

Voluntary Simplicity: Downshifting and The Lifestyle of Australians

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Abstract

Downshifting is part of the voluntary simplicity movement, chosen as a lifestyle strategy to reduce the pressures of materialism and modern life. This study aims to understand the motivations, challenges, and benefits of downshifting among Australians using a qualitative approach and critical theory. The results show that downshifting is undertaken to achieve a better life balance, improve mental health, and foster more meaningful relationships with family and community. Despite facing financial challenges and changes in social status, those who downshift report increased life satisfaction and overall well-being. This phenomenon is also examined from an Islamic ethical perspective, which is in line with the principles of *zuhd* (simplicity) and *qanā'ah* (contentment), and supports environmental sustainability. This study concludes that downshifting is a response to consumerist culture and excessive work pressure, offering a more balanced and meaningful alternative way of life.

Keywords: *Downshifting, Simple Lifestyle, Australia, Life Balance, Islamic Ethics.*

Abstrak

Downshifting merupakan bagian dari gerakan kesederhanaan sukarela yang dipilih sebagai strategi hidup untuk mengurangi tekanan materialisme dan kehidupan modern. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami motivasi, tantangan, dan manfaat *downshifting* di kalangan masyarakat Australia dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan teori kritis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *downshifting* dilakukan untuk mencapai keseimbangan hidup yang lebih baik, meningkatkan kesehatan mental, serta menjalin hubungan yang lebih bermakna dengan keluarga dan komunitas. Meskipun menghadapi tantangan finansial dan perubahan status sosial, para pelaku *downshifting* melaporkan peningkatan kepuasan hidup dan kesejahteraan secara keseluruhan. Fenomena ini juga dikaji dari perspektif etika Islam yang sejalan dengan prinsip *zuhd* (kesederhanaan) dan *qanā'ah* (kepuasan hati), serta mendukung keberlanjutan lingkungan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa *downshifting* merupakan respons terhadap budaya konsumerisme dan tekanan kerja berlebihan, serta menawarkan alternatif hidup yang lebih seimbang dan bermakna.

Kata Kunci: *Downshifting, Gaya Hidup Sederhana, Australia, Keseimbangan Hidup, Etika Islam.*

INTRODUCTION

Downshifting is a life strategy, it first appears in the western nations like the United States, United Kingdom and Australia in the 1990s, it is actually rooted in people's mind as one of the voluntary simplicity's types, it is a lifestyle choice and downshifting became a willful political stance against what we call overwork, overconsumption, and the fast way or the modern way that life goes on. Gives people a mean for them to reconnect with people that they care about and reconnect with the communities that they ones been active in it and also reduce the environmental impact.¹ So downshifting grew up in a place where they can go along with popularity that gets along with movements that promote ethical shopping, fair trade, and simpler living.²

According to Amitai Etzioni, discomfort with the primary goal of capitalist economies where the relentless pursuit of ever-increasing levels of consumption of goods and services is seen as a hollow aspiration has been present since the beginning of industrialization.³ Despite this, personal consumption has continued to rise. Nonetheless, the quest for alternatives to consumerism as the central aim of capitalism remains a subject of interest. Etzioni highlights one such alternative called "voluntary simplicity." This concept can be observed at different levels of intensity, ranging from moderate shifts where individuals reduce their high-consumption lifestyles without drastically slowing down, to more significant forms of simplification.

Downshifterers are individuals who intentionally scale back their lifestyles, voluntarily giving up certain consumer goods often regarded as luxuries. For them, it's about making conscious lifestyle changes. This might mean dressing more casually wearing jeans, simple loafers, t-shirts, and driving older or less flashy cars. Etzioni cites numerous influencers and billionaires as examples of this voluntary simplicity, such as the CEO of Google, "Bill Gates," and the founder of Facebook, "Mark Zuckerberg," along with Yahoo's vice president. These figures often appear at the exclusive World Economic Forum in casual attire, forgoing ties and opting for sweaters. Many of them rarely attend high-profile charity events, instead preferring to stay home, wearing simple clothes like t-

¹ kusuma nurul Rahmah; and ridwan ahmad Hasan; "Urgensi Sistem Ekonomi Hijau Ditinjau Dari Perilaku Produsen Indonesia Dalam Perspektif Tafsir Dan Hadist," *Jurnal Syariat Dan Hukum Islam* 8, no. 2 (2023): 311–329, <https://doi.org/10.31538/adlh.v8i2.4267>.

