

The Negative Impact of Minimalism on Brands: Taking Mcdonald's Fast Food Restaurant Decoration as an Example

Chunyin Diao ^{1, a}, Yeung Ki Fai, Frankie ^{2, b *}

¹ Faculty of Arts and Design, Macau Polytechnic University, Macao, China;

² Faculty of Arts and Design, Macau Polytechnic University, Room P210, 2/F, Chun Hei Building,

^a p2414609@mpu.edu.mo, ^b frankieyeung@mpu.edu.mo

Abstract. In recent years, with the rise of minimalism, many McDonald's outlets have adopting a minimalist style, which has, to some extent, eroded the user experience. While minimalism offers a sense of freshness, it has lost the original lively and bustling atmosphere, creating an emotional distance for customers. This paper analyses how the minimalist trend weakens the emotional connection between the brand and its customers, from aspects such as emotional design. It argues that, as a restaurant associated with happiness and vitality, McDonald's store decor should be able to resonate with customers' emotions. However, overly minimalist designs fail to convey this kind of feeling, thereby having a certain negative impact on the brand image. Therefore, it is emphasised that brands must consider their own positioning and customers' emotional needs when following trends. This paper hopes that through the analysis of the McDonald's case, it will serve as a reminder to brands in sectors highly reliant on customer experience, such as food and beverage and retail, that when undertaking store design or brand image updates, they should be more cautious in balancing minimalism with brand identity. It is hoped that this will encourage brands to pay greater attention to customer emotional responses and avoid damaging their brand image by blindly following trends.

Keywords: Minimalism; Shop fit-out; Brand image; Emotional connection.

1. The Interaction and Key Factors Between the Development of Fashion Trends and Brand Positioning

The development of fashion trends changes with the times and is influenced by factors such as the level of economic development, social and cultural differences across regions, and policy guidance. After the Industrial Revolution, the Bauhaus design philosophy and Mies van der Rohe's classic assertion of "Less is more" laid the foundation for minimalist style. During the era of maximalism, to stand out amidst a flood of information and create distinctive and eye-catching promotions, minimalism categorized emotions as non-functional and unnecessary, with designers focusing solely on visual impact. Minimalism from Japan in Asia also gradually began to influence the world. For example, the Japanese brand MUJI, by July 2025, had nearly 1,400 global stores, enjoying high acceptance in international markets. MUJI pursues "freedom in use," or versatility (as shown in Figure 1), enabling repeated use in most scenarios, thereby reducing the time and financial waste associated with choices in fast-paced lifestyles. Since minimalist styles help reduce cognitive load for audiences when processing numerous advertisements, an increasing number of brands are adopting minimalist design approaches, leading to a trend of homogenization. Brands that already have high recognition simplifying their designs can make their brand image more prominent, but when many brands follow the trend simultaneously, the higher the degree of simplification, the lower the brand's distinctiveness becomes. Established brands influenced by this trend, abandoning their traditional identities and conforming to the flow, risk being overwhelmed by the trend, gradually diminishing their original recognition. A brand image is a design with clear identifiability. Adhering to a brand's own style facilitates the establishment of its image. Brands should not blindly follow trends at the expense of their core values and positioning. Brand style is also one of the manifestations of specific marketing strategies. Brands may adjust their image according to varying

development and marketing strategies at different times, with some aspects aligning with trends and others not.

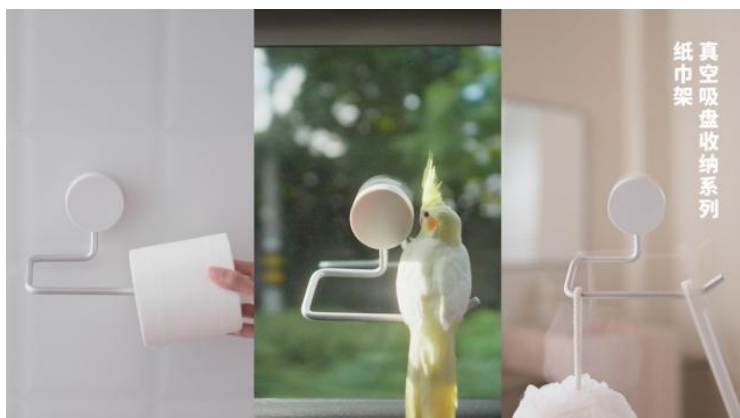


Fig. 1 MUJI "Freedom of Use"

