

Cluttercore: the pandemic trend for celebrating stuff, mess and comfort

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

Is there a room, cupboard, drawer or other place in your house that is full of things that you don't really use but don't want to get rid of? If so, what kind of stuff is in this place?

2 Key words

Match the key words with the definitions. Then find them in the article to read them in context.

triumphant	acquisition	clutter	unearth	conker	cosy
lingering	mantelpiece	accumulation	memento	knick-knack	tyranny

1. the mess created when there are too many things in a place _____
2. successful and victorious _____
3. warm and comfortable, and making you feel relaxed _____
4. a shelf above the opening of a fireplace _____
5. something that you keep to remind yourself of a particular person, place or experience

6. the process by which something increases in amount or is collected together over time

7. discover something that was not known before or that people had kept secret, especially by searching very thoroughly _____
8. the power that something has to control people's lives and the way that they behave

9. lasting for a long time, especially when this is not necessary _____
10. the process of buying something or obtaining it in some other way _____
11. a small cheap object used as a decoration _____
12. the large shiny brown seed of the horse chestnut tree; they are used in a children's game

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Chuck out your decluttering manuals. As we've been forced indoors by the global crisis, clutter has emerged, dusty and triumphant

Morwenna Ferrier

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- 1 In the past few months, the pavement outside my flat has been taken over by stuff: baby baths, filing systems, books, stools. People leave them, others take them; no money exchanges hands. It's a well-established, sustainable micro-economy – and, according to my neighbour, whose bedroom window opens on to this pavement, it's becoming a problem. "You have to ask: where did this stuff come from – and where's it going to go?"
- 2 Clutter has emerged, dusty and triumphant, as a defining by-product of the pandemic. Yet we are undecided on what to do with it. "Forced inside, some people have been decluttering, absolutely, but I've noticed others actively re-embracing their stuff," says Jennifer Howard, author of *Clutter: An Untidy History*. "The pandemic has forced us to re-evaluate what we have, make better use of objects and space, and also see their value, often for the first time."
- 3 Howard, who works from home, has witnessed (among other things) what she calls a "renaissance" in encyclopaedias used as laptop stands. In some corners of social media, such reappraisal of forgotten belongings goes by another name: cluttercore. On TikTok, videos hashtagged #cluttercore have almost 2m views. On Instagram, there are about 1,300 posts. Many of these feature beds piled up with clothes and walls papered with pictures. Other images have a cosier feel: clothes sandwiched neatly together, walls crammed with paintings and mantelpieces groaning under mementoes.
- 4 Cluttercore devotee Amy-Louise Holton, 36, who makes and sells clothes on Etsy, describes her clutter of fabrics and threads as "part of the creative process". Irina Balog, a 32-year-old interior designer agrees. She says cluttercore "is both an aesthetic and an emotion. The way I decorate my space is part of who I am."
- 5 For a generation that rent rather than buy, clutter can be a lifeline. "I've accepted the fact that I won't own a house, so making my home joyful and cosy is really important," says Holton.
- 6 Stuck inside, our social lives much diminished, we may be more likely to fall prey to consumerism. But clutter can mean something other than the excess mess made by an accumulation of things we don't really need. For some, clutter is being repurposed for pandemic life: for example, my ceramic pot now holds pens instead of plants.
- 7 Joseph Ferrari, who studies the psychological impact of clutter at DePaul University in Chicago, describes home as a "situation for living" and a foundation for identity. Home is not simply a place, he says; "it is an extension of our selves, a living archive of memory." It is now also an office, a nursery or any other number of things. It is something to be looked at, as well as lived in. We may not be entertaining friends, but we are inviting colleagues in via Zoom. One artist friend told me that quarantine was her most productive period because she was forced to sketch things inside the home, many of which she hadn't looked at for years.
- 8 Of course, one woman's clutter is another woman's rubbish, and how we view it depends entirely on how we define it. "To me, clutter is stuff that is no longer useful but gets in the way of living," says Howard. Based in Washington DC, she was moved to write her book on clutter after clearing out her late mother's house and unearthing "bags of bags, pickle jars, jars of pennies, jars of rubber bands, records. So much stuff!"
- 9 If maximalism, the embrace of excess, has emerged as a curated rejection of minimalism, a commercial sort of Zen that imagines a home free from the tyranny of its owner's lifestyle, cluttercore is somewhere in the middle. There is a "comfort in things", as the anthropologist Daniel Miller once argued.
- 10 As a concept, clutter was arguably invented during the Victorian period. The idea was that new systems of production required new systems of order, explains Howard in her book, meaning you get stuff, and then get more stuff to deal with the stuff. "The internet hasn't yet killed the lingering Victorian habits of acquisition and display," she writes. Back then, most things were relatively more expensive than today, so they

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were more highly valued – even if they were seaside knick-knacks or children’s toys.

- 11 “Now it is cheap to fill your home with stuff,” says the architect and academic Eddie Blake. “The conkers my son collected are imbued with a

magical esoteric value.” He smiles: “I like stuff. It helps anchor you.”

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3 Comprehension check

Are these statements true (T) or false (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. The author has been decluttering her bedroom and leaving her unwanted items on the pavement outside her flat.
2. Spending more time at home recently has allowed many people to re-evaluate their possessions.
3. The author says she has been repurposing unwanted items.
4. *Cluttercore* is the name of a new Netflix series about minimalism.
5. The conkers collected by Eddie Blake’s son have no value.

4 Phrases

a. Find and underline these phrases in the article.

1. sandwich together
2. groan under
3. fall prey to
4. be moved to

b. Talk about what the phrases mean. Look up the meanings of any you do not know.

c. Use the phrases in sentences of your own about different topics. Which is the most useful expression for you?

5 From a personal perspective

a. How we view something depends entirely on how we define it, says Jennifer Howard (para 8). How would you personally define the differences between the following pairs of words?

1. mess; stuff
2. mementoes; knick-knacks
3. clutter; rubbish

b. Now look up definitions of these words in a variety of dictionaries. How do the definitions compare and contrast?

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6 Quotes

Discuss these quotes from the article, using examples from your life or from the lives of people you know.

- “The pandemic has forced us to re-evaluate what we have, make better use of objects and space, and also see their value, often for the first time.”
- “Home is not simply a place; it is an extension of our selves.”
- “There is a comfort in things.”
- “You get stuff, and then get more stuff to deal with the stuff.”

7 Discussion

- **When did you last throw stuff out? Could you call what you did *decluttering*?**
 - o What kinds of things did you get rid of?
 - o What did you do with them? Did you take them to a collection point, give them to a charity, leave them on the pavement etc?
- **Do you, or does anyone you know, have a collection of knick-knacks or mementoes that you would not want to part with?**
- **Have you recently repurposed any of your stuff?**
- **Do you agree that an accumulation of personal stuff can make a home feel cosy?**
- **Do you know of any examples of clutter used as art or decoration?**