² Jo Lindsay, Ruth Lane, and Kim Humphery, "Everyday Life after Downshifting : Consumption , Thrift , and Inequality," no. December 2019 (2020): 1–14.

³ Mukhammad Dwi Wijaya, Istiyana Afifah, and Zengenene Maybe, "McDonaldization in Sustainable Agro-Industrial Production Systems: Socio-Cultural Implications in the Context of Globalization," *Al-Mada: Jurnal Agama, Sosial, dan Budaya* 8, no. 3 SE-Articles (August 8, 2025), <https://e-journal.uac.ac.id/index.php/almada/article/view/8420>.

shirts. However, downshifting isn't exclusive to the ultra-wealthy. Professionals and middle-class individuals are also embracing simpler living, swapping elaborate dinner parties for more modest, uncomplicated meals.⁴

METHOD

The research method, is one of the ways used by me to collect and analyze the data obtained. the research method can help and guide me in compiling and presenting the data that has been collected into a structured, logical, and factually accurate scientific work. This research is a qualitative study using the critical theory in international relations and using here three concepts (voluntary simplicity, sustainable consumption, and Anti-consumerism) as its conceptual framework, with the concept of critical theory serving as the paradigm for the study. The existence of this paradigm and conceptual framework aims to facilitate the author in guiding the flow of the discussion in the research being examined.⁵

Here in my research I am using the qualitative methodology which is helping me in findings my data in a detail and contextually way. The writing method employed by the author is the qualitative descriptive analysis method using secondary data. This approach aims to produce descriptive data in the form of written sentences or expressions conveyed by individuals, as well as observed behaviors relevant to the research topic. By applying this technique, the author seeks to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the subject matter being examined.⁶

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Australian and Downshifting

In 2003, the Australia Institute shared eye-opening survey results revealing that a quarter of Australian adults had made the choice to downshift deliberately simplifying their lives by reducing their incomes and spending. This wasn't about quitting work to retire for many, it was a chance to slow down, step off the treadmill of constant work and consumption, and find a more meaningful, fulfilling way of living. They wanted to

⁴ Baso R. et al., "Ekonomi Dan Agama : Harmoni Atau Konflik Dalam Dilema Pembangunan Masyarakat Indonesia?" *Al-Mada: Jurnal Agama, Sosial, dan Budaya* 7, no. 2 SE-Articles (August 10, 2024), <https://e-journal.uac.ac.id/index.php/almada/article/view/5429>.

⁵ Arlina Arlina et al., "Peran Kajian Rutin Dalam Meningkatkan Kualitas Akhlak Masyarakat Di Masjid Al-Mukhlisin Tuasan," *MUDABBIR Journal Reserch and Education Studies* 3, no. 1 (2023): 66–71.

⁶ Kholid Albar, Tasbih Tasbih, and Abustani Ilyas, "Kewirausahaan Dan Bisnis Syariah : Kajian Hadis Tematik Ekonomi Di Era Digital," *Al-Mada: Jurnal Agama, Sosial, dan Budaya* 7, no. 3 SE-Articles (August 10, 2024), <https://e-journal.uac.ac.id/index.php/almada/article/view/5421>.

Voluntary Simplicity: Downshifting and The Lifestyle of Australians

reconnect with what really matters time with family, their own health, pursuing passions, and reducing stress.⁷

What's compelling about this trend is that it isn't just for the well-off or middle-aged who can afford to take risks. It cuts across age groups, family types, and even income levels. Downshifting appealed to young parents wanting more time with their kids, middle-aged professionals burned out from high-pressure careers, and even older people looking for a change without waiting for retirement. It was a conscious effort to redefine what "success" means, moving away from material wealth and instead focusing on quality of life and deeper connection.⁸

Yet, it's also important to recognize that downshifting isn't a luxury available to everyone. For those at the lowest income levels, taking a pay cut or working fewer hours may simply be out of reach. Many in this group lack the financial cushion to make such a choice, even if they desire it. Their struggle highlights the challenges and inequalities that remain within the broader push toward simpler living. Still, the widespread appeal of downshifting reflects a cultural shift—people seeking balance, peace, and a way to live more authentically, even when the pressures of modern life say otherwise.

