

Embracing Minimalism: A Guide to Modern Graphic Design Practices

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ABSTRACT

Over time, the practice of graphic design has been undergoing progressive changes so much so that various authorities have come up with various specifications. There are various types of graphic designs amongst which are web design, user interface and user experience design, advertising and marketing design, game design, motion graphics, cartoons and animations, illustrations and typography, and publication design to mention but a few. This topic extrapolates the nuances of a minimalist approach to modern graphic design and in this essay; the word “graphics” has been used as a generic term that encapsulates corporate designs of items such as news magazines, journals, annual reports, calendars, book cover designs and such like. The objective of this research is to bring to the fore and compartmentalize the various stages of the minimalist approach to creating a cutting-edge modest design. The research methodology employed for this study is studio-based and practice-led, the survey and quasi-ethnographic study with some touch of literature review. Discussion exclusively centered on the antecedents of minimalism and steps to be taken in achieving a catchy design using the simplest techniques possible while it was concluded that it is more advantageous to adopt the minimalist approach to graphic designs with reasons rightly highlighted and expatiated on.

Keywords: design, graphics, minimalism, nuances, animations

INTRODUCTION

Background to the study

Minimalism and minimalist art, according to Gombrich (2016) started in the latter part of the 1950s, and in 1959, painters such as Frank Stella (b. 1936) had their

paintings exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art and from this period, they started to veer away from the previous gestural art. The concept of minimalism has always been entrenched in the style of execution of works of Art, be it generic designs, web design, or animations, minimalism exemplifies simplicity in every aspect of the execution.

Consequently, minimalism in the area of graphic design came to the limelight from the 1960s through to the early 1970s where the popular art styles spanned from the visual arts to theatre, architecture, and music, incorporating design elements from past styles such as abstractions. Suffice it to state here that when minimalism started ab initio, Herbert (2010) noted that the styles of De Stijl, which exemplified pure abstraction and universality by a reduction to the essentials of form and color, Van der Rohe and the Japanese designs, influenced their output. Continuing, Herbert (2010) stressed that De Stijl was an art style that originated in Holland around 1917 all through to the latter part of the 1930s; the De Stijl art movement was characterized by the use of lines and shapes, complemented by the grey, white and black colors. Van der Rohe (1886-1969) whose works were simplistically architectural in style was executed in the void whereas the Japanese historical design was all about colors and simple lines.

Even though the renowned architect, Van der Rohe would have been credited with the idea of being the founder or originator of the minimalist principles in the 1900s, Hyatt-Mayor (2012) thinks that Dieter Rams (b. 1932) and Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983) were primarily regarded as the forerunner artists that established the concept of minimalism and made it take roots in various aspects of the visual arts. Whereas Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983) was an architect renowned for his use of geodesic domes in his architectural designs, Dieter Rams was an industrial designer; who was well-known for designing electronic appliances and other consumer goods.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is studio-based and practice-led. Through exploration, information was gathered from diverse sources - library, internet, survey, and ethnographic study which findings were critical to this study. Several subject matter in minimalist design production were explored and studied to bring out its influence on contemporary design practices. The samples produced were analyzed from both the technical, thematic, and conceptual perspectives.

DISCUSSION AND RESULT

The Minimalist style

Minimalism, according to Lester (2020) was strictly guarded by rules and principles instead of being influenced by other artists, and unlike other art styles and movements; the use of blank or void spaces was one of the cardinal principles of minimalism coupled with the minimization of complications and ornate details. Minimalism is guided by the conviction that 'less is more', therefore minimalist artists avoid unnecessary details while ensuring that the right idea is emphasized; for instance, instead of using a bitmap image that may become clumsy and heavy in a design, a minimalist would prefer to use a vector image or just line drawings yet expressing and representing the same idea and even better expressed. Baldwin and Roberts (2006) submitted that Dieter Rams used minimalist principles in the design of his consumer goods by making them simple and pure without exaggeration and being overwhelming. With the important principles of the minimalist style in mind, an artist should be able to understand and create minimalist art, and below are some of the basic minimalist principles as advanced by Buchanan (2010):

