

Minimally Indulgent: How Consumer Minimalism Signals High Self-Control

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Cite as:

Flout Stephanie, Deng Xiaoyan, Huang Yunhui, Zhang Qiang (2026), Minimally Indulgent: How Consumer Minimalism Signals High Self-Control. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 55th, (134007)

Paper from the 55th Annual EMAC Conference, Bath, United Kingdom, June 2-5, 2026



Minimally Indulgent: How Consumer Minimalism Signals High Self-Control

This research explores how others perceive minimalist consumers. Minimalism is an emerging consumption trend, yet there is limited research on consumer minimalism and its implications for consumers, marketers, and policymakers. We propose and demonstrate that minimalist consumers are perceived by others as having superior self-control abilities. This perception is reflected in making healthier eating and lifestyle choices and being generally better at self-control. The minimalist lifestyle, which involves minimal indulgent consumption and consistent denial of consumption rewards, leads people to infer that minimalist consumers tend to avoid indulgence. Consequently, this results in the perception of minimalist consumers having high self-control. We conducted six preregistered experiments to test our hypotheses. Due to space constraints, we report four of them.

Keywords: *Consumer Minimalism. Person Perception, Self-Control*

Consumer Behavior Track

1. Theoretical Background

Minimalism has become increasingly popular as both a design style and as a lifestyle (Liu, 2018). Minimalism arose out of New York and Los Angeles (Meyer 2010) in the early 1960s as a reaction against the dominant style of art and advertising, which was harsh and loud. As a visual art form, minimalism influenced architecture, art, furniture design, and advertising (Pracejus, Olsen, and O'Guinn 2006). Colloquially, minimalism is ascribed to anything spare or stripped down to only the essentials, with one of the main principles being "less is more" (Dopierala 2017). Minimalism has then shifted from an art movement to a form of voluntary, strategic, and thoughtful curation of goods through consumption, such as owning capsule wardrobes, the tiny house movement, and monochromatic home designs (Mathras and Hayes 2019). Minimalism is also used as a way to engage in more sustainable living (Kang, Martinez, and Johnson 2021), reduce the amount one consumes, and express anti-consumption (Pangarkar, Shukla, and Taylor 2021).

Consumer researchers have just begun to study the phenomenon of minimalism and its implications for consumers and marketers. Wilson and Bellezza (2022) make the first attempt to define minimalism as a consumer behavior construct. Minimalism in package design has been found to have a positive effect on brand perception as it is associated with modernity, reliability, authenticity, success, and sobriety (Favier, Celhay, and Pantin-Sohier 2019). Additionally, consumers associate the use of minimal, or visually simple, packaging design with the presence of fewer ingredients within that package, which increases the perceived purity of the product and willingness to pay (Ton, Smith, and Sevilla 2024). Conversely, Min, Liu, and Anderson (2024) find that consumers perceive products with visually simple (versus complex) aesthetics as having lower production costs and are therefore willing to pay less for these products (Min et al. 2024). Finally, brands using visually simple package design are perceived as more simple and therefore more authentic than brands using visually complex package design (Wang et al. 2023). In their work on minimalist advertising, Pracejus et al. (2006) find that brands marketing through minimalist advertising are perceived as more prestigious and as providing higher quality products. This research explores how minimalist consumers are perceived by others. According to Wilson and Bellezza's (2022) dimensions of consumer minimalism, we propose that minimalists should remain vigilant when making consumption decisions to uphold their aesthetic and lifestyle preferences.

People shop to fulfill basic needs and for hedonic reasons, such as gaining immediate gratification (Elliott 1994). Since the concept of indulgence emphasizes yielding to desires and inclinations (Wiggin et al., 2019), we propose that minimalist consumers are perceived as low on indulgence due to their reduced consumption activities.

