

## Aesthetic Experience and User Perception in the Use of Minimalism in Contemporary Web Design

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**Abstract.** *This study explores the aesthetic experience and user perception resulting from the use of minimalism in contemporary web design. As minimalism continues to shape modern digital aesthetics, understanding how users emotionally and cognitively engage with minimalist interfaces becomes increasingly relevant. The research aims to identify how visual simplicity, functional clarity, and negative space contribute to user satisfaction and usability. Employing a mixed-method approach, including user testing and surveys with a sample of 60 participants, this study evaluates responses to minimalist and non-minimalist website prototypes. The findings reveal that minimalist design enhances perceived elegance and ease of navigation, while also increasing the sense of trust and professionalism. However, the absence of visual cues can challenge some users in completing complex tasks. These insights highlight the importance of balancing visual simplicity with user guidance to optimize user experience. This research contributes to the evolving discourse on digital aesthetics and provides practical implications for designers seeking to integrate minimalist principles without compromising functionality.*

**Keywords:** *Aesthetic experience, minimalism, user perception, user-centered design, web design*

### 1. BACKGROUND

In recent years, minimalism has become a dominant aesthetic trend in contemporary web design. Characterized by simplicity, clarity, and the intentional use of white space, minimalism responds to users' increasing demand for intuitive and visually calm interfaces. As digital interfaces grow in complexity, minimalist design provides a counterbalance by emphasizing only the essential elements, thereby enhancing usability and focus (Moran, 2020). This design approach aligns with the principles of cognitive load theory, suggesting that reducing visual clutter allows users to process information more efficiently (Sweller, 2011).

Scholars and practitioners have explored how design choices impact user behavior and perception. Research shows that minimalist interfaces are often associated with professionalism, elegance, and trustworthiness (Tractinsky, Cokhavi, Kirschenbaum, & Sharfi, 2006). However, despite these positive associations, some studies reveal that extreme simplicity may sacrifice clarity, leading to confusion or task failure when users are unable to locate necessary functions (Michailidou, Harper, & Bechhofer, 2008). This highlights a tension between aesthetic appeal and functional usability in web design.

While prior research has examined various dimensions of minimalism—such as visual hierarchy, color contrast, and typography—there remains a gap in understanding how aesthetic experiences interact with user perception and decision-making processes in digital environments. In particular, the emotional and cognitive responses of users to minimalist web design are not yet fully understood, especially across different user demographics and contexts

of use (Lavie & Tractinsky, 2004). Addressing this knowledge gap is essential for developing more effective and user-centered design strategies.

Furthermore, minimalism's growing influence in digital branding and e-commerce necessitates deeper exploration into how users experience and interpret minimalist interfaces. As brands increasingly adopt minimalist aesthetics to signal credibility and innovation, understanding the user's subjective experience becomes crucial for achieving both engagement and retention (Norman, 2004). This intersection between visual aesthetics and user behavior calls for an integrated approach that combines design theory, psychology, and human-computer interaction.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the relationship between aesthetic experience and user perception in the context of minimalist web design. Through a mixed-method investigation involving user testing and surveys, the research seeks to identify key factors that shape user satisfaction and usability within minimalist interfaces. By doing so, the study contributes to the discourse on digital aesthetics while offering practical insights for web designers aiming to create both beautiful and functional user experiences.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The foundation of minimalist web design lies in principles derived from cognitive psychology and visual aesthetics. Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 2011) posits that individuals have limited mental capacity for processing information, and reducing extraneous content allows users to focus more effectively on task-relevant elements. In a digital context, this supports the use of minimalism to simplify interfaces and reduce unnecessary distractions. When a website's design minimizes cognitive load, users are more likely to complete tasks with greater accuracy and satisfaction.

Visual aesthetics also play a critical role in shaping user experiences. According to Lavie and Tractinsky (2004), aesthetic perceptions of websites are multi-dimensional and include both classical aesthetics—such as balance, symmetry, and clarity—and expressive aesthetics, which relate to creativity and originality. Minimalist designs often score high in classical aesthetics, as they emphasize structure, whitespace, and visual harmony. These features have been linked to increased perceptions of professionalism and trustworthiness in various digital settings (Tractinsky et al., 2006).

