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How mess becomes pollution: spatiotemporal and relational dynamics of domestic disorder

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ABSTRACT

This study theorises how consumers interpret and respond to material disorder in domestic spaces, reconceptualising why some forms of mess are tolerated, while others become symbolic pollution that prompts tidying action. Drawing on symbolic pollution theory, the study demonstrates that pollution is constituted through spatiotemporal and relational processes rather than fixed spatial violations. It identifies three interrelated mechanisms shaping this transformation: perceived control, the symbolic elasticity of space across time and use, and family dynamics through which disorder is collectively negotiated. The study extends symbolic pollution theory by shifting its ontology from spatial to spatiotemporal and conceptualising disorder as moving between liquid and solid states. It reframes ordering as the ongoing management of time, relationships and material arrangements through which disorder is rendered acceptable or polluting.

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Introduction

Consumers increasingly express frustration in managing material disorder in their homes and frequently seek support to keep their homes organised and tidy. This is evidenced by the rapid growth of the professional organising industry, projected to grow from $12 billion in 2022 to $15.9 billion by 2030 (Research and Markets, 2023). Material disorder is commonly understood in terms of untidiness, mess, clutter, disarray or dirtiness. In consumer research, material disorder is recognised in a range of material manifestations, including disorganised item sets (Ross et al., 2021), messy items and overcrowded spaces (Ross et al., 2021), unsightly clutter (Arsel & Bean, 2013), and symbolic pollution in consumers' homes (Dion et al., 2014; Douglas, 1967). Despite the varied forms in which it appears, material disorder is regarded as wrong and immoral, threatening the stability and coherence provided by social order (Dürr & Jaffe, 2010).

Dealing with material disorder in domestic spaces has become an enduring challenge for consumers (Dion et al., 2014; Roster et al., 2016). Consumer research highlights that consumers generally avoid and manage material disorder by adopting symbolic

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classification systems (Dion et al., 2014; Douglas, 1967). These systems prescribe the proper placement of objects based on shared cultural meanings and categories (McCracken, 1986; Schwartz, 1981), enabling consumers to organise and tidy their environment. At the same time, consumers also negotiate, change and personalise their classifications' rules and logic to fit their personal preferences and situational needs (Dion et al., 2014; Nippert-Eng, 1996), thereby creating flexible classification systems to better manage and avoid material disorder.

The conceptualisation of material disorder is rooted in Douglas's (1967) theory of symbolic pollution, which posits that disorder arises when items are placed outside of their designated categories and violate the cherished classification systems. Within this framework, material disorder and symbolic pollution are not analytically distinct; objects that are out of their designated place are treated as pollution and necessitate consumers' responses to restore order. Subsequent consumer research has sought to refine this relationship. For example, Dion et al. (2014) distinguish between material disorder as objects that transgress cultural categories and symbolic pollution as a subjective designation that emerges when such disorder is experienced as problematic by consumers. This distinction highlights that not all instances of disorder are experienced as pollution; rather, consumers' reaction to objects 'being out of place that generates their designation as pollution' (Dion et al., 2014, p. 569).

Despite this conceptual refinement, existing literature offers limited insight into the processes through which material disorder becomes construed as symbolic pollution. Dion et al. (2014) suggest that situational risks and concerns shape whether disorder is tolerated or prompts tidying activities. While this highlights the role of context in shaping consumer responses to material disorder, it remains a relatively broad account of when disorder becomes problematic. As a result, the mechanisms through which disorder shifts from a tolerated condition to symbolic pollution remain under-theorised, constraining our understanding of the dynamic and evolving nature of domestic disorder.

This study addresses this limitation by conceptualising the relationship between material disorder and symbolic pollution as processual, contingent and socially negotiated. Accordingly, the study addresses two key questions: (1) how do consumers interpret and negotiate material disorder within everyday domestic life, and (2) through what mechanisms does such disorder become reclassified as symbolic pollution requiring intervention? In response to these questions, the study identifies three interrelated mechanisms, including consumers' perceived sense of control, the symbolic elasticity of domestic space across time and use, and family dynamics that shape when disorder is tolerated and when it is problematised.

Building on these insights, the study makes three interrelated theoretical contributions. First, it reconceptualises symbolic pollution as a spatio-temporal phenomenon, demonstrating that disorder becomes polluting not simply through spatial misplacement but through violations of temporal expectations and household rhythms. Second, it advances a relational understanding of symbolic pollution by showing how meanings of disorder are intersubjectively negotiated through family roles, relational expectations and collective identity goals. Third, it extends liquid consumption theory by theorising how tolerance for disorder and practices of tidying function as mechanisms through which consumers dynamically enact and shift between liquid and solid modes of

consumption. Together, these contributions reposition symbolic pollution as an emergent outcome of spatio-temporal and relational processes embedded in everyday domestic consumption.

Theoretical foundation

Material disorder

The conceptualisation of material disorder in consumer research is rooted in anthropological perspectives, most notably Mary Douglas's seminal work, *Purity and Danger* (Douglas, 1967). Douglas posits that pollution is not primarily a matter of hygiene or health but rather a question of symbolic disorder (Douglas, 1967). She defines disorderly things as 'matter out of place', such as 'bathroom equipment in the drawing room' or 'clothing lying on chairs' (Douglas, 1967, p. 37), which violate cherished classifications and threaten the order of a given system. This foundational concept of symbolic pollution has been instrumental in shaping consumer research, which has extended Douglas's framework to explore material disorder in domestic and commercial contexts.

Consumer researchers have built upon Douglas's concept by examining various forms of material disorder, including dirt (Warren & Price, 2025), messy spaces (Ross et al., 2021), tolerated mess (Dion et al., 2014), unsightly clutter (Arsel & Bean, 2013) and overcrowded spaces (Ross et al., 2021). These studies have expanded the understanding of material disorder beyond mere object misplacement to include phenomena such as clutter, characterised as an overwhelming accumulation of possessions that may not necessarily be out of place but are perceived as excessive or uncontrolled (Cwerner & Metcalfe, 2003; Löfgren, 2017; Roster et al., 2016). For instance, Löfgren (2017) describes mess as 'too much' or 'stuff out of control', while Hyde (2010, p. 176) frames material disorder as encompassing the 'anomalous' elements that have no specific place in the classification. However, while consumer research highlighted the multifaceted nature of material disorder, which can manifest as dirt, symbolic pollution, untidiness, clutter or disarray, consumer researchers used these terms interchangeably across academic discourses, which left the conceptualisation of material disorder muddy and unclear (Gollnhofer et al., 2025). For example, this lack of clarity has led to divergent interpretations, with some studies framing material disorder as objects contradicting cherished classification systems (Dion et al., 2014), while others emphasise the sheer quantity of possessions in a space, regardless of their placement (Cwerner & Metcalfe, 2003; Ross et al., 2021; Roster et al., 2016). To address this conceptual messiness, Gollnhofer et al. (2025) propose a dual framework that distinguishes material disorder as untidiness (misplaced objects) and clutteredness (excessive accumulation), providing a more precise lens for exploring material disorder in consumer lives.