What leads the Australians to change

Research in Australia and around the world has revealed that people choose to downshift for a variety of reasons, often driven by a mix of personal and principled motivations. At the heart of it, many seek a more fulfilling life, often feeling overwhelmed by how work and career demands overshadow other important aspects of living, like time spent with family and friends. Health concerns can also be a major factor. Sometimes, a personal health scare or seeing someone close experience a serious illness pushes people to reassess what truly matters. Daniela Guidera, head of a university stress management and counseling clinic, explains that intense job pressure and long hours can lead to serious stress and even health breakdowns, making people rethink their work-centered lives.

Other life-changing events can also prompt a shift in priorities like a house fire, the loss of a loved one, a marriage ending, or a profound spiritual experience. Each person's journey is unique. For some, global environmental concerns are a strong motivator; they worry about the planet's fragile state and want to make a difference by living simply and reducing waste. The decision to embrace a downshifted life usually doesn't happen

⁷ Clive Hamilton et al., "Downshifting in Australia," no. 50 (2003).

⁸ Ibid.

overnight. For most, it takes time often one to five years of reflecting and making gradual changes until they are ready to commit to a simpler, more meaningful way of living.⁹

Type of Changes

Downshifting is a long personal journey, according to research that have shown there is patterns among those who choose this kind and change in lifestyle in Australia. Most of people said that they are not going to withdrawal completely from the society, but instead they are trying to find out what is the best way to live their own life and address what isn't working for them, they are not going to try to join some kind like movements but in a simple way they want to balance their own life.¹⁰

Tan's also said that there is three motivations behind why people are downshifting (the desire to achieve better balance in work and life, people need to feel or they need to feel freedom from pressures and demands, and also they always wish to live more naturally). For these kind of people downshifting is not something spiritual or a quest but it is about taking a step forward to achieve a more fulfilling life and a meaningful life. And that is what Amitai Etzioni says he believe that people should get more freedom in there life and have more time to achieve their dreams and balance their life between work and family so he critics this capitalism system that push people to do more work for their own goals while their subordinate can't reach their goals, for me I always say that we will never know If downshifting is working or not until we try it by ourselves but I also agree with Amitai Etzion's opinion about this thing that the capitalism system always push people to work more hard so they can achieve their own goals. So if we want to take an example of what capitalism system and consumption concept do to people we can take Japan as an example for what we are talking about, in Japan people almost work for sunrise until they drop actually people there give their own life to work and see work as a holy thing that will make their life better than anybody else, we know that people there have no time for their family and friends until they get older and living alone in a small apartment and we see also from news that to many of them comet suicide because of the pressure that they take from work and they also fell lonely because most of them don't have someone to talk with. I took Japan as an example to show the people that are going to read my research that the capitalism system sometimes washing people's brain until they are totally forget about themselves and they life that they had before diving in this system and concept.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Philomena Tan, "Leaving the Rat Race to Get a Life: A Study of Midlife Career Downshifting" (January 2000).

Some Common Themes About Downshifting

Offers an insightful exploration of career downshifting in Australia, focusing on the psychological and personal experiences of individuals who deliberately stepped back from high-powered or high-income careers to pursue a simpler and more balanced lifestyle. This research, is focusing on phenomenological research, looking for and diving into small select group of downshifters, highlighting on their motivations, challenges, and outcomes.¹¹ Although the research gives important information but its limited scope and sample size present challenges to its general applicability. Tan's research involved detailed interviews with 30 participants, primarily white-collar professionals with tertiary education. These individuals, with pre-downshifting incomes ranging from \$38,000 to \$250,000, were earning significantly above the average Australian income at the time. By design, the study focused on this particular demographic, aiming to understand the psychological transitions associated with career downshifting. This focus on well-educated, high-earning individuals means the study is not representative of the broader population of downshifters, especially those from lower-income or blue-collar backgrounds. Nonetheless, it offers a rich and nuanced account of the transitional journey experienced by these participants¹².

One of the key contributions of Tan's study is her identification of distinct stages in the downshifting process. She emphasized that downshifting is not a single event but a journey that unfolds over time, involving both external changes and profound psychological shifts. While the external transitions, such as adopting new careers and adapting to reduced incomes, are more visible, Tan's work centers on the internal, emotional adjustments that individuals undergo during this process. Her model underscores the complexities of downshifting, showing it to be a deeply transformative experience.

