



The upside of Mess: conceptualising (dis)order as a dynamic family resource

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how domestic (dis)order emerges as shifting states shaped by everyday socio-material interactions. Drawing on assemblage theory and photo-elicitation interviews with 22 households, we show how (dis)order develops through dynamic relations among family members, objects, spaces, and temporal rhythms. We identify three assemblage capacities—transient, functional, and conducive—that shape how disorder materialises and is understood, along with three corresponding management strategies: restoring, tolerating, and concealing. Beyond the home, these capacities extend assemblage theory by providing a transferable framework for theorising how assemblages generate distinct emergent states across consumer and marketplace contexts. Reconceptualising (dis)order as an emergent assemblage property rather than an individual shortcoming, the study reveals conditions under which mess serves as a productive resource supporting household flow, functional efficiency, and relational harmony. The study also offers practical implications for flexible storage design, functional mess zone identification, and organisation solutions that support family wellbeing.

1. Introduction

The global home organisation products market, valued at \$12 billion in 2022 and projected to reach \$15.9 billion by 2030 (Research and Markets, 2023), reflects an enduring cultural preoccupation with keeping homes tidy. We use tidiness and messiness interchangeably with material order and disorder, viewing these not as fixed conditions but as dynamic states that emerge through the rhythms of everyday domestic life. These temporal rhythms, such as the way families pace, sequence, and perform daily routines, shape the emergence and receding of tidiness and disorder over time. For example, material disorder is often a product of routine domestic practices such as cooking, working and parenting, where people are constantly “doing things to and with things” in particular domestic spaces at different times (Gregson, 2007, p. 177). Despite this everydayness, disorder is often judged against cultural expectations of cleanliness and may be viewed as wrong, immoral, and dangerous (Dürr & Jaffe, 2010; Ger & Yenicioglu, 2004; Woersdorfer, 2010), with negative effects on well-being (Rogers & Hart, 2021; Roster et al., 2016). Yet research largely frames disorder as disruptive, overlooking how it may also function within and sometimes support everyday domestic life. Understanding the dynamics of domestic

disorder is important because it reveals when and how mess can shift from a problem to be managed into a resource that supports everyday family life. Such an understanding can also help marketers design products that respond to both the emotional and practical needs of consumers. Prior research shows that households rely on implicit classification systems to manage domestic disorder (Arsel & Bean, 2013; Dion et al., 2014; Gollnhofer et al., 2024). These systems determine “proper places” for objects (Douglas, 1967; Durkheim & Mauss, 2009) by depicting boundaries that specify the appropriate location of each object, thereby shaping shared understandings of domestic order and disorder and prescribing the modes of engagement with them (Dion et al., 2014; Douglas, 1967). When classification systems are disrupted, families either restore order by moving objects back or tolerate disorder to avoid tension (Arsel & Bean, 2013; Denegri-Knott & Parsons, 2014; Dion et al., 2014; Douglas, 1967). For example, families may use temporary hideaway places to de-clutter a family dining table, while a messy work desk might be tolerated as a sign of productivity (Dion et al., 2014).

While these studies highlight how consumers react to mess, they typically frame disorder as a static phenomenon and reduce consumers’ responses to individualised reactions to immediate circumstances (Dion

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et al., 2014; Ross et al., 2021). In practice, domestic order and disorder are not static but fluid states, shifting as home spaces are used, objects are circulated, and family members negotiate their roles, priorities and identities (Abarashi, 2026; Money, 2007; Woodward, 2003). A kitchen may shift from tidy to messy within hours, and different objects demand attention as their function changes. Family practices also overlap and sometimes conflict, shaping what is tidied and what remains messy. Yet prior research largely limits disorder to misplaced objects or breaches of classification rules, treating it as an outcome of individual action rather than as an emergent property of complex socio-material configurations. This overlooks the ongoing interactions among family members, materials, and routines through which order and disorder continuously form and re-form. Reducing disorder to individual acts of misplacement obscures the relational dynamics and temporal processes, such as the continuous coupling and decoupling of people, objects, and spaces through which disorder is produced and managed in everyday family life.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how disorder is generated and negotiated through the unfolding of everyday family life. Adopting an assemblage-theoretical lens, we pursue two objectives: (1) to explore how ongoing interactions among family members, material objects, domestic spaces (i.e., physical and symbolic settings of the home), and temporal rhythms (i.e., recurring patterns and pacing of everyday activities) shape the emergence and interpretation of disorder at home; and (2) to understand how these relational configurations influence practices for negotiating order and disorder.

Assemblage theory conceptualises the social world as dynamic constellations of human and non-human elements, whose interactions generate emergent properties and capacities irreducible to any single part (Canniford & Bajde, 2015; DeLanda, 2006, 2016). In this study, we conceptualise the domestic home as the focal assemblage: a dynamic configuration of family members, material objects, spaces, and temporal rhythms whose ongoing interactions produce material (dis)order as emergent properties rather than a fixed state. Within this perspective, family members are treated as constituent elements of the home assemblage rather than as a separate assemblage, interacting with material objects, domestic spaces, and temporal rhythms to shape the capacities through which order and disorder emerge. Applied to domestic life, this perspective reveals that order and disorder are not outcomes of individual choice but contingent states that materialise through shifting relationships among heterogeneous components within the home assemblage. By recognising the agency of material and other non-human elements alongside human actors, this approach moves beyond anthropocentric accounts of tidiness and messiness to show how diverse components of family life couple and decouple to produce, stabilise, or destabilise domestic order. In doing so, we view (dis)order not as a fixed state created solely by family members, but as emergent properties of the home assemblage that continually form, stabilise, and destabilise through everyday interactions among people, objects, and spaces.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Material disorder in consumer research

Theorisation of material disorder is rooted in sociology, where Douglas (1967) conceptualised disorder as anything that eludes or threatens order. She positioned disorder as objects or ideas out of place, confusing or contradicting the order established by classification systems. This conceptualisation highlights disorder not merely as a physical state but as a violation of symbolic boundaries and classification systems that structure social life. Building on Douglas (1967) contention that mess signals “matter out of place”, a growing body of literature (Dion et al., 2014; Ross et al., 2021; Roster et al., 2016; Woodward, 2003) demonstrates that material disorder is culturally produced and contested. For example, Miller (2008) ethnography of London homes demonstrates how material arrangements – including clutter,

accumulation, and perceived disorder – carry moral, emotional, and social meanings.

Consumer research has primarily approached material disorder through two lenses: misplacement and excess. Disorder is often defined as the improper placement of possessions (Dion et al., 2014; Ross et al., 2021), reflecting Douglas's view of “matter out of place” that violates symbolic boundaries and classification systems. For instance, leaving a book on a kitchen counter instead of a bookshelf indicates such disorder. This perspective emphasises how objects derive meaning partly from their spatial location, with misplacement signalling a breakdown in the cultural understanding that organises domestic life (McCracken, 1986).

Second, disorder has been characterised as “clutteredness” (Gollnhofer et al., 2024), where an excess of possessions, rather than mere misplacement, creates material disorder (Ross et al., 2021; Wilson & Bellezza, 2022). Clutter represents not just spatial chaos but also temporal accumulation, indicating an emotional attachment to things that remain from past consumption and resist disposal (Cherrier, 2009; Roster et al., 2016). However, Arsel and Bean (2013) used the term ‘material disorder’ to describe both misplacement and overabundance without clearly distinguishing these forms, leading to theoretical ambiguity. Gollnhofer et al. (2024) further refines this distinction by explaining that untidiness arises when items are simply out of place, whereas clutter results from having an excess of possessions.

Thus, material disorder is a socially charged phenomenon shaped by emotional attachments and everyday family practices. As Douglas (1967) argued, dirt and disorder are inherently relational, such that what counts as “out of place” depends on culturally specific prescriptions that are consistent with existing social boundaries and moral order. In contemporary consumer culture, messiness signals incompetence and disorganisation (Belk et al., 2007; Elsbach & Pratt, 2007), sparks family conflict over space and responsibilities (Hirschman et al., 2012; Martens & Scott, 2005; Stevenson & Prout, 2013), and strains interpersonal relationships (Kajander & Koskinen-Koivisto, 2023; Thornock et al., 2013).

However, by focusing predominantly on disorder's disruptive consequences, prior research has overlooked how disorder might function within – rather than against – everyday domestic life. In doing so, it treats disorder primarily as a property of individual objects or spaces rather than as emerging from broader, relational configurations. To understand how material disorder gains meaning and elicits social interaction in more complex ways, we must examine not only the symbolic classification systems through which order is defined but also the collective and material dynamics through which disorder emerges, persists, and is negotiated within family life.

2.2. Symbolic classification systems and domestic disorder

The desire for a tidy and organised home is rooted in individuals' cognitive preference for order, rules, and tradition (Vohs et al., 2013), reinforced by marketing discourses that promote tidiness as a marker of responsibility and success (Martens & Scott, 2005). Central to this are culturally informed symbolic classification systems that categorise objects, define boundaries, and prescribe their proper placement (Douglas, 1967; Durkheim & Mauss, 2009). These systems, as Durkheim and Mauss (2009) demonstrated, are culturally constructed schemes that reflect and reproduce social organisations. They guide individuals in determining where things “belong”, shaping perceptions of order and disorder within the home. For example, cooking utensils are expected to be kept in the kitchen, just as cleaning products are expected to be kept in the bathroom, creating an implicit framework for organising domestic spaces (Douglas, 1967; Filiod, 2003; McCracken, 1986).

