Abstract

Self-help literature has attempted to change people’s mindsets for more than a century, but its potential to make a difference for the environment has barely been studied before. This thesis uses an interdisciplinary approach to look at what role self-help literature can play in changing readers’ lifestyles from unsustainable to sustainable ways. Through the perspectives of narrative and discourse theories, it examines how four self-help books on decluttering and minimalism argue that consumption should happen, from the point of purchase to the act of discarding. Frame analysis is used to show how the books view waste differently and what implications this has for the lifestyles’ level of sustainability. Further, the thesis looks at the use of personal narratives as a means of persuasion before analysing how the books argue that their lifestyles will influence the self. Finally, it shows the extent to which the self is framed as capable of influencing communities and the larger society in order to consider the books’ potential for successfully inspiring social change.
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1 Introduction

1.1 Self-help Literature and Sustainable Futures

Gained weight, developed a phobia, grown tired of arguing with the spouse? Self-help literature addresses these problems in one of the most successful genres of today. By promising the readers relief for their worries, self-help titles have become bestsellers again and again for more than a century. This thesis studies one of the recent trends within the genre, namely self-help books that promise to help you declutter your life, materially and mentally. By getting rid of your unnecessary belongings, the promise is that you will permanently rid yourself of the discontent caused by your current lifestyle. What influence can these books have on unsustainable lifestyles? Could self-help books be a successful agent in promoting sustainable practices?

It has been argued that self-help books have been published in almost all written languages on this planet, and that the cultural significance of the genre “pivots on its appeal to the mass market” (Cherry, 2008: 338). With their immense popularity, they make up a diverse, but well-established genre in popular cultures across the planet, especially in developed countries. In spite of this, self-help literature is barely researched, both in general and in the context of environmental studies. An increasing number of researchers see change in lifestyle as an important part of the battle against climate change, and many argue that to make change happen, we must not just present facts and hope for change, but rather aim to change people’s mindsets (e.g. Witoszek, 2012: 119). Self-help literature, meanwhile, has aimed to help people change their mindsets for centuries, and this makes the genre worth exploring from an environmental perspective. The following thesis is my contribution to filling this research gap.

1.2 Purpose

In this thesis, I want to examine how consumption is portrayed in self-help books on the topics of minimalism and decluttering. By identifying the lifestyles promoted in these books and the ways they try to offer meaning in life to their readers, I hope to discover whether self-help literature can be of help in changing lifestyles in developed countries from unsustainable to sustainable practices.
In order to investigate this, I have chosen a set of research questions. My main research question is: *What role can self-help books on minimalism and decluttering play in forging sustainable lifestyles?* To help analyse this question, I have three sets of sub-questions. *How should material possessions enter and exit one’s life according to these books?* is a question that will help uncover the representations of consumption that can be found in these books, and divulge what normative advice they offer on how to acquire and dispose of objects. Furthermore, I will scrutinize how the books try to persuade their readers to change lifestyles. By asking *How do the books use narratives to persuade their readers to change their lifestyle, and what rhetorical tools are used as means of persuasion?* I will scrutinize how the books use narrative structures to give meaning to their proposed lifestyles. The rhetorical tools will show in greater detail how the books attempt to seduce their readers into adopting the normative practices that they advocate. Finally, I will ask two questions regarding the influence of these lifestyles: *To what extent are the lifestyles proposed in the books presented as capable of influencing the idea of the self? To what extent do the books frame the self as capable of influencing its communities and society?* Through these questions, I want to further investigate how the books argue that their lifestyles are supposed to make a change for the self. Additionally, I will assess how the books can inspire and empower the readers to advocate lower consumption practices among others as well, and make a difference for both communities and the greater society.

Before answering these research questions in the following chapters, I will use this introductory chapter to outline the state of research on self-help literature, as well as the historical background of the genre. While the history of the genre is centuries long, we will see that the academic research on it is limited. Following this, I will introduce the titles I have chosen to study and their contents, before I expand on the theories, methods and main concepts I intend to use. My approaches will include narrative and discourse theory, frame analysis, and concepts such as the self and consumption. Finally, the last part will outline the structure of the following chapters of this thesis.

### 1.3 The State of Self-help Research

While the self-help genre has flourished for decades and continues to do so, few researchers have found self-help literature culturally significant enough to warrant
extended research on the topic. There are some exceptions to this tendency, however, which warrants an overview of some of the research that has been conducted.

In 1992 Paul Lichterman provided a sociological study on the act of self-help reading. He studied readers of self-help psychology books, books on personal well-being and relationships, and described them as participants in a “thin culture” (1992: 421-422). While the genre of self-help psychology provides a multitude of discourses, the readers are not committing fully to the content of the books, rather reading them ambivalently. They read the books with an open and experimental mind, but include what they read in their own context of other genres of knowledge (Lichterman, 1992: 427 and 443). “The reading functions as a loosely adopted and partial source of self-definition for even avid self-help readers” (Lichterman, 1992: 427). In his study, he found that his sample readers did not find nor expect to find the solution in one book or from one author. Instead, they rather hoped to gain new insights or verbalizations of things they already felt (Lichterman, 1992: 430-431). At the same time, while they expected the books to be written for the mass market and that each book would not provide exclusive content, they did assume that there would be novel terms and analyses in the books (Lichterman, 1992: 431-432). “The books become for these readers an accessible but not altogether satisfying forum for naming private troubles” (Lichterman, 1992: 434). One of Lichterman’s conclusions is that readers do not use self-help psychology to absorb themselves in individualism, but rather to find solutions in a fragmented and imperfect larger social context, where they continue to place themselves (Lichterman, 1992: 442).

One of the greatest debates within self-help literature research seems to be on whether the genre is capable of facilitating social change. Scott Cherry points to research literature that has studied how self-help books endorse hyper-individuality (Cherry, 2008: 338). Others have argued that the field of psychology is in itself depoliticizing, and that it brings narcissist tendencies with it because the focus is put almost entirely on the individual (Hazleden, 2003: 413). On the other hand, there are those who argue that the individual transformation encouraged by self-help literature could also inspire social and political change (Effing, 2009: 137). In this way, it is not the literature in itself that spurs change. Rather, it is the personal transformation that becomes a link in the chain that leads to social change. This suggests that a definitive answer to self-help literature’s capabilities may be hard to find, but also that it is a topic worthy of further discussion.
Additionally, some quantitative research has been conducted on material that involves self-help literature. Mullins and Kopelman, for instance, studied the level of what they labelled “societal narcissism” in non-fiction bestsellers, by which they meant literature concerned with “psychic self-improvement, mysticism, and an interest in health, physical fitness, diet, and sexuality” (Mullins and Kopelman, 1984: 720). This research topic was partly inspired by the historian Christopher Lasch, who argued that a ‘culture of narcissism’ was developing due to the great emphasis placed on the individual, and that self-help books increasingly promoted the success of the individual at the expense of morals (Mullins and Kopelman, 1984: 721; Lasch, 1979: 58-59). Mullins and Kopelman’s study examined bestseller lists from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s – both the New York Times’ weekly bestseller lists and Bowker’s yearly bestseller lists. The results showed a growth in the percentage of narcissistic titles, as the average percentages from all sources were 5, 8, and 16 percent in each decade respectively (Mullins and Kopelman, 1984: 727). This research was continued by Rovenpor et al., who expanded the coding material and consequently obtained greater scores for narcissism among the Bowker bestsellers in the same decades: 19, 17 and 29 percent respectively. The growth rate stagnated in the 1980s and 1990s, but saw considerable growth in the 2000s and reached 34.67 percent. Furthermore, Rovenpor et al. also studied bestseller lists from the online bookstore Amazon.com, where they found a rise from 15 to 35 percent in narcissistic works from the mid-1990s to the early 2010s (Rovenpor et al., 2016: 419).

In addition to this research material on the genre, writers have also accounted for the history of self-help books. Through their work one can see the otherwise pluralistic genre in a context, and how the genre has influenced and been influenced by the age its titles have been published in.

1.4 A Brief History of Self-Help Literature

The genre of self-help literature originated in the United States of America, and is still flourishing. Locating a specific starting point in time for the genre, however, is next to impossible. As Steven Starker states, the genre does not have established criteria for what kind of titles can be included, which means that the Ten Commandments could be included as a self-improvement guide, and that other ancient texts of moral or practical
advice should be considered included as well (1989: 8 and 13). In the context of the largely American-dominated genre we have today, it is more useful to limit our historical search to American history from the 1600s and onwards. While self-help literature is and always has been a diverse genre, some trends have been more dominant than others, and the following will therefore provide the features that best provide context for the following research.

Early American self-help literature was mainly rooted in Puritanism. While predestination was a part of the Puritan faith – your fate in the afterlife was already decided – the Puritans simultaneously believed that their actions would have a certain influence on their quality of life and might also lead to similar reciprocation from God (Starker, 1989: 13-14). The predestination was related to the Covenant of Grace, while the importance of effort was related to the Covenant of Works, and the tension between these was a cause of debate in colonial America (McGee, 2005: 26-27). The idea that personal effort would directly lead to divine rewards developed over the years, and increased the importance of making the right choices in order to lead a devout life. Many Puritan leaders decided to develop guidelines on how to live during this period, in titles such as Samuel Hardy’s *Guide to Heaven* from 1673 (Starker, 1989: 14).

Continuing into the next century, the genre became gradually more secularized, with Benjamin Franklin at the forefront. He has been described as “one of the grandfathers of the advice literature genre” (McGee, 2005: 6), and some see his book *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1791) as the point of origin for self-help literature, with its moral guide to success and prescriptions on virtue (Effing, 2009: 128). However, several of his writings predating the autobiography contained practical advice or guidance on virtues, such as *Poor Richard’s Almanac* (1732-1757) and *The Way to Health* (1757). In contrast to earlier Puritan writings, Franklin’s advice literature contained great encouragement of social mobility, with emphasis on how to achieve worldly rather than divine success (Starker, 1989: 14-15). Benjamin Franklin, who came from a humble background but became a commercially successful publisher as well as a scientist and diplomat, was one of the first prominent examples of a self-made man trying to teach others the path of self-making (Starker, 1989: 14-15; Effing, 2009: 128). Books on success flourished in this era, but success was defined in a very broad way and could mean success in any part of life, both socially, commercially and health-
wise (Starker, 1989: 15). The historian Richard Weiss states that in the Jacksonian era, i.e. the second quarter of the 1800s, the idea of the self-made man became widely established and accepted. This was made possible by the fact that American society was becoming more egalitarian, and that the idea of success was increasingly equated with a combination of material well-being and a moral lifestyle. In essence, morality and material success became a sign of freedom (Weiss, 1969: 6).

Religious aspects of the self-help genre did not disappear, however. Instead, the religious focus changed and adapted to times of rapid urbanisation and social change. This gave room to the New Thought movement. Their interpretation of God was as a spiritual power, one that could be reached through “mind power”: By thinking the right way, God would receive your message and make your thoughts come true (Starker, 1989: 21). Traces of New Thought can still be found in the self-help culture, such as in the talk show host and media conglomerate owner Oprah Winfrey’s programmes and publications (Peck, 2010: 9). She also devoted several episodes of her talk show to the bestselling spiritual self-help book The Secret (2006), a book which argued that ‘the Law of Attraction’ made you able to bring positive events into your life through positive thinking – in the same way as New Thought publications (Peck, 2010: 8; McGee, 17/05/2007).

In the late 1800s, success and wealth became increasingly equated and interlinked. At the turn of the century, literature on success described economic earnings as a moral obligation (McGee, 2005: 34-35). It also morphed with the ideas of New Thought in Napoleon Hill’s Think and Grow Rich (1937), which argued that repeatedly thinking of money would let these thoughts become a part of your subconscious, and from there they would connect with the “vibrations” of wealth and happiness in the universal ether, rather than the vibrations of poverty and misery (Starker, 1989: 25). The book is still in print and still recommended by several business and financial newspapers, such as Business Insider, which describes it as “one of the best-selling books of all time” (Woodruff, 12/09/2013).

While Hill’s book is popular in financial circles even today, at the time of its publication the definition of success also evolved in other directions. While some individuals experienced immense financial success, the increased “poverty of the masses of men” made it hard for many to believe that success was a sign of virtue and
failure a sign of the opposite (Weiss, 1969: 10). McGee states that successful entrepreneurial opportunities became harder to obtain and accomplish in the first decades of the twentieth century, and that this shifted the ideal of success for the self-made man: Emphasis went from being on creating personal wealth, to functioning well within an organization (McGee, 2005: 36). Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936), a self-help classic that is also still in print today, was one of several books focusing on how conformity and social smoothness was the key to get ahead successfully (McGee, 2005: 36).

Dale Carnegie’s book is further proof of how self-help literature proved its cultural significance in the United States in the 1930s: *How to Win Friends and Influence People* became one of the first major bestsellers in the genre with more than 6 million copies sold in less than twenty years, and out of these, 3.5 million were paperbacks (Starker, 1989: 63). In fact, the paperback had not been a commercial success before Carnegie’s book entered the market, as publishers feared that this cheaper medium would ruin the sales of hardcover books (Starker, 1989: 64). Attempts at paperback publishing had been made unsuccessfully before, but luck turned when Robert de Graff founded a publishing company called Pocket Books together with the publishing giant Simon and Schuster, in order to publish *How to Win Friends and Influence People* for 25 cents per copy, a relatively inexpensive sum at the time. The strategy became quickly successful: 700,000 copies were sold in the first six months, without damaging hardcover sales (Starker, 1989: 63-64).

Pocket Books was also behind the paperback edition of Dr. Benjamin McLane Spock’s child-rearing book *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1946), which sold approximately 7.5 million paperback copies by 1956 (Starker, 1989: 68). Rather than providing rules on how to control children’s behaviour, Spock encouraged mothers to trust their instincts, and he reframed children as creatures needing love rather than pure discipline (Starker, 1989: 72).

McGee describes a shift occurring in American self-help culture during the twentieth century. In the middle of the century, psychoanalysis became a more prominent aspect of the idea of self-making, and in the following decades, successful self-making was increasingly equated with achieving personal well-being and happiness rather than personal wealth and power (McGee, 2005: 18-19). Maslow’s hierarchy of needs placed
self-actualization at the top, thus providing the self-help industry with a definition of humanity’s supreme need (Starker, 1989: 112). The emphasis put on the self continued to grow, and Starker describes the 1960s as a decade of ‘selfist psychology’ (Starker, 1989: 118). This decade turned its goal towards self-expression and self-realization, and some self-help writers did this in ways similar to previous works: Maxwell Maltz provided a method similar to the New Thought in *Psycho-Cybernetics*. His approach was secular, not spiritual, in nature, but still involved thinking positively about your self-image and visualising pleasant and relaxing situations. He believed that changing your self-image would change your personality and behaviour, and he claimed that changing your self-image, personality and behaviour would make you happier, healthier, and more successful (Starker, 1989: 114-115; McGee, 2005: 60). As a consequence of this ‘selfist’ turn, successful self-making became a much more complicated process. With less measurable and more shifting criteria to work towards, the process no longer had an obvious end-point (McGee, 2005: 18-19). Without such an end-point, the genre could be capable of providing further discontent. Still, the second half of the 1900s also saw a shift in framing of the readers in some self-help books. The characterization of readers within many books shifted from framing them as people with serious problems in need of attention, to people who are good enough, but who wish to improve some internal or external aspect of themselves (Woodstock, 2006: 337).

From the middle of the 1900s and onwards, self-help culture also adapted to the economic circumstances of the times. Self-help provided the solution to distress in a time when the labour market was changing greatly. Women were leaving the home and entering the work force, while companies were leaving the national labour market by downsizing and outsourcing (McGee, 2005:40). As a consequence of these changes, work life shifted from being a period of one’s life devoted to one job or a true calling that one followed for an entire career, to being an insecure situation that demanded adaptability and career changes. As a solution to the distress that this change could cause, the search for a calling was replaced, and work life was reframed as a search for self-actualization (McGee, 2005: 40-43). In 1973, Arab states restricted their oil production, which led to energy crises, strong inflation and stagnant growth in Western states. This sparked another breed of self-help literature: books that focused on how to get through the crisis financially (Starker, 1989: 141). McGee describes this development as one of “stark survivalism” (McGee, 2005: 50). Approaches to becoming
a winner developed a harder edge, with titles such as *Winning through Intimidation* (McGee, 2005: 50; Starker, 1989: 140 and 142). The late 1970s and 1980s also saw a new wave of bestsellers on success. According to Starker, they had changed the definition of success yet again: “Now it offered a kind of inverse Protestant ethic. Service to society had been replaced by responsibility to the self” (Starker, 1989: 140). For the women who entered the work force in traditionally male career paths or leadership positions, there were few role models who could provide guidance on how to assert oneself in such environments. Many books tried to fill this gap by offering advice on how to achieve success as a woman, both through behaviour, clothing and strategies (Starker, 1989: 141).

The 1980s was also a decade of books focusing on the physical self, but it was far from the first time period to offer this. Diet books had already been available for many decades, with *Diet and Health with Key to the Calories* published already in 1918 (Starker, 1989: 94). The New Thought movement had preached the possibility of improving everything through your thoughts, including your health, while the expression “You are what you eat” derived from a self-help book on dieting with that title, published in 1940 (Starker, 1989: 96). While the New Thought movement had been filled with laymen, health-related books in the mid-1900s became increasingly dominated by proclaimed experts (Starker, 1989: 98). In the late 1980s, the ‘selfist’ focus entered the health and body-oriented literature too. Being healthy was now important for “the optimal realization of the self” (Starker, 1989: 129-130), and the popularity and number of body-related self-help titles grew exponentially. Starker attributes this development to the post-war ‘baby boomer’ generation’s entrance into their mid-thirties: “the “Me” generation, the Spock babies, were making the difficult transition beyond young adulthood. […] they were to make a valiant effort to retain their youthful features and figures” (1989: 135-136).

Publishing at the end of the 1980s, Starker predicted that the self-help genre would turn away from focusing on the self, as the baby boomer generation began having children. He therefore believed that self-help books in the 1990s might move towards “helping mature individuals to go beyond their individual pursuits and concerns to a broader perspective and greater social involvement” (1989: 146). McGee, however, argues that the genre was rather dominated by consistency than change in that time period, with
books continuing to urge the readers to look inwards (McGee, 2005: 50). If ‘selfism’ ever took a break, it has certainly seen a revival at the beginning of the new millennium. In Rovenpor et al.’s words, self-absorption still has a strong position today:

Narcissism has become inculcated in many aspects of modern society. It can be found in the growing popularity of social media which enable users to post “selfies;” in the competitive race for fame, beauty and extravagant lifestyles; and in the public’s fascination with power-hungry and greedy politicians and businesspeople featured on television and in the movies (Rovenpor et al., 2016: 414).

The 1990s also saw the emergence of Tony Robbins, a major self-help celebrity basing his method on neurolinguistic programming (NLP). Through language and behaviour modification, NLP claims that one can reprogramme one’s emotions and behaviours as easily as programming a computer. This form of mind power is far from diverging from the selfish focus of the previous decades: It is rather a continuation of the similar ideas found in New Thought, such as in Napoleon Hill’s *Think and Grow Rich*, and Maltz’ *Psycho-Cybernetics* (McGee, 2005: 60-61).

The historical works on self-help books have little to say about self-help literature that takes material possessions greatly into account. Searches in online bookstores, however, show that simplifying lifestyles has been a topic in previous decades as well: Amazon.com still offers *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich*, written by Duane Elgin in 1981, and *Living the Simple Life: A Guide to Scaling Down and Enjoying More* by Elaine St. James, published in 1996. These books were described by *The New York Times* as part of “a major and growing trend” in the 1990s (Goldberg, 21/09/1995). Rovenpor et al. point out that there was a surge in sales of feng shui manuals in the 1990s, guiding people on how to harmonically decorate one’s home. They describe this surge as a “backlash against materialistic values” (Rovenpor et al., 2016: 415). The popularity of decluttering books today may then be another reaction to the materialistic aspects of capitalism.

Self-help literature has thus been a remarkable part of popular culture in America over several centuries. Has the self-help genre been a reflection of or an agent in societal and cultural changes through the centuries? It may have been both. As Starker writes, in the case of popular psychological works of the 1970s, the bestsellers were “both
representative of the evolving social climate and a medium for its promulgation” (Starker, 1989: 121). More practically, we have seen that self-help titles helped establish paperbacks as a book format, a more affordable version that made books more accessible to everyone. Considering this, the genre made itself more accessible as well, and therefore increased its potential for influencing the population. As Rovenpor et al. argue, books at the individual level are capable of providing readers with new skills, greater education on a topic, or pure entertainment. On a greater level, however, they have a “potential to document societal trends and to inform us about society’s underlying values, desires and pursuits” (Rovenpor et al., 2016: 415). In addition, they may have made a difference in how people lead their lives on an individual level, and on a greater level, these books may have both documented and promoted certain values and desires found in society at the time of their publication. Considering the life span that some of the books have, such as Think and Grow Rich, they are capable of spreading values from their own era through several time periods, and can thus perpetuate certain values and beliefs.

At the same time, self-help books may also have worked as pacifiers for discontented individuals within the current social climate. In this way, they may have found ways of maintaining the status quo rather than promoting change. McGee shows how self-help books have provided women with solutions that will let them find peace in their current situation: She argues that traditional self-improvement literature has had a masculine framing with ideals of finding a path to success and having a mission in life, while titles targeting women and written by women have tended to be centred on seeing life and work as a work of art, with the goal being to find creativity, balance and self-expression rather than to follow a linear path toward success (McGee, 2005: 45-46). These aesthetic values could consequently discourage women to aim for the masculine definitions of success and thus perpetuate gender patterns. McGee states that the books for women were an attempt at providing an answer to those searching for meaning from the mid-1900s and onwards. The segregated spheres of public and private life that the middle class had been living in increasingly overlapped and the distinction between them became increasingly blurred, meaning that the seemingly mutually exclusive values of profit and nurturance were suddenly overlapping (McGee, 2005: 20-21). Aesthetic values were presented as the answer to dissatisfied women, either if they did not want to or were not able to benefit from the entrance of the public sphere’s
economic and rational thinking into their private life (McGee, 2005: 21). Aesthetic values further became an ideal solution for the spiritually confused in an increasingly secularized world, as “the emerging ideal of life as a work of art bridges the gap between the secular and the spiritual, while privileging the expressive over the instrumental, or utilitarian, dimension” (McGee, 2005: 47).

As this brief history has shown, the self-help genre has been diverse, but influential. The books have provided guidance to individuals searching for meaning, success or contentedness. Self-help books have given advice whether the issue has been religious, as with Puritanism and the New Thought movement, family-based as with Dr Spock’s child-rearing guide, or career-based as with Carnegie and Hill’s successful books on how to gain influence and wealth. Additionally, some books have offered help to those wanting to develop the self, for instance through changing self-images or achieving self-realization. In many different ways throughout many different eras, self-help literature has tried to offer readers the possibility of gaining control over their own fates, bodies and minds.

With this context in place, it is time to look at the books that this thesis will analyse. By seeing them in the context of the genre’s history, it will be easier to understand the choice of format these writers have made and what traditions of self-help literature these different works fit into.

1.5 Material under Scrutiny

Studying the self-help genre in its entirety is impossible in one thesis. I have therefore chosen a subcategory, which I have labelled ‘self-help books on minimalism and decluttering’. This category aims to help people deal with the consequences of the consumerist system they live in: The addressees are people who are frustrated by the amount of possessions they have acquired, or people who are otherwise attracted to the thought of a minimalist lifestyle. This assumes that the readers are middle-class: they can afford enough of what the market has to offer to fill their dwellings with more stuff than they are comfortable with being surrounded by. Additionally, a substantial amount of these possessions are not required to cover basic needs, meaning that they can be discarded. When self-help literature is researched, the research often focuses on titles
concerned with psychology, and thus almost solely on ‘the inside’, whereas the titles I have chosen are also concerned to some extent with ‘the outside’. Although other subcategories might be relevant for environmental and sustainability researchers as well, the focus on the material world in self-help books on minimalism and decluttering immediately makes this subgenre more relevant for environmental studies.


The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying is the only non-American self-help book in the sample. It is written by the Japanese organizing consultant Marie Kondo, and most of the book is dedicated to what she calls the KonMari method, her way of sorting through one’s possessions. In essence, her technique involves tidying the entire home in one go – a process that can last up to six months – and discarding before one stores and tidies away. Furthermore, one should discard by category. When discarding, only one thing should matter: “My criterion for deciding to keep an item is that we should feel a thrill of joy when we touch it” (Kondo, 2014: 68). Throughout the book, Kondo uses personal anecdotes to illustrate her message. She explains how she from an early age was extraordinarily interested in tidying, and how she herself tried different conventional tidying techniques that failed to give lasting results. She also uses anonymised examples of clients she has assisted, and continues to emphasise how they have all succeeded in tidying and continuing to keep their houses in order after receiving her guidance.

Minimalism is the only book chosen that is written by men, more precisely the two bloggers Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus. The book is not only minimalist in its message: Minimalism is only 121 pages long. They dedicate a chapter to their personal journeys from corporate jobs and misery to minimalist lives and meaningfulness, before they spend most of the book on the five values that are supposed to help their readers achieve a meaningful and minimalist life: Health, relationships, passions, growth and contribution. The two authors tie meaningfulness together with happiness. They argue that searching for meaning will in the long run help align your
actions with your values, and by finding your purpose, you will find lasting happiness: “Not ephemeral or fleeting happiness, but lasting contentment that is reinforced by a life of discipline, attention, awareness, and intentionality. Happiness is merely a byproduct” (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 7-8).

The Joy of Less is also written by a blogger, Francine Jay, and was originally a self-published work. Part One of the book is called Philosophy, and is included because “we must mentally prepare ourselves for the challenges ahead” that turning to minimalism will bring (Jay, [2010] 2016: 13). Following the philosophy section is a collection of chapters on Jay’s method of tidying, called STREAMLINE, an abbreviation for “the top ten most effective techniques for achieving and maintaining a decluttered home” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 9). She further devotes a chapter to each of the rooms in a household and explains how to use her method in each location. The final part of the book takes a step back from the tidying process and discusses how a minimalist lifestyle contributes to a greater context.

The final book, Zero Waste Home, is written by Bea Johnson, a French blogger who has settled in the United States. As signalled by the title, she has one of the more extreme approaches: Her goal is to produce zero waste. She also relies on personal anecdotes and references, and contrasts her old life to her new lifestyle: She married an American whom she travelled the world with before she settled in California, originally because of her “yearnings to try the American soccer-mom lifestyle” (Johnson, 2013: 2). Johnson also has her own method that she explains throughout the book: She calls it the five Rs, which are to be followed in order: Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle and Rot (Johnson, 2013: 15). These are an expansion of “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle”, a phrase used by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (04/01/2017) among others. The book is written for the Northern American market and refers to online resources mainly relevant for citizens of Canada and the United States, but the edition used in this thesis was published by the UK branch of Penguin Books, and many of the tips offered are customizable for the reader’s geographical location. Johnson’s book contains dozens of lists to help the readers adopt a similar lifestyle, and her advice is sorted under thematic chapters, such as ‘Kitchen and Grocery Shopping’, and ‘Holidays and Gifts’.

In order to investigate the potential that these self-help books may have in guiding readers from unsustainable to sustainable lifestyles, I decided to choose books that have
a relatively high level of readership. For the books to have any relevance, they must to a certain extent have sparked interest among book readers out there, and while sales numbers provide guidance, these numbers alone cannot guarantee that readers have opened the books after purchase. Therefore, I decided to only look into books with more than 1,000 ratings on Goodreads.com, a large online community for book readers. Marie Kondo’s book was chosen because of its massive popularity; together with its sequel, Kondo has sold more than 6 million copies worldwide (konmari.com, n.d.).

