

## The Minimalism and Contentment in Chloé Zhao Nomadland

Wildan Chaniago<sup>1\*</sup>, Irdina Ariana<sup>1</sup>, Yanti Rosalinah<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Bina Sarana Informatika, Jakarta, Indonesia

[wildanc3110@gmail.com](mailto:wildanc3110@gmail.com)\*

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### Abstract

This study analyzes the representation of minimalism and contentment in Chloé Zhao's film *Nomadland* (2020) by applying a qualitative descriptive method supported by textual film analysis. The research focuses on how the film's dialogue, scene, and overall atmosphere construct a coherent depiction of a minimalist lifestyle and an inner sense of contentment. The findings indicate that *Nomadland* presents minimalism as a deliberate lifestyle choice and contentment in the film emerges from acceptance, gratitude, and the ability to find peace within life's uncertainties and limitations. This study concludes that *Nomadland* successfully integrates the values of minimalism and contentment into its artistic and thematic design, illustrating how simplicity, acceptance, and emotional balance can guide individuals toward a deeper understanding of meaning and well-being in contemporary life.

Keywords: Minimalism, Contentment, Frugal Lifestyle, Movie

### Introduction

In the modern era, characterized by rapid globalization, consumerism, and technological advancement, human needs and desires have become increasingly diverse and excessive, often leading people toward overconsumption and wastefulness. In the other hand, many individuals have started to embrace minimalism and contentment as guiding principles for a more meaningful life (Gani et al., 2021). Through a frugal and minimalist lifestyle, they seek contentment and satisfaction amid the overwhelming pressures of materialism and consumer culture (Thuy Hang & Thi Minh Tam, 2024).

Minimalism is defined as an aesthetic and philosophical orientation that reduces excess and centers attention on essentials. It emphasizes simplicity, intentionality, and the removal of unnecessary elements in order to highlight what truly matters. Within the context of a consumerist society, this orientation is viewed as an expression of self-awareness and conscious resistance to material excess. By prioritizing quality over quantity and purpose over possession, minimalism encourages individuals to cultivate a lifestyle that promotes clarity, balance, and tranquility in both thought and environment (Gurev et al., 2024).

Contentment refers to an inner sense of balance and wholeness, in which individuals are able to accept their circumstances fully without dependence on external factors. It involves a state of inner peace that arises from gratitude, self-awareness, and emotional stability rather than the pursuit of external achievements or possessions (Cordaro et al., 2024). Both concepts of minimalism and contentment share a fundamental rejection of materialism, emphasizing the

importance of finding fulfillment beyond material wealth. Together, they highlight the search for meaning through simplicity, mindfulness, and acceptance, encouraging individuals to focus on what truly contributes to their well-being and sense of purpose.

A movie is generally understood as an audiovisual work that combines moving images, dialogue, sound, and narrative elements to convey meaning and emotion. It functions not only as a form of entertainment but also as a medium for communicating ideas, culture, and social realities (Jing, 2023). Movies are viewed as a powerful means of representing attitudes and experiences through the interaction of visual and auditory components. In recent discussions, it has also been emphasized that movies operate as multimodal texts, in which visual, text, linguistic, and aural signs work together to produce layered meanings (Firmansyah & Julia, 2024).

Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland* serves as a contemporary work that visualizes these ideas through a cinematic approach that is simple, reflective, and emotionally restrained. The film employs a minimalist narrative style characterized by natural lighting, non-professional actors, and slow, meditative pacing. Through these artistic choices, *Nomadland* can be situated within the tradition of American literary realism, which focuses on everyday experience and the search for meaning through contentment (Cicarelli Vieira, 2024). *Nomadland* depicts Fern's displacement after the economic collapse of her rural town, prompting her transition into a contemporary nomadic existence. As she traverses the American West in her van, taking on precarious, short-term employment, she encounters a community of individuals whose lives similarly unfold at the margins of capitalist stability. The film critically engages themes of grief, resilience, communal belonging, and the adoption of minimalist and frugal modes of living as both adaptive strategies and forms of alternative self-definition. (Laist, 2024).

Several studies have examined *Nomadland* in terms of realism, freedom, mobility, labor precarity, and its sociopolitical themes, research specifically analyzing how the film represents the intertwined concepts of minimalism and contentment remains limited. This gap highlights the need for a deeper exploration of how *Nomadland* portrays simplicity, acceptance, and emotional balance through its visual and narrative elements. These factors make the researcher interested in examining how the concepts of minimalism and contentment are represented in the film *Nomadland*.

The purpose of this study is to identify the cinematic elements and narrative strategies that reflect minimalism and contentment throughout the movie. Furthermore, this study explores how minimalism and contentment function in daily life as portrayed through the characters' routines, choices, and interactions. This includes exploring how individuals derive meaning, emotional balance, and personal identity through simplified living and intentional acceptance. The objectives of this research are to identify the visual, narrative, and thematic elements that reflect minimalism and contentment in the film, to analyze the frequency with which these principles appear across the film's scenes and character interactions, and to determine which aspects of minimalism and contentment are most prominently emphasized within the storyline.

