Marie Kondo and the New Self-Help

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Marie Kondo and the New Self-Help
By Kristen Ludwigsen

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**Research Question:** How is Marie Kondo affecting the ways self-help literature is being shared, discussed, and interpreted?

**Abstract**
In the wake of the Marie Kondo phenomenon, is the self-help literature genre being redefined? How is Marie Kondo and her book affecting the ways self-help literature is being shared, discussed, and interpreted? This paper attempts to answer these questions by first discussing the difficulty in defining the self-help genre, and how recent definitions reflect the current economic climate. This paper examines *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* by Marie Kondo; the tone and language used and how it’s typical of books in the self-help genre, despite categorization as a House and Home—Cleaning and Organizing book. This paper looks at Kondo’s social media presence; the amount of followers she has compared to other bestselling self-help authors; and what her readers discuss on social media platforms Instagram and Twitter. Reader-response theories from Wendy Simonds and Wolfgang Iser help shed light on how self-help literature is interpreted by readers, and how readers today might interpret Kondo. This paper examines research by Beth Luey, Wendy Simonds, and Janice Radway, who surveyed nonfiction readers, self-help readers, and romance readers, respectively. Luey’s theory that reading self-help literature is a “private activity” is challenged by Marie Kondo’s loyal followers, who proudly display their “kondo-ing” efforts on Instagram. Finally, this paper considers the public reaction to the book and subsequent backlash; the xenophobic and classist implications that the backlash towards Kondo revealed, such as the view that it’s a sign of prestige to hoard books, but hoarding other objects is frowned upon. The findings of this paper highlight a significant moment in publishing history and the self-help genre, revealing what sharing, discussing, and interpreting self-help literature looks like in the twenty-first century.
Keywords: Marie Kondo, KonMari, self-help literature, self-help, reader-response theory, social media, women readers

Introduction

The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up by professional organizer and de-cluttering expert Marie Kondo has sold over eleven million copies since its US publication in 2014, and spent eighty-six weeks atop the New York Times bestseller list. She was named one of TIME magazine’s 100 most influential people in 2015. Kondo’s Netflix show Tidying Up with Marie Kondo was an instant hit when it premiered in February 2019, and is currently streaming in 190 countries. Through her book and series, Kondo helps her followers organize and clean up their homes by choosing which possessions spark joy and are worth keeping, and tossing the ones that don’t. She dubbed this method, KonMari, after herself. The method has become a movement that’s caused thrift stores to overflow with unwanted, non-joy sparking possessions.

Despite Kondo’s immense popularity, controversy has surrounded her because some disagree with her methods, particularly her thoughts on books. When it comes to books, Kondo says “unread” means “never (Kondo, 2014: 88).” After the premiere of her Netflix series, readers and bookworms alike came out of the woodwork to denounce Kondo’s statement that you should only keep books that bring you joy. Others criticized Kondo for her entire KonMari method, claiming to be on the side of clutter. No other self-help author has been so hotly debated in recent years, and so fiercely loved, as reading the comments on any one of Kondo’s Instagram posts will reveal. Kondo has amassed millions of readers and fans. She has over three million followers on Instagram and over 157,000 followers on Twitter. There are over 300,000 hashtags associated with Kondo and her KonMari method on Instagram alone, with hundreds of thousands of photos of reorganized dressers, bedrooms, kitchens, and garages shared by Kondo’s followers across the platform. Kondo is even changing the way people talk, and with the OED’s recent history of adding pop culture slang into its dictionary, such as the Beyoncé-coined “bootylicious,” is “kondo-ing” next?

Prior research of self-help literature reveals that reading self-help has traditionally been an activity done privately, with readers having been less inclined to share what self-help literature they read with others. However, in this new age of social media, where oversharing has
become the norm and #selfhelp has over two million tags on Instagram, and people discuss self-help literature freely on the internet, is the self-help literature genre being redefined? The Marie Kondo phenomenon suggests it may be. Considering Kondo and the impact her books and TV show have had on American culture in the last four years since her book was published, how is Kondo affecting the ways self-help literature is being shared, discussed, and interpreted?

