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Minimize: Possessions & Identity

Maggie Denham

Portland State University

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Minimize: Possessions & Identity

by

Maggie Denham

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in

University Honors

and

Graphic Design

Thesis Adviser

Briar Levit

Portland State University

2017

PROCESS PAPER & RATIONALE

MINIMIZE: POSSESSIONS & IDENTITY

Maggie Denham

Portland State University Honors

Thesis Advisor: Briar Levit

Topic Brief

A certain interpretation of the minimalist lifestyle is growing in popularity and I began questioning the importance of a minimalist mindset in contemporary life, including in my own graphic design thesis project. The question I will be researching is the following: how does minimalism and the growing minimalist culture of freedom from possessions impact the relationship between possessions and an individual's sense of self?

The main visual project is an examination into my own habits with my own possessions and the relationships I have with them. The visual language I use is a publication with photographed documentation of the things I own with a focus on the things I don't need. This publication also includes written analysis of my thought process while attempting to obtain a minimalist lifestyle. This project is a self-examination of my own attachment to the things I own and also experiments with the conflicts faced with the idea of minimalism as a lifestyle aesthetic.

Research

The research I did on this topic has included a number of scholarly articles that discuss the relationships between material possessions and the individual sense of self. These articles discuss research questions on the benefits of the minimalist living space, consumer identity, liquid relationships to possessions, and the extended self.

Most of the research I reviewed noted a strong relationship between personal identity and consumption or material possessions. Research done by Professor Russel Belk of York University investigates possessions and the extended self, suggesting how we see ourselves as the sum of our possessions (Belk 139). This becomes an important idea in understanding consumer behavior. Belk found that in the event of "involuntary loss of possessions" it's common for creativity to ensue as a way to attempt self-restoration (Belk 143). This research demonstrates examples in which one's possessions impact self-perception.

Another report examines the elite social benefits of a minimalist architectural living space (Gudkova 1). The article argues that social benefits such as freedom, time, nature, and peace are not affordable for the majority, and that these values influence

the social value or benefit of an architectural space (Gudkova 1). This is just one example of how a minimalist lifestyle can influence the ways in which an individual is perceived by others.

Research published by the American Marketing Association discusses how more and more companies have been advertising themselves as lifestyle brands to appeal to consumer need for "self-expression" through brands (Chernev 66). Through observational experiments researchers found evidence showing that validating respondents' personal identity "weakened consumers' preference for subsequently evaluated brands" whereas threatening the identities of respondents actually "strengthened their brand preferences" (Chernev 78). This is one example of how the desire for validation of personal identity impacts what material possessions a consumer might gravitate towards.

An even more recent study in the Journal of Consumer Research brings up the idea of liquid relationships to possessions for consumers that follow a nomadic lifestyle (Bardhi 510). This research paper identifies a global nomadic lifestyle under which "consumers tend to form situation attachments to objects, appreciate objects primarily for their instrumental use-value, and value immaterial or 'light' possessions as well as consumption practices" (Bardhi 523). The evidence in this article provides an increased understanding of the growing lifestyle under which quantity of material possessions becomes less important. The article describes a lifestyle similar to minimalism under which freedom from excessive possessions is valued.

My research for this project also included a collection of a variety of visual resources utilizing a minimalist aesthetic or the showcasing of objects in a deliberate way. The book *Min: The New Simplicity in Graphic Design* by Stuart Tolley has been useful for visual inspiration. This book has hundreds of photographs of contemporary minimalist graphic design examples to draw from.

Another more informal part of my research involved looking into minimalism as a lifestyle. I looked at a variety of popular blogs and books that boast the benefits of maintaining a minimalist lifestyle of low waste and few possessions.

For this project I have also conducted my own research into my own life by experimenting with the minimalist lifestyle. I attempted to pair down my own possessions into the essential things that I have use for. I documented this process with photography of my own belongings and written reflections on my thoughts throughout the process - which are all contained in my graphic design project.

IDEATION

Moodboard

Mind Map

BLOG RESEARCH

Another more informal part of my research involved looking into minimalism as a lifestyle. I looked at a variety of popular blogs and books that boast the benefits of maintaining a minimalist lifestyle of low waste and few possessions.

MIND MAP

It was important for me to break down my research into different areas of focus that I wanted to include in my publication.

VISUAL RESEARCH

I have also collected a variety of visual resources utilizing a minimalist aesthetic or the showcasing of objects in a deliberate way. The book *Min: The New Simplicity in Graphic Design* by Stuart Tolley has been useful for visual inspiration. This book has hundreds of photographs of contemporary minimalist graphic design examples to draw from.

