

Consumerism and Materialism in Muslim Societies: An Islamic Critique

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Abstract

The growth of consumerism and materialism has always pervaded the social spheres of contemporary Muslim societies, thus endangering the moral and spiritual values that Islamic teachings have established. While contemporary globalization and capitalist economies have encouraged people to live a life of excess, Islamic teachings promote simplicity, moderation, and contentment. This article critically examines the growing influence of materialistic values on Muslim societies and juxtaposes them with the Islamic perspective of wealth, lifestyle, and spiritual satisfaction. Based on sources from the Qur'an, Hadith, and the historical practices of early Muslim societies, the study examines the conflict between spiritual growth and attachment to worldly possessions. Furthermore, it evaluates the roles of the media, social influences, and economic systems in socializing consumerist practices. Finally, this paper presents Islamic ethical doctrines—such as zakat, waqf, and sustainable living—as alternative discourses that can help redirect Muslim societies towards their moral and spiritual core values.

Keywords: Consumerism, Materialism, Islamic Ethics, Muslim Societies, Qur'anic Teachings, Hadith, Simplicity, Spirituality, Islamic Economics, Zakat

Introduction

Consumerism and materialism have become dominant ideologies in modern times that have an impact on individual identities, social formations, and economic

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systems in a major way. The development of global capitalism, mass production, and advertising has made people define success and happiness more in terms of material possessions and patterns of consumption. The trend, though widespread, is observed to have a high degree of complexity in Muslim societies, where religious values based on Islam are prone to conflict with consumer culture's wants and needs.

Islam as a comprehensive way of life emphasizes the unity of the essence of God (tawheed), faith in accountability in the Hereafter, and the cultivation of righteousness in the heart at the expense of worldly assets. The Qur'an and Hadith consistently warn against the excesses of wealth and material possessions and encourage the faithful to lead humble, thankful, and socially conscious life. Nevertheless, despite such admonitions, Muslim societies today are increasingly beset by growing consumerism, typically expressing itself in lavish living, brand consciousness, and socio-economic competition.

This paradox raises a set of significant questions: How did consumerist values penetrate societies endowed with rich spiritual heritage? What is the contribution of international media, disparities in the economy, and modern lifestyles in restructuring Muslim priorities? Most importantly, how can Islamic teachings serve as a cure for this growing imbalance?

This essay will attempt to offer an Islamic critique of the consumerism and materialism phenomenon in Muslim societies through the reading of central religious texts, socio-cultural analysis, and the provision of alternative moral paradigms. Through a re-turn to the Qur'anic vision and the prophetic paradigm, this research will attempt to offer insight into how Muslim societies need to rediscover their moral compass in an age of material excess.

The Rise of Consumerism and Materialism in Muslim Societies

The phenomenon of consumerism is not limited to a particular geographical or cultural context. However, its appearance and intensification within Muslim societies indicate a fundamental departure from the traditional Islamic worldview to modern globalized models. Muslim societies have historically preferred simplicity (zuhd), abstinence (i'tidāl), and spiritual richness to materialism. The emphasis was on sufficient as opposed to excessive, and satisfaction as opposed to competition. But globalization, the advent of neoliberal economies, and exposure to Western consumer societies has disturbed the balance severely.

Globalization and Economic Transformations

Over the last decades, most Muslim nations have entered the global capitalist economy. This has promoted industrialization, urbanization, and global market access. While these have raised the standard of living of the majority, they have also contributed to the greater centrality of material ownership. The aspiration for a good life has been synonymous with the acquisition of wealth, branded items, and luxury consumption. This is most evident in oil-rich Gulf nations, where high-end architecture, luxury shopping malls, and conspicuous consumption are the hallmark of economic success.

Media Influence and Lifestyle Aspirations

One of the most powerful drivers of consumer culture is the media, with a focus on social media sites, advertisements, and the entertainment industry. Through movies, TV shows, social media influencers, and celebrity culture, images of prosperity and idealized lifestyles are constantly presented and absorbed. Muslim youth, on the whole, are heavily influenced by these images, idealizing dreams of luxury goods, high-tech goods, and holiday lifestyles that tend to diverge from

their traditional or Islamic values. These dreams, over time, become habitual norms, where a person's value increasingly comes to be determined in terms of what he or she owns, wears, or shows.