The impact of material disorder extends beyond its symbolic significance, often functioning as a destructive and polluting force (Denegri-Knott & Parsons, 2014). Material disorder is perceived as dangerous, immoral and wrong (Dürr & Jaffe, 2010; Ger & Yenicioglu, 2004) because it disrupts established systems of classification, thereby threatening the stability provided by social order (Douglas, 1967). Moreover, material disorder can contaminate what is considered to be safe, pure and clean. For example, individuals or things that transgress classificatory boundaries are often

stigmatised as shameful, dangerous or disgusting (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001; Rozin et al., 2008), reflecting broader processes of moral judgement and social sanctioning. In this sense, responses to disorder are not merely aesthetic or functional but are imbued with moral evaluations. For example, in workplace settings, messiness can lead to less favourable evaluations of individuals, as employees with messy desks are perceived to have lower intelligence (Elsbach & Pratt, 2007). In retail environments, messiness negatively affects evaluations of retailers (Doucé et al., 2014). Similarly, consumers perceive gifts wrapped messily as less valuable (Rixom et al., 2020), highlighting the broader social consequences of disorder. These judgements signal moralised interpretations of disorder as a failure to adhere to social norms of order, care and appropriateness.

Material disorder can also lead to self-regulatory failures by posing a threat to consumers' personal control over their environments (Chae & Zhu, 2014). This aligns with Wilson and Kelling (1982) broken windows theory, which links disorder to problematic behaviours (Keizer et al., 2008). In response, individuals whose personal control over the environment is threatened engage in organising and tidying practices to restore control (Cutright, 2012; Strube & Werner, 1984).

Managing material disorder

The management of material disorder in domestic spaces has turned into an overwhelming challenge for consumers (Roster et al., 2016). Domestic mess is frequently associated with an overflow of consumption (Löfgren, 2017), driven by a materialist culture that equates happiness and success with the accumulation of possessions (Richins & Dawson, 1992). This cultural imperative fosters an 'unlimited hunger for more and more goods' (Fromm, 1967, p. 179), resulting in domestic environments characterised as messy and cluttered. Material disorder thus emerges as both a pressing and obstinate challenge for consumers, as it disrupts the flow of objects and people within the home (Cwerner & Metcalfe, 2003) and emerges as an inevitable consequence of everyday living practices (Gregson, 2007). Part of the challenge in managing disorder stems from its temporal nature. Rather than representing a singular breakdown of order, disorder unfolds through cyclical patterns of emergence, provisional resolution through tidying and recurrent reappearance as objects continue to circulate within household life (Dion et al., 2014; Filiod, 2003; Gregson, 2007). Together, the accumulation of possessions and temporality of disorder underscore its pervasive presence in contemporary domestic life, as reflected in the 'storage crisis' and 'pressing problems with clutter' identified in middle-class American households (Arnold & Lang, 2007, p. 24).

In response to these challenges, consumers utilise various strategies to manage and re-establish order. For instance, tidying practices enable consumers to address material disorder by returning objects to their 'proper places', thereby reinforcing classification systems that distinguish orderly from disorderly states (Dion et al., 2014; Hoy, 1995; Shove, 2003). Storage solutions such as boxes or wardrobes act as tools for creating and maintaining these categorical boundaries (Cwerner & Metcalfe, 2003), enabling consumers to orchestrate domestic order both aesthetically and functionally (Miller, 2005). Beyond reintegrating objects into established categories, consumers manage disorder through spatial separation by isolating messy or excess possessions in

marginal domestic spaces such as garages and attics. These spaces function as cooling (McCracken, 1988), liminal (Hirschman et al., 2012) or transitional zones (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005) that enable consumers to preserve the orderliness of domestic spaces.

More intensive responses to material disorder include decluttering, downsizing and lifestyle shifts towards voluntary simplicity (Cherrier, 2009) or minimalism (A. V. Wilson & Bellezza, 2022). Decluttering is defined by Cherrier and Belk (2015, p. 239) as a purposeful effort to 'clear out mess, disorder, and complications' stemming from excessive accumulation, often involving the disposal or reorganisation of goods. Similarly, Roster and Ferrari (2023) emphasise how clutter in consumer homes can be addressed through disposal and reorganisation practices. These strategies reflect a dual approach to managing material disorder: restoring order through tidying and reducing possessions through decluttering and disposal.

Extant literature also highlights more adaptive and symbolic responses to disorder. When disorder is unavoidable, consumers may reframe its meaning by redrawing symbolic boundaries. For example, Hill and Stamey (1990) demonstrate that unhoused consumers redefine trash as 'good waste', transforming it from an unacceptable form of dirt into a valuable resource. Similarly, Warren and Price (2025) introduce the concept of 'dirt work', describing how consumers renegotiate dirt boundaries to turn disorder into useful resources. Dion et al. (2014) similarly reveal that consumers often tolerate minor disorders when the cost of intervention is too high, allowing transgressions to persist until they escalate into crisis events that demand action. Their study also illustrates that consumers' thresholds for tolerating disorder are not fixed but contingent upon situational factors and risk perceptions. For example, what is considered 'safe' in one context may be construed as symbolically polluting in another and therefore evokes consumers' response to eliminate disorder to maintain order.

Moving beyond accounts that frame disorder management as an individual task, family consumption research highlights that organising and tidying practices are deeply embedded in family dynamics and function as sites where family identity is constructed, performed and negotiated (Epp & Price, 2008, 2010). For example, decisions about what is displayed, stored or concealed within domestic spaces play a central role in negotiating family boundaries and sustaining a collective sense of unity (Edirisingha et al., 2022). However, both symbolic classification theory and family consumption research offer limited insight into how meanings of (dis)order are negotiated at the family level. While symbolic classification theory illuminates cultural rules of 'proper placement' (Douglas, 1967), it tends to treat disorder as a static transgression rather than a fluid and negotiated state. Likewise, although family consumption research has examined identity work and domestic practices (Curasi et al., 2004; Edirisingha et al., 2022; Epp & Velagaleti, 2014), it has paid little attention to how families collectively interpret and respond to material disorder in shared spaces.

Despite these insights, a critical gap persists in understanding the mechanisms that govern the transformation of tolerated material disorder into symbolic pollution. While Dion et al. (2014) note that not all instances of disorder elicit responses, and only some are labelled as polluting based on consumer reactions; the mechanism driving this shift remains underexplored. Extant research has yet to fully clarify why certain forms of disorder are tolerated, while others prompt immediate action. This study aims to address

this gap by examining the dynamic processes through which consumers interpret and respond to material disorder, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of material disorder and its evolving nature.

Methodology

To investigate how consumers interpret and manage emerging material disorders in their domestic spaces, this study adopted a qualitative research design informed by the photo-elicitation technique (Heisley & Levy, 1991). Photo-elicitation involves the integration of participant-generated photographs with non-directive interviews prompted by those images (Dion, 2007; Holbrook, 2005). As Harper (2002) notes, images often evoke deeper layers of meaning than words, making photo-elicitation particularly valuable for exploring consumers' lived experiences. This is relevant to our study of material disorder in consumer homes, where experiences are routinised, emotionally charged and difficult to articulate abstractly. Accordingly, asking informants to document instances of material disorder visually and subsequently using these images as memory aids and interpretive anchors enhanced participant engagement and elicited more in-depth narratives (Stewart & Floyd, 2004). This study restricts its focus to material disorder in consumer homes for two reasons. First, consumers' homes represent an important site for material culture studies (Miller, 2021). Second, it represents an intersection of private and social spheres (Martin-Matthews, 2007), offering an ideal setting in which to observe and analyse the negotiation of order and disorder. To maintain cultural consistency, the study was limited to participants residing in New Zealand. Furthermore, only one individual per household was interviewed. Prior research supports this approach for examining collective phenomena, as individual accounts can illuminate relational dynamics and the negotiation of family identity (Edirisingha et al., 2022; Epp & Price, 2008). Focusing on individual sense-making processes, therefore, captures how tidiness and disorder are negotiated within the family's internal logic.

