

Between less and more: Minimalism vs. maximalism in product design

Prof. Prashant S. Acharya

Faculty of Art & Design,
Department of Design
Vishwakarma University, Pune, Maharashtra,

Abstract

Modern product design often swings between two styles — minimalism and maximalism.

Minimalism emphasizes simplicity and utility, creating space and serenity. Maximalism is the antithesis of minimalism with an emphasis on color, detail, and creativity. In both design categories, it influences how we think, feel, and connect with the items we work on, or with the engendered objects we interact with.

Currently, designers are navigating the balance of less versus more. Some designs feel too underwhelming, while maximalist designs feel overly cluttered. This paper outlines how the duality within the themes of minimalism and maximalism will lead to more meaningful and enjoyable products.

This design thesis studied how minimalism and maximalism affect emotion, utility, and appearance. and contrasted brands and products that leaned toward multiple styles. The human experience and visuals supported personal preference and feedback from users. The impact of lifestyle, culture, and technology emerged within decisions made by users.

The first half of the paper explores history and the development of both minimalism and maximalism. The second half explores modern examples of user experience and design. The following section outlines how designers can utilize a duality of both approaches to improve a design or product. The final section summarizes key take-a-ways and lessons learned from designing.

With the conclusion the author demonstrates minimalism and maximalism could exist together and that it isn't an either/or situation, but two parts of one design narrative, and when mixed within a design can lead to all the expressiveness and humanity of a design.

Keywords: Minimalism, Maximalism, Expression, Aesthetics, Functionality, User Experience, Creativity, Design Balance, Innovation.

Introduction

Design today is essentially a juggle between two contrasting visual styles: minimalism that advocates simplicity and maximalism that favors extravagance. Indirectly such styles determine how products look and function in our lives. To put it simply, minimalism tries to be as simple and clear as possible, whereas maximalism commends being detailed and expressive. Usually, these two design styles weigh most heavily on the designer's mind, but both of them don't always interact well. Hence, designers struggle with how to make the working principles and the users' feelings complement each other when these two styles pull in different directions.

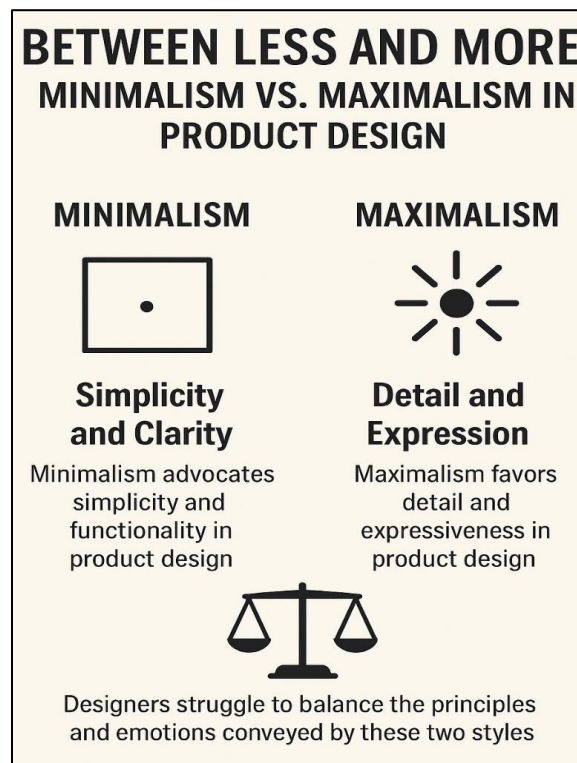
The very notion derives from the fact that product design changes at a rapid pace. Minimalism with its "less is more" principle was quite popular at the time due to modern art and new materials. As technology got smaller, products started to look cleaner.

However, maximalism is now taking over. Things like global culture, social media, and being yourself are factors that demand louder designs that tell a story by reflecting a brand's identity. People want different things; some want simple, while others want color and personality. That is why the knowledge of both styles is crucial now.