In determining the ways that Marie Kondo and her book have affected the ways self-help literature is shared, discussed, and interpreted, I first discuss the difficulty in defining the self-help literature genre, and how recent definitions reflect the current economic climate. The challenge many scholars have faced in attempting to define the self-help genre is the broad range of categories and subcategories within self-help, and the labeling and mislabeling of self-help books. Some “self-help” literature hide behind the guise of other categories. The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up is actually categorized as a House and Home—Cleaning and Organizing book, but the tone and language used are typical of books in the self-help genre, and the mental health aspects of the book have been what’s attracted readers to the book.

Drawing from reader-response theories of Wolfgang Iser, I attempt to use his theories to shed light on how readers interpret, and misinterpret, self-help literature. Though theories which are speculative in nature can only reveal so much, Iser’s theories of interpretations reveal the endless possibilities that literature contains, both within texts and in the minds of readers.

I closely examine research and surveys conducted by Beth Luey, Wendy Simonds, and Janice Radway, who surveyed nonfiction readers, self-help readers, and romance readers, respectively. Their research is highly significant to this paper, in providing context and history of interpreting and discussing self-help literature. Luey found that compared to readers of self-help and romance, nonfiction readers were the most likely to share their reading with others. Luey’s conclusion that reading self-help literature is a “private activity” is challenged by Marie Kondo’s loyal followers, who proudly display their “kondo-ing” efforts on Instagram.

I also examine Kondo’s social media presence; the amount of followers she has compared to other bestselling self-help authors, and what her readers and fans discuss on social media platforms Instagram and Twitter. Other bestselling self-help authors such as Mark Mason, and Jen Sincero each have less than 200,000 followers on Instagram, while Kondo has three million followers on Instagram alone. It can be argued that Kondo’s popularity is due to the visibility she’s received from her Netflix series, and that is fair, but it should not at all diminish
the impact Kondo has had on American culture. It’s her book, not Sincero’s or Mason’s, who earned an entertainment series.

Finally, I consider the xenophobic and classist implications that the backlash towards Marie Kondo revealed. A number of bloggers, authors, and readers lamented Kondo for suggesting to get rid of books you’ll never read, with one blogger referring to her methods as “woo-woo nonsense (Schofield, 2019).” Others pointed out how society accepts hoarding books as a sign of intellectual superiority, but frown upon hoarding anything else.

**Defining the Self-Help Genre**

What then, finally, is a how-to book? It is a publishing chameleon, a category so broad—and also so deep—that it is virtually immeasurable. Like the term ‘non-fiction’ itself, it is so imprecise as to defy definition. (Carter, 1998: 30).

To put it simply, the self-help genre is difficult to define. That measuring the category is “virtually impossible” makes studying the self-help genre that much more challenging. Yet scholars continue to attempt to pinpoint it. So what constitutes a self-help book? According to sociologists Daniel Nehring et al, the lines of what is and what isn’t a self-help book are constantly blurred: “The boundaries between self-help and other advice genres—in particular philosophical ethics, theological ethics, medical advice, and how-to guides for narrow practical tasks—often blur (Nehring et al, 2016: 6).” This help explains why Kondo’s book, which could be seen as a guide for such practical tasks, is viewed by so many as a self-help book. One of the editors interviewed by sociologist Wendy Simonds agreed with self-help having a wide reach, saying self-help is “an umbrella term that’s used to describe a whole wealth of subject areas (Simonds, 1992: 111).” What separates self-help books from nonfiction, Simonds concludes, is that they contain this essential message: “You can do it yourself more cheaply than if you went out and had other people do it for you (1992: 111).” Marie Kondo’s book fits this pattern, as she continually highlights the importance of being responsible for tidying your own space throughout her book.

