
**FROM THE BUKHARAN BAZAAR TO THE DIGITAL MARKETPLACE:
REREADING ABDURAUUF FITRAT'S COMMERCIAL ETHICS IN THE AGE OF
PLATFORM ECONOMY**

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19870929>

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Abstract

This article proposes a novel reading of Abdurauf Fitrat's commercial ethics through the lens of contemporary platform economy and digital marketplace research. While previous scholarship has examined Fitrat's economic ideas in the context of classical moral economy, this study advances a forward-looking thesis: that the conceptual problems Fitrat identified in the early twentieth-century Bukharan bazaar – information asymmetry, trust deficit, predatory intermediation, hidden fees, and the displacement of local producers – reappear with striking similarity in the architecture of today's e-commerce platforms (Uzum, Yandex Market, Wildberries, OLX, Amazon). Drawing on the typology of "five bazaar pathologies" reconstructed from Fitrat's journalistic articles in *Hurriyat* and *Oyina*, the article maps each pathology onto its digital counterpart and proposes a framework of seven "digital muhtasib" functions for contemporary marketplace governance. The empirical illustration draws on Uzbekistan's e-commerce sector (2020–2025), where the gross merchandise value (GMV) grew from 0.4 to 4.6 billion USD. The findings suggest that Fitrat's 1915 framework offers a culturally resonant vocabulary for designing consumer-protection rules, ethical algorithms and transparent marketplace governance in twenty-first-century Central Asia.

Keywords

Abdurauf Fitrat, platform economy, e-commerce, digital marketplace, muhtasib, marketplace governance, consumer protection, algorithmic ethics, Central Asia, Uzbekistan.

When Abdurauf Fitrat in 1915 walked through the bazaars of Bukhara and described, in the pages of "Rahbari najot," a market in which buyers could not verify the quality of cotton without specialised knowledge, where intermediaries

inflated prices through artificial scarcity, and where the absence of clear rules left ordinary consumers vulnerable to exploitation, he was not merely diagnosing a local malaise. He was identifying a structural problem that would later acquire universal theoretical attention under the names “information asymmetry” (Akerlof 1970), “moral hazard” (Holmström 1979) and “market microstructure failure” (O’Hara 1995). What is striking, more than a century later, is not that these problems have been solved, but that they have migrated into a radically new institutional environment: the digital platform marketplace.

The contemporary Uzbek consumer who places an order on Uzum Market for an electric kettle, or who searches for a leather jacket on Yandex Market, or who tries to identify a reliable seller among twenty offering identical sneakers on OLX, faces functionally analogous problems to those Fitrat described a hundred years ago: the asymmetry between what the seller knows and what the buyer can verify, the temptation of intermediaries to extract value at every node of the transaction, and the absence of trusted moral authority capable of enforcing fair play. The technological substrate has changed completely. The structural challenge has not.

This article advances three interrelated claims. First, that Fitrat’s commercial ethics is best understood not as a museum piece of intellectual history but as a working framework for diagnosing market failure. Second, that the categories he developed for the pre-modern bazaar – muhtasib, kalantar, halol, ihtikar, gharar – acquire renewed analytical force when applied to digital platforms. Third, that contemporary Uzbek policy on e-commerce regulation, consumer protection in the digital domain, and the design of platform governance can benefit from the deliberate translation of Fitrat’s ideas into algorithmic and institutional terms. The article is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on platform economy and the limited body of work that has attempted to bring Islamic-economic ethics into dialogue with digital commerce. Section 3 presents the analytical framework: the typology of five bazaar pathologies and seven muhtasib functions. Section 4 applies this framework to the empirical case of Uzbekistan’s e-commerce sector. Section 5 concludes.

Three bodies of literature inform this study. The first is the rapidly expanding research on platform economy, including N. Srnicek’s analysis of platform capitalism, A. Sundararajan’s account of crowd-based capitalism, and the recent work of M. Kenney and J. Zysman on the platform as the new economic infrastructure. This literature has documented in considerable detail the new forms of value extraction, dependency and risk that platform architectures produce – yet

it remains largely silent on the question of culturally specific governance frameworks for non-Western contexts.

The second is the literature on Islamic economic ethics and Islamic finance, represented by the work of M. U. Chapra, M. Iqbal and M. Ayub. While this body of work has produced sophisticated frameworks for evaluating financial instruments against the criteria of *riba*, *gharar* and *halol*, its engagement with digital platforms remains preliminary. Recent contributions by Y. Hidayat and Z. Hassan on Islamic e-commerce ethics have begun to address this gap, but the conceptual vocabulary they employ tends to translate classical *fiqh* categories directly into digital contexts without engaging the rich Central Asian tradition of urban commercial regulation.

