

Losing Our Compass

How Consumerism Conflicts with Islamic Values

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In today's world, social media and consumer culture are reshaping Muslim communities in ways that challenge long-standing values. Practices such as humility, frugality, and Zakat, once central to daily life, may be overshadowed by the cycle of trends, comfort, and material gain. What was meant to foster simplicity and gratitude is now at risk of being replaced by rivalry, greed, and waste. This growing tension highlights the urgent need to reflect on how consumerism distances Muslims from the spiritual balance their faith calls for.

A Losing Game against the Racing Trends

Modern society is overwhelmed by the chase for trends. Styles, gadgets, and social fads now have shorter lifespans than ever, forcing people into an exhausting cycle of constant change. Landfills overflow with barely used products, the environment suffers under mounting waste, and households collapse under record levels of debt. The popular “buy now, pay later” model intensifies the problem, luring people into long-term financial struggles for short-term satisfaction. Muslims have found themselves caught in this race, and some face the added dilemma of drifting away from religious values.

“BNPL providers make money from both ‘merchants’ fees (typically between 2–6 per cent) and customer ‘late’ fees. Up to one in five BNPL users incur such penalties.” – (Threadgold et al., 2024, “Buy-Now-Pay-Later services and young people” section).

Social media magnifies this pace. Platforms reward those who produce content quickly, and influencers are incentivized to push every new product as the “next big thing.” What begins as entertainment soon becomes persuasive marketing, convincing viewers that items once considered unnecessary are now “must-haves.” This subtle messaging transforms wants into needs and links self-worth to possessions. For Muslims, such exposure can pull them away from gratitude and contentment, deepening dissatisfaction and rivalry.

This constant bombardment creates dangerous competition. Individuals subconsciously compare their lives to others, and communities that once thrived on unity now fracture under silent rivalries. Instead of supporting one another, people may find themselves in a contest to flaunt who is more fashionable, up-to-date, or socially relevant. This undermines the spirit of compassion, forgiveness, and solidarity that Islam teaches. In effect, the race to keep up with trends becomes financially and spiritually draining.

The Illusion of Frugality in a World Overrun with Consumerism

Unable to confront the guilt of excess, many Muslims seek comfort in bargains, discounts, and fast fashion. By spending less on a product, they believe they are being frugal and still aligned with Islamic values, but this is a dangerous illusion. Frugality in Islam is not about cutting costs; it is about mindfulness, moderation, and respect for resources. Justifying overconsumption by pointing to low prices distorts the meaning of frugality. True frugality requires reflection. Islam teaches Muslims to question not only how much they spend, but also what they spend on and why. Purchasing countless discounted items is still wasteful if they serve no real purpose. The Quran emphasizes balance, teaching believers to avoid extravagance and to use wealth to support faith, family, and community. Yet consumer culture encourages the opposite—an endless accumulation of things under the false banner of saving money.

Surah Al-Isra’ (17:26-27): “And give to the near relatives their due, and to the orphans, the needy, and the traveler, and do not spend wastefully (your wealth). Indeed, the wasteful are brothers of the devils, and the devil is ever ungrateful to his Lord.” If consumerism can reshape the concept of frugality, its influence is even more evident when it impacts religious duties, such as Zakat. Fast fashion thrives on the mindset that quantity equals value. Communities increasingly flood these markets, believing they are practicing restraint when they may be unintentionally contributing to waste and excess. Consumerism not only reshapes habits but also reinterprets religious concepts, pulling Muslims further from the mindfulness their faith demands.





Zakat: An Obstacle in the Way of Self-Care or a Divine Test of Faith?

Perhaps the clearest example of consumerism's influence is its impact on Zakat. Muslims may struggle to balance self-care with religious obligations, sometimes believing indulgence is justified if it contributes to personal happiness. Zakat is not a burden meant to deprive; it is a divine command to purify wealth, strengthen communities, and restore balance.

Zakat does not forbid self-enjoyment. It places it within a framework of responsibility. By mandating that Muslims give a portion of their wealth to the poor, Islam teaches that money is not one's absolute property, but a trust from Allah, and every believer is accountable for its use. Through this act, blessings circulate to uplift others, combat inequality, and foster solidarity, aligning with the vision of a united ummah. Consumer culture, by contrast, can distort priorities, presenting what

was once a central pillar of faith as optional or secondary to personal comfort.

"The wealth of a person does not decrease by paying Zakat" (Sahih Bukhari 2588).

"Zakat is the right of the poor on the wealth of the rich" (Sahih Bukhari 1395).

Conclusion

The rise of consumerism has quietly challenged Muslim communities, promoting indulgence and personal comfort over Islam's principles of simplicity, generosity, and unity. Yet this struggle is not just about money—it is about how Muslims navigate their values in a world dominated by consumption. The challenge before believers is not to reject modern life entirely, but to engage with it thoughtfully: holding fast to faith, practicing moderation, and ensuring that wealth, possessions, and trends never replace the deeper values of gratitude, solidarity, and spiritual balance.