In *Transnational Popular Psychology and the Global Self-Help Industry: The Politics of Contemporary Social Change*, authors Nehring et. al attempt to define the self-help genre as it is
today, coming to the conclusion that new and popular self-help literature is about surviving everyday life. Writes Nehring et al, “Instead of promising far-reaching professional success, easy get-rich-quick schemes, or lasting love, some self-help bestsellers in recent years have offered strategies for simply getting by, surviving, or opting out of society’s pressures altogether (Nehring et al, 2016: 4).” Nehring says this is a reflection of “the conditions of hypercompetitive global capitalism (2016: 5)” that are dominate in today’s economic climate. Current bestselling self-help books reveal this trend, such as Mark Mason’s The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F**k, Girl, Wash Your Face by Rachel Hollis, and You Are a Bad Ass by Jen Sincero. And Kondo’s book fits into this category of everyday survival as well. The title of Kondo’s book promises to change your life; all you have to do is tidy up your home. But Marie Kondo’s book isn’t labeled by publishers and retailers as a self-help book, despite many readers coming to the book hoping to see improvements in their mental health after reading it and committing to the KonMari method. This is why it’s important to attempt to define the self-help genre. A book like Kondo’s, commonly regarded as a self-help book, is not technically a self-help book.

If you look at the back of The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up, you’ll see the publisher chose to categorize it under House and Home—Cleaning and Organizing. Amazon files the book under Crafts, Home and Garden, and Barnes & Noble places it in the Home and Garden category. So what does it mean that this book isn’t called a self-help book, when that is what most people seem to recognize it as? Kondo herself has never shied away from the topic of mental health, assuring her readers from the get-go that tidying up your home will in turn tidy up your life and bring you peace of mind. “When you put your house in order, you put your affairs and your past in order, too (Kondo, 2014: 4),” she writes in the introduction. “Tidying is just a tool, not the final destination (2014: 21).” Kondo practically admits the book is more about mental health. You help yourself by tidying up and doing the work yourself. “The process of assessing how you feel about the things you own…is really about examining your inner self, a rite of passage to a new life (2014: 64).”

The goals Kondo outlines in her book seem attainable to readers, and she insists that they are again and again throughout the book. Repetition as such is common in self-help books, but readers find this comforting, according to those interviewed by Simonds (1992: 27). Kondo’s book also follows a format that is typical of many self-help books. She writes in the first-person point-of-view, and directly addresses readers in the second-person. Her tone and language are
calm and comforting; she constantly reassures readers that they’re capable of achieving their goals of tidying up. As long as they put in the hard work, of course. The first words of the book’s introduction are written in a style and language typical of many self-help books:

In this book, I have summed up how to put your space in order in a way that will change your life forever (Kondo, 2014: 1).

Some key words and phrases can be broken down from this sentence: “how-to,” and “change your life forever.” Both imply her book is intended to help people, but they have to be willing to do the work themselves. The following sentence, “Impossible? (Kondo, 1)”, is a question which immediately addresses the concerns readers may have after reading such a confident statement. The introduction also includes testimonials from Kondo’s clients. They all praise Kondo and the effectiveness of her KonMari method. They also represent a variety of problems being solved. One client says the book helped them lose weight, another one said tidying up resulted in improving their marriage, another said it gave them the courage to ask for a divorce. One even said they became more successful at work.

However, not every aspect of Kondo’s book are typical of popular self-help books. Kondo’s tidying method, dubbed “KonMari” after herself, is an open practice, one that is encouraged by both Kondo and her readers to share. Reading Kondo’s book is not the “private activity (Luey, 1998: 30)” once described by self-help readers. She invites readers to share their photos with her on Instagram and she reposts photos from fans to her own account almost daily.

**Reading Self-Help**

Reader-response theories help reveal how readers interpret self-help literature. But the problem of relying on theory is that without directly asking Kondo’s readers, I can only speculate as to how they interpret Kondo. Nevertheless, I find Iser’s theories to be insightful and relevant, especially when reading Kondo’s book and discovering she has her own theories on reader-response.

Wolfgang Iser writes that “with a literary text we can only picture things which are not there; the written part of the text gives us the knowledge, but it is the unwritten part that gives us the opportunity to picture things (Iser, 1972: 288).” What readers picture when reading self-help
must be much more personal and deeper than when reading fiction or a biography of someone else’s life. When reading Kondo, for instance, a reader may imagine what their lives will be like once their home is clean and organized. They may imagine how easy their life will be once they’ve simplified their world.

