



SCHOOL OF
ECONOMICS AND
MANAGEMENT

Master's Programme in International Marketing and Brand Management

“ The Rise of Minimalist Branding: Does Less Design Equal More Trust?”

- A Qualitative Study

Written By:

Group 21

Lucie Bourdon & Hana Al Jundi

Master's Thesis, first year (15 credits ECTS)

2nd of June, 2025

Supervisor: Ulf Johansson

Word Count: 21,713 words

Abstract

Minimalist Branding has become popular as a branding technique in a time of visual overload and growing customer distrust. With an emphasis on cultural and age differences, this study investigates whether minimalist branding increases or decreases consumer trust. Using a qualitative research design built upon constructivism and interpretivism, this study conducted five focus group discussions involving participants aged 18-35 years across Sweden, France, Canada, Thailand and the Middle East. The study found that minimalist design often enhances trust by signaling both clarity and authenticity. However, its effectiveness is moderated by several factors including cultural norms, industry context and generational variation. Across more symbolically rich cultures and high-end product categories, minimalist aesthetics were often viewed as cold or lacking identity. The findings suggest that while minimalism can be a powerful trust signal, it must align with cultural expectations and balance uniqueness with minimalism. Therefore, this thesis contributes to the branding theory by clarifying when and why minimalist design can foster consumer trust. Practical implications highlight the importance of aligning minimalist strategies with local cultural values.

Keywords: *Minimalist Branding, Consumer Trust, Brand Authenticity & Visual Clarity.*

Acknowledgement

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the participants who generously gave their time and shared their perspectives in our focus groups. Without your contribution, this study would not have been possible. We are also deeply thankful to our supervisor, Professor Ulf Johansson, for his continuous guidance, constructive feedback, and support throughout the course of this thesis. His expertise and encouragement have been essential in shaping the direction and quality of our thesis.

Lucie Bourdon & Hana Al Jundi

2nd of June, 2025

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	6
1.1 Background & Relevance.....	6
1.2 Aim & Scope.....	7
1.3 Research Question & Objectives.....	8
1.4 Thesis Outline.....	9
2. Literature Review.....	10
2.1 Introduction to the Literature Review.....	10
2.2 Branding and Visual Identity.....	11
2.3 Minimalist Branding: Origins and Application.....	12
2.4 The Psychology of Simplicity: Processing Fluency and Trust.....	13
2.5 Consumer Trust in Branding.....	15
2.6 Contextual Moderators: Culture, Generation, and Industry.....	16
2.7 Gaps in Literature & Relevance of Study.....	18
2.8 Chapter Summary.....	19
3. Methodology.....	20
3.1 Qualitative Research Approach.....	20
3.2 Research Design and Method Selection.....	21
3.3 Data Collection Procedure.....	22
3.4 Participant Selection and Sampling.....	26
3.5 Thematic Analysis Development Process.....	29
3.6 Validity and Reliability in Qualitative Research.....	30
3.7 Ethical Considerations.....	33
4. Findings: How Consumers Perceive Minimalist Branding and Trust.....	34
4.1 Introduction to the Chapter.....	34
4.2 Thematic Analysis of Findings.....	34
4.2.1 Simplicity and Visual Clarity.....	35

4.2.2 Sector-Specific Reactions to Minimalist Branding.....	36
4.2.3 Emotional Perception of Minimalist Branding.....	38
4.2.4 Minimalism and Brand Authenticity.....	41
4.2.5 Cultural Differences in the Acceptance of Minimalism.....	42
4.3 Summary of Findings.....	43
5. Discussion.....	43
5.1 Reconnecting Findings with Key Theoretical Concepts.....	44
5.2 Cultural Influences on Trust in Minimalist Branding.....	45
5.3 Generational Attitudes Toward Minimalist Branding.....	46
5.4 Situational Effectiveness: When Minimalism Builds or Undermines Trust.....	47
5.5 Emotional Connection and the Limits of Visual Simplicity.....	48
6. Conclusion.....	49
6.1 Revisiting the Purpose and Research Question.....	49
6.2 Main Findings and Contributions.....	49
6.3 Implications for Brand Managers.....	51
6.4 Suggestions for Future Research.....	52
Appendix 1.....	54
References.....	55

1. Introduction

1.1 Background & Relevance

The branding world has recently gravitated towards simplicity, subtlety, and clearness over the years (Gumber, 2023). This shift is exemplified by the rise of minimalist branding, which embraces a “less is more” approach by concentrating on clean visuals, fewer elements, and direct communication (Gumber, 2023). Brands such as Muji, Patagonia, and Apple have utilized minimalist styles across their visual identities, packaging, and advertising to connect with modern consumer values such as authenticity, sustainability, and transparency (Wilson & Bellezza, 2021). Other brands such as Pepsi and Starbucks, have redesigned their logos to cleaner and “simpler” versions to match the uprising minimalist trend (Bossel et al., 2019). With fewer colours, shapes and text, the shift towards simplicity in branding was met by resonance across a wide range of consumers (Fraculj et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the adoption of minimalist aesthetics is often connected with a deeper brand philosophy, highlighting ethical practices, environmental responsibility, and emotional connection instead of flashy or aggressive marketing. Standard minimalist features like monochrome color palettes, whitespace, and clean typography strive to express authenticity, sustainability, and ethical accountability (Margariti, 2021). Through intentionally lessening the visual complexity of logos, packaging, websites, and advertisements, brands strive to deliver their messages with focus and openness (Fraculj et al., 2023).

Minimalism itself, as a wider cultural and aesthetic trend, isn't new, with origins in art, architecture, and lifestyle concepts (Başak, 2021; Kumar, 2024). However, its impact on brand strategy has grown more significantly due to the oversaturated market, where consumers are overwhelmed with information and stimuli (Chen, 2023). In this environment, minimalist branding seeks to cut through the clutter by delivering a sense of calm, clarity, and focus (Fraculj et al., 2023). This less cluttered design is believed to not only improve visual attractiveness but also reinforce a brand's perceived authenticity and commitment to simplicity: qualities that are increasingly prioritized by younger, visually literate consumers (Fraculj et al., 2023). Especially for younger generations, these signals are meaningful.

Gen Z and Millennials tend to favor brands that seem honest, socially engaged, and visually coherent (Chen, 2024; Fraculj et al., 2023). This suggests that generational segments may differ in how they view the “less is more” approach to branding. Moreover, this visual and philosophical shift aligns with changing consumer values, especially in markets such as Scandinavia and Japan, where simplicity reflects broader cultural norms (Başak, 2021; Kumar, 2024). In contrast, in regions like the Middle East where richness and status are valued in branding, minimalist visuals might be perceived as cold or lacking in prestige (Wippel, 2023). Cayla and Arnould (2008) argue in their study that brand meanings are deeply rooted in culture and that global brands must align with the local and symbolic frameworks to successfully

resonate with consumers, which also may suggest that cultural context can shape how minimalism is judged by consumers. These recurring cross-generational and cross-cultural patterns in how minimalist branding is interpreted highlight the need to critically examine the relationship between perceived brand trustworthiness and the underlying factors that shape this trust.

Consumer trust is an integral and foundational step towards building strong consumer-brand relationships as brand trust influences the consumer's willingness to "rely" on a certain brand to fulfill its promises (Alan & Karabadayi, 2012). It also helps foster brand equity (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005). Some academics argue that simplicity indicates transparency and improves processing fluency, which in turn strengthens trust (Reber et al., 2004; Guerrero, 2024). However, others caution that minimalism can backfire in categories where visual richness is expected, such as luxury or wine (Favier et al., 2019). Customers may see minimalist branding as impersonal or shallow in some situations, particularly if it isn't supported by a clear brand story or sincere mission (Chen, 2023). The link between minimalist branding and trust appears to be shaped by both cultural background and generational identity. Consumers in different regions interpret visual simplicity differently depending on local aesthetic values and communication norms. Generational segments may also vary in their expectations: while Gen Z may associate minimalism with digital fluency and clarity, others may perceive it as overly stripped-down or insincere. Theoretically, notions like signaling theory and processing fluency provide helpful frameworks for analyzing these exchanges. Drawing on signaling theory (Spence, 1973), minimalist design can convey unspoken cues like expertise, authenticity, or ethical alignment, while processing fluency theory implies that people tend to believe information that is simpler to comprehend (Reber et al., 2004). However, there's been little widespread application of these theories to minimalist branding within a context relating directly to trust. In reality, businesses looking to expand globally or rebrand have a strategic dilemma: minimalism can either increase credibility or decrease it if it is not aligned with customer expectations. Therefore, it is essential to understand how different audiences perceive minimalist branding, especially in a time when trust in businesses is eroding and becoming harder to maintain (Shin et al., 2019).

1.2 Aim & Scope

Although more and more firms are employing a minimalist visual identity (Bossel et al., 2019; Wilson & Bellezza, 2021), it is yet still unclear whether this approach contributes in making them appear more trustworthy in the eyes of consumers. The notion that simplicity builds trust is often assumed in practice, however it hasn't really been probed enough, especially from the point of view of people who interact with these brands in their daily lives. Therefore, this study aims to investigate whether minimalist branding promotes or undermines trust in various cultural and generational contexts in order to deepen understanding of when and why this form of branding

yields positive or negative outcomes, rather than to judge whether it is considered generally good or harmful to branding.

The scope of this study is to focus on analyzing individuals between 18 and 35 years old since they're the ones who interact the most with brands online and fall under Millennials and Gen Z, who tend to care about what a brand represents, not just what it offers (Mandagi & Aseng, 2021), which makes them the most relevant generations to investigate. The study will also involve participants from five distinctive regions: France, Sweden, Thailand, Canada, and the Middle East. These nations and regions were selected because they have different cultural norms and visual expectations, which could impact how minimalist branding is perceived. Furthermore, this study specifically considers brand-level trust, which means that it does not investigate whether someone would purchase a product, but rather how they feel about the brand generally based on its visual appearance. This involves different branding elements such as brand logo, colors, packaging, or even how its website looks. What matters here is not just whether individuals like the design, but rather how this design makes consumers feel and whether it triggers feelings of trust, honesty, or reliability. It's also important to note that minimalist branding doesn't always function similarly. In some scenarios, it might make a brand feel more modern, clear, or even ethical. But in others, it could give the impression that something is lacking, or that the brand is striving too hard to seem refined but then, ends up seeming cold or generic. That's one of the key issues this study wishes to examine: what makes minimalism effective, and when it might actually harm the perception of trust.

Two main theoretical concepts will be used to inform this analysis: signaling theory, which deals with how specific visual components can convey messages about a brand's intentions, and processing fluency, which is concerned with how easily people can comprehend visual information (Reber et al., 2004). On a deeper, more psychological level, these two paradigms ought to help explain how people respond to minimalist design.

1.3 Research Question & Objectives

In alignment with the aim and scope of this study, the existing literature gap concerning the relationship between consumer trust and minimalist branding will be addressed by investigating the following research questions:

- How does minimalist branding influence consumer trust in a brand?

To explore this question, this study will also consider several sub-questions:

- What are consumers' perceptions of minimalist branding in terms of brand trustworthiness?
- How do these perceptions differ across different cultures (consumers in France, Sweden, Thailand, Middle East and Canada)?

- How do different generational groups (specifically Gen Z and Millennials , ages 18-35) interpret minimalist branding with regard to trust?
- What underlying factors influence the relationship between minimalist design and consumer trust?
- How does minimalist branding influence consumer expectations, and does it create a risk of trust erosion if expectations are not met?

Furthermore, the objectives of this study include exploring how consumers interpret minimalist branding in relation to brand trustworthiness, examining generational differences across Gen Z and Millennials in how minimalist branding influences their trust, analyzing the cultural differences in responses to minimalism in brand design and aesthetics among five distinctive regions (Sweden, France, Canada, Thailand, and the Middle East), investigating the contextual factors (industry and cultural values) that can affect consumer trust of minimalist branding as well as contribute to theoretical insights (signaling theory and processing fluency) to explain how visual simplicity can shape consumer trust. Overall, the main objective of this study is to provide practical recommendations for brand managers on how to implement minimalist branding strategies to enhance consumer trust across different regions, cultures, ages and markets.

1.4 Thesis Outline

This thesis is structured into six chapters, each created to build a cohesive understanding of the connection between minimalist branding and consumer trust from a qualitative, cross-cultural point of view.

Chapter 1 sets the stage by introducing the subject, highlighting its academic and practical importance, and presenting the research problem, aims, and research inquiries. It also details the scope and boundaries of the study and offers a synopsis of the thesis layout.

Chapter 2 offers a thorough review of the existing literature, encompassing theoretical foundations such as brand trust, signaling theory, processing fluency, and behavioral economics. It also investigates prior research on minimalist branding, visual perception, consumer behavior, and cultural effects on branding. This chapter pinpoints major gaps in existing knowledge and positions the study within current academic discussions in branding and consumer psychology.

Chapter 3 outlines the qualitative methodological approach employed in the study. It elaborates on the utilization of focus group interviews as the main method of data collection, with five focus groups carried out across France, Sweden, Thailand, Middle East and Canada. Every group comprises 5-7 participants selected through purposive sampling to ensure a range in age, gender, cultural background, and attitudes towards branding. The target demographic focuses primarily on Gen Z and Millennials consumers (aged 18-35), allowing the study to capture generational

viewpoints across different cultural contexts. This chapter also addresses the reasoning behind the qualitative design, data collection processes, ethical considerations, and the strategy for thematic analysis.

Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings from the focus group discussions. The chapter is organized thematically to represent recurring patterns, differences, and cultural subtleties in how participants perceive minimalist branding and its relationship with trust. Key quotes and insights from the participants are used to illustrate and back up each theme.

Chapter 5 provides an in-depth discussion of the findings, interpreting them in light of the literature reviewed in chapter 2. This chapter delves into how cultural background, generational identity, and psychological factors influence trust in minimalist brands. It also reflects on the implications of these findings for theory development in brand management and cross-cultural marketing.

Finally, chapter 6 concludes the thesis by summarizing the main insights and answering the research questions. It also outlines the practical implications for brands considering minimalist strategies in international markets, discusses the limitations of the research, and suggests directions for future research in this developing area of branding.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to the Literature Review

This chapter examines how minimalist branding has been studied in the academic literature and how it might influence consumer trust. The intent is to grasp what is already known about the part branding design plays in forming trust and where gaps remain. The review starts by introducing the fundamental concepts of branding and visual identity, before shifting to the traits and cultural origins of minimalist branding as both: a design selection and a method of brand communication.

To assist in constructing the theoretical bedrock for this thesis, we concentrate on two primary perspectives: signaling theory and processing fluency theory. These were selected because they explicitly address how visual cues and brand simplicity can shape perceptions like credibility, quality, and emotional connection: all of which are closely linked to trust. Other theories, such as semiotics or aesthetic preference models, were considered but not used here as they concentrate more on interpretation or taste rather than psychological or behavioral results like trust.

As trust is an intricate and emotional response, it appeared more pertinent to look at how consumers respond to simplified visuals at both a cognitive and affective level. Processing fluency, for example, elucidates why things that are visually easy to grasp might be seen as more

trustworthy (Reber et al., 2004), while signaling theory aids in understanding how minimalism could send non-verbal messages about brand honesty or professionalism (Spence, 1973).

Since this thesis looks at young consumers across several countries, it also makes sense to include studies on cultural and generational differences in how branding is perceived. In particular, we focus on Millennials and Gen Z, who tend to be more visually savvy and more skeptical of conventional advertising (Mandagi & Aseng, 2021). Understanding how these audiences react to minimalist branding is important to clarify how trust may be formed, or not, in different environments.

Although previous research has examined minimalism in design and marketing, there is still very little work that connects it directly to trust, and even fewer studies that compare this effect across cultures or generations. This literature review will aid clarify where this study fits in, what it builds upon, and how it adds something new. It also lays the groundwork for the focus group design by pinpointing which areas of consumer perception and visual branding are most relevant to explore in depth.

2.2 Branding and Visual Identity

How customers view and engage with a brand is greatly influenced by its branding. It transcends a slogan or a logo. A company's identity and strategic posture are shaped by a combination of visible and invisible components, including names, images, typography, colors, and tone of voice (Keller, 2013). The primary subject of this thesis is visual identity, which particularly relates to the stylistic and graphic elements that assist a business in expressing its identity and desired perception. This covers the layout, typeface, color scheme, logo, and visual coherence over all platforms (Henderson et al., 2004).