Millburn and Nicodemus state in their introduction that they have 4 million readers of their blog Thememinimalists.com (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 2). Francine Jay is behind Missminimalist.com, and the self-published version of The Joy of Less sold more than 75 000 copies on its own before it was taken on by a publishing company and revised (Jay, n.d.). Bea Johnson also blogs, but has not published sales numbers of her book or the numbers of readers of her blog. Even so, she claims that she launched the zero waste movement through her blog (Johnson, n. d.), and other bloggers within this movement trace their epiphany back to her writings (Clark, 22/04/2016). Both she and other zero waste bloggers receive a lot of media attention, often photographed with their year’s worth of landfill trash in a single mason jar, and this makes Johnson’s Zero Waste Home guide worthy of attention.

Finally, I only wanted to choose books by authors who were active before Marie Kondo’s book became a worldwide bestseller. In the wake of her success, there have been a flood of similar tidying books published around the world, and the level of intertextuality that these books have with The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying might be significant. I wanted to select works that are less dependent on each other than these are likely to be, and therefore chose books that were originally published before Kondo’s English edition. Some intertextuality might still occur, however, as the editions of Minimalism and The Joy of Less used in this thesis are updated second editions published after Kondo’s international success became a fact.

1.6 Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This thesis will be an interdisciplinary study, and while using different methods, it will be based on a constructivist approach. Constructivist theory sees the world not as a Real World of objective facts identical to every observer; rather, its ontology is based on the
belief that each observer may perceive – or construct – the world in different ways depending on their own previous experiences and contexts, thus opening up for multiple interpretations of what the world actually is (Moses and Knutsen, 2007: 10 and 199). Epistemologically, constructivists are pluralists: “They are willing to employ different tools to understand the unique nature of the social world” (Moses and Knutsen, 2007: 200). This study will be based on narrative and discourse theory, as well as narrative and frame analysis to uncover what worldviews and perspectives the self-help books are trying to convey to the readers.

1.6.1 The Narrative Approach

Scholars across many disciplines have conducted research on narratives, and as a consequence, narrative theory is available in many different versions (Foss, 1996: 400). Foss defines a narrative as “a way of ordering and presenting a view of the world through a description of a situation involving characters, actions, and settings” (Foss, 1996: 400). Narrative theory is often used in the case of studying storytelling, but they are not limited to fictional novels and plays. Jerome Bruner, for instance, writes of narratives as being part of the process of finding meaning. Bruner is preoccupied with folk psychology, which he describes as “a set of more or less connected, more or less normative descriptions about how human beings “tick””, and as a “system by which people organize their experience in, knowledge about, and transactions with the social world” (Bruner, 1990: 35). This folk psychology is shaped as narratives, and we use narrative structures in almost every context to make sense of the world. According to Bruner, a crucial feature of narratives is how they connect the ordinary and the exceptional, or canonicality and exceptionality:

“[…] while a culture must contain a set of norms, it must also contain a set of interpretive procedures for rendering departures from those norms meaningful in terms of established patterns of belief. […] Stories achieve their meanings by explicating deviations from the ordinary in a comprehensible form […]” (Bruner, 1990: 47)

By looking at canonicality and exceptionality in the narratives in the books, I will be able to interpret how they make sense of the alternative lifestyles that they promote and how these are supposed to help find greater meaning in life. Further, as Bruner writes, telling a story “is inescapably to take a moral stance […]” (Bruner, 1990: 51). By
studying narratives, I will be able to scrutinize the values related to consumption and meaning-making in the books as well.

1.6.2 Narratives and Discourses

Rodney Jones defines discourse analysis as “the study of the ways sentences and utterances are put together to make texts and interactions and how those texts and interactions fit into our social world” (Jones, 2012: 2). Discourse can be considered on three different levels: The formal approach treats discourse as how clauses and sentences combine to make a text, while the functional approach sees discourse as language in use, i.e. how language is used to get different kinds of messages across. Thirdly, the social approach considers discourse to be a social practice, where language is used for instance to construct identities, relationships, and power (Jones, 2012: 36).

Jones argues that a good discourse analysis considers all three levels, and I will therefore pay attention to all three. In order to identify how the books advocate for a change in consumption, I will have to look at how the books try to make their messages convincing to the readers, i.e. the functional level. In this context I will borrow some rhetorical concepts from Aristotle, such as the three modes of persuasion, *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*, to show how the authors appeal to reason, emotion, and their own authority respectively in their narratives (Aristotle, 2004: 7). It will also be relevant to look at how certain linguistic features, i.e. the formal level, are used to invoke certain frames in the readers’ minds. As Johnston argues, “[…]through close attention to language, the analyst can reconstruct a schema that systematically shows the relationships between concepts and experience in speech” (Johnston, 1995: 220). This would fit for written texts as well. Schemas are also known as frames (Lakoff, 2010: 71), and frame analysis will be another central method in this thesis.

1.6.3 Frames and Frame Analysis

I will partly base my analysis on Erving Goffman’s theory on frame analysis. Goffman sees frames as ways of organizing experiences (Goffman, [1974] 1986: 10-11). Experiences or impressions are described as “something that an individual actor can take into his mind” (Goffman, [1974] 1986: 13). Experience is also described as strips of reality, which Goffman explains as being “any arbitrary slice or cut from the stream
of ongoing activity […]” or “any raw batch of occurrence (of whatever status in reality) that one wants to draw attention to as a starting point for analysis” (Goffman, [1974] 1986: 10).

While Goffman was mainly a sociologist, the frame concept has been used across many disciplines. Lakoff describes frames from a psychological perspective, more specifically as an aspect of cognitive science. An important point he makes is that “frames include semantic roles, relations between roles, and relations to other frames” (Lakoff, 2010: 71). While pointing out a frame used in a text will single out one perspective in that text, the frame will not exist in a vacuum: it belongs in a context, both within the text and within a web of other frames. Furthermore, the frame may not be the only frame that is invoked in a reader’s mind by that text.

Goffman also points to the weaknesses with frame analysis, which start with the frame creation itself. As he writes, “I assume that when individuals attend to any current situation, they face the question: “What is it that’s going on here?”” (Goffman, [1974] 1986: 8). The answer to this question can vary substantially. The perspective can be broad or very narrow, entirely depending on who the poser of the question is. It also varies depending on the role of the viewer – a golfer will see golf as play, while a caddy will see it as work (Goffman, [1974] 1986: 8-9). Furthermore, in a given situation there are likely to be several things happening at once, where each event may be starting and ending at different times. Which event constitutes “it” in the question? (Goffman, [1974] 1986: 9).

In my research I will only be able to identify the frames that I am able to fathom. With such qualitative research, it may be that a different researcher would identify or emphasise different aspects than myself. This, however, does not invalidate all qualitative research. In order to conduct interpretive research, one must interpret, and if there were always one single answer to find in such studies, then the academic field of the humanities would barely exist.

By combining frame analysis and discourse analysis, I will be able to see how the language of the texts is trying to invoke certain mental frames in the readers’ minds. Johnston argues that “[…] there is an inextricable link between discourse and frames: it is through intensive discursive analysis that the mental structures of social movement
participants are best reconstructed – from the bottom up, from the text to the frame” (1995: 219).

To illustrate how frames work, Semetko and Valkenburg’s news frame analysis provides a relevant example. They list five frames that have previously been identified in news reports by others. Two of the most interesting frames in the context of self-help literature are the “morality frame” and the “responsibility frame”. Semetko and Valkenburg write that with the morality frame, the author puts the news issue in a context of moral prescriptions, and the story “may contain moral messages or offer specific social prescriptions about how to behave” (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000: 96). With the responsibility frame, on the other hand, the issue is presented in a way that gives someone the responsibility for either a problem or a solution. Semetko and Valkenburg further refer to Shanto Iyengar, who argued that when responsibility framing focuses on the issue in an episodical rather than thematic way, it will in effect put the responsibility for the issue on an individual actor rather than at a systemic level (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000: 96). This makes responsibility frames especially relevant for consumption in self-help literature, as a purely individual focus in the literature could in effect remove the individual from society, making both the problem and the solution a personal issue rather than a social or environmental one. This would then coincide with much of the criticism of self-help literature’s arguably individual focus, as previously mentioned.

1.7 Main Concepts

In order to conduct this study, several concepts will be needed and used. The following will elaborate on what self-help literature, consumption, the self, and the community entails.

While the genre under scrutiny will be referred to as ‘self-help literature’ in this thesis, self-help books are also known under other names. Woodstock argues that the term ‘self-improvement’ became more common when the framing of the readers went from seeing the readers as flawed individuals in need of help, to good enough individuals who were looking to improve themselves (Woodstock, 2006: 337). Richard Weiss also refers to the literature as ‘success literature’ (Weiss, 1969: 4). While different names do
invoke different frames, I will mainly use ‘self-help literature’ in order to avoid confusion, and because this concept seems to be the mainstream term – it is what bookstores tend to name the category, and what research on the topic tends to be labelled under.

Self-help literature is thus literature aiming to help the self, but what is ‘the self’? Ryan et al. define the self as “an intellectual and psychological process of thought in which one becomes aware of ones [sic!] existence in the universe” (Ryan et al., 2006: 433). The question that keeps causing disagreement is whether the self is constructed or unchangeable. As the historical section has shown, many self-help writers promote the idea that the self can be modified. For instance the self-help writer Maxwell Maltz, already introduced in the historical section, insisted that the self was linked to the personality, and that you could change both your personality and behaviour by changing the self-image through certain techniques (Starker, 1989: 114). Woodstock points to how many self-help writers have argued that “ideas of the self are ongoing social creations, created by others as much as by the self” (Woodstock, 2006: 323). Ryan et al., on the other hand, argue that the self is an unchanging entity: “One becomes aware of whom and what one is but essentially the inner self remains the same, what changes is this level of awareness as an individual matures” (Ryan et al., 2006: 433). They conclude that it is rather the roles and the tribes in which one plays those roles that change, not the self (Ryan et al., 2006: 439). In their view, consumption practices cannot change the self. Consumption can provide meaning and differentiation in one’s roles and tribes, but consumption does not provide the existence of a self – the self exists prior to consumption practices (Ryan et al., 2006: 431-432).

Will it matter in this thesis whether the self is a constructed or fixed element of the person? It is important to notice that Ryan et al. open for change in the roles one plays and the tribes one associates with. Even if one accepts their idea of an unchanging core, one does not have to dismiss the thought of self-help books being able to influence the self. Ryan et al. argue that change happens in the level of awareness as one matures rather than in the core self, and while they do not elaborate on what such a level of awareness entails, this could be seen as the individual’s own conscious perspective on the self. If this matures, it changes, and if perception can change it might not matter whether one believes in a core self or not; the perceived self can be influenced either
way. Adhering to the self as an entirely social construct will allow for more change than adhering to a conscious perspective on an underlying core, but change is possible in either case.

The perceived self can therefore be influenced, and the individual can deliberately try to change the impression that others get of his or her self. Erving Goffman compares representations of the self to how one acts on a stage: The front that the self presents consists of setting, appearance and manner. The setting makes up the scenic part of the front, such as furniture and other background items (Goffman, [1959] 1990: 32-34). In addition to a front section there is a backstage area where the self can be out of character, and where the individual can prepare for performances in the front (Goffman, [1959] 1990: 114-116). The performers on the stage, i.e. the selves, tend to present an idealized version of the self, often incorporating “the officially accredited values of the society” (Goffman, [1959] 1990: 45). Idealized presentations are especially associated with social mobility: Climbing the social ladder is a way to gain closer proximity to the values of the society (Goffman, [1959] 1990: 45).

Goffman further describes what he calls “secret consumption”, which is consumption carried out in the backstage area and deliberately hidden from the front. Goffman uses the example of middle-class housewives who hide romance publications in the bedroom instead of leaving them together with the newspapers on the coffee table, where guests and family members might see them ([1959] 1990: 50-51). Furthermore, Goffman states that when several standards are to be upheld, some are often prioritized at the cost of another that can be more easily hidden. For instance, if a company promises speed and quality, they may be more willing to sacrifice quality, as the lack of quality is easier to conceal than a lack of speed (Goffman, [1959] 1990: 53).

As this stage metaphor shows, the self does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, most individuals take part in one or more communities or societies. This raises another question: What is a community, and how does it differ from a society?

Maurice Godelier illustrates this difference using the Jewish ethnic group as an example: Jews living in Israel have created a society that has control over a territory, while Jews living in places such as London and Amsterdam have formed communities within the United Kingdom and the Netherlands respectively (Godelier, 2010: 6-7).
Furthermore, he points to how many large cities have “Chinatown” areas, where the inhabitants speak another language, serve a different cuisine and follow different holiday traditions from the rest of that country’s society (Godelier, 2010: 7). Society is thus a group of individuals, where the group is in control of the territory that it resides in, while a community is a group of individuals that share traits but does not govern a territory. A society can therefore contain several communities: The British society consists of numerous communities, including both Jewish communities and Chinatowns. Communities do not have to be ethnically based, however. As Miller et al. point out, new communication technologies have allowed people to form online communities, which consist of “people who engage in computer-supported social interaction” with each other (Miller et al., 2009: 305). Writing from a business perspective, they also argue that communities can provide a context that shapes the members’ preferences, in this case consumption preferences. While consumption can be a form of self-expression, communities become reference points for consumption practices: They give consumption articles certain values and meanings (Miller et al., 2009: 306-307). Ryan et al. also see consumption patterns as contingent on what they call ‘tribe’ belonging and roles within that tribe. They argue that if one enters a new tribe and thus assumes a new role, consumption behaviour will change accordingly as part of that role performance (Ryan et al., 2006: 440).

Self-help books can also provide opportunities for creating or shaping new communities. Searching Facebook for the term “Konmari”, Marie Kondo’s nickname, will for instance provide a search result with a multitude of groups centred on her tidying method. Further, the writers may provide a constructed community for or with the readers as well. Woodstock argues that “the self-help author weaves his own story with that of the reader, pulling the relationship between them tighter”, and that “authors do not aim to distinguish themselves from their readers, but rather to embrace them as part of the same community […]” (Woodstock, 2006: 330). This opens for the possibility of the authors providing the readers with a sense of belonging to a new community, inspiring them to assume a new role with new consumption patterns.

Consumption has been mentioned frequently already, but what is consumption? Willhite provides a short definition by defining it as “the acquisition and use of things” (2008: 3). Campbell, on the other hand, has a wider definition: He describes consumption as
“any activity involving the selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair and disposal of any product or service” (1995: 104). In this thesis, the main focus will be on the acquisition and disposal of physical objects. Some experiences or services will be mentioned as examples of consumption as well, but this will mainly be done because of the resource use that will follow through the consumption of such services.

What then is sustainable consumption? As defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development, sustainable development is defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (1987: n.p.). Sustainable consumption can therefore be regarded as consumption that meets the needs of the individual without compromising future generations’ possibilities to meet their needs.

In research, consumption is often related to happiness, seeing consumption as a means to acquiring happiness. According to a theory known as the Easterlin Paradox, increased income will affect happiness levels for the poor, but once one’s basic needs are well covered, increased income stops affecting happiness levels in the long term (Arrow and Dasgupta, 2009: F499-F500). Statistics are often referenced as proof of this, such as how the United Kingdom’s GDP has increased twofold since 1974 without showing substantial change in happiness statistics (Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2012: 96). It should be noted, however, that critics have pointed out flaws in the statistical methods used to measure happiness: Skidelsky and Skidelsky write that the mentioned happiness surveys in the United Kingdom have only provided respondents with a four-point scale to choose from, where “fairly satisfied” and “very satisfied” were the only options reflecting happiness. Happy respondents are thus left with little to no room for statistical improvement in their happiness levels (2012: 107-108).

Consumption, however, is not only done for the sake of happiness or satisfaction. Thorstein Veblen developed the concept ‘conspicuous consumption’ at the end of the 1800s. When consuming conspicuously, one is consuming to display wealth in order to establish one’s social status. Status is obtained through wealth, and wealth must be displayed in order to be recognized. This leaves consumers with two options: They can purchase things or spend their time of leisure in ways that signify wealth.
According to Veblen, waste is key to conspicuous consumption. It is not enough to buy things that one needs; one must use one’s wealth wastefully. Purchasing items for the sake of showing off wealth or using one’s time and efforts wastefully is a true sign of fortune (Trigg, 2001: 101). However, Veblen argued that communities were becoming less close-knit because of the increasing mobility in society that he witnessed, and therefore he concluded that consumption of goods was the most efficient way to display wealth (Trigg, 2001: 101).

Importantly, conspicuous consumption is not reserved for the wealthy. In Veblen’s days, society was clearly organized according to class status, and he argued that setting the class above one’s own as the ideal and attempting to consume like members of that ideal class was all that was necessary to consume conspicuously (Trigg, 2001: 101). Neither does conspicuous consumption have to be a conscious effort. Trigg points out that consumption of items like underwear and kitchen utensils can also be conspicuous even though they are rarely visible to others. He explains this with how Veblen argued that the desire to consume for status can manifest itself as a wish to live up to a standard of decency in one’s own class (Trigg, 2001: 108).

1.8 Structure of this thesis

With the theoretical and conceptual framework sketched above in place, I will be able to answer the research questions of this thesis in the chapters that follow. In chapter 2, I will discuss how the four self-help books argue that material possessions should enter and exit one’s life. Framing will be used to highlight relevant differences, such as differing views on waste. By uncovering the books’ views on consumption, I will be able to consider the sustainability of the proposed consumption patterns. Following that, chapter 3 will show how the books use personal narratives as a means of persuasion. Using personal narratives is a common characteristic of self-help books, which will show how the genre can or cannot advocate for sustainable consumption patterns. Chapter 4 will use Goffman’s stage metaphor on the self to show how the books argue that their proposed lifestyles can influence the self, and it will discuss the extent to which the self is framed as capable of influencing communities and society. Finally, the concluding chapter will discuss the extent to which the self-help books advocate
sustainable changes in consumption patterns, and how they may provide an alternative narrative to societal ideals of economic growth.
The aim of this chapter is to answer the research question *How should material possessions enter and exit one’s life according to these self-help books?* Answering this question will help understand the extent to which the books advocate lifestyles that will involve relatively more sustainable consumption practices for their middle-class readership. Comparing the promoted consumption patterns to conspicuous consumption will also contribute to unveiling what changes in consumption patterns the books encourage. I will attempt to answer this research question by looking at how the books urge the readers to dispose of old and acquire new items. Disposal will be discussed first, because of the major focus on decluttering that several of the books display.

As previously stated, consumption involves more than acquiring and disposing of items. However, from an environmental perspective, acquisition and disposal are two of the most important issues relating to consumption. According to Trigg, Thorstein Veblen regarded the rapidly increasing consumer boom in America in the 1890s as the main driving force behind conspicuous consumption (Trigg, 2001: 101). The items we purchase and get rid of do not appear from or disappear into thin air, and the speed at which we acquire and dispose of things puts increasing pressure on nature and resources. If a large part of this acceleration in speed consists of conspicuous consumption, we are witnessing a wasteful use of resources. This is why the attitudes that these self-help books promote regarding acquisition and disposal are important. These attitudes will reveal what changes in consumption patterns the books advocate, and if this is a turn away from conspicuous consumption, then the extent to which these books can make a difference for the environment might be considerable.

2.1 Disposal

For an individual, disposal is the last stage of consuming an article. However, from an environmental perspective, how disposal is carried out is not insignificant. One can put one’s used item in a rubbish bin going to the landfill or a bag aimed for recycling. Still, while the term ‘disposal’ may invoke the frame ‘throwing away’, this does not have to
be the way one disposes of goods. One can also get rid of an item by donating it, selling it, or repurposing it in some way. Before looking at the methods proposed by the writers, I will discuss the extent to which each book emphasizes disposal of things.

As the title *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying* implies, Marie Kondo’s main focus is on tidying up. She explains how she from an early age was interested in tidying, and how she herself tried different conventional tidying techniques that all failed to give lasting results. However, she writes next to nothing about how one should acquire things, or how one should dispose of them. Rather, she focuses on *whether* you should dispose of your things: When you answer the question “Does it spark joy?” (Kondo, 2014: 44), you will have your answer. The importance of this is reflected in the number of pages devoted to it: After the introduction, the discarding process is explained and elaborated upon for 111 pages. Only on page 150 of 240 does Kondo move on to how one should store one’s belongings. Disposal is thus a major part of her approach, even though she rarely states how to do so.

*Minimalism* is in total shorter than Kondo’s discarding section alone, as it is only 121 pages long, and Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus rarely write directly on the topic of consumption. This lack of normative procedures is reflected in their section on definitions of minimalism: “There are no rules. Rather, minimalism is simply about stripping away the unnecessary things in your life so you can focus on what’s important” (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 25). Even so, disposal is mentioned briefly in some contexts, and items you do not need are repeatedly referred to as ‘junk’.

Francine Jay, on the other hand, writes extensively on disposal. In the introduction, she claims that “Developing a minimalist mindset will transform the way we make decisions about the stuff we have and the stuff we bring into our lives” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 9). When deciding on what should be kept and what should be discarded, she emphasizes that items need a good reason to be allowed to stay in your life. The R in her STREAMLINE method is short for “Reason for each item” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 75). Further Jay uses the Pareto principle to argue that approximately 20 percent of your items are used 80 percent of the time, and that figuring out what your 20 percent is should make it easier to discard (Jay, [2010] 2016: 76-77). As the book is called *The Joy of Less: A Minimalist Guide to Declutter, Organize, and Simplify*, having a minimal amount of possessions is an important part of the lifestyle she endorses. However, like
Marie Kondo, Jay cares about the spark of joy that items may give you: “The brilliant glaze on a beautiful vase or sleek lines of a modernist chair may bring a deep and joyful satisfaction to our souls; therefore, such items have every right to be part of our lives” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 16). Satisfaction can then be a reason for an item to stay, while the lack of such is a reason for an item to depart from your life. Her suggestions on how things should depart, however, are much more varied than Kondo’s. Jay’s method involves sorting belongings in three piles, labelled ‘Treasure’, ‘Trash’, and ‘Transfer’ (Jay, [2010] 2016: 69), which means that after deciding on whether an item should stay in or leave your life, items exiting should be further sorted. The advice on how to trash and transfer is further organized under chapters devoted to each room of the house.

In *Zero Waste Home*, it is not just how waste leaves your home that matters, but also how much waste you create in the first place. Consequently, Bea Johnson has devoted a substantial amount of the book to the topic of acquisition and how to avoid unnecessary acquisitions as much as possible. Even so, Johnson writes a lot about what to do with the waste that you do create. Her book contains dozens of lists to help the readers adopt a similar lifestyle, including decluttering lists from her own bathroom and A-Z lists on how to extend the life of your current wardrobe (Johnson, 2013: 85-86, 99-103, and 125-126). Her advice is sorted under thematic chapters, such as “Workspace and Junk Mail” (Johnson, 2013: 161-180). As the following will show, her recommendations on how to dispose are numerous.

### 2.1.1 Framing Waste

In three of the selected books, discarded items are associated with different expressions: ‘Rubbish’ in *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying*, ‘junk’ in *Minimalism*, and ‘landfill’ in *Zero Waste Home*. In each case, waste is framed differently, which sends out different messages to the readers on how they can or should discard. These views will have great implications for the levels of sustainability in the consumption patterns that the books advocate.

**The Rubbish Frame**

Marie Kondo writes very little about how to dispose of items, but her choice of words in the book invokes what we can call the rubbish frame: An unsorted trash bag is indirectly
presented as your main option for getting rid of items. As examples from the text will show, the discourse on rubbish suggests that once you, as the owner, are done with an item, its life has expired and the item almost automatically becomes rubbish.

Two expressions that are frequently used throughout *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying* are ‘discard’ and ‘throw away’. In spite of repeatedly telling the readers how to discard, Kondo argues that it is the joy you feel when touching your possessions that should be your guide, not the lack of it – your focus should be on what to keep, not what to toss. She uses a personal anecdote of how she entered a disposal phase at the age of 15 to illustrate the negativity in focusing on discarding only:

I applied every criterion suggested by the various books I read on reducing. […] I threw out 30 bags of rubbish in one month. But no matter how much I discarded, not a single room in my house felt any tidier. […] At home, I was always uptight, constantly on the lookout for superfluous things that could be thrown away. […] Not surprisingly, I became increasingly irritable and tense and found it impossible to relax even in my own home. (Kondo, 2014: 46)

Words like ‘reduce’, ‘discard’, and ‘superfluous’ create an image of Kondo living in a room full of waste, while the expressions ‘uptight’, ‘on the lookout’, and ‘irritable and tense’ highlight the stress and strain this negative view of her home brought her. The main turning point in her personal anecdotes is when her mindset changed and she began to look for the joy-sparking objects in her possession rather than the undesirable ones:

When I woke up, I knew immediately what that voice in my head had meant. *Look more closely at what is there*. I had been so focused on what to discard, on attacking the unwanted obstacles around me, that I had forgotten to cherish the things that I loved, the things that I wanted to keep (Kondo, 2014: 47).

“Does it spark joy?” is the essence of her method, and the only criterion that should count. The only exception she mentions is documents that must be saved, such as leases and insurance policies (Kondo, 2014: 114).

Nevertheless, large parts of the book are devoted to discussing what you should discard. If an item does not spark joy, it should exit your life, even if you find it hard to discard. As the quote above also shows, reducing for 15-year-old Marie Kondo meant filling 30
‘bags of rubbish’. Kondo rarely writes explicitly about how one should dispose of things, but when she does, she mainly describes the act of discarding as putting items in bin bags:

The amount of things my clients have discarded, from clothes and undergarments, to photos, pens, magazine clippings and make-up samples, easily exceeds a million items. This is no exaggeration. I have assisted individual clients who have thrown out 200 45-litre bin bags in one go (Kondo, 2014: 2).

The act of tidying will in itself “produce bag after bag of rubbish” (Kondo, 2014: 213), and bags of discarded books, clothes and toys are described as “this rubbish” (Kondo, 2014: 54). Family members should not be allowed to see “clothes, toys and keepsakes from the past on the rubbish heap” both to spare their feelings and to prevent them from retrieving unnecessary items (Kondo, 2014: 56). In this way, Kondo effectively labels objects that are leaving a person’s home as undesirable for anyone. This interpretation is further strengthened by the fact that donations are rarely described as an option.

However, discarding something should not make you feel guilty – it is part of the process of turning your home into a peaceful sanctuary. As Kondo explicitly states, “To throw away what you no longer need is neither wasteful nor shameful” (Kondo, 2014: 71). By equating what you do not need with rubbish, Kondo provides the readers with a very broad definition of rubbish, and by calling this “neither wasteful nor shameful”, she dismisses the negative reactions that some may have to such a policy.

To analyse this, we can apply narrative theory. As Jerome Bruner argues, a vital feature of meaning making in narratives is the connection they create between the conventional and the exceptional. In this case, Kondo suggests that lack of necessity is not a conventionally approved reason for tossing something, but she still deviates from this norm. How does she bridge these contradictions?

In order to justify her decluttering method, Kondo subtly appeals to spiritual values. She writes that you should thank the objects that no longer bring you joy for the role they have fulfilled in your life. When deciding on discarding, you should figure out which role the item has fulfilled, even if that role was only to give you the joy of the purchase experience, as in this example of clothes discarding:
why did you never wear it? Was it because you realised that it didn’t suit you when you tried it on at home? If so, and if you no longer buy clothes of the same style or colour, then it has fulfilled another important function – it has taught you what doesn’t suit you. In fact, that particular article of clothing has already completed its role in your life, and you are free to say, ‘Thank you for giving me joy when I bought you’, or ‘Thank you for teaching me what doesn’t suit me,’ and let it go (Kondo, 2014: 70).

By stating this, Kondo encourages the readers to treat their objects like individuals. When treating items as if they have spirits that should be respected, she gives the tidying process a notion of solemnity and respectfulness. This spirituality gives the exceptionality of tossing items a comprehensible explanation, and thus provides a justification that not only gives meaning to tossing usable items, but one that could also make the readers feel as if the tidying process has a greater level of meaning. By merging spirituality with the rubbish frame, Kondo could in effect be making the act of sending items to the landfill a spiritual ritual.

