

**Minimally Indulgent: How Consumer Minimalism Signals High Self-Control**

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### **Abstract**

Minimalism is an emerging consumption trend, yet there is limited research on consumer minimalism and its implications for consumers, marketers, and policymakers. This research proposes and demonstrates that minimalist consumers are perceived by others as having superior self-control abilities. This perception is reflected in making healthier eating and lifestyle choices and being generally better at self-control. The minimalist lifestyle, which involves minimal indulgent consumption and consistent denial of consumption rewards, leads people to infer that minimalist consumers tend to avoid indulgence. Consequently, this results in the perception of minimalist consumers having high self-control. A ChatGPT study and six experiments provide convergent evidence for our core effect, examine the mediating role of indulgence avoidance associated with minimalist consumers, and highlight downstream marketing outcomes of the observed effect.

*Keywords:* consumer minimalism, healthy eating, indulgence, interpersonal perception, self-control

Minimalism has become increasingly popular as both a design style and as a lifestyle (Liu, 2018).

Minimalism arose out of New York in the early 1960s as a reaction against the dominant style of art and advertising, which was harsh and loud. As a visual art form, minimalism influenced architecture, art, furniture design, and advertising (Pracejus et al., 2006). Colloquially, minimalism is ascribed to anything spare or stripped down to only the essentials, with one of the main principles being “less is more” (Dopierala, 2017).

Minimalism has then shifted from an art movement to a form of voluntary, strategic, and thoughtful curation of goods through consumption, such as owning capsule wardrobes, the tiny house movement, and monochromatic home designs (Mathras & Hayes, 2019). Minimalism is also used as a way to engage in more sustainable living (Kang et al., 2021), reduce the amount one consumes, and express anti-consumption (Pangarkar et al., 2021).

Consumer researchers have just begun to study the phenomenon of minimalism and its implications for consumers and marketers. Wilson and Bellezza (2022) make the first attempt to define minimalism as a consumer behavior construct. Minimalism in package design has been found to have a positive effect on brand perception as it is associated with modernity, reliability, authenticity, success, and sobriety (Favier et al., 2019). In their work on minimalist advertising, Pracejus et al. (2006) find that brands marketing through minimalist advertising are perceived as more prestigious and as providing higher quality products.

In this research, we explore people’s perceptions of minimalist consumers in the context of self-control. Specifically, we argue that because a minimalist lifestyle necessitates little indulgent consumption and consistent denial of small consumption rewards, minimalist consumers are perceived by others to have high self-control, which manifests as making healthy eating and lifestyle choices.

Our research makes several important contributions to the marketing literature. First, we contribute to the work on minimalism. While prior work has focused on examining the effects of minimalism in the context of design (Pracejus et al., 2006) and consumption (Błoński & Witek, 2019; Pangarkar et al., 2021; Wilson & Bellezza, 2022), we examine how minimalist consumers are perceived by others and show that they are thought to excel in their self-control abilities. Second, our research contributes to the literature on self-control by expanding the scope of self-control to include minimalism as a novel antecedent of inferences of high self-control. Third, our work contributes to the literature on consumption-based inference-making. by showing that minimalism as a consumption style is sufficient for others to make self-control inferences.

Our work also provides implications for both consumers and marketers. Our studies suggest that being a minimalist engenders a positive interpersonal perception of self-regulation abilities. Our findings also indicate to marketers interested in collaborating with influencers that products endorsed by minimalist influencers are perceived as healthier, making them prime candidates to recommend products that marketers aim to advertise as healthy.

## **Theoretical Background**

### *Consumer Minimalism*

Recent work has defined consumer minimalism as having three distinct and measurable dimensions: few possessions (the ownership of few possessions), sparse aesthetics (the preference for simple and uncomplicated design), and mindfully curated consumption (the thoughtful selection of possessions) (Wilson, 2020; Wilson & Bellezza, 2022). Consumer minimalists make a conscious choice to live a life with few possessions (Rasheed & Balakrishnan, 2023, 2024) in order to keep a healthy balance and steer clear of living in excess (Shukla et al., 2024). The sparse aesthetics is the visual representation

of the choices consumer minimalists have made. The minimalist aesthetic is associated with clutter-free interiors, neutral or plain color schemes, and an emphasis on function over form (Pracejus et al., 2006; Rasheed & Balakrishnan, 2024). Mindful curation is a necessary component of minimalism (Kang et al., 2021; Rasheed & Balakrishnan, 2024) as prior work suggests that minimalism often manifests as a strategic and thoughtful curation of goods (Mathras & Hayes, 2019). Minimalists must remain conscious when purchasing in order to adhere to their aesthetic and lifestyle preferences (Pangarkar et al., 2021; Shukla et al., 2024) and make purchases in a way that is strategic, researched, and purposeful (Lloyd & Pennington, 2020).

We note that there are different types of minimalism, such as voluntary simplicity, reduced consumption, anti-consumption, and inconspicuous consumption (Pangarkar et al., 2021), and while these forms of minimalism may share some similarities with consumer minimalism, they are distinct. Voluntary simplicity, as a form of minimalism, intersects with consumer minimalism in the pursuit of simplicity. However, it diverges in its focus on thrifty, eco-friendly, and economical behaviors (Devenin & Bianchi, 2023). The goal of voluntary simplicity is to turn one's attention, finances, and energy away from acquiring material possessions and towards pursuing aspects of life that bring satisfaction and happiness (Pangarkar et al., 2021). It is less concerned with sparse aesthetics, having few possessions, and mindful curation of goods. While these dimensions might be a byproduct of voluntary simplicity, they are not what these individuals strive for.

An important aspect of consumer minimalism is that it is a choice that those who have the ability and resources to consume more, but decide not to do so, can make. It is not driven by economic constraints such as poverty (Blackburn et al., 2024). This is what separates consumer minimalism from reduced consumption. Reduced consumption, as a form of minimalism, is characterized by necessity (Pangarkar et al., 2021). This form of minimalism is not adopted for reasons surrounding one's aesthetic preference but rather for economic reasons, such as financial constraints. These minimalists might

mindfully select their possessions because they cannot afford to spend money freely. Similarly, they might own few possessions because they cannot afford to purchase more items.

Consumer minimalism is not inherently at odds with consumption, as definitionally one must consume in order to practice this form of minimalism. Consumer minimalists are concerned with curating a particular aesthetic through making purchase decisions; anti-consumption, as a form of minimalism, is a phenomenon where consumers “refrain from buying certain brands or products because of normative influences driven by sustainability, ecological focus, and societal welfare” (Pangarkar et al., 2021). These minimalists are not engaging in minimalism out of a desire to curate a particular aesthetic or simplify their lifestyle via consumption but rather to push back against consumption and consumerism.

Finally, inconspicuous consumption – or inconspicuous minimalism – is a form of minimalism driven by a desire to subtly signal wealth (Bellezza, 2023). Inconspicuous minimalists pursue minimalism in design and the materials used in creating the products they purchase; for example, an inconspicuous minimalist might purchase a designer bag with muted or subtle logos. The inconspicuous minimalist could engage with all the dimensions of consumer minimalism with the desire to subtly signal their wealth. This type of minimalist might later shy away from the minimalist aesthetic when it no longer acts as an inconspicuous signal and is adopted by mainstream culture.

### *Minimalism and Indulgence*

Indulgent consumption, or indulgence, is giving into desires and inclinations (Wiggin et al., 2019). Hofstede was the first to create a framework and definition for societies that are culturally more indulgent versus more restrained: “Indulgence stands for a society that allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun. Restraint stands for a society that controls gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms”

(Hofstede, 2011). More indulgent societies are associated with higher importance on leisure activities and freedom of speech, a higher likelihood to remember positive emotions, and more lenient sexual norms (Heydari, 2020; Hofstede, 2011). More restrained societies exhibit the opposite tendencies, with less importance on leisure, freedom of speech, less likelihood of remembering positive emotions, and less lenient sexual norms. Most recently, Heydari et al. extended Hofstede's work and applied it to the individual level: "Indulgence emphasizes the value of pleasure and having fun. Restraint imposes the control of desire for enjoyment and leisure" (Heydari, 2020).

