

Silent Branding and Consumer Perception: A Phenomenological Study of the Formation of Implicit Brand Recognition in Fashion Brands

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Abstract: This study investigates how silent branding shapes implicit brand recognition among fashion consumers in Makassar, focusing on minimalist brands such as Uniqlo, H&M, and Executive. Employing a transcendental phenomenology approach, the research explores consumers' lived experiences in recognizing brands without relying on logos or explicit visual markers. Twelve purposively selected participants were interviewed in-depth, and data were analyzed through phenomenological reduction, including horizontalization, meaning-unit clustering, and textural-structural synthesis. Findings reveal that implicit brand recognition emerges through the interplay of four dimensions: (1) product design as an implicit identity, including cutting, silhouette, color palette, and material texture; (2) sensory familiarity developed through repeated physical interaction and use; (3) visual exposure across retail and social media environments that reinforces internalized aesthetic schemas; and (4) consistency in aesthetic and material quality across collections, which enhances perceived trust and brand credibility. The study demonstrates that minimalist brands can cultivate strong brand identity without logos when consistent design and sensory cues are reinforced by repeated exposure. This research extends the understanding of consumer perception by highlighting how memory, multisensory experience, and aesthetic consistency contribute to implicit recognition. Practically, the findings suggest that fashion brands adopting minimalist strategies can leverage silent branding to establish meaningful consumer connections, emphasizing experiential cues over overt visual symbols.

Keywords : Silent Branding; Implicit Brand Recognition; Minimalist Fashion; Consumer Perception; Phenomenology

1. Introduction

In the contemporary marketing landscape, brands are no longer understood merely as visual identities attached to products but as symbolic constructs that shape consumer perceptions, emotions, and experiences. Kotler & Keller (2016) argue that brand equity is built through strong, consistent, and easily recognizable associations in consumers' minds. Keller (2013) emphasizes that the strength of modern brands does not solely rely on functional differentiation but on the ability to create a distinctive and valuable identity in the eyes of consumers amid increasingly intense competition. As visual saturation and cognitive load rise due to excessive exposure to logos and symbols, subtler branding strategies are becoming increasingly relevant.

One approach that has emerged in response to this phenomenon is minimalist branding. This approach prioritizes visual simplicity, balanced composition, white space, and clean typography. Studies by Guerrero (2024) and Umpusinga (2025) indicate that minimalist design can reduce consumers' cognitive load and enhance focus on core product attributes. Simple designs are also frequently associated with elegance, modernity, honesty, and sustainability (Ding, 2024; Saintives et al., 2024). In this context, simplicity is not only an aesthetic strategy but also a communicative strategy capable of conveying brand meaning and character more subtly.

A further development of minimalist aesthetics has led to the phenomenon of silent branding, a strategy that reduces or eliminates the use of logos on products. Rather than highlighting visual symbols as the primary identity, silent branding relies on design, texture, silhouette, material quality, and product experience as carriers of brand identity. Studies by Sheth (2025) and Favier & Tran (2025) find that this strategy enhances perceptions of exclusivity and quiet luxury because consumers evaluate products based on aesthetic experience rather than logos. Madhavankutty (2025) adds that premium

fashion consumers interpret silent branding as an expression of mature taste, where identity does not need to be explicitly displayed to convey value.

Beyond luxury products, silent branding is also adopted by mass-market fashion brands such as Uniqlo, H&M, and Executive. Keller (2013) explains that Uniqlo consistently builds brand equity through material quality, cut consistency, and clean design, enabling consumers to recognize products without seeing the logo. In Indonesia, trends of minimalist lifestyles and preferences for simple aesthetics continue to grow (Pratiwi, 2023; Sunarto, 2022), making silent branding increasingly relevant for the urban fashion market.

In consumer perception theory, brand image and meaning are formed through the interaction of experience, memory associations, and personal interpretation. Kotler & Keller (2016) emphasize that brand image is not merely a visual impression but the overall perception formed through consumer-product interactions. National studies also show that a strong brand image can enhance consumer preferences and purchase decisions (Anisawati, 2024; Clarita, 2023; Mahmud, 2021). However, most of these studies focus on explicit visual identities and do not explain how consumers form perceptions of brands that deliberately “hide” their identity through silent branding.

