METHODS & CONCEPTS

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Critical Discourse Analysis of Maximalist and Minimalist Lifestyles: A Corpus Linguistics Approach

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Abstract: This paper undertakes an analysis of two divergent strategies aimed at driving culture towards the extremes: one involving stark minimalism and the other, gaudy maximalism. The former approach is predominantly embraced by the avant-garde, who possess the means to surround themselves with an array of commodities, thereby creating a distinguishing factor in a world characterized by excess. Conversely, maximalism, the origins of which can be traced back to the conception of luxury as abundance, seeks to eliminate fear. This study investigates the representation of minimalism and maximalism in a vast corpus of English-language articles. The research addresses two questions: 1) How are the representations of lifestyles expressed in the most popular articles related to minimalism and maximalism? 2) What meanings do these representations convey? The findings of this study shed light on the discourse surrounding minimalism and maximalism, as well as the motivations and justifications for adopting these lifestyles.

Keywords: minimalism; maximalism; corpus-assisted discourse analysis; lifestyles' representation; media representation

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Western culture, lifestyle is understood both as a form of self-expression and as a means of overcoming personal limitations (Giddens, 1991). The adoption of a particular lifestyle is often linked to the pursuit of authenticity and the quest for a coherent sense of self. Identity, a key concept in the study of popular lifestyles, can be defined as the subjective experience of an embodied self (Cote & Levine, 2002) or, as McAdams (1997, p. 63) puts it, "the story that the modern I constructs and tells about me." This dynamic meta-narrative of the self is shaped through subjective experiences and manifested in a set of identity-related senses, including integrity, distinctiveness, cohesion, and self-esteem.

To systematically investigate how these identities and aesthetic orientations are constructed and articulated, this study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) in conjunction with corpus linguistics methods. While CDA provides a framework for examining the power structures, ideologies, and cultural values embedded in minimalist and maximalist discourse, corpus linguistics offers empirical tools to identify linguistic patterns, frequency distributions, and co-occurrence of key terms within large text datasets. By combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, this methodology facilitates a nuanced examination of how language reflects, reinforces, or challenges dominant narratives surrounding minimalism and maximalism.

Material goods hold profound significance in consumer culture, where owning the „right" possessions is often linked to happiness and satisfaction (Kahneman et al., 2006). At the same time, objects are so embedded in daily life that they are easily overlooked in theoretical reflection (Dant, 1999).

In response, a growing scholarly movement advocates a 'return to objects' – acknowledging their material presence alongside digital and virtual representations. This shift is evident in everyday practices: minimalism, which emphasizes durability and extended use of possessions; the DIY movement, which promotes making and repairing objects; and maximalism, which values collecting and displaying material goods.

This study analyzes two opposing cultural strategies – minimalism and maximalism – each pushing lifestyle aesthetics to extremes. Minimalism, often an avant-garde choice in a world of excess, serves as a form of distinction and, at times, a crisis-response strategy. Maximalism, by contrast, embraces abundance, traditionally associated with luxury but also driven by a desire to counteract fear.

The research examines whether these lifestyles align with Giddens' (1991) concept *of* a reflective project of self-realization. Using CDA, it examines media frames and discursive structures to reveal how material culture is conceptualized beyond mere utility, highlighting the symbolic permanence of objects. Additionally, the study evaluates the usefulness of CDA and corpus linguistics methods in capturing the nuances of lifestyle discourse. By combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, it assesses whether these methodologies effectively reveal underlying ideologies, cultural values, and the role of language in shaping perceptions of minimalism and maximalism.

The paper begins with a literature review on the significance of objects and aesthetics in shaping identity-driven lifestyles. The next stage details key meaning categories, providing the foundation for the discussion on minimalist and maximalist discourse.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: LIFESTYLE AND AESTHETICIZATION

The role of material goods in shaping identity has been extensively studied since the second half of the 20th century. Stephen Riggins (1994) and Tim Dant (1999) emphasize that objects hold significance beyond their utilitarian function, serving as mediators of personal, social, and cultural values. These objects reflect emotions, relationships, successes, and failures, and some sociologists argue that their importance in identity formation underscores the ongoing (re) negotiation of their meaning as symbols of social hierarchy. This critique often targets modern society's fixation on material consumption.

Gilles Lipovetsky adopts an individualistic perspective, introducing the concept of de-socialized consumption. This marks a shift from consumerism as a status marker, as theorized by Veblen and Baudrillard, toward consumption as a source of personal satisfaction. This transformation aligns with broader cultural trends valuing autonomy, uniqueness, and self-expression. Lipovetsky (1994, p. 145–147) describes this shift as neo-narcissism, where individuals prioritize self-image and identity construction over social norms. From this perspective, objects become tools of personal freedom rather than a means of alienation. However, some scholars challenge the notion of fixed identities, arguing that identity is superficial and transient – constructed through visual and spatial expressions.