Much of my visual research included my own data collection. I spent a lot of time photographing my belongings as I went through them and decided which things I no longer needed. I took before and after photos of my closet, documented useless objects I hold onto, and boxes of junk I hide under my bed.

BRAINSTORMING

SKETCHING

FIRST REVISION

SECOND REVISION

The Semi Minimalist.

Contents.

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Beauty
Beauty and
elegance
are the
essence of
style.

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A wardrobe
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functional,
versatile,
and
reflect your
style.

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can see and
learn about
the history of
useless objects.

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Packaging
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Sustainability
is a result of
social and
economic
factors.

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Minimal Mind
A minimal
mind is a
result of
education
and
experience.

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Looking Back
Looking back
is a necessary
part of any
project.

Introduction.

[illegible]

Beauty
Products.

Identity

[illegible]

All of the diagonals that
found when going down
my makeup bag.

The walking sticks that I use I probably only use about half of them on a

Products that I use on a daily or weekly basis when I get ready every morning.

THIRD REVISIONS

FINAL IMAGES

In my final draft I transitioned to a newsprint format. This format will make my thesis more affordable for me to distribute to more people. It also gives the project more physical and visual weight while still allowing plenty of negative white space. Pairing down to two-color printing makes for a more minimalist production method as well while preserving the concept and legibility of the information.

FINAL IMAGES

FINAL IMAGES

FINAL IMAGES

DIGITAL PUBLICATION

MINIMIZE

WINTER 2017

VOL. 1

MAGGIE DENHAM

Life was about to get very messy.

By Maggie Denham
hi@maggiedenham.com

I had ten weeks to do something I always wanted to do. I realized that I have always been somewhat envious of people who live the so-called "minimalist" lifestyle. To be completely honest, I think it's more the aesthetic that appeals to me rather than the actual ideas behind it. ¶ So what exactly is minimalism? I'm not talking about the art movement, although it was extremely influential in beginning this new way of living. According to Joshua Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus of the iconic and sometimes infamous blog The Minimalists, "Minimalism is a tool to rid yourself of life's excess in favor of focusing on what's important—so you can find happiness, fulfillment, and freedom." I had been curious about this lifestyle for a while, so this was my opportunity to try it out for myself.

¶ Over the span of the first four weeks I learned as much as I could about minimalism and basically completed my own crash

course on the topic. After that, it was time to see if I could pull it off. I decided that I was going to photograph my possessions in order to get myself to dive into all the things that I have and to rid myself of the things that I don't need. ¶ On one of the first days that I actually tried to start getting rid of things, I discovered that it's going to be hard to define myself as a minimalist if I don't fit the aesthetic that I've seen growing on social media and all over blogs across the world. I guess this makes me more of a semi-minimalist than a true minimalist. ¶ The following is a collection of photos and writings about my struggle to adopt the minimalist lifestyle, as well as my discovery of a lot of the problems with it. If you are a very average person that has been interested in the minimalist lifestyle, I struggled with this so you don't have to. Spoiler alert: deliberately getting rid of things for no real reason other than to see what happens will not fix any of your problems in life. ¶ If you are a nosy person

that likes looking through other people's things, then this is the book for you. ¶ One of the big reasons I decided to do this was to think about my relationships with my possessions and how this contributes to my identity, but this idea is much bigger than myself. I encourage readers to think about the ways in which possessions contribute to their sense of self, and I encourage readers to question their own relationships to the things they own and why they own them. ¶ In addition to minimalism, I am also interested in the relationships between possessions and identity, and how our consumer choices are influenced by the need for self-expression. The question I hope to answer through research on minimalism and identity is the following: how does minimalism and the growing minimalist culture of freedom from possessions impact the relationship between possessions and an individual's sense of self?

LIVING SPACE

My college bedroom

As an introvert, having a safe and comfortable living environment is very important to me. Part of this experiment with minimalism involves the evaluation of my living space as a whole, and considering the trade off between having more space versus less stuff. ¶ Living in Portland, Oregon means that it can be really difficult to afford a large living space. My room is probably about the size of a jail cell, but I'm honestly just really lucky that I don't have to share a room. This makes it easier to have control over my living space which makes me happy. ¶ It's almost comical for me to watch the whole "tiny house" craze explode in recent years. There are so many reasons why I find it kind of funny. For one, I basically already live in a tiny home, and not by choice. It is technically an apartment, but I have pretty much

the same amount of space. ¶ Why is it that calling it a "tiny home" suddenly makes it cool? People have been living in trailers and RVs due to necessity for decades. They have been ridiculed and labeled as "trailer trash." I think that it is really important to remember that having a small home on wheels is often not a choice, and it's a privilege to be able to afford a space you have control over. ¶ Since I do occupy a relatively small living space, I have to find ways to utilize the space I do have. ¶ During this experiment I have been able to make a lot of extra space for myself, which has been really nice. I feel like there is some sort of psychological value in having a little extra empty space around you, at least for me. I always feel a tinge of regret when I start to overfill my space with things I might not have needed.