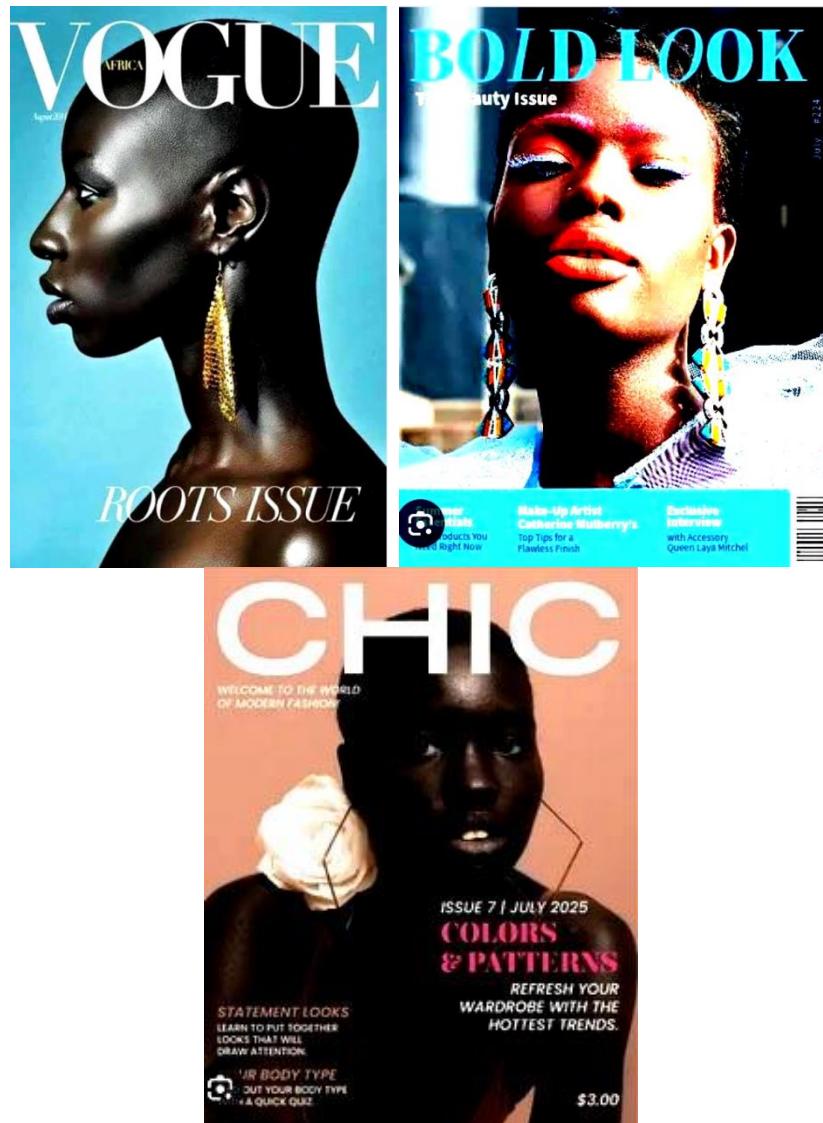


Figure 1. Title: Brochure Cover Designs
source: Free Fashion Magazine Cover Design Template

Figure 1 above depicts three different modern magazine cover designs that are done with modern technology especially software and equipment powered by optical character recognition (OCR)

- a. The first and the most important of these principles is simplicity. Here, it is incumbent on artists that no non-essential elements should be included in the design process; this is to allow enough breathing space in the design;

for instance, unnecessary effects like embossed letterings should be removed and replaced with flat fonts.

- b. Minimalist artists use defined shapes and designs to give room for enough white space.
- c. Colours must be as few as possible, mainly black and white and primary colours
- d. The design must exude purposefulness and functionality and be able to communicate the right message to the targeted audience.

Minimalist designs are done by first completing the designs and revising by removing unnecessary elements like clumsy images, effects, and diagrams. Today, graphic design is found everywhere, from the wrappers of confectionaries, branded vehicles, packaging, television, and the internet, logos, and other sundry designs; graphic design has evolved into the various areas it is presently occupying today as a result of the dynamism of the discipline.

