

The Paradox of Minimalism in the Field of Lifestyle Products

Uncovering How the Minimalism Business Impedes Sufficiency

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Abstract *The commercialized manifestations of minimalism do not necessarily contribute to sufficiency-oriented consumption. Various minimalism business segments have emerged that are primarily based on selling dispensable, aesthetic lifestyle products. In this chapter, we analyze different business segments and discuss possible opportunities and risks for sufficiency-oriented consumption.*

1. Introduction

Since Marie Kondo's bestseller "The life-changing magic of tidying up" (2014) and uncounted subsequent books, magazine articles and videos, minimalism is regarded as a so-called lifestyle trend (Muster et al. 2022).

Minimalism and sufficiency-oriented consumption are related concepts. Both problematize overconsumption and the quantity of goods consumed. The concepts have a shared tradition in the voluntary simplicity movement (Elgin/Mitchell 1977; Etzioni 1999), which criticizes consumer society and advocates a fulfilling life with fewer consumption goods. Both sufficiency-oriented and minimalist consumption are facets of sustainable consumption (Elgin/Mitchell 1977; Gossen et al. 2019; Kang et al. 2021; Sandberg 2021).

However, the media and social reception, as well as the implementation, of these concepts differ significantly. While sufficiency-oriented consumption remains primarily an academic and political concept and – if at all – a niche movement, minimalism has become a commercially oriented, pop-cultural lifestyle trend emulated by people all over the world (Meissner 2019; Zavestoski/DeLaure 2022).

This chapter adopts a critical perspective on the lifestyle minimalism concept as a business. The main hypothesis of our contribution is that the commercialized, pop-cultural manifestations of minimalism risk sustaining consumerism, i.e. the widespread propensity in Western societies to consume and keep consuming. In

turn, this support for consumerism could lead to minimalism offshoots not contributing to efforts of strong sustainable consumption and climate protection but rather harming them. We support our hypothesis by illustrating business segments that have only recently emerged through the minimalism trend and by enlightening sufficiency-inhibiting effects that minimalist principles can have on consumption behavior.

The chapter is structured as follows. In the next section, we trace the development of minimalism into a commercial lifestyle trend. Building on that, the following section focuses on the business of minimalism. We present and analyze various business segments that, at their core, address two questions: “How to become a minimalist?” and “What does a minimalist need?” Then, we discuss the opportunities and risks of minimalism business and prominent minimalist consumption principles for sufficiency-oriented consumption. Finally, we draw a conclusion.

2. The origins of lifestyle minimalism

There are two relevant streams that are significant in capturing the contemporary, pop-cultural minimalism trend in consumption. *First*, minimalism emerged as a design and art movement in the 1960s (VanEenoo 2011). At the heart of this movement was a new aesthetic of simplicity and plainness. Instead of exaggerated emotion and symbolism, it was now considered desirable to emphasize the essential (Wilson/Bellezza 2022). Through advertising, fashion and design, this “aesthetic minimalism” eventually found its way into consumer culture (Wilson/Bellezza 2022).

Second, in the late 1970s, Elgin and Mitchell described a lifestyle in the United States they termed “outwardly simple and inwardly rich” (1977: 13). They characterized voluntary simplicity as a frugal and contented way of living that stemmed from both ecological awareness and a strong interest in personal growth and psychological well-being (Elgin/Mitchell 1977). They extensively examined the market potential of the voluntary simplicity movement and concluded: “Although the demand for some types of products will be damped by VS [voluntary simplicity], the outlook for others will benefit” (Elgin/Mitchell 1977: 14). They listed numerous aspects of product categories and features that could interest people in the voluntary simplicity movement. Shama (1985) also builds on this concept and presents a “marketing guide” to effectively target the voluntary simplicity audience.

In the subsequent decades, especially in the last 10 years, both movements converged into a new form of “lifestyle minimalism”. Recent publications and popular media on minimalism emphasize the individual and their psychological issues, such as stress and overload, and combine it with the aesthetics of simplicity (Ludwigsen 2019; Meissner 2019; Sandlin/Wallin 2022; Wilson/Bellezza 2022; Zavestoski/DeLaure 2022).