Inside my closet

The physical value of the modern minimal architectural space is directly connected to quality of life provided in this space.

Quote from "Representation of Elite Values of Modern Society in Minimalist Living Architectural Space," a research article by Tatyana Gudkova and Alexei Gudkov.

My current bedroom

In my new apartment, I find it comforting not to constantly be surrounded by stuff, so finding a place to put my things and getting rid of what I don't need has been valuable to me. ¶ One of the only reasons that tiny homes make sense to me is the idea of having only the amount of space that you are going to use. Although I can see aesthetic value in vast open space, if you aren't using it then why are you paying for it? Also, with the human population increasing all the time, making more space for other people is something worth thinking about. ¶ I don't have a ton of space in my current apartment so it's easy to make use of what I do have. If you are changing your living situation, it might be a good idea to think about what you will use each room for beforehand. I've always found spare rooms kind of eerie and lifeless. I prefer to go into every area of my living space everyday, so I feel like I fully utilize my space.

MUSEUM OF USELESS OBJECTS

This is my museum of all the random things I realized I have absolutely no use for. I've just been holding on to them for the hell of it. Some of the things in this museum I will probably need to find a new home for, such as the Chanukah candles or my old glasses. But, the other stuff I keep just because it makes me smile. I have to admit that I really enjoy going through old photos and notes and cards. Nostalgia can make it hard to let go of things that we don't really have a use for anymore. It can be great to keep these momentos as long as they aren't holding you back from other things that you want out of life.

1. **Vampire lips kazoo:** I think my mom gave me these for Halloween one year.

2. **TV Remote:** I don't think this remote is even connected to anything.

3. **Earphone splitter:** People use earphones is so other people can't hear.

4. **Laundry cards:** These were for the washer and dryer at my college dorm, where I no longer live.

5. **Old prescriptions:** I don't even remember what these are.

6. **Glasses:** I have worse eyes now.

7. **Passport:** It's expired.

8. **San Francisco snow globe:** I got this for a dollar in Chinatown.

9. **Chanukah candles:** I bought these for a friend and forgot to give it to them. I'm also not Jewish.

10. **Greeting cards:** I love getting cards but honestly I don't ever look at them again.

11. **Batteries:** They are all dead and I don't know what to do with them.

12. **Lightbulb:** I don't have a lamp that this fits in.

13. **Buff:** A trendy infinity scarf made famous by Survivor that isn't necessary at all in real life.

14. **Lactaid pills:** I used to take these because I'm lactose intolerant, but I am now vegan so I don't need them.

15. **X-acto blades:** I go through these like crazy as graphic designer and arts & crafter.

16. **Sea shells:** I'm from California so I kind of feel like I need a few sea shells around the house.

17. **Patrick Star PEZ dispenser:** My mom always gets me these during Christmas.

18. **Work shirt:** I don't work there anymore.

19. **Rock Collection:** Pretty but also pretty useless.

20. **Perler bead letters:** I made these for a random school project.

21. **Nike Frees:** I have had these for four years and they are very gross.

22. **Broken retainer:** It snapped in half when I was cleaning it.

23. **Starburst Chain:** I hate flying in planes so I used to make these to distract myself.

24. **I don't even know what this is.**

25. **Tiny painted horse:** My boyfriend and I decided to make this one day.
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- 8
- USELESS OBJECTS
- USELESS OBJECTS
- 9

BEAUTY PRODUCTS & FASHION

Makeup products I use on a regular basis:

- 1 Urban Decay Naked Basics Palette
- 2 Benefit Posietint
- 3 Benefit Benetint
- 4 EOS Lip Balm
- 5 E.L.F Setting Powder
- 6 Smith's Rosebud Salve
- 7 NYX Baked Shadow
- 8 Two Faced Born This Way Foundation
- 9 Bite Lipstick
- 10 Maybelline Full 'n' Soft Mascara
- 11 Loreal Eyeliner
- 12 H&M Blush
- 13 Maybelline True Match Concealer
- 14 Lancome Concealer
- 15 Kat Von D. Lolita Liquid Lipstick