In addition to making a brand stand out, a great visual identity promotes emotional connection and consumer recognition (Underwood & Ozanne, 1998). According to Keller (2009), a consumer's first impression of a brand is frequently its visual design, and this first impression can significantly impact how reliable or trustworthy the brand comes across. A clear and consistent visual identity serves as a mental shortcut in busy and competitive markets, enabling customers to rapidly determine whether a brand appears serious, up to date, or consistent with their beliefs (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Minimalist branding is built on this logic. It simplifies the visual identity to its most essential components, often removing decorative elements in favor of clean layouts, neutral tones, and balanced proportions. This makes the role of each visual detail even more important. By encouraging trust, minimalist branding can have an indirect impact on brand equity. According to Aaker (1996), the visual communication of a brand shapes its associations, perceived quality, and consumer trust : all of which are important elements of brand equity. When design is clean and consistent, it may signal professionalism, stability, and transparency, especially in cases where consumers lack other information to evaluate the brand. In situations of information asymmetry, signaling theory helps explain how visual identity can

communicate underlying brand values. Spence (1973) suggests that consumers interpret visual signs to reduce uncertainty and make decisions. A simple but deliberate logo or a carefully chosen color scheme can signal competence, ethical intent, or confidence (Davies & Chun, 2002; Walsh et al., 2009). This is especially relevant in minimalist branding, where visual noise is removed, and what remains is meant to speak clearly and directly.

Processing fluency theory complements this by focusing on how the brain responds to visual simplicity (Reber et al., 2004). When consumers find it easy to process a design, they often perceive it more favorably. Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman (2004) further explain that fluent designs lead to more positive affective judgments, including greater trust. Pocheptsova et al. (2010) add that when a design feels effortless to interpret, consumers are more likely to associate it with honesty, even if they can't fully explain why. Modern branding also involves expressing values through visual cues. Holt (2002) and Beverland (2005) argue that brands today are expected to align with broader ethical or cultural narratives. This alignment is communicated in large part through visual identity. It has been demonstrated that visual brand features have a major impact on consumer perceptions. Social conscience, environmental awareness, and openness are among the traits that minimalist branding often communicates through its subtle aesthetic (Yu et al., 2024). This is especially true for younger audiences, such as Gen Z and Millennials, who are more skeptical of inauthentic marketing and more sensitive to design (Fraculj et al., 2023; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

Finally, in digital environments, visual identity contributes directly to user experience. A clear and simplified interface isn't just aesthetically pleasing: it also helps build credibility (Jongmans et al., 2022). Elements such as typography, white space, color contrast, and layout influence how intuitive and trustworthy a brand feels (Palmer, 2002; Van der Lans et al., 2009). Labrecque and Milne (2013) also show that digital consistency reinforces brand reliability, particularly in online interactions where consumers make quick decisions.

In short, visual identity is more than decoration; it's a strategic tool that shapes how consumers judge and trust a brand. Minimalist branding intensifies this effect because it reduces distractions and makes every visual detail more meaningful. This makes it crucial to explore how different consumer groups interpret minimalist design and whether they associate it with brand trust. This section lays the groundwork for understanding the mechanisms behind these visual cues and how they may operate differently depending on cultural or generational context.

2.3 Minimalist Branding: Origins and Application

Minimalist branding has become quite common in recent years. Even if it looks like a modern trend, the ideas behind it go way back. It all started with movements like Bauhaus or De Stijl, which promoted clean lines, order, and the idea that removing what's unnecessary can actually make things clearer (Kumar, 2024). These ideas were later reinforced by cultural traditions like Japanese zen or Scandinavian design, where simplicity isn't just visual: it's a whole way of

thinking (Başak, 2021). That's probably why minimalism today feels both aesthetic and philosophical at the same time. In today's market, where everything is loud, fast, and everywhere, minimalist branding offers something calmer. It helps brands stand out, not by being more flashy, but by doing less and doing it well. Some well-known brands like Apple or Muji use this type of design consistently. They don't just make things look nice; they use minimalism to say something about who they are. Their websites, products, and packaging are often simple, clean, and deliberate. According to Fraculj, Lekaj and Kondic (2023), that kind of look really appeals to younger generations, who tend to connect more with authenticity and ethics than with big marketing slogans. The logic behind minimalist branding is actually quite strategic. When a brand keeps only the essentials such as basic shapes, neutral tones, no extra words; it's trying to show that it doesn't need to overdo things to be taken seriously (Celhay & Trinqucoste, 2015). In fact, that restraint can make it feel more confident. Henderson, Giese and Cote (2004) even suggest that a clean and consistent visual identity can boost the perception of professionalism and competence, especially when it's used in a coherent way across all touchpoints.

This simplicity becomes even more important in digital spaces. Most people today don't have time to scroll through messy websites or try to understand a crowded layout. A minimalist interface is faster to load, easier to read, and gives a better first impression (Labrecque & Milne, 2013). For e-commerce in particular, that matters a lot. If a brand's website is clear and easy to navigate, users are more likely to feel that it's trustworthy and serious (Palmer, 2002). So in this context, minimalism isn't just about beauty; it becomes functional, and that function helps build trust. Minimalist branding isn't only technical. It also carries emotional weight. People who care about values like sustainability, fairness, or transparency often see minimalism as a reflection of those things (Chen, 2023). Because of this, some customers may view a brand's simplicity and lack of exaggeration as an indication of its sincerity or compatibility with their values. Because they are accustomed to interpreting visual clues, Gen Z and Millennials in particular are wary of companies that appear unduly aggressive.

However, not every situation calls for simplicity. A minimalist design may appear chilly or empty in fields like luxury apparel, wine, or artisanal crafts where richness and narrative are anticipated. In certain situations, the lack of information might be interpreted as a sign of character or identity (Celhay & Trinqucoste, 2015). Chen (2023) cautions that consumers may become disengaged or even suspicious if minimalism is applied superficially, such as when a company adopts a clean design but fails to provide a clear experience.

Thus, when used purposefully and consistently, minimalism branding may be a strong strategy for making brands appear more reliable. What that simplicity represents is more important than what is immediately apparent. It's not just about what's on the surface; it's about what that simplicity stands for. And depending on the industry, the culture, and the audience, minimalism can either strengthen or weaken the emotional link between a brand and its consumer. That's exactly what we try to understand: when does minimalist branding create trust and when does it fall flat?

2.4 The Psychology of Simplicity: Processing Fluency and Trust

Processing fluency theory in simple terms refers to the ease with which information is processed (Vaughn et al., 2013). It plays a crucial role in judgement and occurs at different levels that define the speed and accuracy by which an individual processes a certain stimulus (Reber et al., 2004). This theory posits that people tend to prefer stimuli that are easy to process cognitively, feel familiar and true (Bossel et al., 2019). Moreover, processing fluency can be manipulated by marketers in many ways. A key driver of processing fluency is visual design complexity, which indicates that more complex designs have more information, which makes them harder to process. (Grein, 2016). There are two types of fluency, perceptual and conceptual fluency. Both types are consequences of exposure to a certain stimulus (Janiszewski & Meyvis, 2001) Perceptual Fluency as explained by Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman (2004) is influenced by “perceptual priming, clarification, presentation duration, repetition or figure-ground contrast” while Conceptual Fluency focuses on how easy mental operations respond to a stimulus and its relation to “semantic knowledge structures.” In the context of branding, a clean simple design can enhance perceptual fluency which enables consumers to fully recognize and comprehend the brand’s visuals quickly without cognitive strain, which is as previous research has shown consumers like and even find more “true.” (Bossel et al., 2019). Since ease of processing is associated with a brand's trustworthiness (Reber et al., 2004), a brand design that is easy for the mind to process may contribute to brand trust. Therefore, minimalist brands can leverage their simplicity in their different branding elements such as their logo design, packaging and messaging to foster initial trust. However, some studies show that a simple logo, for example, might increase a positive response for everyday consumer products while it may not do the same for luxury or high-prestige brands (Bossel et al., 2019). Pocheptsova et al. (2010) found that making something harder to process may boost previewed quality or exclusivity of premium products. This indicates that the effect of processing fluency on trust may be based on context, something that minimalist brands should take into account.

Furthermore, according to Berlyn’s Two-Factor Theory (1970), when a person is repeatedly exposed to a stimulus, it initially leads to increased learning or familiarity, which can cause boredom. Familiarity and boredom together shape the emotional or affective response to a certain stimulus. The two-factor theory suggests that when something is new, the brain works harder to understand it and overtime this work gets easier. On the other hand, if the stimulus is too simple, the brain understands it very fast and therefore is more prone to getting bored, so the processing fluency rises quickly but then also drops (Stang, 1975). In connection to Minimalist branding, this theory suggests that simple minimalist designs are processed very fluently by the brain which can create a positive feeling for the individual that may get replaced with boredom if the design is too simple or lacks novelty.

Groves and Thompson’s Dual Process Theory (1970) proposes that being exposed to a stimulus influences the tendency to respond or not respond to it. With that, the dual theory focuses on two

main processes: “sensitization and habituation,” and suggests a feeling of excitement in brain activity when the individual is exposed to something new, and this excitement initially grows fast then drops down with more exposure. Therefore, when the brain is used to the stimulus, it starts to ignore it. In other words, when stimuli are complex enough in the right way, they boost fluency while if they are too simple or scattered, fluency suffers. (Janiszewski & Meyvis, 2001). Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman (2004) argue in their research that the more fluently something is processed, the more pleasant it seems and if something looks complex but feels easy, it creates a strong positive reaction. In link with the Dual Process Theory, minimalist branding can be too simple or too empty and therefore, the ease of processing the overall branding and designs should be quick but just with enough detail and richness to ensure the excitement of the consumer and avoid potential boredom. This connects with Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman (2004) research which establishes that moderate complexity that is easy to process can create more positive reactions in branding, art and design.

The relationship between processing fluency and trust is evident in previous research. High processing fluency often translates into higher credibility and trustworthiness since messages or products that are easy to read or recognize are seen as more trustworthy, popular and safer since trust develops with time and familiarity (Schwarz et al., 2020). Previous research suggested that low visual complexity packaging as well as leads to higher brand authenticity (Wang et al., 2023). This is significant because greater previewed brand authenticity has been shown to increase consumer trust in the brand (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2019). Another example is experiments which concluded that companies or brands with easy-to-pronounce names were judged as more trustworthy and consumers were more likely to prefer them when compared to those with complex, hard-to-process names (Schwarz et al., 2020). Simple names are also a form of minimalist branding. Although many studies highlight the trust-building advantages of simplicity, other findings suggest that overly minimal designs could, in certain cases, be perceived as boring and lacking in information (Wang et al., 2023).

2.5 Consumer Trust in Branding

In marketing research, consumer trust is often seen as essential for brand success, affecting both short-term and long-term choices. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) define trust as a customer’s readiness to rely on a brand to consistently keep its promises, even in the face of uncertainty or risk. This trust, which gradually grows based on opinions about a company's skill, dependability, and integrity, is essential for fostering brand connections and promoting brand loyalty (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Nowadays acquiring and keeping customer trust is a primary goal for brand managers.

The visual identity of a brand is among the first indicators of trust in the bond between a brand and its customers. Studies indicate that people formulate initial opinions of a brand within moments of viewing visuals like logos, product packaging, and color palettes (Walsh et al., 2009). These design aspects not only shape the brand’s image but also affect views on its

trustworthiness, particularly when they show clarity, professionalism, and a cohesive design (Keller, 2009). Brands that present a consistent visual style are often considered to be more believable and reliable, especially when the purchase setting is not well known (De Chernatony and McDonald, 2003). With its focus on simple minimalist design, minimalist branding is being used more and more to establish and strengthen customer trust. According to Guerrero (2024), visuals that are simpler appear less manipulative. This in turn fosters a feeling of openness, which customers frequently associate with sincerity and reliability. By fostering feelings of calm and recognizing the user's intelligence, minimalist designs increase emotional trust even in the absence of overt advertising or clear information. This is particularly important for industries like healthcare, technology, and environmentally friendly products that are characterized by high levels of consumer mistrust.

Processing fluency has an effect on the development of trust in psychology. According to Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman (2004), stimuli that are simpler to comprehend mentally are frequently regarded favorably, including as being more reliable. These fluency ideas go well with minimalist branding, which typically has simple typefaces, balanced designs, and few colors. Customers benefit from a more efficient and user-friendly experience as a result. A brand is often perceived as more honest and reliable if its visual communication is simple to understand (Pocheptsova et al., 2010). Moreover, emotions strongly affect brand trust; it's not purely about logic. Similar to how individuals establish trust in their personal bonds, they often view brands as people, attributing human qualities to them (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003). Consequently, a minimalist brand image might signal emotional steadiness or self-assurance, indicating the brand's transparency. However, this outcome hinges on consistency; a simple logo won't engender trust if a website is cluttered or product experiences are disjointed (Labrecque and Milne, 2013).

Brand authenticity, linked with openness and straightforwardness, affects trust, too (Hernández-Fernández, & Lewis, 2019). Beverland (2005) and Napoli et al. (2014) highlight that brands viewed as authentic – that is, faithful to their core principles and history – are often more trusted. Minimalist design, if intentional and not merely for aesthetics, can bolster authenticity, particularly when tied to moral standards like sustainability, inclusivity, or skilled work (Chen, 2023). Nonetheless, minimalist branding does not automatically generate trust. Its effectiveness as a trust-building tool depends on the context. In industries like luxury, hospitality, or heritage-based products, minimalist designs may be perceived as lacking richness or character, which can erode trust rather than enhance it (Favier et al., 2019). Customers who anticipate a certain degree of visual elaboration may perceive visual minimalism as a lack of innovation, investment, or brand narrative. Trust is therefore a complicated concept that is impacted by both the brand's activities and visual cues. By suggesting transparency, competence, and clarity, simple branding can contribute to the development of trust. However, in order to build a trustworthy relationship with consumers, these signals must be backed up with consistent, truthful brand interactions.

2.6 Contextual Moderators: Culture, Generation, and Industry

While the relationship between minimalist branding and consumer trust appears generally positive, it is not uniform across all contexts. Various contextual factors can moderate this relationship including cultural background, generational cohort and industry/product type. For instance, consumers from different cultural backgrounds may respond differently to minimalist branding due to distinct aesthetic preferences and styles of thinking.

Cross-cultural research indicates that western consumers are analytical and tend to focus on individual and logical elements of what they see while people in the east are considered more holistic in their evaluations of product designs (Liu & Orth, 2021). Sinclair & Wilken (2009) highlight the effects of culture on shaping brand meanings and the different challenges associated with cultural adaptation “glocalization.” Research in online consumer product reviews established that American consumers tend to focus more on product usability rather than features while Chinese consumers placed more emphasis on the aesthetic aspects of the products (Wang et al., 2019), which further demonstrates how cultural values shape product evaluations. Cayla and Arnould (2008) in their study also critique traditional approaches to branding and suggest a more “culturally-sensitive” approach and suggest the global brands are interpreted differently across different cultures. In another study particularly in the Middle East and North Africa, it was concluded that branding in these regions blends modernization with local cultural authenticity and prestige (Wippel, 2023). However, Başak (2021) argued in his research that the new minimalist trend in design, which is highly visible in the Scandinavian region, is a movement towards promoting conformity and reducing visible cultural differences.

On the other hand, generational cohorts such as Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z, have been shown to exhibit differing values and behaviors which may also extend to their perceptions of branding. A study by Williams and Page (2011) showed that baby boomers are more likely to respond to emotional storytelling and detailed information. Generation X values multiculturalism and practical solutions, favouring straight-forward communication and benefits. Generation Y is socially conscious, image-driven, and learning-oriented. They value creativity, honesty, humor and challenge. They also seek brands that resonate with their peers. However, Generation Z values instant communication, authenticity, diversity and visually-stimulating content as well as peer endorsements (Williams & Page, 2011). Another study by Wibowo and Zainudin (2024) showed that minimalist design should be integrated when targeting Generation Z since unlike previous generations, Generation Z prefers simplicity in visual content and clean simple designs. Furthermore, since every generation has their unique needs, expectations and values and beside the fact that generational differences remain an open area for further research (Williams & Page, 2011; Wibowo & Zainudin, 2024), it is safe to conclude that age-related preferences will moderate reactions to minimalist branding strategies due to the uniqueness of various generations.