Timeline in Graphic Design History

Graphic design, as an aspect of visual communication, with its essentially accepted branches, has some initial advancement that could be credited to it and this includes the way some breakthroughs in art, language, and mass production of goods were actualized. Goldstein (2021) avers that in human history, cave paintings were regarded as the earliest aspect of visual communication, and the period was postulated as 38,000 BCE. Between about 3300 and 3000 BCE, he stressed that the Sumerians already developed the earliest forms of writing which were pictographs. Around the period of 200 to 1400 CE, the Chinese relief woodblock was already being used to print on silk and paper; also during this period, the very first series of movable type printing press was invented. At about 1100, Europeans created logo designs and in 1389, it was said that signage to mark buildings was introduced, this later snowballed into the invention of the first printing machine by Johannes Gutenberg (d. 1468) in 1440 whereas the very first adverts that were mass produced in what seemed the earliest types of newspaper took place in 1620. The invention of lithography was in the year 1796 while

chromolithography of multi-colour prints was invented in 1837. The year 1903 saw the establishment of the first advertising agency which was established in Austria while sixteen years later, the Bauhaus was established in 1903 Germany; incidentally, this became the first graphic design academy to have been established and in the year 1920, Frederic Goudy (1865-1947) emerged as the first type designer. In 1922, Addison Dwiggins (1880-1956) came up with the nomenclature “Graphic Design” as a way of distinguishing the discipline from other areas of the visual arts. In the year 1947, Paul Rand (1914-1996), the American director and graphic designer did a publication of his contributions to his design principles in what he called “Thoughts on Design” and in 1968, Rudolf Hell (1901-2002), the American Engineer and Inventor created the first digital typeface. Super Paint, which was regarded as the first image editing software was created in the year 1973, and in 1974, computer digital vector fonts for page layout and designs were created this gave way to the digital revolution and transformation of graphic design which started from the 1980s through the 1990s up to the present times and in 1984, The American computer company, Apple incorporated released a set of Macintosh computers into the market and in 1994, the first online advertising appeared on digital televisions and internet and this led to the emergence of the Adobe creative suites.

The timeline of graphic design history is an ongoing development as the industry keeps growing day by day and it is important at this stage to briefly take a retrospective look at the various styles that have emerged in graphic design development. Whereas technological advancements have propelled the development of graphic design, art styles, methods, and trends have also given cognizance to the robust history of graphics over time. Some of the art movements that impacted graphic design practice over the years as submitted by Meggs and Purvis (2018) in chronological order are as follows:

a. **Art Nouveau**

This movement and stylistic tendency occurred from about 1890 and lasted till around 1910. Art Nouveau is a French concept that stands for “New Art”. It was a decorative style dominant in Europe and America. Knobler (2010) submits that characteristics of Art Nouveau are flat patterns of slender and

writhing vine forms abstracted from a naturalistic conception of vegetable growth woven into ornamental designs and elaborate typography. Though most notable in architecture and the decorative arts, the long, sensuously curving line appeared also in most paintings and sculptures of the period. Art Nouveau remains influential in the visual arts of the 1970s.

b. **Modernism**

This movement became popular in the 1950s with styles characteristic of simple shapes, wild colors, and minimalist letterings. Modernist designers approached their works very dispassionately with an emphasis on rationality instead of expressivity with a mindset of emphasis on the belief that form goes with function. As the Nazis seized power in Germany, All aspects of modernist experiments were denounced and as a result, a lot of artists, designers, and architects fled to the United States of America even though the growth of modernist design practice was truncated, it remained one of the most impactful movements in the history of graphic design.

c. **Art Deco**

The Art Deco style popularized around the 1920s to the 1930s was characterized by geometric shapes, symmetrical patterns, lustrous and sophisticated designs, contrasting colors, geometric shapes, chrome glass, shiny fabric, and mirrors, stylized images of airplanes, cars, and skyscrapers. It is a style that represents glamour, elegance, and functionality.

The above are a few of the art movements in the history of graphic design development.

Statement of the Problem

Over time in graphic design practice, there came a time when graphics became an all-comers affair; charlatans and non-professionals veered into the practice of graphic designing partly due to its lucrative nature and because of the non-regulation of this profession, various ideas by different practitioners came up, amongst which are those that are done without recourse to basic design principles. It is against this backdrop that this writer has suggested and in fact, recommended the minimalist design principles in the execution of any graphic design work;

indeed, it is this principle that distinguishes the professional graphic designers and the non-professionals.