Data collection

Participants were recruited via a flyer initially posted on the author's LinkedIn profile and subsequently shared across additional social media platforms (e.g. Facebook) by members of the author's LinkedIn network. This dissemination strategy broadened exposure beyond the author's predominantly academic contacts, yielding a sample composed primarily of working- and middle-class New Zealand citizens. Moreover, some informants had diverse ancestral origins but self-identified primarily as New Zealanders; thus, the sample was treated as a culturally cohesive group. Over 3 months, 22 informants were selected using purposive sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In alignment with the study's theoretical emphasis on material disorder as a lived and dynamically managed phenomenon within shared spaces, recruitment targeted individuals residing in multi-member households, including couples, families with children and intergenerational arrangements. This sampling approach enabled close examination of tidying practices as they unfold relationally in collective domestic environments, rather than in isolation. Selection criteria prioritised informants who were primarily responsible for tidying the house and keeping it organised on an ongoing basis. Therefore, individuals who did not regularly

participate in keeping their home tidy were excluded. This study received formal ethical approval from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) (reference number: 23/277). All participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research, its intended academic dissemination and their voluntary involvement. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and all data were processed in anonymised form. They also provided consent for the publication of anonymised findings, including any photographs shared with the researcher.

Informants were instructed to take 10 photographs of their homes, five depicting messy spaces and five showcasing tidy spaces. They were free to take photographs using their mobile phones or a camera of their choice. No instructions were provided regarding which rooms, angles or objects to photograph. This open framing was intentional, to capture subjective perceptions of un/tidiness, acknowledging that material disorder is a subjective construct 'in the eye of the beholder' (Douglas, 1967, p. 24). Participants were given 2 weeks to complete this task and email their images to the author ahead of their scheduled interviews. In several cases, participants submitted more than 10 photographs or provided images of the same space in both tidy and untidy states, offering additional insight into the temporal and spatial dimensions of tidiness routines. Table 1 provides a detailed description of the informants' profiles.

Following the submission of photographs, the author conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant online via MS Teams. The interviews ranged from 50 minutes to 1 hour and 35 minutes. Interviews began with a brief explanation of the study's aims and ethical assurances. Using the screen-sharing

Table 1. Profile of informants.

Pseudonym	Occupation	Age bracket	Household Type	Household Size
Delaney	Full-time Household Manager	55–60	Married couple + 3 dependent children	5
Ruby	Full-time Lecturer	30–35	Married couple	2
Jessie	Full-time Office applications manager	30–35	Married couple + 1 dependent child	3
Hallie	PhD student/working part-time	25–30	Cohabiting couple	2
William	Full-time Vice President	40–45	Married couple + 1 dependent child	3
Mabel	Full-time Teacher	30–35	Married couple	2
Alice	Graphic designer/freelancer	50–55	Married couple	2
Dina	Full-time Lecturer	50–55	Married couple	2
Leo	Full-time QA analyst	40–45	Cohabiting couple + 2 dependent children	4
Yana	Full-time Professor	60–65	Single adult	1
Myra	PhD student/working part-time	25–30	Cohabiting couple	2
Lesley	Full-time Strategic Advisor	50–55	Cohabiting couple	2
Jean	Full-time Vet	30–35	Married couple	2
Jack	Full-time Associate Professor	40–45	Cohabiting couple	2
Mary	Full-time Senior lecturer	35–40	Married couple + 2 dependent children	4
Nora	Full-time Senior lecturer	35–40	Married couple + 1 dependent child	3
Faye	Full-time Coordinator	30–35	Cohabiting couple	2
Callie	Full-time Senior lecturer	55–60	Married couple	2
Abby	Full-time Lecturer	30–35	Married couple + 1 dependent child	3
Penny	Full-time Teacher	30–35	Cohabiting couple	2
Rose	Retired	55–60	Married couple	2
Trudy	Retired	60–65	Married couple	2

Note: Pseudonyms have also been used for all non-participants of this study.

function in MS Teams, the author displayed each photograph individually and invited informants to engage in a categorisation exercise (Beilin, 2005; Heisley & Levy, 1991), asking them to label each image as either 'tidy' or 'messy' and to explain the reasoning behind their classifications. This was followed by open-ended questions aimed at eliciting narratives surrounding their tidiness practices, emotional responses to disorder and the involvement of household members. The photo-elicitation method provided a powerful narrative framework for participants to articulate their feelings and practices (Heisley & Levy, 1991; Holbrook, 2005). While initial discussions were anchored in the photographed scenes, participants often moved beyond them to reflect on broader patterns and contextual comparisons across other areas of their homes. This approach facilitated a holistic, emic understanding of home tidiness practices (Agar, 2011; Hirsch, 2007).

Data analysis

Consistent with the principles of interpretive qualitative research, the analysis was conducted iteratively to allow for the emergence of contextually grounded insights (Belk et al., 2013). To navigate between emic understandings and etic interpretations (Morris et al., 1999), the author followed McCracken's (1988) recommendation to begin with a literal reading of individual accounts before gradually moving towards a more holistic synthesis across the dataset. Therefore, the initial phase involved the development of codes through close and repeated reading of interview transcripts, with particular attention paid to participants' narrative interpretations of their photographs. The coding process focused on understanding how consumers perceived and diagnosed material disorder, the actions they undertook to manage it and the factors that influenced their decisions to either address the disorder immediately or tolerate it over time.

Thematic coding was conducted iteratively until theoretical saturation was achieved, marked by the absence of new insights (Goulding, 2005). Through this iterative and interpretive process, the analysis produced a progressively refined understanding of how consumers interpret and respond to material disorder within their domestic spaces.

Findings

Domestic spaces usually contain items that are out of place, yet not all instances of material disorder are experienced as symbolic pollution. As Dion et al. (2014) observe, only certain forms of disorder are perceived as symbolic pollution and thus prompt efforts to restore order. Building on this insight, our findings identify three interrelated mechanisms that shape how disorder is interpreted and when it shifts from being tolerated to symbolic pollution: consumers' perceived control over their domestic environment, the symbolic elasticity of domestic spaces and family dynamics. Together, these mechanisms shape consumers' interpretations of material disorder, determining whether disorder remains a tolerated background condition or becomes reclassified as symbolic pollution that requires intervention. The following sections unpack the operation of these mechanisms within everyday domestic settings.

