

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MINIMALIST LIFESTYLE AND THE ISLAMIC PRACTICE OF SIMPLE LIVING

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Abstract

The minimalist lifestyle has risen to become a popular culture in the western hemisphere. What started off as an artistic movement has now become a symbol of anti-consumerism. Many studies have linked the minimalist lifestyle to a better living in terms of mental and physical wellbeing. This paper attempts to conduct a comparative study between the minimalist lifestyle and the Islamic practice of simple living. We discuss the similarities and distinctions between the two vastly different, yet intimately connected philosophies on living the good life. We further explore the origins and motivations behind these practices in order to form a coherent opinion regarding their similarities and distinctions.

Keywords – Minimalism, Minimalist Lifestyle, Islam, Sufism, Islamic Lifestyle, Prophet Muhammed ﷺ

Introduction

The term 'minimalism' has been around for decades and is broad based in nature. It can define, art ^[12], music ^[13] or design ^[14] and lately, also a lifestyle ^[12].

Minimalism started as an art movement in the early 1960s bringing a new perspective to art post World War – II. It was an evolutionary amalgamation of its predecessors, primarily the abstract expressionism and modernism. Agnes Martin, Donald Judd and Frank Stella are among some of the names that pioneered the art form ^[12].

Soon after, the concept of minimalism was adapted into music. A minimalist music piece focusses on repetition and gradual variations in the instruments. La Monte Young, Terry Riley and John Adams are some of the major players who played a crucial role in defining the art form in music ^[13].

In this article, we focus on the minimalist lifestyle, a culture which has gained prominence in the 21st

century. We begin by defining the lifestyle, its origins and purpose. Furthermore, we explore its fundamental ethos and discuss its potential benefits to mental and physical wellbeing.

We then explore what Islam has to offer in terms of simplistic living and mental/physical wellbeing. Defining the fundamental ethos of the Islamic practice of simple living, we shall discuss and analyze the similarities and distinctions of each practice.

The minimalist lifestyle

(i) Definition

The minimalist lifestyle, much as the artform, can simply be defined as living with the minimum number of materialistic things possible. More extreme definitions of minimalism have been made in the past, such as living with *100 things or less* ^[15]. But the more popular and widely accepted definition is *adapting voluntarily to simplicity* ^[1]. Researchers have also used terminologies such as *anti-consumerism* and *de-consumption* ^[1] to add further texture to the philosophy that drives the culture.

(ii) Origins

There are variable perspectives on the origins of minimalism as a lifestyle choice. However, researches have emphasized on the link between the rise of minimalism with the 2008 financial crisis which caused the American housing market to collapse and impacted the entire globe ^[2].

One of the factors that played a major role in the 2008 financial crisis was the excessive accumulation of surplus capital in the financial

sector which was generated mostly from the debt-financed private households. This prompted the researchers to suggest that, had the accumulation of unnecessary goods by the people been less, the impact of the crisis would have been less.

The years after 2008 showed a significant rise of books directly or indirectly related to the minimalist lifestyle movement, particularly in the self-help category.

Given below is a table curated by Mirian Meissner [2] of some of the most influential authors who played a major role in defining the culture of minimalism.

Table 1. Popular minimalist lifestyle narratives according to author.

Authors	Minimalist Lifestyle Narratives
Babauta, Leo	<i>Zen to Done</i> (2013) <i>The Power of Less</i> (2009) <i>Zen Habits</i> (website/podcast) <i>The More of Less</i> (2016) <i>Simplify</i> (2014) <i>Clutterfree with Kids</i> (2014) <i>Living with Less</i> (2012) <i>becomingminimalist</i> (website) <i>Simplify Magazine</i> (online journal) <i>Curation</i> (2017) <i>Soulful Simplicity</i> (2017) <i>Busy</i> (2014) <i>The 4-Hour Work Week</i> (2007) <i>The Minimalists</i> (website/vlog/podcast) <i>Essential</i> (2015) <i>Minimalism</i> (2011) <i>Minimalism</i> (2016, documentary) <i>How to Be Idle</i> (2005) <i>How to Be Free</i> (2007) <i>The Idle Parent</i> (2010) <i>The Idler</i> (magazine) <i>The Joy of Less</i> (2016) <i>Miss Minimalist</i> (website) <i>The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying</i> (2014) <i>Spark Joy</i> (2017) <i>Kanmani</i> (website/online course) <i>The Life Changing Magic of Not Giving a F**k</i> (2015) <i>L'Art de la Simplicité</i> (2017) <i>Vivre Heureux dans un Petit Espace</i> (2016) <i>The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F**k</i> (2016) <i>The No Spend Year</i> (2017) <i>London Minimalists</i> (website) <i>Let's Do Less Together</i> (website/online experiment) <i>Your Money or Your Life</i> (2008) <i>Goodbye, Things</i> (2017)
Becker, Joshua	
Bhaskar, Michael Carver, Courtney Crabbe, Tony Ferris, Tim Fields-Milburn, Joshua & Nicodemus, Ryan	
Hodkinson, Tom	
Jay, Francine	
Kondo, Marie	
Knight, Sarah Loreau, Dominique	
Manson, Mark McGag, Michelle	
Northrup, Kate Robin, Vicky & Dominguez, Joe Sasaki, Fumio	