From the perspective of user experience (UX) theory, Don Norman's (2004) framework of emotional design emphasizes that users respond not only to functionality but also to the emotional resonance of visual presentation. A clean, minimalist interface can evoke positive emotional responses such as calmness and confidence, contributing to better user engagement. However, UX research also notes that overly sparse designs can result in ambiguity, especially for first-time users or those unfamiliar with certain interface conventions (Michailidou, Harper, & Bechhofer, 2008). This suggests a design trade-off between aesthetic simplicity and intuitive usability.

In addition, Gestalt principles of visual perception provide a theoretical framework for understanding how users interpret minimalist design elements. Principles such as proximity, similarity, and figure-ground organization help users make sense of spatial relationships on a web page (Palmer, 1999). Minimalist layouts often rely heavily on these principles to guide attention and create clear visual hierarchies without excessive use of text or imagery. Effective use of Gestalt laws ensures that users can navigate digital environments seamlessly, despite the minimal use of content.

Previous empirical studies have explored the relationship between minimalism and user performance. For instance, Tuch et al. (2012) found that users form rapid judgments about website aesthetics that subsequently influence their perceptions of usability. Similarly, Lindgaard et al. (2006) showed that first impressions of websites are formed within milliseconds, and design factors such as layout cleanliness and visual order significantly affect user trust and retention. These studies collectively highlight the complex interplay between visual design, user emotion, and task performance—offering a basis for this study's investigation into how minimalist web design affects user perception and aesthetic experience.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a quantitative-dominant mixed-methods design to investigate the aesthetic experience and user perception of minimalist web design. The combination of quantitative data (through structured surveys and usability testing) and qualitative insights (through open-ended user feedback) allows for a comprehensive understanding of user responses. The study employs an exploratory sequential approach, where user testing precedes survey distribution to refine the measurement tools (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The population for this research consists of active internet users aged between 18 and 45, selected from academic and professional environments. A purposive sampling technique was applied to recruit 60 participants with diverse digital literacy backgrounds to reflect real-world user diversity. The sample size is considered sufficient for behavioral usability studies that do not involve inferential generalization but rather pattern detection and thematic exploration (Faulkner, 2003).

Data collection involved two main instruments: (1) an interactive prototype of a minimalist website, designed specifically for this study, and (2) a user perception survey containing both Likert-scale questions and open-ended prompts. The prototype presented two interface variations—minimalist and non-minimalist—allowing participants to engage in simple tasks such as navigation, information search, and form submission. After the interaction, participants completed the survey to capture their perceptions of aesthetics, usability, clarity, and emotional response. The survey was adapted from the visual aesthetics scale by Lavie and Tractinsky (2004) and the System Usability Scale (SUS) by Brooke (1996).

Data analysis included both descriptive and inferential statistics using SPSS software. Mean scores, standard deviations, and t-tests were used to compare user responses between the minimalist and non-minimalist designs. To test the significance of mean differences, an independent t-test was applied at a 0.05 significance level (Field, 2013). Additionally, thematic analysis was conducted on open-ended responses to identify qualitative insights related to emotional and cognitive responses.

The research model is built upon the theoretical framework of aesthetic-usability interaction (Tractinsky et al., 2006), in which perceived aesthetics (PA) and perceived usability (PU) are hypothesized to influence user satisfaction (US) and task performance (TP). Symbolically, the model can be stated as:

$$US = f(PA, PU)$$

$$TP = f(PA, PU)$$

where:

- **PA** = Perceived Aesthetics
- **PU** = Perceived Usability
- **US** = User Satisfaction
- **TP** = Task Performance

These variables are measured through the survey instrument and tested for correlation and influence. The instrument's reliability was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient exceeding 0.80 for all constructs, indicating high internal consistency (Nunnally & Bernstein,

1994). The validity of the constructs was examined using construct and face validity, aligning with existing literature.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data collection was conducted over a two-week period in April 2025 at a university-based usability testing laboratory and via online platforms. Participants (N = 60) were randomly assigned to interact with either a minimalist or non-minimalist web prototype developed for the study. Each participant completed five core tasks (navigation, information search, contact form submission, etc.) on the prototype and then filled out a post-task survey measuring perceived aesthetics, usability, emotional response, and task satisfaction.

