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A Muhasabah-Based Self-Reward Model for Students' Self-Regulation and Moral Education: Al-Ghazali's Sufi Perspective

Muhamad Fajar Sodiq^{*1}, Rosidi²

1,2.Institut Al Fithrah Surabaya, Indonesia

*Correspondence: muhamadfajar142002@gmail.com¹, rasyd111@gmail.com²

Abstract: The phenomenon of self-reward in contemporary life cannot be separated from two mutually reinforcing forces: global consumer culture and the social media ecosystem, and it is felt most acutely among students, whose self-regulation and moral character are still forming. What was originally a psychological reinforcement mechanism rooted in behavioral theory has undergone a fundamental functional shift from internal reinforcement to external performance, from self-recovery to consumption justification — a shift with direct implications for how students learn to regulate their conduct and internalize moral values. This study raises three central questions: first, how is self-reward distortion systematically formed within the digital consumerism ecosystem, and what does it imply for students' self-regulation? Second, how does Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's Sufi critique through *mujāhadah al-nafs*, *zuhud*, and *qanā'ah* respond to that distortion? Third, what kind of conceptual reconstruction can be formulated through the encounter of these two horizons within Gadamer's hermeneutical framework? This research employs a qualitative-library approach using Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, explicitly operationalized through three stages: pre-understanding, hermeneutic circle, and fusion of horizons. Primary sources include Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's three major works: *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, *Mīzān al-'Amal*, and *Kimīyā al-Sa'ādah*. The findings reveal that self-reward distortion is not merely an individual psychological weakness, but a systemic consequence of the absence of a transcendental dimension and ethics of proportionality in the modern psychological framework, which intentionally operates within a secular domain. Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's thought does not present itself as a rejection of modern psychology but as a corrective supplement to these absences, offering a normative framework for moral education. The resulting reconstruction model is *muḥāsabah*-based self-reward: a proportional, spiritually-oriented act of self-appreciation integrated within the consciousness of *murāqabah*, positioned as a practical model for strengthening students' self-regulation and moral education.

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1. Introduction

There is something both intriguing and concerning about the way the concept of “self-reward” has been circulating on social media in recent years. Posts with messages like “I’ve worked hard for a month—I deserve to buy something for myself” or “self-reward isn’t wasteful; it’s a necessity” flood the social media feeds of the younger generation—including students in high school and college who are still developing their self-regulation skills and moral character—with an almost ritualistic regularity. What’s striking isn’t just the frequency, but the logic behind it: self-reward, which should be restorative and proportional, has shifted into a moral justification for excessive consumption [1].

Conceptually, self-reward refers to the act of a person giving themselves appreciation after successfully completing a task or enduring a taxing situation [2]. In behavioral psychology, this concept is rooted in B.F. Skinner's theory of operant conditioning: behaviors followed by positive consequences tend to be repeated. Self-reward functions as an internal positive reinforcement that strengthens productive behavioral patterns—a mechanism that is empirically valid and recognized across scientific traditions [3].

The problem lies not in the concept itself, but in the social conditions surrounding it. The development of digital technology, the dominance of social media, and the penetration of global consumer culture have systematically distorted the meaning of self-reward. Jean Baudrillard, in his analysis of consumer society, asserts that consumption in modernity is no longer driven by functional needs but by the logic of symbolic value—individuals consume not because they need to, but because they want to be seen, recognized, and categorized within a specific social hierarchy [4]. In this context, self-reward has become a highly efficient vehicle for consumerism: the purchase of luxury goods, excessive recreational travel, or a hedonistic lifestyle are justified in the name of self-appreciation.

This distortion is empirically confirmed. Putri found that exposure to social media significantly shapes a conception of self-reward that is more oriented toward external recognition among Gen Z [5]. Anggasta et al. identified self-reward as the primary justification for impulsive purchasing behavior—not as a planned reward for achievements, but rather as spontaneous purchases that are subsequently justified as self-appreciation [2]. Fadhilah et al. demonstrate that although self-reward is positively correlated with learning motivation, its ethical and spiritual dimensions are rarely addressed in the academic literature [6].