Image source: https://www.muji.com.cn/cn/video/2024_8_23.mp4

2. The Development of McDonald's Fast-Food Restaurant Brand Store Decoration

The McDonald's logo has undergone multiple simplifications since 1960 (as shown in Figures 2 and 3). The 1960 version removed the blue color, highlighting the Golden Arches. In 1970, the "M" appeared in the hardwired decor. By 1980, a red background was added to emphasize the brand's colors, and the stores also adopted a simpler red design. In 1990, three-dimensional highlights were introduced, and the stores used a richer color palette. In 2002, abstract squares were added, and the stores continued with the 1990 design. By 2017, the logo reached its minimalist form, retaining only the "Golden Arches." Today, the store exteriors adhere to minimalism, emphasizing the logo, and regulations specify that the proportion of yellow used should be higher than red (the opposite of the 1960 version). The restaurant's hardwired decor has gradually reduced ornamentation. Interbrand's "Best Global Brands" report tracks brand logo recognition, and 2022 data shows that McDonald's logo has successfully established a "visual anchor" at the semiotic level. The McDonald's Golden Arches are recognized in over 92% of countries, surpassing the brand name itself. According to the Brandindex database (2021 data), in 12 countries without McDonald's stores, the recognition rate of the yellow Golden Arches symbol was 68%, far exceeding the 23% correct spelling rate of the brand name.