Minimalism is a product of modern art and practicality when we talk about existing works. Professionals refer to it as a method of cutting the unnecessary and focusing on the main thing. On the contrary, maximalism is about being extravagant, layering, and energetic. User experience studies show how these styles affect emotions and how easy something is to use. Minimalism is mostly associated with clarity, while maximalism is more involved. However, the problem of these two styles working together hardly getting any attention, is the reason for this study being here.

This document is an attempt to comprehend the influence of minimalism and maximalism in relation to emotional, visual, and functional aspects of product design, as well as mixing of these methods to enhance user experience. They will investigate the origins of these styles, analyze the examples, and study the impact of such factors on people's wants. The

ultimate goal of such research is the creation of the designer's handbook, which would be helpful in making meaningful and balanced products.



Therefore, the main point to be addressed is this: in what way can minimalism and maximalism collaborate in designing to please people's feelings and to make items work brilliantly? The inquiry implies that there is no necessity for these styles to vie with each other. On the contrary, they might be considered as two aspects of a greater design concept. When employed in harmony, they provide the designer with the opportunity to meet functionality requirements and, at the same time, to add character and establish a relationship with users.

Research Methodology - Qualitative Research

1. Overview of the Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research assists in finding the underlying interpretation of what people are doing, liking or not liking, or how people feel about minimalistic product design.

Numbers and statistics indicate trends but qualitative data indicates why those trends exist. In the case of this study, the qualitative research method examines the subject of what users think, experience, expect, and interpret about minimalism in product design. The interest is to learn how users see minimalism not only as a visual language, but as an interactive experience in real-life dealing with products. This is selected as minimalism is intricately associated with human behaviour, emotional comfort, simplicity, and personal choice. These things are not merely numbers, but they require dialogue, observation, and analysis.

2. Qualitative Study Purpose

In this research, the aim of the qualitative study is:

- To learn the way users are emotionally engaged with minimalistic products.
- To understand what users believe is meaningful simplicity.
- To identify their pain aspects in excessively complex designs.
- To determine the precise properties of minimalism towards which users are naturally inclined.
- To collect practical experiences that show how minimalistic design can or can not assist them.

The proposed qualitative research is helpful in the context of the primary research aim because it provides a deep explanation of the reasons why users make specific decisions and confirms the topicality of a minimalistic design in the use of products today.

3. Research questions

The qualitative study will focus on answering questions such as:

- What do users mean by minimalism?
- What will users relate to minimalistic products emotionally or functionally?
- What are the issues when products are too cluttered or over-designed?
- What is the impact of minimalism on human cognition, emotions and interaction with daily objects?
- What minimalistic features (clean lines, the reduced number of components, natural colours, simple usability)

resonate the most with the users?

These questions support interpretation of data and help to develop human-oriented perception of minimalism.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

Data were collected through a subjective and open-ended approach. There were no figures or scores but instead, personal tales, views, and lines of description. The study employs three primary qualitative methods:

- Semi-structured interviews
- Open-ended questionnaires
- Observation-based insights

Such a loose structure enabled participants to speak out their mind freely.

4.2 Participant and sample selection.

Purposive sampling was used to introduce 20 participants. The sample included:

- College students
- Working adults
- Designers
- Homemakers
- Young professionals

Participants were determined purposefully to get a broad scale of opinions so that the study represents various lifestyles, age brackets, and patterns of product usage.

4.3 Data Collection Process

The qualitative data was gathered within the span of one week. The methods included:

A. Semi-Structured Interviews:

Open-ended questions to the participants included:

- What does minimalistic design mean to you?
- How does it feel to you about minimalistic products?
- What do you think about simple and detailed designs: when and why do you prefer one over the other?

Interviews were in-person and on calls lasting between 10 and 20 minutes.

B. Open-Ended Questionnaires:

The respondents completed brief survey forms with items such as:

- Write about an item you own that is simple and meaningful.
- What annoys you with complex designs?