As Douglas (1967) argues, tidying reveals the cultural meanings that structure the world; placing objects is not merely physical but a social and moral act that reproduces shared norms (Bergesen, 1978; Filiod, 2003; Miller, 2008). Research on domestic material culture similarly shows that the organisation of home spaces reflect deeper cultural

values and social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1984; Miller, 2008, 2021). Through repeated acts of tidying and organising, individuals internalise aesthetic meanings and norms that shape family life (Miller, 2008). The integrity of these systems is maintained through taboos, prohibitions, and normative pressures that reinforce tidiness and discourage disorder (Douglas, 1967; Dürr & Jaffe, 2010). These mechanisms operate not just through explicit rules but through embodied enactments and practical understandings that individuals acquire through socialisation.

However, social expectations of tidiness can often conflict with individual preferences and practical constraints, creating inconsistencies in how classification rules are applied. When people feel unobserved, they may relax these rules and allow disorder to persist, while others deliberately tolerate disorder to resist normative pressures (Dion et al., 2014). Tolerance also arises when tidying would disrupt ongoing routines or relationships, for instance, leaving work materials on a dining table to maintain productivity or harmony (Dion et al., 2014). In such situations, disorder is not a failure to apply classification rules but a strategic response aligned with Goffman's (1959) front stage/back stage distinction, enabling families to present tidy, controlled spaces to outsiders while allowing greater disorder in private areas to preserve practicality and everyday flow.

Further, classification systems themselves are not monolithic but plural and context-dependent. Different family members may hold different standards for what constitutes acceptable tidiness, creating potential sites of conflict and negotiation (Abarashi, 2026; Dion et al., 2014). What one family member considers messy, another may view as organised enough. These competing classifications reflect broader differences in cultural background, gender socialisation, generational norms, and individual personality, all of which shape how disorder is perceived and evaluated (Martens & Scott, 2005).

While classification theory has been useful in revealing the cultural and moral dimensions of domestic order, it has three key limitations that restrict its capacity to explain disorder as it unfolds in practice. First, it treats disorder as a categorical state (i.e. objects are either “in place” or “out of place”) rather than as degrees of (dis)order that emerge processually. Second, these studies have largely focused on dyadic interactions between individuals and immediate situational demands, overlooking the broader socio-material dynamics through which order and disorder are produced, sustained, and negotiated across multiple actors and temporalities. Third, traditional classification systems fail to account for the temporal fluidity of domestic life. For example, a dining table may shift from workspace to family hub within hours, temporarily relaxing classification rules and redefining what counts as tidy or messy. Such transformations highlight how domestic order and disorder are contingent and continually shaped by temporal rhythms and spatial reconfigurations of everyday family life (Hand et al., 2005; Southerton, 2003), dynamic processes that static classification frameworks struggle to capture.

2.3. Disorder, classification and home assemblage dynamics

Material disorder and symbolic classification are embedded in the collective dynamics of family life. Their relationship to everyday routines is shaped by relational, material, and temporal processes through which family members negotiate shared spaces. As a collective environment, the home is constituted through interactions among family members with distinct roles and expectations (Epp & Price, 2008), material objects, spaces, and temporal rhythms. Through these ongoing interactions and coordination, family members co-create and sustain a shared sense of family identity (Edirisingha et al., 2026; Epp & Price, 2010; Miller, 2008), while simultaneously shaping the emergent properties of the home assemblage.

Research demonstrates that consumption practices, including organising and tidying, are sites of family identity construction, performance, and negotiation (Epp & Price, 2008, 2010). Families may use strategic display of material objects to signal empathy, understanding,

and foster family relationships (Miller, 2008, 2021). For instance, managing objects in domestic spaces – deciding what is visible, what gets stored away, and how objects are arranged – is central to negotiating family boundaries and asserting the collective sense of family unity (Edirisingha et al., 2022). In addition, decisions about participation in domestic practices and responsibility for tidying similarly reflect identity work. For example, a parent's decision to tolerate a child's messy room or insist on tidiness reflects not just personal preference but ongoing family identity work and relationship interplays (Epp & Price, 2008, 2010). Thus, domestic organisation is integral to the formation of family identity, with disorder indicating either failures or adaptive negotiation of competing family identity demands.

Moreover, family identity enactment occurs within “networked family dynamics” (Epp & Price, 2008; Epp & Velagaleti, 2014), where multiple family members, extended kin, friends, and material resources shape domestic consumption practices. These networks reveal how families navigate competing demands, coordinate routines across time and space, and balance individual autonomy with collective expectations. Research on domestic labour shows that tidying and cleaning are highly gendered, reflecting relational power dynamics and uneven distributions of responsibility (Pink, 2012). Women often bear disproportionate responsibility for maintaining domestic order, with mess frequently interpreted as a failure of their nurturing role (Martens & Scott, 2005; Shove, 2003), while men and children face different expectations (Maller, 2011).

Despite these insights, both symbolic classification theory and family consumption research have struggled to capture how domestic order emerges through these complex engagements among people, objects, spaces, and routines that constitute the home assemblage. Symbolic classification illuminates cultural boundaries (Douglas, 1967) but treats disorder as a static violation of “proper placement.” In practice, domestic order and disorder are fluid states that shift as spaces are used, objects circulate, and family roles and priorities evolve. Likewise, while family consumption research has examined identity work (Epp & Price, 2008, 2010), inheritance (Curasi et al., 2004), and domestic practices (Edirisingha et al., 2022; Epp & Velagaleti, 2014) it has paid limited attention to how families collectively produce and negotiate disorder in shared spaces. Although existing work recognises tensions between individual preferences and collective expectations (Epp & Price, 2008) and the ongoing negotiation of space, time, and material arrangements (Edirisingha et al., 2026), the specific processes through which disorder emerges and how families strategically manage disorder to maintain relational harmony remain underexplored.

To address these gaps, we employ an assemblage theoretical lens (DeLanda, 2006). Assemblage theory views social life as composed of provisional groupings of human and material elements whose interactions produce emergent properties (Canniford & Bajde, 2015; DeLanda, 2006). Rather than treating domestic order as governed by static classificatory rules or solely as a product of human agency, an assemblage perspective foregrounds the relational processes through which (dis)order emerge, stabilise, and destabilise over time (DeLanda, 2006, 2016; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Assemblages are characterised by their emergent properties and capacities, two interconnected but distinct concepts. Properties are measurable characteristics that specify the identity of an assemblage (Hoffman & Novak, 2018, p. 1184). In the domestic context, states of order and disorder can be understood as emergent properties that arise through the interplay of family members, objects, and spaces. For instance, “messiness” is not an inherent quality of a dining table but a property that emerges when the table, scattered objects, and family members' activities align in particular ways.

Capacities, in contrast, refer to the relational potentials of components – what they can do when interacting with other assemblage components (Parmentier & Fischer, 2015). For example, a kitchen island acquires the capacity to facilitate meal preparation when its surface allows the alignment of ingredients, utensils, and family members. This

capacity does not reside solely in the island itself but emerges from its relational positioning within a broader configuration of family members, objects, and domestic space. The same island may acquire different capacities when coupled with different assemblage elements: a capacity to serve as a social gathering site when aligned with bar tools and wine glasses, or a capacity to function as a temporary storage space when positioned along a family's daily traffic flows.

Assemblages are further shaped by the processes of territorialisation and deterritorialisation. Territorialisation refers to processes that stabilise an assemblage by increasing internal coherence, solidifying its identity, and clarifying its boundaries (DeLanda, 2006). In contrast, deterritorialisation denotes processes through which boundaries become less defined, internal heterogeneity increases, and the assemblage's identity becomes destabilised. In domestic contexts, tidying practices often function as territorialisation work by reestablishing spatial boundaries and restoring classificatory arrangements. However, everyday family activities within the home assemblage continually deterritorialise these arrangements as objects circulate through spaces, routines shift, and domestic environments are repurposed for different activities.

These processes help explain the cyclical nature of domestic (dis)order. Order emerges as a temporary stabilisation of relations among family members, objects, and spaces, while everyday activities continuously reconfigure these relations. Tidying, therefore, represents ongoing work through which home assemblages are stabilised, while the movement of objects and activities across spaces continually reshapes these configurations. In this sense, order appears as a relative and processual accomplishment rather than a fixed state, requiring ongoing maintenance work to sustain assemblage stability (Canniford & Bajde, 2015).

Consumer researchers increasingly use assemblage thinking to understand how consumption practices and markets evolve through heterogeneous interactions among people, objects, and institutions (Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Epp & Velagaleti, 2014; Martin & Schouten, 2014). This perspective challenges anthropocentric views that treat objects as passive elements in consumption processes, instead recognising the role of material entities in shaping routines, emotions, and meanings (Bogost, 2012; Bryant, 2011). As Latour (2005) notes, things participate in social life by enabling, constraining, and reshaping practices. In line with this approach, we conceptualise tidying as an ongoing process of coupling and decoupling people, objects, and spaces through which home assemblages are continually stabilised and reconfigured.

By integrating symbolic classification with assemblage theory, this framework enables a relational understanding of domestic disorder as emergent, fragile, and continuously re-formed. While classification systems illuminate cultural rules governing proper placement, assemblage theory highlights dynamic, material and temporal processes through which those rules are enacted, negotiated, and sometimes relaxed through everyday interactions within the home assemblage. This perspective allows us to examine how human and material elements co-produce tidiness and disorder within the home assemblage, repositioning disorder not simply as rule violations or individual failures but as emergent properties of home assemblages.

3. Methodology

3.1. Photo-elicitation and data collection

We adopted a qualitative research approach, informed by the photo-elicitation technique, to investigate the emergence of disorder and how it has been addressed within consumers' homes. The photo-elicitation technique integrates participant-generated photographs with non-directive interviews prompted by those photographs (Dion, 2007; Holbrook, 2005), facilitating a deeper exploration of lived consumer experiences (Stewart & Floyd, 2004). This method aligns with assemblage

thinking by foregrounding material arrangements and spatial configurations alongside verbal accounts, enabling us to trace how people, objects and spaces couple and decouple in domestic settings (Pink, 2012).