Fig. 2 The Evolution of McDonald's Logos Over the Years

Image source: <https://www.mcdonalds.com.cn/index/McD/about/brand-25>

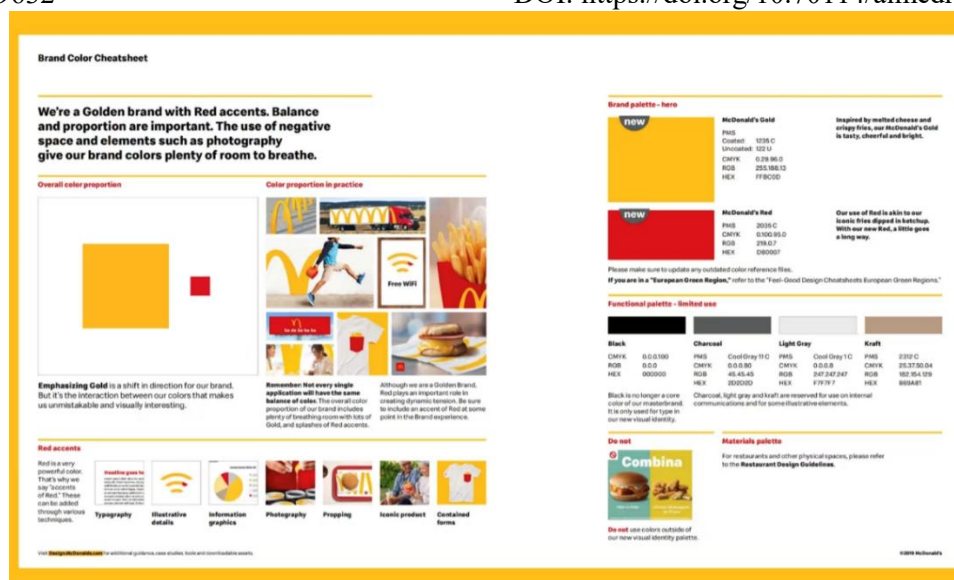


Fig. 3 The Evolution of McDonald's Logos Over the Years

Image source: <https://www.mcdonalds.com.cn/index/McD/about/brand-25>

Store decoration is a concrete manifestation of the brand image. From the perspective of visual hierarchy design, store decoration occupies visual priority. In terms of location, size, color, and other aspects, it can capture people's attention at first glance. Optimized and designed store decoration can, to some extent, assist diners in making choices and help convert the surrounding foot traffic into in-store customer traffic. The brand stores of McDonald's fast-food restaurants have shown a gradual trend of reducing decorations (as shown in Figure 6). In the memories of children from the 1990s to the 2000s, McDonald's had a unique and highly recognizable style. The McDonald's mascot would pose for photos with customers on chairs, and the stores featured children's play areas where kids could play barefoot. Although the facilities were simple, they were still a "heaven" for children. Celebrating a birthday at McDonald's during childhood was considered a cool and happy experience. Classic plastic statues of McDonald's mascot were hung on the walls. The restaurant retained mosaic-covered columns, connected tables and chairs, and an apple tree—all decorations that are no longer seen in modern McDonald's. The different designs of the environment have a significant impact on people's visual perception and psychological state. A richly decorated, child-friendly style can make customers feel relaxed and happy. For example, in a children's environment, expressing emotions such as making mistakes, laughing, or crying is often allowed. In contrast, in an office setting, people usually need to maintain focus and composure while working, and emotional fluctuations during this process are often discouraged from being displayed. The atmosphere of meritocracy also makes people more focused on the success or failure of outcomes. Previously, McDonald's could serve as a "mood transit station" for people, but now, influenced by the minimalist trend, it has become monotonous and boring, losing its function as a "mood transit station." Emotions are inherently an important part of human social life, and store decoration can serve as a way to meet this need, providing people with emotional sustenance. The popularity of minimalism overlooks people's need for warmth and emotional connection on a spiritual level. Moreover, as restaurant interior styles become increasingly simplified, the store decorations are also becoming more similar to those of competitors (as shown in Figures 7 and 8). The minimalist trend has led to the blurring of brand personalities. The trend has caused many brands to adopt the same design language, making it difficult for consumers to distinguish between them. After McDonald's implemented a minimalist store design style and promotional image, more and more people have found it hard to tell the difference between McDonald's, Burger King, and KFC. As of 2025, McDonald's has over 7,000 stores in mainland China (Source: Sina Finance, May 29, 2025). In contrast, its competitor KFC had 11,943 stores in mainland China as of May 2025

(Source: Yum China's First Quarter 2025 Financial Report). KFC's store count shows a decisive advantage. People are increasingly unable to distinguish between the two Western fast-food chains, both impacted by the minimalist design trend, to the point where absurd scenarios occur, such as customers ordering KFC meals at McDonald's. The phrase "This is McDonald's, we don't have V-I-P Thursday" has even become a popular internet meme. Excessive pursuit of the minimalist trend can sacrifice brand personality. Brands should have their own core values and long-term goals, rather than becoming followers of trends. As of June 2025, Burger King had 1,501 stores in mainland China (Source: Sina Finance, June 13, 2025), far fewer than McDonald's and KFC. In interviews, most people expressed unfamiliarity with the brand, and out of 24 interviews, only three people had ever dined at Burger King.



Fig. 4 Real-life photos of McDonald's, KFC, and Burger King.

Image source: <https://www.mcdonalds.com.cn/index/McD/about/brand-25>

An interview conducted based on these three real-life photos, showing McDonald's, KFC, and Burger King from left to right (as shown in Figure 4). The interview took place on Wednesday, July 16, 2025, and yielded a total of 24 valid responses. Only 13 people correctly identified the brand stores, with KFC having the highest correct identification rate. Common errors included confusing McDonald's with Burger King (as shown in Figure 5). This result also proves the importance of in-store design. Current store designs tend to be too simplistic and lack brand distinctiveness, making it difficult for customers to easily recognize the brands.