These reactions gave descriptive information.

C. Observational Insights:

The participants were requested to touch a minimalist product (such as an easy power bank, pen, or container) and share their first impressions. Their conduct was observed, as to comfort, timidity, or ease.

4.4 Data Interpretation Method

Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. The responses were reread, coded, and clustered into major themes including:

- Simplicity
- Emotional clarity
- Functional ease
- Overwhelm from clutter
- Desire for clean visuals

- User comfort and calmness

These themes were used to translate crude opinions into meaningful results.

5. Major Findings (Qualitative)

5.1 Users want Visual and Mental Peace.

The majority of respondents spoke of minimalistic design as relaxing, hygienic and psychologically refreshing. Users reported that they like products that do not yell at them and are comfortable to look at. Most associated minimalism with less stress because simple designs are readable and do not overload the mind.

5.2 Minimalism Promotes Simpler usability.

One of the most significant lessons was that minimalistic products are desirable to users since straightforward is good. Participants mentioned:

- I do not need to look up the functionality.
- "It saves time."
- "It is not confusing."

The ease of use provided by simple forms ensured users could not be shy about engaging with them, as there was no need to follow instructions or trial and error.

5.3 Style is Not as Strong as Emotional Meaning.

According to most participants, minimalism is not just a look but a matter of weightlessness and deliberateness. When they had minimalistic products they said they felt honest, essential and meaningful. Users connect themselves to products that are just what they need and nothing more.

5.4 Over-Designed Products Frustrate.

Numerous complainants frequently complained about:

- Too many buttons
- Extra decorative touches.
- Complex shapes
- Visual noise
- Hard-to-use designs

These characteristics irritated, distracted, or loaded their minds. Minimalistic products were valued because they avoided these frustrations.

5.5 Usersways like basic, non-vibrancy and practical simplicity in design.

Most frequently researched were:

- Clean and straight lines
- Neutral, soft colours
- Lightweight forms
- Simple usability
- Less clutter
- Hidden or minimal controls
- Honest materials

These characteristics were regarded as universal and eternal.

5.6 Minimalism Enables users to concentrate on the purpose.

Respondents indicated that the sparse nature of such products assists them in concentrating on what the product is supposed to do and not getting distracted by outside factors. This emphasis was seen by many as enhancing productivity and minimizing confusion in everyday use.

6. Summary of Qualitative Insights.

In this qualitative research, the natural tendency of users towards minimalistic designs is evident since users are emotionally drawn to simplicity. Minimalism makes them feel tranquil, lowers the cognitive load, and enhances their self-confidence when using the product. Users repeatedly found purpose in simple and uncomplicated products, and user minimalism was characterized as clean, reliable, purposeful, and ageless.

The results provide more arguments in support of the idea that the minimalistic design is not merely an aesthetic statement but an emotional and pragmatic necessity of users today.

Research Methodology - Quantitative Research

The quantitative part of our study gives a clear and measurable picture of the preferences of users towards minimalism or maximalism as regards product design. Although the qualitative phase revealed thoughts and the experiences, this phase will deal with figures, tendencies, and trends to know how many people prefer each style, how much they are actually attached to this style and how design impacts in the continual use.

1. Purpose:

The main goal is to quantify:

- The percentage of users who opt for either minimalistic or maximalistic design.
- The difficulty or the easiness of each style.
- Age differences based on preference.
- How design influences the feelings of users and their convenience in their life.

Through quantification of the qualitative results within the larger sample, we have a better evidence base upon which to base our design decisions.

2. Research Questions:

- What is the number of users who like minimalistic product design?
- Is it possible that minimalism can be more practicable than maximalism?
- Is there an age effect in terms of design preference?
- On what occasion do users get lost in the garbage designs?
- Is minimalism better to enhance concentration or work performance? The questions were used to design the survey and classify data.

3. Methodology:

The questionnaire was developed as a form or structured, close-ended, through Google Forms. It contained several-choice questions, 1-5 Likert, ranking, and preference options and thus simple comparison and analysis are possible.

