

The Minimalist Movement

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A defiance against overconsumption or a new way of commodifying the self?

Introduction

“Despite its connotations of absence, “minimalism” has been popping up everywhere lately, like a bright algae bloom in the murk of post-recession America. From tiny houses to micro-apartments to monochromatic clothing to interior-decorating trends — picture white walls interrupted only by succulents — less now goes further than ever... #minimalism on Instagram include white sneakers, clouds, the works of Mondrian, neon signs, crumbling brick walls and grassy fields. So long as it’s stylishly austere, it seems, it’s minimalist.” (K. Chayka 2016)

Describing what seems to be the essence of being a minimalist today, this depiction, flooded with commodities, is the epitome of materialism. A carefully crafted observation of how a philosophy based on consuming less, transformed into a trend that appears to induce to buy more instead.

Living in a society that is known for turning everything into a product to be capitalized on, the ideology of 21st century consumption relies on commodification, information overload, and power relations. Once set foot online, this form of consumerism is running rampant. Bombarded by the Internet’s lucid dreams of endless possibilities, Millennials are affected the most, resulting in a lack of direction that shows in every facet of their lives. For a generation that grew up in the midst of economic recession, whilst at the same time, feeds off the baby boomer ideal to buy happiness, Millennials find themselves tangled up in society constructs and gravitate towards forms of escapism. Minimalism, a term affiliated with freeing the self of attachment, decluttering the mind, and simplifying life, and most importantly, “being” instead of “having”, sounds endearing within this context. Minimalism’s popularity amongst Millennials caused the philosophy to adopt an online following, resulting in a high number of bloggers to spread the minimalist lifestyle on social media. Focussing on the visual aspects of minimalism, what is in fact spread is a minimal aesthetic assigned to the lifestyle, its actual principles are often treated as secondary or as a by-product of its aesthetic attractiveness. Adopted by the mainstream and turned into a trend, minimalism aesthetic now seems to be used as a vehicle for profit and sells the promise of a tranquil life. To focus on “being” becomes a way of commodifying the self and living through the identifying with belongings. In this way, what is disguised and sold as “being” is just another variation of “having”, as it relies heavily on conspicuous consumption. Many argue that the minimalist lifestyle could be a step in the direction of a social shift towards a more sustainable way of buying and a focus on experiences instead of belongings. However, can a movement that is integrated into our ways of consumption instead of defying the construct of overconsumption, make this kind of change?

Methodology

Within this paper, I aim to investigate to what extent the 21st century minimalist movement creates an escape from the capitalistic concept of overconsumption that characterizes our society. Within this notion, I will highlight the connection between the present minimalist movement and commodity fetishism as a means of self-branding.

To illustrate what the minimalist movement encompasses, I will look at the origins of minimalism and its fundamentals, to then review the possible shift in connotations it went through over time. To establish why the

minimalist lifestyle has gained attention and followers over the past few years I will research in what way the minimalist movement is a reflection of our society, and how today's capitalistic, hyper-individual, and brand aware context influences the original concept of minimalism.

In demonstrating what the current minimalist movement looks like now and what caused its possible growth, I will have a critically look at the idea of minimalism as an escape from overconsumption. Here I will demonstrate the correlation between bloggers and vloggers that label themselves as minimalists, and commodity fetishism.

Finally, through the concepts of self-branding and commodification, I will step away from minimalism as an escape and explore how a minimalist expression in the 21st century can be seen as another form of materialism.

Case Studies

To gain knowledge on the connection between commodity fetishism and minimalism, I have looked into examples of people who define and promote themselves as a minimalist online. Using the Internet personality Jenny Mustard as a main example, I looked into her definition of minimalism, how she embodies and communicates this definition, and how she promotes a minimalist lifestyle on social media.

Theory

To investigate how minimalism, besides being a lifestyle, gained popularity as a fashion trend, I will use the thesis: *New Fashion Minimalism in an Affluent Society: A Paradigm Shift?* by Corinna Karg. Comparing the concepts of "genuine" minimalism and "faux-minimalism", Karg explores the ability for the minimalist movement to create a paradigm shift within society towards mindful consumption.

Diving deeper into one of the academic sources Corinna Karg applied within her thesis, I will use Erich Fromm's theory 'To Have or To Be?' as a parallel conversation to the discussion on the popularity of minimalism amongst Millennials. Fromm's theory evolves around his idea of "having" and "being", which is based on Zen Buddhism and shares its principles with minimalism. Written in 1976, his definition of "having" however, refers directly to modern society's issues of overconsumption and materialism and can be very insightful when looking at our current society in combination with the popularity surrounding minimalist concepts.

Discussing Joseph Davis' theory 'The Commodification of Self', I will try to draw a connection between, on the one hand Davis' ideas of selling the self as a product and identity construction through commodification, and on the other hand minimalism as a way of expressing the self. Davis' thought process behind the idea that self-branding defeats market forces could be especially helpful when trying to answer whether minimalism can step away from mass-consumption and capitalism while still influenced by commodification.

Interviews

To get a better understanding of how people that consider themselves minimalist define this movement, whether they answer to the minimalist archetype aesthetic and how they look upon the popularity of minimalism, I have interviewed three people that have adopted a minimalist lifestyle.

Developing an image of how people define themselves through the concept of minimalism can provide interesting insights about the shift in meaning of minimal living and the thinking of minimalism through the concepts of self-branding and commodity fetishism.