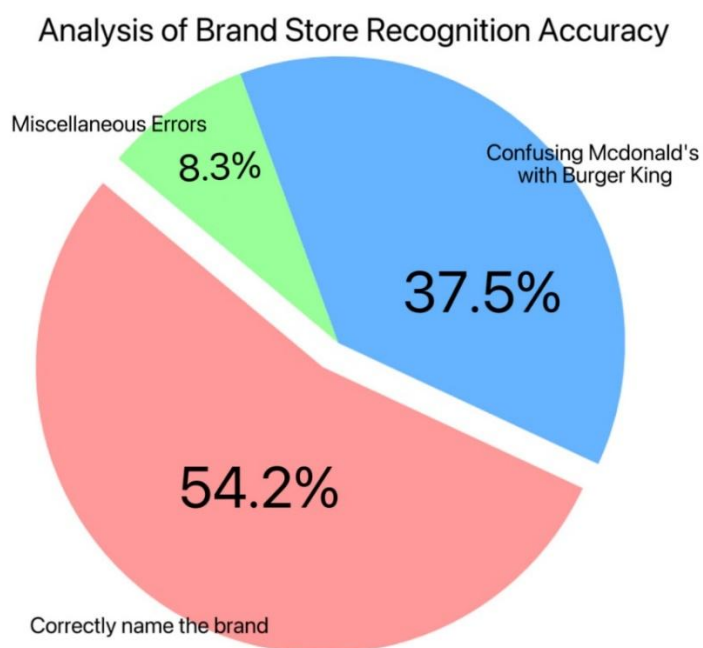


Fig. 5 Analysis chart of brand store identification accuracy

Image source: Drawn by the author.



Fig. 6 The changes of McDonald's

Image source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DLEEOZ1pMDa/?igsh=c2F4ZDJ0cnM0bjNq>



Fig. 7 KFC restaurant store

Image source: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1744459906418384938&wfr=spider&for=pc>



Fig. 8 McDonald's restaurant store

Image source:

<https://m.dianping.com/ugcdetail/278736067?sceneType=0&bizType=29&msource=baiduappugc>

3. Fashion Trends Erode User Experience

In March 2025, "New Phase" published an article on WeChat Official Account titled "McDonald's has turned into an emotionless middle-aged person, what about you?" which sparked widespread attention and resonance, receiving over nine thousand forwards. Many people began to recall the restaurant decorations of McDonald's from that era. The color scheme and signature products of McDonald's are still there, but our experience is no longer as good as it used to be. In today's fast-paced social environment, the service models of the catering industry are constantly expanding, and food delivery has become a highly favored dining option among consumers. This trend has led to a gradual decline in the perceived presence of traditional stores in consumers' minds. If the goal is simply to obtain food, consumers often prefer food delivery to save time. When consumers choose to dine in at a store, their expectations go beyond just the food itself; they also look for carefully designed store decorations and attentive restaurant service. All of these should contribute to a complete and deserved experience for the consumer. After interviewing 24 customers and gathering feedback, 15 people prioritized food delivery, while only 9 preferred dining in-store. The main reasons for choosing to dine in were "happened to be passing by" and "fries get soft if packed to go" (as shown in Figure 9). Currently, in-store decorations and dining environments have not significantly improved customers' dining experiences. Respondents believe that interior design is crucial to the dining experience and hope to perceive the brand's value and uniqueness through a carefully crafted environment.

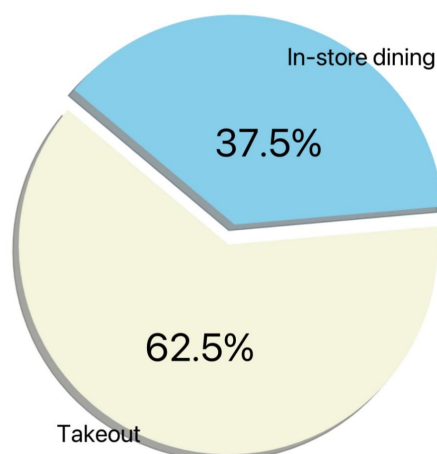


Fig. 9 McDonald's Customer Dining Choice Feedback Statistics Chart

Image source: Drawn by the author.

When McDonald's stores design according to minimalism, they fail to adequately consider the actual consumer experience, leading to an overly simplified shopping experience within the stores. This store model, lacking in depth of experience, is increasingly losing competitiveness compared to more convenient online shopping platforms. In the modern business environment, especially when there is no way to differentiate in store decoration and brand operations, user experience has shifted from a "plus point" to a "must-have." User experience is no longer just a part of design or operations; it is a core competitive advantage that needs to permeate the entire brand strategy. Paying attention to improving user experience is essentially about valuing the long-term development and sustainable growth of the brand.