4. Participants:

There were 50 respondents (18-40 years old) who were representative of a variety of groups: college students, working professionals, designers, creatives, homemakers, and casual users. This combination combined the young and old views.

5. Data Collection:

The questions responded to by the participants included:

- What does it mean by the ease of using minimalistic products?
- Which design is the most aesthetically comfortable one?
- How frequently do you get lost in wasted designs?

The automatic compilation of responses was in the form of percentages and averages.

6. Key Findings:

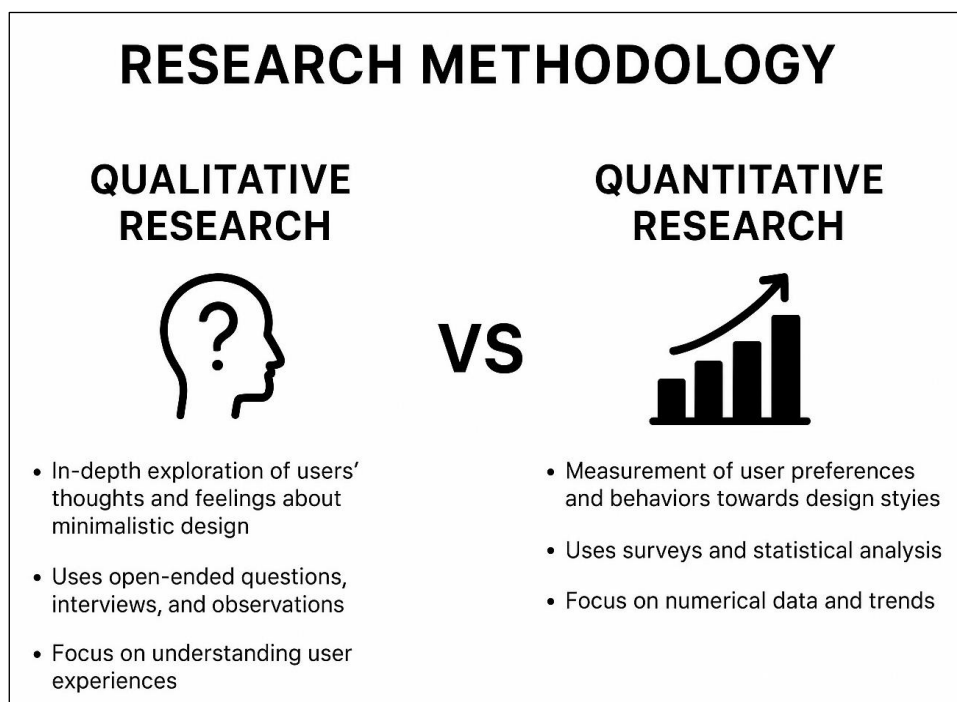
- **General Preference:** 78 percent liked minimalism, 12 percent liked maximalism and 10 percent were neutral.
- **Ease of Use:** Minimalism was rated 4.4/5, and maximalism was rated 2.8/5.
- **Emotional Coziness:** 75% of people were relaxed when using minimalistic products; 66% were overwhelmed by looking at maximalistic designs.
- **Visual Appeal:** Minimalism 4.2/5, maximalism 3.1/5. Minimalism was recorded by users as simple and serene whereas maximalism was perceived as innovative yet uncalming.
- **Age Patterns:** Preference towards minimalism decreased with age - 82 -18-25 74 -26-35 60-36-40.
- **Response to Clutter:** 69 -percent disagreed that use is complicated by clutter; 18% agreed; 13% disagreed.
- **Significance of Simplicity:** 4.5/ 5 vs. decorative features 2.7/ 5. Functionality was more important than visual sophistication.

7. Interpretation:

This information goes to demonstrate that minimalistic design is more comfortable, easier to use, and more pleasing to the majority. The users appreciate saving of time (time-saving), clarity, and less cognitive load. Maximalism is creative and not so useful in everyday life. Youthful users especially tend towards simplicity, which helps in focus and alleviation of stress.