## **Method**

This study was conducted using a qualitative descriptive method with a focus on literary and film analysis. The research relied on textual interpretation rather than numerical data, as the aim was to understand meaning rather than to measure it (Furidha, 2024). The object of the study



was Chloé Zhao's film *Nomadland*, which was examined for its dialog, narrative, and visual representation of minimalism and contentment.




Data collection was carried out through several systematic steps. First, the researcher watched *Nomadland* three times. The first viewing to understand the general storyline and tone of the film. The second to identify scenes related to minimalism and contentment, and the third to verify the relevance and consistency of the selected data. During repeated viewings, the researcher paused scenes containing significant visual, dialog, or symbolic elements. Important dialogues were transcribed and recorded in an observation sheet.





The analysis data was carried out through textual film analysis, paying attention to its character portrayal, scene, dialogue, and atmosphere (Uğuz, 2024). A textual approach was applied to identify the recurring motifs of simplicity, balance, and acceptance that contribute to the film's overall message. After identifying relevant scenes and dialogues, the findings were then interpreted in relation to the minimalist lifestyle portrayed in the film, particularly its symbolic representation of contentment in the film.

## Findings and Discussion

### Findings The Minimalism and Contentment in the movie *Nomadland*

Data No	Scene/ Information	Symbol / Dialog	Minimalism	Contentment
1	 00:07:01	<i>"I want to build the bed up so I could have storage underneath."</i>	The dialogue showed minimalism through practical use of limited space, highlighting her focus on functionality and simplicity in living.	The dialogue reflected contentment through her satisfaction in creating order and comfort within modest means, demonstrating peace with her minimalist lifestyle.
2	 00:07:18	<i>"This is my husband's old fishing box. i put this little latch on it, and then when I open it, the stopper holds it and create</i>	The dialogue showed minimalism through Fern's creative reuse of a sentimental item, emphasizing resourcefulness and purposeful living over acquiring new possessions.	The dialogue reflected contentment through her appreciation of small improvements and emotional connection to meaningful


		<i>more counterspace."</i>		objects, revealing harmony between memory and practicality.
3		<i>"But really, Fern, if you need a place to stay, you can come over and stay with us. We're worried about you."</i>	The dialogue showed minimalism through Fern's gentle refusal of comfort and assistance, expressing her preference for independence and self-sufficiency over reliance on others.	The dialogue reflected contentment through her calm assurance and confidence in her own way of living, showing inner peace despite uncertainty.
	00:09:24			
4		<i>"I'm not homeless. I'm just houseless. Not the same thing, right?"</i>	The dialogue showed minimalism through Fern's detachment from conventional ideas of ownership, emphasizing that a sense of home can exist without material possession.	The dialogue reflected contentment through her acceptance of her situation, revealing peace and self-awareness despite the absence of permanence.
	00:10:12			
5		<i>"I think that, I'm thinking connecting to nature and to a real true community and tribe, will make all the difference for you."</i>	The dialogue showed minimalism through the emphasis on connection with nature and community rather than dependence on material or social status.	The dialogue reflected contentment through the belief that genuine relationships and a sense of belonging bring lasting fulfillment and emotional balance.
	00:22:34			
6		<i>"I love this lifestyle. It is a lifestyle of freedom."</i>	The dialogue showed minimalism through the speaker's appreciation of a	The dialogue reflected contentment through their genuine

		00:23:40		life free from happiness and material excess, sense of valuing simplicity fulfillment found and autonomy in the freedom of instead. a minimalist way of living.
7		00:35:23	<i>Daily in the van : washing dishes, sleeping, repairing her van, cleaning her pans, etc.</i>	The scene showed minimalism through Fern's simple daily routines that focus on necessity and self-reliance rather than comfort or luxury. The scene reflected contentment through her calm engagement in ordinary tasks, showing satisfaction and peace in maintaining a modest, purposeful life.
8		00:39:05	<i>"I'm gonna be 75 this year and I think I've lived a pretty good life."</i>	The dialogue showed minimalism through Swankie's appreciation of a life measured by experiences rather than material possessions. The dialogue reflected contentment through her serene acceptance of aging and gratitude for the meaningful life she has lived.
9		00:46:22	<i>Fren cutting her own hair</i>	The scene showed minimalism through Fern's act of cutting her own hair, symbolizing independence, practicality, and rejection of unnecessary luxury. The scene reflected contentment through her quiet confidence and ease in caring for herself, showing comfort and acceptance in simplicity.
10			<i>Fren and Linda enjoying the moment after work</i>	The scene showed minimalism through Fern and Linda May's choice to unwind in a simple setting after enjoyment of the