To sum up, Kondo provides a frame around the term ‘rubbish’ that energetically permits liberal discarding practices, but which also frames a substantial amount of potentially useful items as waste. The owner of an item has the sole power to decide whether an item is worthy of keeping, and anything deemed joyless automatically becomes rubbish. It is implied that the life cycle of an item ends as the current owner discards it.

**The Junk Frame**

Millburn and Nicodemus barely mention disposal. They do, however, present one statement before their writings properly begin: On the copyright page, below the listed publishing years, they have written: “The best way to organize your stuff is to get rid of most of it” (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016). Left on its own, ‘get rid of’ could be interpreted in many ways, but this is effectively their way of summing up what the book will have to say about organizing. The book does not present any tidying technique, and treats possessions more as a non-topic than something to dedicate substantial attention to. Discarding items at a landfill is thus not an option they actively promote.

A term that still stands out, however, is the word ‘junk’. As the copyright page indicates, Millburn and Nicodemus categorically believe that things will not lead to
happiness. Consequently, they label such purchases as acquisition of junk. One instance is when they write about their lives before discovering minimalism:

To deal with his more subtle discontent, Joshua tried to buy his happiness. He spent money on *stuff*, buying fancy clothes, expensive vacations, consumer electronics, multitudes of unnecessary junk (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 14).

It further becomes apparent that they see value in two different ways: Value can be monetary, or it can be the meaning something brings into your life. One of the five values they promote in the book is health, which they regard as a fundamental requirement to living a meaningful life. In the health chapter, they imperatively urge the readers to acquire a good-quality blender, and if they cannot afford a high-quality blender, they should sell other unnecessary possessions in order to afford one (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 40).

By labelling items as junk, the authors not only imply that they are unnecessary to keep, but also that they are easy to get rid of. This is inversely implied when they describe the possessions left behind by Millburn’s mother after she passed away: “His mother had an interior decorator’s good taste, so none of her stuff was “junk” in the *Hoarders* sense of the word, which made letting go of anything difficult” (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 19). At the same time, Millburn and Nicodemus still argue that one should get rid of unnecessary items even when they do not qualify for the label of junk, as section 2.1.4 will demonstrate.

As these examples show, Millburn and Nicodemus’ junk frame deviates from Kondo’s rubbish frame. While they both use words with negative connotations to describe unnecessary items, Millburn and Nicodemus still recognize the monetary value of ‘junk’. Rather than sending items to the landfill, they tell the readers to exploit the monetary value of their current possessions to acquire items that will bring meaning and health to their lives. Furthermore, by encouraging donations and sales, they indicate that items that are not needed by you or do not contribute to making your life meaningful, could still be needed or wanted by others. Thus the junk frame becomes both positive and negative: Junk is unnecessary and barely worth elaborating on, but what is junk to you can provide value for others, and the monetary value you can gain by selling your junk can be exchanged for items that increase the meaningfulness of your life.
The Landfill Frame

The landfill frame can be identified in *Zero Waste Home*, and is quite different from the rubbish and the junk frames. Most obviously, landfill is the destination of discarded items, but not discarded items themselves. Johnson uses the term ‘waste’ mostly to denote landfill waste, but she also uses it for waste that can be recycled or repurposed. The landfill, however, is regarded as the main reason for why one should aim for a zero waste lifestyle. While Kondo ignores where something one ‘throws away’ ends up, Johnson stresses the destination and consequences of discarded objects:

> Our waste ends up in our landfills, spoiling our precious environments, leaching toxic compounds into our air and soil, wasting the resources used to create the discarded goods, and costing us billions of dollars each year in processing (Johnson, 2013: 14).

As Lakoff explains, frames consist of relations between roles and relations to other frames (Lakoff, 2010: 71), and Johnson builds a frame around the term landfill that is closely related to responsibility: responsibility to protect the environment – and to protect one’s economic interests. In sum, sending items to the landfill is presented as the ultimate way to waste. The combination of environmental and economic interests is clearly apparent when Johnson advocates against disposable kitchenware: Replacing disposables for reusable items will allow you to “Keep your money where it belongs: in your pocket and out of the landfill!” (Johnson, 2013: 46).

When it comes to food waste, Johnson’s focus is on the waste of resources: She stresses how compostable materials will not decompose properly in the landfill and refers to a book called *Garbology*, which describes a 25-year-old landfill sample that contained hotdogs and guacamole that were still intact (Johnson, 2013: 195-196). Air and soil contamination at the landfill is further used as an argument for private composting of kitchen and yard waste (Johnson, 2013: 28). As for plastics, she frames the material as wasteful because the recycling process often degrades the quality of the material, which means that plastics are “destined” for the landfill (Johnson, 2013: 25). Similarly, Johnson describes office supplies like highlighters as “designed for the landfill” once they dry out (Johnson, 2013: 166). By focusing on the inherent fate of certain products and materials, Johnson appeals to agency in her readers: Like her, they should choose options where they can affect the destiny of the product.
All in all, these different frames display different views on acceptable ways to consume. Kondo has the most unsustainable framing – as soon as the consumer no longer finds joy in an item, it can be regarded as rubbish and tossed away. Millburn and Nicodemus’ frame is relatively more sustainable, as they focus on the monetary value and the utility for others that items might have. Consequently, items can have their life cycles extended with other owners, but as the authors do not elaborate on how one should discard, it is very much up to the reader how they decide to make their homes minimalist. It is Johnson that has the most sustainable approach to waste. By encouraging the readers to actively avoid what she sees as the ultimate way to waste – sending items to the landfill – she encourages the readers to not only extend the life cycle of items, but also to give them new life. Several of the ways she proposes to avoid landfill disposal are discussed in the rest of this chapter.

2.1.2 Recycling – The Necessary Evil and The Good Option

Recycling is mainly presented in The Joy of Less and Zero Waste Home, and the topic is framed in two ways: As a good option and as a necessary evil. As seen in the previous section, Johnson discourages use of plastics in Zero Waste Home, because the materials cannot be recycled forever due to degradation in the recycling process. Recycling is the fourth R in her guide, but she still argues that recycling opportunities are not good enough to warrant consumption patterns that rely heavily on recycling:

Of course, by now you know that a Zero Waste household is not all about recycling and that waste management starts outside the home by curbing consumption, which eliminates much recycling and greatly reduces associated concerns. These concerns include the fact that the broad system of recycling not only requires energy to process but also lacks regulations to guide and coordinate the efforts of manufacturers, municipalities, consumers, and recyclers. Recycling currently depends on too many variables to make it a dependable solution to our waste problems (Johnson, 2013: 24-25).

The need to recycle should thus be limited due to the chaotic nature of recycling systems and the waste of energy associated with it. Similarly, Francine Jay encourages
the readers to consider the materials they choose, as natural materials are easier to dispose of and recycle than plastics (Jay, [2010] 2016: 274).

Still, Jay presents a more positive view on recycling than Johnson. Rather than focusing on the obstacles in recycling, she emphasizes how recycling options have become increasingly available in the last years (Jay, [2010] 2016: 270). She also includes compost as an aspect of recycling, even when it is done at home (Jay, [2010] 2016: 271), instead of treating it as a separate option, which Johnson does. Similarly to Johnson, however, Jay urges the readers to reduce and reuse before they recycle:

And I know you know that when I say “throw away”, I mean “recycle if possible.” While tossing things in the trash is easy, we must keep the environment in mind. I don’t think any of us want to be responsible for something sitting in a landfill for the next hundred years. Of course, before you pitch anything, consider if someone else can use it (Jay, [2010] 2016: 70).

This also shows that Johnson’s landfill frame can be identified in The Joy of Less as well. It is not as prominent, but Jay also refers to the landfill as a reason to avoid waste. Recycling becomes the least desirable non-waste option, a necessary but more wasteful option in terms of energy and quality than reducing and reusing would be.

### 2.1.3 Postponing Disposal – Extending the Life of Objects

While decluttering and minimizing is important in all of the books, at some points disposal is discouraged rather than encouraged. This is the case in Zero Waste Home and The Joy of Less. They encourage postponing disposal in two ways: By repairing or repurposing your items.

Postponing disposal of objects means extending their life cycles. To do this, Johnson encourages repairing your objects, either yourself or by calling the manufacturer of the item (Johnson, 2013: 23). She believes schools should teach zero waste living in general, but also the specific skills needed to lead a zero waste lifestyle. For instance, in Johnson’s ideal Zero Waste future, schools would teach “simple needle-and-thread repairs” (Johnson, 2013: 262). In an A-Z list for repurposing wardrobe items, she refers to her blog for those who want to learn how to do such repairs, but she also offers ideas
Jay encourages repairing as well, but also opens up for not doing so. When discussing wardrobe decluttering, she encourages the readers to remove all items “beyond repair (or your ability or desire to do so) – like that holey sweater or shirt with a stubborn stain” (Jay, 2010: 147). Additionally, in the case of decluttering the kitchen of broken items, she states that “if you haven’t yet made the effort to repair them, you evidently can live without them” (Jay, 2010: 177). These examples clearly showcase Jay and Johnson’s different perspectives: in Jay’s book, downsizing trumps waste, while for Johnson, waste reduction is the most important thing.

This does not mean that Jay condones liberal discarding. She also encourages repurposing items such as clothing. Jay’s writing on clothes beyond repair is reminiscent of Johnson’s landfill frame: “That doesn’t mean they’re destined for the landfill. If you can recycle or repurpose them, all the better – but only keep them if you have a specific use in mind” (Jay, 2010: 147). Once again, minimalism is the most important, but if needed, repurposing is a good option.

Jay does not elaborate on how one can repurpose clothes, while Johnson, on the other hand, offers advice: Old clothes can be turned into rags for cleaning (Johnson, 2013: 24). She also has repurposing recommendations for other products: Paper with print on one side only can be used on the other side as well, and the paper that you choose not to reuse this way can be turned into notebooks or new paper. The book includes instructions on how to do both (Johnson, 2013: 176-179).

Food can also be repurposed in a zero waste household. Johnson describes herself as an avid supporter of domestic composting, or ‘Rotting’, which is the fifth R of her method (Johnson, 2013: 27). She describes composting as a “key component” to the lifestyle, but this does not just involve rotting food: Wooden alternatives to plastic products, such as toothbrushes, can be composted when they reach the end of their life cycle and thus turned into “black gold” (Johnson, 2013: 28). In order to help the readers adopt composting themselves, she lists both a guide to different composting systems as well as a list of compostable objects and materials (Johnson, 2013: 30-31 and 49).
While Jay and Johnson are the main advocates of repair and repurposing, there is one instance in *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying* where repurposing is presented as a solution. In fact, when writing about storage solutions, Kondo does two things that rarely occur in the book: She suggests repurposing items you already have, in this case for storage purposes, and she links acquisition to how items should spark joy:

> When my clients use what they already have in the house like this, they always find that they have exactly what they need to store their things. They don’t need to go out and buy storage items. Of course, there are plenty of great designer items out there. But right now, the important thing is to finish putting your house in order as soon as possible. Rather than buying something to make do for now, wait until you have completed the entire process and then take your time looking for storage items that you really like (Kondo, 2014: 174).

In this way, she encourages readers to resist the urge to seek instant satisfaction through purchasing in order to experience a greater satisfaction of acquiring something they truly enjoy later on.

Postponement of disposal could be a way to appeal to the creativity or aesthetic values of the readers, as McGee argues that many self-help books have done in order to ease women’s discontent (McGee, 2005: 21). Interestingly, this is far from the main focus in any of these three books when it comes to repurposing and repairing. Creativity is encouraged to some extent, as the act of repurposing can be regarded as a creative outlet, but the repurposing recommendations are offered because of their practicality and exploitation of available resources, not because of the aesthetic quality they could offer. This focus on practicality could turn the readers’ attention away from purchasing their way out of material issues, and thus encourage turning towards more sustainable practices.

### 2.1.4 Reincarnation – Donating, Selling, and Giving Away

Disposing of items does not mean that you have to throw them away, and all four books mention donations, sales or giving away as options at some point. Marie Kondo devotes the least space to the topic, but both giving away and donating are presented at one point. When it comes to excessively stocking up on consumer articles such as toothbrushes and plastic wraps, Kondo discourages keeping vast amounts in the house.
Instead, you should “Give it away to friends who might need it, donate it or take it to a recycle shop” (Kondo, 2014: 144). This is the only time the word ‘donate’ is used in the book. Apart from this, giving away is only proposed in the case of giving something to family members who already know that they need precisely that kind of item, but this is brought up to modify the section where Kondo strongly urges the readers not to expose their family members to the tidying process (Kondo, 2014: 56). Therefore, giving used items to family cannot be considered a normative practice promoted by Kondo, which means that it is only unused consumer articles that the readers are actively encouraged to give a new life with a new owner. The book thus implies that once possessions have fulfilled their role in one’s life, the lives of the possessions are over.

Zero Waste Home is a great contrast to The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying as donations are frequently encouraged throughout the book. You should donate any kind of useable items that you either do not want or do not need, everything from cookbooks to Halloween costumes (Johnson, 2013: 63 and 222). When it comes to giving away or selling, the book provides a list of possible outlets for usable items, including eBay, women’s shelters, tool co-operatives, and waiting rooms in addition to traditional donations outlets such as charity shops and the Salvation Army (Johnson, 2013: 21).

Francine Jay is also very encouraging of giving away, donating, and selling. In the ‘Trash, Treasure, Transfer’ technique that she proposes, Jay divides Transfer into two subsections, Give Away and Sell (Jay, [2010] 2016: 72). Giving away is especially encouraged, and donations are frequently suggested in the chapters on organizing each room of the house, such as in the kitchen:

We may grow tired of tomato soup before we finish our stash, or decide we’d rather eat fresh fruit than the canned stuff on our shelves. Don’t feel bad; regard it as a wonderful chance to do a good deed! Donate any unwanted canned or packaged items to a local food bank or soup kitchen. The castoffs from your pantry can keep someone else from going hungry (Jay, [2010] 2016: 178).

In this way, Jay shows an active interest in the lifespan of products. As for getting rid of items that one could have used, she writes: “Don’t feel guilty about letting them go; set them free, and give them a new lease on life” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 72). The life of an item can be continued with another owner, and this act will be a good deed, which will make
the effort of that deed worthwhile: “Make some phone calls and offer up your excess—the time and effort to find it a new home is worth the good karma. Save your donation receipts, and take a tax write-off if possible” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 164).

By referring to karma and new life, Jay alludes to Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Karma has been interpreted as a way for the individual to achieve salvation through its own effort, making the individual the cause of both its experienced suffering and happiness (Kaufman, 2005: 15). Donations therefore become a way for the individual to achieve spiritual as well as decluttering goals. Moreover, Jay combines the spirituality of karma with the financial benefits of the American taxation system, and the synergic effect of this can make the act of donating particularly desirable. Similar to how Kondo effectively approves of discarding by framing it with spirituality, Jay uses spirituality to encourage donations.

Donations are one of the few aspects of disposal that Millburn and Nicodemus explicitly discuss in Minimalism. In the chapter on how and why they became minimalists, they write about Millburn’s mother and the belongings she left behind when she died. They emphasize the sentimentality attached to deceased relatives’ belongings:

Furthermore, Joshua was faced with the dilemma of what to do with his mother’s stuff after her death—what to do with those sentimental items we tend to hold on to in perpetuity […]. His mother had an interior decorator’s good taste, so none of her stuff was “junk” in the Hoarders sense of the word, which made letting go of anything difficult. Nevertheless, there was a lot of stuff in her home, likely three or more apartments’ worth in her tiny dwelling, so he knew some things would have to go (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 19).

As previously discussed, Millburn and Nicodemus frame ‘junk’ as unnecessary items that are easy to discard, a frame which is not applicable to many inherited items. Instead of having to reframe his mother’s belongings as ‘junk’, Millburn detached his feelings for his mother from her possessions: He realized that he could keep his memories of her without keeping her things, which made him able to donate most of her items “to places and people who could actually use it” (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 21).

The authors elaborate on the issue of what they label sentimentality, meaning emotional attachment to material objects. They state that sentimental items are not bad in
themselves, but if sentimentality is the sole reason for keeping items, one should consider getting rid of them (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 21). The usefulness of items for others should thus trump the sentimentality of the owner, and the item should be donated.

Lastly, they encourage selling possessions as a way to decrease one’s debts and financial burden. They refer to their personal minimalist journeys where they sold more than half of their possessions locally or online: “Now everything we own serves a purpose or brings us joy, and we don’t miss any of the trinkets of yesteryear” (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 89). Similarly to the other books, need or joy become requirements to keep items – the rest will have to go. Once again, they encourage exchanging the monetary value of useless things into value for one’s minimalist lifestyle.

It becomes clear that usefulness is a label that qualifies items for new lives with new owners in all of the four selected books. It is the extent of encouragement that varies greatly; The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying devotes the least attention to the topic, and Minimalism equally considers the usefulness for others in donating and the monetary benefits for the seller in selling. Zero Waste Home and The Joy of Less, on the other hand, present advice and encouragement on how to give items a new life with new owners throughout the books.

What is also noticeable is the sociological assumptions behind these writings: It is assumed that the readers have been able to afford a lifestyle that leaves them with more items than they can sort in an orderly fashion in their houses, and that they are in a financial position that have given them the opportunity to accumulate debt with creditors. This suggests that their average reader is assumed to be a middle-class citizen who will also have ample opportunities for acquiring new items.

2.2 Acquisition

2.2.1 The Gatekeeper Frame

When it comes to acquisitions, Jay and Johnson are the two writers promoting the greatest level of caution. According to Jay, material possessions should only enter your
life after you as the gatekeeper have approved them. She lists several questions that the gatekeeper should ask before purchasing:

Ask the following (in your head!) of each potential purchase: "Do you deserve a place in my home?" "What value will you add to my household?" "Will you make my life easier?" "Or are you going to be more trouble than you're worth?" "Do I have a place to put you?" "Do I already have something just like you?" "Will I want to keep you forever (or at least a very long time)?" "If not, how hard will it be to get rid of you?" The last question alone saved me from lugging home a suitcase full of souvenirs from Japan – because once something has memories, it’s a bugger to get rid of (Jay, [2010] 2016: 40-41).

We can derive from this that an item must be a useful, simplifying, and novel element in our collection of things in order to be allowed into our lives. Furthermore, it must be worthy: It must include more benefits than nuisance, and it must add value to the household. Finally, items should be framed as a self. Albeit to a lesser extent than Marie Kondo, Jay still tells the readers to address their potential items as a ‘you’. In this example, she makes the item an agent in the readers’ life rather than a passive possession: If items are allowed into your life, they will play a part, either good or bad. Thus, if the item does not provide value or usefulness, it will become a burden, especially if it is hard to get rid of.

The quoted questions make up a screening process that helps the consumer decide whether an item is truly needed. The gatekeeper’s primary task is then to evaluate the usefulness of an item. This requirement is further repeated when Jay discusses free promotional items offered by companies. In the case of shampoos, Jay writes: “And by all means, leave those little lotions and shampoos in the hotels where they belong. Unless you honestly plan to use them, don’t let these miniatures clutter up the cabinets” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 41). By framing the consumer as a gatekeeper checking for usefulness before allowing entry, Jay narrows down the acquisition window to fit the definition of consumption: As the introductory chapter has shown, consumption involves acquisition, use, and disposal.

Likewise, the importance of evaluating your need for something before acquiring is repeatedly stressed in Zero Waste Home. The first step in Johnson’s method to reduce waste is Refuse: “Curbing consumption is a major aspect of reducing waste” (Johnson,
2013: 15). This involves reducing what you purchase, but also refusing the number of items you do not have to pay for, such as junk mail, business cards, and free products with advertisements and company logos on (Johnson, 2013: 15-16).

To explain why refusing makes a difference, Johnson highlights how personal consumption patterns send a message to the providers:

> When we let waiters fill our glass with water that we won’t be drinking and a straw that we won’t use, we are saying: “Water is not important” and “Please make more disposable straws”. When we take a “free” shampoo bottle from a hotel room, more oil will be rigged to make a replacement. When we passively accept an advertising flyer, a tree is cut down somewhere to make more flyers (…)” (Johnson, 2013: 16).

With this, *Zero Waste Home* also frames the consumer as a gatekeeper. The gatekeeper role becomes a way to act responsibly, where decisions on acquisitions should be made with a conscious mind: “With every purchase, the entire life cycle of a product should be evaluated, including recyclability” (Johnson, 2013: 25).

As previously shown, Johnson stresses how figuring out a product’s recyclability is challenging, meaning that recyclability does not automatically warrant an acquisition. Her waste reduction method encourages Refuse, Reduce and Reuse before moving on to two ways to dispose, meaning that the majority of her method is devoted to preventing new acquisitions. The best way to prevent landfill waste is not to extend the life cycle of a product, but to stop the ‘birth’ of a product to begin with.

Kondo also encourages the reader to act as a gatekeeper, but in a different way from Jay and Johnson. She describes how many of her clients stock up on clothing of a similar style that they tend to wear often, such as shirts and sweaters in a specific colour. When stocking up, however, they also have a tendency to leave their purchases in the packaging or with the price tags on and forget about them, which results in new purchases being made without the old items ever having been worn (Kondo, 2014: 187-188). In this case, Kondo explicitly urges the readers to refrain from stocking up. She states that while many believe it is cheaper to buy in bulk when items are on sale, “[…] I believe the opposite is true. When you consider the cost of storage, it is just as economical to keep these things in the store, not your home” (Kondo, 2014: 189).
Following this, Kondo insists that an item is not truly yours until you have removed the tags. She distinguishes between an item being a product and a possession when she writes that tagged clothes have a different aura than used clothing:

They [clothes in a shop] exude a crisp primness, and clothes with their price tags still on still retain that primness. This is how I see it. Clothes in a store are products whereas clothes in the home are personal possessions. Clothes that still have their price tag on have not yet been made our own and therefore they don’t quite ‘belong’. Overpowered by the aura of our ‘legitimate’ clothes, they are less noticeable (Kondo, 2014: 190).

Here, Kondo once again refers to spiritual values inspired by Eastern religions. Like Jay did in the case of donations, Kondo combines spirituality with economic reason to strengthen the persuasiveness of her argument: You honour yourself by being economically sensible in your purchases, and you honour your relationship with your items by treating them right.

2.2.2 Shopping

None of the books write solely positively about shopping. Overall, the act of shopping is mainly described as a negative way of spending one’s free time. For instance, Kondo rarely writes about acquisition or disposal, but when she does, she frames shopping as a negative act in two out of three cases.

In one paragraph, Kondo equates shopping with being a futile stress reliever. In her discarding phase at the age of 15, the distress she still felt after disposing of numerous bags of rubbish led her to self-medicate with shopping: “I found myself going shopping just to relieve the stress and so failed miserably to reduce the total volume of my possessions” (Kondo, 2014: 46). Shopping as a stress-reliever is thus regarded as a counterproductive pursuit, and is likely to be an obstruction in the tidying process.

Moreover, Kondo does not treat “Does it spark joy?” as an exclusively easy question to answer. In the last section of her book, she addresses the dilemma of keeping something because it is a memento of the past or keeping things because you fear they would be needed in the future. Her argument is that such thoughts prevent you from seeing what you need in the present, and this will only lead you to accumulate more things that are unnecessary:
The best way to find out what we really need is to get rid of what we don’t. Quests to faraway places or shopping sprees are no longer necessary. All you have to do is eliminate what you don’t need by confronting each of your possessions properly (Kondo, 2014: 212).

Shopping as a practice to map out one’s needs is consequently discarded, but another section of the book contradicts this message. When discussing families and hand-me-downs, Kondo argues that younger siblings throw away a higher percentage of clothes than older sisters tend to do. Her explanation for this is:

One is that it’s hard to throw away something received from family. The other is that they don’t really know what they like, which makes it hard to decide if they should discard it. Because they receive so much clothing from others, they don’t really need to shop and therefore they have less opportunity to develop the instinct for what really inspires joy (Kondo, 2014: 65).

This implies that shopping must be done to figure out one’s preferences, which could also be seen as Kondo’s message when she encourages readers to appreciate how unused items have taught them what they do not suit, as discussed in section 2.1.1. These contradictions in Kondo’s writings leave it up to the reader to figure out whether shopping is a leisure activity worth pursuing.

Kondo is not alone in discouraging acquisition as a way to relieve mental states, however. Through personal anecdotes, Millburn and Nicodemus stress how they believe that shopping does not lead to happiness. Consequently, they imply that such purchases are acquisitions of junk. One illustration of this is when they write about their lives before discovering minimalism:

To deal with his more subtle discontent, Joshua tried to buy his happiness. [...] When those things didn’t bring lasting happiness, he turned to his childhood vice of food (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 14).

Rather than a way to self-medicate, Millburn and Nicodemus present shopping as a means to satisfy one’s basic needs only. Firstly, when it comes to food, consumption should not be treated as a source of entertainment, but rather as a source of nutrition and a way to strengthen one’s health (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 44). Secondly, while they encourage readers to follow their passions to as great an extent as they can, they do recognize the need for an income in order to live:
[…] there’s no doubt we all need to pay for a roof over our heads, food to nourish our bodies, clothes to keep us warm, medical care when we’re sick or injured, and various other essentials (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 72).

If a purchase can strengthen one of the five values that they promote, however, the acquisition of that item becomes imperative. While they introduce the book by saying that their take on minimalism is an approach that can be adapted to one’s situation, in the case of health they write insistently: “Get yourself a NutriBullet and use it daily”, and if one cannot afford a high-quality blender, “Sell your junk and buy one: we’re certain the juicer will add more value to your life than your unused trinkets” (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 40). Shopping as a pastime, however, is not encouraged in any way, meaning that shopping is mainly framed as a means to an end.

Johnson also treats shopping as a means rather than an end goal, although she devotes considerably more attention to the topic. In order to avoid unnecessary shopping temptations, she suggests choosing set days of the year for clothes shopping, such as a couple of days twice a year. This is to avoid shopping for the sake of its entertainment value, but also to extend the lifetime of one’s existing wardrobe (Johnson, 2013: 119). Purchasing second-hand clothing is also encouraged, even if this means that you may have to dispose of your garments sooner than when buying brand new ones. At the same time, however, Johnson argues that many vintage items are likely to last longer in total than current garments do (Johnson, 2013: 127). By this, she implies that quality vintage items might last just as long as new garments before suffering irreparable damage.

Additionally, Johnson has guidelines for food shopping. She actively urges the readers to use their wallets in accordance with their values: “We can vote with our pocketbooks by avoiding wasteful packaging and privileging local and organic products” (Johnson, 2013: 52). The best way to do this, she argues, is by buying in bulk – not in large quantities, but by weight and in reusable containers that one brings to the store (Johnson, 2013: 52-53). Shopping is here a means to two ends: Covering one’s necessities, and doing so with as little waste as possible in the process.

Jay’s view on shopping is very similar to Johnson’s. Jay encourages shopping on a local scale: She argues that by purchasing goods that are sold by local businesses and that are locally produced, you will help the environment by reducing emissions from
transportation, and the local community by encouraging job creation (Jay, [2010] 2016: 60). In this way, she combines economic and environmental sustainable development in order to strengthen her chances of persuading the readers to follow her advice. Like the other authors, Jay also discourages purchasing for other reasons than necessity. Acquisitions should support one’s overall goal, i.e. living simply. Unnecessary purchases do not agree with a simple lifestyle:

Don’t shop for fun, for entertainment or out of sheer boredom – that’s when you get into trouble! You know how it goes: you’re wandering through a department store, and a cute dress catches your eye. Forty-five minutes later, you’re walking out the door with it – plus matching shoes, handbag, wrap, earrings, and a few more pieces you picked up along the way. Avoid temptation, and don’t set foot in a store (or surf a retailer’s website) until you absolutely need something (Jay, [2010] 2016: 158).

Here, Jay uses a narrative as a persuasive tool. She utilises an ideal that is often portrayed in women’s magazines: The dream of abundance, being able to satisfy any retail desire. By addressing a constructed ‘you’ in this narrative, she places the readers in the middle of this dream, an efficient way to further highlight the temptations that the situation presents. This way, she challenges the readers’ faith in their own willpower as a way to deter them from seeking out any opportunity to make unnecessary purchases.