Urbanization and the Evolving Family Structure

Urban migration and the spread of urban living have transformed traditional family systems. In rural or tribal communities, shared values, simple life, and mutual assistance were the order of the day. Urban environments, conversely, cultivate individualism, competition, and social comparison. The shift from extended families to nuclear families has fragmented shared religious practice and moral checks. With fewer communal checks and increased exposure to market culture, materialism has a fertile ground to flourish.

Religious Consumerism and Commercialization

It is ironic that modern consumerist trends have started to influence even religious rituals. Religious rituals in most contexts have become signs of status, as seen in designer abayas, luxury prayer mats, extravagant weddings, and Hajj packages with VIP treatment. This commercialization of religious life undermines the essence of spirituality, transforming acts of worship into acts of display and not of devotion.

Islamic Philosophy of Wealth, Moderation, and Simplicity

Islam offers a balanced view of worldly life and riches. Islam does not despise riches or discourage legitimate acquisition but instructs moderation, accountability, and spiritual detachment from worldly gains. The Qur'an and Hadith both always emphasize that riches are a trial of faith, not an objective. Muslims are urged to spend their riches in moderation, assist the poor, and avoid extravagance.

Wealth as Trust (Amānah) and Trial (Ibtilā')

Qur'an also teaches that everything belongs to Allah and is put into men's hands to handle. In Surah Al-Hadid (57:7), Allah states:

"Have faith in Allah and His Messenger, and spend of that which He has made you trustees over."

This verse decidedly establishes that wealth is neither a long-term ownership but a trial of how it is spent. Misapplication of wealth, hoarding it, or spending it to control others is in contravention of moral Islamic teachings.

In addition, in Surah Al-Takāthur (102:1–2), Allah warns:

"Worldly competition for growth distracts you until you go to the graves."

This verse is a criticism of materialism and a warning to the faithful about the transience of life and the risk of distraction from the hereafter.

Moderation (I'tidāl) and Simplicity (Zuhd)

Moderation is a principle in Islam and it is absolute. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said,

"Eat, drink, give alms, and utilize clothing, and do not be wasteful or arrogant." (Sunan Ibn Mājah)

Islam does not prepare us for either excess or asceticism. The Prophet ﷺ himself lived a life of moderation, being involved in worldly affairs but distancing himself from worldly affairs. His home was simple, and his lifestyle proved to be humble even though there was abundance around him.

Zuhd, or spiritual detachment, is an Islamic tradition that appeals to the faithful to avoid dunya (worldly life) fixation. It does not mean abandoning the world but having control over one's own wants. As Imam Al-Ghazālī explains, zuhd is not that nothing of the world is yours, but the world is nothing of yours.

Charity and Redistribution of Wealth

Islam established mechanisms of wealth distribution to ensure that it does not

surpass what is right and to avert inequality. Zakat (obligatory charity), Sadaqah (optional charity), and Waqf (endowment) are all means through which wealth keeps circulating among individuals. They help to alleviate economic inequality, promote sympathy, and cleanse oneself of greed.

A society that truly reflects these values would naturally be against the temptation of consumerism. When prosperity is seen as a way of improving the well-being of others and bringing people closer to Allah, rather than being a tool for selfish indulgence, the temptation of materialism reduces.

Islamic economic ethics are also a reaction against consumerism

Islam provides a balanced ethical path that corrects the excesses of materialism with a focus on balance (wasatiyyah), social justice ('adl), and moral responsibility (amanah). Islam does not eschew wealth or consumption but advocates moderation and responsibility in every economic endeavor.