However, the transition to a downshifted lifestyle is not without its challenges. Participants in the study faced significant hurdles, particularly the financial strain of a reduced income. On average, they reported a 54% decline in income, requiring substantial lifestyle adjustments. This financial impact often led to broader challenges, including a perceived 29% drop in socio-economic status. Many participants struggled with feelings of diminished self-worth as they navigated societal perceptions and internalized notions of success tied to status and earnings. Additionally, the shift in career paths brought its own

¹¹ Astrid Prameswari Lestari and Nuzulul Kusuma Putri, "Participatory Action Research Untuk Menyiapkan Model Students-Community Partnership Pada Kemitraan Peningkatan Kesejahteraan Anak," *Media Gizi Kesmas* 12, no. 2 (2023): 810–821.

¹² Tan, "Leaving the Rat Race to Get a Life: A Study of Midlife Career Downshifting."

set of difficulties. Participants often needed to reskill or adapt to new work environments, which could be both daunting and stressful.

The impact of downshifting extended beyond the individuals themselves, affecting their partners and families as well. The adjustments required of family members often created tension, as new dynamics emerged and expectations had to be recalibrated. Despite these challenges, most participants were able to navigate these changes successfully, finding ways to realign their personal and professional lives.

Despite the difficulties associated with downshifting, the study's findings reveal a largely positive outcome for participants. Most reported significant improvements in their overall quality of life following the transition. Enhanced life satisfaction was a recurring theme, with participants consistently rating their happiness and well-being higher after downshifting. Notably, their satisfaction levels were slightly above the Australian average, suggesting that the shift had a broadly positive impact on their mental and emotional well-being. The participants also experienced a better work-life balance, which was a primary motivator for many of them. The transition allowed them to dedicate more time to personal pursuits, family, and hobbies, which contributed to a greater sense of fulfillment. Furthermore, the reduction in work-related stress and burnout was frequently cited as a key benefit, leading to improved mental health and a sense of peace. Almost all participants described the career change as highly desirable, affirming their decision to pursue a more values-driven and meaningful lifestyle ¹³

While Tan's study provides invaluable insights into the phenomenon of career downshifting, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The small sample size of 30 participants limits the study's ability to generalize its findings to the broader population. Moreover, the deliberate focus on well-educated, high-earning individuals excludes the experiences of other downshiffters, such as those in blue-collar roles or lower-income brackets. This narrow scope means that the study offers a partial perspective on downshifting, primarily reflecting the experiences of a privileged subset of the population.

In comparison to broader studies on downshifting, which often include diverse demographic groups and explore various forms of lifestyle simplification, Tan's research is more narrowly focused. It concentrates specifically on career-related downshifting, overlooking other aspects such as early retirement or non-career-driven lifestyle changes. While this focus allows for a deep exploration of a specific subset of downshiffters, it limits

¹³ Ibid.

Voluntary Simplicity: Downshifting and The Lifestyle of Australians

the study's relevance to understanding the full spectrum of downshifting experiences in Australia.¹⁴

Philomena Tan's study is a significant contribution to the understanding of career downshifting, particularly its psychological dimensions and personal impacts. The research highlights both the challenges and rewards of this lifestyle change, showing that while the journey may be difficult, it often leads to greater life satisfaction and well-being. However, the study's limitations in sample size and demographic diversity mean that its findings should be interpreted with caution. Future research could build on Tan's work by including larger and more varied samples to capture the full range of downshifting experiences and their implications for individuals and society as a whole.

The Political Implications on the Downshifting in Australia

As we see in this research, almost all of the studies shows that there is a substantial majority of people in Australia who believe that they can not afford to buy everything they need, but instead they spend their money on things and buy things that is basic necessities in life, it is actually a close number to those Australian who can not really afford everything they need. This indication in the middle class made a big change in Australian's political culture, so here the main political parties attract the feelings of the voters by amplify their view on financial difficulty.¹⁵ So as we can see and read from the articles the politicians are hitting a good spot because they are saying things like "families are doing it tough out there". And the history shows that a large group of middle income where already voting to the new prime minister of Australia because he knows and understand the financial worries of people and he is grateful to help them.