The third is the historical scholarship on *Jadid* economic thought, particularly the works of B. Qosimov, H. Boltaboyev, A. Khalid and Sh. Yuldashev. These studies have established the textual basis for the present analysis but have not pursued the question of how *Fitrat's* framework might inform contemporary digital governance. The present article therefore occupies a deliberate intersection between three domains that have not yet been brought into systematic dialogue.

The methodology is twofold. First, a textual reconstruction of *Fitrat's* typology of bazaar pathologies is conducted through close reading of his articles in *Hurriyat* (1917–1918) and *Oyina* (1913–1915), supplemented by passages from “*Sayyohi hindi*” and “*Rahbari najot.*” Second, an analytical mapping is performed between each historical pathology and its digital counterpart, drawing on empirical data from the Uzbek e-commerce sector and recent reports of the State Statistics Committee, the Anti-Monopoly Committee and the Consumer Rights Protection Agency for the period 2020–2025.

A close reading of *Fitrat's* commercial-economic articles reveals a remarkably systematic diagnosis of what he saw as the chronic ailments of the late Bukharan bazaar. These can be reconstructed as five distinct pathologies, each with its specific mechanism, victim and ethical violation. Table 1 summarises this typology and its proposed mapping to the contemporary platform marketplace.

Table 1.

Five bazaar pathologies and their digital counterparts

No	Pathology (<i>Fitrat's</i> term)	Mechanism in the Bukharan bazaar	Counterpart in the platform marketplace
1	Gharar (excessive uncertainty)	Buyer unable to verify quality, weight or origin of goods at the point of sale.	Photo-reality gap, fake reviews, misleading product descriptions, hidden defects.
2	Ihtikar (speculative hoarding)	Intermediaries cornering	Algorithmic price

		l, cotton or textile to te prices.	elimination, dynamic surge ng, scarcity engineering.
3	Riba (usurious extraction)	Lenders charging ssive interest on small hants, forcing ndency.	High platform commissions 5%), BNPL traps, predatory ch credit.
4	Tattif (false weighing)	Manipulated scales, abelled measures, ptive packaging.	Manipulated rankings, paid ement, dark patterns, drip ng at checkout.
5	Hijab al-suq (concealment of market)	Bazaar information d to outsiders; novices matically disadvantaged.	Opaque algorithms, sclosed ranking criteria, lack plainability for users.

Source: Reconstructed by the author from Fitrat (1915, 1917) and platform-economy literature (Srnicek 2017; Cohen 2019).

The figure of the muhtasib in classical Islamic urban governance was responsible for verifying weights and measures, inspecting goods, mediating disputes, enforcing ethical rules of trade and ensuring transparent prices. Fitrat treats this institution not as a quaint historical relic but as a functional template for any well-ordered market. Translated into the digital context, his framework yields seven core functions that any responsibly governed marketplace must perform.

(i) Verification of seller identity – the digital muhtasib must establish robust seller authentication beyond a simple email address, drawing on the principle that anonymous trade is structurally vulnerable to fraud. (ii) Quality certification – mechanisms analogous to the physical inspection of goods, such as independent product testing, verified-purchase reviews and quality seals. (iii) Price transparency – disclosure of all components of the final price (commission, delivery, taxes) before the transaction is confirmed, eliminating the modern equivalent of false weighing. (iv) Algorithmic accountability – explainability of ranking, recommendation and pricing algorithms to both sellers and buyers. (v) Dispute resolution – institutional mechanisms for mediating conflicts that do not depend on the platform’s commercial interest, echoing the muhtasib’s independent moral authority.

(vi) Protection of small sellers – limits on platform commissions, prohibitions on platforms competing with their own sellers using their data, transparent rules on suspension and removal. (vii) Consumer education – the digital extension of Fitrat’s repeated emphasis on commercial literacy, in the form of accessible information on rights, refund procedures and risk factors. These seven functions provide a normative scaffolding for evaluating both the design of contemporary platforms and the regulatory frameworks that govern them.

The Uzbek e-commerce sector provides a particularly informative empirical case for testing the analytical value of the Fitratian framework. According to data from the State Statistics Committee and industry reports, the gross merchandise value (GMV) of e-commerce in Uzbekistan grew from approximately 0.4 billion USD in 2020 to 4.6 billion USD by the end of 2025, representing a compound annual growth rate of approximately 63%. The number of active marketplace sellers increased from roughly 8,000 to over 95,000 in the same period. This rapid expansion has produced precisely the kind of governance challenges that Fitratian's framework is designed to identify.

Pathology of *gharar* (uncertainty) is empirically observable in the well-documented "photo-reality gap" on Uzbek marketplaces, where buyers receive products that differ materially from advertised images. According to a 2024 report of the Consumer Rights Protection Agency, complaints related to product-image discrepancy accounted for approximately 31% of all e-commerce-related grievances. The Fitratian principle of *rost-go'ylik* (truthfulness in transaction) is directly violated, and the corresponding *muhtasib* function of quality certification offers a clear policy response.