**Table 1 below presents the descriptive statistics for perceived aesthetics (PA), perceived usability (PU), and user satisfaction (US) for both web design variants:**

| Variable             | Minimalist (Mean $\pm$ SD) | Non-Minimalist (Mean $\pm$ SD) | t-value | p-value |
|----------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|---------|---------|
| Perceived Aesthetics | 4.35 $\pm$ 0.48            | 3.69 $\pm$ 0.62                | 5.43    | < 0.001 |
| Perceived Usability  | 4.21 $\pm$ 0.52            | 3.78 $\pm$ 0.66                | 3.74    | 0.002   |
| User Satisfaction    | 4.40 $\pm$ 0.51            | 3.85 $\pm$ 0.59                | 4.90    | < 0.001 |

*Source: Author's analysis using SPSS, 2025*

The findings indicate statistically significant differences between the minimalist and non-minimalist interfaces in all three dimensions measured. Participants rated the minimalist design as significantly more aesthetically pleasing and usable, consistent with previous findings by Lavie and Tractinsky (2004), who emphasized the impact of classical aesthetics on perceived quality. Additionally, these results support Tractinsky et al. (2006), who demonstrated that perceived aesthetics can positively influence judgments of usability—a phenomenon known as the "aesthetic-usability effect."

These results align with Norman's (2004) theory of emotional design, which states that users form affective impressions of products based on their visual qualities. The minimalist design's simplicity appears to have triggered positive emotional responses that contributed to higher levels of user satisfaction.

However, qualitative feedback from open-ended survey items suggests that while the minimalist design was appreciated for its elegance and clarity, a subset of users expressed frustration due to lack of visible cues for deeper navigation. This finding echoes concerns raised by Michailidou et al. (2008), who cautioned that minimalism, when applied excessively, may hinder task clarity—especially for novice users.

This tension between aesthetic value and functional clarity suggests the importance of balance. Gestalt principles, especially figure-ground and proximity, may help resolve this by providing visual hierarchy and user guidance even within minimalist layouts (Palmer, 1999). Therefore, designers should not assume that simplicity alone guarantees effectiveness but must strategically structure content and interactions.

From a theoretical perspective, the results confirm that both perceived aesthetics and usability play critical roles in influencing user satisfaction and task performance. The strong correlation between these variables suggests an interaction effect, in line with the research model proposed by Tractinsky et al. (2006). The model was empirically supported through correlation analysis (not shown here), indicating  $r$ -values above 0.60 for both PA-US and PU-US relationships ( $p < 0.01$ ).

From a practical standpoint, these findings provide actionable insights for UX designers and developers. Applying minimalist principles can improve user satisfaction, particularly in contexts where clarity, trust, and elegance are prioritized, such as healthcare or financial services websites. However, excessive reduction in interface elements must be avoided to prevent disorientation.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

The findings of this study conclude that minimalist web design significantly enhances users' perceived aesthetics, usability, and overall satisfaction, thereby affirming the relevance of the aesthetic-usability effect as proposed by Tractinsky et al. (2006). The minimalist interface elicited positive emotional responses such as calmness and trust, consistent with Norman's (2004) emotional design theory, and was rated significantly higher than its non-minimalist counterpart across all evaluated dimensions. However, some participants reported difficulties in navigation due to limited visual cues, echoing concerns raised by Michailidou et al. (2008) about excessive simplicity reducing functional clarity. Based on these outcomes, designers are advised to maintain a balance between aesthetic simplicity and user guidance by applying Gestalt principles effectively (Palmer, 1999). While the study provides meaningful insights into how users cognitively and emotionally respond to minimalist interfaces, the results

should be interpreted with caution due to the relatively small and demographically homogeneous sample, which may limit the generalizability of findings. Future research should consider more diverse user groups, cross-cultural perspectives, and longitudinal testing to better understand the long-term usability and emotional impacts of minimalist web design (Lavie & Tractinsky, 2004).

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