The impact of minimalist branding on trust can also vary considerably by industry context and product type. For instance, many luxury brands traditionally use complex designs and branding to signal wealth and sophistication (Liu et al., 2023). Furthermore, there are instances where complexity in design is part of the brand identity and displays strong associations which consumers make to the brand (Wang et al., 2023) and other instances, where minimalism seems more appealing such as in high-tech companies including Apple, Microsoft, and IBM, which use minimalist design in their branding by using more white space and minimalist structures that guide users as well as make products and content clearer and more user-friendly (Mehrizi Sani & Keyvan Shokooh, 2016). This demonstrates that while minimalism may enhance perceptions of transparency in technology, it may simultaneously undermine the perceptions of craftsmanship and prestige in heritage driven markets, which is why the type of industry can play a pivotal role in identifying whether minimalist approach to branding is the most appropriate (Favier et al., 2019; Guerrero, 2024).

2.7 Gaps in Literature & Relevance of Study

Despite the growing interest in minimalist branding, there remain few noticeable gaps in the literature that this study specifically addresses. Prior studies have typically focused on outcomes such as aesthetic preference, brand attitude, purchase intentions, or brand authenticity, rather than explicitly measuring trust as a construct (Schwarz et al., 2020; Pocheptsova et al., 2010; Başak, 2021; Wang et al., 2023; Chen, 2023). However, it remains unexplored how minimalist branding elements can translate into trust. According to Moorman et al. (1993), trust is the readiness to rely on a brand and isn't always linked to likeability or perceived authenticity. Furthermore, rather than offering a comprehensive analysis of brand minimalism, the majority of the studies that are currently accessible concentrate on certain components, like packaging design or logo design. This leaves a gap in understanding the full scope of minimalist branding's influence on consumer trust and whether the positive effects observed indeed translate into higher trust across different brand touchpoints. This thesis aims to fill this gap by focusing on the trust formation, identifying whether minimalist designs merely make a brand look aesthetically pleasing or whether they genuinely foster consumer trust and willingness to depend on the brand.

Existing research also has largely been conducted within a single-country context and there is therefore a lack of thorough exploration on how cultural differences might influence consumers' trust of minimalist brands since as suggested in previous studies, cultural factors can moderate consumer responses (Liu & Orth, 2021). Yet the literature lacks comparative studies or frameworks detailing these differences in the branding domain since it is yet unknown whether, for example, a minimalist brand strategy that succeeds in building trust in the west will have the same success in the east, where aesthetic preferences and communication styles differ. The gap in cross-cultural research indicates that managers have little scholarly guidance on adapting minimalist branding for global markets and how that helps shape consumer trust. Therefore, this study should fill this gap by examining and comparing responses across different cultures

(Canada, Thailand, Sweden, The Middle East and France), thereby contributing to international marketing literature. Similarly, there is also a clear gap regarding generational cohorts and how different generations perceive minimalist branding and whether its influence on trust varies by age group. Younger generations (Gen Z and Millennials) are generally assumed to favor minimalist and simple aesthetics (Williams & Page, 2011) yet, academic evidence on this assumption is limited.

In addition to the previously mentioned gaps, there is a conceptual gap in the literature concerning the evolution of minimalist branding from a design choice to a more mainstream branding strategy accompanied by the effects it would have on building and maintaining brand trust and loyalty. This study should provide relevant insights that help contextualize minimalist branding as not merely a trend, but rather a strategic variable in brand management with implications on consumer trust. Addressing these gaps is important for both theoretical advancement and managerial practice. Therefore, this study aims to illuminate where and for whom minimalist branding builds trust and where it may not. It shall help brand strategists tailor their approaches to different markets and demographics and improve the effectiveness of branding efforts in fostering consumer trust.

2.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided the conceptual and theoretical foundation for understanding how minimalist branding may influence consumer trust. By outlining how branding and visual identity play a strategic role in shaping consumer perceptions, especially in contexts where brands depend on aesthetics to signal credibility and authenticity (Keller, 2013; Underwood & Ozanne, 1998; Aaker, 1996), it is now possible to somehow establish in theory a relationship between minimalist branding and trust. Furthermore, it is easier now to view simplicity in branding as a strategic tool as well as a historical and a cultural design (Başak, 2021; Gumbar, 2023; Kumar, 2024).

Theoretical frameworks were also explored in this chapter and shall be carried forward into the analysis. These frameworks include signaling theory and processing fluency theory. Signaling theory (Spence, 1973) shall help this study explain how minimalist visuals may function as non-verbal cues about a brand's trustworthiness and reliability. Processing fluency theory (Reber et al., 2004) shall contribute to help this thesis by helping identify how cognitive ease, which is associated with simplicity, can elicit favorable brand responses, which in turn may foster a sense of trust or have the opposite effect. This concept can be explored using visual stimuli that can show the initial response to minimalism and triggers that may or may not contribute to building customer trust. Furthermore, brand equity theory (Aaker, 1996; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), will help identify whether trust plays an important role in building long-term relationships between consumers and brands, influenced partially by visual design and brand authenticity. These theories aid this study by supporting the assumption that simple visuals can build brand trust; however, there are few contextual variables such as culture, industry and generation since

as previously established, these factors can influence how branding is interpreted. For instance, previous research found that Gen Z and Millennials favor simplicity in design more than other generations, however they seek brand authenticity (Williams & Page, 2011; Wibowo & Zainudin, 2024). Additionally, research suggests that the type of industry is a significant factor in measuring minimalist branding's effectiveness since some product types require more richness and complexity in design (Favier et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2023).

Finally, this chapter highlights significant gaps in the existing literature that guide this study's methodological choices. These gaps include a lack of cross-cultural, industry, and generational analysis on how minimalist branding affects trust as well as limited research on how different branding elements, other than logos and packaging, influence perceived trustworthiness of the brand. Therefore, this study aims to address these gaps by examining minimalist branding's influence on trust across different cultures (Canada, Thailand, Sweden, the Middle East, and France) and generations, contributing to theoretical development and offering practical insights for global brand management.

3. Methodology

3.1 Qualitative Research Approach

Given the exploratory nature of this study which examines how minimalist branding may affect consumer trust, a qualitative research approach was deemed most appropriate, particularly since qualitative research is suitable for capturing deeper insights into participants' perceptions, feelings and unique experiences that would be difficult to quantify (Sellers, 2023). The qualitative design is also particularly suited to exploring how consumers interpret minimalist visual cues in terms of trustworthiness, as outlined by signaling theory (Spence, 1973) and processing fluency theory (Reber et al., 2004), which inform the theoretical foundation of this study. Furthermore, a qualitative approach allows participants to express unique perspectives, ideas, attitudes and motivations in their own words, which in turn provides context to the study and adds depth to the concept of trust that a survey or experiment might overlook and miss, and thereby aligning closely with the purpose of this research. This research shall examine complex and culturally-rooted consumer perceptions of minimalist branding and its relation to establishing consumer trust and may in turn enrich brand equity and the overall brand performance (Aaker, 1996; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). A qualitative design allows in-depth cross-cultural consumer behavior research because it explores how cultural context influences attitudes and interpretations (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2011). It also helps answer the research questions that examine: (1) how consumers perceive minimalist branding in terms of trust, (2) how these perceptions vary across cultures and generations, and (3) what mechanisms underlie these evaluations

According to the social constructivist paradigm, which forms the basis of the research, reality is not objective but rather the result of shared meanings and human interactions (Saleem et al., 2021). This ontological stance aligns with the objective of exploring how individuals from varied cultural and generational backgrounds interpret visual branding aspects and attribute trustworthiness to them. From an epistemological perspective, the study relies on interpretivism, given that it seeks to comprehend the subjective experiences of participants rather than test predefined hypotheses (Mustofa, 2023). Using interpretive analysis and open discussion, the research seeks to reveal the emotional and symbolic ties that participants have regarding minimalist branding. Thanks to this method, the study can look past surface-level preferences and explore how brand experiences, cultural conventions, and individual beliefs impact consumers' attitudes towards simple design.

3.2 Research Design and Method Selection

Through comparing perspectives across different cultural dimensions, the research strives to identify both shared understandings and context-specific distinctions in consumer responses to visual simplicity in branding. Within the qualitative paradigm, this study used a focus group design for data collection. Focus group discussions were chosen as the research primary method since they enable interactive exploration of consumer attitudes in a social context and draw out respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs and reactions in ways that would not be feasible using other methods (Gibbs, 1997). This stems from focus groups enabling participants to engage with each others' perspectives, which can reveal collective norms as well as varying viewpoints that provide the research with insights into why certain branding elements evoke trust and others do not among different consumers. A focus group is a guided group discussion used to collect qualitative data from multiple participants simultaneously (Morgan, 1996). Moreover, the dynamic "group effect" was very imperative for this study since it allowed participants to challenge and question each other as well as collaboratively reflect on their own and each others' experiences, which creates a window into the sources of complex consumer motivations underlying trust (Morgan, 1996). Morgan and Krueger (1993) established that the real advantage of a focus group lies not only in hearing what people say individually, but in observing how opinions formulate and change through the unique group interactions. As participants explain their views to one another, the discussion sheds light on the diversity in opinions and allows one to directly observe the agreement, disagreement and the reasoning behind the different consumer viewpoints, which is an advantage to conducting focus groups (Morgan, 1996).

Other data collection methods were considered as well and with that, it was concluded that they were less suitable for this study's objectives for valid reasons. According to Gibbs (1997), in-depth individual interviews, for instance, would allow detailed personal narratives but will lack the interactive element that is crucial for observing how opinions of individuals are influenced or reinforced in a social setting. Furthermore, an interview showcases each participant's isolated perspective (Gibbs, 1997), while a focus group allows the multiplicity of

views” which sparks from different participants’ ideas and reveals shared norms or diverse opinions on the topic (Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan, 1996; Morgan 1997). Since this study aimed to see how consumers collectively discuss and make sense of minimalist branding, the interview format was set aside and a group discussion was the more appropriate option. Survey methods on the other hand were also ruled out since although they can measure the extent of a certain opinion, they do not easily show the underlying reasons behind that opinion nor can they generate new insights, provoke new feelings or give perspectives beyond the specific questions asked like it is possible in a discussion setting (McKenna, 2002). Furthermore, using secondary data such as analysing existing consumer reviews or scanning through different brand case studies was also deemed as less appropriate for this study since secondary sources would not provide valuable insights on the proposed research question considering the context needed to link minimalist branding to trust perceptions. Therefore, by collecting primary data through our guided discussion, the method is most suitable to explore the exact phenomena of interest since it offers a balance of depth of interactivity that other approaches would not.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

Before detailing the focus group process, it is important to outline the purpose of this data collection phase. Having established earlier that a qualitative approach and conducting focus groups are the most suitable approaches to this research, the next step was to gather first-hand insights from consumers through group discussions. These discussions were conducted for the purpose of exploring how participants perceive minimalist branding and whether these perceptions influence their trust in a brand. By engaging multiple consumers in conversation, the study was able to capture not only individual opinions, but also how hearing one’s arguments and thoughts might reinforce or challenge that of others. The data collection phase was designed therefore to capture and obtain rich, nuanced data on consumer trust dynamics in a way that mirrors real-world social influence, providing a strong empirical basis for addressing the study’s research question.

Five focus group sessions were conducted, each consisting of 5-7 participants, which is recommended to facilitate and easily control the discussion while giving the participants enough time to share “in-depth information” (Wilson, 2014). Groups of this size are small enough to allow everyone to participate, yet large enough to provide a diversity of opinions (Morgan, 1997; Kitzinger, 1995). Conducting this amount of focus groups helped ensure that the findings were not idiosyncratic to a single set of individuals and allowed observation of whether similar ideas emerged across different discussions. Each session was between 70-90 minutes and was held in a neutral, comfortable setting as participants were encouraged to participate by the moderator and to interact freely, building on each others’ ideas and thoughts. The moderator initially introduced the purpose of the study and set the ground rules for having a respectful dialogue where everyone feels heard and engaged. As recommended by Krueger (1998), the moderator’s introduction helps reduce power imbalances and encourages open communication by making participants

comfortable from the start. Giving the moderator control over the discussion ensured a more “structured” outcome while allowing equal chances for everyone in the group to participate (Morgan, 1996). It was also essential that the moderator does not impose any personal opinions on the group but rather listens, asks questions and ensures the participation of everyone in the discussion.

The focus groups were structured around several core themes that revolved around the central research topic, which is exploring how minimalistic branding might influence consumer trust. These themes guiding the research questions included:

1. General Brand Trust Factors: the discussion started with a warm-up that explored what makes a brand seem trustworthy in general and explored whether design plays a role in trust formation. This helped ensure that the focus was kept on trust as an outcome and identify whether design plays an important role in amplifying or diminishing other trust factors. Participants also were invited to share an example of a brand they trust and explain why in order to get them to feel comfortable with the discussion.

2. Perceptions of Minimalist Brand Design: explored questions on what comes to participants’ mind when they think about minimalist branding and design. Participants were asked to share their opinions on AI-generated images that showed a minimalist vs. a non-minimalist design to four different branding elements: logo, package, product and poster. The moderator asked which design was more appealing and why in order to discuss the emotional responses to minimalist branding elements. AI-generated images were used to minimize biases and ensure that participants share their opinions without having a previous emotional connection to a certain brand. This visual stimuli exercise allowed the integration of process fluency theory (Reber et al., 2004) as it captured the initial response to the images as well as the initial emotional reaction.

- **Product Visual Stimuli:** As shown below in Figure 1, the first visual stimuli is an example of a toaster. A daily home appliance which is also a familiar and neutral product that makes it easier to identify and relate to by participants. There were two versions displayed of the toaster: a minimalist and a non-minimalist version. The one with the minimalist design is plain white and gray, clean matte finish, and simple-looking with a focus on its functionality. The second has a non-minimalist design with glossy turquoise finish, chrome detailing, rounded retro shape and multiple decorative buttons.



Figure 1. Product Stimuli (Minimalist vs. Non-Minimalist)

- Poster Visual Stimuli:** As shown below in Figure 2, the second visual stimuli is an example of a marketing initiative (poster), which used a symbolic product (Perfume), since perfumes are often characterized by emotional identity and significance, which is ideal for studying trust in the context of luxury and authenticity. The first is a minimalist version. It has a neutral beige background, black text and a simple clear perfume bottle. On the other hand, the second poster is vintage-inspired poster design with floral background, bold colours, and traditional bottle design that emphasizes a non-minimalist design.



Figure 2. Poster Stimuli (Minimalist vs. Non-Minimalist)

- **Logo Visual Stimuli:** As shown below in Figure 3, the third visual stimuli is an example of a watch logo. Watches are often associated with heritage or modernity. It is a perfect choice for identifying how the logo being the center of visual identity of a brand conveys or undermines trust. The first logo is a simple minimalist version, with light cream background, simple clock item and modern font that shows the brand name. On the other hand, the non-minimalist design had a green background, golden font and crown placed above a circular emblem filled with golden leaves.



Figure 3. Logo Stimuli (Minimalist vs. Non-Minimalist)

- **Packaging Visual Stimuli:** As shown below in Figure 4, the last visual stimuli is an example of cereal biscuit packaging. It's a basic consumer product and one that is a fast-moving good. This is an example of how branding can expand to the food industry and it investigates the relationship between trust and aesthetics in food packaging. The images we showed the participants were one minimalist design of biscuit packaging and another non-minimalist. The minimalist package was clean and simple, showing only a picture of the product inside and the net weight underneath. The non-minimalist was a vibrant warm orange and yellow box with decorative background, more informative, and varying fonts to draw attention.



Figure 4. Package Stimuli (Minimalist vs. Non-Minimalist)

3. Trust Signals in Branding: participants were asked to share what makes them trust a brand more or less. The visual stimulus aided in the exploration of whether aspects of a brand's presentations (colours, logo simplicity, packaging and amount of information provided, etc) influence the participants' trust. This segment also included follow-up questions on transparency, lack of information, product or industry type and how these factors can influence consumer trust.