This study examines how these perspectives are reflected in contemporary discourses on lifestyle. Are these discourses, as Slater (1997, p. 30) states, so superficial that they fail to engage meaningfully with the formation of identity?

The concept of aestheticization is closely linked to these discussions. A continuous shift in the means of expression is associated with a movement towards orality and iconicity in communication forms. Such forms are conducive to aesthetics, referred to as the aesthetics of synthesis. The distinction between aesthetics and function, or between aesthetics and ethics or truth, ceases to be valid. Consumer goods often lack technical or utilitarian functions, focusing instead on expression and semiotics. The line between ethics and aesthetics is increasingly blurred as consumer culture aestheticizes everyday life.

Richard Shusterman (1998, p. 317) argues that aesthetics become a constitutive part of ethics, rather than merely symbolizing it. In this context, one does not separately affirm beauty or good; instead, aesthetics and ethics exist in a synthetic, inseparable relation. The aestheticization of reality and human life represents a disenchantment of the world, leading to a renegotiation of values that legitimize human activity in a world dominated by mass-produced artifacts. This aesthetic focus suggests that taking care of appearances, such as the design of an apartment, becomes morally desirable, reflecting a significant shift in how values are perceived and prioritized.

Therefore, what senses and values accompany aestheticization processes in the discourses under analysis? What experiences and feelings do the authors refer to? Is it a self-referential, iconic discourse, a vehicle for prophecies or bellwethers put forward by post-structuralists and theorists of post-modernity regarding the simulacral character of the world?

METHODOLOGY: CORPUS-BASED CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (CDA)

The methodological framework of the study was formed by CAD, i.e., an interdisciplinary approach that straddles social and humanistic sciences, that aimed to shed light on messages hidden in the discourse. In line with the adopted methodology, any text constituted a product of ideology, which promoted a specific system of values (Wodak 2008, p. 192). Within CAD, text-based hidden meanings and ideologies can be decoded. Besides, the methodology assumed that there was not a single universal research method and instead postulates a triangulation of methods, where the selection of research tools depends on what is most useful for analyzing a given material (Hart, 2018, pp. 402–403).

The study also relied on corpus linguistics methods, which facilitated working with large data volumes and reducing researcher bias. In the first stage of the study, a qualitative and quantitative analysis (Dörnyei, 2007) was performed to provide a multifaceted analysis of trends in lifestyle and to ground the results in more robust and context-sensitive interpretations. The quantitative analysis was performed using Wordsmith Tools 8.0. The expressions used to describe minimalism and maximalism were extracted from the corpus word list, i.e., a list of all the words that appear in a text or corpus, along with their use, frequency and the percentage value that the word contributes to the whole text (Baker, 2006, p. 51). Lists of frequency for the most frequently used nouns and verbs were analysed. The key terms extracted from the articles were selected on the basis of their topical relevance. The corpus comprised 170,662 words, selected from the most popular articles [N=108] (i.e., those that topped the Google search engine list), which dealt with the issues of minimalism (n=57) and maximalism (n=51).

In reference to minimalism, the most frequently (f=frequency) used words were: 'life' (f=437), 'things' (f=371), 'time' (f=313), 'de/clutter' (f=274), 'living' (f=223), 'space' (f=187), 'home' (f=151), 'lifestyle' (f=148), 'items' (f=149), 'stuff" (f=137),' mind/set' (f=135), 'change' (f=126), checklist (f=107), 'simple' (f=108), 'money' (f=101), 'simplicity' (f=94), 'possessions' (f=90), 'experience' (f=76), 'peace/ful' (f=62),' challenge' (f=52), and 'freedom' (f=52). The most frequently used phrasal verbs are: 'get(ing) rid of' (f=124). In the case of the discourse on maximalism, these are: 'design' (f=446), 'home' (f=382), 'like' (f=338), 'interior/s' (f=313), 'have' (f=299), 'style/s' (f=274), 'space' (f=211), 'things' (f=209), 'pattern/s' (f=207), 'room'

(f=194), 'love' (f=180), 'look' (f=162), 'art' (f=153), 'object/s' (f=131), 'colour/s' (f=115), 'house' (f=115), 'life' (f=115), 'bold/ness' (f=113), 'creative/ity' (f=90), and 'en/joy' (f=89). In corpus, the linguistics keywords in the target corpus are used significantly more frequently than those in the referential corpus (Scott, 1997, p. 236).

