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The Impact of Minimalist Design on Consumer's Brand Expectations

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in Business

By

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Under the mentorship of Dr. Lindsay Levine

ABSTRACT

In order for companies to be more effective in reaching their target market amongst growing competition, they must successfully construct their product's packaging to appeal to the consumer's eye and demonstrate their desired qualities. With packaging design aesthetics falling into the two categories of minimalism or maximalism, a relationship may be established between the design aesthetic and the perceptions a certain design imposes. This thesis will conduct an experimental design with fabricated product mockups exemplifying minimalism and maximalism designs in personal care and prepackaged food products. These designs will be evaluated by respondents for different perceptions based on the first impression of the products. The goal of every company is to make a profit and one of the most crucial steps to achieving this goal is to send the right message to consumers. Investigating the possibility of a relationship between minimalist and maximalist packaging designs and its influence on consumer perceptions within the personal care and prepackaged food industries could provide beneficial research to companies about how to effectively design their products' packaging.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW.....	4
HYPOTHESES.....	7
METHODS.....	9
RESULTS.....	14
DISCUSSION.....	21
WORKS CITED.....	24

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Minimalism and Maximalism in Design

Minimalism and maximalism are two vastly different approaches to design and art aesthetics. For example, minimalism emphasizes white space and sans serif fonts to capitalize on the idea of ‘less being more’ and only demonstrating what is needed. Minimalism is often used to communicate cleanliness, simplicity, and purity. Maximalism is essentially the complete opposite of minimalism in that it is characterized by bold colors, layering, patterns, an excess of elements, and serif or decorative fonts that emphasize the product and its features. Maximalism is an approach that has been used for a long time whereas minimalism seems to be a trend that fades in and out (Andrews, 2020). Prior research has been done to show the ways in which minimalism and maximalism can impact consumer perceptions of a product being natural or environmentally friendly, product quality, and brand playfulness.

Minimalism and Maximalism in Consumer Response

Product Naturalness

In a study conducted by Outlaw Consulting (Gunelius, 2008), minimalist packaging and advertising are favored when it comes to “green” brands. This does not guarantee that the company is participating in eco-friendly practices, but the mere implication of being “green” through clean designs catches the audience’s attention and gives the “green” perception. Similarly, research in a study about sustainable packaging explained that a product that contains a minimalist packaging design often suggests that it is composed of organic materials (Jerzyk,

2016). A study conducted by Smith and Brower discovered that 26% of participants perceived a brand to have a “green” personality if they used simple packaging designs, the color green, or icons of nature (Garaszczuk, 2015). Based on these findings, it can be concluded that consumers do not necessarily know or look into a brand to determine if it is “green” or eco-friendly but rely on the physical appearance of the brand’s products to determine their perception. Package design simplicity also has been found to enhance perceptions that a product has fewer ingredients and is therefore purer, and this has been studied using both personal care product (lotion) and packaged food (trail mix) stimuli (Ton, et. al.; 2024).

Conversely, in a study about premium cues based on packaging design, researchers found that respondents reacted negatively to the products that had a more complex design and complained of a sense of “artificiality” of the design. Since the design was more complex, it was seen as more commercial, insincere, and not authentic (Mugge, 2014). In the study by Ton (et. al.; 2024) using both personal care and packaged food stimuli, it was also found that complex package design increased perceptions that the product contained artificial ingredients in both product categories.

Product Quality

Research done by Ruth Mugge (2014) found that consumers generally perceive products that use a minimalist approach in their packaging design to be purer and lack commerciality. Their study focused on discovering the “premium cues” that should be used when designing the packaging for a luxurious or premium product and the data supported the use of minimalistic design strategies to achieve these perceptions. The research explains that consumers will recognize the product as high-quality and exclusive when designers use the premium cues as

previously mentioned, and significantly stresses the importance of a minimalist aesthetic to achieve these perceptions (Mugge, 2014). Ton (et. al.; 2024) theorizes that the increased perception of product purity caused by minimalist design carry over to also impact willingness to pay, which is an indicator of perceived product quality.