Material disorder and control-restoration

Consumers' interpretation of material disorder and its transition to symbolic pollution are shaped by their perceived capacity to exercise control over domestic environments. Prior research demonstrates that individuals have a fundamental need to maintain control over their surroundings (Kelly George, 1955; White, 1959) and that environmental disorder undermines this sense of control (Chae & Zhu, 2014; Glass & Singer, 1972), generating discomfort and triggering tidying practices aimed at restoring order (Cutright, 2012). Extending this work, and consistent with Dion et al.'s (2014) distinction between disorder and symbolic pollution, our findings reveal that disorder does not become symbolic pollution simply because it violates classificatory schemes as conceptualised by Douglas (1967). Rather, it becomes symbolic pollution when it reaches a point that disrupts consumers' ability to carry out, anticipate and sustain routine domestic practices. At this point, disorder shifts from a tolerated background condition to an intrusive state that necessitates restoring actions.

We identify two interrelated mechanisms through which this tipping point is reached. First, the accumulation of material disorder gradually erodes consumers' capacity to manage domestic spaces, pushing disorder beyond a level that can be backgrounded and transforming it into a material interference with everyday routines. Second, even in the absence of accumulation, disorder can become symbolic pollution when its temporal boundaries are unclear. For example, when its duration or resolution lacks temporal structure, it disrupts consumers' ability to anticipate and structure domestic activity, thereby undermining a sense of environmental mastery. Together, these mechanisms reveal when and how material disorder shifts from being tolerated background conditions to symbolic pollution, rather than assuming that all instances of 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 1967) are equally disruptive.

Accumulation of material disorder

Our findings show that minor disorders arising from the in-and-out flux of objects that support daily routines are often tolerated by consumers. However, as disorder gradually accumulates and escalates into a 'crisis' situation (Dion et al., 2014, p. 580), it becomes increasingly difficult to tolerate. Accumulation transforms disorder from a manageable background condition into a material obstruction that interferes with routine activities, signalling a loss of control and prompting efforts to restore order. Abby's account of her kitchen counter and Jessie's reflection on her kitchen pantry illustrate this dynamic.

Abby: *So, this is a photo of my kitchen counter, . . . I took this photo as a messy one. I haven't cleaned it up after that. So, as you can see, there is nothing in any kind of organisational system*.

Interviewer: '*And how often do you tidy up your kitchen counter?*'

Abby: *I think maybe two to three times a week, if I have time. But if I have some deadlines to meet, I'd say once a week . . . ., there is a tipping point if it just becomes too crowded, too cramped and too many items on the counter, then I wouldn't wait till cleaning day to do it, I would just do it straight away*.

Jessie: *I think initially, because it's not gonna get super untidy all at once. I think in terms of it getting untidy, it's a progression where, you know, one thing gets messed up and then another one and then another one, and then eventually it piles up. So, I think if it's just like a little bit untidy, I will let it be. And then when it reaches a point where I start to feel like it's really messy*, [for example] *I'm trying to put something in her* [my daughter] *lunchbox, and then I'm digging through stuff, then that's when I'll start fixing it up.*

Abby's narration (Figure 1) illustrates how material disorder remains tolerated as long as her sense of control over the space is not threatened. Although she characterises her kitchen counter as 'messy' and lacking 'any kind of organisational system', this condition does not initially demand intervention. Instead, Abby manages disorder through established organising rhythms, tidying 'two to three times a week' or less frequently during busy periods. Disorder is thus tolerated not because it is unnoticed, but because it remains manageable and temporally contained within her organisational practices. However, Abby identifies a distinct threshold beyond which accumulation becomes intolerable. When items render the counter 'too crowded' and 'too cramped', disorder ceases to be compatible with her sense of environmental mastery. At this point, she abandons scheduled routines and intervenes 'straight away'. This moment marks the reclassification of disorder from a manageable background condition into symbolic pollution, an intrusion that signals a loss of control and necessitates immediate ordering action.

Jessie's account (Figure 1) similarly demonstrates how the accumulation of material disorder transforms disorder into a control-threatening condition. She describes the disorder in her pantry as emerging, 'one thing gets messed up and then another', and remaining tolerable when it is not escalated and therefore does not interfere with her everyday practices. However, once accumulation reaches a level where it interrupts routine activities, such as preparing her child's lunchbox and having to dig 'through stuff', disorder becomes experientially disruptive. At this juncture, material disorder is no longer tolerated because it undermines her competence and efficiency in care practices. The decision to 'start fixing it up' reflects an effort to reassert control through restoring order. It is this erosion of perceived control rather than physical misplacement itself that reconfigures material disorder as symbolic pollution and triggers tidying practices to restore order.

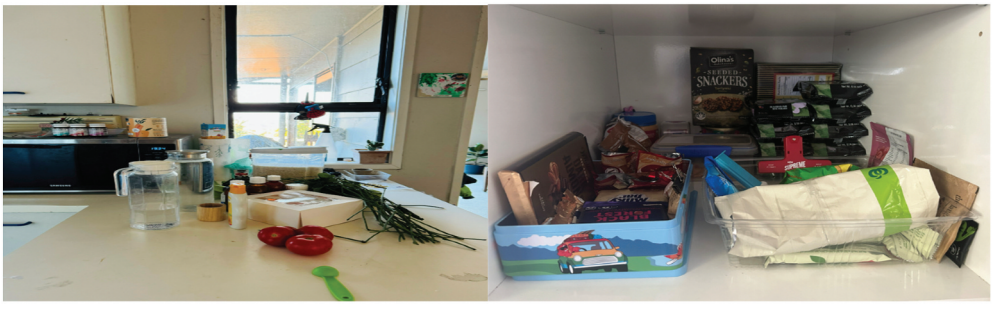

Figure 1. Abby's kitchen; Jessie's kitchen pantry.

Temporal orientation of disorder

Beyond material accumulation, our findings show that the temporal orientation of disorder plays a central role in shaping how consumers interpret material disorder. Prior research portrays disorder as an inevitable feature of everyday life with objects, characterised by cyclical patterns of emergence, provisional resolution through tidying practices and subsequent re-emergence as objects continue to circulate within the household (Dion et al., 2014; Filiod, 2003; Gregson, 2007). Within this view, disorder is persistently recurring, rather than being a stable condition. Building on the temporal dimension of disorder, we demonstrate that disorder remains tolerable when consumers can anticipate its duration and resolution, allowing it to be framed as a contained and reversible deviation from symbolic order. This temporal anchoring sustains a sense of agency and control. By contrast, when disorder lacks a clear temporal endpoint, for instance, due to uncertainty about its duration, recurrence or resolution, it acquires a temporally unbounded character that undermines consumers' ability to anticipate and govern their domestic environments. So when the temporal dimension of disorder remains unclear, it is reinterpreted as symbolic pollution and prompts ordering interventions. This dynamic is evident in Hallie's account of her living room and echoed across other informants, including Lesley and Ruby.