The increased popularity of lifestyle minimalism does not seem to be a coincidence. The minimalism trend can be attributed to consumerism reaching its peak over the past two decades due to digitalisation and globalisation. This culmination can be seen, for example, in the development of (ultra) fast fashion, which has contributed significantly to overcrowded closets. It is therefore hardly surprising that the minimalism trend is particularly evident in the fashion area (Vladimirova 2021). Moreover, an increasing number of people feel burdened by the multitude of belongings in their households (Ross et al. 2021; Roster/Ferrari 2023). Some authors argue that societal crises such as the global financial crisis in 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic further intensified a shift away from the taken-for-granted nature of consumerism (Khamis 2019; Sandlin/Wallin 2022). The increased popularity and dissemination of minimalism in the past decade are also due to its transformation into marketable products, making the idea of simplicity catchier and consumable. This marketability and censurability of minimalism are closely linked to specific content-related features that characterize lifestyle minimalism.

3. Key features of commercialized lifestyle minimalism

3.1 Individualization

As criticized by Khamis (2019) and Meissner (2019), minimalism – and related concepts such as decluttering – are concepts that are apolitical and individualistic in their orientation. Consumption's impact on the environment and society plays a smaller role; instead, the focus is on a new consumer-oriented self-perception. Khamis states, “[d]e-cluttering – at least as popularized by Kondo – sees the removal of excess as less a commitment to social or environmental concerns than a testament to a new and improved consumer self” (2019: 524). This individual-oriented approach is accompanied by a focus on improving one's own life and well-being. While it is acknowledged that the modern consumer and work culture – i.e. systemic structures – contribute to stress, overload and dissatisfaction, the solution is primarily seen within the individual (and not in changing the system).

3.2 Aesthetics

The current understanding of minimalism has led to aesthetics becoming a central component of an entire lifestyle. In addition to reducing the existing belongings, lifestyle minimalism focuses on the deliberate selection of goods and their careful arrangement. Rooms, spaces and products should align with minimalist aesthetics. As Wilson and Bellezza illustrate, “minimalist spaces, collections, and items are usually composed of simple designs, clean lines, limited ornamentation, and

monochromatic colours” (2022: 800). The design thus focuses on essential elements and thereby tries to emphasize a sense of calm, order and functionality (Chou 2011). Achieving a minimalist home that meets aesthetic standards often requires additional design and the acquisition of minimalist products.

3.3 Symbolism

For minimalists, the selection of products is not primarily based on their functional utility but on whether they are aesthetically pleasing and bring joy and happiness. The aim is to reflect on one's feelings towards belongings and their significance in one's life. Meissner writes, “[i]n so doing, minimalist narratives perpetuate consumerism's tendency to revolve around individuals' self-expression, rather than questions of need and/or functionality” (2019: 197). This focus maintains and even intensifies the quasi-religious relationship with possessions (Meissner 2019; Sandlin/Wallin 2022). Especially because many people struggle to navigate the complexity and confusion of the world, minimalism offers a central compensatory, symbolic function – namely, the ability to organize at least one's own home and life. Moreover, minimalism as a lifestyle tends to be a phenomenon among socio-economically affluent groups (Ramchandani/Coste-Maniere 2018). It demonstrates sophistication, taste and exclusivity and thus serves particularly well as a means to distinguish oneself from the mass consumption of the less educated or less affluent.

4. Buy to have less: minimalism business segments

In the following, we outline the most important areas in which the “business of minimalism” can be observed from our perspective.

The minimalism business must be clearly distinguished from sufficiency-oriented business models that embody a “new understanding of corporate value creation” (Jungell-Michelsson/Heikkurinen 2022: 6) and aim to achieve an absolute reduction in resource consumption within their core business. Conversely, we understand the business of minimalism as a primarily profit-oriented, conventional business model that mainly markets (dispensable) lifestyle products or services.

At its core, the business of minimalism is based on two questions: “How does one become a minimalist?” and “What does a minimalist need?”. The answers to both questions are provided for different business segments (see Table 1) that we present in the following sections.

Table 1: Overview of emerging minimalist business segments

How to become a minimalist			What a minimalist needs	
Books	Vlogs	Coaching	Aesthetic products	Accessories and tools

4.1 How to become a minimalist

In the following, we present books, vlogs and coaching as important business segments that aim to support the transition from a consumeristic to a minimalist lifestyle.

All three business segments offer advice and recommendations on how to become a minimalist. The focus is always on decluttering as a central method for achieving a minimalist lifestyle. The assumption is that minimalist living can only begin once the home is decluttered and released from unnecessary stuff. One's own possessions are described as the cause of dissatisfaction and frustration. Therefore, the minimalism guidebooks and vlogs are full of recommendations on how to declutter. Sometimes, even specific quantities or percentages are given to illustrate how much can be sorted out. While the goal certainly is to acquire fewer new things, most minimalism guides anticipate that new acquisitions are probably inevitable. Accordingly, minimalists have come up with a rule of thumb to avoid filling up the house again. As the name of the “one-in-one-out-rule” implies, with every purchase, another good shall leave. Ideally, goods are being exchanged within the same product category. All three segments, especially vlogs, also function as essential marketing channels for products and services that a minimalist is supposed to need.