Conceptual Framework

This study is based on the technicality of the adoption of minimalist design principles in all ramifications of the design process. It involves the jettisoning of unnecessary elements that make a design clumsy. There are very few rules regarding what is and what is not acceptable in minimalist design. However, there are a few well-known types of minimalist art that anyone interested in creating should know; thus the quest to present original ideas unconnected with prototypes in graphic design production necessitated this study.

The motivation for this study also stems from the concept of minimalism as an artistic movement in the arts; it is a movement that accentuates simplicity in every aspect of the world. As mentioned in the introductory part of this essay, it is a movement that took its roots from 1950 through 1959. Notable artists of this movement include Mies Van der Rohe (1886-1969), he is credited with the catchphrase “Less is More”, which means that the less the exaggeration of any element in graphic design, be they colors, images, and fonts, the less busy and clumsy the design would turn out. Another notable artist of this movement is Massimo Vignelli (1931-2014), an Italian designer who worked in a variety of areas including packaging, furniture, and signage. Dan Flavin (1933-1996), was also an American minimalist artist who specialized in installations and sculptural objects. All the above minimalist artists collectively fashioned the framework on which this study is based.

Characteristics and principles of minimalist design

As has been mentioned, minimalism is all about keeping designs as simple as possible and no attempt in minimalism is made to represent any design with a mindset of exaggeration, all the artist wants is for the viewer to respond exactly to what he sees. Talking about aesthetics, Simmons (2018) thinks that minimalist art advances a highly simplistic form of beauty; it can also be seen as representing the quality of truth because it does not pretend to be any other thing apart from what it stands for by way of simplicity, harmony, balance, and orderliness.

The principle of “Less is more” is the overriding principle of minimalism and this is the basis of simplicity in every aspect of design. Minimalist artists make judicious use of white or negative spaces as this gives room for the few elements incorporated in the design to “breathe”. Minimalist artists use few and mild colors but can sometimes, sparingly introduce strong but simple primary colors and neutral colors of black and shades of grey. An essential characteristic of minimalist art, according to Sturken and Cartwright (2001) is purposefulness; they submit that every single element adds some essential functionality and communication; this involves the use of simple, flat, and sometimes slender and elegant fonts with symmetrical organizational balance to avoid clumsiness and over-crowdedness, inner text layouts are mostly in columns with text-wrapped photographs. In most cases, minimalist artists prefer texts on a white background to make for contrast. Minimalist artists do not use unnecessary effects in their works, for instance, embossed fonts and textured backgrounds, these make the designs look over-crowded. Minimalist artists avoid things that make designs uninteresting such as too many colors, heavy fonts, too many images, clumsy layouts, lack of balance, and overall asymmetry.

Today, minimalism can be found in most designs executed by trained graphic artists and it is the view of this writer that minimalism is probably the best option when it comes to designs because the design is not boring to admire.

Advantages of minimalist design

Minimalism and minimalist art have a lot of advantages in respect of its execution and functionality and like the concept of “Less is more”, minimalism stems from getting more from less. Simple designs are wonderful and these are the ability to advance any idea or concept most simply and concisely. Simplicity in designs enables viewers to understand the message conveyed by the design without getting confused or overwhelmed; especially for designs with much text. Minimalist designs are cost-effective; executing simple designs is a lot more cost-effective than complex designs in terms of cost and execution. For this, simplicity might not just be about aesthetics, it is much about creating a crossing point that is unambiguous, insightful, and very easy to use. Minimalist designs make it very easy to attract the

viewer to the very important aspects of the design; keeping designs simple is best because the simpler a design is, the easier it becomes to use.

With very few distractions in a design, Vanden Bergh and Katz (2019) aver that it becomes easier to understand even with non-designers especially when designing a product, and by their very nature; humans prefer simpler designs because they are much easier for the brain to process. Simplicity in designs allows artists to pass their messages in the simplest possible form with a sense of purity and essentialness. Via minimalism, viewers are invited to appreciate the concept of simplicity and understand the true sense of it. The principle of minimalism suggests that designs should strive to eliminate unnecessary elements from designs and focus on creating a clean, straightforward user experience design.

Why Minimalism?

Having discussed some aspects of minimalism and minimalist design, the question arises, why should we make our designs as simple as possible? In answering this question, apart from the above advantages, there are other reasons why we should embrace minimalism in our design process.