4. Consumer Experience and Expectations: for those who have had experience buying products from brands that adopt minimalist branding in their design as well as for those who have had any certain negative experience with minimalist design. This indirectly tied consumer experiences to trust since it explored how minimalist branding led to a negative or a positive response from consumers and explored how the consistency between brand image and product performance influence that trust.

Through the discussion, the moderator used these guiding themes to ensure that the main aim behind the study is explored deeply, while still allowing participants to introduce relevant insights. The interaction among the participants often led to sharing previous experiences and at certain times, to a debate, both which were very encouraged by the moderator at the beginning of the session. Such exchanges were very valuable in uncovering the reasoning process behind customers' judgements of trust. The sessions were audio-recorded as agreed with the participants to facilitate the process of transcribing and analyzing later.

3.4 Participant Selection and Sampling

The participants for the focus groups were selected using "purposeful sampling," which ensures that they can provide information-rich insights due to their knowledge or experience in the area (Palinkas et al., 2015). This meant identifying consumers who had sufficient exposure to minimalist branding so that they could meaningfully discuss the topic. With that, each focus group included participants between the ages of 18 and 35 years old, corresponding to Generation Z and Millennials; age groups noted for their sensitivity to design, ethics, and brand authenticity (Fraculj et al., 2023; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Participants of this age are also very likely to have had relevant purchasing experience that makes them able to reflect on trust in brands. With that, it was possible to select people exceptionally relevant to meet the study objectives, specifically, young adults from diverse cultural backgrounds with various levels of interest in branding. In total, 26 participants took part. Participation was voluntary and this was communicated to ensure that individuals joined out of genuine interest in the topic.

Moreover, five nations were selected for this undertaking: France, Sweden, Thailand, Canada, and Middle Eastern countries (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, & Syria). These countries were chosen to represent a spectrum of cultural values and visual norms, potentially influencing how minimalist branding is perceived. France is known for its minimalist approach in design and luxury branding, most particularly fashion, (e.g., brands like Chanel and Louis Vuitton). French

consumers enjoy elegance and quality, values rooted in their tradition of craftsmanship and luxury (Batat & de Kerviler, 2020). According to Hofstede's cultural dimensions, France scores relatively high on uncertainty avoidance and moderately high on individualism, which suggests that French consumers prefer clear, structured communication and their trust of a brand, product or even a person is built upon signs that showcase quality, consistency and prestige (Hofstede et al., 2010). France represents a mature market where minimalist branding could either reinforce brand trust if executed with sophistication or risk seeming insufficient if perceived as lacking prestige. On the other hand, Canada is a huge representation of a multicultural, western-consumer market with growing attention to ethical consumption and sustainability (Bohatyrets, 2018). It ranks high in individualism and low in both uncertainty avoidance and power distance (Hofstede et al., 2010). This suggests that consumers in Canada value transparency, equality and authenticity and are extremely open to innovation. Including Canada provides a baseline Western perspective for the study: it helps answer whether the effects of minimalist branding on trust observed in, say, Europe or Asia are also found in a North American setting, especially given Canada's high diversity. Furthermore, Thailand is an emerging market with a young population increasingly influenced by global trends. Although Thai culture is traditionally associated with more ornate and culturally complex visual designs, a new generation of urban consumers is gradually embracing minimalism, particularly in major cities like Bangkok (World Bank, n.d). As the country scores high on its uncertainty avoidance, suggesting that Thai consumers prefer detailed information when exposed to information, the country is also traditionally a collectivist country which indicates that Thai consumers are influenced by group norms and reputation rather than purely on individual evaluation (Hofstede et al., 2010). Therefore, Thailand as an explored region provides an opportunity to examine shifts in consumer behavior, noting the rising influence of global trends like minimalism among urban youth in a traditionally detail-rich cultural setting. Finally, countries in the Middle East have a unique consumption culture, often marked by luxury and opulence, but there is also a rising demand for modern, minimalist brands, particularly among younger generations. (Iftahy et al., 2019). Hofstede's dimensions show that Arab cultures are generally collectivist, and exhibit high uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede et al., 2010). This can mean that trust in brands is usually associated with reputation, community approval and visible signals of success and quality. However, since middle eastern consumer habits are constantly changing (McKinsey, 2021), the inclusion of analysis of the Middle East shall allow the examination of how minimalist branding competes with traditional expectations of status, luxury, richness and prestige. Sweden's design ethos on the other hand, is heavily influenced by simplicity and functionality, particularly seen in brands like IKEA, which embraces minimalist design and practical simplicity (Rousi, 2013). According to Hofstede's cultural dimension, Sweden scores low for both power distance and masculinity, which indicates that Swedish consumers favour cooperation, good quality of life and believe that everyone should be treated equally. This can also mean that Swedish consumers prefer brands and products that are simple and not very luxurious, rather than flashy and loud (Hofstede et al., 2010), which is part of what this study aims to explore. Moreover, Sweden

scores low on uncertainty avoidance, which indicates that Swedish consumers are more comfortable with transparency when making a purchase decision (Hofstede et al., 2010). Sweden as a choice for this study allows the examination of minimalist branding in a culture where simplicity and minimalism in visuals and aesthetics are a norm, which allows for comparative analysis and insights (Rousi, 2023).

The final composition of the focus groups consisted of 19 female and 7 male participants. While gender was not a selection criterion, this skew may influence how certain themes were perceived and discussed. Most of the participants were also either students or young professionals, with various cultural backgrounds. Some of them already had a general interest in branding or visual design, but that also wasn't a requirement during the selection process. The key consideration underlying their selection was them being in contact with brands regularly, whether through social media, online and offline shopping, or simply through their everyday life.

The focus groups were held either in person or via online calls, depending on what was most practical in each country. We used the same guide for every session (see appendix 1.), with questions split into different parts. It started with general warm-up questions, then we introduced visual stimulus (for example, minimalist versus more detailed packaging or ads), and ended with open discussions about what makes a brand feel trustworthy. We let people speak freely and didn't try to push them in one direction. The conversations flowed naturally and sometimes even led to unexpected insights. The focus groups in Sweden and Thailand were conducted in English, while the focus groups in France and Canada were conducted in French and the one in the Middle East was conducted in Arabic to ensure the gathering of richer insights and data. Furthermore, the participants in each group had different personalities and ways of thinking. Some were more focused on aesthetics, while others paid more attention to brand values, product details, personal preferences or the overall tone of the brand. This helped bring out contrasting viewpoints. We also noticed patterns that came up across multiple groups, for instance how minimalism can be seen as clean and modern, but not always warm or trustworthy, especially depending on the type of product. Cultural differences also played a role in how people responded to certain visuals. Some participants agreed that design builds-up, enhances or breaks their trust. Others suggested that design was more of a preference rather than a factor that influences their trust in a brand and that other factors play a bigger role such as product quality, longevity, and brand reputation.

To sum up, the diversity of participants gave this study a wide range of opinions and insights. This helped build a clearer picture of how minimalist branding is perceived in different parts of the world. In the next sections, we will go through the main themes that came out of these discussions, showing how design choices can influence consumer trust depending on context.

Country	Participants	Age Range	Gender Distribution	Session Format
France	5	21-35	2 males / 3 females	In person
Sweden	5	20 - 30	3 males / 2 females	Online
Thailand	5	20 - 25	5 females	Online
Canada	5	21-24	5 females	Online
Middle East	6	18 - 31	2 males / 4 females	Online

Table 1. Focus groups' composition per countries

3.5 Thematic Analysis Development Process

This study follows Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis approach, facilitating the theoretical interpretation and analysis of qualitative data and ensures the subjectivity of the researcher. In order to identify the themes from the focus groups, we went through a manual process that did not involve any coding software, while also following the steps recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Step 1: Familiarisation with the Data

Upon finalising the focus groups, we carefully transcribed each voice-recording generated from the different discussions. This process allowed us to go through every transcript and read it carefully to identify recurring remarks. We noted the repeated key words such as "clean," "cluttered," "boring," "cold," "professional," "luxurious," and "elegant." This allowed us to proceed to the next step.

Step 2: Generating Initial Codes

We associated each key word with a specific expression or phrases as shown below:

- "It looks trustworthy because it is clean."
- "It's too empty so it feels cold"
- "It's suitable for young professionals"
- "Watches are luxury products"
- "The design is too simple, it feels lazy"
- "Too much minimalism is boring"
- "It looks like it's trying too hard"
- "I can't visualize it, it doesn't look real"
- "It's simple and elegant"
- In my culture, branding is dominant"

These phrases and expressions aided us in the process of identifying themes as they helped us understand the underlying assumptions and cultural connotations associated with minimalist design and branding.

Step 3: Searching for Themes

By reviewing the manual codes above, a few patterns and meanings started coming into the picture as shown below:

- Many insights on cleanliness, visual clarity and clutter supported the development of the theme: **Simplicity and Visual Clarity**.
- Cross-cultural statements about minimalism and in which context minimalist design was deemed favorable developed into the theme: **Cultural Differences in the Acceptance of Minimalism**.
- Comments linking directly to the concept of simplicity and honesty pointed to the theme: **Minimalism and Brand Authenticity**.
- Emotional reactions derived from visual stimuli and questions about how minimalism makes the participants feel whether it was positive or negative also pointed to the theme: **Emotional Perception of Minimalist Branding**.
- Different conversations during the focus group discussions about how minimalism is perceived across different industries such as tech, food or healthcare and medicine developed into the theme: **Sector-Specific Reactions to Minimalist Branding**.

Step 4: Reviewing and Defining Themes

After developing the themes, it was essential to make sure they were thoroughly evaluated to insure they were coherent, covered all the insights provided from the focus groups and at the same time each was distinctive and unique from the other. This involved going through the transcripts again to ensure that the themes cover the valuable data generated from the focus groups. It was also essential that every theme has a unique and descriptive name consistent with the study's research questions.

3.6 Validity and Reliability in Qualitative Research

Unlike quantitative research which is built on data collection and validity, qualitative research does not follow one clear structure and has a variety of ways in which researchers present their insights and with that, it becomes essential for both readers and researchers to build and establish trust in the research process and findings (Stahl & King, 2020). In qualitative research, the notion of trustworthiness is linked to the concepts of validity and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness is the total integrity and quality of qualitative findings. It basically refers to the assurance that the findings of the qualitative study are accurate, believable, and entirely grounded in the experiences of the participants. Validity refers to how accurately the findings reflect the phenomena being studied

while reliability refers to the “consistency” of the research process (Noble & Smith, 2015). In this study on minimalist branding and consumer trust, ensuring trustworthiness was important to validate the insights. As demonstrated by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the concept of trustworthiness includes “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.” Qualitative researchers aim to demonstrate that their findings are dependable and believable given the research context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Measures corresponding to each of these was incorporated into this study in order to enhance the quality and ensure the trustworthiness of the research.

Credibility is the confidence that the research conclusions are “truthful” and it questions whether the results are believable or consistent with the reality from the participants’ and readers’ standpoints (Merriam 1998; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). It is in simple terms achieved when research findings are judged to be accurate (Shenton, 2004). Ensuring credibility was essential for this study in order to guarantee that the themes identified honestly reflect consumer attitudes towards minimalist branding. To enhance credibility, we ensured all participants got the same initial explanation and were shown identical visual stimuli during the focus groups. This uniformity throughout sessions enabled us to compare answers equitably, while still allowing participants freedom to interpret and react individually. We also used debriefing and constantly checked on members during the discussions by asking clarifying questions and summarising participant responses aloud, which helped confirm our understanding in real time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). It was important for this study to ensure its credibility since it was a way to guarantee that the themes identified genuinely reflect consumer attitudes towards minimalist branding.

Transferability corresponds to the notion of external validity or generalizability in qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). It is a way of providing “thick description,” which entails rich details about the research context and the participants that makes it easier for the reader to relate to it (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Thick description was valuable to this study because it captures the contextual details and meanings behind participants’ statements, so that the reader can understand the situation and assess similarity in other contexts and settings (Ponterotto, 2006). Giving detailed description of the focus group setting and participants’ experiences can help the reader assess whether the findings on minimalist branding in relation to consumer trust is actually relevant to other consumers in a different setting. This was done by asking for real-life examples from participants about their past experience with minimalist brands, giving details about members’ age, as well as cultural insights on the geographical region in which they come from. This helps the reader

Dependability was addressed through systematic documentation. Since a dependable study is achieved when research procedures are carried out carefully so that even though they might not yield the same results in future research, the same procedures can be carried out again because they are deemed both trustworthy and repeatable (Shenton, 2004). Therefore, a record of the research steps were kept as well as a trail of our research decisions, including how participants

were selected, how we refined our discussion guide, and how we approached the coding process. We both independently reviewed the transcripts and discussed any discrepancies in interpretation during the analysis phase, which contributed to the reliability of the thematic structure.

Since confirmability is achieved when results and interpretations are traced back to the data gathered rather than the researchers' biases, motivations or imagination (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tobin & Begley, 2004), it was important for this study to maintain vigilance on minimising biases and allowing participants' voices to guide the interpretation of the data. We reflected periodically on our own position and how our cultural origins and beliefs might influence the study. This reflexive method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Berger, 2015) helped us stay receptive to unforeseen insights and crucial differences between groups. Furthermore, it was also ensured that every single finding and interpretation was derived from the focus group discussions and data. Together with credibility, transferability, and dependability, conformity helps ensure that this study's insights on minimalist branding and consumer trust fulfills the criteria needed to increase the trustworthiness of this research, which is recommended by qualitative study experts.

As a qualitative study within the field of international marketing and brand management, this research incorporates focus group discussions to provide in-depth insights into consumer perceptions of minimalist branding across selected regions and age groups. Employing a purposive sampling strategy, this study focuses specifically on Millennials and Generation Z participants from five culturally diverse countries. While this design facilitates rich, contextual understanding of how minimalist branding influences trust formation at the brand level, it does not establish causal relationships. Instead, the analysis is interpretive and subject to the researchers' analytical judgments. This opens the possibility of finding various limitations of this study. For instance, even though the same set of stimuli was used across all focus groups, perceptions of design are highly subjective and culturally charged. It's possible that certain colors, fonts, or packaging styles resonated differently with participants based on cultural connotations that weren't fully explored during the sessions. Furthermore, this research specifically concentrates on brand-level trust and the role of design elements, treating minimalist branding in a general sense without offering distinctions between specific product categories or industries (e.g., tech product designs, food packaging, or fashion logos). As such, it provides a broad overview rather than detailed sector-specific insights. The limited size of each focus group means that the discoveries aren't generalizable to full populations, even if this cross-cultural method offered depth and allowed us to capture a diversity of opinions. Exploring patterns and meanings rather than making general statistical assertions was the purpose. That said, some nuance may have been missed simply due to time and resource constraints. Conducting further sessions or including more participants from even more different countries/cities or age could have expanded the findings.

Although focus groups enable comprehensive dialogue and the sharing of common knowledge, they also introduce challenges associated with group dynamics. The presence of dominant

personalities may create biases by influencing individual contributions. Some participants may conform to the group's consensus or hesitate to voice dissenting views. The depth and honesty of what is revealed can always be impacted by group dynamics, even though every attempt was made to provide a safe and open discussion space. Probably that some one-on-one complementary interviews might have added a more intimate level of detail in several situations, especially when it came to the emotional reactions to minimalist branding. Kitzinger (1995) observed that focus group participants often articulate views that seem acceptable to the group rather than their own, which means the data may reflect societal norms or peer pressure effects rather than each individual's true feelings. This could undermine the authenticity of the participants' answers. To mitigate this, efforts were made to foster a respectful and inclusive environment, encourage open discussion, and employ open-ended questioning to promote individual reflection. Moreover, despite involving participants from five culturally varied contexts, the findings should not be viewed as representative of all cultural perspectives. The "purposeful sampling" (Palinkas et al., 2015) method which was conducted limits the generalisability of the results to the wider population. Additionally, even though the sessions were held in either English or the participants' native French and Arabic, there is always a chance that subtle subtleties would be lost throughout the translation and interpretation process. Lastly, each focus group was only conducted once due to time and resource limitations, which reduced the possibility of longitudinal research or follow-up. Additional sessions or individual interviews could have enriched the data and allowed for deeper triangulation of insights. Despite these limitations, the chosen scope and methodological design allow this thesis to deeply explore the interplay between minimalist branding and consumer trust. The results add to the scholarly discussion on cross-cultural brand perception and design and provide insightful information for global brand managers.