Books

In the past ten years, an overwhelming number of books on minimalism and the related method of decluttering have been published (Meissner 2019; Ross et al. 2021; Sandlin/Wallin 2022; Zavestoski/DeLaure 2022). Both in the United States and in Europe, a separate genre has emerged. In an analysis of German exemplary guidebooks on minimalism, we found central commonalities. The guidebooks are application-oriented, give step-by-step instructions for the path to minimalist practices and contain practical exercises to help identify important life goals or to question consumption practices. They all promise the prospect of more freedom, clarity and well-being.

Data on the number of publications and sales figures are lacking. However, based on a Google books search, it can be assumed that, in Germany alone, several hundred books with the keyword minimalism in the title have been published in

recent years. In English-speaking countries, the number is probably higher. Books on minimalism are in high demand and can be found on recent bestseller lists such as Amazon Bestsellers (e.g., more than 10 books on minimalism among the top 50 in the category “house & household” [Amazon 2023a]), and many books have been translated into various languages and distributed internationally.

Especially prominent examples of international bestsellers are the books by Marie Kondo. Her four most successful books, including the most well-known book “The life-changing magic of tidying up”, have sold over 11 million copies in more than 40 countries (Foden 2020). These books may provide helpful suggestions and guidance on how to achieve a minimalist lifestyle. Yet, it is evident that the demand for books has been successfully stimulated and satisfied solely due to the vast number of different publications available.

Vlogs

Numerous minimalism influencers on social media use vlogs to demonstrate how minimalism can work in practice and report how it has transformed their own lives. They provide tips and tricks for all areas of life. Followers get to see a minimalist dream world – beautiful people in aesthetically curated homes leading fulfilling minimalist lives. The vlogs function in a similar way to the guidebooks. Packaged in personal stories, the influencers give step-by-step instructions on how minimalism can be realized in various areas. Influencers are known to often earn money by advertising products and services. Although minimalism influencers talk about a life with fewer belongings and reduced consumption, their business models are also based on advertising that stimulates consumption. The promoted products are characterized by minimalist aesthetics, and their necessity is often justified as essential for a slowed-down, minimalist lifestyle.

One example is the influencer MJ Gordon, who identifies herself as an influencer for minimalism, finance and health (MJ Gordon 2023). In her YouTube videos, she showcases her large, beautiful house and provides advice for a relaxed, stress-free, minimalist life. In the description of her videos, she includes links to her Amazon shop, where she sells various items such as supplements, natural cosmetics, pillows, planners, essential oils and light-blocking glasses (Amazon 2023b). In another example, influencer A to Zen Life shares her journey of decluttering and getting rid of debt to lead a happier, more liberated life. While she mentions second-hand products in the description below her YouTube videos, there are also numerous links to new clothing items and decluttering accessories such as boxes, glass jars or hangers (A to Zen Life 2023).

Coaching

Some influencers also earn money with their own consulting services or cooperation with other coaches. So-called minimalism coaches offer workshops, online courses,

guidebooks, individual training or consulting and mentoring sessions. It is particularly noticeable that most coaches also offer their services digitally, which is certainly partly due to the aforementioned boom in the minimalism business during the pandemic. The prices for coaching correspond to standard market fees for counselling and coaching.

An important difference to other forms of coaching is that, to the best of our knowledge, there is currently no certified degree or training to qualify as a minimalism coach. Marie Kondo is an exception here. She not only offers her online tidying course for \$39.99 on her website; she also offers training to become a certified KonMari consultant. These courses do not only qualify participants to become a tidying coach; as stated on the website: “Certified KonMari consultants don’t just tidy homes, they change lives”. According to Marie Kondo, there are already more than five hundred KonMari consultants worldwide (KonMari 2023).

Other coaches usually offer short counselling sessions (a few hours/one day) as well as in-depth courses (several weeks). For example, coach Regina Wong offers a 1-Day Mentoring Session for \$100 on her website *livewellwithless*. This session includes consultation via email, a one-on-one mentoring session, an action plan and one post-session check-in via email two weeks after completion. Additionally, customers can book a one-month session for \$400 (Wong 2023).