The most fundamental issue concerns the normative framework. Modern psychology, which serves as the dominant reference point for the discourse on self-reward, operates within a secular scientific tradition that does not include the transcendental dimension as a relevant variable [7]. This does not mean that modern psychology is “wrong”—it was simply not designed to answer questions about the relationship between humans and God. It is more accurately understood as a limitation of its domain: modern psychology is valid within its own domain, but it lacks the conceptual tools to address questions of ethical proportionality and transcendental orientation. Even richer theories such as Seligman's positive psychology [8], Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory [9], or Viktor Frankl's theory of meaning-making [10], all operate within a humanistic framework that continues to place humans as the sole normative authority.

It is here that the thought of Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (1058–1111 CE) [11], becomes relevant—not as a substitute for modern psychology, but as a scholarly tradition that complements those missing dimensions. As a figure who successfully synthesized philosophy, *fiqh*, kalam, and Sufism into a coherent framework of Islamic epistemology, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali formulated a comprehensive framework regarding the structure of the human psyche and the mechanisms of self-control [12]. In his magnum opus, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, he systematically outlines how humans can achieve a balance between worldly needs and otherworldly orientation through the concepts of *mujāhadah al-nafs*, *zuhud*, and *qanā'ah* [11].

This study aims to address four gaps identified in existing academic research. First, there has been no study that explicitly positions contemporary self-reward as the object of a Sufi-based conceptual critique, rather than merely integrating the concept. Second, there has been no use of Gadamer's hermeneutics that truly presents the process explicitly, rather than merely referring to it as a method. Third, there has been no formulation of a reconstruction accompanied by operational criteria that can be directly traced back to the texts of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. Fourth, there has been no effort to translate this

reconstruction into a framework specifically relevant to strengthening students' self-regulation and moral education.

The three research questions addressed are: (1) How does self-reward distortion systematically arise within the ecosystem of digital consumerism, what are the limitations of modern psychology in addressing it, and what are the implications for students' self-regulation? (2) How can Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's Sufi critique, through the concepts of *mujāhadah al-nafs*, *zuhud*, and *qanā'ah*, serve as an ethical framework to address these distortions? (3) What kind of conceptual reconstruction of self-reward emerges from the fusion of modern psychology and Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's Sufism—as envisioned within Gadamer's horizon—that is relevant for strengthening students' self-regulation and moral education?

Theoretically, the concept of self-reward is rooted in the tradition of behaviorist psychology through B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning theory [3], which views self-reward as a positive reinforcement mechanism to strengthen productive behavioral patterns. In subsequent developments, Bandura's self-regulation theory introduced a more complex cognitive dimension, in which individuals are viewed as possessing the autonomous capacity to monitor, evaluate, and reward themselves [13]. Although this modern psychological literature provides a solid technical foundation regarding the efficacy of self-reward in enhancing learning motivation and mental health, there is a striking epistemological limitation: the entire framework operates within a secular domain that treats psychological well-being as the ultimate goal without considering the variable of spirituality.

In a sociological context, the literature on consumer society offers a sharp critique of contemporary self-reward practices. Jean Baudrillard, through his critical theory perspective, asserts that in modernity, consumption is no longer driven by functional (utilitarian) needs, but rather by the logic of symbolic value, in which goods or services are consumed to affirm status and self-image [4]. Recent empirical studies reinforce this finding; Putri found that exposure to social media significantly shapes the construction of self-reward oriented toward external recognition among Gen Z [5]. In line with this, Anggasta et al. identified that self-reward now often serves as a post-hoc justification for impulsive purchasing behavior, rather than as a form of appreciation for planned achievements [2]. While this literature successfully maps the phenomenon of self-reward as a rationalization for consumptive behavior, it has yet to offer normative solutions grounded in spiritual values as a counterbalance.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the thought of Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, particularly regarding the concept of *mujāhadah al-nafs* and the structure of the human psyche. From an anthropological perspective, Al-Ghazali formulated a psychological structure consisting of the *qalb*, *aql*, *nafs*, and *rūh*, in which the balance of these dimensions is the key to achieving inner peace (*thuma'ninah*). In the concept of *mujāhadah al-nafs*, Al-Ghazali emphasizes the importance of *zuhud* and *qanā'ah* not as a total rejection of the world, but as a form of inner freedom so that the heart is not bound to material things. Although the literature on Al-Ghazali's thought is quite extensive—such as Madhar's study on the relevance of Al-Ghazali's educational philosophy—most of it remains largely normative and textual in nature and has not yet engaged in a systematic dialogue with contemporary psychological issues [14]. Muchtar's study has indeed attempted to link Islamic education to the phenomena of the "inner child" and "self-reward," but it remains general in nature and has not specifically employed the framework of classical Sufism as a tool for critical analysis [15].