To understand the phenomenon of brand recognition without logos, the concept of implicit brand recognition becomes relevant. Friedman & Garcia (2015) demonstrate that consumers can store brand associations implicitly, which later manifest as the ability to recognize products without conscious awareness. Maison (2004) and Machouche & Krishnan (2017) reveal that implicit attitudes can influence consumer preferences even when they cannot verbally explain their reasoning. Hofmann et al. (2013) further note that these automatic associations play a crucial role in consumer evaluation and behavior. Therefore, the recognition of minimalist products such as Uniqlo or H&M without logos can be understood as a manifestation of implicit associations formed through repeated experience, design consistency, and sensory familiarity.

Although various studies have discussed minimalist branding and brand perception, research connecting silent branding with the formation of implicit brand recognition remains very limited, particularly in the context of non-luxury fashion and urban Indonesian society. Agrawal (2022) highlights the importance of indirect communication strategies but does not examine consumer perceptual experiences in depth. At the national level, studies on minimalist design mostly focus on coffee packaging, MSME products, or retail business visual identities (Arsyad, 2022; Hidayat, 2021), rather than consumer experiences in recognizing logo-free fashion products.

The research context becomes particularly interesting when positioned in Makassar. As the largest metropolitan city in Eastern Indonesia, Makassar has a dynamic urban population that is highly consumerist and open to lifestyle developments and global fashion trends. Various global brands such as Uniqlo and H&M, as well as local brands like Executive, have strong consumer bases in the city, especially among students, office workers, and young urban communities. Previous consumer studies in Makassar show that fashion product preferences are influenced by modernity, lifestyle fit, and the practical value offered by design (Azikin, 2023; Rahman, 2022). However, no research has specifically explored how Makassar consumers recognize fashion brands without explicit visual identities.

Makassar is also a city with growing malls, shopping centers, and a strong café culture, all of which are highly relevant to fashion development. The increasingly critical consumption patterns of urban Makassar residents regarding product quality and aesthetics make the city an ideal context to study how silent branding operates at the consumer perception level. Furthermore, the socio-cultural diversity of Makassar allows researchers to capture rich variations in perception, particularly in understanding how consumers from different social backgrounds interpret logo-free fashion products.

Theoretically, this study integrates silent branding, consumer perception, and implicit association into a single analytical framework. Empirically, it provides an in-depth understanding of how Makassar consumers identify fashion brands through aesthetic experience, visual memory, and sensory familiarity without relying on logos. Practically, the findings can serve as a reference for fashion industry practitioners in designing branding strategies that are more relevant to the preferences of urban Indonesian markets.

2. Research methods

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in transcendental phenomenology to explore how consumers experience and interpret silent branding in minimalist fashion brands. Transcendental phenomenology is appropriate for capturing the essence of lived experiences as described by participants, emphasizing epoche, phenomenological reduction, and essence synthesis (Moustakas, 1994). The study focuses on understanding how consumers recognize brands without logos through design elements, silhouettes, textures, and other aesthetic cues, while suspending researchers' assumptions regarding fashion and aesthetics.

2.2 Research Approach

Following the transcendental phenomenological framework, the research emphasizes:

1. Epoche – suspending preconceived notions about fashion and branding to capture authentic experiences.
2. Phenomenological reduction – identifying and interpreting meaning units to reveal the underlying structure of consumer experiences.
3. Textural and structural synthesis – integrating what participants experience (*textural*) with how the experience occurs (*structural*) to derive the essence of implicit brand recognition.

This approach allows for in-depth understanding of how aesthetic consistency, sensory experiences, and repeated visual exposure collectively shape implicit brand recognition in fashion consumers in Makassar.

2.3 Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on criteria relevant to the phenomenon under study (Table 1). A total of 12 participants were involved, consistent with phenomenological research norms prioritizing depth over quantity and ensuring thematic saturation. Participants were coded as C1–C12 to maintain confidentiality.