First, design is an integral aspect of the problem-solving process so it helps identify problems and find innovative solutions. Simple designs enable artists to create products that meet the needs and aspirations of consumers. Simple designs require simple language to execute; complex jargons are avoided thereby saving time. Complex images and effects especially filters that make the computer work below optimum are eliminated, and simple designs are clear and understandable. Minimalist designs are economical; images and texts in minimalist design complement each other therefore, it is possible to use one in place of the other. The minimalist design makes messages memorable; the simpler the message in the design, the easier it is for the brain to process and remember at most times because of its simplicity and non-ambiguity. These and other factors are the reasons why minimalist designs are better to adopt.

Similar to the Bauhaus style

The Bauhaus style is probably the most similar style to minimalism. The Bauhaus principles in the words of Stephen and Balance (2001) had much influence on modern design, interior design, architecture, typography, and graphics. Anthropologists and Art historians classify Bauhaus-style buildings with popular harmony between design and functionality with much noticeable absence of decoration. The teaching philosophy at the Bauhaus school was that artists should be capable of working with the industrialists and so the Bauhaus school's approach of unifying art and craft with technology also influenced their design education.

There was stringent criticism of the Bauhaus style as the Nazis regime began to rise to power. The Nazi government regarded the Bauhaus style as "anti-German," and there was disagreement as it relates to such drastic architectural concepts as flat roofs. From the early part of the Nazi regime, they treated the Bauhaus style as inferior art and the product of unattractive external influences and as a result of this unfair treatment, as has been pointed out before, the majority of the Bauhaus artists fled Germany after Adolf Hitler and his Nazi regime took over power. The fleeing artists further spread the Bauhaus principles all over the world and this led to a major advancement in architectural design in the United States, Canada, and parts of Western Europe.

Processes and ideas of minimalist design

In the first instance, minimalism is psychologically a way of life; Edward (2015) postulates that whatever we do in life, in one way or another reflects our inner character. A man of a simple nature is most likely to behave gently and do things in order. It is the view of this writer that minimalism is another word for moderation and so one does not expect a drunk driver to be driving at minimal speed. The expressionist artist used wild colors and in most cases their works became overcrowded. Therefore, minimalism is a psychological concept because student artists who have carefree attitudes do things in a disorderly manner and so the process of minimalist design follows a simplistic order in this essay, the writer will discuss the minimalist process of designing a simple magazine cover.

In the newsstand, the cover of magazines is probably the first element that attracts the reader; it is the visual appeal and representation of a brand, content, and message so a well-designed magazine cover is most likely to attract more attention, boost sales and leave a lasting memory on the reader and in support of the above assertion, the following theories and postulations are hereby put forward in support of the above assertion.

- a. Cognitive fluency: In the view of Alter (2016), minimalist designs are easier to process and understand, thereby making them more appealing to the brain; this is as postulated by Adam Alter in his book, *Cognitive Fluency*
- b. Attention Economy: Crawford (2020) postulates that minimalist designs stand out in a crowded environment, capturing attention and increasing the chances of being noticed.
- c. visual hierarchy: Minimalist designs create a clear visual hierarchy, guiding the viewer's attention to the most important elements, this is the view of Krug (2005)
- d. Aesthetic-Usability Effect: Minimalist designs are perceived as more beautiful and user-friendly thereby increasing the likelihood of engagement according to Tractinsky (1997).
- e. Cognitive Load Management: Simple designs according to Sweller, (1988) reduce cognitive load, making it easier for viewers to process information and increasing the chances of engagement.
- f. Emotional Connection: Norman (2004) submits that minimalist designs can create an emotional connection with the viewer and so increasing the likelihood of engagement and loyalty.
- g. Standout Theory: Minimalist designs stand out in a crowded market, increasing the chances and curiosity of being noticed and remembered, so postulates Segall (2012)

The above theories support the idea that minimalist magazine design covers are more likely to attract the reader's attention by reducing cognitive load, creating an emotional connection, and standing out in a crowded environment.