1 // Minimalism – The “Origins”

Whereas the roots of minimalism are said to have been established in Japan, the term ‘minimalism’ has been used in a variety of contexts, adapted and appropriated, stretched and shaped to an all-purpose idea. As many coin the Japanese practice of Zen Buddhism as the source of origin, the concept of minimalism seems to have started out as a philosophy.

Buddhist beliefs rest on the idea that everything is impermanent, and therefore swears off the making of permanent relationships to anything. “Everything is subject to change and that suffering and discontentment are the result of attachment to circumstances and things which, by their nature, are impermanent. By ridding oneself of these attachments, including attachment to the false notion of self or “I”, one can be free of suffering.” (S. Nagatomo 2015) In this context, Buddhism also believes that when we do not let go of attachments, we feel anxious and uneasy. By “being” instead of “having”, the Buddhist finds happiness in the reducing of desires as a means of decluttering the mind. (S. Nagatomo 2015)

Zen therefore, relies on the Buddha principles which are defined as:

- Letting go of attachment
- Reducing suffering and increasing happiness
- Mindfulness and focus
- Kindness and compassion

Zen aims at a perfection of personhood, a sense of full self-control and an embodiment of wisdom and compassion. To achieve this, one must break free from ego-consciousness and achieve the state of “no-mind”. This brings your mind to a stage that is not delimited by ideas, desires, and images. In other words, “no-mind” means to be conscious, and to be conscious means to let go of preconceived notions. What is achieved through the state of “no-mind” the Japanese call “self-cultivation”, an embodiment of non-discriminatory wisdom. (S. Nagatomo 2015)

As soon as Zen Buddhism gained followers in Japan, it began to infiltrate into Japanese culture, where minimalism transformed from a philosophy to a lifestyle. This gave people the opportunity to use the ideas of the Buddha and the principles of Zen within every facet of life. Soon after that, minimalism became part of Japan’s art forms, as a means of spiritual gain focused on calmness, simplicity, and self-growth. The idea behind these art forms always focussed on the notion that the nature of material life is illusory, and so its aesthetic reveals the essence of an object through the removal of the unnecessary. (M. Lim 2016)

The term “minimalism” entered our Western society in the 1960’s. Known as ‘Minimal Art’, this movement was evidently rooted in the Japanese ‘Zen Buddhist’ philosophy and adopted many of the aesthetics of Japanese art forms. Originally coined a reaction against ‘Abstract Expressionism’, which had a chaotic and subjective nature, minimalist art was known for its geometric abstraction and claimed to be more objective than its predecessor. (J. Wolf 2017) Minimalism’s philosophy then, is not defined by self-expression and allows for an interpretation that

is not based on the world's preconceptions. Later on, this concept of minimalism defined itself in a broader context and spread across the fields of design, fashion and architecture.

David Raskin, a professor of contemporary art history, assumes that the meaning of minimalism shifted as it was adopted into Western consumer culture and transformed into a vehicle for social status. "One of the real problems with design-world minimalism is that it's just become a signifier of the global elite. The richer you are, the less you have." (D. Raskin as cited by K. Chayka 2016) At this point Chayka calls minimalism "visually oppressive", claiming that: "These minimalist-arrivistes present it as a logical end to lifestyle, culture and even morality: If we attain only the right things, the perfect things, and forsake all else, then we will be free from the tyranny of our desires." (K. Chayka 2016) Here, instead of mimicking the Japanese infiltration of minimalism into an aesthetic that embodies Zen's philosophy, the Western adoption of the minimalist aesthetic seems to have left a lot of the Zen principles behind and focusses not on the spiritual qualities of the minimalist aesthetic but on the high status it has accommodated in Western society.

2 // Minimalism - Resumed

"Minimalism is a tool that can assist you in finding freedom. Freedom from fear. Freedom from worry. Freedom from overwhelm. Freedom from guilt. Freedom from depression. Freedom from the trappings of the consumer culture we've built our lives around. Real freedom." (R. Nicodemus, J. Fields Millburn n.d.)

Over the past few years, the minimalist lifestyle has attracted a lot of followers, and this especially amongst Millennials. A post-baby boomer generation, these 20 to 35 year olds prefer experiences, where others granted higher value to material goods. (C. Karg 2015, p. 2) Referring back to the minimalism principle of "being" instead of "having", the millennial chooses to place emphasis on "making a life" instead of "making a living." (Ng, L. Schweitzer and S.T. Lyons as cited by C. Carg 2010, p. 15). The internet gave millennials a voice that enabled them to enter global debates on topics such as equality and sustainability, and educated them on the misconducts of Western social structures. Challenged with problems such as debt, lack of housing, poor career prospects, and lack of direction (Altavena as cited by C. Karg 2012, p. 15), Millennials' trust in society's mechanisms decreases extensively. The Guardian refers to Generation Y's lack of direction as a result of the overwhelming amount of possibilities available to them. (K. Lyons 2016) "The baby boomer generation had everything mapped out for them, but, for good or bad, we are more interested in enjoying our moment of freedom." (K. Lyons 2016) A seeming translation of this freedom is the overwhelming choice of available products. As today's society is marked by capitalist overindulgence that translates in the booming market of mass consumption and the bombardment of online advertising, a tendency of escapism came to being and Generation Y grew dissatisfied toward "owning" and a preference towards "experiencing".

