

Minimalist Aesthetics: conveying an image through clothing style

Érica Maria Calíope Sobreira

Doutoranda em Administração, Universidade Federal do Paraná / erica.mcs21@gmail.com
Orcid: 0000-0002-7162-4676 / <http://lattes.cnpq.br/5663270256838780>

Danielle Mantovani

Doutora em Administração, Universidade Federal do Paraná / danielle@ufpr.br
Orcid: 0000-0001-7456-304X / <http://lattes.cnpq.br/0007431938530391>

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ABSTRACT

Minimalism is a theme on the rise in consumer literature, especially when it involves fashion and minimalist aesthetics. Despite this, there are few studies dedicated to discussing what reactions the minimalist aesthetics may produce on the perceptions of others about minimalists as individuals. With this essay, we fill this gap by discussing what image minimalist aesthetics conveys about people who adopt a minimalist clothing style. We discuss, therefore, how minimalists may be perceived as more competent and less warm people in the eyes of others, in addition to being able to convey an image of rationality in decision making rather than feelings. Finally, this essay opens up the possibility for a wide range of future studies on minimalism in consumption.

Keywords: *Minimalism. Minimalist aesthetics. Fashion consumption.*



Estética Minimalista: transmitindo uma imagem através do estilo da roupa

RESUMO

O minimalismo é um tema em ascensão na literatura de consumo, principalmente quando envolve moda e estética minimalista. Apesar disso, são poucos os estudos dedicados a discutir quais reações a estética minimalista pode produzir nas percepções dos outros sobre os minimalistas como indivíduos. Com este ensaio, preenchemos essa lacuna ao discutir que imagem a estética minimalista transmite sobre pessoas que adotam um estilo de roupa minimalista. Discutimos, portanto, como os minimalistas podem ser percebidos como pessoas mais competentes e menos calorosas aos olhos dos outros, além de serem capazes de transmitir uma imagem de racionalidade na tomada de decisão ao invés de sentimentos. Por fim, este ensaio abre a possibilidade para uma ampla gama de estudos futuros sobre o minimalismo no consumo.

Palavras-chave: Minimalismo. Estética minimalista. Consumo de moda.

Estética minimalista: transmitiendo una imagen a través del estilo de la ropa

RESUMEN

El minimalismo es un tema en auge en la literatura de consumo, especialmente cuando se trata de moda y estética minimalista. A pesar de esto, existen pocos estudios dedicados a discutir qué reacciones puede producir la estética minimalista sobre las percepciones de los demás sobre los minimalistas como individuos. Con este ensayo, llenamos este vacío discutiendo qué imagen transmite la estética minimalista sobre las personas que adoptan un estilo de ropa minimalista. Discutimos, por tanto, cómo los minimalistas pueden ser percibidos como personas más competentes y menos cálidas a los ojos de los demás, además de ser capaces de transmitir una imagen de racionalidad en la toma de decisiones más que de sentimientos. Finalmente, este ensayo abre la posibilidad de una amplia gama de estudios futuros sobre el minimalismo en el consumo.

Palabras-clave: Minimalismo. Estética minimalista. Consumo de moda.

1. INTRODUCTION

Minimalism has been studied as new mode of consumption focused on reduced consumption (Eckmann; Landwehr, 2020; Dopierała, 2017; Lloyd; Pennington, 2020; Pangarkar et al., 2021) and a way to achieve personal well-being and sustainability through consumption (Derwanz; Strebinger, 2021; Kang; Martinez; Johnson, 2021). Furthermore, minimalism is a theme on the rise in consumer literature, especially when it involves fashion and minimalist aesthetics (Hagen et al., 2021; Wilson; Bellezza, 2022).

For instance, a recent study with people who adopted minimalism shows that minimalist clothing style affects how an individual feels about themselves (Jain, 2022). On the other hand, another study suggests that minimalist aesthetics in products may produce reactions from other people, which may influence their evaluations (Hagen et al., 2021). In this sense, minimalist aesthetics can be presented in products, marketing (Cook, 2019; Lee, 2021; Pangarkar et al., 2021; Wilson; Bellezza, 2022) or, as for the case of this essay, in the clothing style and way of dressing of minimalists.