It has also been discovered (Mugge, 2014) that packaging with an “over the top” design may give the consumer the impression that the product quality is only mediocre and is masking the low quality with the extensive designs. In their study with different designs of chocolate bars and the perceptions of premium products, they found that the chocolate packaging that had more illustrations and coloring that resulted in a less cohesive design that consumers perceived to be low quality (Mugge, 2014).

Brand Playfulness or Seriousness

In a study focusing on package design simplicity and brand perception, three bottles of champagne demonstrating three different levels of complexity/simplicity in their design were displayed to respondents. The results found that the brand with a more simplified or minimalist design was perceived to be associated with “reliability, authenticity, success, and sobriety.” From this study, it can be inferred that a more minimalist approach tends to give the perception of being more serious or straight-forward (Favier, Celhay, & Pantin, 2019).

In the same study, three bottles of champagne demonstrating three different levels of complexity/simplicity, the results found that the brand with a more complex or maximalist design was perceived to be associated with “joy, imagination, and charm.” From this study, it can be inferred that a more maximalist approach tends to give the perception of being more fun or creative (Favier, Celhay, & Pantin, 2019).

HYPOTHESES

While this prior research shows that minimalist and maximalist design decisions may alter consumer perceptions, little is known about how these design decisions may interact with product category. For example, personal care products and packaged food products are two entirely different industries calling for their own set of design principles that are better tailored to their industry and what perceptions companies want to give off to their consumers.

In the food industry, maximalism may be seen as more favorable because of its greater use of information and vibrant feel that resonates with the excitement that consumers generally have toward food products. Food as a product category is often associated with fun and playfulness (de la Ville, et. al., 2010) therefore maximalist design might be more impactful for the food category. In contrast, a minimalist aesthetic in the food industry may prove to be less successful given the clean and simple feel that it gives (Andrews, 2020). As noted by Andrews (2020), maximalism “may be more suitable for branding in the food industry given that the nature of maximalism communicates more of the energetic and lively qualities of food.”

In terms of the personal care industry, it is known that minimalist designs are very relevant as trends drive the market, and makeup products are only one of the many industries that are implementing this minimal design. A minimalist approach in makeup is thought to give the perception of a timeless simple, and natural look- all of which are important qualities consumers look for in the personal care industry (Rizkya, 2020). It has also been suggested that because minimalism influences assumptions about purity, it also implies health goals (Ton, et. al., 2024) and therefore minimalism may be better aligned with quality perceptions of personal care products, as opposed to food products.

Therefore, we hypothesize the following replications of prior research:

H1: A minimalist approach to packaging design will (A) increase perceptions of product naturalness and (B) product quality;

H2: A maximalist approach to packaging design will increase perceptions of brand playfulness.

And, we further hypothesize that:

H3: A maximalist approach to packaging design will have a greater impact upon perceptions of brand playfulness within the food category;

H4: A minimalist approach to packaging design will have a greater impact upon perceptions of (A) product naturalness and (B) product quality within the personal care product category.

METHODS

The survey began with a formal consent page to ensure participant agreement. If the participant agreed to continue with the survey, they were first presented with a scenario and a maximalist and minimalist version of either a self-care product or a packaged food product. Participants were shown the two-product packaging options side by side and were told the following: “Imagine that a brand is testing out how consumers respond to the two different product packaging designs that you see below. In this survey you will be shown each of the two packaging designs and give your opinions on them. Finally, you will be asked some basic demographic questions.” In each instance, the participant was then asked to view each product package design (minimalist / maximalist) separately, shown in random order of appearance, and respond to a variety of questions about their perceptions of the product and brand. Participants were furthermore randomly assigned to either view and respond to the packaging design variations of either a personal care product (Condition 1A: toothpaste $n = 73$, Condition 1B: deodorant $n = 76$) or a food product (Condition 2A: milk $n = 86$, Condition 2B: protein bars $n = 76$), accounting for four possible permutations of stimuli conditions that any one participant might encounter (see Figures 1 and 2). The data from the four permutations was then collapsed into two main categories for study (Category 1: personal care products, Category 2: food products), for a total of 149 participants viewing a minimalist and a maximalist personal care product, and 162 viewing a minimalist and a maximalist food product.