Furthermore, coaches often advertise additional support material such as plans and worksheets. The website *simplehappyzen*, for instance, offers monthly online programs and accompanying e-books. In a 20-week course with guided sessions, participants receive additional worksheets with instructions, audio files for replaying and weekly emails (Simplehappyzen 2021).

4.2 What a minimalist needs

Lifestyle minimalism does not only involve owning fewer of one’s existing goods but also recommends owning the *right*, few goods. In addition, there are plenty of accessories and tools designed to make minimalist life succeed. In the following, we present two categories: (i) aesthetic products and (ii) accessories and tools for a minimalist lifestyle.

Aesthetic products

In recent years, products and styles in minimalist aesthetics have spread across almost all consumption areas. Although, especially in the origins of the voluntary simplicity movement, high quality and exclusivity of goods was particularly important, many minimalist products in the mass market are meanwhile primarily focused on aesthetics. Lamps without shades, bicycles without gears and lights, plain unicolor tops or wardrobes with clear shapes and without ornaments are just some exam-

ples of minimalist aesthetics. Our observations found that minimalist aesthetics is particularly widespread in fashion and furniture.

For example, a minimalist wardrobe does not seem to consist simply of fewer clothes. Quite the opposite, according to certain advertising statements, there are numerous recommendations for which pieces belong in a minimalist wardrobe, such as well-fitting jeans, a black dress, solid-colored tops, a black legging or a solid-colored blazer (Modern Minimalism 2023). The recommendations are so specific that the obvious suggestion for consumers is to start shopping for “capsule wardrobe” pieces. It is not surprising that major fast-fashion companies such as SHEIN or Primark offer capsule wardrobe outfits (Primark 2023; Shein 2023). Fashion magazines promote clothing for the seasonal capsule wardrobe (Vogue 2023).

Another area of a flourishing minimalist product palette is interior and especially minimalist furniture design. Again, recommendations for creating a minimalist living room are often not so much focused on integrating existing pieces of furniture. Rather, specific types of pieces are suggested to create a minimalist living room, such as angular furniture, a statement mirror or a linen sofa (BetterHomes&Gardens 2023). Further, several furniture companies have recently emerged that include minimalism as their unique selling point, such as The Minimalist (The Minimalist 2023) and Minimalist (Minimalist 2023); but existing manufacturers – from IKEA to Westwing or Home24 – also use minimalism as an advertising slogan.

Minimalist aesthetics imply owning few but carefully selected goods. The governing principle for selection is the distinction between things that give pleasure and things that do not: The focus is on the emotional relationship to individual objects in the present. The goal is to create spaces that are aesthetically pleasing. A few objects, carefully chosen and arranged, are supposed to promise clarity and peace.

Accessories and tools

As shown above, lifestyle minimalism emphasizes fostering well-being by reducing possessions, linking minimalism to mindfulness and wellness. We find that several accessories have emerged that are intended as complements to the minimalist lifestyle with a deeper connection with oneself. Examples include a minimalist meditation cushion sold at \$145.00 (Amazema Interiors 2023) or a minimalist essential oil diffuser at \$80.00 (Simons 2023). In addition, a wide range of minimalist beauty products and do-it-yourself sets are offered that promise consumers that they can buy fewer things. In practice, these offers often include countless different skincare products, for example, three different face serums on top of face cream and toner in a minimalist “skin care essential” set by the French brand Typology, sold at \$208.20 (Typology Paris 2023).

Further, specific tools are marketed that supposedly help people maintain a minimalist lifestyle. Storage options play an important role in maintaining order and aesthetics in a minimalist space. Examples include storage boxes or containers to organize personal belongings but with a large variety of sizes and purposes. From drawer dividers made from bamboo, acrylic make-up organizers, a heatproof organizing station for hair styling tools, to food containers or wine racks in a geometric design – there seems to be practically no limit to new storage options (The Zoe Report 2023), always following the latest trend in material or shapes.

5. Discussion

In the previous sections, we have outlined key features and business segments of lifestyle minimalism. In the following, we discuss their potential in promoting sufficiency-oriented consumption and their drawbacks.

The pop-cultural, commercial manifestations of lifestyle minimalism have played an important role in mainstreaming the idea of “owning less”. This mainstreaming is beneficial to the promotion of sufficiency-oriented consumption because it increases the potential audience. The integration of minimalism into the societal mainstream has been successful because the basic principles of lifestyle minimalism have been translated into marketable products, especially books, vlogs and coaching services, making the principles easy to understand and imitate.