The first author posted the recruitment flyer on his LinkedIn page, and a total of 22 informants were recruited to participate in this study. We asked each informant to take 10 photographs of their home, five pictures depicting messy spaces and five showcasing tidy spaces. We requested our informants to take the photographs themselves to capture un/tidiness that is meaningful to them, acknowledging that material disorder is not an intrinsic quality but rather a subjective perception, existing "in the eye of the beholder" (Douglas, 1967). We gave our participants two weeks to capture their photographs and email them to us before their scheduled interviews. The photos taken by our informants captured a range of situations and experiences across different temporal and spatial contexts, illustrating their everyday tidying routines. Some informants sent us more than 10 photos and photographed the same space in both tidy and untidy states, providing valuable insights into the spatial, temporal, and experiential dimensions of their tidiness routines.

We restricted the focus of exploring material disorder to consumer homes because the home represents an important site for material culture studies (Miller, 2021). Home is also a place where social and private spaces intersect, which makes it an ideal context to examine the emergence and management of material disorder as an assemblage phenomenon. Additionally, to maintain cultural homogeneity, data collection was limited to New Zealand.

Methodologically, we interviewed only one individual per household rather than conducting full family interviews. While this means we did not capture perspectives of multiple family members, it aligns with our assemblage theoretical focus on how (dis)order emerges through relational configurations rather than individual viewpoints. Individual family members' accounts revealed how they navigate the home assemblage – how they engage with other family members, negotiate material arrangements, coordinate temporal rhythms, and manage the emergent properties of order and disorder. Their narratives naturally revealed relational dynamics: conflicts over tidying responsibilities, negotiations of shared spaces, and strategies for maintaining family harmony amidst competing demands (Epp & Price, 2008, 2010). Moreover, from an assemblage perspective, disorder is not located "in" individual family members but emerges from configurations of heterogeneous elements. Tracing how one family member navigates these configurations therefore provides valuable insight into the relational dynamics of the home assemblage (DeLanda, 2006). Thus, this approach enabled rich, in-depth exploration of how individuals experience and respond to assemblage dynamics within families, while maintaining practical methodological feasibility.

We had specific inclusion and exclusion criteria in place to select from the potential informants who expressed their interest in participating in our study. For example, individuals who were not actively engaged in home tidiness practices were excluded. Our informants' sample was restricted to individuals residing in multi-member households, encompassing diverse household compositions, such as couples living with partners or spouses, couples with children, and couples cohabiting with parents. We selected the qualified informants gradually over three months and aimed to recruit respondents with varied positions on the spectrum of un/tidiness to capture a nuanced understanding of their home tidiness practices (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Following the photo collection phase, we conducted in-depth interviews with each informant to explore their tidying practices in detail. We organised our interviews by following a categorisation process (Beilin, 2005; Heisley & Levy, 1991). To do so, we first asked our informants to label each photographed space as tidy or messy, followed by their description of that space and an explanation of why they had labelled it tidy or messy. We concluded the interviews with general questions about tidiness and the involvement of other family members

in maintaining a tidy home. Interviews were conducted with durations ranging from 50 min to 1 h and 35 min. Table 1 provides a detailed description of the informants' profiles.

The photo-elicitation technique provided our informants with a narrative framework to articulate their feelings and practices (Heisley & Levy, 1991; Holbrook, 2005). While the interviews initially focused on the specific elements visible in the photographs, informants often expanded their narratives to compare other tidy and messy spaces in their homes, offering deeper insights into their broader tidying practices. Importantly, photographs captured material arrangements – the spatial positioning of objects such as furniture, equipments and personal artifacts – that informants might not verbally describe but are central to understanding assemblage configurations. The combination of participant-generated photographs with in-depth interviews enabled us to capture a rich description of practices and experiences from the informants' perspectives (Hirsch, 2007), attending to both material and discursive dimensions of domestic (dis)order in ways that enabled us to move toward an emic perspective (Agar, 2011).

3.2. Data analysis

We employed an inductive coding approach (Thomas, 2003) to analyse the narrative accounts, which were grounded in the informants' interpretations of their photographs during the interviews. While remaining open to emergent patterns, our analysis was sensitised by assemblage thinking (Canniford & Bajde, 2015), attending to how informants described relations among people, objects, spaces and temporal rhythms rather than focusing solely on individuals' attitudes and practices. The coding process was initiated by the first and second authors, who derived codes from the emergent meanings within the verbatim accounts (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994). The narratives were analysed comparatively to identify patterns and insights (Cassell & Bishop, 2019), beginning with the identification of predominant themes within each narrative. Subsequently, the first and second authors independently categorised these themes, consolidating them into a unified set of categories.

Cross-validation was then performed to compare the narratives, facilitating the recognition of recurring situations and consistent behavioural logics across the dataset (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1992). This iterative approach generated a progressively rich and nuanced understanding of the data. Guided by assemblage thinking, our analytical process traced how relations among people, objects, and spaces

formed and re-formed across time. Coding, thus, attended to these relational couplings and decouplings – how material and social elements interacted to stabilise or destabilise domestic order. In practice this meant coding for the heterogenous components present in each account (people, objects, spaces and temporal rhythms), how these elements came together in particular configurations, what relational capacities emerge from these configurations, what states of order and disorder materialised as emergent properties, and how informants described processes of territorialisation (stabilising boundaries) and deterritorialisation (destablising boundaries). This systematic attention to assemblage dynamics ensured theoretical consistency between our lens and data analysis process. To ensure interpretive consistency, coding decisions were discussed collaboratively among the authors, and any discrepancies were resolved through iterative comparison and consensus. To ensure reliability and depth, the first author's analysis was systematically compared with the second author's interpretations (Goulding, 1999). The analysis continued until redundancy in themes was observed and theoretical saturation was achieved (Goulding, 2005).

4. Findings

Applying an assemblage perspective enables us to understand domestic (dis)order as a dynamic outcome of relations among family members, material objects, domestic spaces, and temporal rhythms. As illustrated in Fig. 1, our analysis identifies three assemblage capacities that shape how material disorder emerges and is interpreted: transient capacity, functional capacity and conducive capacity. These capacities are not inherent properties of objects or spaces but relational potentials that arise when heterogeneous components configure in particular ways. As household practices shift, different capacities activate, generating various states of (dis)order.

Fig. 1 visualises the layered emergence of domestic (dis)order through assemblage dynamics. At the foundation (bottom layer), home assemblage components (family members, material objects, domestic spaces, and temporal rhythms) interact through everyday coupling and decoupling. These interactions generate the three assemblage capacities (second layer from the bottom), which are positioned equally to indicate that they represent distinct yet equal relational potentials. These capacities, in turn, shape management strategies (third layer from the bottom) – restoring, tolerating, and concealing – through which families perform assemblage maintenance work. Finally, these strategies implicate the continuous negotiation between disorder and order (top layer), represented by a double-headed arrow indicating families' ongoing movement between the two states. The upward arrows connecting each layer show how each level emerges from and is shaped by the layer below, demonstrating the hierarchical yet dynamic nature of the assemblage processes.

We next examine each capacity, demonstrating how it emerges from assemblage configurations and what forms of disorder it produces, before discussing the strategies families use to manage these dynamics.

4.1. Assemblage capacities that shape (dis)order

Assemblage theorists have identified different types of capacities based on their nature (DeLanda, 2006; Epp et al., 2014). Specifically, DeLanda distinguishes between material capacities (physical potential arising from material properties) and expressive capacity (semiotic or affective potentials), while Epp and colleagues have referred to imaginative capacity (potential to envision and coordinate future configurations). However, our three capacities – transient, functional and conducive – represent a different analytical focus. Rather than categorising capacities by type, we examine how capacities shape the emergence and management of domestic (dis)order. Each capacity integrates a mix of expressive, material, and imaginative dimensions that prior research identifies. For example, transient capacity combines physical surface properties with temporal coordination practices, functional

Table 1
Profile of informants.

Name	Occupation	Age	Marital status
Clara	Housewife	55–60	Married, 3 children
Violet	Lecturer	30–35	Married
Gemma	Office applications manager	30–35	Married, one child
Nellie	PhD student	25–30	Partner
Liam	Vice President	40–45	Married, one child
Holly	Teacher	30–35	Married
Iris	Graphic designer	50–55	Married, 2 children
Belle	Lecturer	50–55	Married, 1 child
James	QA analyst	40–45	Partner, 2 children
Lucy	Professor	60–65	Single, 2 children
Millie	PhD student	25–30	Partner
Nora	Strategic advisor	50–55	Partner, 2 children
Kacey	Vet	30–35	Married
Leo	Associate professor	40–45	Partner
Cali	Senior lecturer	35–40	Married, 2 children
Lexi	Senior lecturer	35–40	Married, one child
Selma	Coordinator	30–35	Partner
Ruby	Senior lecturer	55–60	Married, two children
Joann	Lecturer	30–35	Married, one child
Alice	Teacher	30–35	Partner
Hayley	Retired	55–60	Married, 2 children
Mia	Retired	60–65	Married