Previous research suggests that what people wear, and their clothing style often convey a message to other people, which allows impressions to be formed about them, in addition to judgments and evaluations by others (Banister; Hogg, 2007; Guy; Banim, 2000; Kaiser, 1990; Hokkanen, 2014; Lee, 2021). Despite this, there are few studies dedicated to discussing what reactions the minimalist aesthetics may produce on the perceptions of others about minimalists as individuals (Hagen et al., 2021; Jain, 2022). With this essay, we fill this gap by discussing what image minimalist aesthetics conveys about people who adopt a minimalist clothing style.

2. MINIMALISM, MINIMALIST AESTHETICS AND CONSUMPTION

Minimalism is defined as “reducing our necessary items to a minimum, and doing away with excess so we can focus on the things that are truly important to us” (Sasaki, 2017, p. 18). In consumption, Wilson and Bellezza (2022) state that minimalism involves three key dimensions focusing on a reduced number of possessions, preference for sparse aesthetic and mindfully curated consumption.

According to Vladimirova (2021, p. 114), minimalism in fashion holds that “people’s needs can be satisfied with a relatively small number of matching, good quality garments that can serve the owner for a long time”. For instance, the stylist and fashion designer Jill Sander showed that synonym with minimalism means subtraction, not addition as a principle of fashion (Minasian; Gudkova, 2022).

Thus, still in this perspective, one of the fundamental dimensions of minimalism is minimalist aesthetics (Hagen et al., 2021), that is present in the minimalist clothing style. Minimalist collections and items emphasize simplicity, being usually composed of simple designs, clean lines, limited ornamentation, and monochromatic colors (Wilson; Bellezza, 2022). Freedom from excess color and preference for monochrome are significant features of minimalist clothing style as well as the preference for more neutral and sober colors (Lee, 2021; Minasian; Gudkova, 2022). Xie (2021) points out reasons why a minimalist style is popular nowadays (Table 1):

Universal standard	When it comes to complexity, people have different interpretations of beauty. However, when it comes to minimalism, beauty has a universal standard.
Easy to understand	Minimalism doesn’t require much explanation, is appreciated because it is easy to understand.

Order and balance	Amid the high-speed rhythm of today's society, adopting a minimalistic style reflects people's needs for balance and order in life.
Comfort, practicality and versatility	Minimalist values comfort, in addition to practical and versatile considerations of style.
Style and quality	Style and high quality are important features of minimalism aesthetics.
Gender neutrality	Minimalism allows unisex style to be valued in the fashion industry.

Source: By the authors from Xie (2021).

As shown in table 1, there are specific reasons why the minimalist style is still popular nowadays. Minimalism as a style presents six components to the consumer public: 1) it is based on a **universal standard** of what is understood as beauty, which moves away from the idea of complexity; 2) it is **easy to understand**, not requiring much explanation; 3) it appeals to the idea of **order and balance**, which helps to reflect people's need for these aspects in today's fast-paced life; 4) values and emphasizes **comfort, practicality and versatility** in style; 5) **style and high quality** are important features of its aesthetics; 6) and opens up the possibility of promoting **gender neutrality** within the fashion industry (Xie, 2021).

In the next section, we discuss how people can convey an image through their clothing style.

3. CONVEYING AN IMAGE THROUGH CLOTHING STYLE

Via their clothing, people show a lot about themselves (Banister; Hogg, 2007; Kaiser, 1990). This may occur because clothing is seen as a person's visible self (Eicher; Roach, 1973), a way of self-presentation (Guy; Banim, 2000; Hokkanen, 2014), and the symbolic character of clothing may include styles and fashion (Kaiser, 1990).

Simmel (1997, pp. 187–89) states that fashion is the result of "the oscillation between adaptation to our social

group (imitation, conformity) and individual elevation from it (distinction, change)". For Gronow (1997, p. 84), when people wear their clothes, they can find:

"a socially acceptable and safe way of distinguishing oneself of the others and, at the same time, satisfies the individual need for adaptation and social imitation" (Gronow, 1997, p. 84).

In this perspective, people can find ways (whether intentional or not) to put a distance between themselves from others or get closer to others by choosing to dress in a certain way or style (Lee, 2021).

According to Lee (2021), to have or be of a certain style goes beyond an individual taste as the style is responsible for the particularity of the individual being subjugated to a "general law", which also applies to others who share that same style. Thus, through their clothing, people can generate visual information processing about their style, allowing subsequent evaluations from others since visual aesthetics and perception meaningfully influence consumer judgments and evaluations (Avalal; Saluja; Jiang, 2019; Kaiser, 1990; Townsend, 2017).