Erich Fromm stresses the importance of this shift in his book 'To Have or To Be?'. Fromm claims that "only a fundamental change in human character from a preponderance of the having mode to a preponderance of the being mode of existence can save us from a psychological and economic catastrophe" (E. Fromm 1976, p. 165). Returning back to the popularity of minimalism amongst Millennials, Fromm implies the solution for the loss of direction of Millennials is the embodiment of the "being mode". In terms of consumption, this means stepping away from the importance given to material goods, and in terms of the mind, this might be interpreted as the repudiation of the attempt to fill the spiritual gap with consumption. (E. Fromm as cited by C. Karg 2015, p. 11) "What the digital natives really want is a less cluttered and more meaningful life, experience instead of

possession and a more balanced life than that of their baby-boomer parents.” (D. Graham as cited by C. Karg 2012, p. 15).

Besides minimalism’s gain in popularity, what is most apparent is how many people stress the moving towards a minimalist way of reforming society as a solution for overconsumption. “Minimalism will never go mainstream. Society, consumerism, and advertisements have so fed the natural selfish tendencies of humanity. Environmentalism can go mainstream... industries can sell Green. Simplicity has gone mainstream... industries can sell simplicity. But minimalism, by its very definition, cannot be marketed to a world built on consumerism.” (J. Becker 2010) If minimalism is unmarketable and uninfluenced by consumer culture than it might well be the answer to a lot of other issues our profit-focussed society has caused. Besides economic recession, buying our way to happiness has shed light on the numerous amount of environmental problems it set into motion. “Enormous consumption has global, environmental and social consequences. For at least 335 consecutive months, the average temperature of the globe has exceeded the average for the 20th century... This temperature increase, as well as acidifying oceans, melting glaciers and Arctic Sea ice are “primarily driven by human activity.” Many experts believe consumerism and all that it entails — from the extraction of resources to manufacturing to waste disposal — plays a big part in pushing our planet to the brink.” (G. Hill 2013) Another article goes on stating that: “We have an economic system that fetishizes GDP growth above all else, regardless of the human or ecological consequences, while failing to place value on those things that most of us cherish above all — a decent standard of living, a measure of future security, and our relationships with one another.” (N. Klein as cited by R. J. Karunungan 2017) It seems again that a minimalist lifestyle is pointed out as a way of living that does not exhaust our resources. Here the minimalist shift in desires is stressed, as instead of finding value in things that harm our planet, minimalists find it in experiences and the joy of buying less and thus living sustainable. It is arguable that people are slowly revisiting their attitude towards possessions, and oversaturating their environment with belongings seems to become less attractive than it has been before. Instead there appears to be occurring a shift towards a preference for decluttering that flows further in an interest towards sustainable as well as ethical practices. (Bloomberg as cited by D. Weinswig 2016)

Adopting a philosophy that rests on the simplification of life through the discarding of attachments however, is a difficult task within a contradictory context of brand awareness, hyper individuality and conspicuous consumption. As I mentioned before, whereas minimalism started out as a lifestyle, later on it got reinterpreted as an art movement to then briefly infiltrate into an aesthetic realm. It is only natural that within our 21st century society, what is picked out and re-appropriated is the aesthetic potential of minimalism. Disguised as a lifestyle for the serene and self-less, 21st century minimalism centralises around appearance and status. “There’s an arrogance to today’s minimalism that presumes it provides an answer rather than, as originally intended, a question: What other perspectives are possible when you look at the world in a different way? The fetishized austerity and performative asceticism of minimalism is a kind of ongoing cultural sickness.” (K. Chayka 2016) It looks like this interpretation of minimalism has picked up where 1970’s minimalism left off, only now this aesthetic is not communicated solely through design world elite, as within today’s society structures, the Internet is taking a lead position in the conversation around minimalism.

3 // The Trendification of Minimalism

Minimalism as a Vehicle for Online Movements

“Advertisements rail against the conventional demands of society and sell products as instruments of liberation. Brands of jeans signify rebellion and rule breaking, fruit drinks and sneakers have countercultural themes, and cars let us escape and find ourselves. In the person of the bourgeois bohemians or “Bobos,” as journalist David Brooks portrays them, we have a social type that lives on precisely this model of “self-determination,” merging an ethic of non-conformism and impulse with a vigorous consumerism.” (J. Davis 2003, p. 45)

In ‘New Fashion Minimalism in an Affluent Society – A Paradigm Shift?’, Corinna Karg analyzes the online conversation surrounding minimalism through the observing of bloggers and vloggers. Describing a phenomenon called “faux-minimalism”, she stresses what happens when the online communication of minimalism integrates aesthetic as its biggest point of reference. Karg suggests that: “The main reasons for minimalist style are both practical as well as emotional. On one hand, the bloggers cited limited space and finite financial resources. On the other hand, they discussed a desire to live a decelerated, simpler, more “authentic” life that prioritizes “being” rather than “having.”” (C. Karg 2015, p. 1) These motivations manifest in a multitude of social media movements that focus on the “being” above “having” philosophy. First, Karg describes movements that express minimalism in materials and names social media trends such as ‘The Great American Apparel Movement’ as examples. What is notable is that these sustainable movements have reached further than fashion and seeped into all aspects of everyday life, such as eating and living. “The Tiny House movement” and “Vegan movement” are examples of this. In this sense, the minimalism that is communicated online is not only focusing on aesthetic, but also on a minimalist lifestyle. What the fashion focused movements are most prominent in doing however, is to create opportunity for the fashion industry to make a trend out of the principle of simplifying life. First described as a way for people to escape “the hamster wheel of novelty” (C. Karg 2015, p. 4) by opting for timeless clothing, these minimalist fashion movements created a following that opted for the stylish qualities of minimalist aesthetic but opting out of the initial meaning that grounds in philosophy, spirituality and ethics. Reducing minimalism to a superficial aesthetic, “faux-minimalist” bloggers abandon minimalism’s simplifying and reducing qualities, as they feature new outfits on social media nearly every day, containing monochromatic basics that adopt the metonymy of authentic minimalism. (C. Karg 2015, p. 4) What happens then, is that the “trickle up” system fashion is so known for, is applied onto the concept of minimalism, and what first was an attempt to distance oneself from belongings becomes a prime victim of conspicuous consumption. Seeping into the realm of mainstream media, minimalism was appropriated as a trend, a fashion trend above all. The popularization of this aesthetic focused version of minimalism created opportunity for high-street brands to create a market for “faux-minimalists”. Marked by fast fashion, unethical practices, and profit based mass production, the initial meaning of minimalism gets lost within our society as its adopted, like anything else, as a vehicle for profit. “As an outgrowth of a peculiarly American (that is to say, paradoxical and self-defeating) brand of Puritanical asceticism, this new minimalist lifestyle always seems to end in enabling new modes of consumption, a veritable excess of less. It’s not really minimal at all.” (K. Chayka 2016)