Based on the above review, this study aims to bridge a research gap by integrating sociological critiques of digital consumer culture with the spiritual-ethical framework of Al-Ghazali's Sufism. While modern psychological literature tends to reduce self-reward to a technical-behavioral level, and sociological literature tends to stop at a critique of

consumerism, this study offers a conceptual reconstruction through Gadamer's hermeneutic method to formulate a model of self-reward that is not merely technical but also ethical-transcendental, while simultaneously being applicable to strengthening self-regulation and moral education among students.

2. Materials and Methods

This study is a qualitative study using a library research approach. All data are sourced from written literature, including both classical primary texts and contemporary academic studies, and therefore do not require field data collection. The nature of this study is both analytical-critical and constructive: it does not merely describe the figures' ideas but formulates conceptual critiques based on textual analysis and verifiable normative reconstructions [16].

Data Sources

The primary sources are three major works by Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali: (1) *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, Volume 3, specifically *Kitāb Ryādāt al-Nafs*, which discusses *mujāhadah*, *zuhud*, and *qanā'ah*; (2) *Mizān al-'Amal* as Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's ethical-practical framework; and (3) *Kimīyā al-Sa'ādah* as a popular synthesis of his thoughts on the balance of the soul. Secondary sources include modern psychological literature on self-reward, reinforcement theory, self-regulation in an educational context (learning self-regulation), as well as international academic studies on the thought of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. The data collection technique involved a documentary study of relevant primary and secondary sources [17].

Analysis Method: Operationalized Gadamerian Hermeneutics

The analytical method employed is Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, as formulated in *Truth and Method* (1960/2004) [18]. The choice of Gadamer's hermeneutics is based on its suitability for the nature of this research, which brings together two scholarly traditions that are historically and epistemologically distinct: modern Western psychology and classical Islamic Sufism. Mahfudh et al. (2026) assert that Gadamer's hermeneutics is relevant to the study of Islamic texts precisely because it enables a dialogue between the historical horizon of the text and the contemporary reader's horizon, without negating the historical distance between the two.

It is important to emphasize here that in this study, Gadamer's hermeneutics is not merely cited as a methodological label. It is explicitly operationalized through three interconnected stages, and it is these three stages that form the structure of the Results and Discussion section.

The first stage is pre-understanding. At this stage, the researcher critically maps out the assumptions inherent in the contemporary concept of self-reward: that self-reward is an individual right, that self-satisfaction is valid in and of itself, and that its measure is determined by subjective preferences [19]. These assumptions, which Gadamer refers to as "productive prejudice," actually serve as a gateway to understanding why Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's texts feel foreign and challenging to modern readers.

The second stage involves interpreting the text through the hermeneutic circle (*hermeneutischer Zirkel*). Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's texts are read through a constant two-way movement: from the part to the whole and from the whole to the part. For example, the concept of *mujāhadah* in *Kitāb Ryādāt al-Nafs* is not read as a standalone concept but is always situated within the broader framework of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's spiritual anthropology concerning the *qalb*, *'aql*, *nafs*, and *rūh*; conversely, our understanding of this overarching framework is refined by the textual details uncovered.