Wealth as an Issue, Rather Than an Objective

Wealth in Islam is regarded as a blessing and a trust from Allah and not as an end. The Qur'an also consistently points out those worldly things are only temporary and are bestowed as a trial:

"Be on your guard lest the existence in this world is nothing but entertainment, distraction, exaggeration, mutual bragging, and rivalry in gaining wealth and children." (Surat Al-Hadid 57:20)

Islam disapproves of hoarding (kanz) and wastefulness (israf) and invites Muslims to utilize their means in the way of Allah. This involves helping the poor, keeping kinship relations alive, and spending on people's welfare. Economic activity is therefore not just transactional but infinitely religious.

The Principle of Moderation (Iqtisad)

Moderation is the key of Islamic philosophy. Muslims are also directed to live in

moderation in the field of spending and consumption:

"And don't make your hand [as] bound to your neck or stretch it out fully and [thus] become blamed and in debt." (Surat Al-Isra 17:29)

This verse is a testament to the Islamic ethos of staying within one's means, not being wasteful, and keeping in mind one's responsibilities towards others.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ embodied this maxim. Even though he could afford a luxurious lifestyle, he lived simply, often going through days on which no meal was prepared. He warned against excess and encouraged his followers to appreciate that simplicity leads to contentment (qana'ah).

Zakat, Charity, and Wealth Redistribution

One of the pillars of Islamic economic ethics is zakat—the compulsory system of almsgiving. It is a method of purification of assets and also a direct antidote to economic imbalance. Further, sadaqah (voluntary charity) is greatly stressed in Islam.

These values create the attitude among Muslims that their income should not be considered individualistic exclusive possessions, but as gifts provided by Allah for the benefit of society at large. This belief clearly varies from self-centered and competitive values adopted by consumerist societies.

The Ban on Riba and Unfair Trade

Islam prohibits riba (usury) and fraud, among other things, in business dealings. The goal is to create a moral market system that encourages fairness, transparency, and mutual benefit. Consumerism thrives in economies of debt, and it is characterized by impulsive consumption and artificial scarcity—characteristics that contrast with Islamic principles.

The Qur'an warns:

"Such as will eat usury shall not stand except as stands one whom the devil has

driven to madness by (his) touch."

(Surat Al-Baqarah 2:275)

By forbidding exploitative economic systems and promoting ethical trade, Islam constructs an alternative narrative to economic hegemony and materialistic avarice.

Prophetic Living as Counterculture to Consumerism

The life of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is a living testament to simplicity, moderation, and abundance of spirit—a counterbalance to the consumer society that emphasizes material wealth over substance. His life is a constant source of reference for Muslims who wish to navigate a world increasingly ruled by materialistic values.

Simplicity in Everyday Life

Despite the possibility of a life of luxury, the Prophet ﷺ chose a simple one. He lived in a modest abode, slept on a palm-leaf mat, and often tied a stone to his stomach as a way of surviving hunger. As narrated by ‘A’isha (RA), "There were months in which no fire was kindled in the house of the Prophet; we survived on dates and water." The voluntary renunciation of luxurious comfort was not out of lack of financial resources but an act of voluntary abdication of worldly desires. Despite his meager possessions, he had plenty of satisfaction. He had once said, "Live in this world as if you were a stranger or a traveler."

(Sahih al-Bukhari)

This perspective is deliberately counter to consumerist philosophy, which encourages the pursuit of material possessions and equates personal worth with material achievement.

Ethics of Consumption and Appreciation

The Prophet ﷺ encouraged mindful consumption with appreciation (shukr). He cautioned his companions not to waste, even in worship. He declared, "Never waste water, even if you have ablution at the edge of a running stream."
(Ibn Majah)

This illustrates an environmental ethic rooted in restraint and responsibility—values that consumerism erodes through overproduction, waste, and environmental damage.

In addition to that, he taught that fulfillment (qana'ah) lies not in possessing more, but in being satisfied with what you possess:

"Richness is not having much. Instead, real richness is richness of the soul."
(Sahih Muslim)

This education fosters inner fulfillment over outer accumulation, advocating a spiritual position that breaks the grip of consumer wants.