8. Summary

The popularity of minimalism in the modern rapidly changing world is well supported by quantitative evidence. It presents emotional, practical, and visual advantages which surpass the ornamental value of maximalism. Although still applicable to artistic use in the modern world, minimalism holds the upper hand in utility and customer experience.



Literature Review

Simplicity Matters: Unraveling the Impact of Minimalist Packaging on Green Trust in Daily Consumer Goods by Yuechun Ding, 2024

The authors note in the introduction, pg 1-2, that highly decorative or complex designs can appear manipulative to consumers, which weakens trust. I relate to this viewpoint because it aligns with my belief that simple, minimal product forms feel more honest and create a calmer, more reassuring user experience.

A Survey of Developable Surfaces: From Shape Modeling to Manufacturing by Chao Yuan, Nan Cao, and Yang Shi, pg 14

The authors mention in the related-work section that when systems become too complex, users feel mentally overloaded and less in control. I agree because the same thing happens in product design—too many features or details confuse people, while minimalism makes products easier and calmer to use.

Modeling Aesthetic Preferences in 3D Shapes: A Large-Scale Paired Comparison Study Across Object Categories by Kapil Dev, 2023, pg 1-2

The author explains in the introduction section that modern design must balance clarity, usability, and user-friendly structure. I think this supports my view that minimalistic product design works better today because users easily connect with designs that feel straightforward instead of visually heavy.

The Application of Minimalism in Modern Packaging Design by Liu Jinglong, 2018, pg 105.

The author explains how minimalism evolved from modernist ideas like “*less is more*” and why packaging must shift from excessive decoration to functional, clean design. I agree with this view because it supports my belief that modern product design should avoid visual noise and instead focus on honest materials, simplicity, and user-friendly clarity.

The Rise of Minimalism in Tech Product Design by Obaydur Rahman Mahin, 2025, pg 1 The author explains in the introduction that modern tech companies adopt minimalism because it creates cleaner interfaces and reduces user confusion. I agree with this because it reflects how users naturally prefer products that feel simple, calm, and easy to understand instead of visually heavy or complicated.

Systematic Literature Reviews in Kansei Engineering for Product Design—A Comparative Study from 1995 to 2020 by Óscar López, Clara Murillo and Alfonso González, pg 3

The author mentions that in today's market *consumers value functionality, usability, and the emotions and feelings a product creates*, which shows how important it is for designs to avoid unnecessary complexity. This supports my perspective that minimalism outperforms maximalism because users connect more easily with designs that feel straightforward rather than visually heavy or confusing.

Beyond Kansei Engineering: The Emancipation of Kansei Design by Pierre Lévy, 2013 The author argues that kansei design goes beyond engineering and neuroscience to reconnect design with human subjectivity, dreams, and beauty. I think this supports my view that minimalistic design is more powerful today, because a calm and focused aesthetic lets deeper emotional and experiential qualities shine, rather than being drowned out by complexity.

Product Styling Cognition Based on Kansei Engineering Theory and Implicit Measurement by Qinwei Zhang, Zhifeng Liu, Bangqi Yang and Caixia Wang, 2023, p 4-6 The author explains in the introduction that *products that resonate emotionally with users gain a competitive advantage, especially as functionality differences between products become minimal*. I think this supports my view that minimalistic design is more effective, because when products are simpler, their emotional message becomes clearer and users can connect with them without distraction.

Form + Function: Optimizing Aesthetic Product Design via Adaptive, Geometrized Preference Elicitation by Namwo Kang, Yi Ren, Fred Feinberg, & Panos Papalambros, 2019

The authors explain that as product functionality becomes standardized, *aesthetic form plays an increasingly dominant role in how users judge and choose products*.

I think this supports my view that minimalistic design works better today, because when form becomes the differentiator, cleaner shapes help users evaluate products more easily than visually dense, maximalist designs.