Table 1: List of popular authors and their narratives on minimalism

As can be seen in Table 1, all of the authors mentioned have published their work post 2007. This further substantiates the claim that minimalism rose to prominence as a threshold to the 2008 financial crisis.

Another argument that has added steam to the minimalist lifestyle is ecology, rather than economy. The push by the world's renowned scientists and researchers to use less of earth's resources and the focus on reusability and recycling of goods have also given rise to a popular culture of anti-consumerism. Many environmental activists have adapted to the minimalist lifestyle [2][9].

Ethos of the minimalist lifestyle

One of the major points of criticism against the minimalist lifestyle has been its subjective approach towards defining the rules of the lifestyle. Authors and thinkers have shared varied perspectives on minimalistic living.

Given the fact that minimalism is a lifestyle that is heavily influenced by the minimalist artform, there is no possible path that can be taken to confine it into a certain set of rules. However, the minimalist lifestyle broadly based on the following set of ethos that have been derived from the literature survey done for this study.

1. It's a counterculture to capitalistic ideals of consumerism. Which is why it is also referred to as anti-consumer culture.
2. Decluttering the space where you live.
3. Learning to be content with what you own. In other words, reducing/removing the craving for wanting more materialistic things.
4. Understanding and internalizing the difference between wants and needs.
5. Reducing time at work by automating and delegating tasks.
6. Reducing material belonging to the extent that cleaning your living space takes little to no time.
7. Developing the will to not be compelled by media advertising tactics.
8. Spending a substantial part of your day in self-reflection and meditation instead of consuming copious amounts of needless data via social media or television.
9. Harnessing the power of the 80/20 principle (i.e., the 20% of tasks that make the other 80% easy or not required) to choose what to focus on.
10. Spending time in activities that add a sense of purpose and meaning to your life.
11. Living one day at a time and developing a sense of urgency viz a viz the short span of life as a motivator to act.
12. Spending your income on things that add meaning and minimum required comfort instead of clutter.

Minimalism for mental health and well-being

Though there has been an abundance of studies done in the social sciences and psychology for assessing the benefits of minimalism, there is a lack of scientific studies that can objectively prove the benefits of minimalism to brain.

Simply put, there is no organized structure to following the minimalistic lifestyle that can be put to the scientific test.

However, it has been the opinion of most researchers that the ethos of minimalism are rudimentary derivations of ancient philosophies and religious beliefs. Many authors that promote a minimalistic lifestyle, such as Cal Newport, Mark Manson and Tim Ferris, have derived their ideologies from ancient Buddhist and Greek traditions. Derivations have also been made from Hindu leaning ideologies and Taoism [2].

It has been evidenced by research that decluttering your mind by reducing distractions reduces anxiety and depression. Contemplation and meditation have also been evidenced to show positive neurological changes in the brain [2][3][4][5][6][7].

On the other hand, substantial studies have been done on the effects of materialism on the human mind. Materialism has been linked to low levels of gratitude and empathy among individuals. It has also been linked with lower levels of satisfaction in relationships [2][3][4][5][6][7].

While negative effects of materialistic living have been well documented [5], there is a requirement for more focussed scientific research on minimalistic lifestyle to cover all important areas.

Considering the fact that almost all of the ethos of the minimalist lifestyle is particularly focussed on deferring the hyper-consumerist culture, an assertion can be safely made that minimalism reduces the negative impacts of hyper-consumerism and materialistic living which also helps in equal distribution of wealth among all sections of human society.