We propose that minimalist consumers, by definition (Wilson & Bellezza, 2022), are low on indulgence and high on restraint. Minimalist consumers shirk indulgence by making a conscious choice to reduce the number of possessions they acquire and own. When minimalist consumers do make purchases, they do so by mindfully selecting possessions, avoiding purchases that would be unnecessary and inconsistent with their minimalist lifestyle. Moreover, indulgent consumption is tied to sensory stimulation and pleasure. For example, people consume indulgent food because doing so is rewarding and pleasurable (Biswas & Szocs, 2019). Even exposure to sensory cues, such as a darker color, enhances consumers' preference for indulgent consumption (Zhang et al., 2016). By maintaining sparse aesthetics, which is characterized by a lack of sensory stimulation (due to the lack of sensory information), minimalist consumers also make a conscious decision not to engage in indulgent consumption.

Shopping is a pleasurable activity for most people (Rick et al., 2014). People not only shop to fulfill their basic needs but also for hedonistic and indulgent reasons, such as diversion from the routine of daily life, learning about new trends, enjoying leisure time (Tauber, 1972), gaining immediate gratification (Elliott, 1994), and reducing feelings of sadness (Rick et al., 2014). When consumers shop for hedonistic and indulgent reasons, the products and services they acquire also provide a pleasurable and indulgent experience. Additionally, when consumers engage in indulgent consumption, they experience more confidence and delight in their purchase decisions, which leads to higher repurchase

intention for these indulgent products and services (Heydari et al., 2021). Prior work has found that some individuals who adopt minimalism are motivated by a desire to spend less time and reduce their shopping behaviors (Martin-Woodhead, 2022; Vladimirova, 2021). Additionally, minimalist consumers have been found to engage more in cautious shopping (Kang et al., 2021) and less in shopping as a recreational behavior (Lloyd & Pennington, 2020).

### *Self-Control*

The ability to successfully execute self-control is one of the most important characteristics of a human being (Thaler & Shefrin, 1981). One way in which self-control manifests is through the inhibition of dominant tendencies for the purpose of achieving more rewarding long-term outcomes (Ackerman et al., 2009; Fujita, 2011). Enacting self-control can be broken into three primary activities: setting clear standards, monitoring behavior, and regulating behavior (Redden & Haws, 2013). For example, when people try to resist buying knickknacks from the check-out lane, they need to recognize that this is a temptation (set clear standards), identify it as a violation of their plan to spend less on unnecessary items (monitor behavior), and resist the tempting purchase (regulate behavior).

An important domain of self-control is whether and how people regulate their eating behavior, e.g., whether and how they monitor the types and amount of food they take in on a regular basis. In general, people with higher self-control have been shown to take in fewer calories from unhealthy food categories (Ma et al., 2013). Prior research has found that people with high self-control utilize different strategies to achieve this healthy eating goal. For example, higher self-control people satiate more quickly on unhealthy foods because they pay more attention to the amount of food being consumed; that is, these people strategically manage their rates of satiation to consume less unhealthy food (Redden & Haws, 2013). As can be seen, healthy eating as a form of self-control requires being mindful of the quantity of food being consumed or the number of calories taken in.



Another important domain of self-control is whether and how frequently people exercise. Indeed, prior work has found that trait self-control can predict exercise adherence (Stork et al., 2017), and high levels of self-control promote the enactment of short-term exercise intentions (Finne et al., 2019). Similar to healthy eating, physical exercise as a form of self-control requires overcoming physical and mental discomfort in order to reach a long-term physical fitness goal (Gröpel et al., 2014; Martin Ginis & Bray, 2010; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). In summary, prior research has shown that high self-control is associated with healthier eating and lifestyle choices.

### *Hypotheses Development*

In order to avoid indulgent and hedonistic consumption, consumers must practice self-control as “it requires self-control to act in line with a long-term goal and shield it from conflicting hedonic goals” (Bernecker & Becker, 2021). Being governed by momentary pleasures and indulgences, even when those pleasures place larger values and goals at risk, indicates a lack of self-control (Prelac & Bodner, 2003). That is, individuals who engage in reduced indulgent consumption have higher self-control. Minimalist consumers spend a significant amount of effort avoiding indulgent consumption in order to mindfully curate few possessions and maintain a sparse aesthetic, which signals their self-control abilities since exerting self-control requires resisting acting impulsively under the influence of visceral factors (Loewenstein, 1996).

We, therefore, predict that because a minimalist lifestyle necessitates little indulgent consumption and consistent denial of small consumption rewards, minimalist consumers are perceived by others to excel in their self-control or self-regulation capabilities. We expect that this effect manifests as minimalist consumers being rated high on both trait self-control and specific domains of self-control, such as making healthy eating choices and healthy lifestyle choices (e.g., engaging in exercise). We also

hypothesize that this effect is mediated by the inference that minimalist consumers tend to avoid indulgent consumption. Formally, we predict the following.

**H1:** Minimalist (vs. non-minimalist) consumers are perceived by others to be high on self-control.

**H2:** The effect predicted in hypothesis 1 is mediated by the inference that minimalist (vs. non-minimalist) consumers tend to avoid indulgent consumption.

We further argue that because minimalists are perceived to be good at self-control and specifically making healthy eating choices, when they recommend products (e.g., in the role of an online influencer), consumers would perceive the product they endorse as being healthier as well. This occurs because how a person is perceived can have an effect on how organizations and products associated with this person are perceived (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). For example, past research has shown that CEOs with youthful faces are perceived as more honest and innocent, which in turn makes people perceive their company to be more credible (Gorn et al., 2008). Recent work has also found that greater racial, gender, or national diversity in a corporate team leads consumers to believe the team will safeguard the broad interests of the community, which in turn leads to the perception of the firm and its representatives as being more moral (Khan & Kalra, 2021). Similarly, the presence of a non-stereotypical service provider, such as a male wedding planner, has been shown to lead consumers to positively perceive the firm (Matta & Folkes, 2005).

Therefore, we intend to demonstrate the marketing implications of the perceptions of minimalists as being good at self-control (e.g., being healthy eaters) by proposing the following hypotheses.

**H3:** An ambiguous food product (e.g., cereal bar) is perceived as healthier when it is recommended by a minimalist (vs. non-minimalist) influencer.

**H4:** The effect predicted in hypothesis 3 is mediated by the inference that the minimalist (vs. non-minimalist) influencer is a healthier eater.

A ChatGPT study and six experiments (all pre-registered) provide convergent evidence for our hypotheses, linking consumer minimalism to an inference of indulgence avoidance and, consequently, a perception of high self-control. Study 1 utilizes a ChatGPT data generation process (previously benchmarked against human samples, showing an agreement rate over 75%, Li et al. 2024) to gather evidence from extensive real-world text data. Study 2 establishes the basic effect that minimalist consumers are perceived to be good in self-control. Study 3 replicates the effect found in study 2 with a visual depiction of the minimalist's lifestyle. Studies 4 and 5 test indulgence avoidance as the proposed underlying mechanism using both mediation (study 4) and moderation (study 5). Studies 6 and 7 demonstrate the marketing implications of the observed effect, suggesting that marketers interested in promoting their brand as healthy or brands interested in selling products and services related to self-control should consider collaborating with minimalist influencers.

### **Study 1: A ChatGPT-Based Study on the Correlation between Apparel Brands Minimalism and Consumer Self-Control**

Large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT are models trained on extensive real-world text data obtained from sources like websites, articles, and books, enabling them to learn human language patterns and produce human-like responses (Casella et al., 2023). Research has demonstrated their capability to generate human-like responses, particularly in marketing research (Brand et al., 2023; Sarstedt et al., 2024).

