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Minimalism in Material Possessions: Theory and Measurement

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We develop the Minimalism in Material Possessions (MMP) scale which measures consumers' preference for a low quantity of material possessions. The 9-item scale exhibits high reliability and is conceptually and empirically distinct from materialism.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In times of growing public awareness of ecological and sustainability concerns, the boom of tiny houses in light of rising house prices, as well as increasing flexibility and mobility demanded by modern working life, minimalism has gained large popularity in the U.S. and beyond as an attractive way of living. In the popular media, minimalism describes a way of living with less—often accompanied by the endorsement of a rigorous decluttering philosophy. In the scientific literature, the research field of anticonsumption (see Makri et al. 2020 for a review) has intensively studied the intentional avoidance of consumption in light of consumers' responsibility regarding environmental, ethical, and socio-political matters (e.g., Alexander and Ussher 2012; Elgin and Mitchell 1977; Leonard-Barton 1981; Shaw and Newholm 2002).

Yet, to date, the literature provides neither a clear theoretical conceptualization of minimalism nor an empirical measurement approach to allow for quantitative and more in-depth research on this construct. The present research fills this gap and develops both a distinct conceptualization and a measurement scale of minimalism.

Minimalism can be broadly defined as the valuation of fewer possessions (Alexander and Ussher 2012, p. 74), which reflects the pure materialistic aspect of anticonsumption without making assumptions regarding the underlying motivations. The literature on sharing, borrowing, and access-based services as forms of consumption alternative to ownership suggests that possessions come with physical, economic, or emotional costs that form a “burden of ownership” (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012; Moeller and Wittkowski 2010). This material burden weighs heavily in an increasingly fast-changing, uncertain, and globalized society (Baumann 2000, 2007) that promotes a modern working life characterized by international travel, short-term employment contracts, and frequent changes in employment or, as a consequence, frequent relocation. Modern-day demands for flexibility, mobility, and adaptability in personal, social, and professional life call for a more liquid relationship with material possessions (Bardhi et al. 2012). Liquid consumption as a more temporary, access-based, and dematerialized form of consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) matches this current zeitgeist, as it minimizes effort and costs associated with physical possessions.

Accordingly, we argue that minimalist consumers seek to avoid the various costs attached to possessions by minimizing the number of possessions itself. Hence, in line with Alexander and Ussher (2012), we define minimalism as a preference for an overall low quantity of material possessions. Importantly, this preference is not restricted to a specific domain of material possessions (e.g., only clothes) and includes all physical, storable, and non-perishable items of any size of which the consumer is a permanent owner. Notably, as a minimalist preference does *not* reflect a valuation of one's possessions but a valuation of a *low quantity* of possessions, minimalism is conceptually distinct from materialism (Richins 2004). To make consumers' interindividual difference in this preference measurable, we develop the 9-item Minimalism in Material Possessions (MMP) scale.

In study 1, 100 participants created a pool of 400 items reflecting minimalist consumers' attitudes and behaviors based on our aforementioned conceptualization of minimalism. This list was reduced to 61 items in a step-wise procedure including independent

appropriateness ratings (Rust and Cooil 1994), careful editing, and redundancy checks.

In study 2, eight consumer behavior junior faculty evaluated the content validity of the remaining items by rating their representativeness of the construct and their comprehensibility on 5-point Likert scales. Items scoring below 4 in both rating dimensions were dropped, which left 21 items.

In study 3 (N=400), we performed a principal component analysis (PCA) on the preliminary scale of 21 items which indicated a one-factor solution. After elimination of items with high cross-loadings, low loadings on the first factor or high content redundancy, a final PCA on the 9 remaining items resulted in a one-factor solution ($R^2 = .72$). A follow-up confirmatory factor analysis indicated a good-fitting model ($\chi^2 = 66.34$, $df = 27$; CFI = .99; TLI = .98; RMSEA = .06). The scale is highly reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$) and only weakly correlated ($r = .11$; $p = .022$) with social desirability (Crowne and Marlowe 1960).

Study 4 (N=400) assessed the convergent and discriminant validity of the MMP scale within its nomological network. A confirmatory factor analysis with the 9 MMP items and 12 other theoretically related constructs yielded a good model fit ($\chi^2 = 18,457.60$, $df = 7,547$; CFI = .73; TLI = .72; RMSEA = .06). The correlations of the 12 constructs with the MMP scale demonstrated good discriminant and convergent validity (range of correlations from $-.42$ to $.44$). We also found significant correlations with demographic variables (i.e., a negative relation to income and a positive relation to education) and variables relating to participants' number of possessions (i.e., the higher the MMP score, the lower the number of possessions).

In summary, by providing a conceptualization and a valid and reliable measurement of minimalism as a preference for a low quantity of material possessions, we contribute to the literature on anticonsumption (Makri et al. 2020) and liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). The present research enables future quantitative research on minimalism, such as examining the antecedents (e.g., to disentangle different types of minimalists) and behavioral consequences (e.g., to identify new styles of consumption) of minimalist preferences. If the modern lifestyle gives rise to a gradual shift from traditional ownership mentality to more minimalist mindsets, marketers will need to find more “liquid” solutions for their customers. The MMP scale serves as an important starting point for corresponding research activities.

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