Iser discusses letting go of preconceived notions when reading: “it is only when we have outstripped our preconceptions and left the shelter of the familiar that we are in a position to gather new experiences (1972: 295).” Marie Kondo writes in second-person and tells her readers they can still become organized individuals even if they’ve been messy their whole lives. She opens then up to what Iser describes as the “formation of illusion” which entangles readers, allowing their preconceptions to fade away so readers can become more present with the text, and opening them up to fully experiencing the text. Iser says this experience is akin to something said by George Bernard Shaw: “You have learnt something. That always feels at first as if you had lost something (Shaw, 1964: 316).” What readers of self-help may hope to lose is whatever negative tendencies they’re reading self-help to eliminate.

When discussing why you don’t need to keep every single book you’ve ever read or own, Kondo reveals her own ideas on reader-response theory, saying the true purpose of books “is to be read, to convey information to their readers…You read books for the experience of reading (2014: 89).” The books, she explains, mean nothing just sitting on a shelf, and when read have already been experienced. So there is no reason to keep them after they’ve been read. Kondo breaks books down even further, into the simple, concrete objects they physically exist as: “Books are essentially paper—sheets of paper printed with letters and bound together (2014: 89).” This phrase alone might have been enough to offend some bookworms.

George Poulet said something similar to Kondo—that books only take on their full existence in the reader (Poulet, 1969: 54), also suggesting that books become fully real only when read. Iser says this is why readers often identify with the main characters in books. Despite differences in past experiences and backgrounds, readers take on the thoughts of the author when they abandon their own thoughts and past experience, and in reading become “the subject that does the thinking (Iser, 1972: 297).”

Harvard English professor Beth Blum writes about readers bringing their past experiences to text, citing Paul Lichterman: “As Lichterman explains, self-help’s ‘thin culture’ operates not as a uniform world system but through readers’ continual negotiation and
qualification of self-help’s ideology in relation to other moral systems prevalent in their cultural environments (Blum, 2018: 1108).” In order for self-help authors to strengthen their authoritative voices, they have to tie in social norms and customs from the reader’s world and show how their book applies to them. Nehring’s theories align with Blum’s: “They…have to promote and convince their readers of particular beliefs about the social world (Nehring et al, 2016: 7-8).” Kondo tells readers they can change their lives, even if they’ve always struggled with staying organized and keeping their homes clean.

Wendy Simonds writes that, “readers allow books persuasive power (Simonds, 1992: 25),” and they “give authority to texts (1992: 25).” In the case of Kondo, this would mean that readers make her into an authority figure, granting her more influence over them. Her authority makes her advice truth, because readers give self-help books more power than they do fiction (Simonds, 1992: 45). Simonds says this is because fiction allows you to escape your problems, while self-help books force you to confront them. The issues Kondo’s readers are seeking to alleviate likely exist all around them—every room, closet, cabinet, and dresser drawer.

Sharing and Discussing Self-Help Literature: A Private Activity No More?

In the article “Who Reads Nonfiction?” Beth Luey surveyed bookstore customers, library patrons, and book club members. She found that nonfiction readers frequently discuss what they’re reading with others. They also don’t mind showing off. Luey says that, “reading serious nonfiction is a source of pride, leading people to buy and display books that they may never get around to reading (Luey, 1998: 30).” Her results highly contrasted those found by Janice Radway, who conducted a similar study, but surveyed romance readers instead. Radway determined that romance readers are more likely to feel guilty about reading romance novels because of other people’s conceptions and views regarding the genre (Radway, 1984: 105.) Because of this, they are also far less likely to discuss their reading with friends and family (1984: 96). But Simonds’s findings from her interviews with women self-help readers did resemble Radway’s. Simonds describes self-help readers also expressing shame and guilt about their reading, with women feeling “contemptuous” and “resentful” of their reading (Simonds, 1992: 41-42). Like romance readers, they rarely discussed their reading with others. Simonds notes that “knowledge of disapproval or condescension impelled many of the women I interviewed to keep their reading to themselves. Indeed, many participants said that they would
not read self-help books in public, especially at work (1992: 44).” Luey concluded from Simonds research that unlike reading nonfiction, “women's reading of self-help books is also a very private activity,” a behavior that

contrasts sharply with the highly social nature of nonfiction readers, male and female, who discuss their reading with friends, co-workers, family members, and book club colleagues. The absence of guilt or shame is further demonstrated by the public display of the books, most frequently shelved in the living room and read both at work and on public transportation (Luey, 1998: 30).