This study employs LLM, ChatGPT in particular, to generate consumer-like responses and use them to examine the association between minimalism brands and the perceptions of consumers who use them. Recent studies have demonstrated that LLMs are capable of capturing and reproducing

human-like perceptions (Caliskan et al., 2016; Li et al., 2024). Our study draws from these studies which show language models trained on extensive real-world text data can pick up brand perceptions present in everyday human language (Caliskan et al., 2016; Nadeem et al., 2020). Specifically, for brand perceptions, Li et al. (2024) proposed a technique for generating attribute-specific brand perceptions using LLMs and discovered that data generated by LLM closely align with those from human surveys, with agreement rates exceeding 75% across various types of prompts.

### *Methods*

We employed ChatGPT Turbo-3.5, a widely used LLM, to investigate whether there is a correlation between minimalist brand perception and perception of consumers' self-control. The data collection process involved two main stages: *brand generation* and *rating generation*. First, in the *brand generation* step, following the approach outlined in Li et al. (2024), we instructed ChatGPT to compile a list of the "most popular apparel brands" and repeated this prompt 1,000 times. We then calculated the frequency of each brand appearing in these 1,000 responses. Based on this analysis, we identified the 50 most frequently mentioned brands in the responses (as depicted in Figure 1).

(INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE)

The second step, *rating generation*, involved requesting ChatGPT to rate several attributes of these 50 apparel brands as if ChatGPT were an actual human participant. To accomplish this, we adopted the method used by Li et al. (2024) and formulated the prompt using the Role-Task-Format (RTF) structure, which specifies the LLM's role (R) as a consumer taking a marketing survey (T) to rate a particular attribute of 50 brands on a 10-point scale (F). The prompt is as follows: "Imagine you are a typical consumer taking a survey. You are asked to rate the following brands: [brand list] on [attribute description]. Provide your response on a scale of 10. Only return your ratings in JSON format, with the key being the brand name and the value being your rating. No other things." This prompt requires a

“JSON format” response to streamline data processing and identify abnormalities in the ChatGPT responses.<sup>1</sup>

In [brand list], we inserted the 50 apparel brands obtained in the brand generation step. The prompt instructs a “ChatGPT participant” (analogous to a “human participant”) to assign a score ranging from 1 to 10 to rate an attribute specified in [attribute description] for each brand. This means the response contains 50 scores, one for each brand on a single attribute. In [attribute description], we inserted the seven attributes (i.e., each prompt for one attribute), including our independent and dependent variables, plus five covariates. The following are the prompts for gathering responses regarding independent and dependent variables:

- Independent variable (i.e., minimalist brand perception): the degree to which you think the brand is a minimalist brand.
- Dependent variable (i.e., perception of consumers’ low self-control): the degree to which you think the consumers of this brand are perceived as having low self-control.<sup>2</sup>

Perceptions of quality, age, price, familiarity, and likability of each brand were considered as covariates in our analysis. We accounted for these variables because consumers who prefer high-quality, expensive, and well-established brands might be perceived as having higher income and therefore, greater self-control (Bernheim et al., 2015). Additionally, individuals who have a preference for well-known and well-liked brands may form a positive overall impression, leading to a perception of high self-

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<sup>1</sup> JavaScript Object Notation (JSON) is a standard text-based format for representing structured data based on JavaScript object syntax. It is commonly used for transmitting data in web applications (e.g., sending some data from the server to the client, so it can be displayed on a web page, or vice versa).

<sup>2</sup> We ask about the perception of consumers’ low self-control instead of their “high self-control” because lack of self-control is an issue that people aim to address and is thus more commonly discussed in daily coverage (the training data of LLM). Consistent with H1, we expect a negative correlation between minimalist brand perception and perception of consumers’ low self-control.

control through a halo effect (Gai & Bhattacharjee, 2022). Here are the prompts we used to gather data on these covariates:

- Perceived expensiveness: the degree to which you think the brand is expensive.
- Perceived quality: the degree to which you think the brand is high quality.
- Familiarity: the degree to which you think the brand is a familiar brand.
- Liking: the degree to which you like the brand.
- Perceived brand age: the degree to which you think the brand is an old brand.

We formulate our prompt for each of these attributes. Such a prompt will request a “ChatGPT participant” to rate all 50 brands on a single attribute (i.e., generate a score for each brand). We then repeated each prompt 5,000 times<sup>3</sup> to ensure sufficient statistical power. In total, we requested ChatGPT 35,000 times (5,000 times × 7 attributes).

### *Results*

Among the 35,000 responses generated by ChatGPT, 79 responses (0.23%) did not generate responses that matched the JSON format requirements in the specified instructions. Therefore, we only included the remaining 34,921 responses in our data analysis.

Similar to Li et al. (2024), we focused on brand-level rating scores. For example, 4,994 responses provided ratings on the degree to which consumers of each brand have low self-control. Therefore, each brand has 4,994 scores on this attribute. For each brand, we calculated the average of the 4,994 scores, resulting in an aggregate-level rating on the perception of consumers’ low self-control. Following this

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<sup>3</sup> The results are quantitatively similar to those obtained using ChatGPT4 with varying response numbers. These results are available upon request.

approach, each brand has seven aggregate-level ratings for the seven attributes. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

(INSERT TABLE 1 HERE)

We then conducted an OLS regression analysis with a sample size of 50 (i.e., the number of brands) to examine the relationship between a brand's minimalism rating (IV) and its consumers' low-self-control rating (DV). We found a strong correlation between the two variables, which remained significant after controlling for the covariates. Our results suggest that consumers of brands considered to be minimalist are less likely to be seen as lacking self-control. Please refer to Table 2 for detailed regression results.

(INSERT TABLE 2 HERE)

### *Discussion*

Study 1, using the advanced LLM technique, provides preliminary evidence supporting the negative association between minimalism consumption and perceived consumer low self-control. Moreover, our results show that this effect is not driven by factors such as subjective liking for the brand and perceived brand expensiveness. Since this study is correlational in nature, in the next study, we will test the effect of minimalism on perceived self-control using experimentation.

### **Study 2: Minimalist Consumers Are Perceived as Making Healthier Eating and Lifestyle Choices**

Study 2 tests hypothesis 1, that consumers who live a minimalist (vs. control) lifestyle will be perceived by others to be higher on self-control and especially more likely to make healthy eating and lifestyle choices. This study was preregistered at [https://aspredicted.org/7SN\\_STQ](https://aspredicted.org/7SN_STQ).

### *Method*

### *Participants and design*

A total of 200 U.S. participants (49.5% female,  $M_{age} = 40.94$ ,  $SD = 13.47$ ) recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) were randomly assigned to a 2-cell (consumer type: minimalist vs. control) between-subjects design.

### *Procedure*

Participants were first asked to read a basic description of a consumer, Anna.