Hallie: *there's like, the basket of fruit, which we were going to* [take it to] *a friend's house . . . sometimes, like, you don't see it now, but sometimes we come in, and we throw our jackets down . . . and actually it bothers me when the coats are on the little kind of lounge area without the pillows. And I feel like it's not tidy, and then I need to put them in the closet . . . . and like the laptop and the cords kind of bother me, like I don't like the cords. I find the cords untidy . . . it actually does kind of like grind a bit, but I'm just like, well, it's just for now, right? It's not half an hour, but I mean, until we get a better apartment.*

Interviewer: *'Why can you tolerate the presence of the cords and fruit basket but not the coat?'*

Hallie: *I have a time frame in my head of when it will be gone. But let's say my partner comes in, and he puts his coat down, and forgets about it. I don't know if he's going to remember in five to 10 minutes or in like, three days. And I don't know when he's going to use it again, right? Like, if it's like warm or he doesn't leave the house for a day or two, and it's just there for a day or two, like that.*

Lesley: *his paperwork is on the table, and it's not tidy. Like, you know, in this photo, it's very tidy and nice. But then he leaves his paperwork on the table to fill them out . . . . it does bother me sometimes if it's for longer than a couple of days. I don't like that there because he also has an office, so he can keep all that sort of stuff in his office. I don't tell him about it, I will just put it away.*

Ruby: *It* [hair tie] *annoys me the most about tidying. My husband and I both have long hair, and so we have a ton of hair ties, and he will just leave them scattered throughout the house. So it's a very little thing, but with two people with long hair, as the week progresses, there just appear to be hair ties all over every surface . . . he would take his hair tie off and place it on the yoga mat or on the bench or on the bed, and so there just tends to always be hair ties lying around.*

Hallie's account of her living room (Figure 2) illustrates how temporal anchoring enables the tolerance of otherwise disturbing disorder. She identifies several sources of disorder, including messy cords, a fruit basket and a coat placed on the couch that she finds aesthetically displeasing. Yet she differentiates between those she can tolerate and those she cannot. The difference, as she explains, lies not in the severity or visibility of the items but in their temporal orientation. The cords, while aesthetically displeasing, are interpreted as a necessary and temporarily anchored compromise. They will remain only 'until we get a better apartment'. Similarly, the fruit basket is tied to a specific forthcoming social activity. These material disorders are tolerated because Hallie holds clear expectations about when and how they will be resolved. However, the coat that is left out of place and identified as a disturbing disorder lacks such temporal anchoring. As she notes, she 'doesn't know if he's [her partner] going to remember in five to ten minutes or in like, three days [to move it to its proper place]'. This temporal ambiguity disrupts her ability to forecast the organisation of the space and undermines her sense of control. As a result, the coat is reinterpreted as symbolic pollution, and its being out of place is no longer tolerated. Here, even a minor instance of disorder becomes symbolic pollution because it resists temporal containment and threatens Hallie's perceived mastery of the domestic environment.

Echoing Hallie's account, Lesley's and Ruby's experiences further demonstrate that disorder becomes symbolic pollution when its temporal boundaries can no longer be anticipated or contained. Lesley initially tolerates her partner's paperwork on the dining table while it is tied to an ongoing task, but once it remains 'longer than a couple of days', the disorder loses its temporal justification. The failure to resolve it within the expected timeframe, despite a more appropriate location being available, reclassifies the paperwork as disruptive and prompts her to intervene. Similarly, Ruby (Figure 3) experiences her husband's hair ties as polluting not due to accumulation, but because of their unpredictable recurrence across domestic spaces. Their repeated and spatially uncertain reappearance prevents Ruby from cognitively stabilising the disorder, undermining her sense of control. In both cases, disorder shifts from a temporally bounded, tolerable deviation to an uncontainable presence, necessitating tidying action.

Figure 2. Hallie's living room.

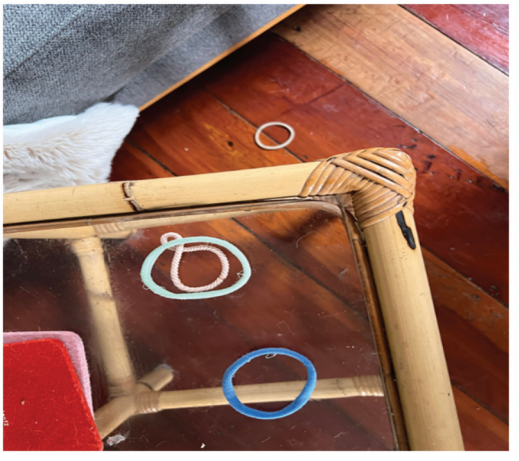

Figure 3. Ruby's coffee table.

Taken together, the accumulation and temporal orientation of material disorder operate as interlinked mechanisms shaping the meaning of disorder and its transition to symbolic pollution. Accumulation renders disorder problematic when it escalates into a 'crisis event' (Dion et al., 2014), disrupting routine activities and undermining individuals' sense of control (Chae & Zhu, 2014). Similarly, disorder can be reclassified as symbolic pollution not due to intensity or volume, but when temporal ambiguity prevents consumers from anticipating its resolution, threatening their sense of control. In both cases, disorder becomes symbolic pollution not simply because objects are 'out of place' (Douglas, 1967), but because they challenge consumers' capacity to manage and stabilise their domestic spaces. This relationship between disorder and perceived control explains why certain disorders escalate into symbolic pollution, while others remain tolerable.

Material disorder and symbolic elasticity of the domestic space

Material disorder is not interpreted uniformly across the home. Rather, our findings reveal that the toleration of disorder and its transition to symbolic pollution depend on the symbolic elasticity of domestic spaces, which shifts as spaces move between states of activity and idleness. Prior research demonstrates that domestic spaces actively manage the boundaries between order and disorder, with marginal areas such as garages, attics or so-called asshole rooms (Gollnhofer et al., 2025, p. 403) functioning as cooling, liminal or transitional zones that contain disorder and facilitate the desacralisation of possessions (Hirschman et al., 2012; Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005; McCracken, 1986, 1988). Extending this work beyond marginal storage zones, we introduce symbolic elasticity to capture the degree to which everyday domestic spaces can accommodate material disorder without compromising their symbolic integrity. Spaces structured around ongoing activity and rapid temporal turnover, such as kitchens, dining tables and living areas, exhibit high symbolic elasticity, allowing disorder to be interpreted as temporary and therefore tolerated. By contrast, spaces oriented towards display and symbolic representation,

such as guest rooms, decorative shelves or curated corners, exhibit symbolic rigidity, where even minor disorder is interpreted as symbolic pollution. This dynamic is illustrated in the narrations of Mabel, Jessie and Jean.

Mabel: *This is the bookshelf that David* [my husband] *sometimes gets messy. There's a little spot on the top shelf next to the plant where he would put his keys, cards or ring. But that one I put it away quickly because I like this space to be just tidy . . . so I will put it away in another space; I will move it to the dining table.*

Interviewer: '*Why is that*?'