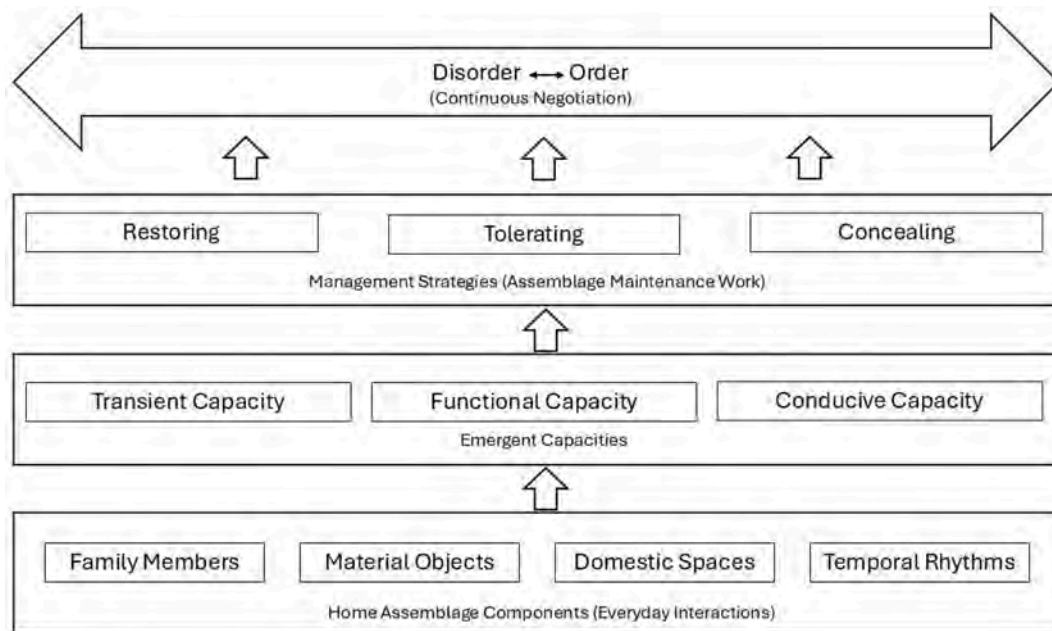


Fig. 1. Assemblage Dynamics of Domestic (Dis)order.

capacity involves material arrangements that support household task completion, and conducive capacity integrates spatial configurations with feelings of belonging and relational harmony. Next, we examine each capacity in detail, demonstrating how it emerges from specific assemblage configurations and what forms of disorder it generates.

4.1.1. Transient capacity

Transient capacity emerges from the home assemblage's need to accommodate multiple, temporal activities within everyday family life. Throughout the day, families transition between practices, professional work, meal preparation, childcare, parenting, and entertaining, each requiring different spatial configurations. As families transition between these practices, assemblage properties reconfigure. For example, a dining table may be territorialised for dinner when coupled with dinnerware, then deterritorialised and re-territorialised as a workspace when coupled with work materials during work-from-home periods. The capacity to enable these transitions emerges when material properties (surface accessibility, visibility and size) align with household traffic patterns and temporal thresholds. Certain surfaces, therefore, acquire transient capacity: the relational potential to temporarily absorb objects and activities during moments of transition. This capacity facilitates movement between household practices while producing disorder as an emergent property. Such disorder is not a random accumulation of things, but evidence of the assemblage reconfiguring to accommodate

temporal shifts between practices, as illustrated by Holly (Fig. 2):

Holly: "So it looks like it's become a drop zone. So whenever we come home, we just leave whatever stuff that we are having. Like the bag, the sunglasses, drink bottles, we just left it on the table just cause it's the easiest accessible surface..... So usually I think in the evenings or afternoon after coming back from work, probably we dropped things on the table. So that's when it gets messy. And then usually we tidy it up by the evening. So by the morning it looks tidy, but then again the next day we end up dropping things there. And if it's the weekend, it'll probably be more messier up until Sunday, and then I Will clean it. And then its fine again by Monday morning."

Holly's dining table shows how transient capacity emerges from the alignment of material properties with temporal transitions. The table acquires the capacity to function as a "drop zone" through the coupling of its physical attributes (flat surface, accessibility, position near entrance) with the work-to-home transition that Holly and her husband navigate daily. As Holly explains, the dining table is "the easiest accessible surface" for depositing work items such as "the bag, the sunglasses, and drink bottles". The dining table's material properties, such as its location and accessible surface, provide it with the capacity to temporarily host work-related objects during the work-to-home transition.

However, the table does not possess an inherent "drop zone" potential but acquires it through its relational positioning at the intersection of arriving family members, the objects they carry, and the temporal pressure to transition efficiently between work and home activities. The assemblage's transient capacity is activated during these threshold moments, enabling movement between household practices while simultaneously producing disorder as an emergent property. Objects accumulate on the table not because of carelessness but because the assemblage is configured to prioritise the family's transitional flow. This temporal arrangement deterritorialises the table's established tidiness boundaries. Disorder appears in the afternoons following the arrival of family members, revealing how the same table transits between orderly and disorderly states as household activities unfold. By evening, Holly restores order, re-territorialising the table for dining, only for it to be deterritorialised again during the next work-to-home transition. These cyclical patterns reveal order and disorder as interdependent assemblage processes.

Holly's experience reflects a broader pattern of "drop zones" acquiring transient capacity through their relational positioning within the household flows. James's kitchen island Fig. 3 demonstrates how

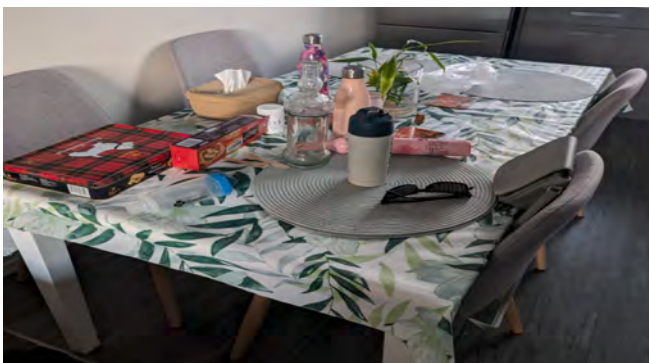


Fig. 2. Holly's dining table.



Fig. 3. James's kitchen island.

multiple household transitions activate transient capacity:

James: "It's just a very easy place to put things it's also very convenient. So if you've gone and got something and you know you're going to be going outside again, it's a great place to put the thing because if you know you could go away do something else and then when you know you're heading out, you'll see it, right it's you know, it's not tucked away. You're not going to forget probably where it was or if you do forget where you put it, as you gaze around the room, you'll probably see it because it's in such a good spot for something like that. Yeah. It's also very big, right? So our house is not huge, and so in terms of where you might put something like this, I think it's definitely a space you might do that."

James's kitchen island acquires transient capacity through the coupling of its material characteristics with household threshold moments such as indoor-outdoor movement, activity shifts, and temporary staging of objects. As James explains, "It's just a very easy place to put things... very convenient", highlighting how the island's positioning within daily traffic flows activates its capacity to temporarily stabilise items during transitions. Thus, the island's transient capacity operates across multiple temporal thresholds. For immediate transitions – "if you've gone and got something and you know you're going to be going outside again" – it maintains items in a liminal configuration: visible, accessible, yet not permanently stored. Though this positioning produces disorder, it serves an essential logistical function: items remain visible to prevent forgetting and are positioned for quick retrieval during the next activity. As DeLanda (2016) describes, this reflects temporal de-territorialisation – a periodic destabilisation of spatial boundaries and object placements that occurs as household rhythms shift. Here, disorder emerges not from failed classification but from the assemblage temporarily reconfiguring to support household flow.

Transient capacity, therefore, reveals domestic (dis)order as temporal and iterative. Holly's evening tidying and James's clearing routines demonstrate rhythmic patterns of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation (DeLanda, 2016). The dining table and kitchen island do not possess fixed identities as "orderly" or "disorderly" but shift between these states as assemblage components (i.e. work material, family meals, transitions) couple and decouple throughout the unfolding of family life. This flexibility – the ability to temporarily violate classificatory norms to facilitate practical household flow – is integral to transient capacity. Transient capacity, thus, repositions disorder not as failure but as a temporary resource that supports everyday household coordination.

4.1.2. Conducive capacity

Conducive capacity emerges when material and social components configure in ways that foster interaction, togetherness, and belonging among family members. We use the term conducive capacity in a

specifically socio-affective sense rather than a generic potential to make any outcome more likely. Conducive capacity denotes the home assemblage's potential to enable distinctly relational outcomes – the interactions, learning, togetherness, belonging, and relational harmony that hold family members together. It is this relational enabling, not a general facilitative potential that the term foregrounds. This capacity arises prominently in shared domestic spaces where multiple family members engage in overlapping practices and mobilise objects to achieve multiple outcomes. For example, when family members come together in a shared living room to socialise, watch television, and play, the home assemblage acquires conducive capacity through these relational alignments. Sofas, entertainment equipment, toys, and family members configure in ways that sustain family togetherness and bonding. Yet, this configuration also produces material disorder as an emergent property. As family members interact and use shared spaces and objects, overlapping activities leave material traces – scattered toys, misplaced clothing, and accumulated items – that represent the space's active role in sustaining family life. The impact of conducive capacity in the emergence of material disorder is evident in James's account Fig. 4:

James: "its not messy; it is doing its job. This jumper is interesting, because that is my daughter, being much tidier than normal. Again, not ideal, but I get it, right. 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, but it's something like other people learning to be tidy and therefore I will leave it in the space because I want them to see that, well not necessarily that I approve exactly of what they've done, but I wouldn't want them to see me taking it away. And then going, ah you know, I didn't do a good job. I even said to her good job for picking up your jersey or putting your jersey not on the floor, and therefore I've left it there so that she knows that I honestly mean that. Whereas if I tidied away after saying it was, she's not stupid, she would know I was supposed to, you know, I was supposed to do more."

James's living area exemplifies a shared space where his family members come together, socialise, and engage in various activities. While the home is considered a shared space (Belk, 2007, 2010) with collective expectations for keeping it tidy and organised, the roles and responsibilities of each family member influence how they use and engage with spaces and objects in the home. Family roles and responsibilities shape family engagements (Li et al., 2019) and their interaction with objects in the home (Epp & Price, 2008). For instance, children typically share less responsibility for maintaining tidiness, which may result in reduced effort to uphold tidiness norms. Within the assemblage, these differentiated roles and responsibilities configure the home such that it acquires the conducive capacity – the potential to accommodate learning, encouragement, and gradual socialisation into shared tidiness norms.

