

Chapter 2

Polarization in Consumer Behavior: The Rise of Minimalism in a Materialist World

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ABSTRACT

Polarizations in economic and social life caused by increasing income and wealth injustices worldwide also affect consumer behavior. In the polarization of consumers' lifestyles, at one end of the spectrum are the consumerist culture's representatives with ostentatious and exaggerated spending based on materialistic understanding. On the other hand, consumers who adopt an anti-consumption approach sensitive to social, environmental, or individual welfare, regardless of the necessity of economic difficulties or economic factors, are increasing rapidly. This study aims to conceptually evaluate the concepts of minimalist and materialist consumption, which represent two rising values regarding consumer behavior and are mutually exclusive, and to provide readers with a holistic perspective. In this context, in this study, the concepts of materialism, minimalist consumption, and anti-consumption were evaluated from environmental, social, and individual perspectives, and their effects on consumer welfare were discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Although the origins of the concept of minimalism date back to the 1960s, it can be said that it has gained significant momentum in recent times as unsustainable consumption models have become a global problem (Pangarkar et al., 2021; Prothero et al., 2010). So much so that the minimalist lifestyle concept is seen not only as a small niche market but as a trend that is strongly adopted among consumers on a global basis, especially in the USA, Japan, and Europe (Duong et al., 2023; Gong et al., 2023; Martin-Woodhead, 2022).

Kotler et al. (2021) begin their book “Marketing 5.0: Technology for Humanity” by addressing three fundamental problems that marketing faces today: The generation gap, prosperity polarization, and the digital divide. The world’s rapidly increasing income and welfare inequalities polarize society in all areas of life. While the ever-deepening gap between rich and poor people is expanding the ultra-luxury markets that will appeal to elite people, on the other hand, the demand for low-priced and valuable products of poor people who have difficulty meeting their basic needs to survive is rapidly increasing. This leads to the polarization of jobs, ideologies, lifestyles, and markets and affects consumer behavior. Thus, the evaluation of new paradigms in marketing requires bringing them to the agenda. Today, consumer behavior is polarized at two extremes. On one side of the spectrum, consumer culture representatives, with their striking and extravagant lives, strictly adhere to materialism. In contrast on the other hand, some minimalists reject excessive consumption and dependence on commodities and prefer to get rid of excess and clutter, thus focusing on fundamental values that add value to life (Kotler et al., 2021).

In the literature, minimalist consumers are conceptualized as consumers who consciously adopt voluntary simplicity as a lifestyle, avoiding materialistic addiction, as a state of well-being, regardless of economic conditions (McDonald et al., 2006; Seegebarth et al., 2016). However, the 2008 global financial crisis is thought to have accelerated the rise of a consumption approach that indirectly challenges the principles of economic productivity, consumption, and growth and advocates the ethics of minimalism (Meissner, 2019). In addition, it can be thought that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic difficulties it brought with it on consumers’ spending tendencies contributed to the spread of the minimalist approach (Kang et al., 2021; Kotler et al., 2021; Seegebarth et al., 2016).

In addition to the minimalist movement, which has become increasingly popular since the beginning of the 21st century, the materialist consumption approach, which reflects ostentatious and exaggerated spending, has also risen (Kotler et al., 2021). Despite the economic difficulties the world is experiencing, the luxury goods market revenue as of August 2023 is 355 billion US dollars. The market is expected to grow over the next five years (Statista, 2023).

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