Mabel: *I think because these are more permanent things and they just stay there, so I feel like this space shouldn't get messy. Whereas the dining table we use it. We change things like we obviously have dinner there sometimes. And we put our dishes there, like we use it more. Whereas this* [bookshelf], *is like permanent. That space has more things happening on it, whereas this is supposed to be predictable, like it's just how it is. I don't like it when something else comes there that doesn't fit. I need to move it off. . . . because it's neat and the things are organised in a way that is aesthetically pleasing to me. I feel like it's showcasing something, like it has sentimental things, like our photos or things related to our wedding gifts and stuff. So I think that's why I feel like I want to keep it at a better standard.*

Jean: *like a little sitting area/ my office, and it's right when you come in through the door, and it's pretty messy. I've got books everywhere, a computer, plants, ukulele. Um, and probably too many chairs for the area, but we need them. It's cluttered . . . and we share the office . . . Um, it is a multi-purpose office*

Jessie: *This will be one of the untidy photos. Everything is just all over the place. This is where the power strip is. So that's where we would normally get stuff charged. That's just always like that . . . it's used a lot of [the time] by everyone. And so, someone will get something, and they just won't put it back the way it was. So, it's pretty much useless to tidy it . . .*

Mabel's account (Figure 4) provides a particularly clear contrast between two spaces: the dining table and the bookshelf. She characterises the dining table as a highly active space where there are 'more things happening on it', including eating, placing dishes and temporarily setting down objects. The meaning of this space is inseparable from its temporal organisation: it is designed for repeated use, continual turnover and the short-term circulation of objects. As a result, material disorder in this space is anticipated and interpreted as transient. Items placed on the dining table are expected to move on, be cleared or be replaced as part of the ongoing rhythm of daily practices. The functionality of this space affords it a high degree of symbolic elasticity, allowing it to accommodate disorder without threatening its symbolic integrity.

In contrast, Mabel frames the bookshelf as an idle, predictable and symbolically charged space. She describes it as containing 'permanent things' that 'just stay there', including wedding gifts and family photographs. Unlike the dining table, the bookshelf is not organised around ongoing activity, but around stability, display and continuity. Its function as a curated showcase establishes a narrow temporal expectation: objects are meant to remain fixed and visually coherent over time. As a result, even minor disruptions,

Figure 4. Mabel's dining table and bookshelf.

such as keys or cards placed on the shelf, are experienced as incongruent and symbolic pollution. Mabel's immediate impulse to remove these items and relocate them to the dining table reflects the symbolic rigidity of the space. Disorder here is not tolerated because it violates the expectations of permanence and predictability that define the bookshelf's symbolic order.

Where Mabel's bookshelf exemplifies symbolic rigidity rooted in permanence and display, Jean's and Jessie's accounts (Figure 5) illustrate how spaces characterised by ongoing activity and temporal flux exhibit high symbolic elasticity. Jean describes her shared office and sitting area as a 'multi-purpose' space filled with books, computers, plants and instruments, where working, studying and shared use overlap. In this space, objects lack fixed locations and are continually repositioned in response to shifting needs, making disorder a functional outcome of everyday use rather than a deviation from order. Similarly, Jessie describes a heavily used surface around a power strip where 'everything is just all over the place' because the area is shared, frequently accessed and subject to constant interruption as 'someone will get something, and they just won't put it back'. Organised around accessibility rather than display, these spaces are defined by the continual emergence and disappearance of objects, rendering order both difficult to sustain and symbolically misaligned with their purpose. In both cases, disorder is tolerated because it aligns with the functional and temporal logic of highly elastic domestic spaces.

Our findings further reveal that symbolic elasticity is not always a fixed property of space, but it could be a temporally fluid condition that shifts as domestic practices unfold throughout the day. For instance, some domestic spaces move through anticipated phases of activity and idleness, which shape how material disorder is interpreted and managed. Consequently,

Figure 5. Jean's sitting area/office; Jessie's corner of her living room.

symbolic elasticity is not inherent to a space but is continuously recalibrated as spaces transition between use and non-use. This dynamic is illustrated in Leo's account of his kitchen.

Leo: *You know*, [there are] *these phases in the house as we go through the day. And if I know we're going from a really active to a more passive phase, [for example], maybe we're all going to move into the lounge and watch something on TV or something like that, I will try to tidy up the space before we go and do that, because I know that* [otherwise] *I'm gonna get a lot of bang for that. You know, if I'm going to tidy it all up and it'll basically just be clean for the rest of the evening. Whereas if earlier in the day you know if I've made breakfast, but it's the weekend and everyone is there, I know from experience that a lot of people are going to use the space and so there's not necessarily a lot of point in devoting a lot of effort into tidying it as much because it's just gonna get messy again*.

Leo (Figure 6) describes the kitchen as moving through 'phases' over the day, alternating between periods of intense activity and relative idleness. During active phases such as mornings or weekends, when multiple household members are preparing food, material disorder is perceived as inevitable and largely inconsequential. As Leo explains, when the kitchen is in constant use, 'there's not necessarily a lot of point in devoting a lot of effort' to tidying because disorder is expected to re-emerge. In these moments, the kitchen exhibits high symbolic elasticity: disorder is tolerated because it aligns with the space's functional and temporal demands.

This interpretation shifts as Leo anticipates a transition into a more idle phase. When the household prepares to move into the lounge for the evening, he becomes motivated to restore order, noting that tidying at this point yields 'a lot of bang' because the kitchen will 'basically just be clean for the rest of the evening'. As the space ceases to host ongoing activity, previously tolerated disorder is reclassified as symbolic pollution requiring resolution. Leo's account thus demonstrates that the transformation of disorder into symbolic pollution is shaped by the fluid and prospective symbolic elasticity of domestic spaces. Consistent with prior research framing domestic order as temporally situated rather than static (Cwerner & Metcalfe, 2003;

Figure 6. Leo's kitchen.

Filiod, 2003), disorder is evaluated in relation to whether a space is expected to remain active or settle into idleness.

Taken together, these accounts show that the toleration of material disorder and its reclassification as symbolic pollution are shaped by the symbolic elasticity of domestic spaces, produced through how spaces are oriented towards use and how these orientations shift over time. Building on prior work highlighting the role of domestic spaces in mediating boundaries between order and disorder (Hirschman et al., 2012; McCracken, 1986, 1988), we show that this mediation is not limited to specific rooms or storage zones but occurs across everyday domestic environments. Spaces embedded in ongoing use or short-term engagement afford greater symbolic elasticity, allowing disorder to be interpreted as temporary and functional. In contrast, spaces oriented towards continuity, display or anticipated idleness exhibit symbolic rigidity, where even minor disruptions are experienced as symbolic pollution.

Material disorder and family dynamics

Our findings reveal that the meaning of material disorder and its transition to symbolic pollution are also shaped by family dynamics. Prior research demonstrates that family roles, responsibilities and relational interactions structure domestic practices and engagements with material objects (Epp & Price, 2008; Li et al., 2019). Building on this work, we show that family dynamics are central to how material disorder is interpreted, tolerated and addressed in everyday family life. Rather than being merely evaluated against abstract norms of order (Douglas, 1967), disorder is assessed through ongoing relational processes within the household. Material disorder is often tolerated when perceived to

support family integrity, for example, by fostering togetherness, enabling caregiving or reducing interpersonal tension. In such instances, disorder is not experienced as symbolic pollution but as a practical condition that allows family life to proceed smoothly. Conversely, a tolerated disorder can shift into symbolic pollution when it threatens family integrity by challenging family identity or becomes a source of tension among members. In these moments, disorder is interpreted as symbolic pollution and triggers efforts to restore order. The role of family dynamics in shaping the meaning of disorder and its transition to symbolic pollution is illustrated in the narratives of the following informants:

Alice: *that is how it usually looks . . . and the next one* [kitchen's photo], *without anything, which is my ideal . . . how I would like it to be. But I just compromised in the middle with Liam* [Alice's husband] *. . . you know, my ideal would be to have nothing, as I said, except the board . . . . but, you know, that corner with the olives and the spices and things is more Liam, because he's the cook at home . . . so for me, it would be ideal to not have those on that corner. But that's my compromise with Liam, because he's more comfortable, and it just makes sense also to have everything handy*.