But the feeling is different when it comes to Kondo and her book readers. Kondo’s readers more closely resemble the nonfiction readers Luey interviewed, rather than the self-help readers Simonds questioned. Her community of readers and loyal KonMari followers are hardly invisible. They’re anything but private, showing off their reorganized dresser drawers on Instagram. Can the difference we’re seeing today be simply summed up as an effect of social media?

Kondo has over three million followers on Instagram, and over 157,000 followers on Twitter. It makes sense that Kondo would be more popular on a visual-heavy, photo-centric platform such as Instagram. Popular Instagram hashtags associated with Kondo and her KonMari method include #KonMari (268,000 tags), #MarieKondo (253,000 tags), #tidyingup (101,000 tags), and #tidyingupwithMarieKondo (38,000 tags). Fans of Kondo show their appreciation for the tidying guru in the hundreds and thousands of comments that are left on the images she posts. Kondo also reposts photos from her followers to her own account almost daily. The photos are usually before and after photos of someone’s entire kitchen or snapshots of a cupboard.

Unless you’re J.K. Rowling, it’s not very common for an author of any genre to have a large following, high book sales or not. Current bestselling self-help author Jen Sincero only has 100,000 followers on Instagram. Rachel Hollis, who currently has two books on the New York Times bestseller list for Advice and How-To books, has 1.3 million followers. A significant number, but still less than Kondo’s three million followers. Though Hollis’s popularity could eventually earn her an entertainment series of her own, given the success of Kondo’s series.
Kondo shares a fan's before and after photo. The image was liked by over 100,000 users.

**Figure 1 & 2**

Dannii Elle rated it ★★★★★ - review of another edition

Shelves: recommended-reading, non-fiction-nuances, spiritual-sanctuary

A book about tidying up, I thought to myself, What a load of nonsense. That was until I saw this as suggested reading for those struggling with anxiety and depression. I was, at that point, desperate for a miracle cure, or really just anything to help me get through the day. So desperate, in fact, that I bought this book whilst still firmly believing that it was going to be rubbish!

How wrong could I have been?

This book has absolutely changed my entire life and my outlook on it. This is not just a book about putting your house in order, but your mind as well.

**Figure 3** A user on Goodreads praises the book for helping with their mental health in addition to tidying up.

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90% of people liked it

All editions: 3.82 average rating, 212523 ratings, 24243 reviews, added by 463377 people, 176113 to-reads

This edition: 3.81 average rating, 169922 ratings, 19724 reviews, added by 377513 people

**Figure 4** A breakdown of Kondo's reviews on Goodreads show her wide reach.
(Mis)Interpreting Kondo

What is this obsession people have with books? They put them in their houses like they're trophies. What do you need it for after you read it?—Jerry Seinfeld (David, Seinfeld, 1991)

Kondo is wildly popular, but not everyone is taken by her. She is a polarizing figure, and the majority of the negativity she’s received in the press and on social media platforms like Twitter come from misconceptions about her views and methods regarding the storing, keeping (and not keeping) of books. In her book, Kondo suggests getting rid of books that don’t spark joy. When it comes to deciding on which books to keep, she writes, “take each book in your hand and decide whether it moves you or not (Kondo, 2014: 90).” The keyword being “moves,” since a book can move a reader in many ways. This sentence alone should have been enough to silence her critics (if they actually read her book is another question). Kondo even offers up her own book as sacrifice, saying that her method still applies to “this book, too. If you don’t feel any joy when you hold it in your hand, I would rather you discard it (2014: 90).”

Kondo writes that she limits her own book collection to “about thirty volumes at any one time (Kondo, 2014: 93).” This phrase in particular sparked a debate about clutter and collecting books, despite Kondo admitting to her own troubles trimming her library, writing within the same breath that “in the past, I found it very hard to discard books because I love them (2014: 93).” But critics interpreted what they chose to, keeping their pre-conceived notions and conceptions about Kondo and her book’s subject intact.

