensibly for “my future children.” This makes sense but is ultimately a facade hiding the larger issue at hand: the sentimentality attached to these objects leads to unnecessary clutter. Boxes of relics from our family’s life crowd our garage and guest room, and while the items within these boxes hold so much sentimental value, we really have no current need for my baby clothes and toys. The space might be of better use. Sentimental items are important, but can easily become just another piece of clutter if not separated from other items. Getting rid of older items--decluttering--helps us appreciate the things really important to us. In the words of Marie Kondo, “To truly cherish the things that are important to you, you must first discard those that have outlived their purpose. To throw away what you no longer need is neither wasteful or shameful.”

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Diving deeper into why our society inundates us with the idea that more items equal higher worth is an interesting journey. To truly discover the base of the problem, one must fully understand the root of why we buy things just to buy them. We yearn to fill our bottomless pits of desire so that we can feel fulfilled. However, this supposed fulfillment is all a facade, so often filled with meaningless scraps. The institutions and corporations behind society’s materialistic ways all circle back to consumerism. Corporations only want more profit, and the promotion of buying items for their positive appeal to our worth aids this money-making process. Propaganda spread by the media advertise items that will supposedly make us happier, healthier, more attractive, and more successful. Some examples include tiny plants, essential oil diffusers, kitschy animal-themed pens, organizational calendars, and rose quartz face rollers. All of these listed objects are not necessary to live one’s life to the fullest extent, and they only add to preexisting clutter. We presume that our decisions to buy things are based on logic, but in reality, logic has little to do with our purchases.

Henry David Thoreau’s *Economy* chapter of *Walden* nicely ties these ideas together. In this section, Thoreau criticizes the luxurious lifestyles that society pushes mankind to achieve. He states, “Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only indispensable but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind...” (Thoreau 12), supporting the point that the collection of unnecessary objects restrict us from living our best lives. Cluttered by these “comforts,” we fall deeper into these messes and struggle to stop ourselves from needlessly collecting. Then, Thoreau continues, “With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor” (12). This further proves his

claim that clutter decreases the quality of life, which is something that he states throughout the rest of *Economy*. Later in the chapter, Thoreau dives into a critique of clothing and the wealthy class. He writes, “We don garment after garment, as if we grew like exogenous plants by addition without. Our outside and often thin and fanciful clothes are our epidermis, or false skin, which partakes not our life, and may be stripped off here and there without fatal injury...” (20). This comparison of mankind to an “exogenous [plant]” that frequently dons clothes like shedding skin illustrates the unimportance of our *fanciful* belongings. We do not use logic in thinking about these things, and the lack of care for these luxurious items demonstrates how little we actually think when purchasing at all.

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My great-Aunt has the impulsive need to steal things that may not have real value to her. While never truly diagnosed by a medical practitioner, she showed many symptoms that would normally be associated with having kleptomania. Unlike typical shoplifters, those with kleptomania do not compulsively steal for personal gain, on a dare, for revenge, or out of rebellion. They steal simply because the urge is so powerful that they can't resist it. My mother tells me stories about my great-Aunt's kleptomania, and I have witnessed the extent of her condition firsthand. It all started out with her relatives noticing her taking ashtrays from restaurants she liked. Then the ashtrays transitioned into steak knives, and soon she had started to steal from her relatives. My mom's lipstick when she was twenty-four, her wedding tiara, my grandmother's silver jewelry, and my godmother's shirt are all examples of her compulsive pilfering. She had no need for any of these items, and would keep them hidden in her home unless confronted or caught in the act. In her New York home, every available surface is crowded with useless trinkets and other reminders of the past. On a piano that she keeps in her living room, countless family photos decorate the unopened lid. Walking upstairs is like opening up a time capsule from the past. Her now-grown children's bedrooms are almost unchanged, and the old linens remain on the beds. This excessive amount of collecting is likely caused by a supposed lack of serotonin, which is common in many impulsive disorders.

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Like kleptomania, hoarding is another compulsive disorder that causes the accumulation of unneeded objects in one's life. Both are caused by changes inside the brain. The science behind the two are similar, but ultimately branch off. Kleptomania is the urge to needlessly steal, while hoarding makes it more difficult to let go of items that we collect for no reason. In a 2012 TIME study about the reasons behind hoarding, the author, Maia Szalavitz, delves into the unique ways a hoarder's brain functions. She details, “When they were faced with tossing or keeping their own items, the [hoarder's] brain... showed excessive activation in the anterior cingulate cortex, a brain region involved with decision-making, particularly in situations involving conflicting information or uncertainty.” This lack of a clear ability to make decisions regarding the possession of useless things and knick-knacks conveys the severity of hoarding. She then continues, “Activity was also elevated in the insula, a region that monitors one's emotional and physical state (it's also involved in disgust, shame and other strong negative emotions).” Combined with discrepancies in both of these regions, the hoarder's ability to assign

significance to the objects they collect is skewed, as they often assign too much significance to meaningless things. The elevated activity in the insular region, which causes negative emotions, further proves the idea that an excessive amount of clutter decreases the quality of life. And, when someone's life ends, who is left to deal with their mess?

While accumulating clutter is not as serious as a diagnosis of kleptomania or clinical hoarding, it is still a serious problem to try to solve. The clutter we accumulate and give value to in the moment ultimately ends up weighing us down later on in life. We believe that we are showing our best selves through what we purchase. However, this notion only causes us to gain more unnecessary items that serve no purpose other than being shown off. Our materialistic society promotes consumers to constantly buy until they achieve all that they can imagine. This proposed standard clutters humanity's once simple lifestyles. We struggle with letting go of items because of their supposed sentimental value, but we must realize that it is not the item itself that holds the value; it is the accompanying memory that is worth more. If mankind can rid itself of the constricting luxuries that are purchased to satisfy the need to feel superior, then it will swiftly move forward onto a finer way of life.

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