Commodifying the Minimalist Self

“The very character of life seems increasingly consumeristic and commercial.” (n.a., The Hedgehog Review 2003)

Ultimately, even though the act of selling is inherently not in line with a minimalist lifestyle, what brands are selling is a minimalist identity. What I mean with this is that, by conveniently using the connotations that are connected to minimal looking clothing as a means to sell, these clothing items are turned into commodities to be bought as an extension of identity expression. "To the degree that social identities are attenuated as the mooring of self-identification (and this, of course, is widely variable), companies can position their goods and images (and ever more precisely with niche marketing) not simply as fulfilling desires but as meeting a felt need for connection, recognition, and values to live by. At the same time, consumers can feel liberated, seeing their consumption choices as facilitating an expressive self and the articulation of personal style without the constraints of tradition or convention." (J. Davis 2003, p. 46) Applying this to minimalism, what ultimately happens with transforming into a trend is that people do not need to live by the principles of minimalism to belong to this community and be perceived as a minimalist, and as minimalism gained a lot of positive connotations over the years, this seems like the logical thing to do when in need of a status boost.

To illustrate the idea of minimalism as a vehicle of commodification of the self, I looked into an Internet persona that engages with this phenomenon and illustrates symptoms of what Corinna Karg calls a "faux-minimalist". Promoting herself as the ultimate minimalist guru, Youtuber, blogger and brilliant brander (Fig. 1) Jenny Mustard makes money by telling you how to live a minimalist life. Claiming to not selling the idea of minimalism as its expression is different for everyone, she quickly contradicts this statement by making videos such as "10 things every minimalist needs" and "How to become a minimalist". Contradictions seem to be a reoccurring trend when analyzing Jenny's online presence. To demonstrate the further paradoxes Jenny Mustard illustrates, it is evident to acknowledge her online performance correlates with the stereotype that has been created around the minimalist lifestyle. As a result of the trendification of minimalist aesthetics, the overall popularity of minimalism with Millennials, and the present zeitgeist that is slowly moving towards a preference for decluttering, the 21st century minimalist trend gathered a number of added characteristics and set a lot of movements into working that refer to a lifestyle rather than merely a fashion trend. Some of the examples I already mentioned before illustrate this idea. Whilst phenomena such as veganism, sustainable housing and no-waste shopping get associated with the minimalist lifestyle, whoever claims to be a minimalist must adopt these phenomena as well. To stress the importance of "must" in the previous sentence, I will look at Jenny Mustard's video "5 annoying myths about minimalism". Here Jenny calls out all stereotypes that have formed around minimalism such as adopting a vegan diet, an all-white aesthetic and a spacious looking home. Funnily enough, she joins her arguments with statements like "Your home does not have to be sparse and white. Our home is, but you know you don't have to adopt this if you're a minimalist.", "I think it makes sense that veganism and minimalism go together, I mean you don't have to, I mean we are vegan, but cause a lot of minimalists care about the environment and about saving the earth resources etc. It usually goes together." (J. Mustard 2017) and "If you look at minimalism online, it's more about like some kind of art music that kind of movement that has a way back when, so it doesn't have anything to do with how many stuff you can own or how wide your apartment is or how much make up you can wear, it's just made up, there are no rules at all. It's more about consciously owning stuff". (J. Mustard 2017) This last statement highlights the insignificance she grants to the history of minimalism, and the idea that minimalism and owning stuff can now be put together without seeming contradictory. Calling out minimalist stereotypes whilst embodying them all at the same time is in fact the result of personifying what sells best and what makes seemingly the best version of a minimalist. "We identify our real selves by the choices we make from the images, fashions, and lifestyles available in the market, and these in turn become the vehicles by which we perceive others and they us. In this way, as Robert Dunn has written, self-formation is in fact exteriorized, since the locus is not on an inner self but on "an outer world of objects and images valorized by commodity culture." (R. Dunn as

cited by J. Davis 2003, p.46) This act of self-optimization criticizes everyone that does not adopt the minimalist lifestyle as it is constructed in our society. To be colourful is not to be a minimalist. What makes minimalism visible to others is regarded important here, whether your actions and mindset move towards a minimalist way of thinking is not.