Upon presentation of each packaging design, participants were asked to complete several 3-item likert-style inventories, adapted from previous research and described in the upcoming ‘Scale Descriptions’ section. Inventories included questions about whether the packaging design led them to assume that the product’s ingredients are natural (Perceived Product Naturalness), of

high quality (Perceived Product Quality), whether the brand is playful (Brand Playfulness), and whether they like the packaging design (Design Liking).



Figure 1. Personal Care Stimuli, Minimalist (L) and Maximalist (R)



Figure 2. Food Stimuli, Minimalist (L) and Maximalist (R)

Finally, the survey ended with a brief demographic section.

Participants & Data Collection

A total of 442 student participants completed the survey, with 131 removed through the use of a two-tiered attention check, leaving 311 participants. The mean age of participants was 21 years, with 46.3% (n = 144) male participants, 52.7% (n = 164) female participants, and the remainder declined to report. Participant demographics included 74.9% reporting themselves as Caucasian, 12.9% Black / African American, 3.5% Hispanic, 2.9% Asian, 4.2% mixed or bi-racial, and the remainder declined to report. The participants of the survey were students in the Georgia Southern University Parker College of Business. Students were recruited for an extra credit opportunity to complete the survey by faculty members that opted to participate, and all responses remain anonymous.

Scale Descriptions & Origins

The following scales were adapted for each of the hypothesis's elements, all containing 7-point likert items:

To address perceptions of product “naturalness,” a three-item scale was adapted from Govaerts and Olsen (2022), to include whether the participant felt that the product presented would have ingredients that were “natural,” “organic,” and “healthy.” To address perceptions of product “quality,” a three-item scale was adapted from Potthoff (2020), to include whether the participant felt that the product had a “higher-than-average price,” are “premium quality,” and “well-made.” To address perceptions of “brand playfulness,” a three-item scale was adapted from McShane and Pancer (2020), to include whether the participant felt that the brand was “playful,” “fun,” and “creative.”

A three-item ‘liking’ scale also was used to simply confirm that there was no difference in participants ‘liking’ of the minimalist versus maximalist packaging designs ($p = .7$) nor was there a difference in participants ‘liking’ of the food product versus the health care product packaging designs ($p = .12$).

Additionally, a question was posed as a stimuli check to confirm perceptions that the designs presented were in fact experienced as “minimalist” or “maximalist.” This was used to confirm that all four products and their package designs were perceived as the anticipated design style, before moving forward with data analysis. An attention check question was also included, asking participants to select a particular scale item if they were reading the prompts, and those that did not select that item were removed from the study, as noted in the ‘Participants and Data Collection’ section above.

RESULTS

Participants were given a manipulation check to confirm that the stimuli were strong representations of minimalist and maximalist design. First, they were offered basic definitions of design minimalism and maximalism, and then asked to rate each of the two package designs they saw on a 7-point likert scale, ranging from minimalist to maximalist. With all participants combined, the minimalist products had a mean score of 1.59 ($SD=1.06$) and the maximalist designs had a mean score of 5.96 ($SD=1.3$), and the mean scores for these groups were significantly different ($F(1, 620) = 2119, p < .001$). These results suggest that the design manipulation was successful.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine the effects of design type (minimalist vs. maximalist) and product type (food vs. personal care products) on consumer perceptions of packaging design. The dependent variables included all above-mentioned scales to measure perceptions of how 'natural,' 'high quality,' and 'playful' the product and brand was perceived. Multivariate tests revealed significant effects for design type (Wilks' $\Lambda = .169, F(3, 307) = 198.67, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .618$), product type (Wilks' $\Lambda = .946, F(3, 307) = 4.27, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .034$), and the interaction between design type and product type (Wilks' $\Lambda = .871, F(3, 307) = 22.07, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .152$).