Minimalism has turned McDonald's into what it is today. With the rise of social media, the appearance of the stores has been reshaped. McDonald's advertisements have gradually been modified to be brightly colored, with simple compositions, emphasizing a "assembly line" commercial style that highlights only the deliciousness and fashion sense of the products. Store decorations have also been constantly reducing their human touch. Under the current highly standardized and commercialized business model, Starbucks and McDonald's share more similarities than one might think. Many once-human-touch details have quietly disappeared, such as

the order handwritten by baristas on coffee cups (as shown in Figure 10), which have now been completely replaced by mechanized, impersonal printed labels (as shown in Figure 11). This transformation may have brought about more than just an increase in commercial efficiency; it also carries a certain indescribable sense of loss. There are even travelers from mainland China who, upon setting foot on the land of Macau, will deliberately include a particular Starbucks that still retains handwritten orders in their itinerary. What they are seeking is not the coffee itself, but that warm memory, now extinct on the mainland, carried by the handwritten orders. Stores with interesting and diverse styles are more likely to establish cross-generational emotional connections. For example, if parents liked the brand when they were young, they will also hope their children will like it. This emotional inheritance is an important part of the brand's long-term value. Shifting towards a minimalist and youthful style might sever this connection, making younger generations feel the brand no longer belongs to them, and also making long-time customers feel the brand has "grown up" and no longer "understands" them as it once did.



Fig. 10 Old handwritten order

Image source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DLnVkGIJpM7/?igsh=MXA3Y3BxOTJjNm44ZA==>
<https://www.instagram.com/p/DJK6az4BF15/?igsh=MXR3NXkybXVxMWw2cg==>



Fig. 11 New machine order label

Image source: Taken by the author.

4. Summary: Analyzing the Negative Impact of The Minimalist Trend on Brands From the Perspective of Emotional Design

Brand services should place greater emphasis on emotional connections with users rather than merely stopping at "meeting needs"; they should actively "create moments of Heartwarming." Some companies blindly follow the marketing content and formats of other brands, resulting in a lack of innovation and freshness for their own brands. This issue is particularly prominent in the digital age.[6] The whimsical visual design of McDonald's in the past was not only a marketing strategy that aligned with the brand's image but also, on a deeper level, responded to people's emotional needs. In a dull world, it meticulously crafted a unique haven of joy for us (as shown in Figure 12). Analyzing from the three levels of emotional design theory: Instinctual Level: McDonald's exaggerated and lively design style in the 1990s captured children's attention and sparked their interest. In a world lacking color, such restaurants became the most unforgettable and memorable places for both adults and children. Whether it was the food itself, the packaging, or the overall environment, everything easily evoked positive emotional responses in people. Behavioral Level: When parents brought their children to McDonald's, the brand established a deep emotional connection with the kids through tangible and perceptible items and facilities. Children's attention was quickly captured by the play equipment and decorations, not only allowing parents to enjoy a moment of tranquility but also promoting spontaneous social interaction among the children. At that time, McDonald's almost provided a "one-stop" solution to parents' needs when taking care of their children, covering food, air conditioning, safety, and play, making it an important and vibrant activity hub in the community. Reflective Level: For many people, McDonald's witnessed countless memorable and beautiful moments in their life journeys, perhaps the first time they scored full marks in an exam or learned to ride a bicycle for the first time. Over time, the decoration and atmosphere of McDonald's have become symbols of happiness and success. This deeply ingrained emotional connection meant that later changes to the decor were not just visual updates; they also brought about a psychological sense of loss. The place that was once a cherished playground in many people's hearts no longer existed, and McDonald's transformed from a destination filled with anticipation into a dining spot that many now choose simply out of necessity to save time (as shown in Figure 13).



