

Understanding Minimalistic (Non-)Consumption Patterns: Implications for Innovative Responsible Business Practices

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Abstract: The rise of minimalism reflects a broader societal shift away from consumerism, as individuals seek fulfilment beyond material possessions. Minimalists prioritize sustainability, simplicity, and intentional living, challenging traditional consumer behaviours. This paper explores the mindsets and behaviours of minimalists and examines their implications for businesses aiming to adopt responsible and ethical practices. Through 20 semi-structured interviews with minimalists in Germany, the research uncovers how minimalists make consumer choices, highlighting their focus on experiences, meaningful relationships, and personal growth over the accumulation of material goods. The findings suggest that innovative businesses have significant opportunities to align with these evolving preferences by offering durable, multifunctional products designed for meaningful use. Furthermore, innovative companies can create experiences that encourage community, authenticity, and personal development, positioning themselves as pioneers of sustainable and responsible practices in a changing consumer landscape.

Keywords: Minimalism, Consumption, Sustainability, Responsibility, Voluntary Simplicity

1. Introduction

Many entrepreneurs are driven by environmental or societal goals rather than personal gain (Smadi – Delcheva, 2021, p. 293). Sustainable entrepreneurs prioritize social responsibility and use renewable resources to improve their environment (Laverty & Littel, 2020, p. 117). Often viewed as "paradigm shifters", they apply creative thinking to innovation. To foster innovation, entrepreneurs must stay aware of global and local competition and identify emerging market trends (Smadi – Delcheva, 2021, p. 293).

Marketers have adopted "Minimalism" as a trendy lifestyle for campaigns promoting luxury goods, clothing, and furniture (Doppler & Steffen, 2024, p. 1). While minimalism is gaining popularity in mainstream culture, often emphasizing reduced consumption and decluttering (Wilson & Bellezza, 2022), marketers are using it to sell luxury items. This article distinguishes between the lifestyle of minimalism, for which people reduce their consumption, and minimalism as a trend, which is used by firms to promote products, and answers the following research question: In which ways can innovative entrepreneurs apply minimalist principles to product marketing?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to Minimalism as a Lifestyle

Minimalism as a post-capitalist lifestyle is currently developing rapidly, particularly formats like "Tidying up with Marie Kondo" (Kondo, 2014) or "The Minimalists" (The Minimalists, n. D.) have brought minimalism into mainstream consumer culture. However, there seems to be a misconception amongst marketers about the meaning of minimalism and how people who practice minimalism interpret and live a minimalistic lifestyle.

Many marketers are trying to integrate the concept into their product portfolio. They are using a market development strategy to communicate existing products accordingly (e.g. Ikea 'Modern Scandi Style: Minimalist and bright home', Ikea, n.d.) or with a diversification strategy to develop specifically minimalistically designed products (e.g. Calvin Klein 'Confident Minimalism', Calvin Klein, autumn 2023 campaign). Such market strategies understand minimalism as a consumer trend and are not to be confused with the idealistic notion of minimalism that those people have who practice this lifestyle.

2.2 Definition of Minimalism

There is still not a commonly used definition of minimalism in literature, which is due in part to the fact consumer minimalism may take many different forms. Derwanz (2015) sees the lifestyle and the change of

consumption habits as fundamental to define minimalism, Wilson & Belezza (2022, p. 800) place the quantity of possession, a rigid aesthetic, and consciously curated consumption at the center of their definition.

Minimalism refers to a low-consumption lifestyle (Lloyd & Pennington, 2020) which is characterized by a change in consumption (Derwanz, 2015), anti-consumption practices (Dopierała, 2017, p. 69), and a focus on simplicity (Lloyd & Pennington, 2020). It is a lifestyle and an intrinsic attitude which inspires people to focus on the essential, regardless of societal trends. Everything that is perceived to be of value e.g. that creates happiness and meaning to the individual is considered essential. Minimalism is an ongoing process that helps individuals to create order, time and freedom (Doppler & Steffen, 2024, p. 12).

3. Methodology and Sample

Two senior researchers conducted 20 semi-structured in-depth expert interviews with people who consider themselves to be minimalists in Germany. The sample consisted of 12 females and 8 males between the ages of 28 and 55 who all practice minimalism voluntarily. None of the participants live a reduced lifestyle because of financial needs or job loss. The interviewers asked participants about their definition of minimalism, their motivation for living a minimalistic lifestyle, consumption habits and personal consequences of living a minimalistic lifestyle. The responses were transcribed, coded and analyzed systematically with the data analysis software MAXQDA.

4. Results

4.1 Mindset of Minimalists

The study participants all explained that they feel very happy with their lifestyle. Although they consume little, but very carefully, they do not miss anything. They prioritize experiences, meet up with friends and develop meaningful relationships. They strive for personal growth rather than to accumulate many items. The study participants own between 270 and 400 items. This is a big contrast to approximately 10.000 items that a typical German household possesses (Doppler & Steffen, 2024, p. 30) or the 300.000 items a typical American household has (MacVean, 21.03.2014).

4.2 Purchase Behaviors and Product Preferences of Minimalists

The interview analysis shows that minimalists do not generally avoid consumption. Products are consumed regardless of fashion and seasonal trends. Figure 1 shows the 5 levels of assessment minimalists go through when making product purchases. Consumption of minimalists is more carefully reflected on several levels before a decision is made.