*“Anna is 28 years old. She was born and raised in a small city. Anna loves music and enjoys making friends. She is liked by her friends and family.”*

Then, only participants in the minimalist condition read a few additional sentences describing Anna’s lifestyle and consumption patterns, which are consistent with the three defining dimensions of consumer minimalism (Wilson & Bellezza, 2022),

*Anna tries to limit the amount of stuff she buys and consumes; she enjoys owning very few possessions. Anna is also mindful when shopping, only buying new things when she knows exactly how she will use them. In her home, Anna creates an aesthetic that is simple and sparse, she likes to leave a lot of open or blank spaces.”*

*Dependent Measures.* Participants then proceeded to respond to four dependent measures (Huang & Labroo, 2020; Laran, 2010). First, they made three choices (order randomized), each between a healthy and an unhealthy food option (e.g., potato chips or apple chips), that they thought Anna would choose. We coded healthy choice as 1 and unhealthy choice as 0, summing scores across the three choices to create a healthy eating index (range: 0-3). Second, participants chose between two gift cards, one for a restaurant providing healthy options and one for a restaurant providing unhealthy options, indicating the one they thought Anna would choose. Both gift cards had the same value (US\$20), and



basic information about the restaurants was provided (Huang & Labroo, 2020). The third measure was a shopping task (Laran, 2010). We gave participants the following instructions: “Now imagine Anna is grocery shopping in a store she usually goes to. She is browsing the snack aisles to pick two snacks for later. Please indicate which two of the following snacks you think she would like to have.” We showed participants a list of 16 snacks, eight of which were unhealthy (chocolate bar, Chips Ahoy cookies, cheese curls, Doritos chips, ice cream, doughnuts, Oreos, and fruit roll-ups) and eight of which were healthy (raisins, celery sticks, cheerios, low-fat yogurt, baby carrots, granola bar, rice cake, and apple). Participants were asked to choose two snacks from the list that they thought Anna would choose. We coded the healthy snack choice as 1 and the unhealthy snack choice as 0, summing scores across the two choices to create a healthy snack-choice index (range: 0-2). Finally, for the fourth measure they indicated Anna’s likelihood (1 = very unlikely, 9 = very likely) of engaging in each of four activities: “exercising in the gym,” “joining a fitness class (e.g., Yoga/Pilates),” “going running/cycling,” and “avoiding tasty, tempting, high-calorie foods containing bad cholesterol and fat.” We averaged the ratings across the four items to create a healthy lifestyle index ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ).

#### *Manipulation check*

For the manipulation check, participants were asked “Based on the description of Anna you saw earlier, is she a minimalist?” (1 = yes, 0 = no). Finally, participants were asked to provide some basic demographic information (i.e., gender and age).

### *Results*

#### *Manipulation check*

A chi-square test revealed that participants in the minimalist condition thought Anna was more likely to be a minimalist compared to those in the control condition (100% vs. 31%;  $\chi^2(1) = 105.34, p < 0.001$ ). So, our manipulation was successful.

*Healthy eating choice*

A one-way ANOVA conducted on the healthy eating choice index (0-3) yielded a significant effect of consumer type ( $F(1, 198) = 73.28, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.270$ ). As predicted, participants in the minimalist condition indicated that Anna would be more likely to make healthy eating choices ( $M = 2.52, SD = 0.67$ ) relative to those in the control condition ( $M = 1.46, SD = 1.04$ ).

*Gift card choice*

A chi-square test performed on the gift card choice revealed a significant effect of consumer type. Participants in the minimalist condition were more likely to indicate that Anna would choose the healthier gift card option than participants in the control condition (93% vs. 63%;  $\chi^2(1) = 26.22, p < 0.001$ ).

*Healthy lifestyle choice*

A one-way ANOVA conducted on the healthy lifestyle choice index (1-9) yielded a marginally significant effect of consumer type ( $F(1,185) = 3.88, p = 0.050, \eta_p^2 = 0.021$ ).<sup>4</sup> Participants in the minimalist condition indicated that Anna would be more likely to make healthy lifestyle choices ( $M = 6.44, SD = 1.58$ ) relative to those in the control condition ( $M = 5.95, SD = 1.80$ ).

*Healthy snack choice*

A one-way ANOVA on the healthy snack-choice index (0-2) revealed a significant effect of consumer type ( $F(1, 198) = 58.82, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.229$ ). Participants in the minimalist condition indicated that Anna would be more likely to make healthy snack choices ( $M = 1.84, SD = 0.40$ ) relative to those in the control condition ( $M = 1.17, SD = 0.78$ ).

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<sup>4</sup> The degree of freedom reduced to 185 because we did not force response for this question in the Qualtrics survey and therefore there were missing data.

### *Discussion*

Study 2 provided strong support for hypothesis 1 by showing that minimalist consumers are perceived as making healthier eating and lifestyle decisions than consumers not described as minimalists. Because in the control condition, participants did not receive information on the consumer's lifestyle and consumption patterns, it is clear that the observed effect was driven by consumer minimalism. Whereas study 2 used a verbal depiction of consumer minimalism, study 3 used a photo manipulation.

### **Study 3: Visual Depiction of Consumer Minimalism**

This study breaks from study 2's verbal depiction of consumer minimalism, instead using photo manipulation. We also include a new measure to examine healthy eating, which assesses whether a minimalist consumer is more likely to adhere to USDA dieting guidelines. Moreover, we include a measure of trait self-control, which allows us to examine the effect of consumer minimalism on the perception of general self-control, going beyond healthy eating and lifestyle choices tested in study 2. Another change is that the target consumer in the study scenario is gender-neutral. This study was preregistered at <https://aspredicted.org/NQ4 WRK>.

### *Method*

#### *Participants and design*

A total of 300 U.S. MTurk participants (55% female,  $M_{age} = 41.08$ ,  $SD = 12.80$ ) were randomly assigned to a 2-cell (consumer type: minimalist vs. maximalist) between-subjects design.

#### *Procedure*

Participants were first asked to read a description of a consumer, Alex, "Please take a moment to imagine Alex. Alex is 28 years old and was born and raised in a small city. Alex loves music and enjoys

making friends. Alex is well-liked by friends and family.” Participants were then shown five images of the interior of Alex’s home (see Web Appendix B for details). Participants read that each morning Alex wakes up in the bedroom, gets dressed in the closet, does work in the office, prepares meals in the kitchen, and relaxes in the living room. Specifically, the home décor of each room shown in the minimalist (maximalist) condition was consistent (inconsistent) with the dimensions of consumer minimalism (Wilson & Bellezza, 2022).

### *Dependent measures*

Participants then proceeded to respond to four dependent measures (Huang & Labroo, 2020; Laran, 2010). First, participants completed the same healthy eating choice task and healthy lifestyle choice task ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ) as in study 2. The third measure was a USDA dieting guideline measure (Talukdar & Lindsey, 2013). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) with three statements: “Alex can easily adhere to the USDA’s nutritional guidelines for healthy eating”, “Alex is able to adhere to the USDA’s nutritional guidelines for healthy eating”, and “Alex is confident that s/he can adhere to the USDA’s nutritional guidelines for healthy eating.” We averaged the ratings across the three items (order randomized) to create a USDA index ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ). The fourth measure was a measure of trait self-control. Participants indicated the extent to which Alex is impulsive (1 = not at all impulsive, 7 = very impulsive) (reverse coded), self-controlled (1 = not at all self-controlled, 7 = very self-controlled), and self-disciplined (1 = not at all self-disciplined, 7 = very self-disciplined). We averaged the ratings across the three items (order randomized) to create a trait self-control index ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ). Finally, we included a measure of chronic stress adapted from Pearlin & Schooler (1978) and a Perceived Stress Scale adapted from Cohen et al. (1983). These measures were included for exploratory purposes and not used in our final analyses.

### *Manipulation check*

Participants indicated the extent to which they believed Alex was a minimalist based on the images they saw of Alex's home (1 = Alex is definitely not a minimalist, 7 = Alex is definitely a minimalist). Finally, participants provided some basic demographic information (i.e., gender and age).

### *Results*

#### *Manipulation check*

A one-way ANOVA confirmed that participants perceived Alex in the minimalist condition as significantly more minimalist than Alex in the maximalist condition ( $M = 5.75$ ,  $SD = 1.38$  vs.  $M = 2.06$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ;  $F(1, 298) = 449.15$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.601$ ).

#### *Healthy eating choice*

The same ANOVA conducted on the healthy eating index (0-3) yielded a significant effect of consumer type ( $F(1, 298) = 12.62$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.041$ ). As predicted, participants indicated that Alex would be more likely to make healthy eating choices when depicted as a minimalist ( $M = 2.28$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ) relative to when Alex was depicted as a maximalist ( $M = 1.92$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ).

#### *Healthy lifestyle choice*

The same ANOVA conducted on the healthy lifestyle index (1-9) yielded a significant effect of consumer type ( $F(1, 298) = 40.98$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.121$ ). Participants indicated that Alex would be more likely to make healthy lifestyle choices when depicted as a minimalist ( $M = 7.17$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ) relative to when Alex was depicted as a maximalist ( $M = 6.12$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ).