The third stage is the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*). It is here that the two horizons—that of modern psychology with its secular-individualistic assumptions, and that of Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali’s Sufism with its transcendental orientation and ethics of proportionality—converge in a productive dialogue. This fusion does not result in a synthesis that erases differences, but rather in a new understanding that expands both horizons simultaneously: modern psychology is expanded with a transcendental dimension, while Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali’s Sufism gains new contextual relevance in responding to digital-consumerist issues.

3. Results

The Pre-Understanding Stage: Mapping the Assumptions Behind Contemporary Self-Reward

The pre-understanding stage in Gadamer’s hermeneutics does not begin from a blank slate; every reader arrives with a pre-formed horizon. In the context of self-reward, this contemporary horizon is shaped by at least three dominant assumptions that must be identified before a productive dialogue with Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali’s text can take place [20].

The first assumption is that self-reward is an individual right that requires no external justification. This assumption is rooted in the principle of individual autonomy within the modern liberal-psychological tradition, which regards self-satisfaction as a value valid in and of itself. This gives rise to the logic that “I have the right to reward myself” without consideration of proportionality or the impact on others [2].

The second assumption is that the most “real” form of self-reward is one that is material and consumable. This is not a natural assumption, but rather the result of a systematic construction by the consumer industry, which has successfully equated “treating oneself well” with “buying something” [2]. Baudrillard refers to this as the reduction of human needs to market demand, and this most directly reveals the limitations of modern psychology: it lacks the normative framework to distinguish restorative consumption from consumption that is merely impulsive [4].

The third assumption—and the one most specific to the social media ecosystem—is that self-rewards that are not shared publicly seem less valid. Putri (2025) found that among Gen Z, the “sharing” component on social media has become an integral part of the self-reward practice itself: the rewarding experience feels more meaningful when it receives a positive response from the digital audience. This is what is meant by the transformation from internal reinforcement to external performativity, and it is a highly significant shift that cannot be explained solely by conventional behavioral psychology [5].

These three assumptions form the initial framework of this study, which will converge with the Sufi framework of Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali in a process of fusion. It must be emphasized here that identifying the limitations of modern psychology is distinct from claiming that modern psychology is incorrect. Bandura’s self-regulation theory [13], Seligman’s positive psychology [8], and Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory [21] have already moved beyond simple behavioral reductionism, but this entire tradition continues to operate within a framework where the vertical relationship between humans and God is not considered a normative variable. That is the relevant boundary of the domain for this study.

These three assumptions carry particular urgency for learners, who represent the demographic most intensively exposed to social media reward culture during a formative period of moral and self-regulatory development. Where self-regulation theory in education emphasizes learners’ capacity to monitor and evaluate their own conduct, the assumptions mapped above show that this capacity is increasingly shaped by external, consumption-oriented cues rather than internalized ethical standards. This gap positions

the present hermeneutic reading not merely as a philosophical exercise, but as groundwork for a normative framework that can inform akhlak (moral) education, particularly in strengthening learners' internal locus of self-regulation before external reinforcement from digital environments becomes dominant.

The Hermeneutic Circle Stage: Reading *Mujāhadah al-Nafs* in Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's Texts

The hermeneutic circle stage begins with a close reading of Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's texts, moving constantly between part and whole. The choice to begin with *Kitāb Riyāḍat al-Nafs* in the *Iḥyā'* is not incidental: this is where Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali most explicitly discusses the mechanism of governing the soul as a structured spiritual project [22].

Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's spiritual anthropology rests on four interconnected psychic dimensions: *qalb* (the heart as the center of moral and spiritual control), *'aql* (the intellect as a discursive instrument), *nafs* (the soul, with its potential desires that must be governed), and *rūḥ* (the spirit as a spiritual substance). The balance of these four dimensions, with the *qalb* at the center, is a precondition for authentic happiness (*sa'ādah*), as Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali states in the *Iḥyā'* [23]. This four-dimensional structure is not an arbitrary division: it reflects Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's reading of the Islamic philosophical tradition, which inherited and reworked the Neoplatonic tradition within the framework of the Qur'an and Hadith.

In Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's thought, the *nafs* has a developmental hierarchy with direct implications for the quality of action. *Nafs ammārah* is the impulse that drives the fulfillment of momentary desires without moral consideration [24], and this is most relevant to the impulsive self-reward phenomenon identified by Anggasta et al. [2]. *Nafs lawwāmah* is the impulse that already possesses moral awareness and reproaches itself when committing wrongdoing. *Nafs muṭma'innah* is the impulse that has attained spiritual tranquility through prolonged *mujāhadah* [24]. The relevance of this hierarchy to the problem of self-reward is that it offers a diagnostic framework: self-reward distortion is a symptom of the dominance of *nafs ammārah*, and its reconstruction is a process toward *nafs lawwāmah* and *muṭma'innah*.

A direct reading of the *Mizān al-'Amal* shows that Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali explicitly distinguishes between legitimate need (*ḥājah mashrū'ah*) and excessive desire (*shahwah mufritah*). *Mujāhadah al-nafs* is directed not at eliminating the former, but at governing the latter. This distinction is crucial: it prevents the reconstruction formulated here from collapsing into an asceticism that forbids self-appreciation altogether, while still providing clear criteria for its proportional limits [25].

In the *Mizān al-'Amal*, *mujāhadah* comprises four practices that form a single, unified spiritual cycle: *muḥāsabah* (introspection and evaluation of every action), *murāqabah* (constant awareness of God's watchfulness in every moment), *mu'āqabah* (self-sanction for transgressions committed), and *mujāhadah al-nafs* itself as an active, continuous exercise [22]. These four practices are not a linear sequence but a mutually reinforcing cycle — and this is what distinguishes *mujāhadah* from self-discipline in the ordinary behavioral-psychological sense.

Zuhud and *qanā'ah* are the two concepts most directly relevant to the problem of self-reward. From a reading of *Kitāb al-Zuhd* in the *Iḥyā'*, Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali defines *zuhud* not as physical renunciation of the world [25], but as a condition in which the *qalb* is not attached (*muta'allaq*) to the world even while the hand holds it. This definition goes far beyond simple asceticism: inner freedom from the domination of material desire can be possessed by someone who physically owns a great deal, so long as their *qalb* is not imprisoned by that possession. This is an internal criterion concerning the orientation of the heart, not an external criterion concerning the quantity of possessions.

Qanā'ah, as discussed by Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali in the *Kimīyā al-Sa'ādah*, is an attitude of accepting sufficiency with full awareness and contentment — but it is not passivity. Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali explicitly distinguishes *qanā'ah* from laziness: it does not forbid effort or achievement, but frees inner satisfaction from dependence on material outcomes [26]. In Gadamerian terms, *qanā'ah* offers a different horizon for measuring sufficiency — not the horizon of ever-escalating consumptive expectation, but the horizon of the awareness that the source of authentic satisfaction is internal and transcendental [27].

Wandira affirms that the project of *mujāhadah* in Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's thought is a systematic and sustained project of character transformation (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) — not an instant solution [28]. This point deserves emphasis: the reconstruction formulated here does not promise that integrating Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's framework will automatically resolve the problem of consumptive self-reward. What it offers is a different normative orientation, one that must be internalized gradually through the practice of *mujāhadah*.

For educational purposes, this staged reading of *mujāhadah al-nafs* offers more than an interpretive exercise: it supplies a graduated pedagogical logic. The progression from *nafs ammārah* to *nafs lawwāmah* and *nafs muṭma'innah* parallels the developmental trajectory sought in *akhlak* education, where self-regulation is cultivated incrementally rather than imposed instantaneously. Understood this way, *mujāhadah*, *zuhud*, and *qanā'ah* are not abstract doctrinal categories but a sequence of internal disciplines that teachers and moral educators can translate into structured guidance for learners in monitoring, moderating, and eventually reorienting their impulses toward self-reward.

The Fusion of Horizons Stage: Reconstructing Muḥāsabah-Based Self-Reward

In Gadamer's hermeneutics, the fusion of horizons occurs when two horizons meet in a dialogue that produces an understanding surpassing either taken separately [18]. In this study, the meeting between the horizon of modern psychology and the horizon of Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's *tasawuf* produces three interrelated reconstructive formulations.