Understanding these possible disadvantages is crucial for analyzing the study's findings. Knowing these constraints enables us to design the study in ways that lessen their impact rather than discrediting the methodology. Rather than invalidating the method, understanding these limitations allows us to design the study in ways that mitigate their impact. This was achieved through careful moderation and group management. The small size of the focus groups, as mentioned earlier, helped the moderator have better control over the group dynamics and the peer influence as well as minimized the risk that any one participant or viewpoint would overpower the conversation. Additionally, having participants of each group share similar cultural backgrounds since they come from similar cultural settings and somehow have similar experiences, helped create a comfortable environment for them. (Sim & Snell, 1996). By fostering an inclusive group climate, we reduced peer pressure and allowed a more authentic range of opinions. Moreover, taking the generalizability limitation into account, it was important for us to aim for theoretical generalizability since it identifies conceptual insights about the relationship between trust and minimalist branding that can contribute to theory or be tested in other settings (Firestone, 1993). We also addressed this challenge by involving native speakers or fluent moderators and by cross-checking translated materials during the analysis phase.

Conducting multiple focus groups rather than a single one, increases the robustness of the findings which allows us to look for replications of similar logic and views across different groups (Morgan, 1997). This repetition helps strengthen the confidence that the results have a broader relevance across different populations.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

All aspects of this study were conducted in accordance with standard ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Before starting the focus group sessions, each participant was provided with a clear information sheet and a consent form, outlining the purpose of the study, what participation meant, and any potential risks or benefits (Smith, 1995). The form explained that the discussion would revolve around personal opinions on branding and that the session will be audio-recorded. The audio recordings and transcript were handled with strict confidentiality and were only accessible by us, the researchers, with the consent of the participants. Furthermore, there are no risks associated with this study as data was collected in the form of voluntarily thematic focus group discussions. After the completion of each session, the participants were thanked for their insights and reminded about the confidentiality and that they could contact us after the session in case they had any further insights to add, questions or concerns. While during the focus groups meetings, control by the moderator allowed the discussion to remain focused on the aim of the study and ensured that mutual respect was practiced during the discussion and in case of varying opinions (Morgan, 1996). Participants were also informed that participation is fully voluntary and they had the right to decline to answer any question. This was emphasized both in writing and verbally at the start of the group discussions (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). Moreover, assurance that no identifying information nor any personal detail involving the participants shall be shared nor published anywhere, protecting their right for confidentiality and anonymity.

4. Findings: How Consumers Perceive Minimalist Branding and Trust

4.1 Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter presents the main findings from the five focus group sessions conducted across different cultural contexts and based on a thematic analysis. The themes capture how consumers define minimalist branding, the way minimalist design connected to their feelings of trust towards brands and how factors such as industry, cross-cultural and cross-generational contexts moderate these their perceptions of minimalism in branding. Consumer trust as established earlier is a key factor that helps foster brand loyalty, brand equity and enhance the overall performance of the brand (Aaker, 1996; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Participants' quotes are

used to illustrate the findings, which in turn provides direct insights into consumer viewpoints. We also explore connections to concepts from the literature review such as processing fluency, brand authenticity and cultural differences in order to place the results within a broader academic context. This chapter shall provide findings that shall allow the Discussion chapter to theoretically and in-depth interpret them.

4.2 Thematic Analysis of Findings

Using the thematic analysis explored in the Methodology chapter, this chapter shall offer a clear overview of how consumers perceive minimalist branding and how these perceptions affect trust, particularly within a multicultural context. In this chapter, we present five core themes that structure our analysis. Each theme begins with a brief introduction and is followed by selected quotes from participants, supported by our interpretations of the patterns that emerged. Where relevant, we point out cross-cultural similarities or contrasts by comparing responses from different countries. Although references to theoretical concepts such as processing fluency, brand authenticity, and visual trust cues are occasionally mentioned for context, our primary focus here is to objectively present the findings. The deeper interpretation of these results in relation to theory is addressed in Chapter 5. By the end of this chapter, we aim to offer a clear overview of how consumers perceive minimalist branding and how these perceptions affect trust, particularly within a multicultural context.

4.2.1 Simplicity and Visual Clarity

One of the most frequently mentioned concepts in all five focus groups was that professionalism, clarity, and simplicity are often associated with minimalist branding. Many participants used the terms "clean," "neat," or "straightforward" to describe minimalist design, frequently associating it with trust when applied well. This aligns with the principle of processing fluency since stimuli that are easier to process tend to elicit more positive responses and judgments (Bossel et al., 2019). Across cultures, respondents overall appreciated the clarity that minimalist branding conveys.

In Sweden, participants particularly agreed about how minimalist design helps make a brand feel clearer and more reliable. They explained that reduced visual clutter makes it easier to process information and generates a more direct communication between the brand and the consumer. For example, one participant said that minimalist design “just feels more serious and modern” and gives a better first impression, especially for tech products.

Similar views were shared in Thailand. Participants there associated minimalist branding with efficiency and a modern lifestyle. Several noted that brands like Muji or Uniqlo use simple design not just to look good but to reflect functionality and purpose. One participant mentioned how minimalist packaging on skincare made her feel like the product was “professional and

focused on what matters.” Several participants also said that when a design is easy to understand, “it’s faster to recognize and it removes distractions,” which makes them “focus on the product.”

In Canada, minimalism was frequently linked with transparency and ethical practices. Some said that when brands “don’t try too hard visually,” it demonstrates confidence and intentionality. However, there was also a clear awareness that minimalism only works if the rest of the brand’s experience, like communication or product quality, follows the same logic.

Participants in the Middle East also made this connection between minimalism and seriousness. Many described minimalistic design as elegant and clean, especially when applied to technology or luxury products. In these categories, minimalism was perceived as a sign of a brand that “knows what it’s doing.” At the same time, a few participants raised doubts about whether visual simplicity could sometimes feel cold or distant, which we will explore later.

In France, minimalism was often perceived as a mark of refinement. Several participants mentioned luxury brands like Hermès or Apple, highlighting how simplicity in branding could convey class and focus. Minimalist logos or packaging were described as more “noble” or “calm,” especially in fashion and tech sectors.

However, across groups, the connection between minimalism and trust wasn’t unconditional. Participants repeatedly stressed that minimalist design only works well when it looks intentional, balanced, and appropriate to the product category. It had to feel like a real design choice, not just a way to cut corners. When done well, it gave the impression that the brand was confident and in control. When poorly executed, it risked looking empty, generic, or even lazy. An example to that is how some in the French focus group described a brand being too minimalist as “cold” or “distant.” The same was observed in the Thai focus group, where participants discussed the concept of minimalism and what is considered to be excessively minimal to the point where the brand loses its trust and value. Furthermore, a few participants across the five focus groups expressed concerns regarding the transparency and informational clarity of minimalist brands, particularly in relation to the products they offer. This concern was most visible in discussions about the food and pharmaceutical industries, where participants emphasized the importance of clear labeling and ingredient disclosure.

On the other hand, some participants linked minimalist branding with reduced cognitive overload. They felt that simple visuals were easier to process and made brand interactions less tiring or confusing. This made the user experience more seamless, particularly in online settings. Therefore, minimalism was viewed as a choice that not only improves aesthetics but also gives customers greater comfort and control over their choices. In general, minimalist design was seen favorably when it complemented a distinct, self-assured, and recognizable company image. Participants across different cultures interpreted this design approach as a potential signal of trustworthiness, especially when used with intention and aligned with the brand’s values and

product type. While not the only factor influencing trust, visual simplicity emerged as one of the key elements that could help a brand appear more serious and professional.

4.2.2 Sector-Specific Reactions to Minimalist Branding

Although minimalist branding was frequently viewed as modern and appealing, people across all five focus groups agreed that its effectiveness relies heavily on the type of product or sector. Throughout the sessions, individuals conveyed that minimalism can foster trust in some categories, but may actually lessen confidence in others. The way minimalist design was received varied a lot depending on what the product was and what consumers expected from it.

One of the clearest patterns came from conversations surrounding **food and health**-related products. In every group, participants expressed a need for more detailed packaging when it came to things they consume. In France, for instance, several participants felt that minimalist food packaging lacked the warmth or sensory appeal that usually makes a product look appetizing. One person said it looked “too cheap” and not very “appetizing”. In Canada, some people felt that the product might be cheap or lacking information, especially when ingredients or certifications weren’t clearly visible. In the Middle East, the concern was slightly different: minimal design on food or medicine packaging sometimes caused suspicion, because it seemed like something important might be concealed or omitted.

By contrast, when it came to **technology**, reactions were more consistently positive. Participants in Sweden, Thailand, and in the Middle East particularly associated minimalist design with innovation and dependability. Tech products or any tech communication that look clean and sharp were seen as advanced and user friendly. Brands like Apple or Microsoft were mentioned as examples of minimalism done well. In these situations, the design’s minimalism was interpreted as deliberate and conveyed a sense of clarity and usefulness that appeared to foster trust.

Though there were some distinct trends, opinions on **skincare and beauty** were more divided. In Thailand and Canada, participants generally liked minimalist design in skincare, especially when it looked clean and clinical. It helped convey a sense of professionalism and transparency. However, in the Middle East and France, several participants pointed out that even in beauty, packaging still needs to include essential product information. Without that, they were less inclined to trust the brand, no matter how clean the design looked.

Fashion brought a different conversation. Minimalism was often appreciated for its elegance, particularly in brands like Uniqlo or COS, which were seen as reliable and consistent. French participants also associated minimalist fashion branding with refinement and premium quality. But others felt that, in some instances, it could become a bit boring or repetitive, especially when many brands adopt the same “clean” visual style. In Canada, a few people mentioned that when new brands try to look minimalist without a strong identity, it can come across as generic.

Luxury was also a special case. Some people considered minimalism to be a component of “quiet luxury”. Participants from France and the Middle East cited Tiffany and Hermès as examples of companies where the sense of exclusivity was reinforced by minimalist hints. However, a lot of people concurred that this only worked when the brand was well-known. Overly simplistic branding from a new or unknown premium business may not engender trust in the same manner. A Middle Eastern participant clarified that a watch logo that is “too basic” could imply that the product isn’t truly high-end.

Participants tended to be more careful in high-risk areas such as **baby items, food, and medications**. In Sweden, Thailand and Canada, people explained that they needed to see clear information, ingredients, or certifications to feel confident buying a product. In these cases, minimalist branding, even if clean and attractive, wasn’t enough on its own to create trust. There was a general expectation that safety-related products should look informative and transparent, even if that meant employing more visual detail.

Overall, the discussions showed that minimalist branding is not one-size-fits-all. Participants made it clear that context matters a lot. When the product is design-driven or digital, minimalism can enhance credibility and make the brand feel more modern. But in sectors where information is essential or emotional connection is important such as food or luxury, too much visual simplicity can sometimes work against trust rather than support it.

4.2.3 Emotional Perception of Minimalist Branding

Minimalist branding was also often described as clean, modern, or professional and many participants across the different countries also brought up the emotional side of branding. A recurring idea in several focus groups was that minimalism can seem cold or distant if it lacks personality or emotional depth. This concern was particularly strong in the Swedish group. According to the participants, firms that use minimalist design appear more polished and well-organized, but they may also come across as emotionally flat. According to one participant, it was “too cold / emotionless” and conveyed a feeling of disengagement, particularly for goods where narrative or emotional connection is anticipated. This was repeated in the French group, where participants also mentioned that minimalist packaging can occasionally fall short of arousing desire in industries like food or cosmetics. A few even mentioned that minimal designs, although elegant, didn’t always trigger an emotional response strong enough to make them want to try the product. In the Middle East, a similar observation came up. While minimalism was often associated with luxury and clarity, some participants explained that certain packaging or branding styles just didn’t attract them emotionally. One participant pointed out that a product can be beautiful and simple, but still feel “impersonal” if it doesn’t express a story or feeling. This was especially relevant for items where cultural richness or visual cues are expected such as perfumes, watches or traditional foods. In Canada, the emotional impact of minimalist branding seemed more divided. Some participants appreciated the calmness and simplicity it conveyed, saying that it helped create a sense of balance. But others felt that overly minimal branding

lacked identity or felt “forgettable”. For example, a few mentioned that when all brands start using similar minimal visuals, it becomes harder to feel attached to them or even tell them apart. Participants in the Thai group did not put as much emphasis on emotional connection. Most of them seemed to value minimalism mainly for its usefulness or tidy look, especially when it came to technology and fashion. Companies like Muji and Uniqlo were cited and described as trustworthy, simple, and easy to understand. The design was liked for being functional, however, there wasn’t significant discussion regarding whether it evoked any specific emotions. Thus, even if the visual style was viewed as beneficial, it didn’t seem to elicit powerful emotional responses. It felt more centered on comfort and habit rather than attachment.

During the focus group discussions, we showed the participants AI-generated images that were used as a visual stimuli to get their reaction on aspects of branding such as product, packaging, advertisement (poster) and brand logo. This was explained more in detail in the methodology chapter. These visuals helped us prompt the discussion further and observe immediate emotional and perceptual reactions to the different designs shown in order to obtain new insights and perspectives.

Initially, participants were exposed to the **product** visual stimuli (Figure 1). Questions asked during the discussion yielded the following results and patterns:

Preferences across regions varied. In Thailand, participants criticized the minimalist toaster as “cheap” and “plastic,” though some appreciated its practicality. As for the non-minimalist toaster, most participants felt that it was higher in quality and thought it looked “vintage,” “durable” and therefore, more trustworthy. In Canada, the minimalist toaster was seen as “modern,” “cool,” and “eco-friendly,” with its design signaling efficiency and trust. Swedish participants generally favored the minimalist design for being “less risky” and easy to integrate into the kitchen, though some questioned the material quality. Overall, trust was higher for the minimalist option in Sweden due to its simplicity. Even though some participants in Sweden felt that the non-minimalist toaster was more “vibrant” and “attractive” in colour, it still felt like the “riskier” option for them as well. In the Middle East, views were split; some praised the non-minimalist toaster’s “retro” and high-end look, while others felt like it was “superficial” and therefore, trusted the minimalist option more, comparing it to brands like Philips and Bosch. Finally, in France, participants had mixed feelings. Certain people favored the non-minimalist toaster, feeling its “vibrant colors” and “retro” look gave it a sense of “personality” and “appeal”. One person said that “the round colorful design is more enjoyable and welcoming”. However, the minimalist toaster was valued for its “timeless white” shade with some thinking it was “classic” and “contemporary”. Globally, the minimalist toaster was mentioned as “simple and clean but with a lack of appeal” compared to the other toaster.

The second visual stimuli (Figure 2) is an example of two **posters** for perfumes. The majority of participants across the five focus groups preferred the minimalist poster. Most participants in Canada viewed the minimalist poster as “fresh,” “clean” yet somehow lacking in character.

Mixed viewpoints were shared in Thailand regarding trust. Some participants pointed out that the non-minimalist poster design seemed “drawn by hand” which made it hard to “take it seriously” while others perceived it as retro and suggested that the product was more likely to offer greater longevity. Overall, the simple poster was preferred due to elegance, “professionalism,” “practicality of product” and poster matching the modern style. Similarly, the majority of the Middle Eastern participants praised the minimalist design and modern nature, but thought it lacked information and was a little empty. On the other hand, some participants felt like the non-minimalist version was more trustworthy as it described the scent of the perfume and hinted at richness, luxury and longevity. According to French participants, the minimalist poster was seen as “classy” and “timeless”. However, they noted that the non-minimalist poster seemed “more inviting”, with a “vintage” feel that conveyed a sense of “character”. One participant said, “The minimalist design is clean and simple, but it doesn’t give me an idea of what the perfume is about.”