Table 1. Part of a sorted concordance which exemplifies the pattern 'WORD design' (by the order in which the texts appear in the corpus)

Left Context	Hit	Right Context
also share 5 lessons we can learn from Nordic culture – including	design	and cultural traditions that have helped make these countries
the world. What is Scandinavian minimalism? Scandinavian minimalism is a	design	and lifestyle philosophy that originated in the Nordic countries
aesthetic. Mix old with new A key element of Scandinavian	design	is mixing old with new to create quirky looks.
a maximalist design that portrays fullness. However, I believe minimalist	design	is timeless. There's something gorgeous about empty space.
appearance of minimalism, as in Jobs's house or the	design	of Apple's iPhone. But Jobs's empty living
The books' sameness of content is matched by a shared	design	of visual serenity. Their covers are all soft colours
the life-hack-minded authors or the proponents of minimalist	design,	that many people have minimalism forced upon them by
not for everyone. There's an argument for a maximalist	design	that portrays fullness. However, I believe minimalist design is
of optimising their spaces and turning storage solutions into striking	design	additions. Bring nature into the home Scandis love adding
that look cold and uninviting While there is a minimalist	design	aesthetic, often characterized by all-white rooms with little
as a style or technique (as in music, literature, or	design)	characterised by extreme spareness and simplicity. I interpret this
essential to have an inviting and stylish space. The Nordic	design	creates a warm and comfortable sanctuary out of limited
cables that certainly are not designed in pristine whiteness. Minimalist	design	encourages us to forget everything a product relies on
flooring Scandis, like the Japanese, are obsessed with wood in	design,	especially flooring. You'd be hard-pressed to find
you can design it the way you want. Read more:	Design	For White Space In Your Life It's not
are 5 minimalist lessons you can apply to your life, including	design,	hygge, Lagom, care, and sustainability. Let's look at
scene for a meal. If you're searching for minimalist	design	ideas, study the Scandinavians. They're experts in creating
take a look to the north for some beautiful minimalist	design	ideas. Here are some tips to get you started:
Minimalist Nordic design Scandinavians' love of minimalism extends to interior	design.	In a region where winters are long and dark,
to hit the reset button on life, so you can	design	it the way you want. Read more: Design For
YouTube sensation, fashion blogger, lifestyle influencer, vegan food, travel, and	design	lover. She's also the author of the book,
we should care about more than the big things. Good	design	makes a difference.'
story perhaps explains the rise in popularity of mid-century	design,	particularly Scandinavian. A pair of early Finn Juhl armchairs
minimalism From the 'KonMari method' to Apple's barely-there	design	philosophy, we are forever being urged to declutter and
Let's look at each in more detail. 1. Minimalist Nordic	design	Scandinavians' love of minimalism extends to interior design. In
massive deal — showing the impact and reach of Swedish minimalist	design.	This article will explore Scandinavian minimalism and how it
items you should own or how you should organize and	design	your environment. It's a mindset that should allow

Source: own elaboration

At the qualitative analysis level, we examined the selected concordance values (keywords in context), i.e., a list of searched words appearing in a text along with their collocations and contexts of use (one, two, three, or more words to the left or right of a keyword). Identifying patterns among the obtained concordances helped to establish the dominant discourses and discourse-related representations of a given phenomenon. I relied on a semi-automated technique to characterize salient patterns containing these words, cf. lexical bundles (Biber et al., 2004). Such concordances presented the most common sequences containing the word of interest, e.g., the word most frequently used in the maximalists' discourse, 'design,' sorted according to the surrounding words. They were useful in elucidating patterns, such as 'WORD design', where WORD can represent any word (see Figure 1).

Applying the aforementioned methodology, 84 lexical patterns were identified that highlight a variety of properties attributed to 'maximalist(s)/minimalist(s)' 'life', 'objects', 'time', 'living', 'lifestyle', 'home', and 'design' (the most popular keywords in the material). Of these, 48 were selected for an in-depth study (exemplary 21 patterns are presented in Table 1). Each pattern contains a filler,

i.e., WORD, WORD, and the keyword or the word and WORD, WORD. The balance of 37 patterns were ignored, i.e. those which were deemed peripheral to the main focus of the study or those whose fillers had low frequencies.

Thus, I proceeded with a semantic-pragmatic classification of the content words included in the patterns, based on a close reading of the texts (e.g., full sentences) and consideration of their contexts. Taking the most frequent fillers as a point of reference for the in-depth analysis, semantic groups of the top keywords were created by considering semantically related fillers. This led to a set of three main categories: 1) Identity and Lifestyle, 2) Home and Objects, and 3) Social Context of Lifestyle, along with six meaning subcategories that linked to the ways of justifying and realizing the minimalist and maximalist orientations. Table 3 illustrates the dominance of the 'Identity and Lifestyle' category in the discourse of minimalists and the 'Home and Object' category in the discourse of maximalists. The former relates to the processes of self-development, along with the rigorous techniques of the self, the essence of which is mindfulness, simplicity, and elements of therapeutic culture, including discovering one's 'true' needs, 'real' pleasures, and freedom, with elements of biographical transformation. The latter is dominated by interior design (1), decorating with 'anything that brings comfort' (4), 'filling up space in the room with a collage of colors, materials, and textures' (1), a 'curated hoarding' (2) of meaningful elements (3) and an 'ornate display' of personality (5). Both discourses exhibit clear references to the instability and unpredictability of the contemporary world, characterized by maximalism, and a lack of future vision beyond or under the capitalist imperative of perpetual economic expansion (6), exemplified by minimalism.