Practicing self-control is essential for consumers to avoid indulgent consumption, as it requires the ability to align with long-term goals while shielding them from conflicting hedonic desires (Bernecker and Becker 2021). A significant aspect of self-control is the regulation of eating behaviors. Individuals with higher self-control typically consume fewer calories from unhealthy foods (Ma et al., 2013) and tend to be more mindful of their food intake (Redden and Haws 2013).

We predict that because a minimalist lifestyle necessitates little indulgent consumption, minimalist consumers are perceived by others to have high self-control, specifically in making healthier eating and lifestyle choices. The perception that minimalists avoid indulgent consumption mediates this effect. We conducted six preregistered experiments to test our hypotheses. Due to space constraints, we report four of them.

2. Study 1: Minimalist Consumers Are Perceived as Making Healthier Eating and Lifestyle Choices

Study 1 ($n = 200$ MTurk participants) utilized a 2-cell (minimalist vs. control) between-subjects design. Participants read a neutral description of an individual named Anna. Those in the minimalist condition read an additional sentence describing Anna as a minimalist (Wilson and Bellezza 2022). Participants responded to four dependent measures (adapted from Huang and Labroo 2020; Laran 2010), making choices they believed Anna would make. They made three choices between healthy and unhealthy food options (0-3), selected between two restaurant gift cards (healthy or indulgent), and chose two snacks from a set of eight healthy and eight unhealthy options (0-2). Lastly, they indicated Anna's likelihood of engaging in four healthy lifestyle activities (1-9; $\alpha = .82$). Participants in the minimalist condition (vs. control) were perceived to make healthier eating choices ($M = 2.52$ vs. $M = 1.46$; $F(1, 198) = 73.28$, $p < .001$) and lifestyle choices ($M = 6.44$ vs. $M = 5.95$; $F(1, 185) = 3.88$, $p = .005$), choose the healthier gift card (93% vs. 63%; $X^2(1) = 26.22$, $p < .001$), and select healthier snacks ($M = 1.84$ vs. $M = 1.17$; $F(1, 198) = 58.82$, $p < .001$).

3. Study 2: Visual Depiction of Consumer Minimalism

Study 2 ($n = 300$ MTurk participants) employed a 2-cell (minimalist vs. maximalist) between-subjects design. Participants were first asked to read a description of a consumer, Alex, “Please take a moment to imagine Alex. Alex is 28 years old and was born and raised in a small city. Alex loves music and enjoys making friends. Alex is well-liked by friends and family.” Participants were then shown five images of the interior of Alex’s home (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Participants read that each morning Alex wakes up in the bedroom, gets dressed in the closet, does work in the office, prepares meals in the kitchen, and relaxes in the living room. Specifically, the home décor of each room shown in the minimalist (maximalist) condition was consistent (inconsistent) with the dimensions of consumer minimalism (Wilson & Bellezza, 2022).