Following up on this result, tests of between-subjects effects were conducted as well. A summary of the result statistics is shown in Table 1. Analysis by product type reveal that there is no difference in perceptions of naturalness between personal care and food products ($p = .143$), nor is there a difference of perceptions of the quality level of personal care and food products ($p = .551$). However, food products are perceived as more playful than personal care products,

when product package design is not considered, which is expected based on findings from the literature review (de la Ville, et. al., 2010).

Table 1. Summary of Results: Between Subjects Tests

<u>Independent Variables</u>	<u>Overall Result</u>	<u>Dependent Variables</u>		
		Naturalness	Quality	Playfulness
	<i>(Wilks' Lamda)</i>	<i>(F-Value)</i>	<i>(F-Value)</i>	<i>(F-value)</i>
<i>Product</i>	.97	2.15 ^c	.355 ^c	6.07 ^b
<i>Design</i>	.38	163.07 ^a	57.65 ^a	633.04 ^a
<i>Product x Design</i>	.85	.142 ^c	9.33 ^b	98.00 ^a

- a. $p < .001$
- b. $p < .015$
- c. non-significant

Tests of between subjects' effects by design type revealed significant differences on all three scales. Perceptions of whether a product was 'natural' were significant ($F(3, 307) = 163.07$, $p < .001$), with minimalist designs perceived as significantly more natural than maximalist designs, supporting H1A. For 'quality' perception ($F(3, 307) = 57.64$, $p < .001$), minimalist designs were also perceived as significantly higher quality than maximalist designs, supporting H1B. For perceptions that the brand is 'playful' ($F(3, 307) = 633.04$, $p < .001$, observed power = 1) maximalist designs were perceived as significantly more playful than minimalist designs, supporting H2. Using a Bonferroni correction for 3 comparisons, all of these findings remained significant at or below the adjusted alpha of $p < .01667$ and are visualized in Figures 3 through 5 below.