The first consideration in designing a minimalist magazine cover is to recognize the target audience. Before the design process, artists are to take cognizance of

their audience, their expectations, their likes, and interests, artists are to take into consideration too, the goals of the magazine and the messages to be conveyed; is it a fashion magazine, sports, food, or medical? All these have their pros and cons and the nitty-gritty of the design process thereafter, artists should decide on an attractive headline and subhead which are about the most important elements on the cover and must be concise and relevant to the inner content. The success or failure of any magazine is dependent on the elements on the cover. Images and graphics must be of high resolution, cutting-edge quality, and eye-catching and should complement the headline and subhead, the visual elements of the cover could be photos, vector images, or icons provided they are relevant to the content of the inner pages.

A good color scheme is a must while designing a minimalist magazine cover. The color scheme should complement the brand identity of the magazine. All elements of good design must come into play on the cover, contrast and harmony, predominance of white space, and elegant fonts, all must be represented on the cover. If it is a magazine that has a masthead, it must be consistent in representation.

Below, figure 2 are three samples of exhibition catalogs designed by the writer to portray elements of minimalist design.

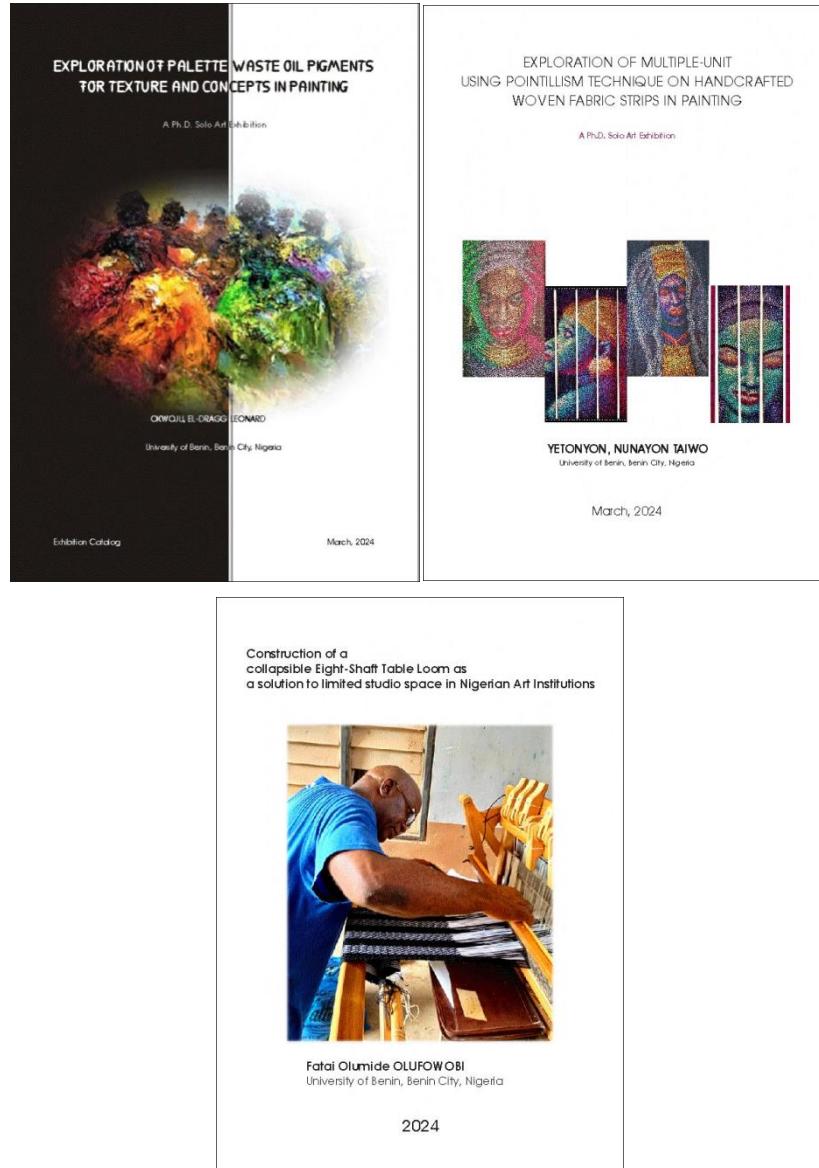


Figure 2. Artist: Felix Osaigbovo Title: Brochure cover designs Medium: CorelDraw / source: Photoshop CS4(2024)

A careful study of the above designs shows similarity in the execution of the designs. The simplicity in the arrangements of elements on these catalog cover designs, the minimal color usage, and the predominance of white space are what probably make their minimalist designs. In sharp contrast to the above designs is Figure 2, designed by a student of Graphic design. There are differences in all aspects of their design principles. Figure 2

conveys confusing color arrangement, fonts are not in harmony and there is a complete absence of white space. This is a direct opposite and a complete departure from the minimalist design principles.