2.2.3 Gifts – Defying Norms and Taboos

Minimalist or waste-free living challenges the social custom of gift-giving. While The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying and Minimalism do not touch upon the subject, both Jay and Johnson discuss how to handle norms and taboos associated with gift giving.

Johnson provides advice on what one can give, which includes experiences, services, and consumables in reusable packaging (Johnson, 2013: 228-230). In addition to this, she encourages second-hand gifts:

Shop your home: Get over the taboo. There is nothing wrong with regifting or giving something that you already own as long as you know for sure that the recipient needs and will appreciate it! Consider as resources those items that you do not use or have set aside to donate (because they are)! Shopping your home not only saves time and money, it is an ecologically sound (and, in many parts of the world, a well-accepted) practice (Johnson, 2013: 231).
According to Bruner’s theory on the narrative, humans use narratives to give meaning to deviations from canonicality. Appeasing the taboo would be the conventional act, but Johnson justifies breaking it by encouraging the readers to reframe the concepts: reframe your unused items as resources rather than disposables, and reframe gifts as appreciable items rather than brand new items. When one redefines these concepts, the related taboo becomes invalid. Additionally, Johnson once again combines the values of capitalism with environmental values. This way she creates a win-win situation where the receiver, the giver, and the environment all benefit from the situation, which makes the act a meaningful way to behave.

Like Johnson, Jay also challenges norms on gift-giving. She argues that you can get rid of gifts that you do not love, and she encourages sending a photo of yourself using the gift to the giver before donating or selling the item in question (Jay, [2010] 2016: 221). Further, she encourages the readers to “avoid these situations altogether by opting out of gift exchanges” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 222). Opting out of gift exchanges is unconventional, throwing out gifts may be considered rude, and some could regard the suggested photos as a form of deceit. In order to make sense of these unconventional behaviours, Jay highlights the symbolic nature of gifts, arguing that the item itself is less important than the gesture. She supports this argument by pointing out that the massive extent of modern gift-giving has been “overtaken by aggressive marketing”, which suggests that corporate interests have diminished the symbolic value of gift-giving. To underline this, she states that the increased number of gift-giving holidays has made the process more burdensome than enjoyable: “our gift-giving nowadays is often fuelled by obligation, expectation, and guilt” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 222). Avoiding gift-giving becomes a way to escape the commercial pressure, as does throwing away or selling unwanted gifts. Sending a photo to the giver is a way to highlight the symbolism of gifts and appreciating the gesture, while the meaninglessness of the item itself warrants getting rid of it afterwards.

2.2.4 Non-ownership and non-consumption

Does consumption have to involve ownership? In The Joy of Less, a chapter is dedicated to enjoying without owning. Jay emphasizes that ownership can make an item less enjoyable, such as having expensive, high-maintenance art on your walls (Jay, [2010]
Therefore, she encourages consumption through non-ownership, which can mainly be done through the use of publicly available resources. Rather than owning a cappuccino machine or setting up a home cinema, she urges the readers to go to the local café or cinema, and she encourages those who tend to purchase beautiful, but unnecessary items to repeat “enjoy without owning” as a mantra when they walk around in shops (Jay, [2010] 2016: 50-51). Moreover, in the chapter on tidying basements, attics and garages, Jay encourages readers to be borrowers rather than owners of infrequently used items such as tools and seasonal sports equipment (Jay, [2010] 2016: 211). Borrowing or renting allows temporary acquisition without ownership, and eliminates the need for disposal of items when they are not needed anymore.

The form of window-shopping that Jay encourages, on the other hand, would not be consumption in this thesis, as consumption has been defined as consuming material objects or substances, not experiences. Johnson implicitly defines consumption in the same way in Zero Waste Home, as she describes the act of gifting experiences as an option that does not involve consumption. However, her list tends to neglect an important fact: Acts of consumption are often an inherent part of experiences. For instance, on her list of suggested activity gifts she includes: “Watching a drive-in movie” (Johnson, 2013: 229). In this case, the acquisition and use of fuel that a drive-in experience requires is ignored. Consequently, Johnson treats fuel burning as non-consumption. Jay does the same when she encourages drinking cappuccino at the local café rather than having a cappuccino machine at home – while the machine is not consumed, the cappuccino is. Such disregard of consumption is counterproductive if one wants to promote sustainable practices; it could become a form of ‘greenwashing’, where individuals underestimate the environmental consequences of their behaviour.

### 2.3 The Speed of Consumption

All of the selected books encourage having less in some way, but this chapter has shown that the attitudes towards consumption vary. While having less decreases the total environmental impact caused by one’s current possessions, the speed at which these possessions are discarded and replaced will have great consequences for one’s ecological footprint. In order to consider the extent to which these books advocate
sustainable lifestyles, it is important to examine the attitudes towards what I call the speed of consumption – how quickly items can enter and exit one’s life.

As the previous pages have shown, Millburn and Nicodemus barely discuss acquisitions. By devoting little attention to the topic, they signal that consumption should not play an important role in a meaningful life. Their five values, health, relationships, passions, growth, and contribution, will all involve consumption at one point, but their lack of focus on this aspect implies that the way to achieve these values does not go through shopping. Their dismissive attitudes towards the ‘junk’ they purchased in their pre-minimalist life further suggest that acquisitions should be given little to no priority, which implies that a high speed of consumption is not desirable.

Kondo does not discuss the speed of one’s consumption extensively either. Her method will help you keep your house tidy, which leaves out most discussions on how and when to acquire new objects. Her tidying process is supposed to be a one-time venture that will leave your home permanently tidy (Kondo, 2014: 16). In the introduction, she claims that photographs sent to her by her former clients show that they “have even fewer belongings than when they finished the course” and that they are now “surrounded only by the things they love” (Kondo, 2014: 5). While a lower total of items will reduce the total environmental impact of consumption, The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying does not present a normative view on the speed of one’s consumption. This leaves it up to the readers to decide, but considering the emphasis put on joy, Kondo implicitly condones tossing joyless things and acquiring new ones instead, also after the tidying process has been completed. This means that readers could maintain consumption patterns with great environmental impact.

In The Joy of Less, there are several normative guidelines that will affect one’s consumption pattern. Under the letter I in the STREAMLINE method, one finds Jay’s One-In-One-Out rule: If one item enters, one item should also exit (Jay, [2010] 2016: 99). This rule is supposed to aid you in maintaining the previous rule, under L, which entails that you should set limits to how much you are allowed to possess of different kinds of possessions, such as books (Jay, [2010] 2016: 93-94). So far, this is not much more than a rule-based message similar to Kondo’s point: Follow this book’s method, and you will have a minimalist home. However, Jay also has a clear environmental agenda: As section 2.2.1 has shown, she urges the readers to take on a role as a
gatekeeper, a role that is likely to slow down one’s speed of consumption if one assumes it properly. Moreover, she discourages shopping as a pastime and actively encourages taking advantage of tool libraries and publicly available amenities. In sum, this means that *The Joy of Less* encourages slowing down the speed of one’s consumption.

Considering the title of *Zero Waste Home*, there is no surprise that Johnson’s book encourages a slower pace of consumption. At the same time, it is worth noting the relativity of her zero waste practice. On the topic of carbon footprints, Johnson writes: “On my end, I have come to accept the consequences of marrying and emigrating out of my country” (Johnson, 2013: 246). This does not mean that she has broken all bonds with France or never sees her relatives in person. Rather, she argues that her children do not learn their second language sufficiently through international phone calls, and do not build a good enough relationship with their grandmother this way: “Flights are an unavoidable part of my bicultural life” (Johnson, 2013: 246). She thus opens up for adapting zero waste lifestyles to personal needs, in this case the need for family connections and keeping in touch with one’s cultural heritage. By letting unsustainable practices such as transcontinental flights be a need, and allowing relative needs as part of consumption practices, Johnson effectively allows her readers to cancel out a substantial amount of the environmental benefits brought by zero waste practices. Even so, it is important to remember that environmentally friendly practices consist of more than cutting down on fossil fuels: As seen in this chapter, Johnson provides extensive advice on how to reduce waste and increase the lifetime of one’s possessions, which will minimize waste of energy and resources as well as the pollution that a high-consumption lifestyle involves. Johnson’s *Zero Waste Home* certainly advocates a considerably slower speed of consumption.

### 2.4 Consuming Conspicuously

As the previous section showed, the books in question do not actively encourage adopting or continuing consumption at a high speed. However, this does not automatically place restrictions on consuming conspicuously. As defined in the introduction, conspicuous consumption is consumption done wastefully as a way to
signify social status, often a higher status than one has. To what extent do these books place restrictions on conspicuous consumption?

Put shortly, Jay and Johnson urge readers to limit their consumption to necessities only. Jay, however, also allows acquisition of some objects that are valued for their beauty alone. As long as they truly bring deep joy, “such items have every right to be part of our lives” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 16). Her minimalist method does place restrictions on the number of items one can own, however, and she follows up this quote by saying that one cannot accept all “artsy” items automatically. Still, she states that “if it always brings a smile to your face – or if its visual harmony gives you a deeper appreciation for the beauty of life – its place in your home is well-deserved” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 16). Similarly, Kondo’s requirement for keeping possessions is that they spark joy. She admits that it is a vague requirement, but claims that physically touching an object will make your body react: “Its response to each item is different” (Kondo, 2014: 48). In her view, joy is the only factor that you will need to follow in order to achieve a happy life in a happy home.

This raises an important question: What makes us appreciate objects? For instance, is a modernist chair only appreciated for its sleek lines, or is it also appreciated for the social status or lifestyle that such lines suggest? Paul Bloom argues that we cannot separate pleasure from the background story of a product (quoted in O’Callahan, 07/02/2013). He hypothesizes that the taste experience is different when brand names are known, a theory that has been supported by psychological experiments that have shown how the brain reacts differently to the same product in blind taste tests compared to taste tests where the brand is known (O’Callahan, 07/02/2013). Bloom calls this phenomenon essentialism: Your appreciation of something is based on your beliefs about that item, which is connected to your background knowledge (Bloom, 2011: 49). Bloom thus argues that some items are not desired just because of the price level that they signal: An original painting can be more greatly appreciated because of the creative process behind its creation, an appreciation that would not be attached to a replica of that same painting (Bloom, 2011: 49). One can therefore say that the story behind and context associated with an item affects our appreciation of it.

This means that in theory, the subjectivity of joy and aesthetic appreciation could be founded on the luxurious nature of an item – narratives of luxury and finesse may
appeal more to us than other narratives. Based on Bloom’s theory, a buyer of a modernist chair would not only prefer that chair because it looks a certain way, but also because the background story it is associated with sparks more joy psychologically than a plain chair does. In this aspect, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying* and *The Joy of Less* do not put restrictions on conspicuous consumption.

At the same time, one cannot justify calling Jay an encourager of conspicuous consumption, as she discourages what she considers wasteful consumption in other parts of the book. Granted, when it comes to fashion, she does not completely dismiss following trends as she encourages the readers to follow her One-In-One-Out rule to keep their wardrobe “a fresh, ever-changing collection” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 156). However, she follows this up with pointing out how marketing and corporate interests drive the fashion cycle, meaning that one should not feel pressured to purchase new items for the sake of novelty only (Jay, [2010] 2016: 156). Furthermore, when it comes to trendy items, she states in a categorical fashion:

> These things will never wear out before you tire of them (or before you’re too embarrassed to own them). Even if you donate them, resources were still wasted on their manufacture and distribution – better to have never purchased them in the first place (Jay, [2010] 2016: 273).

As for seasonal decorations, she suggests finding nature’s products rather than manufactured items, such as pinecones and holly rather than baubles for Christmas (Jay, [2010] 2016: 210). To strengthen the persuasive nature of this idea, she uses the words “manufactured” and “mass-produced”, which invoke images of factory sites and ordinariness, the opposite of festive displays. Furthermore, she creates a contrast to this by highlighting the freshness of nature’s findings, “in every sense of the word – and better yet, nothing to store” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 210).

In *Zero Waste Home*, fashion is also discussed. Johnson claims that fashion, when defined as style rather than fast fashion, fits well into a zero waste lifestyle. She describes fashion as “the art of getting dressed, making the most of my inventory”, and as a way to “express one’s creativity” (Johnson, 2013: 117). As she promotes second-hand shopping and keeping one’s wardrobe small, there is little room for conspicuousness, but one could still find some room for letting the items one owns express a self from a higher social class.
In *Minimalism*, shopping is presented as a means to fulfil one’s basic needs, and overall, *The Joy of Less* and *Zero Waste Home* primarily advocate consumption based on needs. Still, we have seen the relativity of these conceptions of ‘need’. Millburn and Nicodemus, for instance, argue that you need not only a good-quality blender, but a Nutribullet. While a Nutribullet is supposed to extract nutrients more efficiently than regular blenders, does this purchase really cover a basic human need?

In a critique of capitalism, Joseph Clayton defines needs as one’s basic demands for food, clothes and shelter, while he considers wants to be anything the human desires (Clayton, 1938: 805). Clayton argues that capitalism tries to persuade consumers to acquire novel products in order to make luxury goods into necessities. Writing in 1938, he compared the motor car to the horse and carriage (Clayton, 1938: 806). In 2017, we can compare the smart phone to landlines, letters, and encyclopaedias, or basic mobile phones and personal computers. Modern inventions have made everyday life easier, and many activities, such as travel and communication, have become considerably quicker affairs. Even so, the convenience offered by new devices does not equal having a basic need for them, in spite of how many would regard such items as necessities. This blurring of distinctions between definitions makes it very difficult to draw the line between conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption. These minimalist books would discourage acquiring excessive amounts of smart phones, for instance, but they also encourage digitizing papers, meaning that they consider digital equipment to be a part of modern life (Johnson, 2013: 175; Jay, [2010] 2016: 207; Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 21). Consequently, some restrictions on conspicuous consumption are advocated, but the books neither can nor do present the readers with a lifestyle completely ridden of conspicuous consumption.

It is important to remark that if the authors did manage to present lifestyles completely ridden of conspicuous consumption, they might not be able to persuade readers to follow their advice. Considering the extent to which marketing permeates everyday life with corporate messages, and how marketers have succeeded in making a vast number of annual holidays consumption-centred events, ascetic living can be a change too drastic for many readers. The zero waste lifestyle promoted by Johnson may for instance be too extreme for many. Jay’s method gives readers more freedom to choose how to live, as with fashion, which could make her message more convincing for some.
Even so, there could still be desirable, conspicuous aspects to leading a minimalist life. Thorstein Veblen considered both conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure in his writings. Both Kondo, Jay, and to some extent Johnson emphasize the tidy and organized home that their proposed methods will result in. Even though Kondo insists that her method will keep your home permanently tidy, acting as the gatekeeper and organizer of one’s home is likely to require both time and effort after the initial decluttering phase. Is this level of order and minimalism attainable in a high-paced modern lifestyle? The emphasis on finding a meaningful life in Minimalism will also require a considerable amount of time and effort. When family and professional obligations have been met, how much time and effort does the modern person have left to spend? Having the time for these pursuits is a luxury that many cannot afford; in this way, achieving a minimalist lifestyle can be considered a wasteful or conspicuous way of spending one’s time of leisure, a modern way of displaying wealth.

2.5 Conclusions

This chapter has analysed how the four selected books argue that items should enter and exit one’s life. The analysis has shown that the books frame waste differently: Kondo frames all undesirable items as rubbish that should be thrown away, while Johnson, on the other hand, frames landfill waste negatively, as the ultimate way to waste resources. Millburn and Nicodemus, on the other hand, use the word ‘junk’ to describe unnecessary acquisitions that are, because of their uselessness, easy to get rid of, but that still retain monetary value which the owner can benefit from. Furthermore, we have seen how emotions are treated as an important factor when decluttering: Joy is regarded as the sole criterion for decision-making by Kondo, and as an important one by Jay.

All in all, the views on consumption differ between the books. The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying shows a very isolated view on possessions that barely considers how items should come and go. Joy is described as the deciding factor, and is also implied to be the deciding factor for new acquisitions. Millburn and Nicodemus’ message on consumption is that things are there to cover your basic needs on your journey towards meaningfulness and happiness. When discussing minimalism as a term, they write: “Ultimately, minimalism is the thing that gets us past the things so we can focus on life’s important things – which actually aren’t things at all” (Millburn and Nicodemus,
[2011] 2016: 25). In *The Joy of Less*, items should be acquired with a cautious and mindful approach. Items that spark joy can be purchased, but the consumer is framed as a gatekeeper whose main focus is on acquiring things that are needed and keeping out all other temptations. Even so, it is Johnson who has the strongest focus on making resources last for as long as possible and wasting as little as possible. Minimalism and *The Joy of Less* also encourage giving items a new life through donations, while *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying* briefly mentions giving away useful consumer articles to friends or ‘recycle shops’. On the whole one can see clear differences in the levels of attention given to environmentally friendly disposal methods: Jay and Johnson offer the greatest number of alternatives to landfill waste, and stress the problems with wastefulness in a way that cannot be detected in Kondo or Millburn and Nicodemus’ book.

These findings indicate the extent to which these books advocate sustainable lifestyles. None encourages rapid acquisition and disposal, but Kondo allows the readers to find meaning in the purchasing of items that they in the end never used. Jay and Johnson actively encourage slowing down one’s speed of consumption, and their encouragement of reducing levels of acquisition and waste suggest that the consumption practices they advocate will be markedly more sustainable for their readers. Millburn and Nicodemus might be seen as discouraging consumption because they encourage readers to spend their time and attention on values, experiences, and other non-material aspects rather than material objects. At the same time, by not discussing the topic extensively, they do not encourage their readers to have a mindful and reflected attitude towards their consumption habits, which can result in readers ignoring the implications of their own consumption. The consumption acts that are ignored by Johnson when discussing experiences as gifts, and by Jay when she presents the mantra ‘enjoy without owning’, also become loopholes that readers can use as opportunities to maintain unsustainable practices.

Finally, we have seen how the blurred distinctions between joy and conspicuousness, as well as needs and desires, make it difficult to promote a lifestyle devoid of conspicuous consumption. While a minimalist lifestyle that bases consumption on needs is likely to have a cooling effect on conspicuous consumption behaviour, it is next to impossible to advocate a lifestyle with no trace of conspicuous behaviour. In fact, the ‘waste’ of time
and effort that one spends on keeping a minimalist, organized home may be considered as conspicuous behaviour in itself.
3 Making it Personal: Narratives as a Means of Persuasion

While self-help books present normative practices that are supposed to be of aid to their readers, persuading their target groups to adopt these practices requires more than a list of what one should or should not do. This chapter will help answer the research question: How do the books use narratives to persuade their readers to change their lifestyle, and how are rhetorical tools used as means of persuasion? I will look at how the authors use personal narratives try to persuade their readers that their method and message is the one that will lead to a happier and more meaningful life. Meaning is a key term in this context. At one level, self-help books try to convince their readers that they can resolve the immediate issues of discontent in their lives. However, they do not just present themselves as user manuals on how to tidy. On another level, they try to make their messages about more than for instance sorting through one’s things. The following pages will therefore also look at how the books try to provide their readers with greater meaning in life through their proposed lifestyles.

When it comes to the structure of self-help books, Hochschild describes women’s advice literature as containing four characteristic elements: The books establish a tone of voice and connect the readers to an authority, such as the Bible or “the school of hard knocks” (Hochschild, 1994: 4). Secondly, they describe what reality looks like from their points of view, and thirdly, they contain normative practices aiming to achieve the ideal state in this reality. Finally, the books tell stories, either exemplary or cautionary ones, as a way to tell the readers what to do and what not to do (Hochschild, 1994: 4). These stories also have their own characteristic traits: “Stories contain magnified moments, episodes of heightened importance, either epiphanies, moments of intense glee or unusual insight, or moments in which things go intensely but meaningfully wrong” (Hochschild, 1994: 4).

Chapter 2 has highlighted the normative practices promoted in the books. This chapter will especially pay attention to how stories are used as a means of persuasion. The use of personal stories in order to gain authority and proximity to the readers will be an important point of discussion. Additionally, the books’ portrayal of reality and how
these views are utilised will be studied. We will also look at how rhetorical tools such as metaphors and similes are used within these narratives and constructions of reality.

Bruner’s theory on narratives will help uncover how narratives are used to make sense of the alternative lifestyles proposed. Elements of canonicality and exceptionality will show how the books’ arguments correspond with or deviate from elements found in the present culture (Bruner, 1990: 47 and 49-50). As Bruner states, the function of the narrative is to explain the reasons behind the identified deviations in order to create meaning (Bruner, 1990: 49-50). In the context of self-help books on minimalism and decluttering, the new lifestyles proposed can be regarded as the deviations from the norm of having high consumption levels. Their explanations for why these changes will make a difference for the self will be significant in identifying how these lifestyles are promoted.

Rhetoric will also be of help in analysing the attempts of persuasion found in the narratives of the books. In the days of Aristotle, rhetoric was used to analyse speeches, but the analytical framework can be applied to written texts as well. According to Aristotle, who analysed and systematized the use of rhetoric among his contemporaries, rhetoric is essentially both about observing available means of persuasion and affecting an audience’s decision-making (Aristotle, 2004: vii and xi). Persuasion can be achieved through the speaker, the speech, or the audience, and the rhetorical means of persuasion associated with these are capable of creating pistis, which can be translated as good faith or confidence: The goal is to make the readers have confidence in the message presented by the speaker (Aristotle, 2004: 7; Andersen, 1995: 33).

The three modes of persuasion available are ethos, pathos, and logos. Ethos is the character of the speaker. In ancient Greek poleis, a speaker’s reputation would often be known to the audience beforehand, and a good reputation would automatically strengthen a man’s speech (Andersen, 1995: 34-35). In Aristotle’s view, however, the speaker’s ethos would have to be established through the speech itself, and he argued that a strong ethos could be the strongest means of persuasion available to the speaker (Aristotle, 2004: 7; Andersen, 1995: 35). To use pathos, on the other hand, is to appeal to the audience’s emotions. By affecting the audience’s feelings one would also affect their view and judgement of the matter at hand (Andersen, 1995: 37). Finally, logos is the appeal to reason and the intellect, where the speaker argues for the probability or
truth of his argument by using logic or facts (Fabricius and Roksvold, 2004: 22; Andersen, 1995: 34). The three modes of persuasion can be used separately or all at once, and the speaker may either use them evenly or rely more on one. In modern journalism, columnists may strive to construct a solid *ethos* in their texts, while entertainment features may rely heavily on *pathos* (Fabricius and Roksvold, 2004: 25).

### 3.1 Searching for Solutions: The Personal Stories

Personal stories are commonly used in self-help literature. As mentioned, Hochschild identifies such stories as a characteristic element in women’s advice literature. Woodstock argues that while experts in other genres of literature tend to emphasize their professional expertise to gain authority and distance to the readers, self-help books do the opposite (Woodstock, 2006: 322). Instead, the author’s character in the book builds authority “through articulation of similarity with the reader” through his or her personal stories (Woodstock, 2006: 323). Woodstock borrows Max Weber’s model of authority to argue that self-help authors construct charismatic authority based on their personal stories of transformation (Woodstock, 2006: 328).

As this chapter will show, personal stories are prevalent in the chosen decluttering and minimalism books. This section will look at how these stories are used to give meaning to the lifestyle changes proposed.

#### 3.1.1 The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying – the Imperfect Prodigy

Marie Kondo uses her personal story to a great extent throughout *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying*. She presents herself as a self-taught expert on the topic, and she establishes her *ethos*, her authority as an expert, by telling stories of her strenuous tidying efforts in her childhood. Interestingly, she states towards the end of the book that she did not dream of becoming an organizing professional as a child, and that she had to become an adult before she realized how much she enjoyed organizing (Kondo, 2014: 202). In spite of this, she constructs her life story as a path towards her predestined future.
In the first chapter after the preface, Kondo tells the readers how she has been interested in tidying for most of her life: She started reading women’s magazines at the age of five (Kondo, 2014: 13-14). She made games out of saving power and water in the home, and she reorganized shelves in her classroom and criticized the organization of the school’s mop cupboard (Kondo, 2014: 14-15). Kondo quotes her childhood self muttering: “If only there was an S-hook, it would be so much easier to use” (Kondo, 2014: 15). What an S-hook is remains unexplained, which enhances the impression that Kondo knew specialized storage terms at a very young age. By portraying an intense passion for and knowledge of the topic throughout her life, Kondo constructs an image of herself as a tidying prodigy.

The stories from her childhood paint a picture of a person dedicated to finding the method to keeping a household permanently immaculate. Her discoveries are represented as revelations or epiphanies in several instances. She discovered tidying when she in junior high school found a book on discarding. Kondo describes how she was “intrigued” by this new topic, devoured its contents on her way home, and, once in her house, immediately started sorting through her things (Kondo, 2014: 17-18). The result was a revelation:

What shocked me most, however, was how different my room looked. After only a few hours, I could see parts of the floor that had never been clear before. My room seemed to have been transformed and the air inside felt so much fresher and brighter that even my mind felt clearer. Tidying, I realised, could have far more impact than I had ever imagined. Astonished by the extent of the change, from that day on I turned my attention from cooking and sewing, which I had thought were the essentials of home-making, to the art of tidying (Kondo, 2014: 17).

All of her smaller revelations lead up to Kondo’s final epiphany, the one where she discovered that holding items in one’s hand and asking whether they spark joy is the path to a tidy home:

I had spent three years tidying and discarding things, yet my room still felt cluttered. *Would someone please tell me why my room isn’t tidy when I work so hard at it!* Although I did not say this out loud, in my heart I was practically shouting. At that moment, I heard a voice.

‘Look more closely at what is there.’ (Kondo, 2014: 46-47)
This voice in her head is open to interpretation. It could be an inner voice, or it could be a case of divine intervention, where something greater than herself led Kondo to her discovery. By leaving this interpretation up to the readers, she alienates neither religious nor secular readers. Those with spiritual inclinations can interpret this as if Kondo had reached her destination as predestined by a divine power, while non-believers can see it as a moment of inspiration after a long struggle.

Kondo’s personal story is not told in chronological order in one chapter. Instead, small excerpts are frequently used to introduce new topics. Meaningful failures are used both to explain her road to expertise and why her approach is better than others. For instance, she tried to throw away one item a day, but this system soon collapsed due to forgetfulness (Kondo, 2014: 20). In order to argue that simplicity is key to a tidy home, she describes her own light-bulb moment when, after trying all the storage techniques and items she could find, she realized that her room still felt cluttered (Kondo, 2014: 26). She then moved on to repeatedly tidying by location, such as tidying the living room on the fifth day of every month, but this made her realize that rooms got messy because similar items were not stored in the same location (Kondo, 2014: 27-28).

Anecdotal evidence like this is the main source used by Kondo to back up her claims of having the most effective tidying method. This concurs with Woodstock’s observations. While Kondo works as an organizing consultant, she rarely relies on logos, such as facts and scientific research to build her own ethos. Percentages are for instance used in a casual rather than scientific way: “Tidying dramatically changes one’s life. This is true for everyone, 100 per cent” (Kondo, 2014: 205). Even so, her book has gained immense popularity, suggesting that her portrayal of herself as a tidying prodigy is an efficient way to build authority. Because she builds her ethos from the very beginning, her claims gain leverage throughout the book and are increasingly likely to make the tidying process seem meaningful to readers.

At the same time, Kondo’s examples of personal mistakes are an important element of her story. According to Woodstock, self-help authors try to create a sense of similarity rather than distance, and by making the author and the readers’ selves seem alike, they encourage the readers to shape their own stories according to the author’s personal narrative (Woodstock, 2006: 324). Kondo admits mistakes that she has made as a professional organizer: “Somehow I imagined that a complex approach consisting of
different methods for different character types would make me look professional” (Kondo, 2014: 30). While few would want professional help from someone who uses the wrong approach, this example is used to illustrate how her method is now faultless. This mistake was a step on the way to her discovery that no matter one’s personality, tidying must begin with discarding (Kondo, 2014: 31). When Kondo argues that she has learned from her mistakes, she implies that she has treaded the path for her clients and readers. Instead of going through the same laborious process as her, readers can aim for the perfected method at once.