#### *USDA dieting guideline*

The same ANOVA conducted on the USDA index (1-7) yielded a significant effect of consumer type ( $F(1, 298) = 21.77$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.068$ ). Participants indicated that Alex would be better able to

follow the USDA dieting guidelines when depicted as a minimalist ( $M = 5.93$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ) relative to when Alex was depicted as a maximalist ( $M = 5.39$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ).

### *Trait self-control*

The same ANOVA conducted on the trait self-control index (1-7) yielded a significant effect of consumer type ( $F(1, 298) = 80.46$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.213$ ). Participants indicated that Alex would have higher trait self-control when depicted as a minimalist ( $M = 5.84$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) relative to when Alex was depicted as a maximalist ( $M = 4.59$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ).

### *Discussion*

The results of this study again supported hypothesis 1. This study also replicated the effects we found in study 2 with a photo manipulation of a consumer's minimalist lifestyle. While study 2 showed effects on specific self-control domains, this study demonstrated that these effects generalized to trait self-control. In the next study, we will test hypothesis 2 that the perception of minimalist consumers as being better at self-control is mediated by the inference that minimalist consumers tend to avoid indulgent consumption.

### **Study 4: The Mediating Role of Indulgent Consumption**

The purpose of this study is to test hypothesis 2, the mediating role of indulgent consumption. Studies 2 and 3 demonstrated our basic effect that minimalist consumers are perceived as having higher self-control. Here, we predict that minimalist consumers are perceived as being less indulgent than non-minimalist consumers, which in turn leads to the perception of them having higher self-control and being more likely to make healthy eating and lifestyle choices. This study was preregistered at [https://aspredicted.org/TV8\\_92K](https://aspredicted.org/TV8_92K).

### *Method*

### *Participants and design*

A total of 300 U.S. MTurk participants (57% female,  $M_{age} = 40.44$ ,  $SD = 10.97$ ) were randomly assigned to a 2-cell (consumer type: minimalist vs. maximalist) between-subjects design.

### *Procedure*

Participants received the same photo manipulation as in study 3, depicting a gender-neutral consumer, Alex, as a minimalist or maximalist.

### *Dependent and mediator measures*

Participants were given the same four dependent measures as in study 3 (order randomized; see Web Appendix C for details): healthy eating choice, healthy lifestyle choice ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ), USDA dieting guideline ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ), and trait self-control ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ). Afterward, participants proceeded to respond to two measures for indulgent consumption (order randomized), which served as the mediator. First, they were told that Alex wanted to stream a movie online and had a choice between a highbrow movie (a more serious and intellectually stimulating choice) and a lowbrow movie (a more pleasurable watch but less serious and intellectually stimulating). They were then asked to choose which movie they thought Alex would choose (7 = Alex will definitely choose a lowbrow movie, 1 = Alex will definitely choose a highbrow movie). Next, participants were asked to imagine that Alex's good friend was leaving town and hosting a goodbye party later that evening. However, during the afternoon, Alex's boss gave them the urgent task of preparing an important presentation for the next day. Because the presentation requires considerable work, if Alex attends the friend's party, they will not be able to prepare a decent presentation. Participants were then asked to predict Alex's likelihood of attending the party on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all likely, 7 = very likely) (adapted from Mehta et al., 2014).

### *Manipulation check*

For our manipulation check, participants were asked “Based on the images you saw of Alex’s home, is Alex a minimalist?” (1 = yes, 0 = no). Finally, participants were asked to provide some basic demographic information (i.e., gender and age).

## *Results*

### *Manipulation check*

A chi-square test confirmed that participants in the minimalist condition thought Alex was more likely to be a minimalist compared to those in the maximalist condition (92% vs. 10%;  $\chi^2(1) = 205.02, p < 0.001$ ).

### *Healthy eating choice*

A one-way ANOVA conducted on the healthy eating index (0-3) yielded a significant effect of consumer type ( $F(1, 298) = 20.38, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.064$ ). As predicted, participants indicated that Alex would be more likely to make healthy eating choices when depicted as a minimalist ( $M = 2.38, SD = 0.74$ ) relative to when Alex was depicted as a maximalist ( $M = 1.96, SD = 0.85$ ).

### *Healthy lifestyle choice*

The same ANOVA conducted on the healthy lifestyle index (1-9) yielded a significant effect of consumer type ( $F(1, 298) = 52.09, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.146$ ). Participants indicated that Alex would be more likely to make healthy lifestyle choices when depicted as a minimalist ( $M = 7.33, SD = 1.25$ ) relative to when Alex was depicted as a maximalist ( $M = 6.05, SD = 1.78$ ).

### *USDA dieting guideline*

The same ANOVA conducted on the USDA index (1-7) yielded a significant effect of consumer type ( $F(1, 298) = 20.48, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.064$ ). Participants indicated that Alex would be better able to



follow the USDA dieting guidelines when depicted as a minimalist ( $M = 5.97$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) relative to when Alex was depicted as a maximalist ( $M = 5.43$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ).

#### *Trait self-control*

The same ANOVA conducted on the trait self-control index (1-7) yielded a significant effect of consumer type ( $F(1, 298) = 88.51$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.229$ ). Participants indicated that Alex would have higher trait self-control when depicted as a minimalist ( $M = 5.89$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ) relative to when Alex was depicted as a maximalist ( $M = 4.67$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ).

#### *Movie choice*

The same ANOVA conducted on the movie choice revealed a significant effect of consumer type ( $F(1, 298) = 20.95$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.066$ ). Participants perceived that Alex would be more likely to pick the highbrow movie, which is a less indulgent decision, when depicted as a minimalist ( $M = 2.75$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) relative to when Alex was depicted as a maximalist ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ).

#### *Party choice*

The same ANOVA conducted on the party choice revealed a significant effect of consumer type ( $F(1, 298) = 15.34$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.049$ ). Participants perceived that Alex would be less likely to attend the party, which is a less indulgent decision, when depicted as a minimalist ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ) relative to when Alex was depicted as a maximalist ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ).

To test hypothesis 2, we ran mediation analyses using the average of the movie and party measure as the mediator (Hayes, 2017). The indirect effect of consumer type on all dependent measures via the mediator was significant: healthy eating choice ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ , 95% CI: 0.08, 0.23), healthy lifestyle choice ( $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ , 95% CI: 0.04, 0.38), USDA dieting guidelines ( $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ , 95% CI: 0.10, 0.33), and trait self-control ( $\beta = 0.22$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ , 95% CI: 0.10, 0.36).

### *Discussion*

The results of this study supported hypothesis 2. The effect of consumer minimalism on perceptions of self-control was mediated by the inference that minimalist consumers tend to avoid indulgent consumption. The next study aims to provide additional support for hypothesis 2 using a process-by-moderation approach.

### **Study 5: The Moderating Role of Indulgent Consumption**

The purpose of this study is to provide further evidence for our proposed mechanism. If the effect of consumer minimalism on perceived high self-control is indeed driven by the inference that the minimalist consumer tends to avoid indulgent consumption, then information about this consumer's engagement in indulgent consumption should eliminate this effect. That is, if a consumer engages in both minimalism consumption and indulgent consumption, then they will not be perceived as high in self-control. In other words, we examine if the presence or absence of information cueing indulgent consumption moderates the effect of minimalism on perceptions of self-control. This study was preregistered at [https://aspredicted.org/KFG\\_GDX](https://aspredicted.org/KFG_GDX).

### *Method*

#### *Participants and design*

A total of 318 (38% female,  $M_{age} = 20.54$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) undergraduate students from a large US public university participated in this study for course credit. They were randomly assigned to a 2 (consumer type: minimalist vs. maximalist)  $\times$  2 (indulgence cue: present vs. absent) between-subjects design.