Figure 3. 'Naturalness' Scale by Design Type

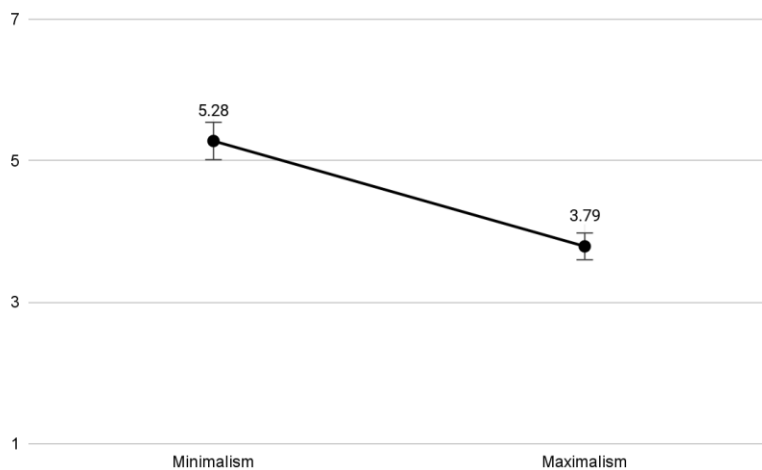


Figure 4. 'Quality' Scale by Design Type

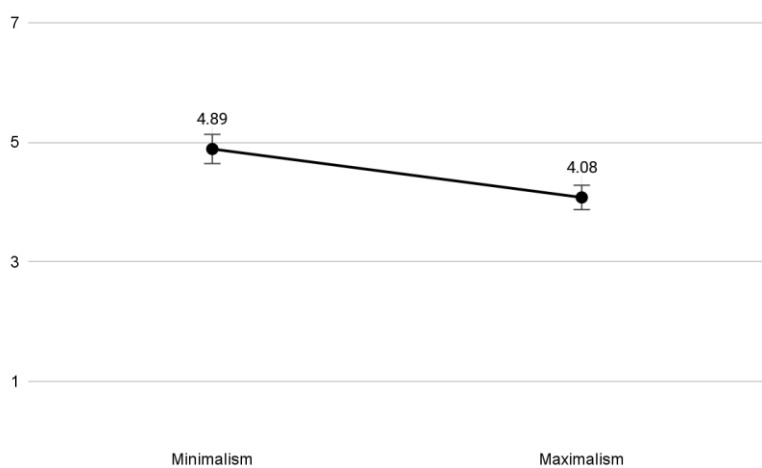


Figure 5. 'Brand Playfulness' Scale by Design Type

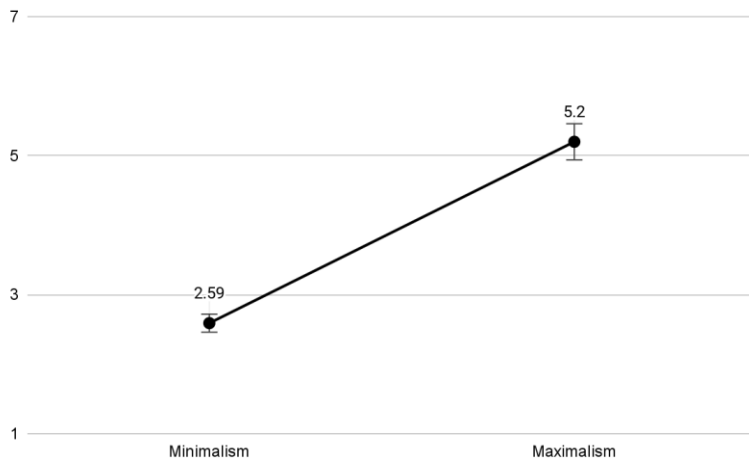


Table 2. DV Cell Means by product type and by design type

	by product type		by design type	
<u>SCALE</u>	<i>Food</i>	<i>Personal Care</i>	<i>Minimalist</i>	<i>Maximalist</i>
Naturalness	4.62	4.45	5.28	3.79
Quality	4.45	4.52	4.89	4.08
Playfulness	4.01	3.76	2.59	5.20

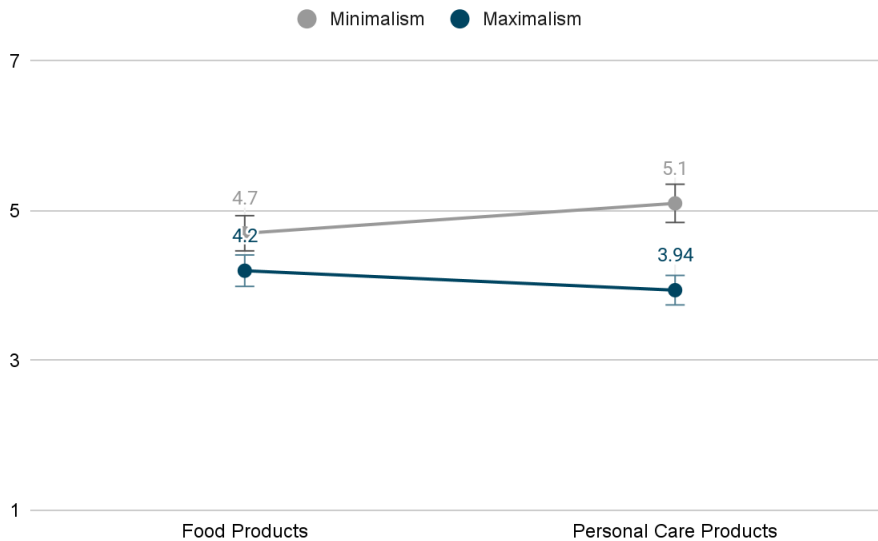
Examining the interaction between product type and design type, the 'naturalness' scale was found to be non-significant, as noted in Table 1 ($p = .706$), which suggests that minimalist designs are seen as more natural than maximalist designs, regardless of product category, which disproves H4A. This relationship can be seen within Figure 6 below.