Emphasis on Community over Individualism

Consumerism tends to encourage hyper-individualism, with individual benefit taking precedence over the well-being of the community. The Prophet's model was based on care for one another and well-being of the community. He would distribute his food, prioritize others even during times of scarcity, and provide for no member of society to go hungry.

He elaborated,

"He is not a believer whose stomach is full at the expense of hunger of his neighbor."

(Sunan al-Kubra al-Bayhaqi)

This ethic of compassion, empathy, and interconnectedness challenges the consumerist attitude that places self-interest above all else.

The Psychological and Spiritual Implications of Materialism

Materialism, as it pervasively exists in Muslim society, not only distorts consumption patterns but also permeates inner spaces of consciousness, reshaping concepts of success, satisfaction, and meaning. Islam teaches that unbridled pursuit of material wealth results in a lack of spiritual richness, emotional suffering, and separation from the presence of the Divine.

Internal Restlessness and Anxiety

Materialism tends to generate a cycle of never-ending desire and discontent. The Qur'an speaks of this insatiable aspect of humanity:

"Competition in [worldly] increase distracts you, until you go to the graveyards."
(Surah At-Takathur, 102:1–2)

The chase after material riches and wealth can turn into an absolute fixation, leading to increased stress, tension, and possible depression when things fail to meet expectations. Psychological studies in a multitude of ways also confirm the reality that those who emphasize materialistic desires have poorer well-being and more anxiety with social comparison tendencies.

Islam resolves this dilemma with the teachings of tawakkul (trust in Allah), qana'ah (contentment), and dhikr (remembrance of God), which redirect the soul to lasting values and away from the transitory illusions of this world.

Loss of Spiritual Focus

Materialism tends to divert people from their main mission: servitude and worship of Allah. The Qur'an cautions against such a situation:

"O believers, do not let your possessions or children divert you from the remembrance of Allah."

(Surat Al-Munafiqun, 63:9)

The heart involved in worldly riches and worldly status grows less disposed towards prayer, charity, and humility. This spiritual decay results in a hardened heart (qaswat al-qalb), which the Prophet ﷺ has characterized as one of the most perilous conditions of the soul.

On the other hand, Islam calls for purification of the heart (tazkiyah) by means of true worship, charity, contemplation, and detachment from worldly attractions.

Erosion of Ethical Boundaries

Materialism can also result in moral compromises because vices such as fraud, corruption, exploitation, and greed become part of societies that worship riches. This can be observed through the increasing frequency of economic imbalances, for instance, usury (riba), hoarding (ihtikār), and unjust trade practices—each of which is disapproved of in Islamic scriptures.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

"There will come a day on humanity when one will not mind how one acquires one's wealth, legally or illegally."

(Sahih al-Bukhari)

Such mindsets represent not only economic downfall but moral breakdown. Islamic faith lays great importance on acquiring wealth through halal means, being generous, and upholding justice in money dealings.

Islamic economic principles are the answer

The Islamic economic model offers not only a philosophical critique of materialism but also a pragmatic solution based on moral, spiritual, and social values. Rather than eschewing wealth altogether, Islam requires a balanced balance in seeking and distributing wealth that maintains human dignity and advances social welfare.

Wealth as Trust, Not an End

Wealth in Islamic thought is a trust (amanah) of God, not a goal. People are trustees (khalifah) of assets, responsible for how they make and spend. The Qur'an warns:

"Have faith in Allah and His Messenger, and spend of that with which He has made you heirs."

(Surat Al-Hadid, 57:7)

It discourages selfish accumulation and hoarding of resources. It encourages a reflective and ethical form of consumption, which aligns economic behavior with spiritual values.

Zakat and Redistribution of Wealth

One of the central institutions in Islamic economics is zakat, which is a compulsory charity tax aimed at purifying wealth and lessening disparity. In contrast to capitalist economies that tend to accumulate wealth among a select few, Islamic scripture institutionalizes redistribution as a means of creating social harmony.