The third visual stimuli (Figure 3) is a comparison between two watch **logos**. When exposed, it was immediately clear that most participants across the five focus groups favoured the non-minimalist design. Overall, all participants from Canada viewed the minimalist design as “lacking character,” and less trustworthy. The non-minimalist logo design was considered more expressive, nostalgic and “luxurious” even though it was a little “cluttered.” Similarly in Thailand, the non-minimalist design had the edge as it was associated with luxury and tradition and therefore was trusted more. However, the minimalist was viewed as “cheap”, lacking in quality and not matching the luxury expectations of a watch. French participants also agreed that simplicity is not suitable and the minimalist design has more heritage and detail. Middle Easterns had similar feelings and added that the non-minimalist design shows premium quality and is more trustworthy. Finally, the Swedish participants highlighted the “royal” design feeling associated with the non-minimalist design and that the complexity in design made the brand seem more trustable.

In the last visual stimuli (Figure 4), we looked into product **packaging**. Similar to the logo example, most participants preferred the non-minimalist version almost instantly. In Canada, the minimalist package was viewed as “cheaper” while the non-minimalist package felt “colourful”, which made it more eye-catching. Some participants chose the minimalist package as they perceived it as “healthier” while others were more attracted to the visually-appealing non-minimalist package. Similar patterns were seen in the Middle East as most participants agreed that they lean more towards the non-minimalist package due to the visibility of ingredients. Swedish consumers also preferred the non-minimalist package since it felt more “appetizing” and “fun.” Similarly, the French group viewed the minimalist design as “cold” and lacking information. Furthermore, participants in Thailand felt a stronger sense of trust towards the brand of the non-minimalist package because of its visual richness. One participant pointed out that it reminded them of “grandma” biscuits, which evoked a feeling of nostalgia.

It was evident in every group that a crucial component of brand trust is emotional connection. When selecting a product, participants frequently rely on emotions such as warmth, excitement, and familiarity. Although minimalism can promote credibility and clarity, it occasionally lacks the expressive or sensory elements that elicit these feelings. Because of this, brands that rely too much on minimalism run the danger of coming across as cold or uninteresting, particularly if they have nothing else to connect with.

So, minimalism branding may not necessarily elicit emotional involvement, while being widely regarded as sophisticated and aesthetically pleasing. The participants concurred that design should have purpose in addition to being aesthetically pleasing. Minimalist branding must be matched with other components that appeal to the heart as well as the eyes in order to truly inspire trust.

4.2.4 Minimalism and Brand Authenticity

In all five focus groups, many participants remarked about how minimalist branding may sometimes feel more “real” or honest, depending on how it’s done. A recurrent theme was that a brand appears to be being transparent when it opts for a simple, clean design, suggesting that it doesn’t need to conceal anything behind eye-catching imagery or grandiose statements. In France, this was especially tied to the idea of brand values. Several participants said that minimalism can reflect authenticity, but only if it matches what the brand actually stands for. One person explained that when a product looks minimal and is also made locally or ethically, “it just makes sense”. But when the branding is clean and minimal and there’s no other sign of substance or value behind it, it feels more like a trick. Therefore, it has to be backed up by something more substantial than just the design itself. In Canada, people brought up the same kind of logic. A few said that minimalism, when used by eco-friendly or ethical brands, helped reinforce the message that the company was serious and had nothing to hide. Brands like The Ordinary or Attitude were mentioned as examples that use minimal visuals to express something about simplicity, safety, or even sustainability. Once more, the brand’s overall clarity, ingredients, and source were just as important as the aesthetics. So, minimalism only seemed authentic when the rest of the product felt aligned with it. The Middle Eastern group also discussed this. Some participants said that they trusted brands more when the design didn’t try too hard, especially in categories like luxury or wellness. But they also pointed out that if the design looked too plain or generic, it could do the opposite. One person described a watch logo as “so minimal it looked fake,” which shows that simplicity doesn’t automatically create authenticity unless it’s supported by things like quality, consistency, or a clear brand story.

In Sweden, the idea of consistency came up. Participants felt that minimalism only really worked when it was used across the entire brand experience. That meant the product, the messaging, and even the online presence had to feel coherent. If the packaging was simple but the brand tone was overly aggressive or confusing, it created doubt. On the other hand, when everything feels

aligned, it builds trust. In Thailand, participants were a bit more reserved about the concept of authenticity, but some did express that minimalism seemed to reflect confidence. They appreciated when a product didn't "oversell" itself and just presented what it had to offer in a clean and direct way. People like when a product looks "honest", especially in categories like skincare or fashion. Still, for most of them, minimalism wasn't enough by itself: it had to be backed up by quality or consistency, otherwise it could come off as just a marketing look.

Overall, across all groups, people agreed that minimalist branding can support the feeling of authenticity, but only when it's used in a way that makes sense with the rest of the brand. If the design looks stripped down, but the message is vague or the product feels low-quality, then the effect is lost. Minimalism, in this sense, can act like a signal but it's only trusted when it's matched with something real and profound behind it.

4.2.5 Cultural Differences in the Acceptance of Minimalism

Despite the fact that many responses to minimalist branding were similar among the various groups, the discourse surrounding it frequently varied by region. It is evident that the cultural background affected how minimalism was perceived and whether or not it increased a brand's perceived credibility.

For instance, the majority of participants in Sweden appeared accustomed to minimalist design. It wasn't very novel or unexpected to them. It was in line with what people already see in many commonplace items, particularly in the fashion and technology industries. It was described as serene, tidy, and effective, and it appeared to embody traditional Swedish ideals such as practicality and modesty. It wasn't really exciting, but no one really questioned it either. It simply felt expected, even typical.

The French group had more mixed feelings. Some participants liked minimalist branding when it was done in an elegant way, especially in luxury or fashion. They saw it as refined, sometimes even noble. But in other categories like food or cosmetics, they said it could feel too cold or too plain. One person mentioned that in food packaging, minimalist design didn't make them feel hungry: it just felt empty. So in France, the impact of minimalism depended more on the product and the emotional context.

In Canada, the feedback was also split. Some participants really liked minimalist branding, especially in wellness and skincare, where it gave a clean and healthy image. But others pointed out that not everyone sees minimalism the same way. A few explained that they grew up with more colorful or expressive designs, and that those still felt more appealing in areas like snacks or entertainment. The group generally agreed that minimalism could work well, but only if it matched the brand's message and what the product is supposed to stand for.

In the Middle Eastern group, the reactions were more cautious. While people appreciated minimalism in tech and high-end products, because it felt modern and polished, they were more

skeptical when it came to traditional or everyday goods. Some explained that in their culture, rich visual details often help show value and identity. So when a product looked too plain, especially in luxury or food, it could seem like something was missing. But even then, a few participants admitted that minimalism is starting to show up more in ads and social media, so their perception might be changing little by little.

The Thai group also had a balanced view. Most participants liked minimalist branding in areas like tech or fashion because it looked organized and not overwhelming. They felt it made products seem efficient and modern. But at the same time, they were careful about it in categories where information is important like food or health. If there wasn't enough visible detail, some said they'd hesitate to trust it, even if the design looked nice.

So overall, even though minimalism was often seen as positive, especially when it looked “clean and professional”, cultural context really mattered. In some places, people are more used to it and even expect it. In others, it might not feel complete or warm enough, especially if it doesn't connect with local habits or expectations. Brands must therefore use caution when using minimalist design in various nations. What is effective in one location might not be in another.

4.3 Summary of Findings

Theme	France	Sweden	Thailand	Canada	Middle East
Visual Clarity	▸ Clarity ▸ Elegance ▸ Cold	▸ Professional ▸ Clear ▸ Reliable	▸ Efficient ▸ Functional ▸ Modern	▸ Transparent ▸ Ethical ▸ Simple	▸ Luxury ▸ Clarity ▸ Skepticism
Sector Reactions	Food: unappealing Tech: refined	Tech: + Pharma: - Fashion: mixed	Food: needs info Tech: +	Food: cheap Skincare: clean	Food: distrust Luxury: +
Emotional Perception	Too cold, lacks desire	Emotionally flat	Functional, not emotional	Split: calm vs. forgettable	Elegant but cold
Authenticity	Elegant = authentic Needs depth	Consistency is key	Confident, clean = honest	Eco brands = trust, needs coherence	Too plain = fake, trust when consistent
Cultural Variation	Mixed, luxury positive vs. food negative	Expected, commonplace	Balanced, likes clarity	Split views, depends on sector	Modern = +, Simplicity = cautious

Table 2. Summary of Key Themes and Cultural Differences in Consumer Perceptions of Minimalist Branding and Trust

5. Discussion

The prior chapter presented the primary findings that resulted from the five focus group sessions, providing insight into how participants from diverse cultural backgrounds and age groups perceive minimalist branding and its relationship to trust. This chapter now seeks to interpret these findings more deeply by linking them to the theoretical concepts introduced in the literature review. In so doing, it explores how minimalist branding is not only perceived but also understood and evaluated by consumers across varied contexts.

This discussion will be arranged thematically, following the five key patterns that emerged from the findings: perceived visual clarity and trust signals, emotional connection and perceived coldness, the part of context and product category, perceived authenticity and credibility, and lastly, the effect of cultural and generational differences. For each theme, the analysis will consider how the focus group findings reflect, challenge, or extend existing theoretical frameworks such as signaling theory (Spence, 1973), processing fluency theory (Reber et al., 2004), and brand authenticity (Beverland, 2005; Napoli et al., 2014).

By positioning the empirical findings in conversation with previous research, this chapter intends to clarify the mechanisms through which minimalist branding may enhance or weaken trust, and under which conditions it is most effective. In doing so, it also reflects on the implication for brand strategy and international marketing.

5.1 Reconnecting Findings with Key Theoretical Concepts

The comments shared during focus groups frequently mirrored the idea of processing fluency as described by Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman (2004). Many participants, particularly in Sweden and Thailand, mentioned how minimalist branding made products feel more accessible and less mentally taxing to assess. For tech products, this simplicity was seen as reassuring rather than plain; supporting the theory that the ease of processing visual elements can positively influence emotional responses and trust. In Canada, for example, minimalist skincare packaging was described as “clean” or “safe”, which seemed to contribute to a perception of quality even without in-depth information.

The focus groups discussions also pointed to signaling theory (Spence, 1973). In several countries, participants felt that minimalist branding could signify premium quality, ethical standards, or even technological advancement. This was particularly evident in the Middle Eastern and French groups, where brands like Cartier and Apple were linked with simplicity and prestige. The message seemed to be: if a brand isn’t striving excessively visually, perhaps it has nothing to hide. But this signal only worked when the brand’s performance backed it. When minimalism lacked context or transparency, like in food or supplements, some participants felt it was empty or even suspect. This nuance reinforces the argument that visual cues must match consumer expectations to be effective trust signals (Celhay and Trinquecoste, 2015).

The theme of brand authenticity also stood out. Many participants expressed that they trust brands more when the design felt deliberate and reflected deeper values. In both France and Canada, there were discussions around brands that felt “honest” due to their simple and consistent design; especially when linked to sustainable or ethical messaging. This lines up with Beverland (2005), who suggested that authenticity stems from alignment between a brand’s communication and its actual behavior. Nevertheless, when minimalism seemed too generic or emotionless, it raised doubts. Participants emphasized that minimalist branding should feel purposeful instead of trendy, echoing Wang et al. (2023) who warned that extreme simplicity can weaken emotional engagement.

Altogether, the data from the focus groups reinforced the idea that minimalist branding can foster trust but only under specific conditions. Trust doesn’t come from visual style alone. It relies on the ease of interpretation, consistency overtime, emotional alignment, and context. Theories such as processing fluency, signaling, and authenticity were beneficial in unpacking why participants responded the way they did, and in understanding how design decisions interact with deeper psychological and cultural expectations.

5.2 Cultural Influences on Trust in Minimalist Branding

It became more and more evident during the focus groups talks that customers’ perceptions of minimalist branding and their level of trust in it are greatly influenced by their cultural background. Depending on their origins, participants’ interpretations frequently varied, even when they were responding to identical designs. This supports the notion that branding is filtered through each cultural group’s values, expectations, and aesthetic standards rather than being processed in a vacuum. For example, minimalism is ingrained in daily life in countries like Sweden and Japan. Participants in the Swedish focus group spoke of minimalism almost like a default aesthetic. For them, simplicity was familiar and expected. Minimalist packaging or branding didn’t raise suspicions: it often made the brand seem more professional, modern, and aligned with broader cultural ideals around functionality and modesty. Their reactions supported previous studies that highlight the influence of Nordic design culture on how minimalism is received (Başak, 2021). Clean visuals, neutral tones and minimal text were viewed not only as beautiful but also as signs of trustworthy brand. In contrast, participants from the Middle East approached minimalist branding more cautiously. While some acknowledged that simplicity could be elegant and premium in certain categories like watches or perfume, others were skeptical. In industries where information and status signaling are important, like food, beauty or health, stripped-down packaging often creates doubt or a sense of emptiness. Some participants even said that overly minimal labels in the food sector made them feel like the brand was hiding something. This aligns Wippel’s (2023) argument that in markets where richness and prestige are central, minimalism might seem cold or even suspicious.

Interestingly, the Thai focus group revealed a mix of both acceptance and hesitation. There was clear admiration for minimalist design in tech and fashion, which were seen as categories where

clean visuals equate to innovation and reliability. However, when it came to consumables, participants were more hesitant. They wanted more visual clues and detailed information to feel reassured. This divide between product categories echoed research by Liu and Orth (2021), which explains that holistic thinkers may require more contextual cues to build trust.

Participants from France and Canada showed similar patterns of ambivalence. In France, the association between minimalism and authenticity came up often, particularly in fashion and beauty. At the same time, some participants admitted that overly simple branding lacked warmth or soul. In Canada, several participants noted that minimalist designs reminded them of ethics and eco-consciousness, but others found them boring or hard to connect with emotionally. These findings suggest that while Western consumers might appreciate minimalism for what it represents—clarity, ethics, or quality—they also need it to be supported by a coherent narrative or brand experience.

Across all five groups, it became clear that culture doesn't just influence aesthetic preferences. It shapes how consumers decode branding cues and what they expect to find in them. Trust wasn't given automatically to minimalist designs. It depended on whether those designs made sense within the cultural context and product category. In other words, minimalist branding can increase trust but only if it feels intentional, familiar, and aligned with what people value in a brand. This reinforces the concept that branding must be culturally sensitive to be meaningful and effective (Cayla & Arnould, 2008). Brands can not assume one-size-fits-all when adopting minimalist strategies globally. A clean logo or simple package might communicate purity and reliability in Sweden but feel incomplete or cold in another region. In cross-cultural branding, context is everything.

5.3 Generational Attitudes Toward Minimalist Branding

Another clear pattern that surfaced throughout focus groups was the part or age and generation in shaping how participants understood and responded to minimalist branding. While the entire study concentrated on Millennials and Gen Z, the conversations showed that even within this age range, there were noticeable differences in visual expectations, brand engagement, and trust mechanisms. Gen Z participants often associated minimalist design with modernity, digital fluency, and ethical values. They seemed to read between the lines of a brand's visuals and were quick to question whether simplicity was a sign of clarity or just an empty aesthetic trend. Their responses mirrored study by Djafarova and Bowes (2021), who found that Gen Z inclines to engage critically with branding, pursuing authenticity behind visual clues. Several of them characterized minimalist branding as “clean” or “refined”, but their trust is not instant: it had to be gained through consistency and transparency past the surface.

Millennials, conversely, were more practical in their interpretations. They valued simplicity for its usability and calmness, especially in digital settings. Various participants spoke about feeling swamped by visual clutter online, so brands that used minimalist visuals were viewed as a kind

of mental relief. This corresponds to the work of Williams and Page (2011), who portray Millennials as goal-oriented and responsive to clear, functional brand communication. Still, they were also more nostalgic than Gen Z, demonstrating affection for brands with richer visual identities, especially in categories like food or luxury products.

Another nuance that stood out was how each generation balanced aesthetic appreciation with information needs. Gen Z often appreciated minimalist packaging but insisted on having access to detailed product information. For them, beauty and clarity had to be paired with transparency. Millennials were more forgiving if the design was simple, as long as it conveyed a sense of quality and wasn't misleading. This distinction might relate to how each generation defines trust. Gen Z appeared to define trust as something interactive earned through ongoing clarity, ethical behavior, and alignment with personal values. Millennials were more likely to see trust as stability, built over time through repeated good experiences. These perspectives reinforce what we observe in the literature: trust is a multifaceted concept that hinges on both emotional connection and logical cues (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Generally, although both cohorts displayed a willingness to minimalist branding, they didn't see it in the identical manner or for the same causes. Companies that cater to these demographics should recognize that simplicity is insufficient on its own. More important is how effectively the design fits the trust expectations of each generation, whether that means usability and reliability for Millennials or openness and ethics for Gen Z.