Leo: *This jumper is interesting, because that is my daughter, being much tidier than normal. Again, not ideal, but I get it. It hasn't been put away. It's not in her room. But instead of just throwing it on the floor, she has put it on the back of the chair. So, I regard that as a win. I don't even know what category in the hierarchy of tidy I put this in, but it's something like other people learning to be tidy, and therefore I will leave it in the space because . . . I wouldn't want her to see me taking it away. And then going ah, you know, I didn't do a good job.*

Dina: *. . . my husband gets a bit annoyed, because he says, you only put what you want there* [bookshelf]. *I want to put my stuff here as well. So, he thinks that I'm more dominant at putting only my stuff there, so I don't like him to think that way. So sometimes that's when I give up. Okay, just put whatever you want there, and I'll just keep it.*

Alice's narrative (Figure 7) demonstrates how tidying practices are relationally organised and oriented towards sustaining familial relationships rather than merely achieving an idealised state of order. Although she describes her preferred kitchen as minimalist – characterised by clear surfaces and concealed objects – she tolerates the presence of spices and cooking items on the counter. This tolerance stems from her recognition of Liam's role as the primary cook; keeping spices accessible

Figure 7. Alice's kitchen.

supports his meal preparation and signals respect for his contribution to household life. As Alice explains, this arrangement represents a 'compromise', through which she negotiates competing ideals of order and relational care. Consistent with Epp and Price's (2008) argument that household practices are co-constructed through relational accommodation, the untidy corner is tolerated because it supports Alice's relational accomplishment that sustains spousal comfort and affirms role-based identities within the household.

Similarly, both Leo's and Dina's accounts illustrate how material disorder is evaluated through its relational implications rather than against abstract standards of tidiness. In Leo's case (Figure 8), the jumper placed on the back of a chair constitutes disorder when evaluated against conventional standards of order. Yet Leo interprets this placement relationally, situating it within his daughter's ongoing learning of tidying practices. By recognising it as an improvement, 'instead of just throwing it on the floor, she has put it on the back of the chair', he reframes disorder as a partial achievement. Tolerating this disorder allows Leo to communicate encouragement and reinforces the pedagogical dimensions of everyday family practices (Epp & Velagaleti, 2014).

Dina's narrative likewise frames disorder through relational considerations, though in this case, shaped by concerns of equity and power within a spousal relationship. The bookshelf, a space associated with display and symbolic representation, becomes a contested site when her husband challenges her unilateral curation of it. Allowing his belongings onto the shelf generates disorder relative to her aesthetic ideal, yet she tolerates it to avoid appearing dominant or unfair. By giving up control and allowing her husband to place 'whatever you want there', Dina reinterprets disorder as a necessary concession to preserve relational balance and mutual recognition. As prior research suggests, domestic spaces often function as arenas where power, inclusion and legitimacy are negotiated through material arrangements (Epp & Price, 2008). In both cases, tolerating disorder becomes a relational strategy through which care, encouragement and inclusion are materially enacted.

Figure 8. Leo's dining table.

While individuals may tolerate material disorder to sustain relational harmony and mitigate interpersonal tensions, our findings show that such tolerance is conditional and fragile. Disorder that is initially tolerated can be reclassified as symbolic pollution when it threatens the family's projected identity or becomes a source of tension among family members. This dynamic is illustrated in our following informants' accounts.

Mary: *So this is the kitchen. Um, this is really tidy for the kitchen . . . I get frustrated with these [cooking spices] on the bench. I like them in the pantry, but my husband says that they need to be there for cooking. I guess I compromise a little bit. I put them away sometimes if we have guests come over, I put those away.*

Leo: *As long as it stays inside the room, I'm gonna be pretty lenient. If anyone starts yelling or complaining, you know that they've impaled themselves on a piece of Lego or if they start arguing to each other because their stuff is getting into each other's zone. You know, I might step in and tell them you need to tidy it up so that you're not annoying each other or annoying yourself. But otherwise, let them go for it.*

Mary's account (Figure 9) illustrates how tolerated disorder can escalate into symbolic pollution when it threatens the family's projected identity. In everyday contexts, the spices on her kitchen counter are tolerated as a means of supporting domestic cooperation, affirming her husband's role and minimising spousal tension. However, the meaning of this disorder shifts when it jeopardises the family's desired presentation. As Mary explains, 'If we have guests come over, I put those away'. In this moment, the spices are no longer evaluated for their role of supporting family integrity, but for what they symbolically communicate about the family. What was previously acceptable is re-evaluated as symbolic pollution because it risks signalling disorderliness and domestic inadequacy, thereby misaligning with the family's desired identity. Consistent with research on household identity construction (R. W. Belk, 1988; Goffman, 1959), disorder becomes problematic not because of its material presence per se, but because it threatens the family's social image and collective self-presentation.

Figure 9. Mary's kitchen.

Material disorder also shifts into symbolic pollution when it disrupts internal family dynamics by generating tension or signalling a failure of role expectations. Leo's account of his children's room shows that disorder is provisionally tolerated as long as it remains contained and does not undermine relational harmony. While he is 'pretty lenient' when mess 'stays inside the room', he intervenes when disorder produces conflict, complaints or injury. In this context, disorder becomes problematic not because it violates abstract standards of tidiness, but because it signals a breakdown in relational balance and self-regulation. Once disorder disrupts coexistence, it is reinterpreted as symbolic pollution that demands tidying action.

Taken together, our findings demonstrate that the meaning of material disorder is also shaped through family relationships. Consistent with prior research showing that family roles, responsibilities and interactions organise domestic practices and material arrangements (Epp & Price, 2008; Li et al., 2019), we show that material disorder is often tolerated when it sustains family integrity. However, the tolerated disorder is reinterpreted as symbolic pollution when it threatens relational balance and jeopardises the collective identity the family seeks to uphold.

Discussion

This study advances a nuanced understanding of symbolic pollution by distinguishing between everyday material disorder and instances that escalate into symbolic pollution. Our findings theorise the mechanisms underlying this shift, highlighting how consumers' perceived sense of control, the symbolic elasticity of domestic spaces and family dynamics collectively shape the interpretation of disorder and determine when it prompts tidying interventions. Specifically, our work makes three interrelated theoretical contributions.

Our findings contribute to reconceptualising symbolic pollution as a spatio-temporal phenomenon, rather than a purely spatial violation of classificatory systems. Consumer research has long drawn on Douglas's (1967) notion of pollution as 'matter out of place', emphasising spatial misalignment of objects or clutter as a source of symbolic pollution (Ger & Yenicioglu, 2004; Gollnhofer et al., 2025; Ross et al., 2021). This spatial framing has been highly productive, yet it remains incomplete. Subsequent work has shown that material disorder is not inherently polluting and may be tolerated depending on situational risks and contextual issues (Dion et al., 2014). However, across these accounts, the temporal dimension of disorder remains largely implicit or backgrounded.