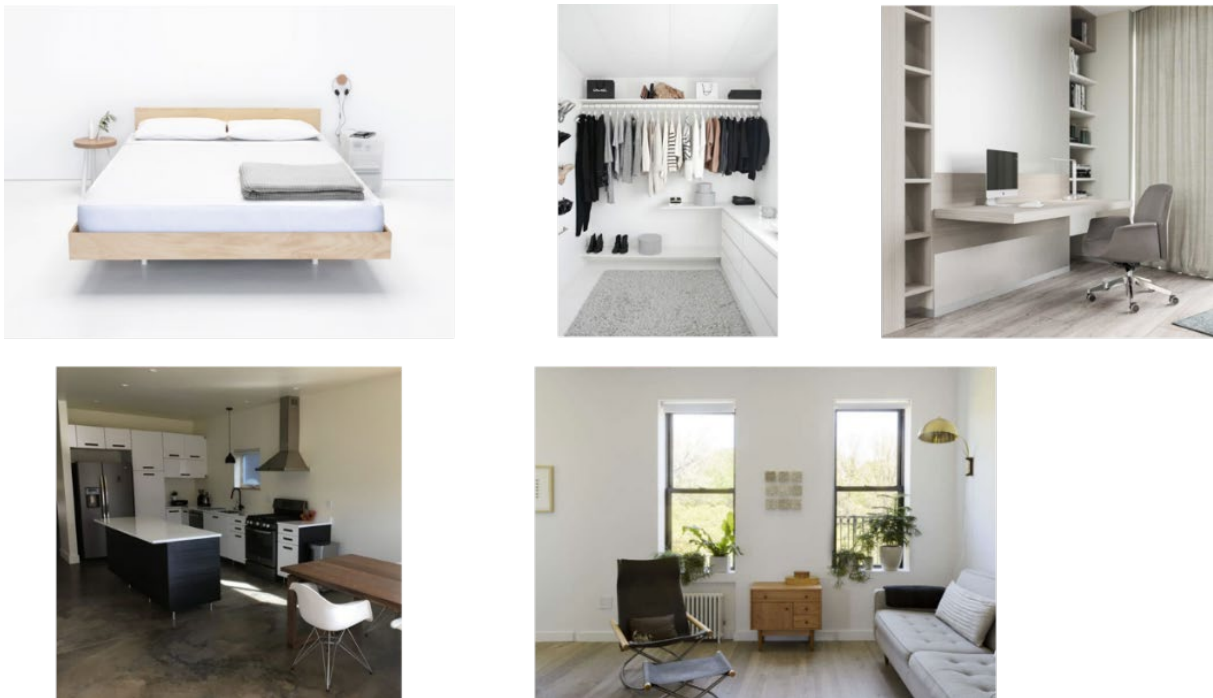


Figure 1. Images shown in the minimalist photo condition.

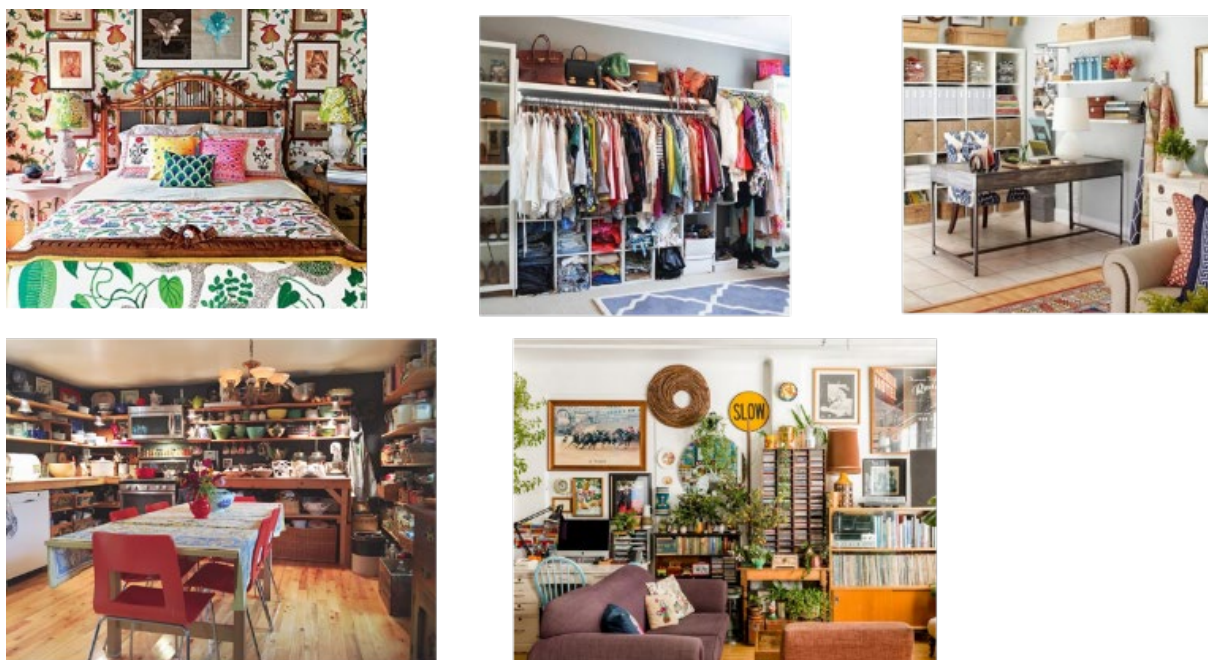


Figure 2. Images shown in the maximalist photo condition.