5.4 Situational Effectiveness: When Minimalism Builds or Undermines Trust

Another key idea arising from the focus groups is that minimalist branding doesn't always build trust the same way across all circumstances. The reaction individuals had to minimalist visuals plainly hinged on what type of product was concerned, and occasionally even on how well-known the brand already was. For instance, several participants explained that in the case of tech products, simplicity in design frequently made them feel that the brand was modern and efficient. Products like Apple or Muji were cited as examples where minimalism worked because the clean aesthetic seemed to align with the functionality and consistency of the product experience. However, this reaction didn't carry over across all sectors. In areas like food, health and children's products, participants from all five countries raised concerns. Several people mentioned that in these categories, excessive simplicity could feel like something was lacking. For food packaging in particular, minimalist designs often lacked vital information or emotional appeal. Some participants from France said they would hesitate to purchase biscuits in a package that looked too plain, because they felt it could either be "cheap" or "untrustworthy". This concern was echoed by participants from Canada and the Middle East who pointed out that, for anything you consume or apply to your body, you expect to see certifications, ingredients, or informative visuals. Without those, minimalism was viewed as vague, or even suspicious.

This aligns with what Reber et al. (2004) describe in the theory of processing fluency. Simpler visuals can in fact lead to more positive feelings if the viewer finds them easy to process. But in

high-stakes categories, participants appeared to expect more than just fluency; they also wanted reassurance and detail. In these cases, minimalism felt as if it left too many questions unanswered. The importance of product type also connects with signaling theory (Spence, 1973), which highlights that brands send signals through design. If a brand removes too many elements, it may unintentionally send the wrong message. For example, during the French focus group, participants were presented with minimalist biscuit packaging and showed hesitancy. Though the simple design might have sought to communicate purity or health, it actually made some participants doubt the product's quality and flavor. Lacking images, ingredients, or appealing colors, they stated the design appeared “empty” or even “cheap”. In this instance, the absence of visual cues failed to signal trust and instead introduced skepticism, demonstrating how minimalism can occasionally backfire based on the product type and consumer expectations.

Another intriguing nuance was that trust in minimalist branding often depended on the brand's existing reputation. In Thailand, participants said they trusted Apple not because it looked minimalist, but because their experiences matched the aesthetic—clear, reliable, and consistent. The minimalist design then reinforced what they already felt. But for newer or unknown brands, minimalist design alone would probably not be sufficient to build trust. Without previous experience or strong social proof, minimalism could even create distance or seem impersonal. Participants from Sweden and Canada both noted that when a logo or product design looked overly simple but came from a brand they didn't know, they didn't feel confident purchasing it. This shows how familiarity can act as a kind of safety net for minimalism.

The industry, the level of information required, and the brand's history all appeared to play a part in whether minimalist branding increased or diminished trust. Whereas some participants saw it as an honest, even luxurious approach in areas like fashion or tech, others found it inappropriate or even manipulative when used in categories where transparency and reassurance are essential. Minimalism alone is not necessarily trusted: it had to make sense in the situation, and more importantly it had to align with what people needed to feel safe.

5.5 Emotional Connection and the Limits of Visual Simplicity

While simplicity in branding often helps convey clarity and professionalism, this research revealed that visual minimalism can sometimes fall short in delivering emotional resonance. Several participants across the focus groups, especially in France, Canada, and Thailand, noted that although they appreciated clean and elegant designs, they sometimes felt that something was missing. Minimalist aesthetics, when stripped of personality or storytelling, may risk appearing distant or uninspiring. This insight points to a tension between cognitive ease and emotional engagement. Processing fluency theory (Reber et al., 2004) helps explain why simple visuals are easier to understand and generally preferred. Yet trust and attachment aren't only built on ease; they often rely on emotional signals that evoke a sense of warmth, identity, or even nostalgia. Participants in Sweden and the Middle East mentioned feeling more drawn to packaging that had character, even if it was slightly more complex. This suggests that emotional connection might

require more than just simplicity but it may call for subtle cues that reflect the brand's values and personality.

Some also mentioned that they couldn't "feel anything" from brands that used minimalist branding without further context or backstory. This aligns with existing research showing that consumers often expect brands to embody emotional authenticity (Beverland, 2005). A simple design alone might not be enough to spark feelings of trust or affection unless it's supported by a consistent message, meaningful details, or cultural relevance. The emotional gap becomes even more apparent in categories like food or cosmetics, where sensory and sentimental factors often influence purchase decisions. This emotional flatness is especially noticeable when too many brands rely on similar minimalist templates. Without distinct features or warmth, they begin to look and feel interchangeable. In that sense, visual simplicity can unintentionally reduce brand memorability or connection. While minimalism might still work in sectors like tech or wellness, it seems less effective when consumers are seeking richness or emotional stimulation.

In short, although minimalism can be a powerful tool for signaling modernity and trust, it must leave room for emotional depth. Overly neutral or sterile design decisions may make communication easier, but they come at the expense of a chance to build genuine human connections. Minimalism must represent the core of the company, not simply its outside, in order to be more than just a fad.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Revisiting the Purpose and Research Question

This study set out to explore how minimalist branding influences consumer trust across different cultures and ages. Specifically, we asked the question: "Does less design equal more trust?" and later investigated using a qualitative method for both Gen Z and Millennial consumers in different regions (Thailand, France, the Middle East, Canada and Sweden). This research aimed to uncover how a minimalist design in branding such as cleaner logos, simpler packaging or product design, can affect the perceived trustworthiness of a brand, and how this relationship can vary across different cultures and generations. Chapter 4's findings and Chapter 5's interpretation and analysis helped this study answer the questions it asked, which demonstrated that in general, a minimalist approach to branding can indeed enhance consumer trust, but this effect is mediated by several factors including cultural norms, generational values and brand execution. Furthermore, this study, in a qualitative multi-cultural context, not only demonstrates that the "less is more" principle in design can indeed foster consumer trust and in turn enhance brand equity, but also clearly explains when and why this effect happens and what factors may influence it.

6.2 Main Findings and Contributions

As established by this study's empirical findings, clarity and authenticity are the key trust mechanisms in minimalist branding. Across all five regions in which focus groups were conducted, participants agreed that simple and uncluttered designs made brand information easier to understand, which in turn strengthened the perception of brand sincerity. An example to that is how participants noted that minimalist packaging or logo felt more “transparent” and made the brand seem like it has “nothing to hide,” all of which are components necessary to establish trust. During the discussion, it became more and more apparent that minimalist branding generally enhances perceived trust by signaling clarity and authenticity, which supports the idea that consumers link brand authenticity with trust (Hernández-Fernández, & Lewis, 2019; Napoli et al., 2014; Beverland, 2005).

However, the influence of minimalism on trust is neither uniform nor unconditional. Across regions and generations, there were visible variations in consumer trust perceptions:

- **Cultural Variations:** Perceptions of minimalist branding varied across different cultures and this was visible during focus groups discussions. Swedish participants viewed minimalism as the comfortable norm and linked it to professionalism and cultural values. Middle Eastern participants appreciated the luxury and elegance associated with simplicity but showed distrust towards simplicity when design lacked information. Similar patterns were seen across Thai participants who appreciated the minimalist design in the fashion and tech industries but were skeptical about simplicity in consumables where the lack of information reflected lack of trust. French and Canadian participants focused on the sustainability, ethics and environmental-awareness that they linked with trust towards minimalist design; however, feelings of “coldness” or lack of emotion were visible in their perception of minimalism.
- **Generational Variations:** across the different focus groups, we noticed patterns of how Gen Z was more accepting of minimalism as they associated it with modernity and ethics; however they were also demanding more information and transparency from simple designs. Millennials on the other hand valued the clarity and simplicity but at the same time showed feelings of nostalgia associated with the need for more visual richness in premium and luxury products.

Aside from these variations in how consumer perceptions can vary across cultural and generational differences, the narrative where minimalist branding can both increase and risk losing trust has been explored. Many participants during the focus groups felt that simple designs made the brand seem “less likely to fail since less can go wrong.” This made them trust the brand more at first. However, many participants emphasized the importance of reliability, quality and consistency which they linked to their perceived brand trust. In this case, high-expectations associated with minimalist design could break the trust if the brand does not live up to the

expectations it set. Therefore, while minimalism can build trust through clarity and authenticity, it can also raise consumer expectations which raises the stakes for brand performance.

This study contributes to the branding theory and practice in several ways. Initially, it brings empirical evidence which links minimalist design elements to consumer trust in a multicultural setting, which reveals how consumers link simplicity with brand authenticity and reliability. Therefore, this study bridges gaps between brand trust and design psychology. By that, it provides valuable insights into how simpler visual designs increase perceived brand authenticity and trust and how cross-cultural and generational comparisons moderate the link between minimalism and trust. This suggests that minimalism is not perceived the same way around the world; however, visual design is a pivotal factor contributing to trust formation. Furthermore, this study concludes that a balance between minimalism and brand differentiation, where simplicity does not harm trust by making the brand seem emotionless so consumers cannot establish a strong bond to the brand yet at the same time is simple just enough in a way that provides sufficient clarity, reduces cognitive overload, signals quality and remains authentic.

These findings not only answer the research questions asked but also enrich the theoretical models of building brand trust and authenticity by incorporating minimalist aesthetics and visuals.

In summary, this study's findings reinforce and extend theoretical frameworks in the following ways:

- **Processing Fluency and Trust:** It provides real-world, multi-cultural evidence that simple, clear visuals found in minimalist design can yield positive feelings and initial trust, as suggested by Reber et al., (2004). This study also clearly explains the limits to this effect; it suggests that fluency alone does not convey trust if there is a lack of important information.
- **Brand Authenticity:** This study supports the notion that simplicity enhances brand authenticity (Wang et al., 2023), contributing to the literature by adding not only qualitative depth, but also a discussion focusing on a diversity of branding elements (brand logo, packaging aesthetic, promotional poster and product design) were explored during the focus group sessions.
- **Signaling Theory:** established that minimalist visuals may serve as strategic signals of authenticity, simplicity and ethical alignment, resonating with signaling theory's proposition that external cues shape perception of intrinsic qualities (Spence, 1973).
- **Cross-Cultural Branding:** It offers insights that while minimalism is becoming a global trend, which was established by how participants were fully aware of the new trend, successful trust-building using simple design still requires localization, which means that the brand needs to align with the cultural expectations to establish consumer trust.

6.3 Implications for Brand Managers

The findings of this study provide practical implications for brand managers, marketers and designers. A minimalist design can be an effective tool to signal trustworthiness when employed in the right way and this includes leveraging simplicity to signal transparency, balancing minimalism with brand identity, tailoring designs based on local values and fulfilling promises.

Leveraging simplicity across markets can signal transparency when uncluttered designs make the brand messages easier to process, follow and believe. Brand managers are able to incorporate this by simplifying packaging and user platforms. As discussed during the focus groups, some participants pointed out that official websites that are simple and “easy to follow” are more appreciated than cluttered complicated designs. Furthermore, packaging lacking too much in information and guidance can invoke feelings of distrust in the brand. This shows that brands should ensure that their minimal designs are still consistent with their messages and values as well as customers’ expectations of transparency. With that, visual simplicity could enhance perceived honesty and in turn, brand trust.

Creating a balance between minimalism and brand identity is also essential to make sure that brands maintain their minimalist identity while also ensuring that the brand is not perceived as emotionless and lacking in distinctive brand elements. As suggested by our focus groups discussions, consumers favor and feel more connected to brands that ensure their minimal visuals still carry cultural or emotional significance which can help the consumers feel more connected to the brand. Therefore, managers, designers and marketers should tailor their minimalist designs to match their target demographic. With that, they can appeal to their consumers more and establish trust. This is achieved more efficiently when the brand localizes their minimalist branding strategies. For instance, in markets where there is a need for heritage, richness and cultural embodiment, managers could pair minimalist designs with storytelling marketing campaigns that promotes cultural sensitivity and adopts the minimalist aesthetics the brand stands for. In summary, managers can use minimalist branding to build consumer trust by emphasizing the clarity and authenticity associated with visual design while also maintaining a strong brand identity based on cultural relevance and uniqueness.

6.4 Suggestions for Future Research

Building on the insights provided by this study, which incorporated a qualitative research design, future quantitative validation would complement and strengthen the findings and interpretations by adding statistical support. A large-scale survey or an experimental design could statistically test this study’s insights and in turn, quantify and measure the outcomes. Furthermore, future research should explore in more detail cultural nuances, examining how local design traditions interact with minimalism. There are also other cultural regions to explore in this area such Latin America, which was not explored in this study.

The design elements can also be explored further in detail such as the colour, typography, and imagery and how each of these elements contributes to brand trust. Researchers can also explore the effects of rebranding to match the minimalist branding trend which focuses on brands which changed their design to match minimalism and what that can do to their perceived brand trust; whether it increases consumer trust or breaks it. The exploration of how consumer trust shifts before and after minimalist design could be explored in future studies. Moreover, the digital aspects of branding and user experience can be further explored in terms of minimalist website layouts, mobile applications, and online marketing campaigns and how simplicity in such scenarios increases or undermines consumer trust. Each potential future study should focus on maintaining validity, trustworthiness and cultural sensitivity as our study emphasises. By addressing these suggestions, future research can create a better understanding of how minimalist design and trust interact worldwide, guiding in turn both scholars and practitioners in the art of branding.

Appendix 1 - Focus Group Main Questions

Part A: Warm-up and General Attitudes Toward Branding

1. Can you name a brand you really trust right now? Why do you trust this brand?

Theory Link: Consumer trust and Brand Authenticity (Alan & Karabadayi, 2012; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020).

2. Have you noticed that some brands are moving towards minimalist designs? What do you think about this? How would you describe it?

Theory Link: Minimalism and Minimalist Branding (Kumar, 2024; Başak, 2021; Wilson & Bellezza, 2021).

Part B: Reactions to Visual Stimuli

3. Which of these two designs do you like more and why?

Theory Link: Processing fluency (Reber et al., 2004).

4. Does one of these designs seem more trustworthy than the other? If so, what signals this trust?

Theory Link: Consumer Trust, Brand Authenticity and Signaling Theory (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Signaling Theory, Spence 1973; Beverland, 2005).

5. Do you think the design of a product can tell you something about the brand?

Theory Link: Signaling theory, Consumer Interpretation (Cayla & Arnould, 2008).

6. Have you ever felt like the packaging was too minimal, as if the company was hiding something? Or did it feel too generic or lacking identity?

Theory Link: Emotional Resonance (Berlyne, 1970; Reber et al., 2004).

7. Do you feel like one design looks more relatable than the other? In which aspects?

Theory Link: Cultural Preferences (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2011; Liu & Orth, 2021).

Part C: Summary of Reflections

8. What do you think are the disadvantages of Minimalism? When does minimalism go too far?

Theory Link: Processing Fluency, and Signaling Theory (Reber et al., 2004; Spence, 1973).

9. Can design deeply influence your trust in a brand? Why or why not?

Theory Link: Brand Authenticity and Signaling Theory (Spence 1973; Beverland, 2005).