I realized that several of these words might belong to more than one (sub) category. For example, some words could belong to both the 'Identity' and 'Home' frames, such as 'space' and 'simplicity'. Words considered ambiguous were classified into a given group depending on their context of use and their dominant meaning.

Table 2. Largest semantic categories in the KeyWords list

Category	Subcategories	The most frequent key words, phrases
		Minimalism
Identity and lifestyle	Self-development and 'techniques of the self' projects	mind/set/full, meaningful, mental, full, fulfilling, simplicity (as a tool for spiritual growth), purposeful, relaxing, mental, true, real, rich, enjoying, slower, intentional, challenge
	(2) The rationality of control	self-control, discipline/more disciplined, effective, rationalize
	(3) The processes of conversion	change, improve, radical shift, choice/s, decision
Home and objects	Design: functionality and simplicity	organized home, decluttered/ clutter-free/ less-cluttered home, checklist, (white) space, (more) simplicity/ simplify, cut/ting out, reducing, get rid of, removing, small number, less than 100, reorganization, eliminate
	Anti-materiality	with less, little, fewer, non-essential, wrong, unnecessary, absence, happiness not through (things), focusing on little
Social context of lifestyle	Criticism of (over)consumption	Consumerism, pressures, (over)consumption, less is more, capitalism/tic
		Maximalism
Home and objects	Eclectic design	eclectic, chaotic creative, boldest, frivolous, visual, unconventional, different features, decorations, colors, fabrics, more is more, break style rules, go beyond
	Materiality and Excess	over/stuffed, excessive garish, bold, full, clutter, glorious
	Sentiment	meaningful, significant, museum/s, unique, memorabilia, objects to remember
Identity and lifestyle	Self-expression	express/ing yourself/myself, creative/ity, personalize/ing, display, individuality, self-designed, unique style, personal, unique story
	Self-acceptation and emotional well-being	love, joy, happy, comfort, proud, vibrant, fun, pleasure/able,
Social context of lifestyle	Escape from uncertainty	pandemic, escape, recession, crisis

Source: own elaboration

RESULTS

SELF-DEVELOPMENT AND SELF-ACCEPTATION: BETWEEN CHALLENGE AND PLEASURE

Minimalists and maximalists both engage with the self, yet they embody distinct approaches to agency, inwardness, and self-determination in the modern world. For minimalists, the question "Who am I?" is answered through intentional, reflexive choices – decisions aimed at simplifying life and cultivating self-improvement. These choices include reducing possessions (f = 124), adopting a new lifestyle (f = 148), enhancing personal growth (f = 21), and limiting overconsumption (f = 13). In contrast, maximalists adopt the perspective of "I am what I am, and I am proud of it" (proud, f = 12), emphasizing self-affirmation over self-transformation.

Minimalism is characterized by a continuous pursuit of improvement, redefining one's identity and needs, and rationalizing personal decisions – often shared through blogs, interviews, and literature. A central tenet of this philosophy is the "ideology of effectiveness" (effective, f = 13), encapsulated in the notion that "minimalism is a habit of highly effective people." Effectiveness in this context means optimizing life by eliminating unnecessary tasks and possessions and seeking the most efficient, cost-effective solutions. Minimalists take on challenges (challenge, f = 52) and embark on structured projects, such as "Take the 12-12-12 Challenge," "Minimalist Lifestyle Starter Tips," or "How to Start Decluttering When Overwhelmed: 9 Doable Actions."

The ethical framework of minimalism does not adhere to rigid moral codes or prohibitions but rather aligns with Michel Foucault's concept of "technologies of the self" (1998). It focuses on self-regulation through practical techniques and strategies, enabling individuals to shape their lifestyles and identities independently.

In contrast, maximalism is a celebration of self-expression, presenting one's individuality as unique and exceptional: "Maximalism is appealing because it allows you to put yourself and your family on display – something to be proud of because it's YOU!" The core principle of maximalism is the desire to showcase (display, f=41) personality and individuality through bold expression (express/ion, f=45). This ethos extends to fashion – "Instead of wearing basics to simplify life, why not invest in clothing that truly represents your personality, no matter how extravagant?" – and home design – "A maximalist home stands out; it is creative, personal, and striking." Its owners embrace playfulness and bold gestures, living with vibrancy and pursuit of comfort and happiness."