A Practice-Based Approach to Defining Maximalism by Ioana Pioaru, 2021, pg 40,86 The author explains that maximalism expands artistic space through dense detail, multiple media, and an intentional "horror vacui" that rejects emptiness. I think this supports my view that maximalist product design communicates richness and personality, offering users an immersive experience that minimalism cannot achieve.

Conclusion

Design is not just about things, this is how individuals feel, behave, and connect. Minimalism soothes the mind with straight edges, simplicity and intention producing simpler and more focused life. Maximalism, in its turn, is full of boisterous color and character, so products become whimsical and easy to remember, and too much of it may overload. In this balanced strategy, it is demonstrated that restraint and exuberance might not be compatible, but they could be together. A well-designed product is a marriage of less structure and more soul, something that provides the experience that soothes, pleases and is remembered. Well design is needed to balance glory with need, use with narrative. More than tools, designers provide us with an interesting enjoyable aspect of life by embracing both sides. The right product, in turn, is expressed, and balanced between simplicity and expression, design is indeed human.

Future Implecations

The knowledge of the extreme side can help a designer to design a product, which is not only useful but also appealing. Designs of the future can be made more user friendly incorporating simplicity and expression to adapt to different lifestyles. With the aid of technology and AI, it becomes possible to foresee the balance that works best when applied to various users. This can be advantageous when it comes to sustainable design, which integrates the efficiency of minimalism and the emotive endurance of maximalism. Users can also develop loyalty and trust by brands creating more immersive experiences. This can be used to create an inspiration towards innovation, creating timeless yet exciting products. Finally, the design of products in the future can be carried out in connection with human needs, emotions, and stories rather than only aesthetics or trends.

References

1. Ding, Y., Meng, X., and Sun, C. Simplicity Matters: Unraveling the Impact of Minimalist Packaging on Green Trust in Daily Consumer Goods. *Sustainability* 16, 4932 (2024) pg 1-19.
2. Yuan, C., Cao, N., & Shi, Y., "A Survey on Developable Surfaces: Methods, Applications, and Challenges," arXiv:2304.09587 (2023), pg 1-18.
3. Dev, K., "Modeling Aesthetic Preferences in 3D Shapes: A Large-Scale Paired Comparison Study Across Object Categories," arXiv:2505.12373 (2025), pp. 1-11.

4. Liu, J., “The Application of Minimalism in Modern Packaging Design,” *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* 204, 105–109 (2018).
5. Mahin, O. R. (2025). The rise of minimalism in tech product design. BAF Shaheen College Kurmitola. Pg 1-3
6. López, Ó., Murillo, C., & González, A. (2021). Systematic literature reviews in Kansei engineering for product design—A comparative study from 1995 to 2020. *Sensors*, 21(19), 6532.pg1-19
7. Lévy, P. (2013). Beyond kansei engineering: The emancipation of kansei design. *International Journal of Design*, 7(2), 83–94.
8. Kang, N., Ren, Y., Feinberg, F., & Papalambros, P. (2019). Form + function: Optimizing aesthetic product design via adaptive, geometrized preference elicitation pg 1-10,40-46
9. Pioaru, I. (2021). A practice-based approach to defining maximalism (Doctoral dissertation, University of Chester; under the auspices of Glyndŵr University).
10. Gumber, S. (2023). Minimalism in Design: A Trend of Simplicity in Complexity. *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 4(2).
11. Alesan, N., & Fialho, F. (2021). Analysis of Aesthetic Minimalism: A View at the Creative Process in Minimalist Brand Design. *e-Revista LOGO*, 10(2)
12. Guerrero, C. L. (2024). The Impact of Minimalist Design on Consumers’ Brand Perceptions. (Honors thesis, Georgia Southern University). Retrieved from Georgia Southern University Digital Commons.
13. Benaissa, B., Kobayashi, M., & Kinoshita, K. (2023). Design aesthetics recommend a system based on customer profile and wanted effect.