Zakat is spoken of alongside prayer in most Qur'anic passages, announcing its pivotal position within the socio-economic framework. Zakat redistributes funds, covering the poor, orphans, debtors, and travelers, thus limiting the risks of class inequality through consumerism.

Encouragement of Simplicity and Moderation

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ lived in simple ways in spite of having access to wealth. He taught:

"Richness is not the quantity of goods but richness is the richness of the soul."

(Sahih al-Bukhari)

Islam promotes moderation (wasatiyyah) in consumption and expenditure. The Qur'an commends:

- "Those who, in their expenditure, neither indulge in extravagance nor display parsimony, but who strike a moderate path between both extremes."
- (Surah Al-Furqan, 25:67)
- This middle path promotes individual discipline and safeguards against the extremes of deprivation and indulgence.
- Ethical business and Halal business practices.
- Islamic principles encourage commerce and business—if it is equitable, transparent, and just. The Prophet ﷺ has said:
- The honest and trustworthy merchant will be among the Prophets, the righteous, and the martyrs. (Sunan al-Tirmidhi)

By making possible halal trade, the forbidding of riba (usury), and the denouncing of dishonesty, Islam constructs an ethics-and-spiritualities-based economics that resists the dehumanizing philosophy of consumerist capitalism.

Empirical Research and Contemporary Exhibitions

The development of consumerism and materialism in modern Muslim communities is a real issue, assuming tangible forms that reconstitute cultural identities, moral standards, and communal life. While many Muslim-majority nations have experienced economic development, they also have had to suffer the religious and communal consequences of adopting consumerist ways of life, often in conflict with Islamic values.

Gulf States: Wealth and Religious Disaffiliation

The oil-rich Gulf countries illustrate a paradoxical scenario. The United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have some of the highest per capita incomes in the world; yet, their societies are increasingly dominated by Western-type consumer culture. The social landscape is dominated by the ubiquity of upscale shopping malls, designer wear, and lavish wedding parties.

Despite mass investment in religious infrastructure, there is a discernible shift in youth culture towards material satisfaction. As per the Arab Youth Survey (2023), a study found material wealth, internet status, and consumer labels to be primary concerns in life for the majority of young Arabs. This heightened materialism is likely to co-exist with superficial religiosity, with religion turning symbolic and not transformative.

Pakistan: Cultural Consumerism and Middle-Class Aspirations

In countries like Pakistan, consumerism has been fueled by expanding media, aggressive marketing, and the aspiration for upward social mobility. Ramadan, a sacred time for spiritual reflection, is increasingly commercialized through corporate campaigns, shopping festivals, and branded iftar parties.

The urban middle class's values are largely defined by fashion trends, smartphone culture, and the design of home living spaces. Here, Islamic values of humility, simplicity, and community responsibility often take a back seat to the need to conform to peer consumption patterns and lifestyle choices.

Turkey and Malaysia: Balancing Modernity and Morality

Turkey and Malaysia illustrate Muslim societies that strive to harmoniously resolve modern challenges while maintaining their Islamic identity. In the face of the existence of strong consumer markets along with engagement in the global capitalist system, the two countries equally uphold the drive to develop Islamic ethical finance, the practices of halal consumers, as well as modest fashion practices.

For example, Malaysia has created one of the best model halal certification systems in the world, thus ensuring consumer products conform to religious standards. However, in these systems, critics argue that the "halal" industry would

lead to religion being commoditized, where ethical issues are trumped by financial interests.

Digital Consumerism and Social Media Influencers

Consumer culture growth has been concurrent with the rise of social networking sites. Among various Muslim populations, influencers largely dictate consumer behavior. Modest fashion influencers, Islamic cosmetics businesses, as well as Islamic lifestyle channels, combine Islamic identification with business activities, often blurring the lines between da‘wah as proselytizing and marketing strategies. This digital consumerism has led to the rise of what some scholars term “religious branding,” where piety is performed and consumed online for likes, views, and commercial gain. While some of this content inspires positive change, it also risks reducing spirituality to aesthetic expression.