Comments on Jenny Mustard's video include "I get frustrated when I look for minimalist design ideas on Pinterest because it's not minimal at all. They have a million things in those rooms like a stupid black and white globe on the bookshelf and millions of little trinkets. A white colour palette does not make you a minimalist." and "The concept of 'true minimalist' goes against everything this video is about!" But what is a true minimalist these days? According to Jenny Mustard, it is someone who surrounds him/herself with minimal looking things that do not serve a practical purpose, but radiate the appearance of decluttering. (Fig. 2) "To self-brand, therefore, individuals must get in touch with their skills, the "selling parts" of their personality, and any and every accomplishment they can take credit for. "packaging counts—a lot... Like the famous brands that have become a part of our consciousness, self-branders have to go about enhancing their profile and increasing their visibility through marketing, marketing, marketing. Via self-promotion, they too can become objects of desire." (J. Davis 2003, p. 15) Bombarding her Instagram with sponsored messages that sell minimal looking products (Fig. 3), it seems the original idea of minimalism is completely lost in the commodifying nature of today's society. Davis briefly explores the idea that this act of commodification of the self can be seen as a way to defeat market forces at its own game, however reducing the self to a product is something companies have been doing long before self-branding, and so this act is not outsmarting these business, but surrenders to its logic and demands. "We become more narrowly instrumental, impersonal, and contingent. To be successful at Me. Inc, my traits, values, beliefs, and so on—the qualities by which I locate myself and where I stand— must be self-consciously adopted or discarded, emphasized or deemphasized, according to the abstract and competitive standards of the market." (J. Davis 2003, p. 48) In this sense, using minimalism to define the self by, contradicts the true meaning of what minimalism stands for and therefore loses every possibility this movement has to provide an escape from consumer culture.

The last contradiction I want to illustrate in Jenny Mustard's online presentation is the argument that being a minimalist means to be privileged. In the video "10 things every minimalist needs," Jenny suggests that the purchase of these 10 things will simplify life and make it easier to become a minimalist. These things include: fast Internet, a dishwasher, a clothes steamer, high-quality equipment, and most importantly, "something beautiful to look at and just be like "this is beautiful."" (J. Mustard 2017) Defining the act of becoming a minimalist by referring to the owning of luxuries, opposes the minimalist principle of simplifying life through the releasing of emotional attachments, and underlines Raskin's argument that minimalism has become a signifier of the global elite. (D. Raskin as cited by K. Chayka 2016) By encouraging others to aspire to own the "right" things, Jenny Mustard's directly bypasses the idea that a minimalist's belongings only rest on practicality and directly emphasises the link between being a minimalist and conspicuous consumption: the acquiring of luxury goods and services to publicly display economic power and acquire social status.

The allure of 21st century minimalism

To get an idea of the influence Internet personas such as Jenny Mustard have on the idea millennials have of minimalism, it is evident to look at people who define themselves as a minimalist, without making profit out of this. Whilst these "minimalists" do use the concept to define themselves through, the fact that they adopt this lifestyle without the intention of capitalising on it can highlight possible different motivations for adopting a minimalist

lifestyle within our society and might show that there is more behind the appearance of minimalism as vehicle for status gain.

When interviewing these minimalists, the overall idea of what being a minimalist means in our present society was very consistent. When asking the participants how they would describe a stereotypical minimalist, they immediately referred to aesthetic characteristics such as the “#allwhiteeverything” look, followed by a lot of brand name drops such as COS. Adrienne states that: “This person is super stylish, wearing straight shaped basics without any frills and furbelows and owning brands like COS and other Scandinavian brands. This is really just a stereotype, or maybe that's the fashionable version of it. However, I think a true minimalist is a bit different from that... Minimalism roots in traditions like the Japanese Zen philosophy before it became more of an element in Western architecture, design, art, and maybe even music if you think of ambient and grime?! Anyways, I think at the moment, the minimalist lifestyle is mostly driven by online society. But hey, if that spreads more environmentally-friendly living, that's cool!” (A. Mönkediek 2107) Referring to Jenny Mustard as the most popular blogger she follows online, this ties into the argument I stated before, that minimalism is now solely based on a system of commodification and aesthetic characteristics, losing its original philosophy. What Adrienne does establish here is the distinction between minimalism as a trend and true minimalists, who do live by the original meaning of minimalism as originated from Zen philosophy. What is also apparent is that she connects the popularity of the minimalist trend to the rise of environmentally friendly practices. However, when looking at the answers of other participants, the connection between minimalism and sustainability is not a necessary one. When asked if being environmentally conscious is part of the minimalist lifestyle, all participants answered yes, however, when asked if they themselves were environmentally friendly, answers such as: “my’ minimalism does not really tie into that. It's more of a tool to make the most out of my own life and to get a sense of clarity and peace.” (S. De Groote 2017) and “I see it more as an aesthetic (fashion, interior, etc.) way of living. I don't really consume less as I still buy a lot of clothing.” (J. Volleberg 2017) popped up. What is also interesting, is how all contestants seem to try and live a simplified life one way or another, but two out of three mentioned this does not lead to consuming fewer clothing items. “When it comes to clothing, I still consume to be honest.” (A. Mönkediek 2107) It seems that most of them adopt the concept of consciously living and therefore consuming, however when it comes to buying clothing, this does not mean they buy for practical reasons, but evidently for aesthetic. Their homes reflect this as well. Two out of three participants mentioned a stereotypical idea of how a minimalist home now looks like, filled with commodities that refer to the minimalist aesthetic. “Clean, extremely white more in the direction of ‘DROOG’.” (J. Volleberg 2017) When asked the participants if they followed minimalist bloggers, two of them mentioned they did, whilst one of them mentioned the social media account of a minimalist fashion brand. When asked about why they think the minimalist movement has gained so much popularity, they all mentioned the existence of a trend and the role of digital spreading. Combining these two insights might state that all interviewees are or have been influenced by minimalism as a trend and based their minimalist principles on how this trend was spread by minimalist bloggers. This might explain why there is such a big focus on the aestheticizing of minimalism. Concluding, whilst all having different reasons to adopt a minimalist lifestyle, all of them correlate with my arguments on the popularity of minimalism amongst Millennials. Sam mentioned he was looking for direction, whilst Adrienne talked about the counteraction of mass production. Jules stated that he uses minimalism as a way to save money by buying things that will never go out of style. Clearly defining themselves through a type of aesthetic, all contestants appear to be involved with the commodification of the self and to an extent all adopt a minimalist lifestyle as a way of expressing themselves. Whilst this highlights the idea that minimalism is just a trend, two of the contestants stated reasons other than minimalism as vehicle for self-branding. Adrienne strongly advocates for a sustainable and environmentally friendly lifestyle, consciously putting an effort