Where minimalists opt for a "white box" devoid of excess, maximalists surround themselves with vibrant (f=25), gorgeous (f=9), and even garish (f=8) objects.

Their philosophy aligns with an Epicurean pursuit of joy (f = 89) and happiness (f = 68), prioritizing aesthetics and mood enhancement: "Things are good if they feel good." Possessions play a central role in this well-being – "Each object should make you happy: Surrounding yourself with beloved items instantly boosts your personal sense of well-being."

The act of decorating and adorning one's home with cushions, curtains, and memorabilia serves to foster pleasure (f = 25) and coziness (f = 15). However, the maximalist discourse portrays coziness not as an experience of communal warmth but as a means of achieving self-care and self-expression: "A maximalist home embodies your unique self – your wants, needs, daily habits, design values, and tastes." As a result, maximalists often derive satisfaction and security from collecting and preserving objects rather than from interpersonal connections.

Ultimately, minimalism and maximalism offer two contrasting yet equally valid paths to self-development and self-acceptance – one through discipline and intentionality, the other through abundance and self-affirmation.

SELF-LIMITING CHOICES AND UNLIMITED BOLDNESS

When it comes to the identity-related differences between minimalists and maximalists, it is worth noting that while the former exhibit a strong orientation towards control, the latter promote an element of unpredictability, a lack of control, and a disregard for rules: 'The key to maximalism is that there really are no rules.' Maximalism is supposed to be "the anti-minimalist trend that celebrates mess and creative chaos." Instead of forcing designers along well-trodden paths, maximalism allows them to unleash their creativity. Here, form follows feeling rather than function'.

Maximalism is not a modern orientation towards purposefulness and rationality but rather expresses a conviction that one cannot predict the future. Therefore, instead of 'cutting out and making sad sacrifices,' maximalists recommend: 'Pile it on, enjoy it all, forget the rules!' Maximalism is a stance to the world and to oneself. It is a stance rejecting self-limitation and self-denial built on the fear that a catastrophe is imminent (see: "Searching for escape"). The essence of maximalism is *boldness* (*bold/ness*, f=113), *creativity* (*creative/ity*, f=90), *excess* (f=49), and *passion/s* (f=20).

Minimalists' responses to the 'how to live?' question point to a certain model that is intended to promote greater discipline (f = 6). Individuals should be subject to greater control to maintain *order* (f = 31) and stay organized (f = 16): "The simple act of clearing, cleaning, and properly arranging has a strong psychological effect." If you struggle with this exercise, it may be worth deeper introspection and a more concerted effort to maintain order in your life and space'.

Minimalists strive to eliminate the chaos associated with excess, seeking to gain control over themselves and their lives through a purposeful and rational choice of basic goods. They offer advice to each other on how to rationalize their choices, reduce the amount of goods used, and decorate their apartment in a minimalist style, as well as how to eliminate unnecessary furniture or clothing. One of the most frequently used words in their discourse is 'de/clutter' (f=274) and 'checklist' (f=107) – with the latter referring to a list of items that constitute an ideal minimalist inventory. There are numerous descriptions of the content of their optimally-fitted 'capsule wardrobes'. Minimalists' skillfulness, optimality, and conscious management are confronted with visual mess and excess, associated with thoughtlessness, laziness, irresponsibility, and frustration: 'It's amusing that something so important and essential to their day-to-day life could be so disorganized – so much so that it actually causes frustration.'

Objects are meticulously (rationally, functionally) selected, and the list descriptions are presented on internet blogs. Subsequent steps, such as 'Decluttering, Organizing, and Paring Down' or '10 Simple Steps to Get Started with Eco-Minimalism,' crucial to achieving minimalist priorities, are described. Being in charge of objects, illusory to a greater or lesser extent, ought to correspond with potential cognitive and behavioral changes in various aspects of life. Minimalism, as a tool, helps to accomplish many, often overlapping, objectives, initially related to decluttering the living space and, ultimately, to 'getting in charge' of one's belongings and maintaining greater discipline.

MATERIAL AND TRANSCENDENT EXTENSIONS OF SELF

A minimalist's identity is defined by being free of materiality, which is all that limits, oppresses, and poisons. A ritual is defined as a cleansing, getting rid of things ('get rid of', f=124). For maximalists, collecting goods is a ritual. Maximalists negotiate identity through material objects. Numerous comments on the significance of objects ("We want only to be surrounded by things that have a purpose, that have been created for both their beauty and their meaning") and a focus on their 'interior design' (f = 142) validate the role of accommodation and materiality. This kind of setting, in relation to the world, is that of a home, which provides an existential ground for their embodied being; they are both in it and of it, acting in relation to it (cf. Marratto, 2012).