Restoring Islamic Principles in a Market Economy Society

Confronting the pervasive influence of consumer culture among Muslim societies requires than a mere critical analysis; it is imperative to actively adopt genuine Islamic principles. Islamic teachings have a rich spiritual and moral core that can adequately counter the allurements of materialism while, at the same time, promoting personal dignity, social well-being, and environmental sustainability.

Reassessing the Concept of Zuhd (Abstinence)

One of the core Islamic responses to consumerism is zuhd, often translated as asceticism or renunciation of worldly excess. Contrary to misconceptions, zuhd does not imply rejecting lawful pleasures or wealth; rather, it is a spiritual state where the heart remains detached from material possessions.

The Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) modeled the values of zuhd even though he had the

chance to gain riches and power. He lived in simple, humble surroundings, gave away his belongings liberally, and often reminded his community, “Wealth is not everything, for one's riches is the enrichment of the soul” (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī).

In contemporary terms, zuhd translates into intentional consumption, ethical purchasing, and prioritizing spiritual enrichment over social status.

Islamic Economics and Ethical Finance

Islamic economics, based on principles like interest-free financial dealings, giving through zakāt, and equitable wealth distribution, provides a methodical alternative to the market-oriented capitalist system. The Qur'an promotes moderation in spending:

"Enjoy food and drink in moderation. For indeed, He dislikes those who indulge themselves excessively." (Qur'an 7:31)

Zakāt and ṣadaqah are important mechanisms for wealth distribution in communities, elevating the position of the poor while discouraging the culture of hoarding wealth. Muslim communities need to rediscover these institutions not just as obligations, but as social justice mechanisms for balancing economic inequalities and preventing self-aggrandizement.

Role of Islamic Education and Spiritual Revival

Education is the most important tool in the values change. Madrasahs, schools, and universities ought to include, besides the methods of Islam, the moral viewpoints embedded in Islam that challenge consumerist philosophies. Sufism, which focuses on inner cleansing, spiritual love, and transcendence of the lower self (nafs) as major aims, can play an important role in reviving spirituality.

Traditional texts like Kashf al-Mahjūb and Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn offer timeless frames of reference concerning the dangers inherent in attachment to worldly

things and the satisfaction achievable through proximity to the divine. Their integration into present-day educational structures can promote a deeper and reflective spirituality that resists ephemeral materialist pursuits.

Powers of Exclusion

Geopolitics of Mosques, khanqahs, and Muslim communities can be centers of promoting symbols for simple living, social solidarity, and life committed to service. Programs such as communal dining, skills and knowledge exchange networks, and waste reduction campaigns can be led by the worldwide Muslim community with strong promise.

Highlighting the practice of gratitude, service, and awareness, such activities represent authentic and spiritually enriching alternatives to consumerism in the Muslim scene.

Therefore,

We now live in an age of consumer capitalism and materialism, with the challenge before Muslim society to redefine the concepts of success, happiness, and progress in light of Islamic values. The unbridled spread of consumerist and materialist values not only negates the spiritual nature of Islam but also causes serious threats to the communal, moral, and environmental balance required for creating a more just society.

Islam does not specifically condemn the accumulation of wealth or the enjoyment of comfort, but sets specific religious and moral standards for these activities. The Qur'an and Sunnah encourage notions of moderation, appreciation, and generosity alongside warnings against extravagance, pride, and omission of the hereafter. Moreover, the Islamic tradition including scholarship, Sufic philosophy, and moral economic theory provide applicable contexts for understanding and

overcoming the materialistic worldview.

Finally, the rekindling of an Islamic worldview—rooted in values like taqwa (God-consciousness), zuhd (asceticism), ‘adl (justice), and rahma (compassion)—yield a collective experience instead of just an individual religious activity. Such a transformation requires intentional adjustments within educational systems, economic systems, cultural narratives, and daily practices. By disabusing people of the fallacy that true well-being is achieved through worldly achievements and establishing instead a culture based on fulfillment, responsibility, and compassion, Muslim communities can enable not just individual transformation but also act as a solid counter-narrative to the widespread global materialism crisis.

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