in reducing belongings. Sam mentioned how he let go of unnecessary attachments and how it made him feel peaceful. These last reasons do induce the idea that the concept of 21st century minimalism rests partly on the principles of the original minimalist lifestyle and might contribute to a movement away from overconsumption.

4 // Minimalism as Paradigm Shift

“It is the essence of simplicity, normalness and serenity combined that characterizes all these recent fashion phenomena. This strengthens the hypothesis that the New Minimalism, in whichever form it may come, is the epitome of a paradigm shift.” (C. Karg 2015, p. 20)

Despite her display of faux-minimalists and superficial imitators (C. Karg 2015, p. 40), Corinna Karg does see potential in vloggers and bloggers who adopt a minimalist style. Stating that fashion is an indicator of an actual cultural shift (C. Karg 2015, p. 1), Karg describes blog posts and our sociocultural context as indicators for a paradigm shift and further on claims that fashion is the vehicle which will put this shift into movement. “Fashion, as a cultural and creative force that is highly competent in the areas of communication and change, can contribute to re-modelling society and lasting prosperity.” (Carbonaro and Goldsmith as cited by C. Karg 2015, p. 7). Her arguments support the idea that the “buying” in a minimalist way leads to a “decrease of unsustainability” (C. Karg 2105, p. 7). These environmental benefits have the potential for spiritual growth and the exposure and defeat of artificially induced needs might eventually lead to increased satisfaction and mindfulness, to a paradigm shift towards “being” instead of “having”. (C. Karg 2105, p. 7) Here she places a lot of emphasis on the minimalist way of consuming. However, is it possible for the 21st century minimalist movement, which is reformed into a trend, to induce such a paradigm shift? “What differentiates these principles from other belief systems is that aesthetics are not dismissed as entirely insignificant or too worldly, on the contrary, refined design is a key factor to fulfilled being. Zen seems to show a way to realize the being mode without asceticism or renunciation of physical elegance.” (C. Karg 2015, p. 14) This statement neglects the fact that 21st century minimalism is reduced to an aesthetic that is often completely removed from the sustainable and spiritual qualities of minimalism. By appropriating minimalism in a context of consumerism and commodification, it is hard to believe that the people who live by the original principles of minimalism can cause a paradigm shift, when at the same time the mainstream expression of minimalism leans more towards another way of materialism and disintegrates effort to move away from our consumer culture.

Karg’s idea of minimalism indicates a spiritual approach to consumption, that highlights more importance on experiencing life than having belongings. She follows philosopher Ehrenfeld in this, who stresses the importance of embracing true authenticity to accomplish the shift from a culture of possession to a culture of spirituality and transcendence. (Ehrenfeld as cited by C. Karg 2015, p. 9) She continues to explain that one of the main reasons bloggers/vloggers on the Internet adopt a minimalist look is because it makes visible the real self. One of the bloggers she interviewed states: “For me, minimalism connotes power. When you wear [sic] minimalist attire, you have the power to control what others think about you purely based on you as a person. There are no connotations from colour or unnecessary frills. No one can jump to any conclusions when you give them no clues.” (n.n. as cited by C. Karg 2015, p. 26) Completely discarding the commodification of the self, this statement can be refuted simply by pointing out that adopting a minimalist look to convey the idea of authenticity is influenced by the meanings of the commodities that are used to convey this idea. Another reason to adopt a minimalist image online, Karg explains, is minimalism’s promise for a tranquil life and spiritual growth. One of her

interviewees states she sees this transition as an “enlightening experience, shedding past burdens, and flooding life with new meaning – transcending the old into a purer version of oneself.” (Dayinmydreams.com as cited by C. Karg 2015, p. 29) It is apparent then that Karg acknowledges that the bloggers and vloggers she interviewed do not necessarily care for the principles minimalism supports on, (C. Karg 2015, p. 38) and in a way, they contradict these principles in the sense that they condense minimalism to a trend that rests on commodification. However, Karg focuses more on the fact that expressing this minimal style makes them feel better about themselves. (C. Karg 2015, p. 32) Knowing this, is the spiritual approach to consumption here then a substantiated way to move towards a paradigm shift as she claims it to be? If, within this society, “being” and focusing on experience and spirituality is connected to and defined by commodification and consumption, the answer to this question is likely negative.

