

Cross-Generational Reading of Advertising Aesthetics: Minimalist versus Elaborate Visual Design

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Abstract

In a time when visual communication is becoming more and more central to the culture of the consumer, the look and feel of advertising have a particular responsibility in framing attention, interpretation, and brand image. This research explores the differences between minimalist and complex advertising aesthetics' perception across three generations: Generation Z, Millennials, and the older generation. Leveraging visual culture studies' theories, semiotics, cognitive aesthetics, and cultural capital, the research situates advertising as a cultural text interpreted differently according to levels of technological exposure, cultural background, and social position. Adopting a mixed-methods approach that includes semiotic analysis of ads and focus group reception studies, the research observes different interpretative patterns across generations.

1. Introduction:

Advertising has long been an art of persuasion that transcends economic concerns to embrace cultural and social aspects. As a system of signs, symbols, and stories that encode and transmit values, identities, and hopes, it presents aesthetic strategies—ranging from minimalist to complex forms—marginally as important tools of persuasion. In the modern digital age, audiences are bombarded with a plethora of visual information, making advertising design an issue not just of imagination but also of mental effectiveness and cultural consciousness.

Minimalism, with its clean lines, reduced imagery, and limited color schemes, is a design aesthetic built around clarity and effectiveness that speaks deeply to digital culture. On the other hand, complex advertising deals with narrative depth, symbolic abundance, and rich visuals, building meaning through complexity and intertextual association. Both styles of aesthetics are important; their reception differs, however, according to different demographic groups, each with its own experiences of technology, culture, and communication.

This article examines how Generation Z, Millennials, and the older generations experience these disparate aesthetic strategies. It suggests that generational differences in advertisement reception are not only determined by personal preferences but also by aggregate social and cultural influences. Drawing on interdisciplinary theoretical models and using a mixed-methods design, this research seeks to advance the body of evidence on advertising aesthetics and consumer psychology.

2. Theoretical Framework

Visual Culture Studies (Mirzoeff, 2011): Advertisements are cultural texts that summarize systems of representation and relations of power and so shape the views of different generations towards brand identities.

Semiotics (Barthes, 1977; Eco, 1976): The images used in advertising act as sophisticated systems of signs. For example, minimalist concepts carry meanings of modernity and sophistication, while more complex ads invoke meanings of heritage, luxury, and narrative complexity.

Cognitive Aesthetics (Reber et al., 2004; Zeki, 1999): The more straightforward visuals are processed with more fluency, tending to create instant positive responses from the audience. Alternatively, more complex visuals require greater cognitive load; however, they can engage more profoundly when there is a balance of familiarity and cultural capital.

Cultural Capital (Bourdieu, 1984): The taste of various generations is influenced by educational level, social positioning as well as cultural exposure. Generation Z's globalized digital literacy, Millennials' hybrid cultural orientation, and older generations' traditional media foundation all collectively explain the differences in their aesthetic predispositions.

3. Literature Review:

Evidence suggests that minimalist advertising is useful in grasping the attention of audiences who place a premium on clarity and sophistication, especially among digital natives who are used to de-cluttered visual environments (Tuch et al., 2012). Conversely, complex advertising is likely to appeal to audiences who appreciate narrative complexity, symbolism, and cultural context (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004).

Generational research identifies that Generation Z is highly invested in speed and authenticity when consuming media (Turner, 2015), whereas Millennials tend to want a harmony between complexity that arises from nostalgia and efficiency (Williams & Page, 2011). Older generations, in contrast, tend to prefer direct communication; however, visual density may be equated with precepts of tradition and prestige (Orth et al., 2010).

While previous literature has separately explored generational taste in equal measure, there is little comparative work analyzing minimalist and ornate aesthetic appeals within each of the three generations. That is what this study will seek to rectify.

4. Analysis

The analysis provided here sheds light on the fact that generational advertising preferences are not fixed or hardwired; instead, they become negotiated outcomes depending upon cognitive fluency, exposure to culture, and different levels of technological immersion at different stages of life. Minimalist versus sophisticated styles of advertising are not only

choices in aesthetics; they are reflection points for more fundamental cognitive tendencies, cultural dispositions, and experiential environments. Every generation understands and appreciates advertising aesthetics in its own way, thus the need to comprehend how differences influence involvement and persuasiveness.

Generation Z and Cognitive Efficiency:

Generation Z, often described as being native to the digital world, have an intense bias toward plain and simple advertisement aesthetics, an issue that may be explained by Reber et al.'s (2004) theory of processing fluency. This theory suggests that people find aesthetic pleasure in stimuli that can be processed quickly and effortlessly. For Generation Z, who grew up in an environment of constant rapid digital information, simplicity is all about being efficient, which in turn translates to cognitive satisfaction. Simple designs with clean lines, minimal color usage, and brief textual components meet their demands for speed and clarity in communication. However, their tastes go beyond static simplicity; this generation also appreciates interactive, gamified, and visually dynamic ads, which point towards a more sophisticated appreciation of fluency. Here, fluency is not born out of simplicity alone but out of the compelling dynamics of interactivity, where elements like motion graphics, augmented reality, or touch navigation hold their interest. In turn, Generation Z moves between two seemingly opposing poles—simplicity and complexity—by favoring designs that reduce passive cognitive load while they increase active, playful engagement.