Additionally, she demonstrates her own mortality. Kondo balances the immaculate image she paints of minimalism and herself with her personal challenges. In order to argue that a home with joy-sparking items will give the owner confidence, she contrasts her personal struggles with the joy and confidence she finds in her surroundings. She states that her passion for tidying comes from her need for recognition by her parents as a middle child (Kondo, 2014: 207). Because she finds it difficult to trust and depend on others, she argues that

> It was material things and my house that taught me to appreciate unconditional love first, not my parents or friends. To tell the truth, I still don’t have a lot of self-confidence. There are times when I am quite discouraged by my inadequacies.

> I do, however, have confidence in my environment. […] The things and people that bring me joy support me. They give me the confidence that I will be all right. I want to help others who feel the way I once did, who lack self-confidence and find it hard to open their hearts to others, to see how much support they receive from the space they live in and the things that surround them. (Kondo, 2014: 208-209).

Kondo, her home, and her tidying method are mainly portrayed as immaculate, but statements like this highlight how Kondo is a human with faults and issues. The perfect home that she promises her readers can seem too perfect and thus leave her readers feeling dispirited rather than inspired. Through admitting that she, the discoverer of this perfection, can still make mistakes and feel inadequate, frames the perfect home as a home that anyone can achieve, including the imperfect and fallible.

In this way, Kondo decreases the apparent distance that perfection creates between the reader and the author, and instead creates a sense of similarity and familiarity. After
explaining how she failed at making a success of tidying one item per day, she writes: “So I can tell you from experience that you will never get your house in order if you only clean up half-heartedly. If, like me, you are not the diligent, persevering type, then I recommend aiming for perfection just once” (Kondo, 2014: 21). If someone chooses to read Kondo’s book, it is most likely because they have not been able to persevere in keeping their house tidy. Even if they had not labelled themselves as the opposite of diligent beforehand, this phrasing encourages the readers to identify themselves with Kondo. Through this, she sends two messages: We are the same, and like you, I am not perfect.

By insinuating that an imperfect person can create and maintain a flawless home, Kondo strengthens the plausibility of the ideal lifestyle that she constructs in her book. She uses her own adoption of the lifestyle to show how imperfect individuals can have perfect lifestyles. This can be seen in her first chapter on storage methods, which starts with an outline of her daily routine when she returns home from work: Kondo greets her house and thanks her items and clothing for their efforts before putting them away and changing into indoor clothing. Shoes are placed neatly in the hall, while the contents of her handbag are taken out and placed in their designated spots in a drawer under her bed (Kondo, 2014: 151-152). She also has time to sort her mail and prepare a pot of tea within the first five minutes after entering her home: “Now I can go back to the kitchen, pour myself a cup of tea and relax” (Kondo, 2014: 152). After sketching out this scenario, she states that “I did not give you this account to boast about my beautiful lifestyle, but rather to demonstrate what it’s like to have a designated spot for everything” (Kondo, 2014: 152-153). This modesty does little to conceal Kondo’s claim that this lifestyle is beautiful – instead, the sentence links a beautiful lifestyle to having designated spots for things.

The essence of Kondo’s method is that the feeling of joy should be your guiding star when tidying, while nearly everything else is irrelevant. However, she opens for the possibility that a clean and tidy room may not leave the individual feeling automatically relaxed (Kondo, 2014: 24). Such cases are framed as being caused by psychological issues, and this is again backed up with a personal story. Kondo, like many others, would frantically tidy when she was supposed to study for an exam. The tidy result would leave her temporarily relaxed, but it would not rid her of her anxiety: “If you let
the temporary relief achieved by tidying up your physical spaces deceive you, you will never recognise the need to clean up your psychological space” (Kondo, 2014: 23). While this could be a disclaimer of liability, Kondo also uses this claim to create greater meaning with her method:

If you can’t feel relaxed in a clean and tidy room, try confronting your feeling of anxiety. It may shed light on what is really bothering you. When your room is clean and uncluttered, you have no choice but to examine your inner state. You can see any issues you have been avoiding and are forced to deal with them. From the moment you start tidying, you will be compelled to reset your life. As a result, your life will start to change (Kondo, 2014: 24).

In this, she argues that one of the effects of the ‘life-changing magic of tidying’ is that you will be able to declutter your inside world as well as your outside world. While tidying in order to gain an ordered home may be meaningful enough for some, this argument brings additional meaning to the method that Kondo proposes. She does not provide a method on how to solve one’s psychological issues, but she takes credit for making the readers want to deal with their personal issues. By promising to solve more than one area of discontent in her readers’ lives, she provides them with hope of a better life.

Anecdotal evidence is also used to back up her claims of the greater meaning that tidying can bring. Kondo provides an example of a friend of hers who applied her method, and by sorting through and discarding books she discovered that her passions were not in IT, the business sector she was working in, but rather in social work, as this was the topic of the books that she decided to keep (Kondo, 2014: 203). This sorting of books made her aware of her true passion, which inspired her to start a babysitting company a year later (Kondo, 2014: 203). To further strengthen the idea that tidying can lead to a changed life, Kondo writes that she often hears clients say “‘When I put my house in order, I discovered what I really wanted to do.’” (Kondo, 2014: 204). After this, she continues to argue that her clients find more interest in their work as well as other areas of their life after decluttering, concluding that “Their awareness of what they like naturally increases and, as a result, daily life becomes more exciting” (Kondo, 2014: 204). In this way, what starts as an anecdote about an unnamed friend becomes an argument for how tidying will make your life more interesting – once again, a built-in
promise of a better life. Anonymous testimonies are similarly used both in the beginning and towards the end of the book to show how the lives of her clients have been changed by her tidying method (Kondo, 2014: 3 and 206).

3.1.2 Minimalism – the Alienated Consumerists

While Kondo presents herself as a prodigy searching for the ultimate solution, Millburn and Nicodemus portray themselves as former consumerists: They were successful corporate ‘hotshots’ who tried to gain happiness and satisfaction through conspicuous consumption, but who increasingly felt alienated by this lifestyle and idea of happiness. In the introduction of Minimalism, they immediately establish the meaninglessness of the pressures that society puts on individuals. On the first page, they write: “You hear it on the radio, the solipsistic, overindulgent Hummer-driving rap stars and champagne-guzzling pop stars promulgating irresponsible living. This is how you’re supposed to consume.” (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 1).

As for this consumption pressure, Millburn and Nicodemus quickly point out that the readers do not have to live under such a burden:

> The truth is that nearly all the pressure we feel is completely internal. Sure, this pressure is influenced by external factors, but that doesn’t mean that we have to take the bait. […] Happiness comes from within, from inside yourself, from living a meaningful life. And this is what this book aims to help you discover (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 2).

Millburn and Nicodemus present reality the way they see it. They also present an argument for how to deal with the pressure from society: As it comes from within, *you* are the one who can solve it. This is what Semetko and Valkenburg have described as responsibility framing (2000: 96). By locating the problem *inside* the self, the self-help authors suppress potential societal and structural causes for discontent and give the individual responsibility for improving his or her life. The individual becomes partially responsible for the problem, and fully responsible for its solution. At the same time, Millburn and Nicodemus stress that the readers are not left on their own: The book the readers are reading is the tool they will need to discover meaning. Responsibility framing of solutions like this becomes an efficient way to make the readers feel dependent on the book.
Immediately after presenting their view of society, Millburn and Nicodemus weave it together with their own experience of discontent. On the same page, after a paragraph on the success they are enjoying with their blog and the great number of big media actors who have featured them, they briefly outline their lives before finding minimalism:

Once upon a time, we were two happy young professionals living in Dayton, Ohio. But we weren’t truly happy. We were best friends in our late twenties, and we both had great six-figure jobs, fancy cars, big houses, expensive clothes, plenty of toys – an abundance of stuff. And yet with all this stuff, we knew we weren’t satisfied with our lives; we weren’t fulfilled. We discovered that working 70 or 80 hours a week, and buying more stuff, didn’t fill the void – it widened it. So we took back control of our lives using the principles of minimalism to focus on what’s important (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 2-3).

Less than three pages into the book, Millburn and Nicodemus have already outlined the world as they see it – a consumerist, growth-focused, status-hunting society – and shown how their canonical lifestyle left them feeling empty. By sketching out the canonical features of their culture like this, they have already built a foundation for making sense of the exceptionality that the lifestyle they promote in the rest of the book will represent.

Their claim of having taken back control is important in framing their former lifestyle. They both imply that they had lost control and that some other element had gained control of their lives. Whether it was the 80-hour jobs, their possessions, or the idealization of high consumption in society that had control over them, is not explained. This is left up to interpretation for the readers, who can then choose the version that fits with their own experience of having lost control. Such openness to interpretation lets a greater number of readers identify with the authors, making it possible for more readers to align their own path of self-improvement with the narrated path of the authors.

Millburn and Nicodemus' background story is retold in several sections of the book, such as in the context of discontent. They describe how they lived their “version of the American Dream”, chasing praise and promotions:

It was something like a cocaine high. The more praise we received, the more we needed it to function, the more we needed it to feel happy. It got
to the point where we were living just to break even emotionally (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 8).

Their depiction of their corporate life is both here and in the previous example alluding to the rewards of the American Dream, but the Dream is reframed as an empty ideal. This is also apparent in the way they present their childhoods and early adult lives. As children living in unstable homes with substance-abusing single mothers, the two learnt that food provided an easy escape from a difficult reality (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 10). In their teenage years, Nicodemus started experimenting with alcohol and drugs, while Millburn developed obsessive-compulsive behaviours. They both pursued jobs that would let them earn money and status, but not give them happiness (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 11-12). The corporate success they soon achieved came with stress, anxiety, and depression (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 15).

All in all, Millburn and Nicodemus’ rewriting of the American Dream plays out as rags-to-riches stories with misery rather than happiness as the end result. The glaring lack of meaning in their corporate lives is an elaboration on the society they presented in the very first pages of their book, and a destruction of the ideals of the American Dream, a dominating narrative in American society. By reframing the American Dream as meaningless, they establish a solid contrast to the meaningful, non-material lifestyle which they spend the rest of their book presenting. In Bruner’s terms, the meaninglessness of the canonical American society gives meaning to the exceptionality of the lifestyle they promote. The readers are left looking for alternative goals to pursue, which Millburn and Nicodemus conveniently provide. Like Kondo, they build their ethos on personal experiences of trial and error. Based on these experiences, they authoritatively state that it is not materiality, but their five values – health, relationships, passions, growth, and contribution – that are tangible means of finding meaning in life.

3.1.3 Zero Waste Home – the Concerned Citizen-Homemaker

Zero Waste Home presents the most radical lifestyle change out of the self-help books in question. According to Johnson, her family of two adults and two children produce “a quart-size jar of landfill waste” annually (Johnson, 2013: 150). Considering the great change in consumption patterns that this zero waste approach requires, Johnson must
make sure that she does not drive away her readers. In order to do this, she uses her own story to illustrate how she found balance in this lifestyle, and this is especially emphasized in the context of homemaking activities. Initially, Johnson took her zero waste practices too far, but these failures also became meaningful events in her life. One such example is when Johnson tells the story of the time she tried to make her own mustard and kefir. While mustard-making was a manageable task, kefir also started out well until it turned out that the kefir grains needed regular feeding to be kept alive. This resulted in her family treating the kefir grains as if they were family pets. In the end, Johnson decided that kefir was not worth the effort and composted the seeds, but in spite of this, she learnt several lessons: “By the time I took a step back from the kefir madness, those little grains (and the mustard seeds before them) had forever changed my relationship with food, packaging, and even people” (Johnson, 2013: 39). She argues that making condiments from scratch gave her a sense of control over what she ate, in contrast to ready-made products with incomprehensible names that she “can neither pronounce nor trust” (Johnson, 2013: 39). It also strengthened her sense of freedom seeing as she did not have to support major corporations, which also made her feel “as though I am outsmarting the system in place” (Johnson, 2013: 39). In addition to this, it made her relationship with her mother and mother-in-law stronger, in spite of generational and cultural differences (Johnson, 2013: 39). This story uses pathos to appeal to the readers, both because of the idea of strengthening one’s relationships, and also because of the encouragement of rebellious behaviour. Trying to beat ‘the man’ and fight the system alludes to the David versus Goliath narrative structure, where the underdog can beat the dominating actor even when it might seem implausible. Noticeably, logos is not used to explain why corporations cannot be trusted.

Similar to Millburn and Nicodemus, Johnson uses personal accounts to display the contrasts between her current and former lifestyle. The “soccer mom” lifestyle she had seen on TV was the appeal that made her settle down in a suburb of San Francisco after travelling the world with her husband (Johnson, 2013: 2):

Our sons, Max and, soon after, Léo, were born into the trappings of the American Dream: a three-thousand-square-foot contemporary home, on a cul-de-sac, complete with high ceilings, family and living rooms, walk-in closets, a three-car garage, and a koi fishpond [...]. We owned an SUV, a huge television, and a dog. We stocked two large refrigerators and filled an
industrial-size washing machine and dryer several times a week. [...] And yet we felt good about our environmental footprint because we recycled (Johnson, 2013: 2-3).

She continues to explain the extensiveness of their American Dream, including how they had no financial worries and could afford “my Barbie-like platinum-blond hair, artificial tan, injected lips, and Botoxed forehead” (Johnson, 2013: 3). However, like Millburn and Nicodemus, she states: “We seemed to have it all. Yet things were not quite right” (Johnson, 2013: 3). They missed their active life before settling in suburbia and having the opportunity to walk to bakeries and cafés (Johnson, 2013: 3). Their solution was to move to a small but expensive village, which meant downsizing in all areas. Johnson concludes that by reducing their number of possessions, they found the time to do things they enjoyed (Johnson, 2013: 3). Other revelations followed, as they realized that they had given items too much importance, and that their former consumption decisions had been detrimental to the environment (Johnson, 2013: 4-5).

Like Kondo, Johnson explains and illustrates her own conclusions with personal anecdotes, and like Millburn and Nicodemus, her previous life together with her revelations reframe the American Dream as meaningless. By using the words ‘Botoxed’ and ‘Barbie-like’ to describe her beauty habits, she frames the Dream she lived as superficial. While Millburn and Nicodemus explicitly state that they were searching for meaning, Johnson implies the same. By listing the expensive and voluminous acquisitions she and her family made in their previous lifestyle, she alludes to the yearning for abundance that the American Dream appeals to, but by stating her discontent among these lavish items, she also reframes the meaning of abundance. As for activities and the equipment that these require, Johnson writes that they found it better to focus on fewer activities that they truly enjoyed rather than have their home crowded in sporting equipment (Johnson, 2013: 4). By stating this, she implies that quality is more important than quantity, and that enjoyment is not the same as variation.

Johnson also uses personal stories to show how things and experiences do not have to be inextricably linked. After she won an environmental award and was heading to the award ceremony with her son Max, she planned to refuse any free items as well as the physical trophy, but in the heat of the moment, she was not able to resist accepting: “I posed for the press, award in hand, and for the rest of the evening, Max proudly held it
under his arm, as he “always wanted a trophy.” (Johnson, 2013: 18). The attachment that her child felt to the physical award could have prevented her from reusing the item, but she describes how his attachment faded over the next few months together with the excitement of winning. When she asked if she could send it back to be reused for the next year’s awards ceremony, her son agreed:

He has not regretted it one moment, nor have I. The pictures taken that night, the memories that we share, and the meaningful endeavors that the grant has since funded are reminders of a terrific evening. And I don’t have to dust those things! (Johnson, 2013: 18-19).

By emphasizing how an important event for her relationship with her son can be detached from things, she once again uses pathos and tries to connect the readers’ positive emotions to a minimalist lifestyle.

In sum, Johnson’s take on a low-consumption lifestyle is similar to what Soper calls alternative hedonism, which is

the pursuit and enjoyment of pleasures with less emphasis on consumption, such as walking or biking instead of driving a car […]. Growing your own vegetables does not only give the pleasures of fresh air and closeness to nature, but enhances health and enables you to eat and prepare slow food instead of fast food (Endreson, 2015: 33).

This hedonism cherishes the small pleasures in life, the ones connected to nature or relationships rather than material goods. The notion of alternative hedonism can also be detected in Millburn and Nicodemus’ writings due to the way they make nonmaterial aspects of life the central features of their minimalist lifestyle.

### 3.2 Forging Familiarity – It Is All About ‘You’

A noticeable trait in all four books is that they address the reader. This is a feature of what rhetoricians call low style, which is a concrete, personal way of writing that often centres on the present (Fabricius and Roksvold, 2004: 90). Journalists often use this to create a sense of closeness between themselves and the readers (Fabricius and Roksvold, 2004: 90), and the striking use of the second person pronoun ‘you’ suggests that this is the intention for self-help writers as well.
We have already seen how Millburn and Nicodemus use the pronoun ‘you’ in the presentation of their view of society. They address the readers in several other instances as well, such as at the end of the chapter preceding the chapters focusing on values: “Let’s begin, shall we?” (Millburn and Nicodemus [2011] 2016: 31). Once beginning, they introduce every chapter with a constructed narrative:

Health is the most important of the Five Values. Don’t believe us? Let us prove it.

Imagine winning the lottery, finding a perfect match in your significant other, paying off your debts, moving into your dream home (on the beach, of course), and not needing to work another day in your life.

Now imagine you wake up tomorrow morning with a sharp pain in your gut. (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 33).

The phrase “Don’t believe us? Let us prove it” is repeated in the beginning of each chapter on values, while the paragraph following is expanded with the fulfilment of the values of the previous chapters. This is done to stress how each value is important in a meaningful life. After this quote in the chapter on health, Millburn and Nicodemus include a short imaginary dialogue with a doctor who gives the patient, ‘you’, less than a month to live (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 33). Through this pronoun, they make their readers imagine being in the situation themselves, which can increase their level of identification with the narrative. This makes the argument laden with pathos, as they appeal to the readers’ emotions relating to illness and death.

In some cases, identification with the emotions presented is not desirable. When explaining the difference between diet and a dietary lifestyle, Millburn and Nicodemus specify:

It’s also important to note that there is not a singular, ideal dietary model to follow to live a healthier life. This frustrates some people because it is much easier to be told what to eat; it’s much easier to follow a strict set of rules from which you are not allowed to deviate (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 37).

By using ‘some people’, readers are less likely to ask themselves whether this would be a frustration for them. Had the authors written ‘You may feel frustrated by this’, they might have triggered emotional responses that would be counterproductive for their
argument. The ‘you’ that follows after the semicolon, on the other hand, is connected to a context that is not solely negative. Being allowed a lifestyle that is void of strictness and prohibition of deviation would provide more freedom than a diet requiring constant discipline.

As previously stated, using ‘you’ is a way to create a sense of familiarity and a close relationship with the readers. This is especially apparent in The Joy of Less. Jay does not use her own story to a great extent, and neither does she focus on other people’s stories. Instead, she states: “[…] there won’t be dozens of case studies about other people’s junk; the focus here is on you” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 8).

By addressing the reader as ‘you’, Jay creates an illusion of dialogue, while it in fact is a monologue directed at the reader. By doing this, she tries to “embrace them as part of the same community […]”, as Woodstock argues that self-help writers do (Woodstock, 2006: 330). This forging of community with her readership starts from the very beginning of the book. When laying out the book’s structure, Jay writes:

> Since so many of us suffer from overstuffed closets, we’ll spend a whole chapter dealing with wardrobe issues. (I promise, you’ll look fabulous with a fraction of your current clothes.) Then once we’re in the groove, we’ll attack the stacks of paperwork in our home offices, and reduce the inflow from a flood to a trickle. Our minimalist makeover will tame even the messiest of workspaces (Jay, [2010] 2016: 10).

By using ‘we’, she creates a sense of being in the situation together. The comment in parentheses contributes to this sense of camaraderie, since rather than framing this paragraph as expertly advice from a professional authority on the subject, Jay frames it as a message from a friend or confidante who happens to have more knowledge and experience on the topic than the addressee. This makes her an authority and an equal at the same time.

Moreover, instead of personal anecdotes, Jay uses an array of metaphors and similes to convey her message. The metaphors in the quoted paragraph above portray the ‘you’ as someone who will gain control by following the book’s method. The reader is currently ‘suffering’, which implies that the self is currently a victim of its items. The possessions are framed as having characteristics found in the wild, as they enter one’s life in a ‘flood’ and create a mess that can be ‘tamed’. The human being can bring these wild
and unruly possessions under control by ‘attacking’, thus making sure that the human is in control of, or superior to, the formerly untamed belongings. This narrative of man against nature, order against disorder, is a common narrative structure that the readers will be able to recognize and be engaged by. In this way, the narrative structure gives meaning to the behaviour proposed by Jay. 

Her attempt to construct a community and a relationship with her readers continues throughout the book. For instance, to describe the feeling of joy that minimalism can provide, Jay writes:

Let’s take a breather, and reminisce about how carefree and happy we were as young adults. Not coincidentally, that period was likely when we had the least amount of stuff. Life was so much simpler then: no mortgage, no car payments, no motorboat to insure. Learning, living, and having fun were far more important than the things we owned. The world was our oyster, and anything was possible! (Jay, [2010] 2016: 27).

Once again, Jay uses ‘we’ to create the sense that the readers and she are in the same situation. Here she also implies that they have the same kind of background, even though that might not be the case in real life. Even so, while this scenario might not be a real-life situation for either her or the readers, by inversion she manages to emphasize the worry that comes with financial responsibilities in adulthood. Furthermore, this becomes an argument for minimalism based on pathos: This constructed narrative of a carefree life appeals to the emotions in her readers.

In addition to this, Jay uses fictional examples to evoke feelings and illustrate the challenges that the readers might come across. In the case of items kept because of a sense of obligation or a proof of an event or experience, she adds “(worried that Aunt Edna would turn over in her grave if you gave away her porcelain tea cups)” and “(as if nobody would believe you visited the Grand Canyon if you ditched the kitschy mug)” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 17). These are of course fictional experiences, but as examples they manage to construct vivid images for the readers through their specificity. The reader might not have an Aunt Edna, but the idea of a sour old relative leaving behind items one did not really want in the first place may be recognizable either because the reader has experienced this or because of examples seen in TV series or other artefacts of popular culture.
Another fictional narrative Jay uses contains comparisons and similes, which are used to illustrate the destructiveness of high consumption practices:

When we overconsume, we’re like bulls running through a china shop – leaving a destructive path of downed forests, dirty waterways, and overflowing landfills in our wake. […] Instead of being bulls, we strive to be butterflies – living as lightly, gracefully, and beautifully as possible. We want to flit through life with little baggage, unencumbered by excess stuff. We want to leave the earth and its resources whole and intact (Jay, [2010] 2016: 279-280).

By addressing herself and the readers as a ‘we’, she avoids sounding accusatory towards any over-consuming readers. Instead, to illustrate the consequences of a large number of people consuming unsustainably, she writes: “Imagine hundreds, thousands, even millions of bulls stomping through the world and stripping it of its bounty” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 280). Once again, we see a pathos-filled argument. Jay includes the readers on her butterfly path by using we, and encourages rejection of high consumption living by showing the power of destruction in numbers. The great contrast between bulls and butterflies is also hyperbolic, and this gives the imagery a more forceful emotional effect.

A final comparison worthy of attention is when Jay compares the decluttering process to dieting, in order to explain why people often fail in decluttering their homes:

We can jump right in, count our possessions like we count calories, and “starve” ourselves to get fast results. All too often, however, we’ll end up feeling deprived, go on a binge, and wind up right back where we started. Instead, we have to change our attitudes and our habits – kind of like switching from a meat-and-potatoes to a Mediterranean diet (Jay, [2010] 2016: 9).

Jay does not address the difficulty in making a permanent change of lifestyle. The fact that weight issues is seen as a growing health problem in developed countries, in spite of the multitude of diet books that have been published over several decades, is not given attention. Instead, the readers’ knowledge of dieting is exploited to illustrate how rapid tidying and purging will be ineffective if minds and behaviours are not changed as well.
3.3 The Capability to Inspire and Empower

By using their personal stories, the self-help authors portray a minimalist or zero waste lifestyle as an attainable lifestyle. Through these portrayals, they may provide a more influential narrative than previous climate communication has. The countless dystopian climate narratives that have been featured in the media have struggled to inspire people to take action (Endreson, 2015: 29). Thorunn Gullaksen Endreson suggests that dystopian narratives may induce climate change denial and apathy in their addressees not only because of the factual content, but also because of the fear-inducing way in which the narratives are framed (Endreson, 2015: 29-30). She refers to several critics who argue that what we need in order to inspire action are visions that make it possible to imagine a future where the earth is not destroyed (Endreson, 2015: 31). The option presented by Endreson is to engage with utopian narratives in an “essayistic” way, meaning a way that is skeptical but open-minded, which allows discussion and dialogue around the proposed utopian visions for the future (Endreson, 2015: 38-40).

By providing visions of future lifestyles for the self, self-help books on minimalism and decluttering may be able to inspire readers to make changes that will benefit the environment as well as the self. Jay and Johnson, who both include environmental considerations in their arguments for a minimalist or zero waste lifestyle, avoid the dystopian framing that many climate communicators have used before them. While Johnson encourages zero waste alternatives throughout her book, she does not delve extensively into the specifics of the environmental threats that wasteful practices involve. As seen in the previous chapter of this thesis, when framing waste as landfill, she tells the story of researchers finding decades-old, but intact guacamole in a landfill, and states that toxins from landfill waste leak into the grounds. However, such descriptions are only used briefly, and the dangers of toxins are not specified. By being vague about the environmental consequences, Johnson can invoke the feelings and associations readers have with climate change based on what they have read and heard before, without overwhelming them with facts. At the same time, by using only a small fraction of the book on the environmental concerns of landfill waste and the vast majority of it on measures one can implement to reduce one’s own waste – even in a way that simultaneously benefits the self – she frames the waste issue as an issue with a great variety of solutions rather than as an issue with a multitude of consequences.
Similarly, as the next chapter will discuss, Jay states that the simplest way to be an environmental activist is by simply not consuming (Jay, [2010] 2016: 265). This is stated toward the end of the book, after the chapters that explain how the readers can make each room of the house “lovely and inviting” or “a place of peace and serenity” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 130 and 175). By the time readers reach the final part of the book, Jay has explained to them over and over again how minimalism will improve their lives. This could make the readers see the environmental benefits of this new lifestyle as a win-win situation. At the core is the help that the self will get, while the environmental benefits are an added bonus that do not require added efforts. As seen in section 2.1.4, even when the readers are encouraged to donate their surplus belongings, Jay stresses that they will receive the benefits of ‘good karma’ and tax deductions.

Instead of urging citizens to make an effort to protect the environmental interests of future generations or to prevent intangible health threats they may never see the direct consequences of, self-help books encourage environmentally friendly behaviour while keeping the self as the centre of attention. While Kondo does not address environmental issues, she manages to make a minimalist lifestyle seem attractive; Millburn and Nicodemus make a value-centred, minimalist lifestyle seem considerably more meaningful and appealing than a consumption-centred one. None of the four books present a calculation of the ecological footprint that their proposed lifestyles involve, which means that we do not know how much better these lifestyles are in terms of environmental benefits. Even so, decreasing consumption will ease the pressure that the individual puts on the environment, and if minimalist self-help books can make readers do this, they provide a better communication alternative than dystopian narratives.