In James's case, his daughter's jumper draped over the back of a chair does not simply signal a lapse in tidiness. Rather, it materialises



Fig. 4. James's dining table.

through the coupling of his daughter's developing tidiness practices, the chair as an available surface, and James's parental commitment towards reinforcing incremental progress. Here, the conducive capacity – the assemblage's potential to foster learning, support and relational affirmation – produces disorder. The assemblage prioritises learning and encouragement over immediate aesthetic order, deterritorialising established tidiness norms. Thus, material disorder emerges as an outcome of the home's relational and developmental capacity.

This same conducive capacity also shapes James's interpretation and management of material disorder. As a father and educator, James views the misplaced jumper not merely as a disorder but as part of his daughter's progression towards becoming more responsible and tidier. Disorder, in this sense, is folded into broader relational and developmental processes through which the home assemblage is continually enacted. Rather than immediately correcting the disorder, James recognises and supports his daughter's effort as a step in her learning process. Therefore, conducive capacity entangles disorder with values of care and continuity, enabling James to accept minor disorder as part of the socialisation process and family cohesion (Canary & Canary, 2013), rather than requiring immediate reterritorialization.

Our findings reveal that when interplay among heterogeneous components does not foster a sense of togetherness and family belonging, consumers interpret material disorder as an undesirable disruption that must be addressed to maintain order. Nellie's comparison of two domestic spaces Fig. 5. illustrates how the presence or absence of conducive capacity shapes disorder thresholds:

Nellie: *"The space is very lived in, so I actually tolerate, like, a higher level of untidiness. Like, I guess, like, if we think of it as a continuum, a space that I live in more, I think of being less tidy is still more tidy because it's constantly used. So things are constantly in flux, but a space that is rarely used, which we'll see, like with the couch, actually even just one thing on it being out of place makes me think of it as untidy because it doesn't have that lived-in feeling."*

Nellie's comparison of her living room and a couch in a less active area highlights the dual nature of the conducive capacity in shaping her interpretation and management of disorder. In her living room, conducive capacity emerges through the coupling of Nellie, her partner, objects, and space in frequent, overlapping activities. This configuration generates what Nellie describes as a *"lived-in feeling"* – an affective assemblage property that signals active inhabitation and a sense of togetherness. This active engagement generates material disorder, yet Nellie perceives it as acceptable because disorder emerges here as evidence of the space's conducive capacity in practice. On the contrary, in spaces where interaction is minimal and conducive capacity is absent,



Fig. 5. Nellie's living room.

she exhibits a lower threshold for disorder. For example, it is not acceptable for her to see even a single item placed on the couch in a rarely used space, and this disorder necessitates the immediate restoration of order.

This reveals how the conducive capacity shapes both the emergence and management of disorder. In shared spaces like the living room, frequent interactions among people, objects, and spaces produce disorder as a byproduct of shared use. Yet, this disorder is rendered acceptable because it emerges as evidence of the space's conducive capacity in sustaining family interaction. By contrast, in spaces where conducive capacity is absent, disorder is less tolerated. Even minor disruptions appear incongruent with the assemblage configuration and are therefore required to be immediately reconfigured toward order.

This pattern demonstrates what Bennett (2010) describes as the affective dimension of assemblages – how material-social configurations generate an emotional atmosphere that shapes interaction and action. James's tolerance of his daughter's jumper and Nellie's acceptance of living room disorder both illustrate how assemblages produce affective alignments that exceed individual intentions. Disorder becomes meaningful through its relational position within the assemblage. It signifies family learning, togetherness and the *"lived-in"* quality that holds the assemblage together. This extends symbolic classification theory by showing that disorder's meaning is not predetermined by cultural rules but emerges through ongoing assemblage interactions. Thus, the conducive capacity not only drives the production of disorder in shared, lived-in areas but also informs the shifting thresholds of its acceptance, with disorder normalised in spaces of collective engagement and problematised in quieter, less interactive spaces.

4.1.3. Functional capacity

Functional capacity emerges when heterogeneous components – people, objects, and spaces – couple to achieve particular household outcomes. However, it refers not to the isolated purpose of individual objects or spaces but to the collective performance that arises when these components interact to achieve specific family goals. For instance, when material objects in a living area are arranged to produce aesthetic pleasure and communicate a desired sense of family identity, the assemblage acquires the capacity to perform identity work. Similarly, when assemblage components align for meal preparation – a family member, kitchen, dining spaces and cooking equipment coupling together – the assemblage acquires the capacity to support the practical efficiency of everyday routines. Functional capacity, therefore, goes beyond the fixed roles of individual components to encompass the dynamic interplays through which material and social elements are coordinated to serve particular functions.

Our findings demonstrate that when heterogeneous components couple to fulfil a particular function, the resulting material disorder is assessed in relation to whether it interferes with or enables that function. This assessment shapes consumers' interpretation and responses to the emerging disorder. Crucially, functional capacity also produces disorder as an emergent property: the configurations that enable goal achievement generate material accumulation and spatial disruptions. Gemma's multifunctional kitchen counter reveals how functional capacity generates disorder through effective assemblage coordination:

Gemma: *"This is something that I've been realising recently, because there was a time when our dining table, I don't think I sent it as a photo, but our dining table is also we use a kitchen counter as our dining table. So we don't have a dedicated dining table at home. And so that's the desk where, if I'm working from home, that's where I would sit and work from, and if my daughter were, let's say, doing some homework, that's where she would sit and do her homework. And then a lot of times, she would also leave her pens on the desk or leave her notebook and paper on the desk. And she's fiddling with some toy, and she'll leave it on the table, because it's our kitchen counter. And then it's also our dining table. So typically, as time goes on, things will accumulate on the desk. And then I would just generally leave it there and maybe casually tell her to put stuff away. But as long as there's still space to*

eat, then I kind of just let it be.”.

Gemma’s statement reveals how functional capacity emerges from multifunctional assemblage configurations. In her home, the kitchen counter simultaneously accommodates dining, professional work, and her daughter’s homework – each activity requiring different couplings of family members, material objects and domestic spaces. This convergence reflects the purposeful interplay among heterogeneous components, including Gemma, her daughter and the objects they bring to the kitchen counter to accomplish various tasks throughout the day. As these functions overlap, functional capacity generates disorder through the gradual accumulation of items such as toys, papers, and work tools, drawn into the counter’s multiple roles. Yet this disorder is not immediately addressed because the assemblage must remain multifunctional. As Gemma notes, “as long as there’s still space to eat, then I kind of just let it be”. Disorder, in this context, becomes an acceptable emergent property of functional optimisation: the assemblage successfully coordinates multiple practices (dining, working, studying) while producing material accumulation as a byproduct.

The emergence of material disorder generated by functional capacity was reported in multiple instances. For instance, Selma’s office/sitting area Fig. 6 exemplifies functional capacity operating at high intensity. Although she tidies it once a week, disorder continuously emerges. She described the area as:

Selma: “...a little sitting area slash office and it’s right when you come in through the door and it’s pretty messy. I’ve got books everywhere, computer, plants, ukulele. Um. And probably too many chairs for the area, but we need them. It’s a cluttered space... And we share the office. So that is actually Luca’s computer in the back. And if you can see my laptop is in the front and I use these two textbooks to raise it to my level so um...the multi-purpose office.”.

Selma’s account reveals an assemblage configured to accommodate multiple overlapping functions. The space’s functional capacity emerges through the coupling and decoupling of books, computers, plants, ukulele, chairs and two family members (Selma and her partner Luca). As she explains, “we share the office...that is actually Luca’s computer in the back...my laptop in the front”, illustrating how assemblage components couple to perform multiple household functions simultaneously. The space functions as a shared office, a temporary sitting area, and occasionally a storage zone. As she further explained: “Like right now, different from that photograph, I have some bike parts that are next to me that were shipped yesterday that we’re just going to have here for the next few days. I have some of my bicycle parts as well. The stuff that was in the laundry area is all over here because we had to clear it out for the repair guy.”.

The constant reconfiguration of assemblage components (bike parts, laundry items, work material) demonstrates how functional capacity generates disorder as an ongoing emergent property. In the shared office, objects continually couple and decouple to accomplish shifting goals such as repair, assembly, temporary storage, and work. As Selma



Fig. 6. Selma’s office/sitting area.

and her partner coordinate tasks across overlapping purposes, tools, documents, equipment, and unfinished items accumulate and produce disorder. This disorder emerges not from neglect but from the assemblage successfully accommodating multiple functions. As the space supports several household goals simultaneously, it accumulates the material traces of those activities. Functional capacity, therefore, continually deterritorialises spatial boundaries, enabling the flow of household practices while preventing order from becoming stable. Selma’s weekly tidying attempts temporary reterritorialization, yet functional capacity generates new disorder as the assemblage reconfigures around shifting household tasks.

These findings reveal functional capacity as an assemblage capacity arising from the coordination of heterogeneous components. Gemma’s multifunctional kitchen counter and Selma’s shared office show how disorder emerges precisely when assemblages function effectively (i.e. emergent properties that cannot be reduced to individual parts, DeLanda, 2006). Rather than reflecting individual carelessness, disorder arises from the coordination of people, objects, spaces, and tasks to achieve household goals. As Hoffman and Novak (2018) noted, such configurations exhibit emergent capacities that both enable and constrain action. Functional capacity thus enables everyday practices (e.g. meal preparation, work) while simultaneously producing disorder as a byproduct. This challenges anthropocentric views that position tidiness as an individual achievement, revealing instead that (dis)order is a relational outcome of how assemblage components configure to perform multiple functions. When assemblages are functionally optimised – when a kitchen counter serves dining, work and homework simultaneously – disorder becomes not a problem to solve but evidence of successful multi-purpose coordination.