They then completed the same healthy eating and lifestyle choice measures ($\alpha = .86$) as in Study 1. Participants also assessed Alex's adherence to USDA dieting guidelines (Talukdar and Lindsey 2013) and Alex's trait self-control ($\alpha = .82$). They reported Alex's decisions between three different indulgent and non-indulgent options, which were combined to create an indulgence measure. Alex in the minimalist (compared to maximalist) condition was more likely to make healthy eating ($M = 2.38$ vs. $M = 1.96$; $F(1, 298) = 20.38$, $p < .001$) and lifestyle ($M = 7.33$ vs. $M = 6.05$; $F(1, 298) = 52.09$, $p < .001$) choices, follow USDA dieting guidelines ($M = 5.97$ vs. $M = 5.43$; $F(1, 298) = 20.48$, $p < .001$), and demonstrate higher trait self-control ($M = 5.89$ vs. $M = 4.67$; $F(1, 298) = 88.51$, $p < .001$). Indulgence mediated the effect of minimalist versus maximalist lifestyle on healthy eating ($\beta = .15$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI: .08, .23) and lifestyle ($\beta = .20$, $SE = .09$, 95% CI: .04, .38) choices, USDA dieting guidelines ($\beta = .20$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI: .10, .33), and trait self-control ($\beta = .22$, $SE = .07$, 95% CI: .10, .36).

4. Study 3: The Moderating Role of Indulgent Consumption

Study 3 ($n = 318$ undergraduate students) utilized a 2 (consumer type: minimalist vs. maximalist) $\times$ 2 (indulgence cue: present vs. absent) between-subjects design. Participants in all conditions received the same photo manipulation as in Study 2. Those in the indulgence cue present condition were informed that the individual, Jesse, frequently consumes indulgent

foods. Participants completed the same trait self-control measure ($\alpha = 0.81$) used in Study 2. Analysis revealed a significant interaction ($F(1, 314) = 16.07, p < .001$). Jesse was rated higher on trait self-control when depicted as a minimalist (vs. maximalist) ($M = 5.49$ vs. $M = 3.78$; $F(1, 314) = 131.91, p < .001$). When the indulgence cue was present, the minimalist (vs. maximalist) was still perceived to have higher trait self-control ($M = 4.09$ vs. $M = 3.22$; $F(1, 314) = 33.82, p < .001$), although this difference was significantly reduced ($M_{\text{difference when indulgence cue present}} = 0.87$ vs. $M_{\text{difference when indulgence cue absent}} = 1.71$) (Figure 3).