The first formulation is an ontological redefinition of self-reward. Where modern psychology defines self-reward as internal positive reinforcement for behavior deemed successful, measured according to subjective preference, the *tasawuf*-based reconstruction reformulates it: self-reward is a proportional act of self-appreciation (grounded in the principle of *waṣaṭiyyah*), integrated within the consciousness of *murāqabah*, and functioning as a means of *muḥāsabah* rather than as an end in itself [29]. The keyword "proportional" here refers directly to the principle of *waṣaṭiyyah* that appears consistently throughout Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's texts: the rejection of two extremes, namely *isrāf* (excess) and *taqtīr* (self-deprivation) [30]. The criterion of proportionality is not a matter of nominal amount, but of whether the act of self-appreciation originates from *ḥājah mashrū'ah* or from *shahwah mufrīṭah*.

The second formulation is a three-layer model of self-reward derived from Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's texts. The three layers are not an arbitrary authorial choice: they reflect three dimensions of *mujāhadah* found in the *Iḥyā'*, moving from the layer closest to functional-psychological need toward the layer closest to transcendental orientation [22].

The first layer is functional-restorative self-reward (*muṣallīṭ al-quwwah*). From a reading of the *Iḥyā'* — specifically its discussion of bodily needs and the shariah limits governing their fulfillment — Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali recognizes the need for restoration as *ḥājah mashrū'ah* [25]. Self-reward at this layer is that which is shariah-justified: the restoration of physical and mental energy that involves no *isrāf* and does not foster dependence. The parameter of *isrāf* in Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's texts is anything that exceeds real need and diverts orientation away from the otherworldly (*ukhrawī*) goal [23].

The second layer is reflective-*muḥāsabah* self-reward. This is the layer at which every moment of achievement is turned into an occasion for introspection. The question asked is

not merely "what have I achieved?" but "what is this achievement for? Does it draw me closer to or further from God's *riḍā*?" This is a direct operationalization of *muḥāsabah* as found in the *Mizān al-'Amal*: self-evaluation that does not stop at the performative dimension but reaches into the dimension of intention and orientation. At this layer, self-reward shifts function from a mere reward into a reflective mirror [25].

The third layer is transcendental self-reward, oriented toward God's *riḍā* as the ultimate horizon. From a reading of the *Kimīyā al-Sa'ādah*, Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali consistently positions *riḍā* as the only form of appreciation free from impermanence. Within the logic of Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's *tasawuf*, this is not an abstract theological argument: a person who orients their self-appreciation toward God's *riḍā* will not experience the emptiness felt by those who rest it on social validation or material accumulation, because its source is neither exhaustible nor subject to change [26].

The third formulation comprises four operational criteria traceable directly to the text. These criteria are not authorial abstractions but are derived from concepts Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali explicitly discusses. The criterion of proportionality (*waṣaṭiyyah*): self-reward does not exceed the bounds of *ḥājah mashrū'ah* and does not cause *ḍarar*. The criterion of conscious intention (*niyyah*): self-reward is undertaken with the awareness that it is an expression of gratitude for divine *tawfīq*, not a competition for status. The criterion of non-dependence (*istighnā'*): self-reward does not create material or emotional dependence that impedes spiritual functioning. The criterion of *murāqabah* integration: every act of self-reward is accompanied by an awareness of God's watchfulness, which automatically filters out purely exterior orientations [12].

Taken together, the three-layer model and the four operational criteria constitute more than a theoretical reconstruction; they form an instrument that can be operationalized within *akhlak* education. Educators may use the layered structure diagnostically, to help learners locate where their self-reward practices currently sit, and the four criteria (*waṣaṭiyyah*, *niyyah*, *istighnā'*, and integration of *murāqabah*) prescriptively, as reflective checkpoints that strengthen learners' capacity for self-regulation from within rather than relying solely on external behavioral reinforcement.

Productive Dialogue: Points of Convergence, Points of Divergence, and Critical Implications

Gadamer's fusion of horizons is not a synthesis that erases difference. There are points on which modern psychology and Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's *tasawuf* agree, and there are points that cannot be reconciled — and it is precisely this difference that proves productive.