	00:49:17		work, valuing rest and companionship over luxury or entertainment.	present moment, revealing gratitude and satisfaction in life's small, ordinary pleasures.	
11		00:54:24	<i>"I can do it. Thanks"</i>	The dialogue showed minimalism through Fern's independence and preference for self-reliance, reflecting her desire to manage her simple life without unnecessary assistance.	The dialogue reflected contentment through her quiet confidence and satisfaction in handling her own space, showing peace in her autonomy and capability.
12		01:14:54	<i>"why don't you move in with us?"</i>  <i>"I can't live here."</i>  <i>"I can't live in this room. Thank you. But I can't"</i>	The dialogue showed minimalism through Fern's refusal to settle into conventional comfort, expressing her commitment to a simple and mobile lifestyle free from attachment.	The dialogue reflected contentment through her acceptance of her own path, revealing peace in following a life that aligns with her sense of freedom and authenticity.
13		01:24:45	<i>Dave : "Yeah, you can stay."</i>  <i>Fern : "Oh good thanks. I need to do laundry."</i>  <i>Dave : "you know, I meant"</i>	The dialogue showed minimalism through Fern's practical focus on simple daily needs rather than emotional or material attachment, highlighting her	The dialogue reflected contentment through her calm and thoughtful response, showing that her sense of peace comes from independence and

*stay longer, grounded and self- living life on her  
 fern." sufficient nature. own terms.*

*Fern : "what'd  
 they think  
 about that?"*

14		<p><i>Fern decides to leave and not stay with Dave's family.</i></p>	<p>The scene showed minimalism through Fern's decision to continue her solitary journey instead of settling down, demonstrating her commitment to a simple and independent life free from attachment.</p>	<p>The scene reflected contentment through her peaceful acceptance of solitude, revealing that fulfillment for her comes from freedom and self-discovery rather than stability or companionship.</p>
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## Discussion

### Minimalism as Lifestyle

The film show that minimalism in Nomadland aligns strongly with the theoretical understanding presented by Gurev , who describe minimalism as a conscious lifestyle that reduces excess and focuses on essential values. Fern's actions such as maximizing van space, reusing sentimental objects, and rejecting conventional housing, embody minimalism as intentional living. Rather than a forced deprivation, Fern's minimalist practices reflect purpose-driven choices that prioritize clarity, freedom, and self-determination. Fern and her nomadic community decision to live in a van and keep moving illustrates a conscious rejection of societal norms that equate success with accumulation. Her minimalist existence allows her to define home and happiness on her own terms. The film presents minimalism as both a personal philosophy and a form of resilience.

### Contentment as Acceptance, Emotional Resilience, and Presence

Contentment in the film reflects the psychological framework outlined by Cordaro, who define contentment as a blend of self-acceptance, gratitude, emotional balance, and inner peace. This understanding is visible across multiple scenes in the findings, especially in Fern's consistent calmness, independence, and appreciation for small daily tasks. Contentment is portrayed as a continuous process of acceptance rather than the attainment of a fixed emotional state. In Nomadland, Fern and her nomadic community journey illustrates that genuine peace arises from embracing impermanence and finding meaning in small, human moments rather than in material comfort or stability. Through her interactions with other nomads, she discovers a shared sense of gratitude, freedom, and emotional resilience amid life's uncertainties.

## The Interconnection Between Minimalism and Contentment

The findings also show that minimalism and contentment operate as mutually reinforcing values in the film. Minimalism provides the structural conditions (simplicity, reduced possessions, mobility) that allow characters to focus on emotional balance. Meanwhile, contentment supplies the internal qualities (acceptance, gratitude, resilience) that make such a lifestyle sustainable. This interaction affirms the theoretical argument that both values function as alternatives to materialism in modern society. Fern's decision to leave Dave's family (Scene 14), for example, is not merely an act of independence but an instance of choosing a lifestyle that aligns with both minimalist freedom and contented acceptance. Theory helps reveal that this choice reflects internal authenticity, not rejection.

## Conclusion

The study entitled "The Minimalism and Contentment in Chloé Zhao's Nomadland" analyzed how minimalism and contentment are represented through the film's scene, dialogue, and overall atmosphere. The findings show that the film constructs minimalism not simply as the reduction of possessions, but as an intentional lifestyle grounded in autonomy, simplicity, and resistance to material excess. At the same time, contentment emerges as an internal process of acceptance, gratitude, and emotional resilience demonstrated through Fern's daily routines, social interactions, and mindful engagement with impermanence. The study demonstrates that minimalism and contentment operate as meaningful frameworks for navigating daily life, offering alternatives to consumer-driven definitions of success. The film suggests that individuals may find purpose and emotional balance through simplicity, intentional living, community connection, and acceptance of change. Future research may expand on these insights by examining how other contemporary films employ minimalist aesthetics, or by comparing Nomadland with films that present contrasting responses to economic precarity. The film reminds viewers that fulfillment is found not in abundance but in balance the harmony between solitude and connection, movement and stillness, loss and acceptance. This study concludes that Nomadland successfully embodies the philosophy of contentment through minimalism, illustrating that simplicity and acceptance together create the foundation for a deeper, more compassionate understanding of life.

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