Stability of identity manifests itself as accumulated excess: 'Maximalism in an aesthetic of excess and redundancy'. If we assume that an act of getting rid of things is an act of self-identity, whereby minimalists reject certain aspects of 'self', then it is understandable why maximalists collect or expose things that remind them who they are, give testimony to their passions, experiences or skills

as a homeowner: 'People look at their homes as a way to share their personal stories, travels, family history, belief systems, and character'.

In the maximalists' discourse, the integrity and stability of identity guarantee an extension and 'exporting' of an individual – their memory, accepted values – to the outside, to the material spaces: '(…) our craving for happier and more personalized spaces that teleport us to the places we love'.

However, the minimalist's self is constituted by a sense of inwardness, which is best captured through inner depth. Life's goal is to eliminate anxiety from one's consciousness, to effectively cope with a crisis, and to restore inner peace ('peace/ful', f=62). An orientation towards contemplation, discovering oneself, and experiencing 'the true essence of the world' should serve as a metaphysical approach towards oneself and the world, where 'self', the universe, and absolute meld into one: '(…) people can be happier by aligning themselves more closely with nature and rejecting all mainstream desires'.

The maximalists' strategy is linked with another type of philosophy than the one promoted by minimalists, which places 'self' within a broader context. What is accentuated here is not the relationship between an individual and the universe or nature, but rather their place not only within a community (e.g., the family) but also as an idealized form of self-expression. The inhabited space, marked by its owner's personality traits, is an important element of the discourse. In the process of making the house interior private, hence in the process of progressive differentiation and spatial customization, individuals can find some room for boundless creativity and self-fulfillment:

We want our homes to stimulate us, too, and how much stimulation can you get from a white box? It's about creating a kind of fantasy, a fantasy that we can sink into, but one that excites and informs us, and emotionally uplifts us at the same time. (Votés, 2023)

Self-expression emerging from such a discourse, in the context of a lack of more important identity foundations ready to be extracted, seems to be a basic value and means of self-fulfillment. All that happens on the outside seems to be pale and pointless in comparison to the inner material world.

What is of importance is the sense that home objects were chosen personally or imbued with personal meaning (meaningful, f = 24). Their presence is supposed to be a source of satisfaction or pride. Privacy is a condition not only for confronting the domestic, safe fortress with a foreign exterior but also for confronting individual satisfaction derived from occupying a domesticated space filled with 'self.'

Minimalists view independence and mobility as more important than material goods. A need to be 'free' (f = 52) is tied to a need for change (f = 126) and mobility (f = 13), rather than safety (safety, security, f = 0). Not being attached to objects and being ready to change should provide minimalists with greater

liberty to generate 'programs of self-actualization' and ' mastery' (Giddens, 1991, p. 9). Instead of purchasing goods, minimalists prefer collecting experiences ('experience/s', f=117): 'I started questioning my stuff, removing one by one the unnecessary things from my life, eventually jettisoning 90% of my material possessions, replacing them with worthwhile experiences'. Minimalism is a theory that prioritizes experiences over possessions. Possessions are insignificant; what really matters is experiencing *real freedom*. However, 'to experience' encompasses 'to consume'. In lieu of possessions and status, the designations of which are predominantly virtual, a source of satisfaction for minimalists is undertaking enterprises and collecting experiences. Distinctive functions emerge from the sphere of experiences and emotions.

SENTIMENTAL AND FUNCTIONAL

In the discourse of minimalists, the home is an 'emotional warehouse' (Gurney, 2000), where various feelings, along with their wealth of functions, are experienced and stored. The most common ones are: scope for creativity ('creative/ity', f=90), a space that offers 'freedom' (f=52), security ('safe/security', f=26), bringing sensual 'pleasure' (f=26), evoking 'memories' (f=18): 'Through maximalism, homes become museums of personal interests, hobbies, and precious memories'. It is an intimate space; however, it is deficient in a context for close, caring relationships. When it comes to homes, the discourse of minimalism most frequently mentions functionality ('funcional/ity', f=15), good organization ('organize/ing', f=54).

Maximalism and minimalism are the bipolar points on the axis of individuals – objects stretched between emotionality and reflexivity. Although it is undeniable today that the traditional dualism between reason and emotion cannot be upheld, it remains clearly visible in the analyzed discourses. It results from the level of reflexivity of the relationship between individuals and objects. We employ two modes of acting, drawing inspiration from diverse sources. The ideology of functionality is juxtaposed with the one of sentiment and nostalgia.