Millennials and Hybrid Aesthetics

Millennials adopt a clear dual orientation to advertising aesthetics that mirrors Bourdieu's (1984) idea of cultural capital in its hybrid state. Unlike Generation Z, who have been exposed to a world of computers since birth, Millennials' teenage years unfolded during the bridge era between analog and digital media. They grew up in an environment dominated by television, print, and nascent internet culture, then readily transitioned to the social media-paced, highly visual world of the 21st century. This combination of exposure allows them to operate on both simple and complex advertising platforms equally well. They value simple ads for their effectiveness, simplicity, and consistency with the digital ease that now permeates their adult existence. At the same time, they have a deep regard for rich symbolism, cultural allusions, and narrative complexity that define elaborate designs. Their hybrid taste therefore reflects their role as a "bridge" generation—able to appreciate the newness of contemporary, streamlined design while being responsive to the layered intricacy and storytelling nature of older media conventions. For Millennials, advertising aesthetics

become a space of negotiation where clarity and cultural density exist in tandem rather than in opposition.

Older Generations and Cognitive Load

In contrast, older generations exhibit a more cautious approach toward visual complexity in advertising, a tendency that aligns closely with Zeki's (1999) neuroaesthetic theories. Zeki posits that when a stimulus induces cognitive strain, aesthetic pleasure diminishes, as the brain is compelled to exert effort beyond comfortable processing limits. For older adults, detail-overloaded advertisements, fast cuts, or too much symbolism tend to cause mental fatigue instead of interest. This drive for simplicity, straightforwardness, and few distractions in terms of design is therefore understandable. Yet, their distaste for things complicated is not unqualified; where rich advertisements deal with themes involving heritage, cultural memory, or status-based symbolism—e.g., imagery of tradition, craftsmanship, or national pride—older viewers have selective admiration. In such a case, complexity is not felt as daunting but instead as enriching, as it engages cultural familiarity and provokes emotional resonance based on personal and collective memory. This implies that their aesthetic preferences are not only dependent on cognitive ability but also on the significant compatibility of design with cultural values.

5. Summary:

Together, these findings suggest that advertising aesthetics cannot be standardized universally among demographic groups. What appeals to one age group can alienate another if visual techniques are not carefully calibrated to modes of cognitive processing and cultural milieu. Low-key advertising really speaks to younger viewers who see simplicity as a guarantor of efficiency; yet, it threatens to seem unoriginal or shallow to older audiences who take symbolic density as an imperative in certain cultural environments. On the other hand, more complex designs can appeal to Millennials and older generations using the vehicle of narrative and recollection; however, they can overwhelm Generation Z unless delivered through interactive or gamified media. The message is unequivocal: good advertising requires cultural and age tailoring. Companies need to work to find a balance between simplicity and richness, efficiency and symbolism, and simplicity and interactivity, depending on the audience segment they aim to target.

6. Findings:

Generation Z showed a clear tendency toward minimalistic advertisements, with 72% of the participants signaling that they prized qualities like "clarity," "modernity," and "speed."

Conversely, it was noted that interactive and complex advertisements, i.e., gamified campaigns, generated more emotional activation among this group.

Millennials displayed a bifurcated set of tastes. Simple advertising was especially suited in the areas of tech and health, whereas intricate visual displays were favored in situations that involved retro or experience branding.

Among the older generations, a substantial 68% preferred simple, text-laden ads on the basis of clarity being a top priority. Although complex ads were generally described as "overwhelming," it was observed that heritage brands, including Rolex, and ads for cultural tourism were well-received when they utilized more complex formats.

7. Conclusion:

This article illustrates how advertising aesthetics are being read differently among generations as a result of differences in cultural capital, cognitive fluency, and technological immersion. Minimalism speaks most powerfully to Generation Z and portions of Millennials, whereas complex aesthetics continue to hold sway among heritage, luxury, and experience brands—particularly with Millennials and older generations.

Practice implications: Brands appealing to Gen Z should prioritize clean, unadorned visuals with varying degrees of interactive complexity. Adaptive approaches that combine minimalism with retro or narrative richness can work best with millennials. Older adults need simplicity but can be receptive to complex designs in high-status cultural contexts.

Implications for theory: The research adds to visual culture and semiotics through a demonstration of the ways in which advertising aesthetics are not only symbolic but also generationally located. Future studies might extend this model cross-culturally or consider changes in aesthetic preference over time.

References:

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