At the same time, it is important to question the capacity of self-help books to spur discussion around their proposed lifestyles. While the books may state that only parts of the content will be applicable to the individual reader, the behaviours they promote are often presented in imperative ways or as the single best solution to the readers’ problems. By encouraging the readers to identify with the authors’ life stories, one could argue that the books encourage conformity and submission rather than critical discussion of the alternatives presented. Critical thinking is needed to assess the difference that measures will make, both for the self and for the environment.
Lack of criticism can be seen in Jay’s comparison of decluttering with dieting quoted in the previous section. Jay argues that lifestyle change is a better way to succeed than a quick diet or a quick purge, but she does not discuss whether readers will be able to maintain their minimalist home over time. Similarly, Kondo states that tidying only has to be done once, and that after this you only have to put items back in place (Kondo, 2014: 33). She does not address the potential difficulty of maintaining the diligence to put things back in their assigned places at once. When presenting a lifestyle change as easy and attainable, the authors may be able to sell their books and inspire readers to make an initial effort, but they may also be setting the readers up for failure. Diets are known to fail in the long term, with individuals gaining back the lost weight and more. The gatekeeper frame discussed in chapter 2 is meant to prepare the readers for material temptations, but none of the books discuss what the readers should do if they relapse. Readers may be able to get back on track by rereading the books, but this could result in a pattern similar to ‘yo-yo diets’. This would mean alternating between a high level of consumption and a high level of discarding and waste disposal, which would be a great strain on the environment.

3.4 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have seen how the selection of self-help books exploits personal narratives in order to build authority and forge a personal relationship with the readers. Kondo uses her story as evidence for her conclusions on how to tidy. She also uses her seemingly perfect lifestyle together with her own weaknesses to help the readers identify with her as a ‘normal’ person and to argue that regular people can achieve a perfect, organized home. Millburn and Nicodemus construct a pressure-filled reality, but argue that the source of this distress is internal and that the individual can get away from this through own efforts – and by reading their book. They also reframe the American Dream in order to highlight the meaninglessness of the canonical American society, which increases the appeal and meaning of adopting their exceptional lifestyle. Johnson’s use of her personal story is similar to both Kondo and Millburn and Nicodemus. In addition to this, she utilizes the emotional appeal of personal accounts in order to argue that important events are memorable even without the physical objects one may associate with them.
Personal stories can make alternative lifestyles appealing and attainable to others, and the self-help way of writing could potentially inspire readers to act in ways that are more environmentally friendly. At the same time, there are pitfalls in this way of framing environmental messages. The books may be encouraging conformity to their ideal rather than critical thinking, and they may only be able to inspire readers on a short-term basis. The solely positive view on minimalist and zero waste lifestyles may leave the readers unprepared for the challenges they may face when trying to keep up their low-consumption lifestyles in the long term.

Much more could be said about the way the books argue their cases. In an environmental context, it is especially important to look at the way the books portray the relationship between the self and society, in order to see the extent to which these books are capable of making the readers look beyond the self. This will therefore be the main focus of the chapter that follows.
4 The Self Versus the Community

The premise of self-help books is that they are meant to help the self change or improve in some way. This has caused great criticism, as many regard this orientation towards the self as narcissistic and incapable of causing greater social change (e.g. Hazleden, 2003: 413; Madsen, 2014: 173). This chapter will look at how the self and the community are considered in the selected self-help books of this thesis. This will help answer two research questions: To what extent are the lifestyles proposed in the books presented as capable of influencing the idea of the self? To what extent do the books frame the self as capable of influencing its communities and society?

The hypothesis behind this research question is that critics are more likely to be correct in saying that the books are incapable of causing greater change if self-help books regard the self as an isolated creature. McGee argues that the ability of self-help books to contribute to social change depends on the books’ understanding of the self. When the self is understood in an individualistic way, as an autonomous, self-governing individual, then the self will have little influence on external affairs. However, if the self is seen as part of a social sphere, where selves influence and constitute each other, then the self can have “radical political possibilities” (McGee, 2005: 23).

This chapter will first look at why the self is supposed to change. How are minimalist and potentially sustainable lifestyles supposed to benefit the self? Goffman’s stage metaphor will be applied in order to illustrate how the self’s material surroundings may be considered as a part of the self. His theory will also highlight whether the readers are encouraged to change their onstage presentations in order to construct a genuine version of themselves, or to create an insincere façade based on other interests.

The next section will scrutinize the books’ view on the self in relation to economic issues. This will show how the authors argue that their advocated lifestyles will change the self and its economic situation, and also how the self is framed as capable or incapable of influencing society as an economic realm. After this, the chapter will look more generally at the extent to which these self-help books consider society. As the genre has been criticized for being too self-absorbed and therefore incapable of inspiring social change, it is important to see whether these works from the sub-genre
on minimalism and decluttering fall into this trap or are in fact able to gaze beyond the limits of the self. The final section will then look at how the books may contribute to building the self, as well as building community.

4.1 Expressing Values or Pleasing the Audience?

Self-help books aim to help the readers’ selves solve some issue or discontent in their lives. As part of the sub-genre on decluttering and minimalism, the four books attempt to provide the readers with the tools needed to change their material surroundings and their relationship with these. But why should this change be made, according to these books? Why should tidiness be important to the self?

Taming one’s surroundings can be compared to taming one’s body. Benedicte Hauge has qualitatively studied women who diet, and she argues that the ideal body in Western cultures today is one that expresses control. As calories are available in great abundance in developed countries, the ideal is now to be able to control and limit one’s intake, which will influence one’s physical appearance (Hauge, 2007: 13-14). This aspect of control is visible both in one’s practices and in the body as the end result. One of the subjects in Hauge’s study saw her body as presenting misinformation about who she was due to its size, and she consequently used dieting as a tool to eliminate this discrepancy (Hauge, 2007: 110).

Erving Goffman describes social performance and representation of the self as happening on a stage, with a front section and a backstage area. The backstage is an area where the self can be out of character, and an area that the self can use to prepare for performances on the front stage (Goffman, [1959] 1990: 114-116). Hauge’s study found that the subjects exercised control over their food more easily when the act of eating was committed ‘on stage’ rather than ‘backstage’, as with lunch at work compared to an afternoon snack alone (2007: 95).

Similar to this, decluttering and minimalism can be seen as tools to make the home and the body represent the values that one wishes to express. As Wilhite writes, the appearance of one’s home is “a constant beacon carrying elements of identity” (Wilhite, 1999: 284). We can apply Goffman’s stage to the home in several ways: The home can
be the backstage area whilst the outside world is the stage; similarly, some areas of the house may be furnished to be presentable to guests, while other parts of the house may be considered private backstage areas that are styled and organized differently. Wilhite provides an illustrative example of this from North America and Europe: Many houses have had – and some still have – a special living room reserved for entertaining guests. This room is always tidy and clean in order to be ready for unexpected visitors (Wilhite, 1999: 285). While many homes do not have a separate living room for representational purposes anymore, we can find similar divides in small dwellings: Goffman suggests that bedrooms function as backstage areas, while the rooms that guests may visit are treated as front (Goffman, [1959] 1990: 124). Finally, cupboards, wardrobes, and drawers can also be a backstage, while the plainly visible parts of rooms make up the front.

According to Goffman, most dwellings tend to have a front and a backstage, where the front is usually tidy and well decorated (Goffman, [1959] 1990: 125). In his theory, he also argues that in order to maintain an idealized self, the performer will conceal his or her incompatible aspects from the audience (Goffman, [1959] 1990: 56). As the backstage area is described as a place where the self can be out of character, a seemingly tidy person could allow themselves to be messy behind the scenes, such as in bedrooms and cupboards. This, however, is not the case with the three self-help books that deal with material possessions. Here, the area of tidiness includes all parts of the home, including backstage areas like bedrooms, attics and cupboards. This means that the backstage is no longer available as a place to be out of character, which raises the question of why the self should adopt tidiness.

*The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying* contains detailed guidelines on how to achieve an organized or minimalist home. The premise of the book is that the readers are discontent with the clutter in their lives and seek a solution to their despair. According to Kondo, the cause of clutter is that one owns too much stuff, which again is caused by not knowing how much one has. Consequently, if one’s storage solutions allow one to have a full overview of all possessions, she argues that one will be able to maintain order inside and outside the storage space – tidiness and organization throughout the home is the clue to an uncluttered life (Kondo, 2014: 159-160). In this context, Kondo thus implies that the self is an audience, and all areas should be controlled in order to make
the audience happy. Having an organized wardrobe, for instance, will bring happiness: “It feels great to open up your wardrobe and see the clothes you love arranged neatly on hangers” (Kondo, 2014: 90). She further claims that the secret to keeping one’s wardrobe tidy is to hang long and heavy garments to the left so that the hems create a line rising to the right (Kondo, 2014: 92). All items in a drawer should be folded so that they can stand upright, and should be organized so that every item is visible once the drawer is pulled out (Kondo, 2014: 88). She also claims that her folding technique for clothes will make folding fun (Kondo, 2014: 88).

In this way, what is conventionally the backstage area also becomes a front stage. The self observes its own tidiness, judging whether the wardrobe makes he or she feel great or not, which turns the self into an audience. Order is maintained to keep the audience happy and to avoid criticism from it, meaning that visitors are no longer the main source of moral judgement. At the same time, the process of keeping the home tidy – folding clothes – and the appearance of the organized storage areas are supposed to bring the self joy, just like the possessions themselves.

Wardrobes are traditionally a backstage area, and an area of concern in both The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying, Zero Waste Home, and The Joy of Less. In The Joy of Less, Francine Jay introduces her ‘Wardrobe’ chapter by stating: “We’ll explore how paring down our attire can save us time, money, space, and stress – while making it easier for us to look well-dressed. Having a streamlined wardrobe is one of the true joys of being a minimalist!” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 144). The chapter focuses to a great extent on how the wardrobe should be able to help the self prepare for entering the stage in an obstacle-free manner. When organizing the wardrobe, one should divide garments into two categories, Inner Circle and Outer Circle, according to frequency of use, and the former category should be placed in the most accessible areas (Jay, [2010] 2016: 152). Additionally, sorting garments into modules, i.e. grouping similar items together, will make the owner realize how many items he or she owns, and according to Jay, this realization will prevent further unnecessary purchases and cluttering. Like Kondo, Jay argues that having an overview of one’s storage spaces will prevent cluttering in other parts of the house. This argumentation makes a tidy front contingent on a tidy backstage, and provides an explanation for why readers have seen their homes go from
tidy to messy time and time again – their backstage areas have not been decluttered and organized in accordance with the standards of the front stage of their homes.

In the chapter on storage spaces, Jay argues that filling up one’s storage areas contradicts the principles of a minimalist lifestyle: “Frankly, I think it’s easier to live minimally when you don’t have any storage space!” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 205). At the same time, she suggests that storage spaces can be used as “flex space”, where one can “pursue messy hobbies” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 205). Instead of being a part of the front, storage spaces are in this context regarded as backstage areas where the self can practice ‘secret consumption’, as Goffman calls it ([1959] 1990: 50-51). Thus Jay turns storage from a passive to an active backstage area, while still concealing the incompatible feature that mess is to a minimalist. In a similar fashion, Kondo recommends using cupboards for hiding incompatible features. She points out how all of her clients have at least one space they do not wish to show her, usually containing items they want to keep but that they do not want others to know about. According to her, loved items should not have to be hidden, but if you still do not want others to see them, you can decorate the inside of a wardrobe with them: “No one will complain as no one will see. Your storage space is your private paradise so personalise it to the full” (Kondo, 2014: 187). In this situation, the out of character features of the self can be lived out backstage.

Bea Johnson has a different twist on the wardrobe and house. In contrast to Kondo and Jay, her method is centred on reduction of waste caused by one’s lifestyle rather than how items should be sorted and stored. Even so, her book includes discussions on how to keep one’s house in order, and in this context she sees a minimalist home as a financial opportunity as well as an opportunity for emancipation from one’s items. Renting out one’s house while travelling can ease travelling costs or prove to be profitable if one prefers camping to rented accommodation (Johnson, 2013: 249). A zero waste lifestyle makes renting out the house easier, but also frees the self from the anchor that material attachment is: Johnson describes renting out one’s house as a “personal rite of passage to material independence”, and argues that the “taboos related to opening our home to “people we do not know” have been lifted” (Johnson, 2013: 249). According to her, full minimalism also within wardrobes and cupboards is not necessary to facilitate short-term rentals, but it makes preparation for renters significantly less time-consuming: “clearing our space of the few personal items takes
only fifteen minutes” (Johnson, 2013: 249). In sum, Johnson frames wardrobe minimalism as freedom for the self: Freedom to travel and to spend one’s time as one wishes, without feeling anchored by one’s possessions.

All three books thus provide reasons for why a tidy, organized home is beneficial for the self. A minimalist front is supposed to provide the self with joy or freedom – but is this a resolution of the discrepancy between how the self lives and wants to live, or between how the self lives and wishes to be seen?

### 4.1.1 Face or Façade?

In Goffman’s stage theory of the self, the self has the power to express the attributes that she wants her audience to see in her, and suppress what she does not want to display in that role on that particular stage (Goffman, [1959] 1990: 28). Efrat Tseëlon interprets Goffman’s actor as having neither an exterior nor an interior with a true and false self, but rather a number of faces for different situations where none is more genuine than the other (Tseëlon, 1992: 116). Michael Schwalbe, on the other hand, reads Goffman as saying that the real self can be seen in moments of decision, resistance, and feeling, where moments of decision include when one decides which mask to put on in front of a certain audience (1993: 337). As stated in the introduction to this thesis, this raises the question of whether a true self exists. However, what is more relevant for this thesis is to discuss whether a façade exists, defined by the online English Oxford Living Dictionaries (2017) as a “deceptive outward appearance”. This can be interpreted as an insincere presentation of the self, one that does not express attributes that the self believes that he or she possesses, but which is put on for other reasons. According to Goffman, the self’s attitude towards his or her own projected front may vary: He describes the self’s belief in its own front as a continuum between conviction and cynicism, where the convinced believe in their own act, while the cynical do not (Goffman, [1959] 1990: 28-29). A self can move between conviction and cynicism, and cynical fronts may be put on for different reasons, such as private gain or for what the self believes is for the audience’s own good (Goffman, [1959] 1990: 29-31).

‘Façades’ will here be interpreted as fronts based on cynicism, while ‘face’ will describe fronts based on the self’s conviction. Goffman’s theory, however, implies that
the same front can at different given times be either a cynical façade or a face chosen because the self is convinced that this is a genuine presentation of itself. This also means that a front originally put on without the self being convinced by its own performance can become a front that the self truly believes in later on. At the same time, one can question whether the self has to believe in a portrayal at all times and in all situations in order for it to be genuine. Goffman states that “A back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted” (Goffman, [1959] 1990: 114). This means that the back region is one where the self has the opportunity to live out the opposite features of what it has fronted in a situation. Does this make the front fake and deceptive? Not necessarily. Maybe the self has situational preferences, meaning that the self may enjoy being energetic and outgoing when socializing with certain friends, but also enjoy being the slow-moving type who does not answer the phone when resting at home. Similarly, the self may enjoy having a sparsely decorated living room and a cluttered cupboard, or it may identify with a minimalist home in some periods of time, but feel disconnected from it at other times.

This leaves the question of how the self-help books argue that the self should adopt the new fronts that they offer. So far, this chapter has shown how Kondo, Jay, and Johnson frame the benefits from the lifestyles as barely related to façade. Minimalism or zero waste is not actively encouraged as a way to seem tidy in front of the neighbours or to keep up an impression of being a decent homemaker. Instead, chapter 2 illustrated how Kondo states that you should tidy because a tidy home will bring you joy. She does not address why some items spark joy or whether it is okay to own items for the ideal self that one wishes to present. Instead, she implies that once an item has lost its ability to spark joy in you, this joy is permanently gone, and the item should therefore be thrown away. At the same time, we saw in the previous chapter that she also argues that following one’s feeling of joy in the decluttering process can uncover one’s true interests, which will help finding one’s passions in life (Kondo, 2014: 203). This implies that a material lifestyle based on joy will be linked to the self’s interests, not an imagined self.

As also seen in chapter 2, Johnson is mainly concerned about the environmental costs and waste caused by a consumerist lifestyle, and the signals that wasteful consumption
sends to manufacturers and suppliers. These signals are about consciously expressing one’s opinion on how resources should be used. By following one’s zero waste principles in all consumption decisions, producers are told what you approve of and what you disapprove of. By encouraging such behaviour, Johnson tells her readers to put up a front based on values they are convinced about, and to remember to keep it up at all times. At the same time, Johnson encourages reducing waste “not just for a better environment but also for a better you”, and argues that the zero waste lifestyle will give the readers healthier and richer lives (Johnson, 2013: 10). Still, environmental concerns are given greater priority in the argumentation found in the introduction to Zero Waste Home, with the changes towards a better life for her family being presented as added benefits derived from an environmentally conscious lifestyle. Zero Waste Home is written in a way that assumes that the readers want to act in environmentally friendly ways, and Johnson therefore does not spend pages on convincing her readership of why environmental behaviour is needed. This further suggests that Johnson assumes that the presentation of the self as a waste-reducing citizen is based on conviction, not cynicism, and that the readers will adopt the zero waste lifestyle accordingly.

Rather than the environment, Millburn and Nicodemus’s main concern is finding meaning. Their fourth value, passion, is closely linked to this pursuit. Working for the sake of earning a paycheck is framed as a crushing principle of the American Dream:

“[…] we’re supposed to work that soul-crushing job for 40 years so one day we might be able to retire and enjoy our lives for a few years […]. We’re taught that there is much more value in that paycheck – and all the stuff that paycheck can buy us – than there is in actuality” (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 72).

Instead, they argue that one should devote one’s time to work that can be a mission rather than a job. They specify that one does not necessarily have one true passion or calling in life, and that one can be passionate about “virtually anything”, from horseback riding to accounting (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 76). With this, they argue that one should not use a job as a financial means to construct one’s material façade, but rather that one’s occupation should be based on joys and interests, and thus be an end in itself.
These arguments on passion suggest that readers should find what brings them true excitement. Millburn and Nicodemus specify that passionate people can have days when they do not feel like going to work or embarking on new projects (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 77), which means that the self’s excitement regarding an interest does not have to be static in order for that interest to be a passion. When they state that the readers do not have to have one true calling, they also open up for changing one’s occupations as one’s passions develop or change. The main point is that the self’s choice of occupation should be rooted in the self, not in external matters such as money or status (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 80-83). If one’s passion is to sell shoes, then the customer service demands of workers regarding demeanour will have to be followed in order for the self to follow its passion, even on the days when the self does not believe in the smile that it puts on. By stating that passionate people can have bad days, Millburn and Nicodemus are implicitly open to occasionally putting on cynical fronts in order to follow the overall passion that the self believes in. However, the chosen mission has to be based on conviction rather than cynicism in the long term.

Jay is the only author that explicitly and critically questions acquisitions made for impressions only. In the first chapter of the book, she argues that “products will never make us into something we’re not” and that advertisers “exploit the fact that it’s a lot easier to buy status than to earn it” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 21). Similarly, she points out that owning an item that facilitates certain actions will not make you a master of that action. If your high-end camera or heaps of yarn have not made you a skilled photographer or knitter yet, there is no point in possessing either items anymore (Jay, [2010] 2016: 21-22). She states that we may be surprised at how many of our items “belong to our imaginary selves” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 22). By treating the imaginary self as the true owner of certain items, she implies that they do not belong to you and should therefore not be in your possession anymore. By distinguishing between these two identities, she draws a line between genuine and fake selves, which implies a belief that items should be owned because they express a genuine self. This also encourages the readers, by inversion, to question whether their items belong to their true self. Jay provides a much clearer distinction between a real and fake representation of the self than seen in the other books, which mainly assume that the new lifestyles they present will be pursued due to conviction and that constructing a façade is a behaviour that belongs in the past.
The overall focus in all four books is to follow one’s own instincts in order to find a lifestyle or a material environment that the self will flourish and feel content in. Even in *Zero Waste Home*, the alternative lifestyle is presented as a way to please the self, both by relieving its environmental conscience and by providing the self with the complimentary benefits that a zero waste lifestyle brings. To borrow Goffman’s analogy, one could say that the self-help books are providing the readers with instructions on how to act on stage in order to enjoy and realize themselves while acting. The realness of the performance, on the other hand, is either implied or left up to the readers to figure out. However, one can look at this from another perspective too: By building their persuasion on what is best for the self in minimalist lifestyles, the authors also imply that a lifestyle based on less consumption is what the readers truly want and need to be happy – a lifestyle with reduced consumption levels is in the self’s self-interest. When this is implied, the books may convince the readers to adopt a lifestyle with lower environmental impact, regardless of the extent to which they describe the self as being a part of a greater context.

Even so, these lifestyles will not be lived out in a vacuum. Rather, these lives will be lived in a society based on certain values and principles, and societies in developed countries tend to be coloured by their dominant economic principles. The next section will therefore look at how the books position their visions within an economic reality, and how they either distance themselves from or embrace the economic principles associated with consumption in developed market economies.

### 4.2 The Minimalist Self in an Economic Society

Whatever lifestyle an individual chooses to assume, he or she will still live this life in a society based on certain norms and principles. At a news conference in December, 2006, American President George W. Bush stated that in order to “achieve important goals for the American people”, the national economy had to keep growing, and to accomplish this he encouraged the American people to spend: “The recent report on retail sales shows a strong beginning to the holiday shopping season across the country. And I encourage you all to go shopping more” (Bush, 20/12/2006). This view of economic growth as a vital part of progress is central in mainstream economic theories
and in the politics of many developed countries. This means that the minimalist self must find a way to live within a society that greatly encourages high consumption.

Capitalism was originally a fusion of asceticism and acquisitiveness, where religious ideals of prudence were merged with a desire for accumulating acquisitions. An important aspect of capitalism and economics is rationality, which was shaped by the ideas of asceticism and acquisitiveness in the early days of capitalism (Bell, 1979: xx). Rational behaviour is seen as consumption decisions that maximize the utility one can derive from the resources that one has (Evans and Newnham, 1998: 463). For example, if one has a total budget of $100, one would spend this on the items that provide the greatest usefulness, joy, or satisfaction for the self. In the same way, a rational actor would choose to minimize disutility in disadvantageous situations. In total, the self acts according to its self-interests. Economists give utility levels numerical values and assume that these may vary between individuals, depending on each individual’s needs and wants – which also explains why different decisions made by different individuals can be considered rational. However, growth is regarded as one of the pillars of capitalism, together with private ownership, marketization, and product differentiation and turnover (Wilhite, 2016: 6). Bell argues that the diminishing importance of religion and its ideals of frugality have left boundlessness as the core element of capitalism, which in combination with technological progress has made exponential growth a societal ideal (Bell, 1979: xx). Bell sees the market as where the economy meets the culture’s ideals of lifestyle: While being economical would be to work and save for later and greater gratification, marketing forces in American culture promote a hedonistic way of life (Bell, 1979: xxv). The advertisers in the market thus promote pleasure as the ultimate goal in life, and they encourage consumers to achieve this through instant gratification of desires.

Many researchers consider high consumption levels as a vital part of the environmental challenges of the day. Wilhite, for instance, argues that maintaining a healthy ecosystem will demand a decrease in economic growth (Wilhite, 2016: 2). As chapter 2 has shown, increased consumption also collides with the ideals of a minimalist home and lifestyle. Considering this, encouragement to increase spending and consumption seems to clash with both minimalism and environmentalism. This section will look at how the books state that their minimalist and zero waste lifestyles can positively influence the self
when the self resides in a society that idealizes economic growth. It will also show how the self is framed as capable of influencing society and the economy without adhering to the ideal of high consumption levels.

### 4.2.1 The Low-Consuming Self in the Economy

On a general note, one can say that consumption as a path to economic growth and progress is not promoted by any of the self-help books under scrutiny. *The Joy of Less* and *Zero Waste Home* encourage reduced consumption, *Minimalism* barely gives the topic of consumption any attention, while Kondo in *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying* claims that all the ‘graduates’ from her tidying course manage to maintain a home with much fewer possessions than before. Even so, monetary matters are given considerable attention by all authors apart from Kondo.

While barely considering shopping, Millburn and Nicodemus spend several pages of *Minimalism* on the topic of money. This is discussed in connection to what they call ‘anchors’, meaning elements of life that hold the self back from leading a meaningful life. According to them, money is

> [...] worth identifying as its own anchor – because of the stronghold it places on so many people, because of the importance our culture places on money, because it’s typically the number one reason for someone to continue doing something they hate (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 83).

They further argue that the best way to remove this burden is by giving money less importance in life (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 83). This is similar to the way they frame consumption, as a topic not worthy of attention. In spite of this, however, the book continues with several pages on how and why one should set up a budget, pay down one’s debt, and invest as part of a long-term savings plan (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 83-88). This shows that economic issues are not framed as something that a minimalist can choose to ignore: The authors present the self as having to find a plan to ease its economic situation in order to be able to push economic concerns aside and devote its attention to more meaningful pursuits.

As mentioned in section 2.1.4, Millburn and Nicodemus encourage selling possessions as a way to pay down one’s debt. While they state that their blog provides more advice
on how to minimize, this is one of the few places in the book where they offer advice related to materiality, and it is offered in the shape of a personal anecdote: “We also learned that by simplifying – by identifying which material possessions weren’t adding value to our lives – we were able to more quickly become debt-free by selling more than half our stuff […]” (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 88). This once again suggests that the authors frame the readers as middle-class selves residing in a market economy. These middle-class citizens are assumed to have been creditworthy enough to acquire debt, and so the authors attempt to show them how minimalism can influence their situation by granting them financial freedom. In this instance, they use the logic of utility to encourage selling possessions: If an item offers little utility to the self but is desired by someone else, choosing not to sell it would be an opportunity cost for the self, as he or she could have used the money from that sale to buy something providing greater utility. The rational choice to make is therefore to sell the item, which is what Millburn and Nicodemus encourage the readers to do.

In addition to selling items, the authors encourage donating. The book provides a list of lessons Millburn learnt when he had to handle the items left behind by his late mother:

- We are not our stuff.
- We are more than our possessions.
- Our memories are within us, not our things.
- Our stuff weighs on us mentally and emotionally.
- Old photographs can be scanned.
- You can take pictures of items you want to remember.
- Items that are sentimental for us can be useful to others.

Lists are only used mid-chapter in *Minimalism*, as a way to highlight what the authors consider to be especially important to remember or implement. In this list, the authors emphasize how the self is set apart from its possessions, but also how possessions can restrain the self – items, like money, become an anchor. In order to free the self from its entrapment, possessions must be allowed to exit its life. This creates a certain level of narrative tension: Why is it okay to pass the burden of material objects onto others? If a
life with fewer items is the way to meaningfulness, why can one sell one’s belongings to others? To solve this, Millburn and Nicodemus appeal to the usefulness of items: Useful items will not weigh on the self, and by assuming that needs are different, usefulness becomes a relative notion. Thus items you do not need can be sold to others. Readers are not encouraged to consider whether items are useful to others before passing them on, which implies that this is a highly subjective consideration that the buyer should make instead. This subjectivity alludes to the utility concepts and rational behaviour advocated by many economists. The minimalist self is therefore presented as someone who can and should take advantage of the sales opportunities provided by the market economy. The principles behind society’s ideas of economics should be exploited – but the self is also framed as someone who should reject the importance that the culture places on possessions and acquisitions.

On a societal level, Millburn and Nicodemus clearly distance their lifestyle from the hedonistic capitalist principles they outline in society. Mainstream society is framed as a community centred on a pressure to consume: They describe “society’s idea of living” as purchasing happiness through “ephemeral indulgences” (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 75). In the very beginning of the book, they criticize the conformity that they believe is encouraged by society: By having celebrity ideals like the Kardashian family, standards on how to live, look, and consume are raised, which cause great conformity pressures on the self (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 1).