Islamic Ethical Perspective on Downshifting and Voluntary Simplicity

From an Islamic ethical standpoint, the concepts of downshifting and voluntary simplicity resonate with the ethical principles of *zuhd* (ascetic moderation) and *qanā'ah* (contentment), which are foundational to Islamic moral philosophy regarding material life and consumption. Islamic ethics emphasize moderation in consumption and the avoidance of excess (*isrāf*) and waste (*tabdhīr*), which parallels contemporary calls for mindful consumption and sustainability within economic behavior.¹⁶ Scholars in Islamic economics

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Irjus Indrawan, "Pendidikan Karakter Dalam Perspektif Islam," *Al-Afkar: Jurnal Keislaman & Peradaban* 2, no. 1 (2016).

have articulated that mindful consumption should fulfill real needs while integrating ethical considerations and environmental preservation, aligning consumption behavior with spiritual and social responsibility rather than material accumulation alone.¹⁷

Furthermore, the framework of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* provides a comprehensive normative basis for evaluating human behavior—including economic and lifestyle choices—through the protection of essential objectives such as religion (*ḥifẓ al-dīn*), life (*ḥifẓ al-nafs*), intellect (*ḥifẓ al-'aql*), lineage (*ḥifẓ al-nasl*), and wealth (*ḥifẓ al-māl*) in ways that transcend mere utility maximization.¹⁸ Downshifting as a conscious reduction in consumption and economic activity can, therefore, be interpreted as an ethical strategy oriented toward restoring balance and human dignity—challenging neoliberal economic structures that prioritize material growth over human well-being. Normative research in *maqāṣid* emphasizes that ethical economic practices, including moderate consumption and purposeful allocation of resources, help achieve justice, welfare, and protection of human rights, aligning macroeconomic choices with ethical human development.¹⁹

In addition to normative economic considerations, Islamic legal and ethical teachings explicitly condemn wastefulness (*isrāf*) and support environmental stewardship, echoing contemporary sustainability concerns. Empirical and conceptual analyses of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* demonstrate that principles such as *khalīfah* (stewardship of the earth), *mīzān* (balance), and *maṣlaḥah* (public interest) provide an ethical foundation for ecological responsibility and sustainable development.²⁰ These values align with the underlying rationale of voluntary simplicity, suggesting that reduced consumption and mindful living not only reflect personal spiritual objectives but also contribute to ecological sustainability and social justice, thereby offering an integrative ethical framework that extends beyond individual choices into global socio-economic and environmental policy considerations.

¹⁷ Misi Anggraini, “View of Mindful Consumption in Islamic Economics: A Conceptual Analysis within the Framework of Sustainability.”

¹⁸ Samsul Arifin and Sri Herianingrum, “Kajian Mendalam Analisis Infak Produktif: Pendekatan Strategis Mewujudkan Maqasid Syariah,” *Jurnal Ilmiah Ekonomi Islam* 10, no. 1 SE-Articles (March 16, 2024): 799–806, <https://jurnal.stie-aas.ac.id/index.php/jei/article/view/12202>.

¹⁹ Muawanah Muawanah et al., “Evaluasi Strategi Pemberdayaan Mustahik Melalui Program Bantuan Modal Usaha: Analisis SWOT Di BAZNAS Kabupaten Mojokerto,” *Al-Mada: Jurnal Agama, Sosial, dan Budaya* 8, no. 3 SE-Articles (August 31, 2025), <https://e-journal.uac.ac.id/index.php/almada/article/view/8681>.

²⁰ Maulana Bagus Rahmat, Masruchin, and Fauzan, “The Idea of Islamic Ecotheology in Responding to the Global Environmental Crisis: An Analysis of the Concepts of Khalifah, Mizān, and Maṣlaḥah,” *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Theology and Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2025): 93–110.

CONCLUSION

Downshifting in Australia is actually a point of view of a person, we can not decide if this downshifting is success without trying it by ourselves. Downshifting is a significant lifestyle change among Australian people as a form of resistance of overconsumption, and the pressure of overwork, and the environmental and how a person is living in the modern world, it aim to more simple life, and how can a person reach his fulfillment, and of course making a balance between work and life, the Australian gave a good reaction on the downshifting choice that they made it gave them the opportunity to escape from capitalism and make a success life in terms of well-being, sustainability and also the relationships in their life. Although downshifting makes big challenges for those who went through it form the financial control and the changes in the social status and also the benefits that they are taking from their past relationships, but in the other side the improving in their mental health and a satisfaction life that they get makes this choice a good choice for many people.

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