Not until the release of Kondo’s Netflix series was there so much negative commentary by the press and people on social media. Much of this backlash was encouraged by Anakana Schofield, who wrote a pot-stirring article reprimanding Kondo’s methods for The Guardian. “How dare she come for our books (Schofield, 2019),” wrote Schofield. “Literature does not exist only to provoke feelings of happiness or to placate us with its pleasure; art should also challenge and perturb us (2019).” Never mind that readers don’t always read to be challenged, especially as seen with the women Wendy Simonds interviewed for her book, who found the repetition present in self-help books to be welcoming and comforting. Schofield called Kondo’s
method of “waking up” books by tapping them “woo-woo, nonsense,” and didn’t stop with her xenophobic comments, writing on Twitter:

Do NOT listen to Marie Kondo or KonMari in relation to books. Fill your apartment & world with them. I don’t give a shite if you throw out your knickers and Tupperware but the woman is very misguided about BOOKS. Every human needs a v extensive library not clean, boring shelves (Schofield, 2019).

Keep all of your books, she suggests, writing in the Guardian article, “unless it’s self-help or golf, in which case, toss it,” revealing her bias toward self-help literature, Kondo or no Kondo.

Kondo addressed these misconceptions about her method in an interview with the Los Angeles Times in 2019. She described how her thoughts on organizing books have been greatly misconstrued. She told the Times:

I do think there are misconceptions. I was quite surprised because some things that I've never said before are just being talked about as part of my method…I think this occurred because…I said that when I was tidying and going through my books I had about 30 books left. Maybe misreading there…The important concept of my method is that you focus not on what you want to discard but what you want to retain…So if you love books, if you're passionate about books, go ahead and keep them (Kondo, 2019).

The point Kondo has always tried to make clear, whether in her book or on her Netflix show, is that the KonMari method is about keeping the possessions you love and surrounding yourself with the objects that truly spark joy. Simply put, it’s about what you keep, not about what you get rid of. Writes Kondo: “Imagine what it would be like to have a bookshelf filled only with books that you really love…for someone who loves books, what greater happiness could there be? (Kondo, 2019: 88-9).”

Yet critics of Kondo haven’t listened to what she’s actually written, just attacked her. Even for her use of a Japanese-English translator. Author Barbara Ehrenreich’s tweets about Kondo were full of xenophobic and racist undertones, attacking Kondo’s English-speaking abilities: “I will be convinced that America is not in decline only when our de-cluttering guru
Marie Kondo learns to speak English,” Ehrenreich tweeted on February 4th, 2019. She deleted the tweet forty minutes later only to come back with more negative comments toward Kondo, tweeting:

I confess: I hate Marie Kondo because, aesthetically speaking, I’m on the side of clutter. As for her language: It’s OK with me that she doesn’t speak English to her huge American audience but it does suggest that America is in decline as a superpower (Ehrenreich, 2019).

Ehrenreich later referred to the tweets as “subtle humor.” Author Celeste Ng tweeted back in regards to Ehrenreich:

Lots of people saying “Maybe seems hacked? Maybe it’s satire?” and who knows yet, but it says a LOT about our current moment when basically anyone could come out saying super racist s–t and it seems plausible they’ve been thinking it all along (Ng, 2019).

It’s not only Kondo’s methods that have drawn ire, but her appearance too, suggesting how deep seeded xenophobia is at play here. American poet Katha Pollitt said that Kondo has a “fairy-like delicacy and charm (Pollitt, 2019).” Elaine Showalter, in a now-deleted tweet, said Kondo “is certainly a pretty little pixie … but I am immune to Tinkerbell teaching me how to fold my socks (Showalter, 2019).” Journalists and bloggers have also used problematic language when describing Kondo. Molly Young wrote in *New York* magazine, “As a physical presence, Marie Kondo has more in common with a snowflake than with the flesh-and-blood humans around her (Young, 2019).”