#### *Procedure*

Participants in the indulgence cue absent conditions only received the same photo manipulation as in studies 3 and 4, depicting a consumer, Jesse, as a minimalist or maximalist. In addition to receiving the same photo manipulation, participants in the indulgence cue present conditions were also told that Jesse enjoyed eating indulgent foods. This information was accompanied by a photo collage of various indulgent foods (see Web Appendix D for details).

#### *Dependent measures*

Participants were given the same trait self-control measure ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ) as in studies 3 and 4 (order randomized; see Web Appendix D for details).

#### *Manipulation checks*

For the manipulation checks, participants were asked “Based on the description of Jesse you read earlier, is Jesse a minimalist?” (1 = yes, 0 = no) and “Based on how you imagined Jesse earlier, does Jesse enjoy eating indulgent foods?” (1 = yes, 0 = no). Finally, participants were asked to provide some basic demographic information (i.e., gender and age).

### *Results*

#### *Manipulation checks*

As expected, a binary logistic regression model with consumer type and indulgence cue as the two factors predicting perceptions of Jesse as a minimalist revealed only a significant main effect of consumer type ( $X^2(1) = 102.55, p < 0.001$ ). Neither the main effect of indulgence type ( $X^2(1) = 0.44, p = 0.507$ ) nor the interaction ( $X^2(1) = 0.68, p = 0.409$ ) was significant in predicting perceptions of consumer minimalism. Validating the manipulation of consumer minimalism, participants in the minimalist condition thought Jesse was more likely to be a minimalist compared to those in the maximalist condition ( $\beta = 4.57, SE = 0.60, p < 0.001, 95\% CI = [3.40, 5.74]$ ).

A binary logistic regression model regressing perceptions of Jesse's indulgent food preference on consumer type and indulgence cue yielded significant main effects of consumer type ( $\chi^2(1) = 17.08, p < 0.001$ ) and indulgence cue ( $\chi^2(1) = 28.07, p < 0.001$ ), but the interaction was not significant ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.16, p = 0.688$ ). Convergent with our theory and prior results, participants in the minimalist condition thought Jesse was less likely to be indulgent compared to those in the maximalist condition ( $\beta = -1.29, SE = 0.60, p = 0.030, 95\% CI = [-2.46, -0.12]$ ). Validating the manipulation of indulgence, participants in the indulgence cue present condition thought Jesse was more likely to enjoy indulgent foods compared to those in the indulgence cue absent condition ( $\beta = 1.97, SE = 0.38, p < 0.001, 95\% CI = [1.23, 2.72]$ ).

#### *Trait self-control*

A 2 (consumer type: minimalist vs. maximalist)  $\times$  2 (indulgence cue: present vs. absent) ANOVA conducted on the trait self-control index (1-7) revealed a significant main effect of consumer type ( $F(1, 314) = 149.65, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.323$ ) and a significant main effect of indulgence cue ( $F(1, 314) = 87.19, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.217$ ). More importantly, a significant interaction emerged as expected ( $F(1, 314) = 16.07, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.049$ , see Figure 2). First, to test our typical result, we assessed the planned comparison of minimalist versus maximalist when the indulgence cue was absent. Replicating the previous studies, Jesse was rated higher on trait self-control when depicted as a minimalist ( $M = 5.49, SD = 0.89$ ) relative to when Jesse was depicted as a maximalist ( $M = 3.78, SD = 0.83; F(1, 314) = 131.91, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.296$ ).

Critically, we predicted that when a minimalist consumer engages in indulgent consumption, perceptions of the consumer's high self-control will be attenuated. Indeed, when the indulgence cue was present, although the minimalist Jesse was still perceived to have higher trait self-control ( $M = 4.09, SD = .96$ ) than the maximalist Jesse ( $M = 3.22, SD = 1.05; F(1, 314) = 33.82, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.097$ ), this

difference was significantly reduced ( $M_{\text{difference when indulgence cue present}} = 0.87$  vs.  $M_{\text{difference when indulgence cue absent}} = 1.71$ ).

(INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE)

### *Discussion*

Study 5 demonstrated the way in which indulgence consumption moderated the effect of consumer minimalism on perceived self-control. We found that adding a description of a minimalist consumer as enjoying indulgent food decreases the perceptions of that consumer's trait self-control as high. This result provided additional evidence for our proposed mechanism.

#### **Study 6: Recommendations From a Minimalist Influencer Are Perceived as Healthier**

Thus far, we have presented strong evidence that minimalist consumers are perceived as making healthier eating and lifestyle choices and being better at self-control in general than non-minimalist consumers. We have also shown that these effects are mediated by minimalist consumers being perceived as less indulgent. In study 6, we demonstrate a marketing implication of our core effect by testing hypotheses 3 and 4. We propose that labeling a blogger as a minimalist will have a positive effect on consumers' healthiness perceptions of the blogger's food recommendation. That is, consumers will perceive a food recommendation from a minimalist blogger as healthier versus a recommendation from a non-minimalist blogger. Additionally, we propose that this effect is mediated by the inference that the minimalist blogger, versus non-minimalist blogger, tends to make healthier consumption decisions. This study was preregistered at [https://aspredicted.org/P7Y\\_GD7](https://aspredicted.org/P7Y_GD7).

### *Method*

#### *Participants and design*

A total of 300 U.S. MTurk participants (63% female,  $M_{age} = 40.51$ ,  $SD = 13.22$ ) were randomly assigned to a 2-cell (blogger type: minimalist vs. control) between-subjects design.

### *Procedure*

Participants were first asked to read a description of a blogger, Anna.

*Anna is 28 years old. She was born and raised in a small city. Anna loves music and enjoys making friends. She is well liked by her friends and family. Anna is a lifestyle blogger. Her blog covers fashion, beauty, food, and daily life. Anna writes personal stories about life as well as featuring home makeovers, hair tutorials, and weekly recipes.*

Then, only participants in the minimalist condition read a few additional sentences about Anna's lifestyle and consumption patterns, which are consistent with the three defining dimensions of consumer minimalism (Wilson & Bellezza, 2022),

*Anna tries to limit the amount of stuff she buys and consumes; she enjoys owning very few possessions. Anna is also mindful when shopping, only buying new things when she knows exactly how she will use them. In her home, Anna creates an aesthetic that is simple and sparse, she likes to leave a lot of open or blank spaces.*

Participants across both conditions went on to learn that in a recent blog post Anna, who enjoys reviewing different food products, has written an article recommending a new cereal bar. They then proceeded to respond to our dependent measure, the perceived healthiness of the cereal bar.

### *Dependent measures*

Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with the following statements (presented in randomized order): "The cereal bar Anna recommended is very healthy (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)", and "The cereal bar Anna recommended is low in sugar and trans fats (1 = strongly

disagree, 7 = strongly agree)". These items are based on measures of perceived product healthiness that have been used in prior work (Irmak et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2019; Mead & Richerson, 2018; Schnurr, 2019; Ye et al., 2020). These two items were averaged to form a perceived product healthiness index ( $r = 0.83$ ).

Next, we measured the extent to which Anna was perceived as a healthy eater and someone who prefers to patronize healthy restaurants (1 = not at all, 7 = very much,): "To what extent do you perceive Anna as a healthy eater (a person who routinely make healthy eating decisions)?" and "To what extent do you think Anna prefers to patron healthy restaurants when she eats out?". The two items were averaged to form a perception of the blogger index ( $r = 0.83$ ).

#### *Manipulation check*

Participants indicated whether or not (1 = yes, 0 = no) they believed Anna was a minimalist. Finally, participants were asked to provide some basic demographic information (i.e., gender and age).

### *Results*

#### *Manipulation check*

A chi-square test confirmed that participants in the minimalist condition thought Anna was significantly more minimalist compared to those in the control condition (95% vs. 16%;  $\chi^2(1) = 191.34$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

#### *Perceived product healthiness*

A one-way ANOVA conducted on the perceived product healthiness index (1-7) yielded a significant effect of blogger type ( $F(1, 298) = 13.75$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.044$ ). Participants in the condition wherein Anna was described as a minimalist perceived the cereal bar recommended by Anna to be

healthier ( $M = 4.91$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ) than those in the control condition ( $M = 4.37$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ). This result supported H3.