Additionally, they criticize how society encourages individuals to attach their identity to how they earn their paycheck (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 73-74). As seen in chapter 3, the solution they offer to avoid the consumption pressures of society is to not “take the bait” and instead focus on meaningfulness (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 2). As for the typical conversational question of what one does to earn a paycheck, they propose to answer with what one’s passions are rather than one’s job title (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 74). These suggestions, however, are not made to help the self change society and the economy, but rather to show how a minimalist lifestyle can influence the situation for the self. Thus minimalism can make the self find meaning in a capitalist society, but the self is not framed as capable of making capitalist society more meaningful.
In effect, Millburn and Nicodemus simultaneously reject the mainstream attitudes on consumption and spending while also appealing to mainstream economic principles. In this way, they offer the readers an alternative lifestyle that still fits within the society that they reside in. This combination of rejection and adoption of capitalist values allows them to win over individuals whose state of mind is coloured by society’s economic principles. By disapproving of the societal pressure to consume in order to conform to the ideal, they appeal to the discontent that readers may feel regarding consumption and take a moral high ground against ‘consumerism’, which implicitly strengthens their ethos as moral experts on meaningfulness. Rather than being a problematic discrepancy in logic, these contradictions allow the authors to capture the attention of their readers without having to embrace a completely different model of society. At the same time, they do not frame the self as capable of changing the economic society, but only as capable of changing its own life and economic situation within that society. Consequently, the section on money seems more about persuading and helping the readers than making a change for society.

Millburn and Nicodemus has the most explicit discussion of economic concerns among the books. Even so, Johnson highlights the economic benefits of a zero waste lifestyle on several occasions in Zero Waste Home. For instance, in a brief section on the economic savings that zero waste can bring, she writes: “The most quantifiable benefit of the lifestyle is financial. My husband, Scott, was not convinced about the Zero Waste lifestyle at first, but he jumped on the Zero Waste wagon once he accounted for money savings” (Johnson, 2013: 33). In a ten-point list of financial benefits by living zero waste, she also lists cumulative savings by replacing disposables with reusables, selling recyclables to actors in need of them, and, like Millburn and Nicodemus, selling unused items (Johnson, 2013: 33).

With the example of her husband, Johnson illustrates how individuals concerned with economic matters can still find benefits in assuming a zero waste lifestyle. The financial benefits are presented as being part of a win-win situation: In a zero waste life, the self will save both money and time, and at the same time produce benefits for the environment. Saving is all in all presented as a central phrase in a zero waste lifestyle: The word ‘saving’ is used 32 times in the book, while ‘save’ occurs 59 times, and the
term is framed in two ways: As rescuing resources from wastefulness and as spending less, either time or money.

Win-win situations are plentiful in *Zero Waste Home*. When it comes to buying in bulk, Johnson makes sure to emphasize that she means buying by weight, as shown in section 2.2.2. She stresses that the other kind of bulk buying will easily result in the opposite of saving, which has a negative cumulative effect: “Buying more than needed inevitably results in food boredom and racing against expiration dates, both of which ultimately lead to wasted food, resources, and precious time!” (Johnson, 2013: 52). Buying bulk by weight, on the other hand, will save food waste and packaging. To reduce consumption, Johnson promotes purchasing reusables instead of single-use products, and she argues that reusables save money and resources while also providing elegance, such as in the case of table settings (Johnson, 2013: 46 and 69). Laser hair removal is also said to save time and money compared to traditional hair removal methods (Johnson, 2013: 92), and a small wardrobe saves resources as well as time, since smaller wardrobes mean that less clothes will have to be manufactured and shopped for (Johnson, 2013: 128-129). Fewer garments will also save the readers money for check-in fees when travelling (Johnson, 2013: 129).

Like in *Minimalism*, the appeal to economic principles in *Zero Waste Home* is an attempt to convince the readers to adopt the suggested practices, and to show them how the alternative lifestyle can influence their financial situation positively. Considering the extremity of reducing one’s landfill waste to the volume of a mason jar, Johnson’s inclusion of economic gains moves her approach more towards the mainstream, which potentially increases the number of people who may find zero waste living appealing. Thus, rather than taking the moral high ground in these examples, Johnson builds her arguments on *logos* associated with economic rationality: Saving is the reasonable thing to do, both for the self and the environment. A zero waste lifestyle will influence readers by filling their lives with benefits.

Jay’s depiction of money in *The Joy of Less* is a mix of those found in *Minimalism* and *Zero Waste Home*. She argues that fewer possessions will lead to less stress for the self, as a large amount of items will require a large amount of maintenance. When possessions demand significant time, money, and energy of the self, “we may start to feel like our stuff owns us – instead of the other way around” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 25).

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This implies what *Minimalism* and *Zero Waste Home* also argue; less stuff will make the burden of possessions feel smaller while also giving the self a greater sense of freedom.

Society, meanwhile, is framed in two ways: As an economic sphere dominated by sly marketers, but also as a resource for enjoyment of things. Advertisers “constantly bombard us with the message that material accumulation is the measure of success”, which she contradicts by stating that “products will never make us into something we’re not” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 21). Marketers are portrayed as lobbyists of consumerism, trying to get the readers’ contact details to send them dozens of catalogues, and trying to convince everyone that they live in the spotlight and therefore need a wardrobe fit for a celebrity (Jay, [2010] 2016: 20-21 and 172). This portrayal of the advertising industry as pestering can be interpreted as a hyponym used as a symbol: pestering marketers, while only a section of what capitalism has to offer, become a symbol for capitalism as a whole. However, this is not the only framing of society: As section 2.2.4 showed, Jay encourages enjoying without owning. Galleries and museums allow the self to enjoy art without the responsibility and cost that maintenance of valuable art pieces requires: “We’re incredibly lucky, in our modern society, to have access to so many of mankind’s masterpieces – without having to acquire and maintain them ourselves” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 49). The opportunity to enjoy art at a low or non-existent fee, and drink barista-made coffees without having to acquire and maintain the skills and equipment to do so, means that society becomes a low-cost resource for material enjoyment. The minimalist self is consequently framed as needing to resist the immoral advertisers of society, but also as capable of exploiting the joys that modern capitalist societies provide.

On the whole, this shows that the proposed lifestyles are presented as having a positive influence on the self and its economic situation. A minimalist or zero waste lifestyle will empower the self to resist the pressures from marketers and society’s ideal of conformity through consumption. Additionally, the self will gain several freedoms: It will not be anchored by possessions and monetary concerns anymore, both by saving with its new lifestyle practices and by selling unnecessary items to reduce debt. The self will also be freed from the stress and cost of maintaining expensive items.

We have already seen that Millburn and Nicodemus do not frame the self as capable of influencing the economic society. The next section will therefore look at how Jay and
Johnson argue that the self can influence society when adopting their proposed minimalist or zero waste consumption practices.

### 4.2.2 Minimalist Consumption as a Contribution to Society

As seen in section 2.2.2 on shopping, Johnson encourages her readers to spend their money in ways that reflect their values, as changing the market demand will have influence on the market supply. Additionally, she encourages privileging local products, for instance by joining community supported agriculture (CSA) initiatives (Johnson, 2013: 57). These initiatives let individuals subscribe to locally sourced produce, which supports the local community and the organic industry (Johnson, 2013: 57). How the community support manifests itself is not explained, however. Jay, meanwhile, explains the benefits brought to the local community as well as society through her version of minimalist consumption. By buying locally, she argues that the consumer strengthens society first of all by contributing to the local economy. Secondly, this participation in the economy offers the chance to forge meaningful relationships with local suppliers, thus socially strengthening the local community (Jay, [2010] 2016: 278-279). Additionally, Jay states that the self can become “more socially active and civicly engaged” from consuming in public rather than at home, but she does not explain what effects such civic engagement can lead to (Jay, [2010] 2016: 52).

Jay and Johnson thus frame local consumption as a practice that can strengthen the local community, but they are vague on how this influence manifests itself. The self’s power to influence the economy is more explicitly stated, and they attempt to empower the individual by arguing that one person can make a difference through its consumption practices, either by strengthening the local economy or by affecting the market supply of sustainable and unsustainable goods. In total, however, the economic benefits from minimalist or zero waste consumption are mainly individually focused in all three books. As this subsection has illuminated, the self’s influence on communities and the society is given much less attention than the proposed lifestyles’ influence on the self. The books primarily highlight the economic benefits for the self and argue that their proposed lifestyles will empower the self to make a difference in the economic sphere of his or her life. This is probably an attempt to persuade more readers to adopt the
proposed lifestyles, but this overshadows the lifestyles’ potential of changing the economic aspects of society.

Even though the economic benefits are centred mainly on the individual level and how the lifestyles can influence the self, there are other contexts to consider as well. The next section will further consider how the authors propose that the alternative lifestyles make a difference for the self, or enable the self to make a difference for others.

### 4.3 Who Are They Helping? The Self Versus the Society

It is no surprise that self-help books are trying to help selves. The question is whether this is all they do: Are the books exclusively focused on helping the self, or do they consider the individual as having influence on the communities and society it resides in?

*Minimalism* has a strong focus on the self. As the full title *Minimalism: Live a Meaningful Life* implies, the book’s goal is to help the readers find meaningful ways to lead their lives. Consequently, the topics are centred on how to provide meaning for the self. The Five Values, which are supposed to be the greatest priorities when searching for meaning, are health, relationships, passions, growth, and contribution.

Out of these values, contribution is the one that appears to be mostly directed towards others: “It’s an incredible cycle: the more you grow, the more you can help others grow; and the more you help others grow, the more you grow in return” (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 101-102). Millburn and Nicodemus also state that humans are more willing to make an effort for the people they love because “humans have an intrinsic need to contribute beyond themselves – contribution is a basic human instinct” (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 102). Following this, they illustrate how contribution can happen in different ways by telling how they felt the most fulfilled in their corporate jobs when they were adding value to other people’s lives (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 102).

Based on this, one would think that the chapter on contribution was altruistically written, but all in all, the main point is not how much value you add to others, but rather how much you add to yourself: “The good news about contribution is no matter how
you contribute, you get to feel an immense satisfaction from your contributions – a satisfaction like no other” (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 105). As for how to contribute, they suggest joining local organizations or starting one’s own: “Many people discover so much satisfaction from contributing to others that it becomes important to them to create their own means by which to contribute” (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 104). Contributing will make the self experience its life as more meaningful, and this is the drive that makes people initiate new ways to contribute.

However, while the satisfaction gained by the self is given emphasis, this does not mean that contribution is done for the sake of the self only. Millburn and Nicodemus also stress how the contributor should continuously assess how much value his or her contributions add: “When you think in terms of adding value, you’ll start to notice everything you do begins to add value in various ways. That’s because over time you’ll begin to weed out anything that doesn’t add value to your own life or to other people’s lives” (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 103). In this case, there is no obvious primary beneficiary. While the value for the self is still mentioned, this statement also opens for contributions that mainly benefit others. The main point here is that value is added, not who the recipient of the amount of value is. This shows a belief in the self’s power to contribute to others, and thus influence communities and society. The extent of this power, however, is not stated, and the benefits for the self are given the greatest emphasis when Millburn and Nicodemus discuss ways to contribute.

In The Joy of Less, more emphasis is put on making a difference for others than in Minimalism. While the majority of the chapters discuss possessions and how to deal with them, Jay devotes the final chapter before her conclusion to “The Greater Good” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 263). This section works both as a summary of some of her previous points and as an explanation of how these lifestyle changes will make a difference for communities, the society, and the environment. As part of this explanation, a new concept is introduced to re-label and reframe the proposed consumption role of the individual:

Instead of toiling away as consumers, we can become “minsumers” instead: minimizing our consumption to what meets our needs, minimizing the impact of our consumption on the environment, and minimizing the effect of our consumption on other people’s lives (Jay, [2010] 2016: 264)
This shows a tripartite benefit of reducing consumption, which she has been alluding to throughout the book: By making a change for itself, the individual is able to make a change for others and the environment as well. Later on, Jay states that “Our ultimate goal as minsumers is to live lightly on the earth” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 270), showing a prioritization of helping the environment over helping the self.

In the case of reducing consumption, Jay describes the environmental consequences of production, transport, and disposal, and she portrays the benefits of reduction as a way to remove worries for the self: “Better to never own the item in the first place than have to worry about how it was made, how it got here, and how to get rid of it later on” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 267). Second-hand items should be considered before new products because it will “avoid putting additional pressure on our overtaxed environment, and prevent something useful from winding up in the trash” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 269). Composting is briefly suggested because it is “doubly good for the environment” as it reduces the need for packaged garden fertilizers and keeps compostable materials from wasting away in landfills (Jay, [2010] 2016: 271). The self is thus framed not only as capable of influencing the environment, but also as responsible for it. Caring for the well-being of the planet should be done because we “have a responsibility to nourish and nurture it for future generations” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 281), which means that Jay frames the self as capable of influencing the well-being of future members of the society.

While the environment gets considerable attention in her Greater Good chapter, Jay also urges her readers to consider the conditions of the labourers who make the products they purchase. When concluding the chapter, she states: “We can be pioneers of social and economic change simply by consuming less, and encouraging others to do the same. It’s the easiest form of activism imaginable, yet has the power to transform our lives, our society, our planet” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 281). By framing minimalism or ‘minsumerism’ this way, Jay portrays the lifestyle as an obstacle-free version of activism.

Kondo, on the other hand, maintains a strong focus on the self. Following her methods will not only lead to happiness, but also help the selves free up time to find and nurture their passions and missions in life (Kondo, 2014: 237). However, she says nothing of what these passions and missions are, meaning that they could or could not be centred
on contributing to something greater than the self. As already mentioned in chapter 3, Kondo states that one of her friends changed professions after adopting her tidying method. By sorting through her book collection, the friend realized that the topic of the books that she decided to keep were all on social work rather than the sector she was currently working in (Kondo, 2014: 203). This tidying process showed her that “she wanted to contribute to building a society where mothers could work without feeling anxious about their kids” (Kondo, 2014: 203). Considering this, Kondo’s method opens up for individuals being able to influence society, but she does not elaborate. The main focus is still on the self, and her lack of focus on anything besides tidying is a challenge recognized from chapter 2: Kondo elaborates extensively on tidying methods, while anything outside of her tidying universe is given little attention. As a result, she leaves a lot up to interpretation for the readers. This means that readers with a self-absorbed state of mind are given the opportunity to maintain and even strengthen their focus inwards, which leaves little time and attention for influencing society.

In contrast to this, Johnson considers society in several parts of her book. She uses the terms society and community interchangeably, but one can still detect two different frames fitting the two concepts. In some sections, she frames society as an arena that poses challenges to the self. The house her family lived in before adopting a zero waste lifestyle was located in a “bedroom community”, a suburban area structured in a way that favoured driving rather than walking to shops and cafés (Johnson, 2013: 3). Furthermore, she argues that recycling is a challenging alternative for waste management, considering how recycling opportunities vary greatly between different societies, which means that recycling demands a great extent of research by the consumer (Johnson 2013: 27 and 50). Adopting a zero waste lifestyle may also cause criticism and remarks from others in one’s society.

In such cases, Johnson advises the readers to seek out online zero waste communities for support (Johnson, 2013: 253). She also argues that one can find like-minded people in the real world as well as online. By joining communities that support the same values as the zero waste self, for instance collaborative consumption efforts such as community gardens, one can achieve great benefits to the self: “We discover like-minded people, no longer feel alone, and find hope that we never before saw in the future” (Johnson, 2013: 35). In this case, communities are framed as capable of influencing the well-being of the
self. At the same time, individuals are not powerless: Johnson emphasizes the market power that consumers can have if they collectively consume in a zero waste manner: “While the individual act of refusing does not actually make the waste disappear, it creates a demand for alternatives” (Johnson, 2013: 18). Towards the end of the book, she describes the phases that someone adopting a zero waste lifestyle is likely to go through, and the final stage is where the individual wants to contribute to “the broader community” (Johnson, 2013: 254). This can be done in several ways according to Johnson, where the first mentioned is that one can be an ambassador for the lifestyle simply by adopting it. While the rest of the book is focused on benefits for the environment and the self, this is one of the few instances where appearances are considered: Within the framework of Goffman’s theory, the self in an ambassador role will present itself on stage in ways concordant with the values that it wishes not only to portray, but also to promote.

This shows that Johnson encourages the zero-waste self to contribute to the society that he or she lives in by being an ambassador for the lifestyle. Through zero waste living, the consumer is framed as having the power to oppose the waste issues that Johnson identifies in society, and thus affect what producers supply to the market.

While *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying* and *Minimalism* frame the self as capable of influencing society to a lesser degree, *The Joy of Less* and *Zero Waste Home* stress the influence that the self can have on others. This raises another question: Do these books try to inspire social change?

### 4.3.1 The Self in the Mirror: How Self-Help Books Encourage Social Change

As we have already seen signs of, two out of the four self-help books studied discuss how to make a change for communities and society: *Zero Waste Home* and *The Joy of Less*. While both books mainly discuss how the self can make a change for itself through its consumption patterns, both also contain sections that argue how the readers can make a greater difference with their new lifestyles.

As mentioned, Johnson argues that by adopting zero waste, one also becomes an ambassador for the lifestyle. Additionally, having a simplistic home that one rents out
on a short-term basis can inspire renters to change their lifestyles (Johnson, 2013: 250). Through this argument, she extends the representational role to the home. Furthermore, Johnson argues that the self can contribute to societal change through individual efforts. We have seen how she encourages using one’s wallet to show manufacturers what they should and should not produce. Taking this one step further, she urges the readers to contact suppliers of unsustainable goods or packaging and state their concerns:

An email, call, or a handwritten letter can effectively suggest the implementation of a sustainable practice or the modification of a wasteful one. Communicating our concerns is a powerful way to not only proactively support Zero Waste but also actively participate in and accelerate our society’s ecological progress (Johnson, 2013: 255).

For those wanting to take their activism yet another step further, she suggests sending wasteful products or packaging back to the supplier with a message urging them to change to alternative materials. This form of activism will involve use of fuel for delivery, but she argues that this is worth the cost as that one package can make the supplier adopt more sustainable practices from then onwards (Johnson, 2013: 256). In order to make this action easier for the readers, Johnson provides a template as well as two sample letters that they can model their letters on (Johnson, 2013: 257-258).

Jay, meanwhile, writes that participation in protests and demonstrations are not necessary. The civil disobedience from not buying is enough:

By simply not buying, we accomplish a world of good: we avoid supporting exploitative labor practices, and we reclaim the resources of our planet. It’s one of the easiest and most effective ways to heal the earth and improve the lives of its inhabitants (Jay, [2010] 2016: 265).

Thus, according to Jay, protesting for change is best done through changing consumption patterns, not through verbal protests. Similar to Johnson, however, she argues that adopting a lifestyle can make you an inspiration to others: “we inspire others with the beauty of our actions” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 281). She argues that this can “change the current paradigm” and that consuming less and encouraging others to do so will make the readers “pioneers of social and economic change” (Jay, [2010] 2016: 281).
Whether these books successfully inspire readers to try to change society requires further research, but one can evaluate the height of the threshold for social action that they construct. Jay’s suggestion is based on a minimum of effort: Be a minsumer, and you can inspire others. This makes advocacy seem unproblematic, but she does not explain how living the lifestyle is enough to inspire. Jay does not actively encourage the readers to share their personal journeys with others, meaning that their lifestyle change could go unnoticed. Johnson, on the other hand, urges her readers to make their voices heard, at least with manufacturers and suppliers. This will demand more of the readers than just adopting the lifestyle, but Johnson provides them with not one, but two different tools they can use when writing their own letters asking for changes in practices. Whether this actually makes readers take up her advice would have to be investigated in an empirical study.

4.3.2 Joy to the Self: Materialism in the Quest for Joy

At this point, it is apparent that the extent to which the books studied promote sustainability varies greatly, but that they all give considerable attention to the self and its benefits from their proposed lifestyle changes. The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying leaves decisions on consumption up to the readers, but treats the feeling of joy as the one requirement that all decisions should be based on. The Joy of Less and Zero Waste Home place their proposed practices in an environmental context, but as the title of the former book indicates, these behavioural changes are also done in order to find more joy in life. Can these low-consumption lifestyles actually bring more joy to the self?

A study by Brown and Kasser may enlighten this question. They studied the correlation between subjective well-being and ecologically responsible behaviour, and found that these factors were complementary rather than in conflict with each other (2005: 360). They studied individuals living a lifestyle based on voluntary simplicity, i.e. a lifestyle where attention is shifted from material goals to intrinsically satisfying goals instead, and found that they were showing greater subjective well-being than individuals living a mainstream lifestyle, unless the individuals in this latter group also reportedly cultivated their intrinsic values (Brown and Kasser, 2005: 362). Even so, Brown and Kasser found that individuals living a voluntarily simplistic lifestyle were more likely to be oriented towards intrinsic values, and that this lifestyle correlates with ecologically responsible
behaviours (2005: 363). Considering this, focusing on intrinsic rather than extrinsic goals may increase subjective well-being, and a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity is likely to result in ecologically responsible behaviour, meaning that a minimalist lifestyle could result in both happiness and sustainability. As a consequence, pursuing happiness through a minimalist lifestyle has the potential of shifting lifestyles to a more sustainable path, and may thus make a change for the environment as a whole.

This does not answer the question of whether these self-help books bring a lasting lifestyle change to their readers, however. If a voluntarily simplistic lifestyle does not lead to a shift of focus from extrinsic to intrinsic values, or if this shift is short-lived, then an increase in subjective well-being may also be ephemeral. If the simplistic lifestyle is not maintained over time, then this may also influence the type of values prioritized by the individual. The lasting effect of decluttering and minimalist self-help books, and the resulting effect – if any – on an individual’s values, should be studied in order to reach any conclusions on this subject.

### 4.4 Building the Self or a Community?

Russell W. Belk (1988) provides a discussion on the extended self, meaning the self and its possessions. Arguing that we either knowingly or unknowingly see our items as part of ourselves, he states that instead of studying single acquisitions as representations of the self, “a complete ensemble of consumption objects may be able to represent the diverse and possibly incongruous aspects of the total self” (Belk, 1988: 140). What happens to the self when the individual starts changing and reducing its material surroundings?

Based on Belk’s understanding of possessions, one can argue that the self-help books studied try to help readers reconstruct their selves, but approaches such as Kondo’s may also be tearing the self down. In Kondo’s method, readers are supposed to complete the entire tidying process over a shorter period of time. Can one be conscious of all sides to oneself in such a process? In Belk’s view, the total self can be seen as diverse and incongruous. When readers are told to focus on one aspect of the self, such as joyfulness, they may make decisions that are disadvantageous to other parts of the self. As previously discussed, Millburn and Nicodemus encourage severing the bond
between sentimental memories and items: “We are not our stuff” (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 21). Similar points are stressed by Kondo (2014: 133-136) and Jay ([2010] 2016: 224-234), where Jay states that “Parting with them feels like parting with our selves. But we all know that’s not true!” ([2010] 2016: 228). But what if Jay is wrong and we are, at least partly, the stuff we surround us with? What if some items lack joy, but are important reminders of our core traits or values? Considering this, the self may risk reducing its total self by decimating its amount of possessions.

At the same time, if we constantly are our belongings, then we would never be able to discard anything, and we would never be able to change, only expand our selves. It is the discontent caused by the overflow of things that several of these self-help books base their advice on. It may be that the self wishes to reduce its total self, such as if there are aspects of its identity that it does not appreciate. A decluttering of the home can thus be a decluttering of the self, and a redefining of who the self is. Belk discusses other scholars’ suggestions, which propose that we regard items as part of ourselves once we have control over them, but also that we may experience items as if they impose their identities on us (Belk, 1988: 140-141). The self-help books scrutinized here offer the readers a way of gaining control of their material surroundings, or a way to remove the control that items have seemingly had on them. Based on this, the self-help books can be tools that help readers to redefine and rebuild the self. By regaining control over their items, the readers also regain control of their own identity.

Whether the selves will allow a redefinition aided by the authors is another matter. As this thesis has shown, the four books scrutinized have different viewpoints on a lifestyle based on a reduction of possessions: Millburn and Nicodemus take attention away from things and shifts it onto other aspects of life, Kondo mainly cares for joy, Johnson’s priority is the self’s impact on the environment, while Jay provides a combination of minimalist and environmental concerns. Whether the readers embrace the content may be partly dependent on whether they identify with the perspectives presented. As chapter 3 showed, the authors try to create a feeling of similarity between their own and the readers’ life stories, but if this fails, the readers may not be inspired to rebuild themselves. The lasting effect of any rebuilding of the self must also be questioned. Self-help books have existed in an enormous variety for more than a century, and ideas and approaches resurface from time to time. Ole Jacob Madsen describes this as the
fundamental paradox of self-help literature. While the books promise to make readers happy, there is still a demand for more titles, suggesting that they do not work; if they had worked, there would be a sharp decline in demand, and the literature would eradicate itself (2014: 14). This paradox seriously questions any wide-ranging change-making effect of self-help books.

If readers of decluttering and minimalism books do restructure their lifestyles, if not also themselves, then this new life will not be lived in isolation. It may be that the change can be prolonged by the creation or joining of a community, and the support that may be found there. Section 4.3 discussed the selected self-help books’ inclusion of society in their writings. As stated, Johnson encourages seeking out environments of likeminded people, through measures such as joining a community garden or an online community. While Kondo does not elaborate on this, she has inspired online communities such as the Facebook group ‘Konmari Adventures’, with 45,000 members as of April, 2017. Millburn and Nicodemus also encourage joining initiatives such as soup kitchens or other local charitable organizations (Millburn and Nicodemus, [2011] 2016: 104). By helping a community through voluntary efforts like this, one can strengthen social bonds, cultivate a sense of belonging, attain a network that supports one’s change in lifestyle, and simultaneously try to make the larger society a better place to live in. With their reference to how the sense of meaning found in contributing inspires many to start their own initiatives, Millburn and Nicodemus also encourage creating smaller communities, thus building communities from scratch.

The support from likeminded community members may influence the longevity of the readers’ attempts at change. They will still reside in the same society as before, where the consumption pressures criticized by Millburn and Nicodemus live on. In order to withstand these purchasing pressures prevalent in market economies, communities may keep the individual on the minimalist track. As seen in chapter 3, Jay compares adopting minimalism to dieting, which is a lifestyle issue which sees many failed attempts at behavioural change. In the case of health and weight loss, it has been suggested that social support may inspire behavioural change through information and reassurance, and by increasing the compliance to change in the individual (Verheijden et al, 2005: S180). However, if the network providing this support displays unhealthy habits, this can negatively affect the individual’s success rate instead (Verheijden et al,
As Verheijden et al state, a successful intervention strategy for one kind of behaviour may not be successful for other behaviours (2005: S185), but if one assumes that lifestyle change for weight management can be compared to sustainability-focused lifestyle change, then the communities that the self finds itself in may be either positively or negatively influencing factors. This suggests that individuals in communities that provide little support or express unsustainable lifestyles may struggle more with adopting a low-consumption or low-waste lifestyle. If this is the case, then the success rate of minimalist self-help books may increase if the books also convince their readers to seek out supportive environments with similar lifestyles to what they aspire to. This discussion is merely hypothetical, however. Measuring the effectiveness of social support is highly difficult because of the spillover effect of such support, as stated by Verheijden et al: The supportive network may influence a subject’s information levels as well as habits relating to the lifestyle being studied, which makes it difficult to isolate social support from other influencing factors (Verheijden et al, 2005: S180-S181).

What this thesis can state, however, is that the community level is granted considerably less attention than the self in the studied self-help books, and critics have argued against the capability of self-help books to change society. McGee, who discusses social change as change towards equality, argues that self-help culture fails to provide the political community needed for such change, even though it may address the unrest felt by individuals (McGee, 2005: 187-188). In the context of recovery from substance abuse, she argues that self-help groups like Alcoholics Anonymous have created a space for discussion, but that the anonymity required, the groups’ insistence on being apolitical, and the restrictions placed on commenting on other members’ contributions turn the meetings into serial monologues by addict personas (McGee, 2005: 186).

A problem that McGee identifies here is that anonymity encourages the self to separate the addict role from its other roles, which isolates the issue from the rest of the person as well as from being seen in a greater context (2005: 186). This could be a problem with self-help books too, such as The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying: When Kondo solely looks at the tidying process as a way to achieve an organized home, the housekeeper role of the self may be isolated from the self’s other roles and personality traits, and the consequences for the environment and the society may similarly be
separated from the issue and ignored. This could be detrimental to the sustainability of
the new lifestyle if environmental concerns are not considered in the tidying process at
all. Such separation of tidiness from everything else could also make the discussions
within a community based on the Konmari method isolated from other social issues.
Online communities often have rules for what one can and cannot discuss, which can
impose limits on the kind of community that develops and the social impact that such a
community could have.