Table 1. Participant Selection Criteria

No	Criteria	Description
1	Minimalist fashion consumers	Purchased/used products from Uniqlo, H&M, or Executive
2	Experience recognizing products without logos	Have experienced “instant recognition” of a brand without seeing a logo
3	Reflective verbal ability	Able to narrate experiences meaningfully
4	Residence	Living in Makassar to ensure contextual relevance
5	Demographic diversity	Variation in age, occupation, lifestyle, and income
6	Consent to participate	Agree to interview and recording

2.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through naturalistic, semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in settings familiar to participants, including cafés, public spaces, or homes. Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim.

Initial interactions included casual discussions about fashion preferences and shopping habits before probing core questions on recognizing brands without logos. Field notes and reflective memos were recorded after each session to capture contextual cues, non-verbal expressions, and initial interpretations.

Table 2. Interview Questions and Focus

No	Interview Question	Research Focus	Dimensions Explored
1	"Can you describe a time you recognized a product without seeing the logo?"	Lived experience	Implicit recognition, context
2	"What made you confident that the product belongs to a specific brand?"	Perceptual cues	Design, silhouette, material, aesthetics
3	"How do you perceive the aesthetics of minimalist brands like Uniqlo/H&M/Executive?"	Consumer perception	Visual assessment, emotional value
4	"How do you feel when you automatically recognize a brand?"	Emotional response	Familiarity, trust, comfort
5	"Why do you think brands choose to appear without logos?"	Meaning-making	Interpretation of branding strategy
6	"Which elements are easiest for you to recognize?"	Identity elements	Style codes, signature cuts
7	"Does this recognition occur frequently?"	Recognition pattern	Repeated exposure, product experience

2.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using phenomenological reduction as outlined by Moustakas (1994). The analysis followed several iterative stages to identify the essence of participants' experiences:

Table 3. Phenomenological Data Analysis Steps

Stage	Description	Output
Immersion	Repeated reading of transcripts to understand the holistic experience	Initial holistic understanding
Horizontalization	Treating all statements with equal value	Meaningful statements
Meaning Units	Identifying significant statements related to perception and recognition	Units of meaning
Clustering Themes	Grouping meaning units into core themes	Phenomenological themes
Textural Description	Describing what participants experienced	Narrative of experiences
Structural Description	Describing how experiences were formed	Structure of experiences
Essence Synthesis	Integrating textural and structural descriptions	Essence of the phenomenon

Thematic saturation was reached by interview 10, with two additional interviews to confirm stability. Member checking and peer debriefing with two researchers enhanced credibility and minimized interpretive bias (Birt et al., 2016).

2.6 Ethical Considerations

The study ensured voluntary participation, confidentiality, and data anonymity. Participants provided informed consent before interviews, and all identifiers were replaced with codes. Researchers adhered to ethical guidelines for qualitative research, emphasizing respect for participants' narratives and lived experiences.

3. Results and Discussion

Phenomenological analysis of twelve participants revealed four main dimensions explaining how fashion consumers in Makassar develop implicit brand recognition through silent branding, without relying on logos. The analysis was conducted reflectively through verbatim interview transcriptions, open coding, clustering of essential meaning units, and phenomenological theme synthesis. This approach ensures that the meanings emerge genuinely from the participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Participant Characteristics

Participants were aged 19–38 years, including seven females and five males, who actively use minimalist fashion products from Uniqlo, H&M, and Executive. Their backgrounds ranged from retail, creative industries, banking, and education to urban students. Interaction intensity with the products varied from moderate to high, both through direct visits to shopping centers and online media. This diversity provided depth in interpreting implicit recognition experiences, from spontaneous recognition to reflective evaluations of design aesthetics.

Dimensions of Consumer Experience

The reflective thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) generated 52 initial codes, reduced to 14 essential aspects, and grouped into four primary dimensions:

Design as Implicit Identity

Consumers identify brands through cutting, silhouette, color palette, and fabric texture. These aspects function as visual identity markers, replacing logos. A participant stated:

"If the cut is neat and clean like that, you immediately feel it's Uniqlo." (C4)

This finding aligns with Keller (2013), who emphasizes that consistency in design across collections creates strong identity traces. Neutral color palettes and distinctive textures reinforce implicit product recognition, while minimalist silhouettes facilitate direct brand association.