Fig. 12 Old McDonald's Interior

Image source: https://www.sohu.com/a/125418035_614787



Fig. 13 New McDonald's Interior

Image source:

<https://m.dianping.com/ugcdetail/317759269?sceneType=0&bizType=29&msource=baiduappugc>

"From the history of commodity consumption, emotion not only profoundly influences people's consumption choices and behaviors, but it has also gradually evolved into a consumer product itself." [7] McDonald's once organized a sunrise viewing check-in event. They invited fans from different regions around the world to check in as the sun rose, and after reaching a certain number of check-ins, they would offer breakfast coupons. This marketing strategy was both romantic and effective. It achieved the goal of promotion while also bringing the brand closer to consumers. In Marx's labor theory of value, abstract labor creates the value of commodities, and capital realizes its increase in value through the sale and consumption of these commodities. [7] This reflects the impact of emotion on consumption. If a brand values the emotions of its consumers, it will naturally gain more favor from them. In this context, brands should be even more cautious about blindly simplifying their brand image design. Instead, they should carefully select emotional connection points with customers and integrate them with innovative design. The importance of restoring the restaurant as a place for emotional connection needs to be emphasized, encouraging it to become a space for people to interact and communicate, rather than just a cold, impersonal "cattle and horse canteen." These limited-time check-in events bring consumers together in the same physical space at the same time, where they meet many others with similar interests. At these moments, McDonald's is not just an ordinary restaurant; it also becomes an indispensable communication space for connecting people with shared hobbies. The experience a store provides to consumers is a channel for the brand to communicate emotions with them. Decoration is a means of creating atmosphere, and atmosphere is the result and feeling created by the decoration.

5. References

- [1] Wang.H.(2025). Research on the Minimalist Trend of Internet Marketing Design under the Background of Visual Information Overload. *Trade Fair Economy* (11),115-118. doi:10.19995/j.cnki.CN10-1617/F7.2025.11.115.
- [2] Li.J.,Li.Y. & Zhang.Z.Y.(2025).ZhangZeyuan:Driving omni-scenario innovation through a user experience design perspective.*Design* (10),96-101. doi:10.20055/j.cnki.1003-0069.002647.
- [3] The boundary of emotional design.*Design* (08),44. doi:CNKI:SUN:SJTY.0.2025-08-026.

- [4] Wang.X.T. (2025). The Application of Emotional Design in Public Space. SHOES TECHNOLOGY AND DESIGN (08),152-154. doi:CNKI:SUN:ZWXE.0.2025-08-050.
- [5] Du.Y.R. & Jiang.Y.H.(2025). Emotional Design for Interactive Art Therapy Installations in the Age of AI and Big Data. Screen Printing (07),121-123. doi:10.20084/j.cnki.1002-4867.2025.07.034.
- [6] Chen.X.(2024). Innovative Trajectories in Corporate Brand Image Design under the Context of Digital Technology. Screen Printing (23),78-80. doi:10.20084/j.cnki.1002-4867.2024.23.022.
- [7] Zuo.I.P.(2023). The Capitalization of Affect and the Emotionalization of Capital: A Critical Examination of the Capitalist Logic of Emotional Consumption and Its Countermeasures. Studies in Ideological Education (04),65-71. doi:CNKI:SUN:SIXI.0.2023-04-010.
- [8] Pei.Y.(2025). The Influence of Minimalist Art on Chinese Visual Design Practice. ART AND DESIGN (05),36-38. doi:10.16824/j.cnki.issn10082832.2025.05.009.
- [9] GU.Z.D.,LIANG.B.W. Study on the Optimization Path of Visual Hierarchy Design based on Cognitive Psychology in the Era of Information Overload [J]. SHOES TECHNOLOGY AND DESIGN,2025,5(10):34-36. DOI:10.3969/j.issn.2096-3793.2025-10-011.
- [10] Chen.Y.L. A Study on Humanized Interior Design Based on Psychological Effects [J]. Building Materials and Decoration,2013(13):46-47.
- [11] Xiao.Y. Research on the Optimization Design of Urban Fair Space from the Perspective of Space Experience [D]. Dalian University of Technology,2022.