The most significant point of convergence is the recognition that self-appreciation is a legitimate human need. Maslow places esteem needs at the fourth level of the hierarchy [31], while Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali recognizes the need for restoration as *ḥājah mashrū'ah* [12]. Both also agree that sound self-management requires the capacity for internal regulation — Bandura calls it self-regulation [13], Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali calls it *mujāhadah* [22]. And both agree that failure to manage self-reward carries the potential for pathology.

The most fundamental point of divergence lies in the source of normative authority and the horizon of purpose. Modern psychology makes psychological well-being the ultimate goal, with the human being as the authority who determines its own measure [32]. Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's *tasawuf* places God's *riḍā* and *sa'ādah al-ākhirah* as the highest goal, with revelation (*wahyu*) as the normative authority [33]. This difference need not be resolved; it is simply the terrain on which the two traditions proceed from different foundations. What can be done is to use it productively: modern psychology fills the domain of psychological-behavioral management [34], while Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's *tasawuf* fills the normative-transcendental domain that would otherwise remain empty [12].

In the context of contemporary self-reward pathology, the implications of this reconstruction model are fairly concrete. Against consumptive-materialistic tendencies, Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's *zuhud* framework does not forbid consumption but frees the *qalb* from the materialistic orientation that makes consumption a source of identity [2]. Against dependence on external validation, the value of *qanā'ah* provides a foundation of internal satisfaction that does not depend on the number of likes or positive comments on social media. Against digital performativity, the concept of *murāqabah* fundamentally places divine appreciation above human appreciation — not because human appreciation is worthless, but because it cannot be the sole source of self-appreciation [5].

William C. Chittick affirms that the Islamic Sufi tradition had in fact developed a highly sophisticated psychology of the soul long before modern psychology emerged as a scientific discipline. The *mujāhadah*-based self-reward reconstruction proposed in this study is an attempt to reactualize that intellectual wealth in responding to the concrete psychological challenges of digital society — not nostalgia for the past, but a dialogue that produces something new [35].

This productive dialogue ultimately underscores why the reconstruction matters beyond the individual level: it offers *akhlak* education a normative vocabulary that modern self-regulation theory alone does not supply. By situating learners' self-reward practices within the framework of *mujāhadah*, *zuhud*, *qanā'ah*, and *murāqabah*, moral educators gain a conceptual bridge between psychological self-regulation and spiritually grounded character formation — the two dimensions the revised title of this study places at its center.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study extend, rather than merely confirm, existing scholarship on self-regulation and moral education in the Indonesian academic literature. Nugraha and Suyadi argue that self-regulation in learning is primarily a cognitive-behavioral capacity that can be trained through instructional design [13]. The *muḥāsabah*-based reconstruction offered here suggests a complementary but distinct claim: that self-regulation among students cannot be adequately strengthened through behavioral training alone if the underlying orientation of the self remains uncorrected. Where Yuliana and Sartono found a positive correlation between self-reward and learning motivation among PGSD students, the present study offers a normative explanation for why that correlation may be unstable over time — a self-reward practice untethered from *murāqabah* risks drifting toward the very distortion diagnosed in the pre-understanding stage, regardless of its short-term motivational benefit [19].

This study's reading of Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali also departs methodologically from prior work. Madhar and Astuti et al. studies on Al-Ghazali's concept of the soul and adolescent character formation remain largely normative-textual, presenting *mujāhadah al-nafs* as doctrine to be taught rather than as an analytic lens applied to a contemporary phenomenon [12], [14]. By operationalizing Gadamer's hermeneutics explicitly through pre-understanding, the hermeneutic circle, and fusion of horizons, this study demonstrates one way that classical Sufi concepts can be brought into direct interpretive contact with a specific, empirically documented contemporary pathology — digital self-reward distortion — rather than applied as a general ethical backdrop. This addresses the gap identified in the Introduction: prior Al-Ghazali scholarship has rarely engaged systematically with contemporary psychological or consumer-behavior literature.