I would say that beauty products are a part of my identity. With the use of beauty products and makeup, I feel like I have the chance to transform myself into someone that I think is more myself than the me I start with when I wake up. Makeup gives me the opportunity to be creative every single day, even in such a small way that other people may not notice. I love makeup. But it does make me question - am I any less "me" without it? I honestly feel like yes, I not only look different but I also feel different without it. I feel sloppy. I don't know if that is because of the countless advertisements I have been subjected to throughout my life, or if there really is power in having the option to modify external appearance. ¶ The problem is that I have way too many beauty products sitting around my room that I don't even use. It makes me feel like I was tricked into buying some of these things. For example, I don't even really use lotion, but for some odd reason I have like 20 different lotions sitting around my house. The same thing happens to me with

chapstick. All chapstick is basically the same, yet I've ended up with 11 different kinds, at least half of which are old or I don't use. ¶ Fashion is something that I have been interested in since I was a kid. I remember being ten and being so excited for my subscription to teenvogue to arrive every month. I anticipated that it would be pretty difficult to make much of a dent in my wardrobe when trying to rid myself of stuff that I don't need. ¶ I realized that it doesn't make sense to get rid of things that you know you will use, and that you find value in. As a somewhat creative person, I see clothes as just another way you can express yourself. I happen to love neutrals, and black. I also love patterns and warm colors, and I don't think I'm prepared to get rid of my individuality. ¶ We can't deny that the fashion industry has changed radically over the last 50 years. In the US we have gone from producing quality clothing that lasts to making things as cheap and trendy as possible. Industry standards have declined to reel shoppers in on a weekly basis

in order to maintain fashion relevancy. This has caused a negative impact on small businesses, the environment, and factory conditions among major clothing companies. ¶ When you're getting rid of clothes that you don't use, don't throw them away. The last thing the earth needs is more junk filling up more landfills. Americans only donate or recycle about 15% of their discarded clothing, meaning close to 10.5 million tons of clothing waste is created every year in the US alone. Over the span of this project I have chosen not to purchase any clothing. I can say that this has in no way effected my happiness, stylishness, or identity. These are just a few reasons why it is so important to think twice before you make a new purchase. ¶ Consider whether it's something you will keep in your closet for years to come. This sounds like common sense but its something that I know I often forget to remind myself of when I'm making an impulse purchase.

SURVEY

How does minimalism impact the relationship between possessions and individual sense of self?

Throughout the process of making this publication I've realized how attached I am to my own possessions. I do feel like they contribute to my own idea of who I am, and I know that I am not willing to give up comfort in the pursuit of minimalism. ¶ In realizing my own relationship to my possessions, I became curious about how other people around me feel. I developed an anecdotal about this and gave it to my friends at our clothing swap to find out more about how they connect with the things that they own. ¶ The findings from this questionnaire only reflects my small group of friends, but it still made for some interesting discoveries. ¶ I found that 90 percent of those that I interviewed felt like their favorite possession contributed to their identity in some way. I also found that half of the participants cited an electronic device such as a phone, computer, or gaming device as their favorite possession. This says a lot about the value of technology in contemporary society right now.

Favorite Objects Identified in Survey

92%

92% percent of participants had heard of the minimalist lifestyle

5/10

5 out of 10 cited an electronic device as their favorite possession

90%

90% said their favorite possessions contributed to their identity

Our possessions contribute to our own ideas about who we are.

RATIONALE + WORKS CITED →

RATIONALE

I am interested in minimalism as an aesthetic and way of life, and this project has served as an opportunity for me to practice with both. I ended up choosing a newsprint format for this design project because I wanted my work to hold more weight visually and have a greater potential for distribution. I also wanted a lot of negative space to allow my text and photography to have a larger impact on the viewer. I used a grid system to organize the type and photography throughout the publication which is also typical of minimalist design.

My design choices are informed by the minimalist design aesthetic, as well as Swiss modernist design. I chose a single typeface called Europa because it is a contemporary sans-serif geometric typeface that has the modern, simplified look I was working with. I chose to work primarily with black text and black and white photos to use as few colors as possible to communicate in true minimalist fashion. The addition of the yellow allows for another level of hierarchy to communicate ideas clearly and to highlight important areas. The yellow attracts attention that is lacking from my original black and white color palette. Yellow also shows the vast contrast that I found in my own life between the idea of the "true minimalism" versus what is a realistic lifestyle for a regular person.

The goal of this project is to have a publication developed with exploration in photography, page design, and the minimalist design style. It serves as a reflection of my own experience with minimalism as a lifestyle and aesthetic. I want to call attention to the lifestyle while also being able to critique the flaws of the contemporary minimalist. Going forward, I could see this turning into a quarterly publication that might feature a different perspective on minimalism each issue. I would like to expand upon this project to include even more viewpoints in the future. I see design as a way to make life a little more simple and a little more beautiful, and I believe the minimalist mindset can be a way to accomplish both of these things.

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