Figure 6. 'Naturalness' Scale Interaction



Meanwhile the 'quality' scale interaction was significant ($p = .002$), and the interaction can be seen in Figure 7 below. Follow-up ANOVAs show that minimalism is associated with higher perceptions of product quality than maximalism in both categories ($F(3, 307) = 4.18, p < .001$ in the case of food products, $F(3, 307) = 3.76, p < .001$ in the case of personal care products), although the spread seems slightly greater numerically for the personal care products (shifting from a mean of 3.94 to a mean of 5.10, as compared to a shift from 4.2 to 4.7, in the food product category), as seen in the higher F value, and visually represented in Figure 7 below. Importantly, follow-up ANOVAs suggest that minimalism may be significantly more impactful ($F(3, 307) = 6.3, p = .005$) on increasing quality perceptions of personal care products, as compared to food products, supporting H4B. On the other hand, maximalism seems to be significantly more impactful ($F(3, 307) = 2.12, p = .04$) on decreasing quality perceptions of personal care products, as compared to food products. Therefore, decisions about design type seem more critical to quality perceptions of personal care products.

Figure 7. 'Quality' Scale Interaction



Finally, the 'brand playfulness' scale interaction was also significant ($p < .001$), as seen in Table 1. Follow-up ANOVAs show that maximalism is associated with higher perceptions of brand playfulness than minimalism in both categories ($F(3, 307) = 3.15$, $p < .001$ in the case of food products, $F(3, 307) = 1.85$, $p < .001$ in the case of personal care products), although the spread seems greater numerically for the food category (shifting from a mean of 2.22 to a mean of 5.81, as compared to a shift from 2.98 to 4.54 in the personal care product category), as seen in the higher F value, and visually represented in Figure 8 below. Importantly, maximalist design resulted in significantly higher perceptions of playfulness in food products, than in personal care products ($F(3, 307) = 12.11$, $p < .001$), and minimalist design resulted in significantly lower perceptions of playfulness in food products than personal care products ($F(3, 307) = .039$, $p < .001$), which can be seen in the notably lower F value in the personal care product result. This result supports H3. All interaction means can be seen in Table 3 below.

Figure 8. 'Brand Playfulness' Scale Interaction

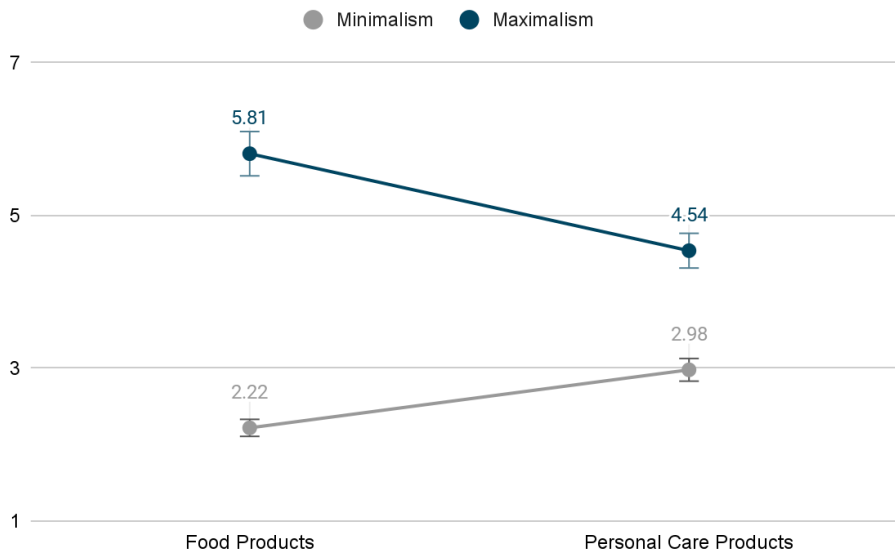


Table 3. Interaction of product type x design type on DVs: Cell Means

<u>SCALE</u>	<u>Product Type</u>	<u>Design Type</u>	
		<i>Minimalist</i>	<i>Maximalist</i>
Naturalness	<i>Food</i>	5.34	3.90
	<i>Personal Care</i>	5.22	3.69
Quality	<i>Food</i>	4.70	4.20
	<i>Personal Care</i>	5.10	3.94
Playfulness	<i>Food</i>	2.22	5.81
	<i>Personal Care</i>	2.98	4.54

Overall, these results demonstrate the significant influence of both design type and product type on consumer perceptions of packaging design, as well as the interaction between these factors.