Functionality clashes with sentiment and attachment, viewed as impediments to change. Minimalists subject the purchasing of or getting rid of things to scrupulous reflection. Their choices are strongly marked by a need to rationalize, justify, and seek possible motivations for their decisions. Such moments of reflection on things are most commonly linked with radical changes in minimalists' lifestyles, specifically through a form of conversion known as 'biographical transformation': 'A dramatic reorganization of the home causes correspondingly dramatic changes in lifestyle and perspective'. They describe dilemmas connected with imposing various forms of logic and narrative upon themselves. Oftentimes such a reflection required reworking new patterns of thought and

action, ultimately bringing satisfaction with the decision taken. Joshua Fields Millburn (n.d.) said:

> I had already simplified my life, paid off my debt, changed my spending habits, and radically reduced my cost of living. So I sold my house, paid off my car, eliminated nearly all my bills, and moved into a tiny $500-per-month minimalist apartment (…) Over time, I slowly became an "expert" on leaving the corporate world in the pursuit of dreams.

In the discourse of maximalists, arguments justifying the collection of things are derived from the past and memory: "Personally, I see it as a collection of emotions and memories." Objects help to organize and store memories, as the emotions evoked by a given object can be linked to one's closest and dearest relationships. Getting rid of those would be tantamount to betraying one's ideals and denying one's relationships. Conversely, minimalists express different sentiments: rationality, practicality, and minimalism being in vogue seem to be justified, dictating the rejection of emotions as a troublesome impediment to change.

What proved to be crucial in the clash between functionality and sentiment was to define problematic objects as either 'unnecessary clutter' (f=32), 'junk, or treasure/s' (f=26). The latter evaluation is justified: 'So we say never hold back with the personal objects, mementos, pictures, and paintings that evoke a memory or a story, as those are the things that transform a house into a home.' Unwillingness to discard such objects, according to Jonathan Culler (1988), is identical to the fear of forgetting one's past.

SEARCHING FOR ESCAPE

At a moment when ongoing climate change, economic uncertainty, mutating pandemic, and geopolitical crisis all threaten to destroy the things that the middle classes take for granted, there appears to be a renewed interest in things (maximalism) or 'new forms of inwardness' (minimalism). Both approaches are a manifestation of a desire for a 'different world': 'The world can be a grey, grim place, and in response, we want our homes to exist as a kind of joyful refuge' seems to be the maximalists' manifesto.

Embracing the thesis that Western society may be perceived as anomic[1], minimalists hold pessimistic views of global capitalism, which causes them to view their lifestyle as a form of escape, allowing for personal growth. Minimalists

[1] Anomie is a sociological term used to describe situations where social „norms" are conflicting or non-integrated. At the individual level, anomia can be used to describe someone who feels alienated and unable to direct her/his life meaningfully in a social context (Roberts, 1978).

attempt to escape what they describe as a highly materialistic and morally flawed society and, as such, perceive a reversal of their previous conformist lives. The minimalists' life goals are determined by pursuing a project of self-improvement (f = 27). Such an experience of the authentic 'self' is described by Charles Taylor (1989, p. 130,176) as a 'radical turn' to the self as a self or first-person subjectivity, owing to which we are thus able to conceive of ourselves as having inner depths (2007, p. 539–40). Christopher Lasch (1991, p. 29) explains that as people lost hope in improving the world politically, they retreated into self-improvement.

In a time of crisis and social tension, the 'return to materialistic things' motto seems sound: 'In contrast to the optimism that accompanied the sleek minimalism of the nineties, the terrifying situation we live in today has conjured a desire for the wealthy to hide themselves away.' Objects help us feel comfortable in the world. Thanks to their materialistic dimension they are palpable and solid, hence are able to counter an excess of loosely drifting meanings and be used as support: 'In a changing world, where constants are being challenged, clutter core helps people ground themselves in the material, and in beautiful things that often hark from a more stable past'.

The functions of objects are grounded in various narratives (see above). By construing meanings that give them a sense of security, maximalists rely on certain goods to shield themselves from anxiety, stress, uncertainty, and risk. Maximalists envision and experience their home as a resource for 'finding one's own space' outside the social, political, and economic contradictions: 'We create a space in which we can retreat from all the terror outside.' In their discourse, a home serves as an idealized form of a safe, cozy stronghold where one can hide from the world: 'We want to feel safe, we want to feel comfortable, we want to feel protected and taken care of – things can act like a literal cocoon'. Since unpredictable things happen from time to time, it is advisable to be prepared in advance: '… the more money you spend, the more protected you can become, hidden amongst your excessive home décor.'

However, Cohen and Taylor (1992, p. 15) raise an important observation: 'What 'the collapse of meta-narratives' implies is that there is no single meaning system or metaphor that we can use to obtain a sense of the world from which we want to distance ourselves or against which we want to construct an alternative'. Hence, post-structural thought argues that it is not possible to talk about escape when there is no all-encompassing reality from which to escape. As Rojek (1993, p. 212) cynically states in "Ways of Escape": "There is no escape."