Pathology of *ihtikar* (hoarding) reappears in the form of algorithmic price-discrimination practices, where the same item is offered at different prices to different users on the basis of browsing history, device type and location. While such practices are common globally, their introduction into the Uzbek market – where consumer awareness of digital pricing mechanics remains limited – raises particular concerns. Fitratian's argument that the artificial creation of scarcity is a form of social harm provides a normative basis for restricting these practices.

Pathology of *riba* (extractive intermediation) is visible in the high commissions charged by platforms to small sellers – typically between 15% and 30% of the transaction value, often combined with mandatory storage fees, delivery margins and advertising spend. For small artisans selling handcrafted goods, the cumulative effect can absorb fifty percent or more of the gross revenue. The Fitratian critique of usurious extraction here acquires direct contemporary force: when a platform's revenue model systematically transfers value from small producers to large intermediaries, it reproduces the structural pathology of pre-modern usury in a new institutional form.

Pathology of *tatfif* (false weighing) is empirically present in the practice of "drip pricing," in which the initial advertised price is supplemented by progressively disclosed delivery, packaging and service fees. A 2024 study of the top five Uzbek marketplaces found that the difference between the initial displayed

price and the final paid price averaged 12–18% across the analysed product categories. The Fitratian principle of transparent pricing offers a clear normative anchor for the regulatory response: full disclosure of all price components prior to transaction confirmation.

Pathology of hijab al-suq (concealment of the market) is most acute in the case of opaque ranking and recommendation algorithms. When a small Uzbek artisan complains that their handmade ceramic from Rishton receives few impressions while imported plastic substitutes occupy the top positions, they are encountering precisely the structural problem that Fitrat described as the systematic disadvantaging of those without insider knowledge of the bazaar. The contemporary remedy – algorithmic transparency, explainability and right-to-know – is functionally equivalent to the Fitratian demand for an open and observable market.

The mapping presented above is not merely an academic exercise. It generates concrete recommendations for the ongoing development of Uzbekistan's e-commerce regulation. First, the design of the Consumer Protection Code should explicitly include disclosure obligations for marketplace operators that go beyond the minimal standards typical of comparable jurisdictions, drawing on the comprehensive transparency standards implicit in the muhtasib function. Second, the Anti-Monopoly Committee's mandate should be expanded to include digital pricing practices, including explicit prohibition of certain forms of algorithmic price discrimination that contradict the principle of fair price. Third, a graduated commission framework for marketplaces, with reduced rates for small artisans and protected cultural goods, would operationalise the Fitratian concern with the protection of small producers.

Fourth, the introduction of algorithmic-explainability requirements – obliging marketplaces to disclose, in accessible language, the principal factors influencing product ranking and pricing – would directly address the pathology of hijab al-suq. Fifth, public-funded consumer education campaigns, perhaps in cooperation with the Bukhara University of Innovation and other higher-education institutions, can extend Fitrat's emphasis on commercial literacy into the digital era. Together, these measures translate a century-old framework into the institutional architecture of twenty-first-century Uzbek marketplace governance.

The argument advanced in this article rests on a simple but consequential observation: the conceptual problems Fitrat identified in the early twentieth-century Bukharan bazaar are not historically obsolete but structurally recurrent. They reappear, in technologically transformed but functionally equivalent forms, in

the digital marketplaces that today mediate an ever-larger share of economic activity in Uzbekistan and the broader Central Asian region. This recurrence is not coincidental: it reflects the deep continuity of the structural challenges that any market institution must address, irrespective of its technological substrate.

Three substantive conclusions follow. First, Fitrat's framework offers a culturally resonant vocabulary for diagnosing platform-marketplace pathologies in the Uzbek context, complementing and in some respects deepening the imported categories of contemporary platform-economy literature. Second, the seven *muhtasib* functions reconstructed in this article provide a practical normative framework that can inform both regulatory design and platform self-governance. Third, the empirical mapping onto Uzbekistan's e-commerce sector demonstrates that this is not a purely theoretical exercise: each Fitratian pathology has a clearly observable digital counterpart, and each suggests concrete policy responses.

Beyond its specific contributions to platform-economy research and Uzbek policy debate, the present article also illustrates a broader methodological possibility: that historical economic-ethical traditions, including those of Muslim modernism, can serve as living analytical resources rather than mere objects of historical curiosity. The bridge between the Bukharan bazaar and the digital marketplace is not metaphorical but conceptual, and traversing it productively can enrich both contemporary economic policy and the scholarly understanding of Central Asia's intellectual heritage. In an era when global discourse increasingly recognises the limits of purely technocratic approaches to digital governance, the recovery of culturally specific moral-economic frameworks is not nostalgia but necessity.

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