4.2. Dis(order) management strategies

While assemblage capacities explain how domestic (dis)order emerges, families also enact strategies to negotiate and temporarily restore stability. We conceptualise restoring, tolerating, and concealing as forms of assemblage maintenance work: practices through which relations among people, objects, and spaces are reconfigured or sustained to manage emergent properties of (dis)order within the home assemblage. Drawing on Franco et al.’s (2024) conceptualisation of entropy work – the labour required to sustain assemblages against their tendency towards destabilisation – we view these strategies as the ongoing work families perform to navigate the disorder that assemblage capacities necessarily generate. Specifically, restoring constitutes reterritorialisation, as it re-stabilises the assemblage by clarifying spatial boundaries and reestablishing object classifications (DeLanda, 2006). Tolerating reflects territorial maintenance, where households sustain assemblage functioning despite the presence of disorder, without actively reconfiguring material relations. Concealing represents expressive reterritorialisation, stabilising the assemblage at the level of appearance and meaning by managing the visibility of disorder while allowing underlying configurations to persist.

Importantly, these strategies emerge from the assemblage capacities discussed above, though these relationships are not one-to-one. Transient capacity may evoke cyclical restoring strategies that reterritorialise spaces after transitions. Functional capacity may prompt tolerating strategies, as eliminating the disorder would disrupt the coordination of multiple household practices. Similarly, conducive capacity may encourage tolerating, as disorder signals relational processes such as learning and socialisation. Also, these strategies are not hierarchically ordered; they often overlap and co-exist within the ongoing management of home assemblages. We discuss each strategy in turn.

4.2.1. Restoring strategy

The restoring strategy involves addressing emerging material disorder by recoupling objects with their designated places within the home assemblage. It expresses moral and emotional investment in re-

establishing the boundaries of order: returning toys to boxes, folding laundry, or clearing the dining table. Through these reterritorialising practices, families reaffirm social meanings of responsibility, respect, and care embedded in classification systems (Douglas, 1967). This act of recoupling does not eliminate disorder permanently but temporarily stabilises the assemblage. All of our informants reported using the restoring strategy when addressing material disorder. For instance, Fig. 7 Gemma explains how restoring helps her keep her pantry cupboard organised:

Gemma: “maybe every time we’d go to the grocery and then stock up. But I mean, that’s kind of because new stuff is coming in, so then we’d have to kind of reorganise it. But I think for me personally, and my role in the household, pretty much whenever I open it and if I see that something is not in order, so like my husband and daughter aren’t quite as fussed about it. So let’s say the chocolates the grab a bar so some of those are say a KitKat so she’d grab a KitKat and then she just put it anywhere so she might put it in the clear container on the right for example and then whenever I open it, I will always then put them back or sometimes I would open the cupboard and I’d see like the seaweeds there would be like, fell over. And so they’ll be mixed up or some would be in a different place. So I would do it every time I open it.”

Gemma’s statement illustrates a classification system in which categories of objects are defined and boundaries separate each category from the others. For example, different types of chocolates are grouped in a container, separating them from other items, while seaweeds are organised and placed at the back of the cupboard. Gemma combines both functionality (ease of access) and aesthetic rules of classification in organising her cupboard. Disorder emerges as a byproduct of functional capacity, especially when categories are disrupted, and objects are placed incorrectly. For instance, chocolates may be misplaced by family members or seaweeds may fall and mix with other items. To address this disorder, Gemma employs a restoring strategy by recoupling misplaced items to their designated spaces. This reterritorialization work not only helps maintain visual order but also provides cues for what needs replacing during the next shopping trip.

Violet Fig. 8 explains how she is addressing the emerging mess and clutter in their shoe rack:

Violet: “So that is right in our doorway as we walk into the house. And this is just something that I do in the mornings, we’ll usually like, just throw our shoes off when we come in. And so I’ll put the shoes back on the shelf. And I also do my like, hair and makeup there before I leave. And so right now you can see all of my hair and makeup stuff just on the top. And so this is an untidy photo...So it’s like an everyday thing of just when I’m leaving the house or when someone’s coming over, I’ll, you know, put the four or five pairs of shoes back in their place, and remove my makeup and hair stuff from the top and put it back in the cabinet, so it could be a daily thing. I usually have the silver bag and a cabinet, and then you can see my hairspray and hair straightener and hair dryer, and that’s usually placed neatly into the basket, but right now you can see the cords, you know, going to their connection, and they’re just kind of half heartedly thrown there, because I probably left for work as soon as I finished.”



Fig. 7. Gemma’s Cupboard.

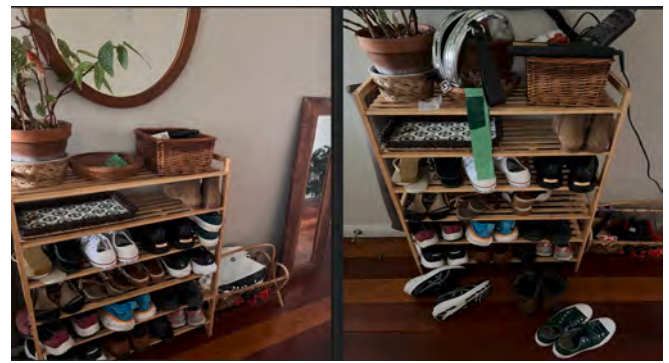


Fig. 8. Violet’s Shoe rack. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

The shoe rack located at the entrance of her home frequently becomes messy during daily routines such as work-to-home transition and morning preparations (transient capacity). When she and her husband arrive home, their shoes are often thrown off, while her hair and makeup items remain scattered after use. Violet addresses this emerging disorder by employing a restoring strategy. As she explains, restoring involves actions such as putting “shoes back in their place” and returning “makeup and hair stuff” to the cabinet or basket where they are typically stored. Thus, restoring signifies what DeLanda (2006) describes as re-territorialisation – the active work of re-establishing spatial boundaries and object classifications after de-territorialisation.

Through restoring, families perform the ongoing labour of recoupling objects with designated places, temporally stabilising their home assemblages. However, as the examples of Gemma and Violet show, such stabilisation is provisional and iterative. This continuous need for restoration underscores the assemblage insight that order is never static but a pursuit requiring maintenance work (Canniford & Bajde, 2015). Restoring, therefore, serves a dual function: it reaffirms symbolic classification rules (i.e. shoes belong in racks, chocolates in containers) while revealing the temporality of these classification rules. The repeated need for restoring demonstrates that home assemblages naturally tend towards disorder through everyday use (Gollnhofer et al., 2024), making tidiness an ongoing practice of re-assembling rather than a permanent state.

4.2.2. Tolerating strategy

The tolerating strategy involves accepting disorder that emerges from everyday decouplings rather than immediately investing time and labour to restore order. Families may delay recoupling objects in order to prioritise other tasks such as professional work, meal preparation, or childcare. In these situations, disorder becomes a pragmatic accommodation rather than a flaw, enabling flexibility within the assemblage. Tolerating reflects territorial maintenance, whereby households sustain the assemblage’s functioning without actively reterritorialising its material relations.

As Dion et al. (2014) explain, consumers are more likely to tolerate disorder under specific circumstances. First, when tidying requires substantial time and energy, individuals may ignore minor disorder to preserve their physical and mental resources. This would enable them to maintain their daily routines without becoming overwhelmed by the demands of constant reterritorialisation. Second, when addressing disorder involves situational risks or complications, individuals may tolerate it to avoid disruption. This is demonstrated in Lucy’s narration Fig. 9:

Lucy: “here, you’ve got a corner of my kitchen, which for the last two months, has looked a bit like this, it’s just around the corner, you can actually see it from most, most of the rest of the room. But it’s got a whole lot of supplements, because I’ve been on a whole that health regime. And I have to take something like 24 different tablets in a day, or not different ones, but at



Fig. 9. Lucy's kitchen corner.

different times of the day. And so that's what this is set up for.... I just consider it a bit messy, but it's just the easiest thing for now. I have got room, I could keep it in the pantry. But I don't want to forget to take one of these supplements. So that's why they're in sight."

Lucy's approach to organising her kitchen demonstrates how tolerating can be used to manage disorder. Despite recognising the visible disorder caused by the placement of health supplements on her kitchen counter, Lucy deliberately tolerates it: "I just consider it a bit messy, but it's just the easiest thing for now." While she could store the supplements in the pantry, doing so would disrupt her health routine and increase the risk of forgetting to take them.

Our other informants similarly described tolerating disorder to facilitate smoother transitions between their daily routines. For instance, Joann explained that tolerating kitchen disorder allowed her to leave home on time when urgent tasks arose. Thus, tolerating represents a strategic acceptance of emergent decouplings within everyday family practices. Rather than immediately recoupling objects with their designated places, family members defer this work to prioritise other demands within the home assemblage such as health routines, time management, and family coordination. This extends [Dion et al.'s \(2014\)](#) conceptualisation of tolerating disorder by showing that tolerance is not merely passive acceptance but an active assemblage strategy for managing competing household demands. From an assemblage perspective, tolerating demonstrates adaptive judgement: families recognise when disorder serves a valuable purpose (i.e. supporting family routines, avoiding disruption) and should therefore persist. Thus, tolerating is not a failure to restore but an alternative mode of assemblage management that prioritises the flow of everyday family life over material classificatory compliance.