AESTHETICS: TRANSPARENT SIMPLICITY – ECLECTIC ENCLAVE

The aesthetics of simplicity and functionality prevalent in the minimalist approach take the form of eclecticism and abundance in the case of maximalism, defined as a counter-aesthetic to the minimalist hegemony. A wealth of objects forms colorful mosaics, and a wealth of patterns, colors, shapes, layers, and materials becomes a synonym for warmth and 'coziness.' Minimalistic materials, such as glass or concrete, are often perceived as cold and inhuman, making them unwelcoming: 'These homes are impossible; they have no signs of life.'

Maximalism is 'a reaction against the muted tone and empty homes of minimalists'. Such an aesthetic stands in opposition to the formal codes of minimalism, which are expected to be 'rigid and lacking in personality'. Maximalists' apartments are equipped with everything needed. Therefore, one should be isolated from the external world, a symbol of instrumental, cold relations and unpredictable events, by means of curtains, shutters, and blinds. Those, in turn, wanted to be discarded by modernistic reformers, striving to replace the bourgeois with modern transparency. Such coziness and decorativeness have come under criticism from minimalists, who, following modernist architects and philosophers such as Walter Benjamin, claim that their objective is to free individuals from symbiotic and limiting structures (van Herck, 2005, pp. 124–127). Le Corbusier justified his attack on the cozy interior by a need to object to 'sentimental hysteria', Bruno Taut claimed that 'cozy practices are an almost primitive or neurotic ritual of 'rugglueing'', while Hannes Meyer believed that 'coziness (Gemütlichkeit) is something that should find its place in 'the heart of the individual' and not on 'the wall of his home'' (cited by van Herck, 2005, p.124). Such a belief contributed to promoting the model that is motivated by rationality and tidiness. Being separated and isolated was viewed by Benjamin as an expression of egocentric individualism. His model, ideal for the 20th century, was a house of glass, an epitome of openness and transparency (van Herck, 2005, p. 127). Consequently, a minimalist design aesthetic is characterized by 'white' (f = 47) rooms with minimal furniture or décor, and by 'extreme spareness and simplicity' (f = 94).

The discourse of maximalists leans towards the traditional vision of home, rooted in space, where objects are carriers of emotions, feelings, memories, and identity but also bring sensual pleasure. Coziness and abundance, reminiscent of Victorian times, can be viewed as a bridgehead for traditional ways of thinking about home, a bulwark against the expansion of the modern, uncertain, unpredictable, and turbulent.

CONCLUSION

The analyzed discourse re-emphasizes 'the self,' relying on individual worldviews to (1) redefine escape as a mindset (minimalism) or self-expression through home interiors (maximalism) and (2) shift 'objectivity' (truth/ethics) toward subjective experiences (minimalism) or aesthetic synthesis (maximalism).

Maximalist discourse, rich in imagery rather than deep meaning, celebrates excess, pleasure, and bold aesthetics. Aesthetic experiences, rooted in sensual pleasure, are subjective rather than ontological. While design can be a valid form of self-expression, equating self-expression solely with aesthetics may limit its depth.

For minimalists, self-care and inward focus shape identity, aiming for peace or pleasure through self-improvement. Their discourse aligns with the idea of *gnothi seauton* as an exercise rather than self-discovery. Minimalism promotes decluttering as a path to control, reducing life's complexity to psychological recommendations. It creates a myth of "happiness" achieved by discarding objects, equating simplicity with moral purity, yet devoid of moral content.

Maximalists, instead of rejecting the imperfect self, seek affirmation through self-expression. Both discourses exemplify expressive individualism, where self-fulfillment is not a privilege but an expectation. Socialization now demands self-articulation, making personal identity formation almost obligatory.

The maximalist ideal home serves as a topos – an aspirational model of identity and freedom. Home is not just a living space, but an extension of the self; yet, the pressure to achieve this ideal can lead to frustration, a reality often overlooked in maximalist narratives.

Both movements, despite rejecting external trends, operate within a system of institutional reflexivity (Giddens, 1991), which is influenced by expert-driven industries such as interior design. While Lipovetsky argued that status in consumerism has waned, maximalist decorativeness and minimalist luxury suggest otherwise. Both lifestyles align with middle- and upper-middle-class tastes, subtly reinforcing class distinctions while avoiding explicit discussions of cost or status.

As media-driven cultural trends, these discourses shape contemporary consumption, influencing the organization of space, leisure activities, and design. They reflect modern uncertainties rather than offering resistance or subversion. While they attempt to redefine biographies and deepen identity, they lack engagement with fundamental existential or moral questions, remaining largely aesthetic pursuits. Whether seen as fashionable escapism or a response to modern contradictions, their rejection of moral certainty presents its own challenges.

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