#### *Perception of the blogger*

The same ANOVA conducted on the perception of the blogger index (1-7) yielded a significant effect of blogger type ( $F(1, 298) = 27.00$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.083$ ). Participants in the condition wherein Anna was described as a minimalist perceived Anna to be more likely to make healthy eating decisions ( $M = 5.32$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) than those in the control condition ( $M = 4.64$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ).

#### *Mediation analysis*

To test H4, we ran a mediation analysis (Hayes, 2017) that included blogger type (minimalist vs. control) as the independent variable, perceived product healthiness as the dependent variable, and perception of the blogger as the mediator. The analysis revealed that the indirect effect of blogger type on perceived product healthiness via the mediator, perception of the blogger, was significant ( $\beta = 0.59$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ , 95% CI: 0.37, 0.82). This result supported H4.

### *Discussion*

This study provided evidence that recommendations of a food product from a minimalist blogger are perceived as being healthier, than if the same recommendation comes from a blogger not described as a minimalist. This is because minimalists are perceived as making healthier eating choices, which positively influences the healthiness inferences consumers make about the products recommended by minimalists. The results of study 5 demonstrated an important marketing consequence of our core effect. Marketers interested in promoting their brand or product as healthy should consider partnering with bloggers and influencers who portray themselves as minimalists.

### **Study 7: An Incentive-Compatible Measure**



The purpose of study 7 is to replicate the findings from study 6 using an incentive-compatible design. Specifically, participants learned that their choice would have consequences such that they would watch the YouTube video of their choice in its full length. This study was preregistered at [https://aspredicted.org/FGX\\_MZP](https://aspredicted.org/FGX_MZP).

### *Method*

#### *Participants and design*

A total of 297 U.S. MTurk participants (53% female,  $M_{age} = 40.80$ ,  $SD = 11.14$ ) were randomly assigned to a 2-cell (blogger type: minimalist vs. maximalist) between-subjects design.

#### *Procedure*

Participants were first asked to read a description of a blogger, Jordan.

*Please take a moment to imagine Jordan, a blogger based in the United States. Jordan likes to write about food, design, and daily life and provides a monthly newsletter recommending videos they have recently watched. In the past, Jordan has made a blog post showcasing the interior of their home and how they use their space.*

Then, participants received the same photo manipulation used in previous studies that depicted Jordan as a minimalist or maximalist. Participants across both conditions went on to learn that Jordan had written a newsletter recommending two YouTube videos to their followers: a video about self-control and a video about showerhead replacement. We chose the video on showerhead replacement to serve as the alternative option because it was unrelated to self-control. Before deciding which video to watch, participants were told that each video was approximately 10 minutes long and given a brief description of each video. To make the choice incentive-compatible, participants were told that

whichever video they chose, they would spend the next ten minutes of their time watching that video in its entirety (see Web Appendix G for details).

#### *Dependent measure*

Participants indicated which YouTube video they would choose to watch (1 = The video about self-control, 0 = The video about showerhead replacement). They then went on to watch the video of their choice.

#### *Manipulation check*

Participants indicated the extent to which they believed Jordan was a minimalist, based on the images they saw of Jordan's home (1 = Jordan is definitely not a minimalist, 7 = Jordan is definitely a minimalist). Finally, participants provided some basic demographic information (i.e., gender and age).

### *Results*

#### *Manipulation check*

A one-way ANOVA conducted on the manipulation check confirmed that participants perceived Jordan in the minimalist condition as significantly more minimalist than in the maximalist condition ( $M = 5.69$ ,  $SD = 1.40$  vs.  $M = 2.07$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ;  $F(1, 295) = 396.34$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.573$ ).

#### *Video choice*

A chi-square test performed on video choice revealed a significant effect of blogger type. Consistent with our expectation, participants in the minimalist blogger condition were more likely to choose the video about self-control than participants in the maximalist blogger condition (60% vs. 46%;  $\chi^2(1) = 6.197$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ).

### *Discussion*

The goal of Study 7 was to examine whether being a minimalist can affect an influencer's ability to recommend self-control-related content. We found that when a recommendation to watch a video came from a minimalist influencer, participants were more likely to choose a video about self-control. Because of the perception that minimalists are less indulgent and, therefore, better at self-control, consumers are more likely to choose to consume self-control-related content when that recommendation comes from a minimalist influencer or blogger. Managerially, brands interested in selling products related to self-control might consider partnering with a minimalist influencer to market their products.

### **General Discussion**

Minimalism as a consumption trend is becoming increasingly popular. However, there is little work to date on minimalism in general and the perceptions of minimalist consumers in particular. In this research, we show that minimalist consumers are perceived as making healthier eating and lifestyle choices and being better at self-control in general than non-minimalists. This effect occurs because minimalist consumers are perceived as being less indulgent. Subsequently, the positive effect of minimalists being perceived as making healthier eating and lifestyle choices increases the perceived healthiness of products that are recommended by minimalist influencers. We demonstrate support for these effects across a ChatGPT study and six experiments using both verbal and photo manipulations of minimalism and a variety of different measures of self-control. Study 1 demonstrated the positive association between minimalism and perceived high self-control using generative AI (i.e., ChatGPT). Study 2 used verbal manipulation to show that minimalists are perceived as making healthier eating and lifestyle choices. Study 3 replicated the results of study 2 using photo manipulation and generalize the effect to trait self-control. In study 4, we found that minimalist consumers are perceived as less indulgent, which mediates the perception of minimalist consumers as being better at self-control. In study 5, we identified a factor moderating the effect of minimalism on self-control perceptions by

demonstrating that adding a description of a minimalist as indulgent decreases the perception of that individual's self-control. Finally, studies 6 and 7 documented the downstream consequences of our core effect. In study 6, we utilized a context in which a minimalist blogger recommends a generic food product and showed that because minimalists are perceived as making healthier eating choices, consumers infer that recommendations from the minimalist influencer are healthier. In study 7, employing a context in which a blogger recommends two videos, we showed that when the recommendations come from a minimalist influencer, participants were more likely to consume the self-control-related content.

### *Theoretical Contributions*

Our research makes several important contributions to the marketing literature. First, we add to the literature on consumer minimalism by showing that minimalist consumers are perceived differently than non-minimalist consumers. Prior work has focused on examining the effects of minimalism in the context of design and found that the use of this visual element influences perceptions of quality, brand prestige, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intention (Pracejus et al., 2006, 2013). Additional work has examined the effect of minimalism on consumption and found that minimalism can be used as a way to express anti-consumption (Błoński & Witek, 2019; Pangarkar et al., 2021). Our research differs from prior work and examines how minimalist consumers are perceived by others and shows that they are thought to excel in their self-control abilities.

Second, this research contributes to the literature on self-control by identifying and empirically demonstrating a novel antecedent of inferences of high self-control. The bulk of the research on self-control has discussed factors influencing an actor's self-control (Hur et al., 2015; Klesse et al., 2015; Thaler & Shefrin, 1981). While prior work has examined self-control as a function of political ideology (Clarkson et al., 2015), healthy eating (Chandon & Wansink, 2007; Wansink & Chandon, 2006), and how

the perceptions of another person's use of self-control might affect one's own self-functioning (Ackerman et al., 2009), less work has considered the effect of consumption style on the *perceptions* of self-control. There has been little research that examines how observers make inferences about other people's self-control. Here, we expand the scope of self-control to include minimalism as an antecedent of inferences of high self-control.

Third, our work contributes to the literature on consumption-based inference-making. Prior work has focused on status inference-making of luxury and conspicuous consumption (Bellezza et al., 2014, 2017; Berger & Ward, 2010; Fuchs et al., 2013; Young et al., 2010). This work examines a consumption trend very different from luxury and conspicuous consumption. It shows that minimalism as an increasingly popular consumption style can impact self-control inferences. Moreover, it suggests that people not only infer minimalist consumers to have higher self-control and make healthier eating and lifestyle choices, but even the products associated with them are perceived to be healthier.