Visual information can also generate other aesthetic evaluations, for example from the design or color of a person's clothing (Pazda; Thorstenson, 2019; Salvi; Merino; Fialho, 2016), in addition to stimulating emotions in the form of affective reactions to people's clothing styles (Carvalho, 2013; Fontoura; Zacar, 2008). For instance, Kim et al. (2020) and Pazda and Thorstenson (2019) suggest that differences in colors (warm vs. cool) and chromas (high vs. low) can influence impressions of personality. Warm colors and high-chroma are associated with creativity, extraversion and innovativeness while cool colors and low-chroma are with elegance, introversion and comfort.

In the next section we discuss how minimalists can be seen by others based on the aesthetics of their clothing style. Specifically, we are going to discuss what image they might

generate in others.

4. MINIMALISTS: WARM OR COMPETENT, EMOTIONAL OR RATIONAL PEOPLE?

In general, people perceive and differentiate others in terms of their warmth and competence, two dimensions that are often perceived as opposite characteristics in impression management (Suls et al., 2019). In this sense, there may exist a negative relationship between the two dimensions of competence and warmth. For instance, perceivers often judge a person as less warm when the person is described as competent and judge a person as less competent when the person is described as warm (Kervyn et al., 2012). However, Fiske et al. (2018) found that some groups are negatively regarded on both dimensions, whereas other groups tend to be regarded positively on both, what we suggest is not the case for minimalists.

Warmth includes perceptions of generosity, kindness, helpfulness and thoughtfulness (Judd et al., 2005). According to Suls et al. (2019, p. 252), “perceived warmth tends to confer liking”. That is, people who seem to be friendly, kind, likeable, nice (Halkias; Diamantopoulos, 2020).

Even in the case of minimalists being seen as “nice” people who give little importance to material things and value simplicity (Wilson; Bellezza, 2022), they may be perceived as **more competent and less warm people in the eyes of others** because their clothes, often with simple designs, and more neutral, sober colors (Lee, 2021), can help convey this perception. This would be in line with the study by Hagen et al. (2021), which shows how the search for functionality in consumption is related to the visual aesthetics of products presented to consumers. The authors show that if consumers seek functionality (focus-on-essentials), they prefer minimalist aesthetics.

We suggest that just as minimalist aesthetics is associated

with functionality, minimalists may be perceived as being more functional, practical, and competent people. In this direction, a recent study suggests that a minimalist fashion and style focuses on practicality, comfort and versatility (Xie, 2021), which is often observed in clothes with understated or monochromatic colors (Minasian; Gudkova, 2022).

Competence includes confidence, effectiveness, intelligence, capability, skillfulness, practicality, success (Aaker Et Al., 2010; Grandey Et Al., 2005). For instance, Steve Jobs, a person often associated with minimalism, is considered a figure of financial success (Cashmore, 2011). In Fumio Sasaki's book 'Goodbye, Things', he states that "many minimalists are fond of Apple products and of Apple's founder, Steve Jobs. The products that Jobs created always avoided excess" (Sasaki, 2017, p. 43).

In this sense, the minimalist style and aesthetics can be associated with competence, that is, the notion of success or even efficiency, since competence can be defined as the efficiency in the achievement of tasks, such as being competent, efficient, and capable (Carrier et al., 2014). Efficiency and competence relate to each other mainly regard to the ability to manage financial resources, being effective and appropriate in its management (De Nardo et al., 2017). For instance, minimalists can manage their own time better, as they do not dedicate so much of their time and mental space to worrying about many material goods and the purchase of those goods (Uggla, 2019). Thus, by reducing one's possessions, minimalists are also practicing time management since they have more time to devote to other activities (Uggla, 2019). It can also convey an image of competence to others.

Being seen as more competent people can also help convey the image that minimalists are more rational people, rather than more emotionally driven people. Past studies show that people's decisions can be feeling-based (i.e., relaying on emotions and feelings) or reason-based (i.e., relaying on their reasoning and the pros and cons) (Chang; Hung, 2018).