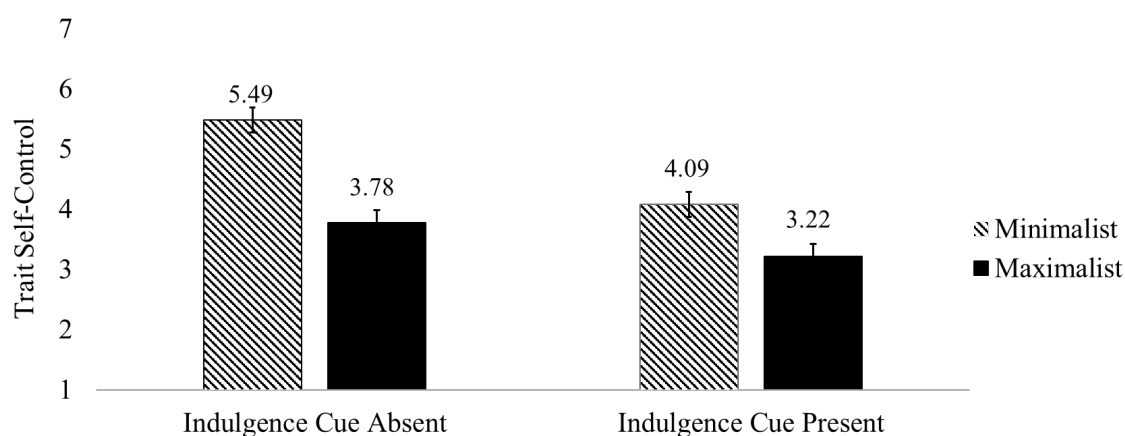
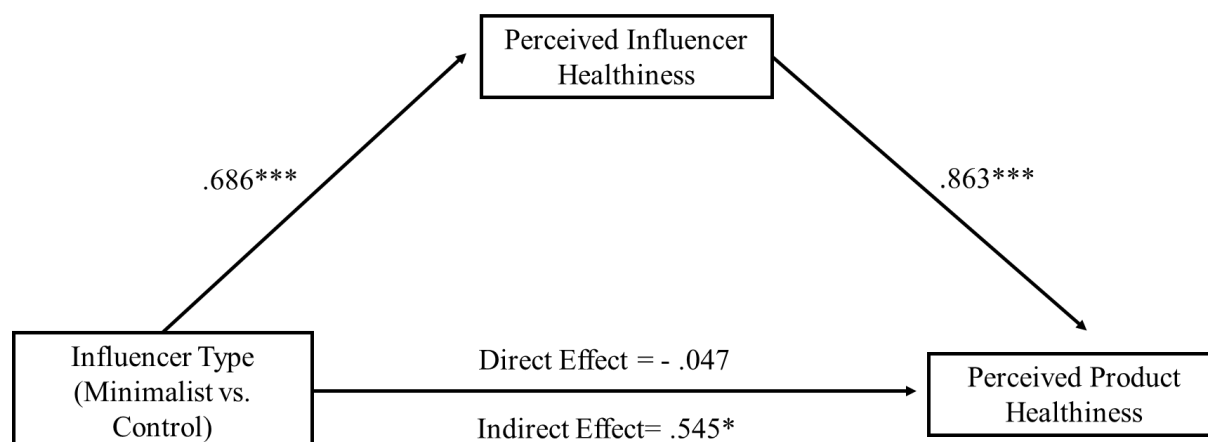


Figure 3. Indulgent consumption moderates the effect of Consumer Type on Perceived Trait Self-Control.

5. Study 6: Recommendations From a Minimalist Influencer Are Perceived as Healthier

Study 4 ($n = 300$ MTurk participants) utilized a 2-cell (minimalist vs. control) between-subjects design. Participants read a description of an influencer named Anna, who recommended a cereal bar. Those in the minimalist condition received additional information about Anna's minimalist lifestyle. Participants rated the healthiness of the cereal bar (1-7, $r = .83$) and the healthiness of the influencer (1-7, $r = .83$). The cereal bar was perceived as healthier when the influencer was described as a minimalist (compared to not being a minimalist) ($M = 4.91$ vs. $M = 4.37$; $F(1, 298) = 13.75, p < .001$). This effect was mediated by the perception of Anna as a healthy eater ($\beta = .59, SE = .12, 95\% CI: .37, .82$) (Figure 4).



Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Figure 4. Perceived Influencer Healthiness mediates Perceived Product Healthiness.

6. Conclusion

Taken together, we provide convergent evidence indicating that minimalist consumers are seen as making healthier choices and having better self-control overall compared to non-minimalists, as they are viewed as less indulgent. This perception enhances the perceived healthiness of the products they recommend.

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