Hannah McGregor, an assistant professor of publishing at Simon Frazier University, suggests what happened was that Kondo angered people who identify as “bookish (McGregor, 2019).” Liking books, explains McGregor, is considered an identity, and Kondo’s so-called attack on books by suggesting they’re mere clutter was also a personal attack on those who identify as such. She acknowledges there are xenophobic and racists implications at play, but the book debate in particular stems from “a long, classed history of book consumption as social posturing (2019),” a result that turned “book-loving into a consumer identity (2019).” She writes:
Mere book-owners may see books as things that can be repurposed as decor or given away when they’re no longer needed, but *readers* know that books contain other worlds—and their book collections become status symbols, signs of their heightened sensitivity (McGregor, 2019).

McGregor explains that the book as simply an object is both “a stand-in for the act of reading and a trophy to demonstrate that you have the correct emotional and intellectual relationship” for the act of reading. So if you read books, it means you’re smart, and if you keep them, it proves it. Eliza Romero wrote on Medium how it’s common for people to interpret hoarding as “disgusting and only for poor, white trash people (Romero, 2019)” while on the other hand, “book hoarding is good and moral. It’s like the organic food of owning things (2019).” She noted the lack of backlash towards creators of shows like *Hoarders* and *Clean Sweep*, where the hosts practically bully people into getting rid of their things. Meanwhile, Kondo is attacked for gently suggesting people get rid of only what they want to get rid of. The Kondo debate revealed how much books are still seen as signs of intellect and prestige.

![Figure 5 Books seen as acceptable to hoard.](image)

**Conclusion**

Whether or not *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* is an actual self-help book or not, readers and nonreaders alike clearly interpret it as one. If they didn’t, fans wouldn’t praise and thank Kondo for helping them change their lives on social media platforms, and her critics
wouldn’t be so offended thinking she’s trying to change who they are and clean out their clutter and come for their books. The discussion and controversy that have surrounded Kondo show how reading and discussing self-help literature is less the “private activity” it once was. And while the style and message of Kondo’s book are typical of self-help books, its labeling as a House and Home book challenges attempts at pinpointing a definition of the self-help literature genre, and suggests the difficulty in defining the self-help genre won’t be going away anytime soon. Wolfgang Iser’s reading theories help explain how people reacted to Kondo, explaining how readers bring their past experiences to their reading, but must take on the experiences of the author and let their past experiences go to become fully absorbed in a book. Because of this, Kondo’s critics seemed to have difficulty letting go of their biases in order to understand what Kondo actually meant when she discussed discarding books and cleaning out clutter. The negative and xenophobic reactions toward Kondo that the great clutter debate revealed proved biases at work, and this aspect of the paper alone is worth more extensive analysis and research. Other recommendations for future research would include conducting a survey similar to those done by Luey, Radway, and Simonds. Their research is pivotal to understanding the complicated category of self-help. Surveying current self-help readers would be of immense help in clarifying Marie Kondo’s impact on the self-help genre, and present an even greater in-depth overview of self-help literature in the twenty-first century. Kondo’s overall impact on American culture and influence on the self-help genre is a significant moment in publishing history, and is present in every clutter debate on Twitter, before and after photo (#KonMari) on Instagram, and trip to the thrift store.

Acknowledgements

When I first heard there was a new self-help guru on the scene encouraging people to trim their libraries, I admit I was taken aback. As a book lover and graduate student pursuing a Master’s in Book Publishing, the concept of getting rid of books seemed appalling. But I was intrigued to know more about The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up, and its author, Marie Kondo, who was taking the world by storm. I started by watching her Netflix series, Tidying Up with Marie Kondo, and almost immediately after watching the first episode I was reorganizing
my dresser drawers and cleaning out my closet, amassing several bags to donate, including (gasp!) three bags of books. This experience had me wondering at the larger implications of Kondo’s success: could the popularity of her book be reflective of current American society and culture? And if so, could similar reflections be found in other current bestselling self-help books?

I approached my professor, Dr. Rachel Noorda, with these questions in a Researching Book Publishing class in the winter of 2019. She encouraged me to pursue research into the nature of self-helps books, and helped narrow my focus to Marie Kondo and the impact she’s had on the self-help literature genre. Her guidance was pivotal in the creation of this paper, as she advised me to read the theories of Iser and Radway, and encouraged me to expand on Lucoy’s conclusion that reading self-help was traditionally a “private activity.” I’m incredibly thankful for all of her help and inspiration in writing this paper.

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**Bibliography**