4.2.3. Concealing strategy

The concealing strategy involves processes of expressive reterritorialization ([DeLanda, 2006](#)), whereby families reconfigure relations within the home assemblage to stabilise its visible and symbolic order without fully reorganising its material composition. Rather than eliminating disorder, concealing decouples visible order from functional

disorder by relocating materials to hidden zones within the home assemblage. By storing items behind doors, in drawers, or in multi-use spaces, families construct an appearance of tidiness while allowing functional disorder to persist unseen. Concealing protects social appearance and emotional well-being by reducing visual clutter and potential judgment, demonstrating how surface order can coexist with hidden complexity. This separation of visible and functional disorder illustrates how assemblages sustain harmony without achieving total control.

The concealing strategy emerged in our findings as a commonly used approach among consumers to manage and suppress visible signs of material disorder in their homes. This strategy involves moving or hiding out-of-place items into less visible or enclosed spaces, such as cupboards, drawers, or behind furniture, so that they are no longer perceived as a mess. Concealing material disorder helps consumers preserve the visual or aesthetic aspect of order ([Arsel & Bean, 2013](#); [Wilson & Bellezza, 2022](#)) even when disorder itself has not been resolved. For example, Millie [Fig. 10](#) used concealing as a strategy to manage disorder and keep her living room tidy and organised:

Millie: "I took a photo of underneath the cabinet. So, as you can see, there's like, some crap under there. So, so this is, this is not tidy...But again, okay, it's like wires, like you can't really, I don't know how to tidy up wires. I mean, we could, right, like, there's things that you can do to make it tidier, but it's kind of just, it just gets messy again. I mean, it's just again, you don't really see it too much. It's kind of hidden, actually, like that is just, if there's anything, like, for example, the golf balls, again, that's like my partner's crap, which he wouldn't put in a cupboard or anything. So I've just like pushed them under the cabinet so they're kind of not in view of, I don't even know, yeah."

Millie's account illustrates how concealing is employed to manage disorder. Referring to the mess beneath her cabinet, she notes, "this is not tidy," yet she intentionally pushes objects such as wires and golf balls out of sight. As she explains, "you don't really see it too much. It's kind of hidden," which allows the living room to appear tidy even though the underlying disorder remains. All of our informants reported using concealment at times without full restoration. For example, Clara described storing her children's toys inside a decorative cabinet. By simply closing the doors, the toys are hidden from view, and the living room appears orderly.

Thus, concealing relocates decoupled objects to hidden zones where disorder persists but remains unseen. This creates dual operating modes: presentation spaces (visible, ordered) and operational spaces (hidden, disordered). From an assemblage perspective, concealment is pragmatic rather than deceptive. It acknowledges that achieving total order across all domestic spaces would require unsustainable effort. Millie's concealed wires and Clara's hidden toys represent strategic spatial partitioning, where disorder is contained rather than eliminated, satisfying expectations of visible order ([Arsel & Bean, 2013](#)) while accommodating the practical demands of everyday family life.

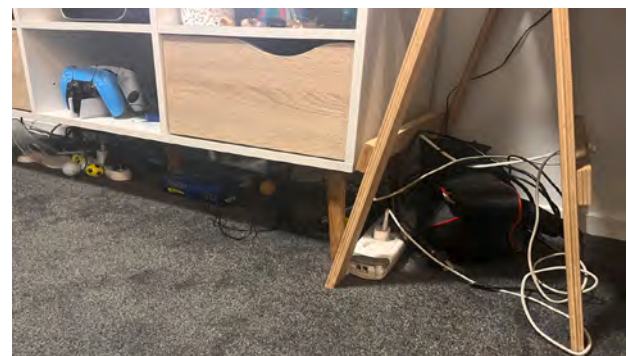


Fig. 10. Millie's living room.

5. Discussion

This study conceptualises domestic (dis)order as a dynamic and ongoing process rather than a series of isolated acts of tidying. Each assemblage capacity we identified – transient capacity, functional capacity, and conducive capacity – represents a manifestation of the assemblage process. Transient capacity reflects de-territorialisation as domestic routines shift; functional capacity illustrates how heterogeneous components form temporary couplings to perform family tasks; and conducive capacity demonstrates the affective alignments through which the home assemblage is continually stabilised despite ongoing reconfigurations. By revealing how these capacities simultaneously produce disorder and shape strategies for managing it, our findings advance theoretical understanding of domestic (dis)order in three ways.

5.1. Theoretical implications

5.1.1. (Dis)order as an evolving assemblage rather than a static pursuit of symbolic classification

This study re-orientates understanding of domestic material (dis)order from classification compliance to evolving assemblage dynamics. Prior research, grounded in symbolic classification theory, positions order as achieved by placing objects in their “proper places” (Dion et al., 2014; Douglas, 1967; Durkheim & Mauss, 2009) and disorder as violations of these boundaries. This framing treats (dis)order as categorical and fixed states – objects are either “in place” or “out of place” – and frames disorder primarily as an individual failure to maintain classificatory rules. While useful for revealing cultural meanings and moral dimensions of tidiness, this framing overlooks the relational and temporal processes through which disorder emerges in practice.

Our assemblage approach responds to Cwerner and Metcalfe's (2003) call to view disorder not as the “underside” of order but as part of an iterative spatio-temporal process. We show how flows of objects, people, and family practices materialise into assemblages that continually reconstitute the meaning and management of (dis)order. Rather than reflecting failures to maintain classification rules, (dis)order emerges through ongoing negotiations among family members, objects, and spaces within home assemblages (Canniford & Bajde, 2015; Hill et al., 2022). A kitchen counter used simultaneously for dining, working, and studying (Gemma) or a cosy, “lived-in” living room (Nellie) illustrates how order forms through these interactions rather than through static classification adherence.

Beyond explaining domestic (dis)order, our findings also extend the application of assemblage theory in consumer and marketing research. Assemblage theory conceptualises capacities as the relational potentials of assemblages and their components (DeLanda, 2016; Parmentier & Fischer, 2015). Building on this perspective, consumer researchers have conceptualised capacities according to the forms of interaction they make possible. For example, Epp et al. (2014) distinguish material, expressive, and imaginative capacities to explain how different components participate in processes of reassembly. Our findings extend this perspective by proposing a different basis for differentiating capacities. Rather than classifying capacities according to the nature of interactions among assemblage components, we conceptualise transient, functional, and conducive capacities according to the distinct forms of emergence they enable. In this way, our framework shifts attention from how assemblage components interact to the kinds of emergent states those interactions produce.

Specifically, our transient, functional, and conducive capacities explain three distinct forms through which domestic (dis)order emerges within the home assemblage, while the associated disorder management strategies illustrate how these emergent capacities are negotiated and stabilised in everyday family life. First, transient capacity shows that (dis)order is temporally contingent, shifting between states as assemblages undergo de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation (DeLanda, 2016). The same space moves between order and disorder as daily

family rhythms shift, revealing (dis)order as processual rather than categorical. Where classification theory treats spatial disorder as stable (objects maintain proper placement until disrupted), our findings show that domestic spaces necessarily cycle through ordered and disordered states as families move between activities within limited spaces.

Second, functional capacity demonstrates how (dis)order emerges from the assemblage's collective performances in achieving household goals. When assemblage components couple and decouple effectively to accomplish family tasks (e.g., meal preparation, work, childcare), disorder arises as a byproduct of optimisation rather than individual negligence. Where prior research frames disorder as a failed state (Ross et al., 2021), we show that disorder emerges precisely when assemblages are optimally configured for multifunctional coordination – functional disorder signals successful assemblage performance.

Third, conducive capacity – home assemblage's socio-affective potential to enable togetherness, belonging, and relational harmony – illustrates how affective assemblage properties shape (dis)order tolerance. Spaces generating strong feelings of togetherness and belonging accommodate higher disorder thresholds because disorder signifies relational qualities that foster family relationships. Classification theory conceptualises all disorder as threatening social boundaries (Douglas, 1967), whereas our findings show that disorder can reinforce boundaries when it materialises as evidence of family socialisation, cohesion and belonging.

Finally, our three disorder management strategies reveal how domestic material (dis)order is managed through assemblage dynamics rather than individual choice alone. Where prior work emphasises individual responsibility for tidying (Belk et al., 2007; Martens & Scott, 2005), we show that strategies emerge from assemblage configurations and re-configurations. For example, disorder is tolerated when assemblage functionality or conducive potential justifies its persistence (e.g., Lucy's supplements and Nellie's living room). Concealing arises when assemblages must satisfy competing demands for functional disorder and social presentation (e.g., Millie's cabinet and Clara's toy storage). Restoring occurs cyclically as assemblages require periodic re-territorialisation to maintain operational efficiency (Gemma's cupboard and Violet's shoe rack). Thus, these strategies represent assemblage-level adaptations to competing domestic demands rather than isolated individual decisions.

Collectively, these capacities suggest a broader way of mobilising assemblage theory within consumer research. Existing applications have primarily used capacities to explain the interactional potentials of heterogeneous assemblage components (e.g., material, expressive, and imaginative capacities; Epp et al., 2014). Our framework complements this approach by showing that capacities may also be differentiated according to the forms of emergence they generate. Transient, functional, and conducive capacities therefore provide a lens for examining how assemblages become temporarily stabilised, accomplish everyday practices, and sustain relational coordination. Although developed within domestic home assemblages, this framework may prove useful for analysing other consumer and marketplace assemblages where order emerges through ongoing reconfigurations of people, material objects, spaces, and practices.

5.1.2. Disorder as a positive coping resource that scaffolds family life

Douglas's (1967) seminal work casts material disorder as “matter out of place”, a threat to symbolic boundaries that must be removed to restore social order. Consumer research builds on this view, portraying disorder as a source of embarrassment, fragmentation, and moral failure (Belk et al., 2007), as well as family tension and relational strain (Hirschman et al., 2012; Kajander & Koskinen-Koivisto, 2023; Martens & Scott, 2005; Stevenson & Prout, 2013). This literature largely treats disorder as inherently negative and tidying as beneficial. Even studies that acknowledge context sensitivity in managing (dis)order (Dion et al., 2014) still frame (dis)order as inherently problematic, positioning tolerance as temporary acceptance rather than recognising its potential

value. Our study challenges this assumption by showing that material disorder can be both disruptive and productive, depending on assemblage configurations. We identify three forms through which disorder functions as a coping resource in everyday household life: transitional disorder, functional disorder, and relational disorder.