Conclusion

In this paper, I aimed to critically assess the possibilities for the minimalist movement to move away from overconsumption and other capitalist constructions our society is characterized with. Analysing the concept of minimalism over the past centuries, I came to the understanding that whilst execution of these versions of minimalism vary, they all rely on the fundamental believe that less is in fact more, and the practical execution of this philosophy leads to a decluttered and peaceful mind. It seems that both the example of Jenny Mustard and the Thesis of Corinna Karg lead towards the conclusion that minimalism is something that has become extremely attractive due to these redeeming promises and popular aesthetic. However, analysing both, the attempt of Karg to see 21st century minimalism as a way of evoking a paradigm shift in consumer culture is one that fails under the concept of commodification. Whilst I do agree with Karg that the commodification of minimalism could lead to the buying of more sustainable items, the fact that this is mostly pursued because of selfish reasons such as the portraying of an online image and juxtaposes with a fast fashion movement that offers the same aesthetic in a system of mass-consumption, makes me wonder how the 21st minimalist movement can move past the hype and lead to actual changes towards a society that is less focused on consumption and capitalism and more on the Erich Fromm’s concept of “being”.

However, whilst the 21st century version of minimalism does not seem to offer a lot of leverage to transform society’s constructs, it does induce the idea that minimalism is just part of an umbrella movement to find meaning or focus in life and react to the insecurities we now encounter in society. Like the ‘No-Waste movement’, the ‘Vegan Movement’, the rise of sustainable fashion brands. Based on the findings of Corinna Karg and the interviews I conducted, what can also be considered is that these movements are there to make us feel better and in control about ourselves and our lives in a society that seems to glorify discrimination and appears to be highly unstable.

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Appendix

- A. Interviews
- B. Images

A. Interviews

A.1. Interview with Adrienne Mönkediek (2017)

1. Why do you think the minimalist movement has gained so much following lately?
Social Media Trend
2. When did you adopt a minimalist lifestyle?
As I am quite orderly, I never possessed many items that would clutter my life. Also, my style always has been very minimalistic. I got attracted to how smart and sophisticated it looked from a very young age. However, I am consciously transitioning for about a few months now.
3. Why did you become a minimalist?
First of all, as a counteract to the production of mass products that come with a short lifespan. This goes hand in hand with environmental reasons. Taking the status quo of our planet in consideration, I think it is reckless, if not almost ridiculous to consume the way the westernised society (sadly still) does. We possess so much, while so many people lack the most basic necessities. I mean, this imbalance is of no fault of one's one, as we cannot influence what we are born into.
4. What does living a "minimalist lifestyle" mean to you?
To me personally it means consuming less, consuming consciously, opting for a 'zero'-waste lifestyle, which is difficult to achieve nowadays. I try to avoid packaging when grocery shopping, but even Whole Foods or organic products are wrapped in plastic. Furthermore, I prefer to re-use objects and integrate them into my

interior, - or more recently I started to make my own care products. You don't have to be a desperate Youtube-housewife to DIY.

Another definition of having a 'minimalist' lifestyle in my opinion is repairing things instead of replacing them immediately. I love the wabi-sabi concept ;). As an example, I own four plates – admittedly, it only allows us (boyfriend incl.) to invite two people over for dinner, but when one of them broke, I fixed it instead of throwing it away. I think it's a beautiful thing. To be honest, I also did it because they were handmade in Columbia and a bit pricey, but that value for money makes me keep things for a much longer time span – that's why I try to avoid cheap stuff that is bought impulsively, because I wouldn't feel such a big barrier when throwing it in the trash if you know what I mean.

5. Can you describe how a stereotypical minimalist looks like to you?

If I think of the typical minimalist, a picture of this #allwhiteeverything blogger comes into my head. Someone, who lives in a white, neat space with only a very few essentials, almost spartanic. Of course this person is super stylish, wearing straight shaped basics without any frills and furbelows and owning brands like COS and other Scandinavian brands. This is really just a stereotype, or maybe that's the fashionable version of it. However, I think a true minimalist is a bit different from that. Maybe you already know that, but minimalism roots in traditions like the Japanese Zen philosophy before it became more of an element in Western architecture, design, art, and maybe even music if you think of ambient and grime?! Anyways, I think at the moment, the minimalist lifestyle is mostly driven by online society. But hey, if that spreads more environmentally-friendly living, that's cool!

A.2. Interview Sam De Groote (2017)

1. Why do you think the minimalist movement has gained so much following lately?

On one hand, the spread of ideas in general has sped up exponentially in the digital era, so I think movements and philosophies of all kinds have an easier time gaining traction. As far as minimalism specifically, I believe that advertising and the ideology of consumerism have reached a point that is so easily recognizable as twisted that many people find themselves looking for alternative ways to live and be.

2. When did you adopt a minimalist lifestyle?

At age 18-19. I'm 25 now.

3. Why did you become a minimalist?

I was going through a personal crisis. I took some time to focus on my priorities and to identify what I wanted out of life. Then I eliminated everything else.

4. What does living a “minimalist lifestyle” mean to you?

It means being conscious. Not living on autopilot. Taking an honest look at how you're spending your time and money. Is that person really being a friend to you? Are those clothes really adding any value? What are you getting out of this TV show? What are the few essentials (people, possessions, activities) that actually deserve your time and attention?

5. Can you describe how a stereotypical minimalist looks like to you?

The stereotypical concept revolves around a dramatic reduction of the amount of possessions you own, often with some artificial number in mind. Also, the colour white comes to mind. That's just a temporary fad, though. Minimalists have been here since Buddha and Jesus all the way up to Thoreau, Emerson and Kerouac.

6. Are you environmentally conscious? If so, how?

'My' minimalism does not really tie into that. It's more of a tool to make the most out of my own life and to get a sense of clarity and peace.

7. Do you think being environmentally conscious is part of the minimalist lifestyle?

They often go hand in hand, but I don't think they have to. I think the point is to just generally be conscious of what you're doing and to design your own life instead of following some script based on habit and cultural conditioning.