Building on Woermann and Rokka's (2015) conceptualisation of temporality as a lived and rhythmic experience, we demonstrate that temporality is central to how consumers interpret disorder and decide when it escalates into symbolic pollution requiring action. Disorder is evaluated not only by where objects are located, but by how long they persist, whether their presence is perceived as temporary or open-ended, and how well they align with domestic rhythms (e.g. active versus idle phases). Uncertainty about when disorder will be resolved, as in Hallie's living room (Figure 2), or perceptions that it has lingered beyond its appropriate phase, as in Lesley's dining table, render disorder intolerable. Symbolic pollution thus emerges not primarily by material excess or spatial misplacement per se (Dion et al., 2014; Gollnhofer et al., 2025; Ross et al., 2021), but from violations of temporal expectations. For example, a misplaced object may be tolerated during active

phases such as cooking, yet becomes polluting when it lingers into periods of idleness, signalling a failure to restore order in rhythm with household life.

By foregrounding these spatio-temporal dynamics, we extend the ontology of symbolic pollution from spatial misplacement to spatio-temporal violation. This ontological shift in conceptualising symbolic pollution helps us better explain variation in tolerance thresholds that purely spatial accounts struggle to capture. Moreover, it integrates temporality as a key mechanism through which consumers evaluate material disorder. Finally, it extends attention from ordering as the management of objects to ordering as the management of time, rhythm and anticipation in everyday consumption practices (Dion et al., 2014; Douglas, 1967; Woermann & Rokka, 2015). This reconceptualisation also has practical implications. For example, professional organising services and household product designers may be more effective when they introduce time-based organising frameworks (e.g. rhythm-sensitive routines or reset cycles) that signal temporality, rather than relying solely on storage optimisation or volume reduction. More broadly, policy and regulatory approaches that rely on snapshot assessments of domestic order may benefit from distinguishing persistent disorder from temporally functional disorder, thereby avoiding moralised evaluations of everyday household practices.

Our work further uncovers the relational and collective nature of symbolic pollution, challenging accounts that frame it solely as a structural transgression of classificatory systems (Douglas, 1967) or as an individually negotiated response shaped by contextual risks and issues (Dion et al., 2014). While these perspectives illuminate macro-social logics and micro-level coping strategies, they devote limited attention to the intersubjective processes through which meanings of disorder are co-produced in shared living environments (Epp & Price, 2008). Drawing on family consumer research that positions the home as a site of negotiated identity and role coordination (Edirisingha et al., 2026; Epp & Price, 2008, 2010), our findings demonstrate that interpretations of disorder are shaped through family roles, relational expectations and collective identity goals. Specifically, meanings of 'out of place' objects are intersubjectively negotiated through family roles (e.g. parental education role, as in Leo's interaction with his daughter's jumper, see Figure 8), relational expectations (e.g. Alice (see Figure 7) and Dina's kitchen and bookshelf arrangements) and collective identity goals (e.g. Mary's kitchen arrangement when expecting visitors, see Figure 9). Objects that might violate classificatory norms are tolerated when they support relational harmony or shared identity projects but are designated as symbolic pollution when they threaten relational integrity or the projection of an ideal family identity. By shifting symbolic pollution from a purely classificatory (Douglas, 1967) or individual contextualisation (Dion et al., 2014) to a relational and intersubjective outcome, this study explains why tolerance varies even in the absence of changing situational risks. This insight complements the spatio-temporal reconceptualisation above, positioning symbolic pollution as a negotiated outcome of shared domestic life. For managers and service designers, this suggests that interventions addressing disorder should move beyond individualised responsibility and instead support coordination and shared agreement around tolerance thresholds, timing and roles, particularly in multigenerational, care-intensive or co-living households.

Finally, our findings extend the liquid consumption theory (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017) by theorising how consumers actively negotiate the boundaries between liquid and solid

consumption through the symbolic elasticity and material disorder. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) conceptualise consumption as a spectrum ranging from solid modes (enduring, ownership-based, material) to liquid modes (ephemeral, access-based, dematerialised), while recognising hybrid forms and contextual conditions that favour one mode over the other. Subsequent research has documented fluctuations and tensions in the coexistence of liquid and solid logics, such as desire-driven balancing in access-based consumption (Rosenberg et al., 2023) and negotiations of economic rigidities in globally mobile service relationships (Minina & Holmqvist, 2021). Also, recent calls have urged deeper exploration of the shifting roles and meanings of liquidity and solidity across diverse conditions and contexts (Atanasova et al., 2024).

We identify tolerance for material disorder as a key mechanism through which consumers enact and modulate liquid and solid consumption within domestic life. For instance, during active phases, such as meal preparation, consumers elevate their tolerance for disorder, loosening classificatory boundaries and treating objects as temporarily assembled, mobile and primarily valued for their immediate functional utility. In these moments, disorder is not experienced as symbolic pollution but as an enabling condition that supports fluidity, temporality and detachment; thereby constituting a situated enactment of liquidity within an otherwise ownership-based context. By contrast, when active phases give way to idleness, consumers withdraw tolerance for disorder and reclassify it as symbolic pollution. Through practices of tidying and reordering, they restore objects to 'proper' places, reasserting stability, durability, control and clear categorical boundaries. These reordering practices reinforce enduring material arrangements and produce situated enactments of solidity.

By foregrounding disorder tolerance and tidying as mechanisms through which these shifts are accomplished, this study extends liquid consumption theory by refraining liquidity and solidity as practice-based accomplishments rather than inherent properties of consumption forms. Rather than treating liquid and solid consumption as relatively stable modes tied to particular market configurations, our findings show how consumers actively produce and negotiate these modes through everyday boundary work. In this way, liquidity and solidity emerge as dynamically enacted and continuously negotiated within mundane practices, shifting the analytical focus from when these modes occur to how they are situationally performed within enduring ownership contexts. The domestic sphere thus emerges as a key site where the boundaries of liquidity and solidity are continually accomplished and contested through practices of disorder and order.

Limitations and future research directions

While this study provides a nuanced understanding of how material disorder transitions into symbolic pollution, several limitations offer opportunities for future research. First, the study focused on single informants per household, which captures individual sensemaking but may not fully reflect the diversity of perspectives within family units. Future research could adopt multi-informant or ethnographic approaches to explore the negotiation of disorder across household members and generational perspectives. Second, the study was conducted within a specific cultural and socio-economic context. Given that domestic norms, family dynamics and consumption practices vary cross-culturally, comparative research could examine how spatio-temporal interpretations of disorder and

tolerance thresholds differ across cultural and social settings. Third, while this research highlights the relational and temporal dimensions of symbolic pollution, it relies on qualitative data from photo-elicitation interviews, capturing subjective experiences rather than long-term behavioural patterns. Longitudinal or diary-based studies could investigate how the liquid–solid boundaries and tolerance for disorder evolve over time, particularly in households experiencing life-course transitions such as child-rearing, cohabitation or relocation. Finally, future work could examine the implications of technological interventions and smart-home systems for managing disorder. By integrating temporally sensitive and relationally coordinated strategies, such technologies could support household negotiation of tolerance thresholds and contribute to the design of interventions that account for both spatio-temporal and social dynamics of domestic life.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Jamal Abarashi is a Lecturer in Marketing at the Auckland University of Technology Business School, New Zealand. His research draws on Consumer Culture Theory to explore everyday consumption practices, including collecting, gift-giving, social exchange , and home tidiness routines. His work examines how consumers create meanings and navigate everyday life through consumption practices.

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