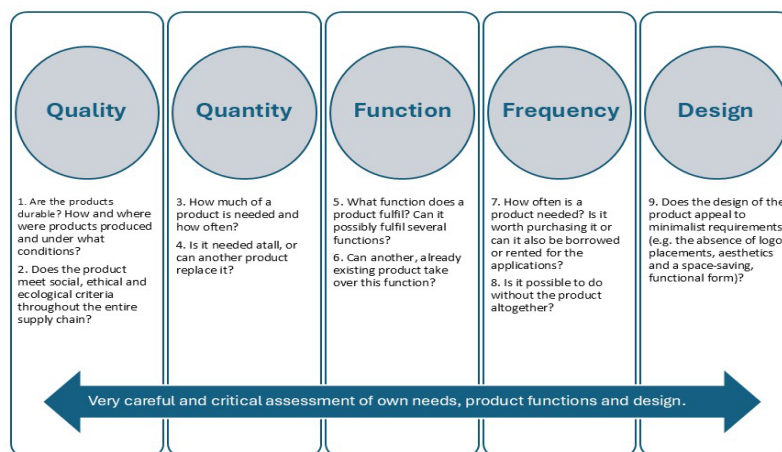


Figure 1: Minimalists' 5 levels of critical and reflective consumption assessment

The analysis also shows that Minimalists limit their media consumption by avoiding television and newspaper subscriptions. When they do consume media, it is intentional and on-demand. Instead of excessive media use, they prefer outdoor activities, spending time with loved ones, or reading. Some minimalists aim to use their devices until the end of their life cycle, which may lead to issues like incompatible apps, poor content quality, limited storage, or small screens.

5. Recommendations for Innovative Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurs recognize that environmental protection is vital for long-term business success (Lavery & Littel, 2020, p. 118). The UN's 12th Sustainable Development Goal promotes sustainable consumption and production to drive business and lifestyle changes (Umweltbundesamt, n.d.). As consumers increasingly expect responsible behaviour, businesses are shifting toward sustainability (Maloney & Meurer, 2023, p. 259). Minimalism, promoting sustainability and purpose, challenges traditional consumer culture. While minimalists consume less, their product choices often align with non-minimalists, making them a relevant target for businesses.

5.1 Strategy and Business Model

To reach minimalist or consumption-critical consumers, businesses should consider rental, subscription, exchange, and second-hand options, already established in the mobility sector (e.g., bicycles, cars, e-scooters). These models could be applied to seasonal or infrequently used items like tools, games, and kitchen appliances. For example, Decathlon's 'Second Use' program offers sports and camping products in categories such as 'as new,' 'very good,' and 'good' both in stores and online (Steffen, 2023, p. 333).

To connect with minimalist and discerning consumers, businesses must gain a deep understanding of their values and earn their trust. Traditional marketing, which focuses on immediate responses, is less effective. Instead, companies should focus on the social and ecological impacts of their products, shifting from image-driven content to informative content series (Plaschke, 2020, p. 30). Minimalists and discerning consumers prefer transparent, fact-based unbiased information to make independent purchasing decisions.

Thompson & Norton (2011) noted the trend of "feature creep," where products are overloaded with features that, while expensive and reducing usability, signal technological sophistication. To better serve minimalists, businesses should prioritize simplicity and functionality. Minimalists can contribute to product design, particularly in "pluralism of use," where products serve multiple functions with a reduced design (e.g., multifunctional appliances or versatile clothing). Businesses could involve minimalists in co-creating or redesigning products in product development workshops e.g. by asking the nine questions outlined in Fig. 5.

5.2 Product Marketing

Providing reliable, accessible information on a product's entire life cycle is essential for minimalists when making purchasing decisions. A circular economy and transparency in materials, manufacturing, and disposal are critical. Businesses should share disposal or recycling options early in the product's life cycle—even before purchase.

For food and hygiene products, offering flexible quantities and packaging sizes benefits environmentally conscious consumers and minimalists. Unpackaged options let them buy only what they need, minimizing waste and supporting sustainable consumption.

Traditional segmentation based on age, gender, or income (Solomon, 2016, p. 11) is less relevant for minimalists. Instead, they should be seen as "communities of values," guided by sustainability, simplicity, and purpose (Solomon, 2016, p. 76).

6. Conclusion and Limitations

Innovative entrepreneurs can succeed financially by developing products and services based on minimalist ideas. These products should be long-lasting, versatile, and designed for specific purposes. They can also create experiences that foster community, authenticity, and personal growth—reflecting the relational and experiential values of minimalists.

To reach minimalists and consumption-critical consumers, communication should extend beyond company channels to where the community engages. In corporate communication, minimalist values can be emphasized by highlighting quality over quantity, reducing resource use, and promoting well-being, satisfaction, and health. Ethical, social, and ecological responsibility should be integrated to encourage behavior that benefits the common good. Traditional influencer marketing is ineffective, as minimalists limit digital consumption and distrust influencers. Instead, companies should build in-house expertise, with employees sharing tips on product care, repairs, and second-hand options via social media.

This research is limited to interviews with minimalists and does not reflect the perspectives of non-minimalists on minimalist practices. Additionally, minimalists were not directly asked about product requirements in the

context of product development. Future research should address these gaps and include interviews with entrepreneurs as well.

Ethics Declaration

Ethical approval was not required as the study involved voluntary adult participants who received information about the study and gave verbal consent. No funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest.

AI Declaration

The authors declare that no generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. DeepL Translate, DeepL Write and Quillbot were used to correct grammar and improve language.

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