8. How would you describe your clothing style?

I like clothing that feels and looks simple and natural. A few months ago, I was living in Thailand and I'd wear t-shirts with cotton pants or shorts and sandals, pretty much every day. I liked that. It makes you feel free and put together at the same time. I've never really liked formal clothing. That being said, I do wear a grey blazer to work because it seems people take you more seriously that way.

9. What does your home look like? (Generally speaking)

It's spacious and has a lot of light coming in. There's nothing in it that I do not love.

10. Finally, do you follow any minimalist blogs? If yes then why?

Tim Ferriss's lifestyle design blog and Colin Wright's blog 'Exile Lifestyle', amongst others, were pretty inspiring to me when I was younger. Now I mostly do my own thing, because I'm no longer looking for older 'role models' to follow, I don't need validation.

A.3. Interview Jules Volleberg (2017)

1. Why do you think the minimalist movement has gained so much following lately?

I personally think this happened a couple years ago. Don't really know why to be honest. I think it became more a trend that a lot of people follow.

2. When did you adopt a minimalist lifestyle?

About 4 years ago

3. Why did you become a minimalist?

Because minimal clothing doesn't go out of fashion and therefore I can keep my clothing longer and don't need / want to buy less clothing.

4. What does living a “minimalist lifestyle” mean to you?
I see it more as an aesthetic (fashion, interior, etc.) way of living. I don't really consume less as I still buy a lot of clothing.
5. Can you describe how a stereotypical minimalist looks like to you?
Only wearing black (just cudding). They look like a lookbook shot from COS.
6. Are you environmentally conscious? If so, how?
Yes, buy second hand clothing, don't wash my clothes often, sell my clothing instead of throwing it away, etc.
7. Do you think being environmentally conscious is part of the minimalist lifestyle?
I think so. One needs to buy less items if they don't go out of fashion.
8. How would you describe your clothing style?
Classic, understated, relaxed
9. What does your home look like? (Generally speaking)
Clean, extremely white more in the direction of DROOG.
10. Finally, do you follow any minimalist blogs? If yes then why?
No, I don't follow blogs and despise them to be honest. I do follow some vintage margiela Instagram accounts

B. Images

B.1 Description on Jenny Mustard's Instagram Account (2017)



B.2. Image on Jenny Mustard's Instagram Account (2017)



jennymustard
Berlin, Germany Follow

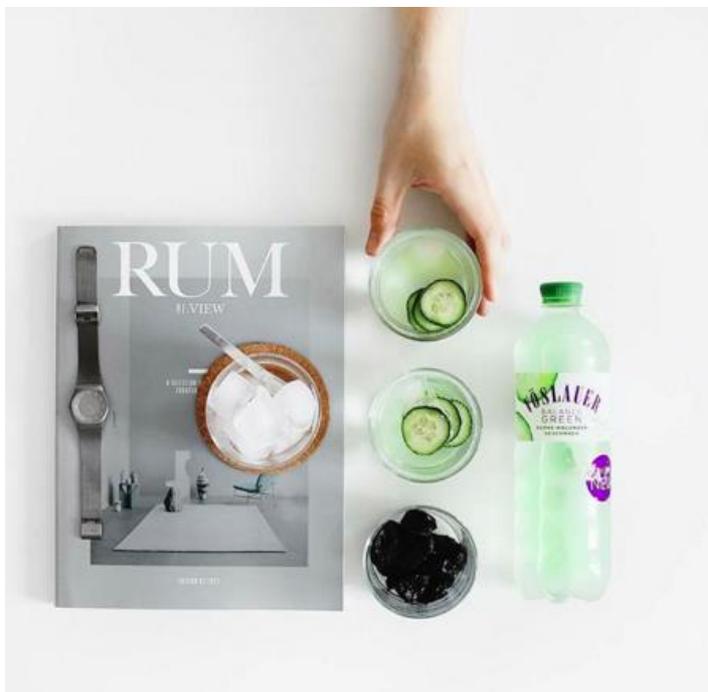
jennymustard PLAN WITH ME !

- new video in how to plan your month 🍷 (on the blog & yt)
- jennymustard #blogger #vegan #scandi #fbloggers #fashionblogger #whiteaddict #livefolk #scandinavian #style #livethelittlethings #minimal #minimalism #minimalist #minimalmood #minimalistic #styleaddict #minimalstyle #berlin #lessismore #hygge #design #interior4all #ibloggers #interior #fashionbloggers #stylist #interiordesign #liveauthentic #decor #fashion
- luxeandpure You guys are incredible. Can't stop admiring how much content you

♡ 🔍
2,679 likes
3 DAYS AGO

Add a comment... ...

B.3. Image on Jenny Mustard's Instagram Account (2017)



jennymustard
Berlin, Germany Follow

1,883 likes 2w

jennymustard what's your fav moment of the day ?

- read all about mine on the blog !
- and a big thank you to @voeslauermineralwasser for teaming up for this post and letting me try one of their newest additions ! i mean, just look at that colour <3 #jungbleiben #voeslauer #sponsored
- jennymustard #blogger #vegan #vegansofig #fbloggers #fashionblogger #whiteaddict #scandinavian #livethelittlethings #minimal #minimalism #minimalist #minimalmood #minimalistic #styleaddict #minimalstyle #berlin #lessismore #onmytable #vlogger #ibloggers #flatlay #fashionbloggers #stylist #hygge #liveauthentic #fashionstylist #fashion

♡ Add a comment... ...