References

- Aaker, D.A., 1996. *Building strong brands*. New York: Free Press.
<https://archive.org/details/buildingstrongbr00aake>
- Alan, A. K., & Karabadayi, E. T. (2012). Brand trust and brand affect: Their strategic importance on brand loyalty. *Journal of Global Strategic Management*, 6(1), 80–88.
<https://doi.org/10.20460/JGSM.2012615788>
- Başak, R. (2021). *Janteloven: Scandinavian social conformity, IKEA, minimalism, and the socialism of design*. *Artuklu Sanat ve Beşeri Bilimler Dergisi*, 6, pp.159–185.
<https://doi.org/10.46372/arts.909874>
- Batat, W., & de Kerviler, G. (2020). How can the art of living (art de vivre) make the French luxury industry unique and competitive? *Marché et organisations*, (37), 15–41.
<https://doi.org/10.3917/maorg.037.0015>
- Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219–234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475>
- Berlyne, D. E. (1970). Novelty, complexity, and hedonic value. *Perception & Psychophysics*, 8(5-A), 279–286. <https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03212593>
- Beverland, M.B., 2005. Crafting brand authenticity: The case of luxury wines. *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(5), pp.1003–1029.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V., 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp.77–101.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235356393_Using_thematic_analysis_in_psychology
- Bohatyrets, V. (2018). Embracing multiculturalism of Canada: The roots & the present-day realities. *Modern Historical and Political Issues*, (35–36), 32–41.
<https://doi.org/10.31861/mhpi2017.35-36.32-41>
- Bossel, V., Geyskens, K., & Goukens, C. (2019). Facing a trend of brand logo simplicity: The impact of brand logo design on consumption. *Food Quality and Preference*, 71, 129–135.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodqual.2018.06.005>
- Cayla, J., and Arnould, E. J. (2008). A cultural approach to branding in the global marketplace. *Journal of International Marketing*, 16(4), 86–112. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jimk.16.4.86>
- Celhay, F., & Trinqucoste, J. F. (2015). Package Graphic Design: Investigating the Variables that Moderate Consumer Response to Atypical Designs. *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 32(6), 1014–1032.
- Chaudhuri, A. and Holbrook, M.B., 2001. The chain of effects from brand trust and brand affect to brand performance: The role of brand loyalty. *Journal of Marketing*, 65(2), pp.81–93.
https://business.columbia.edu/sites/default/files-efs/pubfiles/593/The_Chain_of_Effects.pdf

Chen, Q. (2023). *When less is more: Understanding consumers' responses to minimalist appeals*. *Psychology and Marketing*, 40(7), pp.1324–1339.

Chen, Q. (2024). *Behavioral economics: Understanding the psychological factors driving consumer decisions*. *International Journal of Global Economics and Management*, 4(1).
<https://doi.org/10.62051/ijgem.v4n1.16>

Cinelli, M. D., & LeBoeuf, R. A. (2020). Keeping it real: How perceived brand authenticity affects product perceptions. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 30(1), 177–195.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1123>

Davies, G., & Chun, R. (2002). Gaps between the internal and external perceptions of the corporate brand. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 5(2/3), 144–158.

De Chernatony, L. and McDonald, M., 2003. *Creating powerful brands*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Delgado-Ballester, E., Munuera-Alemán, J. L., & Yagüe, M. J. (2003). Development and validation of a trust scale. *International Journal of Market Research*, 45(1), 35–56.

Delgado-Ballester, E. and Munuera-Alemán, J.L., 2005. Does brand trust matter to brand equity? *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 14(3), pp.187–196.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235294705_Does_brand_trust_matter_to_brand_equity

De Mooij, M., & Hofstede, G. (2011). Cross-cultural consumer behavior: A review of research findings. *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, 23(3-4), 181–192.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08961530.2011.578057>

Ding, Y., Meng, X., & Sun, C. (2024). Simplicity matters: Unraveling the impact of minimalist packaging on green trust in daily consumer goods. *Sustainability*, 16(12), 4932.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su16124932>

Djafarova, E. and Bowes, T., 2021. 'Instagram made me buy it': Generation Z impulse purchases in the fashion industry. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 59, p.102345.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0969698920313539>

Favier, M., Celhay, F., & Pantin-Sohier, G. (2019). Is less more or a bore? Package design simplicity and brand perception: An application to Champagne. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 46, 11–20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2018.09.013>

Firestone, W. A. (1993). Alternative arguments for generalizing from data as applied to qualitative research. *Educational Researcher*, 22(4), 16–23.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X022004016>

Fraculj, M., Lekaj, L., & Kondic, L. (2023). *Research on attitudes toward minimalistic design in marketing communications. International Journal of Multidisciplinarity in Business and Science*, 9(14), 32–40. <https://doi.org/10.56321/ijmbs.9.14.5>

Gibbs, A. (1997). *Focus groups. Social Research Update*, 19. <https://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU19.html>

Grein, M. (2016). *Does minimalistic product design equate to maximum liking? – The perception of visual design complexity* (Doctoral dissertation, RWTH Aachen University). Retrieved from <https://publications.rwth-aachen.de/record/677977>

Groves, P. M., & Thompson, R. F. (1970). Habituation: A dual-process theory. *Psychological Review*, 77(5), 419–450. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0029810>

Guerrero, Carolina L., "The Impact of Minimalist Design on Consumer's Brand Expectations" (2024). *Honors College Theses*. 941. <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/honors-theses/941>

Gumber, S. (2023). Minimalism in design: A trend of simplicity in complexity. *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 4(2), 357–365. <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2.2023.539>

Hammarberg, K., Kirkman, M., & de Lacey, S. (2016). Qualitative research methods: when to use them and how to judge them. *Human Reproduction*, 31(3), 498–501. <https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/dev334>

Henderson, P. W., Giese, J. L., & Cote, J. A. (2004). Impression Management Using Typeface Design. *Journal of Marketing*, 68(4), 60–72

Hernández-Fernández, A., & Lewis, M. C. (2019). Brand authenticity leads to perceived value and brand trust. *European Journal of Management and Business Economics*, 28(1), 2–19. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJMBE-10-2017-0027>

Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill.

Holt, D. B. (2002). Why do brands cause trouble? A dialectical theory of consumer culture and branding. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29(1), 70–90. <https://doi.org/10.1086/339922>

Huang, J., Sun, Y., & Wan, X. (2020). Gender differences in the associations between gray matter volume and the centrality of visual product aesthetics. *Neuroscience*, 431, 64–72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroscience.2020.01.038>

Iftahy, A., Mellens, M., Walia, N., & Youssef, A. (2019). A closer look at the fashion industry in Gulf Cooperation Council markets. McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/a-closer-look-at-the-fashion-industry-in-gulf-cooperation-council-markets>

- Janiszewski, C., & Meyvis, T. (2001). Effects of brand logo complexity, repetition, and spacing on processing fluency and judgment. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 28(1), 18–32. <https://doi.org/10.1086/321945>
- Jongmans, E., Jeannot, F., Liang, L., & Dampérat, M. (2022). Impact of website visual design on user experience and website evaluation: The sequential mediating roles of usability and pleasure. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 38(17–18), 2078–2113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2022.2085315>
- Keller, K. L. (2009). Building strong brands in a modern marketing communications environment. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 15(2–3), 139–155. <https://markenmanagement.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/buildingbrands.pdf>
- Keller, K.L. (2013). *Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity*. 4th ed. Harlow: Pearson Education
- Kitzinger, J. (1995). Qualitative research: introducing focus groups. *BMJ*, 311(7000), 299–302. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.311.7000.299>
- Korstjens, I., & Moser, A. (2018). Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 4: Trustworthiness and publishing. *European Journal of General Practice*, 24(1), 120–124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2017.1375092>
- Kotler, P., & Keller, K. L. (2016). *Marketing Management* (15th ed.). Pearson. https://students.aiu.edu/submissions/profiles/resources/onlineBook/S3D7W4_Marketing_Management.pdf
- Krueger, R. A. (1998). *Moderating focus groups*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Kumar, S. (2024). *Minimalism: A concept of Japanese happiness*. ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379642512_Minimalism_A_Concept_of_Japanese_Happiness
- Labrecque, L. I., & Milne, G. R. (2013). To Be or Not to Be Different: Exploration of Norms and Benefits of Color Differentiation in the Marketplace. *Marketing Letters*, 24(2), 165–176. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/257619416_To_be_or_not_to_be_different_Exploration_of_norms_and_benefits_of_color_differentiation_in_the_marketplace
- Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G., 1985. *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications. <https://lubcat.lub.lu.se/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=263714>
- Liu, L., & Orth, U. (2021). Cultural differences in design-based product evaluation: The role of holistic and analytic thinking. *Sustainability*, 13(5), 2775. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13052775>
- Liu, Z. J., Yildirim, P., & Zhang, Z. J. (2023). Less is more: A theory of minimalist luxury. *Journal of Economics & Management Strategy*, 33(1), 78–110. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jems.12558>

- Mandagi, D. W., & Aseng, A. C. (2021). Millennials and Gen Z's perception of social media marketing effectiveness on the festival's branding: The mediating effect of brand gestalt. *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review*, 21(3), 102–121. <https://doi.org/10.59588/2350-8329.1389>
- Margariti, K. (2021). “White” space and organic claims on food packaging: Communicating sustainability values and affecting young adults’ attitudes and purchase intentions. *Sustainability*, 13(19), 11101. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su131911101>
- McKenna, C. K. (2002). Listening to stakeholders: Interviews, focus groups, surveys, and direct observation. In G. S. Burke & S. M. Friedman (Eds.), *Critical organization and management elements* (pp. 173–184). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-780590-0.50050-X>
- McKinsey & Company. (2021). A closer look at the fashion industry in Gulf Cooperation Council markets. Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/a-closer-look-at-the-fashion-industry-in-gulf-cooperation-council-markets>
- Mehrizi Sani, S., & Keyvan Shokooh, Y. (2016). *Minimalism in designing user interface of commercial websites based on Gestalt visual perception laws: Case study of three top brands in technology scope*. 2016 Second International Conference on Web Research (ICWR), 115–124. IEEE. <https://doi.org/10.1109/ICWR.2016.7498455>
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*. Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Morgan, D. L. (1996). Focus groups. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 22, 129–152. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.22.1.129>
- Morgan, D.L., 1997. *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. <https://www.kth.se/social/upload/6566/Morgan.pdf>
- Morgan, D. L., & Krueger, R. A. (1993). When to use focus groups and why. In D. L. Morgan (Ed.), *Successful focus groups: Advancing the state of the art* (pp. 3–19). Sage Publications.
- Morgan, R. M., & Hunt, S. D. (1994). The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 58(3), 20–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299405800302>
- Moorman, C., Deshpandé, R., & Zaltman, G. (1993). Factors affecting trust in market research relationships. *Journal of Marketing*, 57(1), 81–101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299305700106>
- Mustofa. (2023). *Epistemological paradigms in positivism, interpretivism, and action research in educational research: A literature review*. *Journal of Office Administration: Education and Practice*, 3(3), 214–224. <https://ejournal.unesa.ac.id/index.php/joa>

- Napoli, J., Dickinson, S.J., Beverland, M.B. and Farrelly, F., 2014. Measuring consumer-based brand authenticity. *Journal of Business Research*, 67(6), pp.1090–1098. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0148296313002567>
- Noble, H., & Smith, J. (2015). Issues of validity and reliability in qualitative research. *Evidence-Based Nursing*, 18(2), 34–35. [https://doi.org/10.1136/eb-2015-102054:contentReference\[oaicite:0\]{index=0}](https://doi.org/10.1136/eb-2015-102054:contentReference[oaicite:0]{index=0})
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42(5), 533–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
- Palmer, J. W. (2002). Web Site Usability, Design, and Performance Metrics. *Information Systems Research*, 13(2), 151–167. <https://doi.org/10.1287/isre.13.2.151.88>
- Pocheptsova, A., Labroo, A. A., & Dhar, R. (2010). Making products feel special: When metacognitive difficulty enhances evaluation. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 47(6), 1059–1069. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.47.6.1059>
- Ponterotto, J. G. (2006). Brief note on the origins, evolution, and meaning of the qualitative research concept "thick description." *The Qualitative Report*, 11(3), 538–549. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2006.1666>
- Reber, R., Schwarz, N. and Winkielman, P. (2004). *Processing fluency and aesthetic pleasure: Is beauty in the perceiver's processing experience?* *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 8(4), pp.364–382. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0804_3
- Rousi, R. (2023). The Scandinavian style: Nordic values in HCI. arXiv. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2304.06820>
- Saleem, A., Kausar, H., & Deeba, F. (2021). *Social constructivism: A new paradigm in teaching and learning environment*. *Perennial Journal of History*, 2(2), 403–421. <https://doi.org/10.52700/pjh.v2i2.86>
- Schwarz, N., Jalbert, M., Noah, T., & Zhang, L. (2021). Metacognitive experiences as information: Processing fluency in consumer judgment and decision making. *Consumer Psychology Review*, 4(1), 4–25. <https://doi.org/10.1002/arcp.1067>
- Sellers, K. (2023). *Public health workforce: Where is the qualitative research?* JPHMP Direct. <https://jphmpdirect.com/public-health-workforce-where-is-the-qualitative-research/>
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22(2), 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201>
- Shin, S.K.S., Amenuvor, F.E., Basilisco, R. and Owusu-Antwi, K. (2019). *Brand trust and brand loyalty: A moderation and mediation perspective*. *British Journal of Applied Science & Technology*, 38(4), pp.1–17. <https://doi.org/10.9734/CJAST/2019/v38i430376>

- Sim, J., & Waterfield, J. (2019). Focus group methodology: Some ethical challenges. *Quality & Quantity*, 53(6), 3003–3022. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-019-00914-5>
- Sim, J., & Snell, J. (1996). Focus groups in physiotherapy evaluation and research. *Physiotherapy*, 82(3), 189–198. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0031-9406\(05\)66923-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0031-9406(05)66923-4)
- Sinclair, J., & Wilken, R. (2009). *Strategic regionalization in marketing campaigns: Beyond the standardization/glocalization debate*. Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies, 23(2), 147–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310802710496>
- Smith, M. W. (1995). Ethics in focus groups: A few concerns. *Qualitative Health Research*, 5(4), 478–486. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104973239500500408>
- Spence, M. (1973). *Job market signaling*. The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 87(3), pp.355–374. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1882010>
- Stahl, N. A., & King, J. R. (2020). *Understanding and Using Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research*. Journal of Developmental Education, 44(1). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45381095>
- Stang, D. J. (1975). Effects of "mere exposure" on learning and affect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 31(1), 7–12. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0076165>
- Tobin, G. A., & Begley, C. M. (2004). Methodological rigour within a qualitative framework. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 48(4), 388–396. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2004.03207.x>
- Underwood, R. L., & Ozanne, J. L. (1998). Is Your Package an Effective Communicator? A Normative Framework for Increasing the Communicative Competence of Packaging. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 4(4), 207–220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/135272698345762>
- Van der Lans, R., Pieters, R., & Wedel, M. (2009). Competitive Brand Salience. *Marketing Science*, 28(5), 882–896. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mksc.1070.0327>
- Vaughn, L. A., Dubovi, A. S.-Y., & Niño, N. P. (2013). Processing fluency affects behavior more strongly among people higher in trait mindfulness. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 47(6), 803–810. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2013.08.002>
- Walsh, G., Winterich, K. P., & Mittal, V. (2009). Do Logo Redesigns Help or Hurt Your Brand? The Role of Brand Commitment. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 19(2), 76–84.
- Wang, Y., Wang, Z., Zhang, D., & Zhang, R. (2019). Discovering cultural differences in online consumer product reviews. *Journal of Electronic Commerce Research*, 20(3), 169–183.
- Wang, Y., Jiang, J., Gong, X., & Wang, J. (2023). Simple = authentic: The effect of visually simple package design on perceived brand authenticity and brand choice. *Journal of Business Research*, 166, 114078. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.114078>

- Wibowo, M. C., & Zainudin, A. (2024). The influence of minimalist design elements on visual preferences of Generation Z: A quantitative study. *International Journal of Graphic Design*, 2(2), 236–247. <https://doi.org/10.51903/ijgd.v2i2.2133>
- Williams, K. C., & Page, R. A. (2011). Marketing to the generations. *Journal of Behavioral Studies in Business*, 3, 1–17. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242760064>
- Wilson, C. (2014). *Focus groups*. In *Interview Techniques for UX Practitioners: A User-Centered Design Method* (pp. 83–111). Morgan Kaufmann. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-410393-1.00005-3>
- Wilson, A. V., & Bellezza, S. (2021). Consumer Minimalism. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 48(5), 796–817. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucab045>
- Wippel, S. (2023). Branding the Middle East: *A review of regional manifestations of a global phenomenon*. *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 13(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2023.2178172>
- World Bank. (n.d.). Thailand: Development news, research, data. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/thailand>
- Yu, M., Zainal Abidin, S., Shaari, N., He, C., Shi, L., & Liu, Q. (2024). *Effects of brand visual identity on consumer attitude: A systematic literature review*. *Environment and Social Psychology*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380673140_Effects_of_Brand_Visual_Identity_on_Consumer_Attitude_A_Systematic_Literature_Review