The minimalist style is relatively restrained (Lee, 2021;

Xie, 2021) and minimalism is associated with preference for monochromatic colors (Minasian; Gudkova, 2022; Wilson; Bellezza, 2022). Since chroma is a perceptual variable that can influence first impressions of personality, influencing perceptions of a person or group (Pazda; Thorstenson, 2019), observers may see minimalists as more rational once it is easier to evaluate rational people as more reserved or introverted than lively or extraverted. In this perspective, Pazda and Thorstenson (2019) show that people who wear clothes with low-chroma colors are perceived as more reserved or introverted than those who used clothes with high-chroma colors in their study, seen as more lively or extraverted.

In the same line, Kim et al. (2020) suggest that cool colors affect aesthetic perceptions more positively than warm colors regarding characteristics such as comfort and elegance. On the other hand, warm colors affect aesthetic perceptions more positively than cool colors regarding characteristics such as creativity and innovativeness (Kim et al., 2020). As minimalists tend to wear soft and monochromatic colors, paying attention to comfort and practicality, and sense of order and balance (Xie, 2021), we may expect that observers will see them as more proximate to cool colors while distant of warm colors. This will also contribute to conveying an image of more rational and competent people.

Furthermore, Zalewska and Cobel-Tokarska (2016) analysis of blogs of Polish Minimalists suggest that minimalists go through a process of rationalization of pleasure and emotions. They use rationality over impulse-based pleasures and control over emotions involved in consumption (Zalewska; Cobel-Tokarska, 2016). What observers may perceive is that minimalists would be more rational, that is, tending to make decisions based on cognitive reasoning (Chang; Hung, 2018) (e.g., pros and cons of consuming fewer and better quality products and adequate financial management for this purpose) rather than based on affective feelings, since feeling-based decisions are often more

automatic and insensitive to numerical quantities (Chang; Hung, 2018; Zajonc, 1980), compared to decisions with a focus on rationality. Thus, the search for a sober and simple aesthetic focusing on what is essential and of high quality (Vladimirova, 2021; Xie, 2021), leads minimalists to pursue few possessions and reduced consumption, which can convey **an image of rationality in decision making rather than feelings.**

5. FINAL REMARKS

In this article we bring to light a new mode of consumption based on the reduction of possessions, called minimalism, focusing our discussion on minimalist aesthetics (i.e., simple designs, clean lines, limited ornamentation, neutral, monochromatic, and sober colors) (Lee, 2021; Minasian; Gudkova, 2022; Wilson; Bellezza, 2022). Specifically, this essay discussed what image minimalist aesthetics conveys about people who adopt a minimalist clothing style.

Exposure to minimalist aesthetics might generate specific perceptions and reactions in others. In this essay we suggest that, based on minimalist aesthetics, minimalists are seen as more competent and less warm people in the eyes of others, in addition to conveying an image of rationality in decision making rather than feelings.

This has implications for the field of fashion. Since minimalist aesthetics can convey these messages, could this help fashion brands induce greater perceptions of success by appealing to this type of aesthetic in their products? Past studies show that competent and less warm-hearted people are seen as successful people (Carrier et al., 2014). In this direction, some questions can be raised in future research: What effect does a minimalist aesthetic have on brands and their fashion products? What strategies should brands use to attract and engage minimalist consumers?

Thus, this essay opens up the possibility for a wide range

of future studies on minimalism in fashion consumption. For instance, some studies suggest that minimalist aesthetics can be associated with terms such as inconspicuous minimalism (Pangarkar et al., 2021), or inconspicuous consumption (Bellezza, 2023), also called quiet luxury, where products, generally fashion products, are marked by subtle brand signals (Brandão; Barbedo, 2023). However, no studies have investigated this association to date. Future research can advance in this direction.

There are some social implications when this aesthetic is adopted by people in their clothing style. Since minimalist aesthetics conveys an image of their adopters being more competent and rational, can people be seen as more autonomous and independent, more focused on themselves than on others? Or could they be seen as more withdrawn compared to others? Future studies can investigate these questions.

Therefore, future research may follow the investigative path outlined in this essay, evaluating not only minimalist aesthetics, but also the lifestyle of minimalists and the implications of what each one signals to other people. There is a growing proliferation of recent qualitative studies of minimalism (Lloyd; Pennington, 2020; Oliveira De Mendonca; Coelho Rocha; Bogéa Da Costa Tayt-Son, 2021). Considering the current scenario, we suggest that quantitative and experimental studies can further open the field of study on minimalism in fashion, marketing, and consumer behavior.

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