Sensory Familiarity and Repeated Exposure

Brand recognition also develops through multisensory experiences, such as touch and repeated use. Makassar consumers can identify fabric textures, thickness, and product feel without seeing the label. Repeated visual exposure through social media and retail environments strengthens the brand's visual schema in memory. One participant noted:

"I often see it on IG; over time I just know the style." (C9)

This aligns with implicit memory theory (Hofmann et al., 2013), which explains that repeated experiences generate automatic recognition. Visual exposure and sensory experiences complement each other in forming a brand representation that lives in consumers' memory.

Aesthetic Consistency as a Reinforcer of Trust

Repetition of designs across collections and stability in material quality create predictability, allowing consumers to recognize brands intuitively. Aesthetic consistency also strengthens perceptions of brand credibility and professionalism:

"If the design is consistent, we are confident that the brand has a clear concept." (C10)

Consistency not only facilitates identification but also builds trust, indicating that the brand has a mature concept, consistent with Johnson et al. (2021) regarding the relationship between aesthetic consistency and perceived professionalism.

Formation of Implicit Brand Recognition

This dimension integrates sensory experience, visual exposure, and design consistency. Consumers internalize brand aesthetic patterns, allowing recognition to occur automatically, without conscious analysis:

"At a glance, just seeing the fabric, the brand comes to mind." (C5)

Brand identity is understood as a recurring aesthetic pattern rather than merely a graphic symbol or logo, in line with Orth & Malkewitz (2008), who emphasize the role of aesthetic representation in consumer memory.

Discussion of Findings

The results confirm that silent branding effectively fosters implicit brand recognition. Consumers perceive brand identity through consistent cutting, silhouette, texture, and color palette, rather than logos. Multisensory experiences and repeated exposure create "signature cues" that enhance automatic recognition. This phenomenon extends the traditional concept of branding: the brand is no longer only a visual symbol but an aesthetic pattern embedded in consumers' memory. In the urban context of Makassar, consumers not only recognize brands but also develop intuitive expertise to "read" brands through visual style. These findings support Madhavankutty (2025), who suggests that silent branding enhances perceived exclusivity and brand character through aesthetic experience.

Moreover, consistency across collections serves as a psychological signal that builds consumer trust. Brands maintaining design stability facilitate identification and convey reliable quality perceptions. These findings confirm that minimalist aesthetics are not merely a visual strategy but an identity strategy that fosters emotional connections with consumers (Sheth, 2025; Saintives et al., 2024). Overall, silent branding demonstrates that brand identity can reside in consumers' memory and experience, not only in logos or graphic symbols. This provides new insights for branding strategies in the fashion industry, particularly for brands seeking to build subtle yet profound consumer relationships.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Summary of Findings

Phenomenological analysis of twelve fashion consumers in Makassar revealed four key dimensions of implicit brand recognition through silent branding: (1) design as implicit identity, (2) sensory familiarity and repeated exposure, (3) aesthetic consistency as a reinforcer of trust, and (4) the formation of implicit brand recognition. Consumers are able to identify brands such as Uniqlo, H&M, and Executive without relying on logos, by internalizing consistent aesthetic patterns through visual, tactile, and experiential cues.

4.2 Theoretical Implications

The study extends traditional branding theory by demonstrating that brand identity is not limited to visual symbols or logos, but can be encoded in recurring aesthetic patterns that live in consumers' memory. This supports existing literature on implicit memory (Hofmann et al., 2013) and aesthetic representation (Orth & Malkewitz, 2008), highlighting the role of silent branding in shaping consumer perceptions, trust, and intuitive brand expertise.

4.3 Practical Implications

For fashion brands operating in urban contexts such as Makassar, maintaining design consistency across collections, using distinctive textures, and leveraging repeated multisensory

exposure can strengthen implicit brand recognition. Silent branding strategies can enhance perceived exclusivity, credibility, and emotional connections with consumers, providing an alternative approach for brands seeking subtle yet effective engagement.

4.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited to a small sample of twelve participants in Makassar, which may affect generalizability to other cities or demographic groups. Future research could explore implicit brand recognition in broader populations, different fashion segments, or cross-cultural contexts. Additionally, combining phenomenological insights with quantitative measures could provide a more comprehensive understanding of silent branding effects.

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