Islamic practice of simple living

As discussed above, many of the pioneers of the minimalistic lifestyle have been influenced by a varied set of religious ethos, primarily deriving most of it from Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism, no research has been done towards a comparative study between the Islamic ethos of simple living and the minimalist lifestyle.

Islam, both in terms of asceticism and lifestyle in general, promotes a simple and non-materialistic living [1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9]. However, there is a distinction between Islamic lifestyle and the lifestyle prescribed by other religions, be it monotheistic or polytheistic.

Islam tends to take a more pragmatic and centrist approach towards a simple living [11]. It has been best encapsulated by the following saying of Hadhrat Ali (رضي الله عنه) the fourth Caliph of Islam:

“Asceticism (zuhd) is not that you should not own anything, but that nothing should own you”.

Islam emphasizes less on the importance of forgoing worldly pleasures but instead focusses more on internalising and acting upon gratitude towards the creator [10][11][12][13][14]. This is done by many means but primarily through acts of charity, and offering Salah five times a day. This is contrary to the Buddhist principles which dictate the forgoing of all longings and pleasures as the ultimate cure for suffering. Christianity recommends abstinence in order to be devoted to Christ.

Islam on the other hand focusses on directing and channelling these urges towards good. Islam dictates that every act committed needs to be for the sake of charity to achieve equal distribution of wealth in human society.

The Islamic ethos of simple living can be broadly classified as follows.

1. Frequent remembrance of Allah as an act of gratitude for the means of livelihood he has provided.
2. Spending at least 2.5% of your wealth in charity provided your wealth meets the minimum threshold value (nisab).

3. Dressing modestly (applicable to both men and women) and wearing minimum jewellery by women.
4. Keeping the afterlife in your mind in all decision making.
5. Keeping a clear perspective on the temporary nature of existence and that all material things are of utility to us only for a short period of time.
6. Avoiding extravagance in all situations and spending surplus wealth in a pragmatic manner for the sake of Allah.
7. Living a life of humility by avoiding unhealthy pride for material belongings or status.

The ethos mentioned above have deeply rooted significance in Islam and are repetitively mentioned in the Quran and Ahadith texts in varying contexts. For the sake of simplicity of discourse, we choose to avoid giving references for all the ethos as the evidence could potentially be endless.

Unique characteristics of Prophet Muhammed ﷺ

It is worthy to mention certain unique characteristics of Prophet Muhammed ﷺ in the context of simple living as a practical example of Islamic doctrine. The reason being that although most of the actions and sayings of the Prophet ﷺ became part of the mandate for the followers of Islam, not all of his actions are compulsory upon Muslims.

Muslim scholars quote these unique characteristics of Prophet Muhammed ﷺ as the main reason for him being mentioned by Allah as the best example for humanity to follow in terms of living the good life (i.e., a life that is pleasing in the eyes of the creator).

1. Although only fasting in the month of Ramadhan is mandatory for Muslims, the Prophet Muhammed ﷺ used to fast frequently throughout the year on varying dates in addition to fasting in the month of Ramadhan.
2. Prophet Muhammed ﷺ never kept enough wealth so that he had to give the mandatory charity.
3. There are clearly defined laws in Islam regarding the distribution of inheritance.

However, the Prophet Muhammed ﷺ left no materialistic inheritance to his family and followers.

4. Prophet Muhammed ﷺ prayed many additional prayers apart from the 5 mandatory Salah, often until late into the night. The Quran mentions this characteristic of the Prophet ﷺ in detail.
5. Though the Prophet ﷺ had an abundance of family and followers, he voluntarily chose to do most of his home chores himself.
6. The Prophet ﷺ discouraged criticism of any food on the table. He disliked people who criticised the food provided to them.
7. He ﷺ is also recorded to have practiced eating less (i.e., just enough to satisfy the appetite and avoiding overeating at all costs). The textual evidence available suggests that the Prophet ﷺ never got sick in his life except during the last few days of his life. Scholars and adherents of Islam argue that his ﷺ habit of eating less was the primary reason for his ﷺ remarkable health.
8. Multiple accounts speak of the attitude of Prophet Muhammed ﷺ towards adversity and hardships. He ﷺ is known to use every hardship and adversity as an opportunity to show gratitude towards Allah.
9. Prior to his ﷺ Prophethood, he used to spend a substantial amount of time in self-reflection in the cave of Hira. He continued this practice in the form of night prayers throughout his life.

Discussion

At first glance the comparison between the two philosophies seems to show certain set of similarities. For instance, self-reflection and meditation seems to be a common theme.