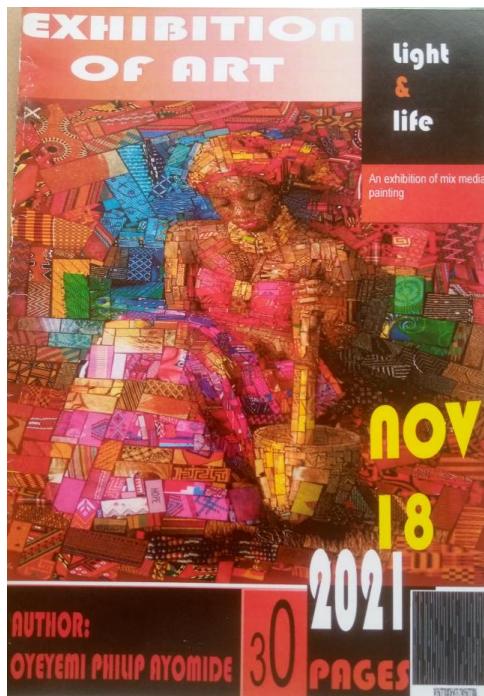


Figure 3. Artist: Oyeyemi Philip Ayomide Title: Brochure cover design Medium: source: Corel Draw (2021)

Keep it Simple, Stupid (KISS)

The KISS principle, as advanced by Peter and Michael (2001) is the hallmark of Minimalist design which states that designs and systems must be as simple as possible and it states that wherever possible, complexity must be avoided as simplicity guarantees the highest level of user acceptability. The “KISS” principle is used in various disciplines including but not limited to product design, software development, engineering, and game design.

According to Howells (2008), the acronym KISS was first used in the US Air Force and was said to have been coined by Kelly Johnson (1910-1990), who incidentally was the head of the engineering unit at the Lockheed Skunk Works. Kelly was said to have instructed the fighter plane designers to make their designs as simple as

possible to enable an ordinary man with basic mechanic training and simple tool repair in case of war situations. That was the origin of keeping things simple and stupid which does not mean that one is stupid but that designs should be made in such a way that it should be understood by a layman.

The Bauhaus principles of style and design are based on a minimalist approach which features clean lines with bold, simple coloration. The style has been reflected in buildings and home furnishings since the Bauhaus Art School was founded by Walter Gropius in Weimar Republic Germany in 1919. The Bauhaus architectural design influence has since spread worldwide and features a focus on sustainability and a combining of form and function.

CONCLUSION

Albert Einstein once asserted “If you can’t explain it, you don’t understand it well enough”; here, Albert Einstein was only explaining the KISS principles; as was pointed out earlier, any activity that one engages in is better done in moderation and so minimalism and minimalist designs epitomize this assertion. Anything done with exaggerated excesses always has negative outcomes and so it is with graphic design principles and methods. Earlier in this essay, mention was made of the principles of “Less is more”, which aims at getting more from less, which shows that when we minimize the elements in a design, we get more interest and admiration from the targeted audience coupled with the principle of “Keep it simple and stupid, (KISS)”, this principle is about de-complicating designs and deemphasizing unnecessary elements in a design that can lead to complexity, in order not to get targeted audience confused and grumpy. Today, the KISS principle has become a part of the average graphic designer and indeed most other aspects of human activities.

Contribution to knowledge

Much has been written on this study about minimalism and minimalist design principles therefore professionals and students of graphics must understand the advantages of embracing the minimalist principles. This study has

been able to bring to the fore, the nitty-gritty of minimalist design systems and methods and has been able to make them know that the absence of minimalism in all that we do takes the shine away and makes our works look clumsy and grossly uninteresting. This study has also been able to advance the techniques of achieving a good minimalist design project and it is hoped that graphic artists and the general public that come across this study should understand the basic principles of minimalism and embrace it.

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