Within lifestyle minimalism, simplicity and consumption reduction are exclusively communicated in association with positive effects, seen as liberation, relief and contribution to well-being. This communication also has substantial value in promoting sufficiency-oriented consumption as it fosters the acceptance of consumption reduction practices. Moreover, there are numerous empirical studies that also prove these positive effects (Kang et al. 2021). The emphasis on aesthetics also carries symbolic value. Consumption reduction does not simply mean leaving out; it involves deliberate selection and composition, through which status and distinction can be conveyed. As demonstrated, numerous products facilitate this approach and might attract consumers with conspicuous motives (Ramchandani/Coste-Maniere 2018).

As a central minimalist method, decluttering can also promote reflection and learning processes about one’s own consumption behavior and possessions. First studies show that these reflection processes can have a positive effect on reduced acquisition behavior (Chamberlin/Callmer 2021; Muster et al. 2022). In summary, it can be concluded that lifestyle minimalism can indeed have positive effects on disseminating sufficiency-oriented consumption practices. From our perspective, however, there are central risks that might offset the opportunities.

Of Sandberg's (2021) four types of sufficiency-oriented practices (absolute reduction, sharing practices, product longevity, modal shifts), lifestyle minimalism initially only addresses one dimension: (absolute) reduction. This dimension is primarily achieved through decluttering possessions and, ideally, by limiting new purchases. Decluttering, however, might result in the disposal of items that are still usable and functional, rather than keeping them for potential future needs, repurposing or passing them on. Furthermore, the goal of actual limitation and reduction of new purchases is undermined by the frequently communicated "one-in-one-out" rule. Following the rule could imply disposing of goods regardless of their condition, age or quality simply because they are "too much". Since many consumers may not be able to resist the temptations of consumption, the one-in-one-out rule offers an easy relief principle that has the potential to maintain and even foster overconsumption.

Moreover, it appears questionable whether absolute reduction in consumption can be achieved at all when numerous new and often dispensable products are marketed as necessary tools for a minimalist lifestyle. Based on our observations, borrowing or sharing practices play a subordinate role in lifestyle minimalism. This subordination arises because, even in minimalism, thing culture and materialism are significant; while fewer, special possessions are aspired to, ownership of objects remains unquestioned (Meissner 2019; Sandlin/Wallin 2022). The emphasis on the aesthetic value of reduction actions can impede the focus on another crucial sufficiency dimension: extending product lifespans through maintenance and repair. However, because the recommendation is to discard items that do not bring joy or have no emotional value, "functionality" and "durability" as basic qualities of goods play subordinate roles. Moreover, new products marketed as minimalist are not necessarily high-quality and long-lasting but primarily aesthetically pleasing.

Lastly, the individualistic orientation of lifestyle minimalism, combined with the overemphasis on ego-driven motivations such as well-being and relief, can make it challenging to transfer and apply the reduction concept to other areas of life, such as political engagement for sufficiency policies or, especially, ecologically relevant consumption areas. From a sufficiency perspective, the resource intensity of goods is more important than their emotional value or potential to spark joy (Geiger et al. 2018). The sole focus on reducing the quantity of visible material goods in households carries the risk of overlooking individual goods that are especially resource-intensive. These goods include resource-intensive investment goods (such as cars, houses, heating systems), as well as resource-intensive services (such as air travel) and consumer goods (such as animal products). However, these consumption areas play a subordinate role within minimalism, which is inadequate from a sufficiency perspective.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have presented minimalism as a commercialized lifestyle trend with its business fields and prevailing principles. While there is no empirical evidence – as far as we know – that the business of minimalism has actually contributed to lower consumption levels, one finding is particularly obvious: successful business fields have emerged, and many (dispensable) new products are being sold. Although pop-cultural commercial minimalism certainly holds opportunities for sufficiency, the risks appear to be significant.

It seems important for minimalist businesses to critically reflect on the principles currently in place and focus on values such as quality and longevity of goods and truly mindful and slow consumption, values that were in the roots of the minimalism movement but were lost in the path of commercialization. It is also important that consumers can clearly distinguish and recognize genuinely sufficiency-oriented business models. Therefore, education about misleading advertising campaigns that use minimalism as a “green claim” remains essential. Consumers need to understand that a sufficiency-oriented or truly minimalist lifestyle is never just about individual products or reducing possessions in the short term but rather about reducing consumption levels in the long term.

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