DISCUSSION

In summary of the findings, the results of the survey supported the previous literature which detailed that minimalism gives consumers perceptions of a product being more natural, high-quality, and the brand overall being perceived as a more serious brand. Conversely, maximalist designs give perceptions of being less natural, low-quality, and the brand overall being perceived as a more playful or fun brand. When analyzing the interactions between the design types and the product category, two scales were confirmed to have a significant interaction between the design types and the product category.

In regard to quality perceptions, personal care products benefit significantly more from minimalism. This finding not only demonstrates the benefit of using minimalist packaging for personal care products, but also highlights the possible consequences of using maximalism. From a marketing and branding perspective, a company should be aware of the perceptions it wants its consumers to have about its products. Therefore, a minimalist approach to packaging design should be utilized if companies are looking to market their personal care products as higher in quality and more of a premium product. This approach would be well-received to consumers looking for a higher quality personal care product. In contrast, if a company is looking to market their personal care products as a more common, non-exclusive product, a maximalist design may be more suitable. However, this approach could be risky due to the perception of lower quality.

In regard to perceptions of brand playfulness, food products benefit significantly more from maximalism. This finding is essential to the food product category as research shows food products are marketed as playful products (de la Ville, et. al., 2010). A food company looking to market their brand as a playful brand should use a maximalist approach for their packaging

design as it gives perceptions of brand playfulness, being a fun brand, and being a creative brand. However, a food company that is aiming to be perceived as a more serious brand should use a minimalist approach as the data shows brand playfulness perceptions significantly decrease when minimalism is used.

While much of the general findings supported previous research, the confirmed significant interactions that were found for perceptions of quality in personal care products and perceptions of brand playfulness in food products demonstrates that design has a greater influence on consumer perceptions than previous research suggested. Minimalist and maximalist decisions are more critical for these designs and product categories which is useful for companies who are creating their packaging to reflect their brand values. Trying to reach the target market is hard itself, but trying to send a specific message to consumers can be even more difficult because of consumer perceptions. This study demonstrates how important minimalist and maximalist design decisions are and how perceptions change not only because of product design, but because of the product category itself.

Limitations and Future Research

While the survey received over 300 responses, the study itself focused solely on the college student demographic which is not a valid representation of the general population. Also, the products and brands used for the survey were completely fabricated, therefore may not be the most accurate or realistic exemplifications of personal care and packaged food products. Another significant limitation of this study is that brand and product perceptions are caused by numerous factors, not just product packaging. It should be noted that brand names create very strong product perceptions and bias based on brand awareness and reputation. Therefore, in application

of the findings in the real world, premeditated bias and perceptions based on other factors are not accounted for in this study.

In terms of future research, there are many ways to expand this study since this study itself encompassed a very general understanding of brand design and design aesthetics. One method to expand this study would be to test additional product categories. This would broaden the study to further support the significance of product category and design styles. Also, looking into how individual and personality differences may influence preferences and perceptions of minimalist and maximalist aesthetics could specialize consumer groups in the study. Looking across different cultures could also be an interesting element as people from different cultures may perceive designs to convey different qualities and assumptions. Lastly, as previously mentioned, this study works with a very general understanding of minimalist and maximalist aesthetics, so delving deeper into a specific element of the designs would be a more specified approach. Some of these elements could be the variety of fonts, the size, alignment, and position of text, and the use of icons and background designs. This could further specify design types and provide more support on what elements of minimalism and maximalism specifically influence perceptions across product categories.

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