At the same time, McGee’s support group example is not the same as a decluttering
context. Anonymity is for instance not required as a minsumer or a zero waste
consumer: We have seen how The Joy of Less and Zero Waste Home both urge their
readers to be ambassadors for the proposed lifestyles in order to inspire others.
Additionally, the change from addiction to sobriety or from inequality to equality is not
the same as from clutter to minimalist order and from societal unsustainability to
sustainability. While dialogue and political action is needed for a turn towards
sustainability as well, the acts and habits of individuals are a substantial part of the
problem. Considering this, McGee’s criticism may not be as valid for decluttering and
minimalism literature as it is for other parts of the self-help industry. In the case of
sustainability, a restructuring of individuals’ habits and lifestyles is sorely needed in
order to reach more sustainable consumption levels in total. Communities can be
influencers, providing encouragement and incentives to change to more sustainable
practices. Communities can also provide individuals with meaning in life, as Milburn
and Nicodemus suggest, thus bringing a sense of fulfilment that some may have
previously tried to accomplish through consumption. Self-help books alone may not be
able to build communities that spark major political change, but they might influence or
even help build smaller communities in ways that will inspire other individuals to
change their consumption patterns towards more sustainable practices. Concluding on
the books’ ability to help readers build communities would be speculation only in this
thesis, but empirical research on the community-creating abilities of popular culture
phenomena such as Marie Kondo’s The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying, and the
potential role of such communities in maintaining a low-consumption lifestyle for their
members, would be valuable contributions to the field of self-help research.
4.5 Conclusions

This chapter has looked at how the self-help books studied present their lifestyles as capable of influencing the self, and the extent to which the books frame the self as capable of influencing its communities and society. It has examined how the self is supposed to benefit from changing its lifestyle according to the books, and this has shown that the books mainly appeal to bringing out the readers’ ‘real’ self rather than constructing insincere façades. Further, this chapter has looked at how the books position their lifestyles and the self in an economic reality. In different ways, Jay, Johnson, and Millburn and Nicodemus frame the self as being positively influenced by a minimalist or zero waste lifestyle. They argue that the lifestyles they advocate will empower the self to resist the pressures to consume from advertisers and cultural icons. The books include those feeling alienated by the high-consumption ideals in society without repelling those who embrace the benefits of a capitalist system, but their framing of the self as capable of influencing the economic society varies. Millburn and Nicodemus only frame the self as capable of influencing its own economic situation, while Jay and Johnson argue that the self can affect the local economy or the market’s supply and demand, respectively, by changing lifestyles. Jay and Johnson also claim that the readers can influence the local community through local consumption, but they fail to elaborate upon this, which results in the economic benefits of the self overshadowing the self’s potential to influence the economy.

In all of the books, the lifestyles are presented as influencing the self by granting it freedom: The self is freed from its possessions, which lets it discover its passions according to Kondo, or travel easily and lightly according to Johnson. Jay emphasises the freedom from the costs and maintenance that private ownership of expensive items like art pieces demand, while Millburn and Nicodemus highlight freedom from debts and consumption pressures as benefits from a minimalist lifestyle filled with meaning. By showing that instant gratification does not bring lasting happiness to the self, the books distance their proposed lifestyles from the hedonistic aspect of capitalism that Bell identified. As Millburn and Nicodemus argue, this leaves the readers free to pursue happiness through meaningful activities.
Additionally, we have seen the extent to which the self is encouraged to contribute to its community as well as to itself. *Minimalism* and *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying* keep focusing on the benefits for the individual, even when contribution to society is part of the topic. *The Joy of Less* and *Zero Waste Home*, meanwhile, manage to frame the self as part of a society and an environment, with a responsibility to protect the environment and an opportunity to inspire others to adopt the same lifestyle.

Finally, this chapter has discussed the self-help books’ ability to build the self as well as to build community. When seeing possessions as an extension of the self, decluttering and minimalism can strongly influence the self either by reconstructing or tearing the self down. At the same time, it may be that the self desires a reduction of its identity as well as its material possessions. Building community from scratch or joining and participating in them can provide valuable support in a lifestyle change, although the effects of social support are difficult to measure. Additionally, it is highly difficult to consider the ability of the books in themselves to build community through the research methods used in this thesis, and a conclusion on this would therefore require further research.

Unsurprisingly, the self is in the spotlight in self-help books. In the four books scrutinized here, the extent to which the self is framed as capable of influencing communities and society varies significantly. While *Minimalism* and *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying* mainly focus on benefits for the self, neither book scrutinizes the self in complete isolation. Kondo argues that tidying reveals your passions, which may involve contributing to society. Millburn and Nicodemus, on the other hand, see contributing beyond the self as a way of finding meaning in life. While the environmental focus of *Zero Waste Home* is obvious from the very beginning, *The Joy of Less* manages to frame minimalism as a way to help the environment. By encouraging readers to use their consumption patterns to express their values to producers and inspiring others to change their lifestyles, Jay and Johnson clearly frame the self as capable of influencing society.

This book selection suggests that it is unfair to claim that all self-help books are incapable of raising their readers’ gaze out beyond the tip of their noses. As clearly shown, some books on decluttering and minimalism do frame the self as able to influence and improve the environment and the society. McGee argued that self-help
books that understand the self as part of a social sphere, where selves influence and constitute each other, can have radical possibilities in influencing politics, and therefore also society. Based on the findings in this chapter, one cannot state that the self-help genre can undoubtedly make a significant number of people adopt more sustainable lifestyles. However, it is clear that Zero Waste Home and The Joy of Less frame a low-consumption lifestyle as desirable for the self and as capable of empowering the self to inspire others, both individuals and manufacturers, to also adopt more sustainable practices. Whether the self-help books make their readers act on this potential requires further study, but this still shows that sustainable lifestyles can be framed as greatly beneficial to the individual. I therefore suggest that environmentalists can benefit from using this sub-genre of self-help literature as a source of inspiration in their communication strategies. This will be further discussed in the concluding remarks that follow.
5 Concluding Remarks

Self-help books have tried to change people’s mindsets for more than a century, but the genre has rarely been studied in an environmental context. The aim of this thesis has been to see whether self-help books on decluttering and minimalism can help change Western middle-class citizens’ mindsets in order to make them willing to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle. To answer this, I have studied four self-help books: *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying* (2014) by Marie Kondo, *Minimalism: How to Lead a Meaningful Life* [2011] (2016) by Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus, *The Joy of Less: A Minimalist Guide to Declutter, Organize, and Simplify* [2010] (2016) by Francine Jay, and *Zero Waste Home: The Ultimate Guide to Simplifying Your Life* (2013) by Bea Johnson. The books’ target is a relatively affluent readership as they assume that the readers have enough items to feel that their homes are decluttered. They also assume that a significant amount of these items will not be required to cover basic needs and can consequently be decluttered. I posed the following research question: *What role can self-help books on minimalism and decluttering play in forging sustainable lifestyles?* Three sets of sub-questions were chosen to aid in answering this question. The first sub-question was asked to uncover the consumption practices that the books advocate: *How should material possessions enter and exit one’s life according to these books?* The second sub-question was chosen to show how the books use narratives and rhetorical means of persuasion in order to convince readers to adopt their proposed lifestyles: *How do the books use narratives to persuade their readers to change their lifestyle, and what rhetorical tools are used as means of persuasion?* The final set of sub-questions were posed to show how the books argue that they can change the readers’ perception of their selves, and whether they frame the self as able to change the communities and larger society that the readers reside in: *To what extent are the lifestyles proposed in the books presented as capable of influencing the idea of the self? To what extent do the books frame the self as capable of influencing its communities and society?*

5.1.1 Findings

Chapter 2 has shown how the books have both similarities and differences in their views on consumption, from the point of acquisition to the end of ownership. As for how
items should enter one’s life, Minimalism has the least to say. This book attempts to move attention away from possessions and onto what the authors label as values, such as finding one’s passions and taking care of one’s health. The other three books, however, advocate the idea of the self as a gatekeeper that consciously decides what is allowed and what is prohibited from entering one’s life: In The Joy of Less, Jay emphasizes that new items should be useful, simplifying, and novel in order to deserve a place in one’s home. Johnson has a similar view in Zero Waste Home, where she also encourages second-hand clothes shopping for the sake of the environment. When purchasing any kind of item, Johnson stresses the power that the individual has in sending signals to the manufacturers based on what they do and do not consume. In The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying, Kondo argues that one should not stock up on items, as new items left in storage take up valuable space, and she warns readers against using shopping as a stress-reliever. Similarly, Millburn and Nicodemus show how shopping did not relieve them of the anxiety and depressions they suffered in their previous lifestyles, and they stress how acquisition should be a means to cover basic needs.

In chapter 2, three different frames on waste were detected. Kondo frames items that no longer spark joy as rubbish that should be put in bin bags and thrown away. Millburn and Nicodemus, on the other hand, label unnecessary items as junk, but emphasize the monetary value that such items can have or the usefulness that the items may provide for others. Finally, Johnson frames landfill waste as the ultimate waste of resources, which should therefore be avoided to the greatest possible extent. Kondo barely recommends any alternatives to throwing away, while Millburn and Nicodemus mention donating and selling on. Consequently, Millburn and Nicodemus’ minimalist lifestyle promotes sustainable practices to a greater extent than Kondo’s. Johnson and Jay both provide more opportunities in the form of repairing, repurposing, and recycling, suggesting that their view on consumption is considerably more sustainable than Kondo’s. In sum, chapter 2 found that all four books encourage reduction in acquisitions, meaning that they all promote lifestyles with a potential to be relatively more sustainable than the current lifestyles of their readers. At the same time, it is only Jay and Johnson who obviously promote normative consumption practices with the intention of making their readership lead more sustainable lives.
Chapter 3, meanwhile, illuminated how three of the four books use personal narratives extensively to strengthen the authors’ ethos, meaning their authority as experts on minimalist and zero waste ways of living. The chapter also showed how the authors address the readers with the second person pronoun ‘you’ in order to create a feeling of familiarity and intimacy with the readers. Both the personal anecdotes and constructed narratives in the books were found to generously use pathos, meaning appeals to the readers’ emotions. Arguments based on logos, meaning facts and logic, were used to a much lesser extent. A promising finding in this chapter is that Johnson manages to frame environmental issues as having a great variety of solutions that the self can easily adopt, rather than as overwhelming issues that would require a reduction of living standards and quality of life. Additionally, the authors manage to make their proposed lifestyles seem attractive: Kondo describes her self-proclaimed beautiful lifestyle, and Jay compares minimalist living to the life of a butterfly. Millburn and Nicodemus frame consumption-centred living as devoid of meaning, which emphasises the meaningfulness that their minimalist lifestyle will bring to the readers’ lives. At the same time, these largely positive depictions of minimalist or zero waste living leave some pitfalls for the readers: There is no advice on how to maintain these lifestyles over time and no tips on what to do if experiencing a relapse. Similarly, by encouraging the readers to identify with the author’s experiences, the books may stifle critical thinking, which means that the readers might be adopting new consumption practices without considering whether they are sustainable for the environment.

Chapter 4 demonstrated how the books argue that their proposed lifestyles can influence the idea of the self. By applying Goffman’s stage metaphor, we saw how Kondo, Jay, and Johnson encourage the self to include parts of the house that have traditionally been backstage areas, such as bedrooms and cupboards, into the front stage. The backstage area is originally out of view for the audience, such as visitors to the home, and an area where the self can be out of character. By treating the entire house as a front, the authors frame the self as being an audience whose well-being depends on what her or she can see: According to Kondo, the self will feel great if he or she finds order and system when looking into wardrobes and storage areas. While tidy fronts have traditionally been used to impress visitors, the individual now has to keep all areas of the house organized in order to please its self as well. The self as an audience is also crucial in maintaining order: Both Kondo and Jay argue that having a complete overview of one’s
belongings, also in storage spaces, is essential to prevent cluttering in any part of the house.

Furthermore, the chapter showed that if one regards an individual’s possessions as an extension of the self, as Belk argues, then one can also argue that these decluttering approaches and minimalist or zero waste lifestyles enable the self to reconstruct its identity, or to declutter the parts of itself that it wants to get rid of. However, it may also be that decluttering reduces the self to a greater extent than the self is aware of at first. I have argued that if the individual focuses solely on joyfulness in the tidying process, as Kondo and to some extent Jay argue, he or she risks disposing of items that are tied to other central aspects of the self. Items may be important reminders of core traits and memories that the self has, even if they do not spark joy, and a major decluttering process could then lead to a larger reduction of the self than the reader initially wanted.

Finally, chapter 4 found that two out of the four studied self-help books frame the self as capable of influencing its communities and society. In The Joy of Less, Jay stresses the positive influence on the environment that a low-consumption, minimalist lifestyle may have, and she also highlights the social benefits that ‘minsuming’ rather than consuming will bring. According to her, the self will most likely support fair working conditions by purchasing from local producers, and local consumption will strengthen the self’s social bonds in addition to the local economy. Jay further argues that consuming as a minimalist is the easiest form of activism, which concurs with Johnson’s point in Zero Waste Home when she states that the individual can be an ambassador for zero waste practices just by living the lifestyle. However, Johnson encourages more activism as she urges the readers to contact manufacturers who use unsustainable packaging or production methods, either by sending a letter or sending the unsustainable product in return. The chapter also highlighted how having a supportive community can make it easier for readers to maintain these new lifestyles over time. Without empirical research it is difficult to assess whether the books can help readers build communities. Even so, normative practices such as Millburn and Nicodemus’ encouragement of volunteering for charities might inspire readers to build or strengthen smaller communities, where they may be able to promote more sustainable practices to other members.
To sum up, this thesis has shown that the studied self-help books *can* have a role in forging sustainable lifestyles, but that this role is not solely helpful in this process. Before concluding on the final implications of these findings, I will briefly review some of the criticisms of self-help literature.

### 5.1.2 Criticisms

Critics have argued that self-help literature is largely introspective and incapable of inspiring change. Hochschild points out how critics have argued that advice books appeal to individual choice, yet at the same time leave the readers with *no* choice with regard to the advocated normative practices. Advice books have also been criticized for tending to ignore societal or structural causes of individual problems (Hochschild, 1994: 3). In his analysis of psychological self-help books, Ole Jacob Madsen expresses concern over psychological self-help literature’s potential to make a difference for climate change. He is concerned that the turn inwards encouraged by this sub-genre will prevent collective action that could radically change lifestyles and consumption patterns (Madsen, 2014: 173). He also argues that many authors claim that the positive changes their books lead to will let the self contribute to creating a better world – without explaining *how* this alleged contribution manifests itself (Madsen, 2014: 176). Finally, Madsen theorises that the ‘feel good’ message of self-help books is the reason why the genre has such an extensive readership, while the ‘feel bad’ message of mainstream climate change communication is the reason why scepticism and a lack of willingness to listen have been great in this area (Madsen, 2014: 175). Criticisms of self-help literature have also been visible in recent public debate: Norwegian philosopher Kaja Melsom argues that self-help books *profit* on our insecurities, and that they make us chase individual happiness when true happiness is found in communities (Østby, 28/04/2017). British author Oliver Burkeman has similarly argued that by encouraging positive thinking, the self-help genre makes you risk experiencing every setback as a major failure in life (Østby, 28/04/2017).

Compared to this thesis’ findings, some of these criticisms are warranted while others are not. Self-help books certainly profit on our doubts of how to achieve a happy life or a joyful home. We have also seen how they can ignore societal or structural causes of problems by placing responsibility for the problems and their solutions on the
individual. I have also argued that the extent to which the books impose normative practices on their readers may hinder critical thinking. Furthermore, the high level of perfection and order that authors like Kondo and Jay advocate can indeed make any setback or relapse feel like a major failure, and thus demolish the inspiration that the books had originally provided.

However, decluttering and minimalist literature is less introspective than psychological self-help literature is likely to be. This thesis has found that the degree of focus on the self varies significantly between the four books studied. *The Joy of Less* and *Zero Waste Home*, in spite of mainly giving advice relating to the self, frame the self as capable of inspiring and influencing others in communities and the larger society. Additionally, *Minimalism* maintains that the self can bring value to others through voluntary work, even though they promote volunteering primarily to create meaning for the self. This suggests that not all self-help books make us chase happiness solely on our own.

Finally, this thesis has shown how the books make reduction of consumption seem beneficial to the self, meaning that they promote environmentally friendly efforts in a ‘feel good’ rather than a ‘feel bad’ manner. By making more sustainable lifestyles seem desirable, and consumerist pursuits seem meaningless, they may also be able to offer a different narrative of an ideal life than the mainstream society currently offers.

### 5.1.3 The Potential Crisis of a Master Narrative: Self-Help Literature’s Role in Constructing an Alternative Ideal

Chapter 3 of this thesis has demonstrated how two out of the four studied self-help books reframe the American Dream as an empty goal. The concept of ‘The American Dream’ was coined by James Truslow Adams in 1931 in his book *The Epic of America*. He argued that the Dream was taking form “in the hearts of men” already in the 17th century (Adams, [1931] 2012: 31). Further he stated that through history, many of the migrants to the American continent have had economic motives for their migration, but they have also dreamed of a better and freer life than they had at home. The American Dream would let men and women develop to their fullest, without being held back by class or social orders (Adams, [1931] 2012: 31 and 405). The concept of the American Dream immediately became a popular metaphor on American culture, and was not just
embraced by the people: Sociologists also embraced the metaphor and have used it extensively in cultural analyses of America since the 1930s (Schneiderman, 2012: x).

A cultural narrative like the American Dream is known as a master narrative: Master narratives are overarching narratives that reflect a culture’s values and create expectations of normative behaviour within that culture (Bergen, 2010: 47 and Smith and Dougherty, 2012: 454). This overarching story also shapes local narratives (Smith and Dougherty, 2012: 454), meaning that one can often recognize the pattern of the master narrative in the everyday narratives in a culture. Bergen argues that individuals are not bound by master narratives, and that they can choose to reject them or reshape their own narrative in order to make it fit the overarching story (Bergen, 2010: 50).

As seen in this thesis, Millburn and Nicodemus use the stories of their own upbringing and early adulthood to reframe and reject the American Dream. The chapter also demonstrated how Johnson states that her personal chase of the American Dream was successful, but that the lifestyle it resulted in still left her feeling like her life lacked something. Jay, meanwhile, does not discuss the American Dream, but she also alludes to it. She argues that everywhere in society, one receives messages saying “own this, and you’ll be more successful; acquire this, and your happiness will know no bounds”, and she stresses that items leave their owners feeling overwhelmed rather than overjoyed (Jay, [2010] 2016: 6). While not mentioning the American Dream, she still frames the Dream’s promises of happiness through economic prosperity as diametrically opposite to the effect that its proposed methods actually have. Considering this, it is clear that these three self-help books on minimalism and decluttering attempt to abandon what is a dominating cultural narrative. The issues they raise suggest that the American Dream is in crisis. Do they produce an alternative narrative that can fill the gap and become a new normative ideal of success in life?

In some ways, the books are noticeably different from each other. It is evident that the worldviews in Johnson’s *Zero Waste Home* and Jay’s *The Joy of Less* have aspects of ecophilosophy, or ‘ecosophy’, to them. As Arne Naess states, ecosophy is a philosophy centred on wisdom regarding the earth and our basis of existence on it (Naess and Haukeland, 2005: 105-106). Naess emphasises the great plurality of ecosophies, but states that at the core one finds a willingness to respect non-human parts of nature and consider the ecological challenges that the earth is facing (Naess and Haukeland, 2005: 
111). This thesis has demonstrated the concern that both Jay and Johnson express over the negative impact that modern consumption patterns have on nature and its capacity to meet the needs of future generations. At the same time, they maintain a strong sense of individualism in their advice – although not as strong as the ones found in Kondo’s *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying* and Millburn and Nicodemus’ *Minimalism*. These latter two books are clearly individualistic, with no explicit concerns shown for the strain that 21st century lifestyles may or may not put on the environment. Millburn and Nicodemus additionally frame the self as a being that strongly benefits from joining communities, but the core that these books share is an individualism that prioritizes the well-being of the self.

At the same time, the books all argue that detaching oneself from material abundance will provide opportunities for greater quality of life. To some extent, Kondo argues that decluttering will uncover one’s true passions, which gives the self the opportunity of leading a more meaningful life. Millburn and Nicodemus, meanwhile, insist to a great extent that a meaningful life will be acquired through non-material pursuits such as finding one’s passions and working on one’s health and relationships. Johnson argues that making her own condiments made her strengthen her relationships and feel in control of what she ate, and she also stresses that the way zero waste let her family detach themselves from their possessions gave them greater freedom to travel. Jay highlights how consuming local products can forge new relationships, and how consuming without owning relieves the self of the costs and stress of keeping up with the maintenance of expensive possessions. Through arguments like these, the authors construct an ideal of a successful life as a life where the self can have control, find meaning, and gain freedom. They also construct this ideal in opposition to the American Dream of abundance, either explicitly or implicitly, which implies that they regard a life based on the American Dream as a life that provides none of these three elements. Additionally, Jay and Johnson highlight the benefits to the environment from pursuing their alternative ways of living, which means that their alternative ideal life is one that harms neither persons nor nature. Together with Millburn and Nicodemus, they all build a narrative that values quality of experiences instead of quantity of things.

However, is this alternative narrative really radically different from the American Dream? Kasser and Ryan argue that financial success is a core element of the American
Dream (1993: 410), and if one equates economic prosperity with the Dream, then the alternative narrative in the self-help books certainly seems radically different. Still, the idea of a better and freer life is central to both narratives, and there is a sense of rags-to-riches in the books’ narrative as well. Striving for freedom is central to the American Dream, and as this thesis has shown, all four books studied have highlighted the freedoms that the self will gain from adopting a new lifestyle. The self will move from discontent to content, from being controlled to having control, from living a meaningless life to living a meaningful one. Additionally, while minimalist and zero waste living will not lead to riches in abundance in absolute terms, Johnson and Millburn and Nicodemus highlight how their lifestyles involve fewer financial commitments and worries. Jay also implies that the self will be freer to spend its resources as it wishes once it is freed from the consumption pressures imposed by marketers and Western capitalist cultures. Thus, both this ‘quality of life’ narrative and the American Dream involve economic freedoms for the individual. The books frame the American Dream as being in crisis, but their alternative is still based on similar core values.

If one treats the self-help books’ narrative as a separate narrative and a candidate for the position as a master narrative, then its competition must be considered as well. A strong contender to a low-consumption lifestyle as a solution to sustainability issues is ecological modernization. This school of thought treats technological innovation as the great resolver of our sustainability challenges, arguing that technological developments will provide us with sustainable goods produced with greater energy and resource efficiency – without changing the growth paradigm (Witoszek, 2016: 139). Idealization of technological entrepreneurs can be detected in the mass media, such as the attention given to Elon Musk, the founder of several successful companies including the electric vehicle manufacturer Tesla. Many of his ventures centre on solving the issues posed by climate change, a situation that he publicly raises his concerns about (Mack, 30/10/2016). Stories such as Musk’s could be regarded as alternative versions of the American Dream, where success is not found in any arbitrary commercial venture, but rather in attempts at exploring environmentally friendly business frontiers. As already stated, the freedoms offered by the self-help books concur with the emphasis on freedom found in the American Dream. This means that those searching for a sustainable master narrative among these options must choose which value they want to
prioritize: Freedom, or morally justified financial success. While the self-help books position their alternative lifestyles within the current economic reality, the ‘frontier’ narrative of ecological modernization fits within the current growth paradigm. Additionally, this narrative does not prevent a continuation of the hedonism and instant gratification that marketers arguably encourage. I would therefore argue that the ‘freedom’ narrative and the ‘frontier’ narrative thus appeal to different people: Those who thrive in capitalist societies and believe in the potentials of technological innovation are likely to prefer the ‘frontier’ dream. Those feeling anchored and restricted by economic issues and consumption pressures, on the other hand, are more likely to prefer the freedoms offered by the self-help books’ narrative.

At the same time, in 2017 one can also detect a countermovement against this self-help sub-genre on tidiness and minimalism. The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying has for instance inspired the book The Life-Changing Magic of Not Giving a F*ck, one example of several countermovement books that try to tell their readers to care less (Forani, 20/09/2016). However, these books are still self-help literature, only with a different goal in mind. As a consequence of this, they do not really challenge the ideal of self-improvement that one finds in self-help literature. Instead, they offer carelessness as a path to happiness. While these books have not been studied here, there is reason to be concerned of this countermovement’s capability to forge sustainable lifestyles. In societies based on market capitalism and economic growth, consciously caring about the consequences of one’s consumption habits is necessary to achieve a sustainable lifestyle.

It is possible that self-help books on decluttering and minimalism forge a new ideal that can inspire more people to live sustainably, but it seems unlikely that this ideal will outdo both the American Dream and ecological modernization anytime soon. For that to be the case, a significant proportion of the middle-class people exposed to these narratives would have to feel negatively affected by the principles of economic growth and consumption. This suggests that the role of self-help literature in forging sustainable lifestyles is not a leading one. However, it may be that supporting roles can still make a difference.
5.1.4 The Role of Self-Help Literature in Forging Sustainable Lifestyles

This thesis has shown that the role of self-help literature in forging sustainable lifestyles is neither non-existent nor a leading role. The level of sustainability in the promoted consumption practices varies between the books, and it may be unlikely that books on decluttering and minimalism alone can cause great social change. However, their positive and engaging narratives may inspire readers to adopt some if not all of the practices that they promote, and based on the findings of this thesis, some are likely to be sustainable. I read these books purely for the interest of research, not to change my relationship to possessions, but the books have still managed to affect me: During my research my purchasing levels have decreased and I have started mending more of my clothes instead of replacing them. Whether these behavioural changes will last is difficult to say, and this question is relevant for all readers of this genre. While the books might succeed in inspiring small-scale change, this inspiration might be short-lived, and if this is the case, then the ‘new’ lifestyles forged are ultimately not sustainable, neither for the self nor for the environment.

It might be that the books sell an illusion to their readers. Having a home that looks like a feature story from an interior design magazine may seem like a beautiful way to live, but such homes are unlikely to be snapshots of real homes. Is it possible for a 21st century family to live without any mess, all day and all week? It seems unlikely. At the same time, the long history of self-help books demonstrates the persistent human desire to strive for perfection, no matter how unrealistic the illusion is. New dieting books have been published regularly for decades without any radical reductions seen in the public’s waist measurements. This suggests that self-help literature is predominantly a source for fantasies and half-hearted attempts rather than a source that provides the key answer to how one can adopt a new lifestyle that lasts.

However, considering how communication on climate change has been criticized for fronting a negative message that only leads to apathy, there may still be greater potential in the communication approaches used by self-help books than what one can find in mainstream climate communication. The majority of Marie Kondo’s readers might still live in disordered households, and most of those reading Bea Johnson’s zero waste tips might still need rubbish bins larger than mason jars to deal with their landfill waste.
This being said, it is possible that some readers are able to reduce their consumption levels through the advice offered in these books, and even if this does not bring their ecological footprints substantially down, it will still be a small victory. Two out of the four self-help books studied focus primarily on the self and not on the environment, which means that their contribution to sustainability would be incidental. The other two books, however, manage to forge an apparent connection between the self’s consumption practices and the well-being of our planet, while still stressing the positive effects that the self will receive through sustainable lifestyle changes. The books’ strong focus on the benefits for the self, benefits that can be reaped quite rapidly, is something that climate communicators should note and learn from. Pointing to grave, long-term consequences that the individual cannot immediately feel has failed to make the middle-class masses change their unsustainable ways of living. It may be that a strongly self-centred approach is exactly what climate communication needs. I hope that these conclusions will inspire other scholars to do more research on this topic. Narratives on consumption reduction must frame sustainable lifestyles as attractive rather than prohibitive and limiting, if anyone is going to listen.
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