#### *Practical Implications*

This research offers insights for marketers, consumers, and policymakers. Specifically, the results of study 6 show that food products are perceived to be healthier when they are recommended by minimalists compared to when they are recommended by non-minimalists. Consumer Packaged Goods (CPG) brands interested in communicating the health benefits of their products may benefit from entering partnerships with minimalist bloggers and influencers in order to position themselves as healthier. Partnering with such individuals likely influences consumers' perceptions of the brand as healthy. Additionally, it may be beneficial for restaurants that are tailored towards healthy eating or want to be perceived as healthy to adopt a minimalist spokesperson or highlight reviews from prominent minimalist bloggers and influencers. The inverse application of these findings could also be true. Marketers wishing to position their brand as indulgent should not enter brand deals with

minimalist bloggers and influencers and should avoid adopting a minimalist aesthetic as these will result in the brand being perceived as less indulgent. The results of study 7 show that individuals exposed to minimalism are more likely to consume media related to self-control. Brands that are interested in selling products related to self-control might consider partnering with a minimalist influencer to market their products since consumers will be more likely to be interested in the product when the recommendation comes from a minimalist.

Our research is also useful for consumers who wish to be perceived as having high self-control. The findings of studies 1 through 5 would suggest that adopting a minimalist lifestyle will lead others to perceive one as less indulgent and, therefore, as having high self-control. Consumers and individuals in jobs related to exercising self-control might consider adopting a minimalist aesthetic in order to communicate to others their ability to control their impulses. This could be especially useful for those in health and wellness professions, such as personal trainers and dieticians. Adopting a minimalist aesthetic and lifestyle could lead potential clients to infer that one is better at making healthy eating and lifestyle choices and, therefore, a better choice than a non-minimalist.

Finally, the present findings have practical implications for policymakers in utilizing minimalism in the framing of public health messages and campaigns. Because minimalism is associated with low indulgence and high self-control, policymakers might try to leverage minimalist spokespeople or encourage the adoption of a minimalist lifestyle to encourage consumers to indulge less and exercise more self-control.

#### *Future Research*

Understanding the effects of consumer minimalism facilitates future research on the topic. First, individuals with a goal of losing weight or eating healthy may seek out restaurants and dining spaces that utilize minimalist interior design. Future work could examine whether restaurants that utilize

minimalist versus non-minimalist interiors are perceived as being healthier. For example, consumers might perceive the menu options of a restaurant with a minimalistic (vs. non-minimalistic) design to be healthier. Should these results be true, it may be beneficial for restaurants that are tailored towards healthy eating or want to be perceived as healthy to adopt a minimalist interior design style.

Extending this logic to the CPG realm, marketers can consider adopting a minimalist packaging design to attract consumers who shop with a health goal in mind. Products that utilize sparse aesthetics in their packaging, one of the hallmarks of minimalism, could be perceived as healthier than products that utilize non-minimalist packaging. Consumers with a health goal will likely be more attracted to such a product because of the association between minimalism and healthy eating.

Additionally, exploring other inferences observers make about minimalist consumers would be advantageous. For instance, warmth and competence perceptions are important in interpersonal contexts as these dimensions “account almost entirely for how people characterize others” (Fiske et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2017). Warmth judgments usually include evaluations of kindness, friendliness, trustworthiness, and helpfulness whereas competence includes evaluations of perceptions of effectiveness, intelligence, power, and skillfulness (Aaker et al., 2010; Fiske et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2017). Recent work has found that indulgent consumption signals warmth (vs. competence), showing that “when consumers are seeking a service provider, those who prioritize interpersonal warmth (vs. competence) are more likely to choose a service provider who shares indulgent (vs. healthy) consumption content on social media.” (Tang et al., 2022). Because consumers use indulgence as a signal for interpersonal warmth, it stands to reason that minimalists, who avoid indulgent consumption, will be perceived as less warm simply because they do not indulge.

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Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics of the 50 Brands' Brand-Level Ratings on Seven Attributes (Study 1).*

	mean	std	min	median	max
Perception of consumers' low self-control	4.64	0.49	3.51	4.62	5.56
Minimalism brand perception	4.35	0.93	1.89	4.46	6.32
Perceived expensiveness	6.63	1.72	2.87	6.39	9.29
Perceived quality	7.60	1.02	5.14	7.69	9.04
Familiarity	7.48	0.95	5.70	7.48	9.42
Liking	7.49	1.00	5.45	7.62	9.03
Perceived brand age	6.26	1.44	2.94	6.18	8.98

Table 2

*Correlation between Minimalism Brand Perception and Perception of Consumers' Low Self-Control (Study 1).*

	Perception of consumers' low self-control (1)	Perception of consumers' low self-control (2)	Perception of consumers' low self-control (3)	Perception of consumers' low self-control (4)
Minimalism brand perception	-0.188*** (0.071)	-0.428*** (0.095)	-0.452*** (0.109)	-0.437*** (0.113)
Perceived expensiveness		0.046 (0.057)	0.115* (0.062)	0.143* (0.080)
Perceived quality		0.282** (0.128)	0.169 (0.179)	0.124 (0.197)
familiarity			0.204* (0.117)	0.256* (0.149)
liking			-0.054 (0.225)	-0.055 (0.226)
Perceived brand age				-0.037 (0.065)
Observations	50 brands	50 brands	50 brands	50 brands
R2	0.127	0.438	0.502	0.506
Adjusted R2	0.109	0.401	0.445	0.437

Note: \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Figure 1. Frequencies of Brands Mentioned in 1,000 ChatGPT Responses in the Brand Generation Step (Study 1).

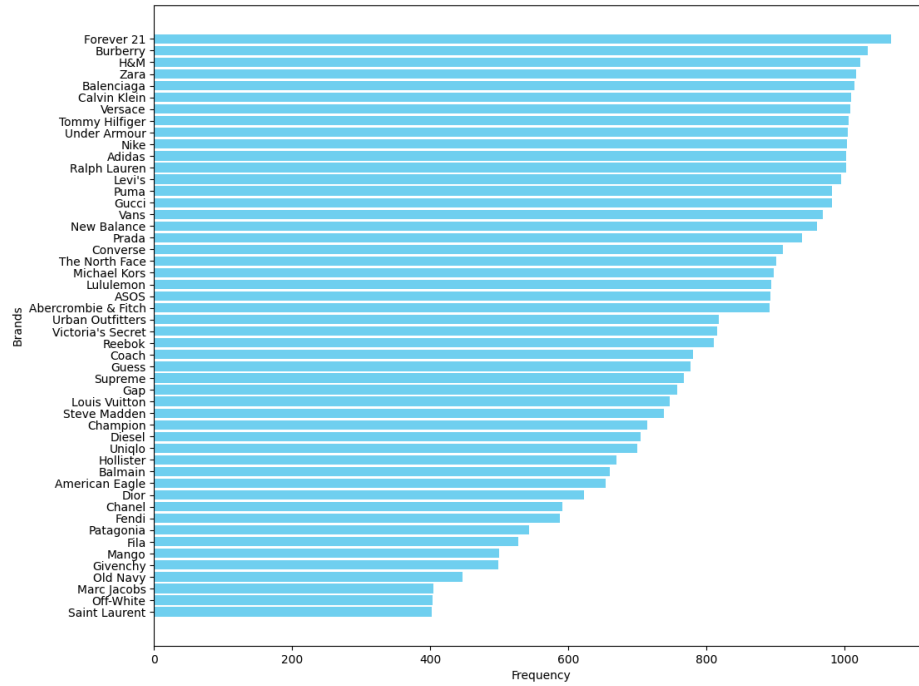


Figure 2. Indulgence Consumption Moderates the Effect of Consumer Type on Perceived Trait Self-Control (Study 5).