Transitional disorder arises during shifts between household activities. Holly's dining table, accumulating items after work and James's kitchen island functioning as a daily "drop zone" show how temporary mess facilitates the flow of family rhythms. These brief accumulations create spatial buffers that absorb tensions, support movement between family domains, and help households adapt to unfolding practices. Objects left temporarily "out of place" also act as cues for later action, reducing cognitive strain during busy periods. In this way, transitional disorder provides essential scaffolding for navigating everyday family life.

Functional disorder emerges when family members prioritise getting things done over maintaining aesthetic order within the home assemblage. Gemma's kitchen table serves as a workspace, dining surface, and study area at once, generating mess because it supports multiple activities. Likewise, Selma's office accommodates bike parts, work materials, and temporary storage items because its role requires flexible object arrangements. Such disorder sustains productivity and adaptability, signalling efficiency rather than neglect. Classification systems that assume single-purpose spaces and fixed object placements overlook the realities of contemporary domestic life. We therefore conceptualise functional disorder as assemblage intelligence, where prioritising household practices takes precedence over rigid symbolic order.

Relational disorder emerges when preserving family harmony requires tolerating mess. It supports connection, care, and emotional continuity. James, leaving his daughter's misplaced jumper on the chair, interpreting it as part of her learning process, illustrates how disorder can strengthen bonds and express intimacy rather than threaten order. Similarly, Nellie tolerates living-room mess because it creates a "lived-in" feeling that signifies family togetherness. In these cases, insisting on immediate tidiness would undermine the socialisation, learning and sense of togetherness that such disorder enables. Thus, relational disorder reveals that maintaining family cohesion sometimes requires accepting material mess.

Our findings also reveal the opposite dynamic; just as disorder can be productive, the pursuit of order can be disruptive. While classification systems prescribe tidying as a path to harmony and stability (Douglas, 1967), insistence on restoring order can become constraining (Dion et al., 2014). For individuals, constantly returning objects to their proper places can interrupt everyday routines, for example, Lucy's supplements must remain visible to support her health regime despite violating aesthetic norms, and Gemma's counter must tolerate the accumulation of items to preserve its multifunctional use. At the family level, ordering practices may generate tensions when one member's pursuits of tidiness conflict with others' ongoing activities in shared spaces. This challenges the dominant assumption that order inherently enables stability (Vohs et al., 2013) and highlights that both disorder and ordering must be understood relationally, in terms of their situated impact on everyday family life and assemblage functioning.

5.1.3. Extended understanding of collective family life and assemblages

By positioning (dis)order as emerging through the dynamics of the home assemblage, we show that managing disorder is a collective and relational practice rather than an individual responsibility. Prior family consumption research has employed assemblage thinking to understand family identity (Epp & Price, 2008), networked family dynamics (Epp et al., 2014), and technology integration into family life (Epp & Velagaleti, 2014; Hoffman & Novak, 2018). However, these studies have not examined how interactions among family members, material objects, domestic spaces, and temporal rhythms generate material disorder as everyday family life unfolds. Our findings extend this literature by revealing that the same assemblage dynamics that construct family

identity – shared spaces, collective family practices, relational interactions – simultaneously produce disorder as an emergent property of everyday domestic life. Specifically, we identify three ways in which disorder is integral to assemblage dynamics and family identity processes.

First, the spaces and practices that construct family identity simultaneously produce disorder. For instance, Nellie's "lived-in" living room and James's tolerance of his daughter's misplaced jumper illustrate how disorder becomes a material trace of family identity work. The mess is not incidental to family identity formation but integral to it – evidence of ongoing family practices, learning moments, and collective inhabitation of domestic spaces. While prior research (Epp & Price, 2008; Epp & Velagaleti, 2014) show how families construct identity through consumption practices, we demonstrate that these practices inevitably produce disorder that must be navigated as part of identity work itself.

Second, disorder management reveals how power dynamics and role allocation among family members contribute to the ongoing reconfiguration of the home assemblage. Family members occupy different positions with varying responsibilities and tidying standards. James's role as a father-educator shapes his tolerance for his daughter's imperfect tidying, Gemma's role as primary organiser drives her active restoration of the cupboard order, and Millie conceals her partner's "crap" to maintain living room aesthetics. These responses show how disorder becomes a site for ongoing negotiation of roles, responsibilities, and relational harmony (Epp & Price, 2008).

Third, our findings show that family cohesion and disorder tolerance are interdependent. Spaces that foster togetherness (conductive capacity) often generate higher disorder thresholds because the disorder materialises family connection and bonding. This extends assemblage research on family by showing that material disorder is not necessarily a failure of family coordination but can reflect successful coordination of everyday family life, leaving material traces of assemblages working to sustain relational bonds and domestic flow.

5.2. Managerial implications

Our findings challenge a dominant assumption underlying the growing home-organisation market that consumers primarily benefit from eliminating mess and maintaining continuous visible order. Instead, some forms of disorder support everyday functioning, accommodate changing household activities, and facilitate family coordination. This creates opportunities for designers, retailers, organising brands, and professional organisers to move beyond solutions centred on decluttering, minimalism, and permanent control. Rather than treating all mess as a problem to be removed, managers can develop products and services that help households distinguish between disruptive and productive disorder and flexibly manage the transition between them. This extends calls for more holistic organising practices (Denegri-Knott & Parsons, 2014; Johnson, 2013) by showing that effective organising may involve not only restoring order, but also strategically tolerating or concealing disorder when it supports everyday family life.

First, recognising concealing as a strategy for managing disorder creates opportunities for innovation in storage, homewares, and interior design. Households often need to maintain visible order without removing objects that remain important to ongoing activities. Brands can therefore design solutions that allow spaces to move easily between use and presentation, such as multi-purpose furniture with concealed storage, modular shelving that closes when needed, designated "clutter zones," or entryway systems that temporarily absorb objects in transition. Existing offerings such as IKEA's pull-out storage and Muji's modular organising systems already point toward this possibility. The opportunity, however, extends beyond simply hiding clutter. Products can be designed specifically to preserve accessibility and everyday functionality while allowing households to quickly restore visible order when circumstances require it. Second, recognising that some disorder can be productively tolerated has implications for professional

organising, home-management services, and retail communication. Our findings show that disorder can support overlapping household activities and family coordination rather than simply indicate organisational failure. Professional organisers could therefore move from prescribing uniformly tidy spaces toward helping clients distinguish between disorder that interferes with household functioning and disorder that enables it. For example, a kitchen command centre, children's play area, or combined work-study space may appear untidy while supporting effective household coordination. Retailers could similarly present more realistic room settings that reflect multifunctional family life rather than exclusively showcasing idealised, continuously tidy homes. This could help brands position themselves as enabling workable homes rather than imposing unattainable standards of domestic perfection.

Finally, restoring strategies show that maintaining order is an ongoing household activity rather than a one-off organisational achievement. This creates opportunities for firms to develop products and services that support repeated transitions between order and disorder. Shared household apps, collaborative task systems, modular storage cues, and family-oriented organising services could help distribute tidying work across household members and integrate it into everyday routines. Marketing communications could likewise reposition organising products away from promises of permanent control and toward helping families repeatedly reset spaces as their activities change. Such positioning acknowledges that successful home organisation is not necessarily a permanently tidy home, but one that can move flexibly between disorder and order while continuing to support household functioning and family relationships.

5.3. Limitations and future research directions

While this study has examined the emergence and management of material (dis)order within consumers' homes by attending to the interplay of people, objects, spaces, and time, several avenues remain open for further exploration. A particularly important direction for future research lies in unpacking how (dis)order is shaped by power relations within households. Although our findings suggest that individuals' roles within the family influence both their interpretations of disorder and their strategies for managing it, we did not examine the broader politics of domestic relationships and how these dynamics shape accountability for order. Future studies could investigate how household members, such as partners, children, or extended kin, construct, perform, and negotiate responsibilities for maintaining order, as well as how these responsibilities may be contested or resisted. Employing ethnographic and longitudinal methods could provide deeper insights into how such dynamics shift over time, particularly during periods of household transition or role reconfiguration, such as divorce, migration, caregiving, or retirement.

Another fruitful avenue for research involves extending the conceptualisation of (dis)order beyond the domestic sphere. Non-domestic environments such as workplaces and co-living arrangements present distinct challenges and opportunities for understanding how material disorder is produced, tolerated, or resolved. These contexts often operate under more fluid or undefined norms and power structures and are typically shared by individuals with varying levels of authority, routines, and expectations. For example, in co-working offices or colleges, the negotiation of tidiness must accommodate multiple users' needs and temporal rhythms without the presence of formal hierarchies or clearly defined roles. Such settings offer fertile ground to explore how shared responsibility is distributed, how conflicts over disorder are managed, and how situational factors shape the functionality and tolerability of disorder. Investigating these contexts could yield novel insights into the networked nature of disorder and extend the framework proposed in this study by highlighting alternative configurations of (dis)order as a dynamic and relational phenomenon.

Finally, as participants were primarily recruited via LinkedIn and were predominantly highly educated, the sample reflects largely middle

to upper-middle-class households. This may shape the findings through particular norms, resources, and spatial arrangements associated with these groups. Future research could examine more socio-economically diverse contexts to explore how (dis)order emerges and is managed under different material and cultural conditions.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Jamal Abarashi: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Prabash Edirisingha:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Amy Errmann:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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