Additionally, the practice of gratitude and keeping short life in a proper perspective also seems to be a shared value system. Dressing appropriately and not overindulging in pleasurable activities such as eating and excessive comforts also share some common ground.

However, differences start to surface when we focus more on the motivations rather than the actions.

(i) Motives for practicing Minimalism

Minimalism focusses primarily on the psychological impacts of materialism. As such, the motives behind practicing minimalism can be listed as follows:

1. Decluttering your life by getting rid of any unnecessary material possession.
2. Conserving your earnings and spending it on things that add meaning and purpose to your life.
3. Removing distractions so you can focus on activities that meaningful.
4. Reducing decision overload by voluntary reduction of choices.
5. Focusing more on relationships and taking pride in social equality instead of material belongings.
6. Practicing contemplation to become more emotionally stable and centered in your decision-making process.
7. Finding peace and tranquility in what nature provides instead of constantly pursuing the betterment of your surroundings.
8. Learning to live, out of your comfort zone to make you more formidable when faced with adversity.
9. Reducing depression, anxiety and the FOMO (fear of missing out) phenomenon.
10. Practicing self-care.

(ii) Motives for practicing Islamic simple living

Upon thoroughly researching the holy texts and Islamic scholarly works, it becomes abundantly clear that following the Islamic practices in day-to-day life may emulate similar effects as to that of following minimalism. The reason being the similarity in actions.

However, contrary to minimalism, the motivation behind all actions in the Islamic practice is solo. It is to ensure peaceful life on earth and equal distribution of wealth which are the objectives demanded by Allah the omnipotent and omnipresent God. The Quran makes it clear that the only purpose of every human being is to praise God as a gratitude towards His bounties, therefore, all acts of piety and simplistic living, though may share similarity in actions and results, are starkly different when it comes to the motivation behind them.

An ideal Muslim is expected to do everything in life as per the guidance of Allah and his Prophet ﷺ. Be it offering Salah, spending time in seclusion, doing charity, dressing modestly, not overindulging in lustful pleasurable activities. The sole motivation for them needs to stem from a strong desire to see God's favor.

As far as comparing Islam with other monotheistic and polytheistic religions is concerned, Islam may share some similarities in motivation but the approach that Islam takes makes it distinct.

Unlike Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism which mandate extreme measures to attain an ascetic living such as sexual abstinence, oaths of silence and voluntary poverty, Islam takes a more balanced approach.

As long as a Muslim does not indulge in anything that has been explicitly declared forbidden (haram), any wealth or material thing of value that is acquired by means that are allowed (halal) and done for the pleasure of Allah, is encouraged.

Islam does not discourage comfortable living or enjoying what life has to offer, be it materialistic or spiritual. However, charity has been emphasized as a compulsory deed to eradicate poverty in human society. It is a religion that has mandated a definitive meaning to life for all of humanity and as such, demands from its adherents, an absolute submission to God's guidance in all things.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed the meaning and origins of the minimalist lifestyle. In the process, we have attempted to define the ethos that drive the philosophy of minimalism.

As a counter-study, we explored the Islamic practice of simple living. In doing so, we navigated through the ethos defining the Islamic lifestyle by means of the Islamic texts as well as the unique characteristics of Prophet Muhammed ﷺ.

Upon analysis, we have discovered certain links between the actions and the results of both lifestyles. This has given some insights as to the similarities that both the ideologies share.

It is in the motivation behind the actions where we noticed the distinction between Islamic practice of simple living and minimalism.

Quranic References

COLOR CODE: ■

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2. Surah Al A'raf, Verse 55
3. Surah Al A'raf, Verse 205
4. Surah Al Isra, Verse 24
5. Surah Al Mu'minin, Verse 2
6. Surah Luqman, Verse 18
7. Surah Al An'am, Verse 42
8. Surah Al Hajj, Verse 34
9. Surah Hud, Verse 23
10. Surah Luqman, Verse 12
11. Surah Aal-i-Imran, Verse 145
12. Surah Ibrahim, Verse 7
13. Surah An Nisa, Verse 147
14. Surah An Nahl, Verse 53

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Mir Habeebullah Quadri is a scholar / researcher in the fields of Artificial Intelligence, computer science and psychology. He has an interest in studying the correlation between religious / cultural practices and their scientific impact on human psyche. He shares an equal interest in studying philosophy and its intricate bond with religion.