Compared with Muchtar, who connects Islamic education and Islamic economics to the phenomenon of inner child and self-reward, the present reconstruction is narrower but more textually grounded: rather than treating *tasawuf* as a general ethical resource, it derives a three-layer model and four operational criteria directly traceable to specific passages in *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, *Mīzān al-'Amal*, and *Kimīyā al-Sa'ādah* [15]. This textual traceability is what allows the model to function diagnostically and prescriptively for moral educators, rather than remaining at the level of general exhortation.

The findings also resonate with Risqoh and Khobir and Rahmi et al., who integrate *murāqabah* and *muḥāsabah* as a form of "Islamic mindfulness" for university students' mental health. Both studies converge on the view that sustained self-awareness before God functions as a stabilizing psychological resource [29], [31]. However, the present study differs in emphasis: where Risqoh and Sopiah frame *muḥāsabah* primarily as a mental-health intervention, this study frames it as an educational and characterological instrument — positioning *muḥāsabah* not as therapy for distress, but as an everyday evaluative habit that shapes how students relate to reward, achievement, and self-worth from an early stage of moral development.

Theoretically, these findings suggest that models of student self-regulation drawn solely from behavioral or cognitive traditions may be structurally incomplete for contexts, such as Indonesian Islamic education, where moral formation (*akhlak*) is an explicit institutional goal. Practically, the three-layer model (functional-restorative, reflective-*muḥāsabah*, transcendental) and the four criteria (*waṣaṭiyyah*, *niyyah*, *istighnā'*, and integration of *murāqabah*) offer moral educators and counselors a structured vocabulary for guiding students to reflect on their own self-reward practices, rather than simply restricting or permitting them.

This study is not without limitations. As a library-based conceptual reconstruction, it does not empirically test whether the proposed model changes students' actual self-regulatory behavior or reduces consumptive self-reward patterns. The model's criteria, while textually traceable, have not been operationalized into a measurable instrument. Future research could translate the four criteria into a validated scale or classroom intervention, tested empirically among student populations, to assess whether *muḥāsabah*-based self-reward produces measurable gains in self-regulation and moral conduct beyond what conventional behavioral approaches achieve.

5. Conclusion

This study successfully answered the three research questions posed and yielded three main findings. First, contemporary self-reward distortion is not merely an individual weakness but a systemic consequence of two mutually reinforcing forces: a social media ecosystem that transforms reward from an internal experience into an external display, and the logic of consumerism that equates self-worth with material consumption. The limitations of modern psychology in addressing this distortion do not stem from any inherent error in modern psychology itself, but rather from its operation within a domain that excludes the transcendental dimension and the ethics of proportionality as normative variables.

Second, a hermeneutic reading of Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's texts reveals that *mujaḥadah al-naḥs*, *zuhud*, and *qanā'ah* are not anti-worldly ascetic concepts, but rather an ethical framework that explicitly distinguishes between *ḥājah mashrū'ah* and *shahwāh mufritah*. This framework, derived directly and verifiably from the text, addresses three contemporary pathologies of self-reward: consumerism, dependence on external validation, and social media performativity.

Third, the reconstruction model derived through Gadamer's fusion of horizons is self-reward based on *muḥāsabah*: an act of self-reward that is proportionate, integrated into the consciousness of *murāqabah*, and oriented toward God's *ridhā* as the ultimate horizon. This model consists of three layers derived directly from Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's text—functional-restorative, reflective-*muḥāsabah*, and transcendental—and is complemented by four operational criteria: *waṣaṭiyyah*, *niyyah*, *istighnā'*, and the integration of *murāqabah*.

The theoretical implication of this research is the availability of a conceptual model in Islamic psychology that does not merely integrate the two traditions eclectically but explicitly demonstrates how the dialogical process operates through Gadamer's hermeneutics. The practical implications are the provision of a reflective guide for

individuals, educators, and counselors to help students interpret self-reward more wisely within the context of a consumerist-digital culture, while also serving as a framework for strengthening self-regulation and moral education that can be integrated into learning and guidance practices in educational institutions.

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