

# Self-Reward as a Modern Self-Care Strategy to Enhance Gen Z's Psychological Well-Being: A Qualitative Case Study

**Putri Nur Amalia**

Universitas Islam Negeri Prof. K.H. Saifuddin Zuhri, Purwokerto, Indonesia  
[pnamalia456@gmail.com](mailto:pnamalia456@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

Generation Z faces unprecedented psychological stress driven by complex academic and professional demands in a fast-paced digital era. Consequently, modern self-care strategies are vital to safeguard their mental health. This study aims to investigate how Generation Z utilizes self-reward as a contemporary self-care strategy to enhance their psychological well-being. Employing a qualitative case study design, this research examined two distinct Generation Z subjects within the same urban area: a university student (MS) and an employed professional (AS). Data were systematically analyzed using the interactive qualitative model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings reveal that self-reward modalities are highly contextual and phase-dependent. MS applies spontaneous, short-term rewards (e.g., entertainment, casual dining) as an immediate coping mechanism against academic burnout. Conversely, AS adopts structured, reflective rewards (e.g., travel, self-development workshops) to establish professional boundaries and maintain emotional stability. When practiced mindfully, self-reward effectively satisfies the core psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thereby reinforcing environmental mastery and self-acceptance. However, without self-regulation, it risks devolving into destructive consumptive behavior and task procrastination. This study concludes that mindful and proportional self-reward serves as a resilient, adaptive mechanism that harmonizes productivity with sustainable psychological well-being for the digital generation.

## Introduction

The rapid advancement of technology, driven primarily by the internet, has revolutionized global communication by making the exchange of information faster and more accessible. Consequently, the internet has become deeply integrated into daily life, serving as the primary tool for human interaction. Social media, in particular, functions as a platform where individuals interact, collaborate, share information, and present their identities (Nasrullah, 2017). It allows users to communicate and share diverse information without being constrained by time or geographical boundaries, thereby granting them substantial virtual freedom (Ramadhani & Sukardani, 2023).

Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, has grown up amidst this dynamic social, economic, and technological evolution (Dimock, 2019). In contemporary discourse, particularly on social media, the term "self-reward" has become highly popularized among Gen Z. It is commonly defined as the act of giving oneself gifts or treats as a form of self-appreciation and self-love for one's effort and life journey. This practice is widely regarded as an effective means to maintain mental balance, foster self-motivation, promote positive thinking, alleviate stress, and cultivate mental well-being.

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This phenomenon stems from the intense pressures of modern life that Gen Z faces, including social, academic, and professional demands. High productivity expectations and fierce competition in both academic and professional spheres frequently lead to stress and psychological burnout. To mitigate these pressures, Gen Z has adopted self-reward as a modern self-care strategy to safeguard their psychological and emotional well-being. This method is implemented by rewarding oneself after achieving specific milestones, such as completing academic assignments, obtaining good grades, or reaching personal goals. Common forms of self-reward include traveling or taking leisure trips, purchasing desired goods or food, and engaging in relaxation, such as watching movies or undergoing personal care treatments. Gen Z should perceive self-reward as a reflective practice that fosters mental balance, gratitude, and a healthier relationship with oneself. However, if not practiced mindfully, proportionally, and in alignment with genuine emotional needs, self-reward risks losing its essence as a self-care strategy, transforming instead into a compensatory or consumptive behavior that may induce additional psychological stress.

Generation Z differs from previous generations, who tended to view self-reward in simpler terms. Modern youth view self-reward as an integral component of contemporary self-care—a conscious effort to maintain emotional equilibrium and self-worth. They recognize that success is not merely measured by academic or professional accomplishments, but also by the ability to enjoy the process, relax, and protect mental health. This shift is evident in rising social media trends such as "me-time," mental health awareness, and the self-love movement. Social media platforms serve as spaces for expression and knowledge-sharing regarding effective self-care methods, where content creators and influencers continuously advocate for the importance of taking personal time after accomplishing demanding tasks.

Furthermore, a newfound awareness of mental health has made Gen Z more open to discussing psychological challenges. They no longer dismiss burnout, fatigue, or stress as trivial issues. A concrete manifestation of this awareness is self-reward, which enables individuals to recuperate and acknowledge their personal limits. This practice also reflects a paradigm shift toward a holistic view of self-care, expanding beyond physical activities like sleeping or exercising to encompass emotional and spiritual needs.

From the lens of positive psychology, Self-Determination Theory by Ryan & Deci (2000) provides a robust framework for understanding self-reward. This theory asserts that human intrinsic motivation and well-being depend on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Self-reward serves as an indirect mechanism to fulfill these needs: autonomy is met through having control over one's decisions, competence is reinforced by acknowledging personal achievements, and relatedness is strengthened through a deeper emotional connection with oneself and others. Consequently, self-reward can function as a source of positive motivation that enhances psychological well-being.

In contrast, according to the psychological well-being theory posited by Ryff, (1989) and Ryan & Deci (2001), well-being comprises both transient happiness (hedonic well-being) and the pursuit of life purpose (eudaimonic well-being). By engaging in mindful self-reward, individuals can enhance their self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and positive relations with others. This practice offers more than momentary gratification; it fosters a deeper appreciation for every milestone achieved and the process endured.

Given these trends, researching self-reward among Generation Z is pivotal, as it illustrates a paradigm shift in how the younger generation perceives and manages their psychological well-being. Self-reward is not merely a form of entertainment or an

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escape from complex academic, social, and professional pressures. Instead, it is a modern self-care strategy tailored to the exigencies of contemporary life. This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Gen Z utilizes self-reward to maintain emotional balance, boost motivation, and build a healthy relationship with themselves. Additionally, the findings of this research are expected to serve as a foundation for developing contextual mental health education and intervention programs tailored for the younger generation in the digital era.

## **Method**

This study employs a qualitative research approach, which is designed to generate descriptive data from individuals' written or spoken words and observable behaviors within their natural context (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Rather than relying on statistical metrics, this approach utilizes detailed narratives to unpack, clarify, and understand specific social phenomena, symptoms, and dynamic social situations. Within this qualitative paradigm, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for decoding and interpreting meanings. Consequently, a robust theoretical understanding is essential for the researcher to effectively analyze the nuances and critical gaps between conceptual frameworks and empirical realities (Sari et al., 2025).

To investigate the self-reward phenomenon deeper, a case study design was selected. This method is particularly suited for exploring contemporary events, bounded situations, or social phenomena where human understanding and behavior are closely tied to their specific contexts. The primary objective of a case study is to unearth the unique characteristics and intrinsic complexities of the case under investigation. Methodologically, the case study provides a systematic framework that guides the entire research process (Ilhami et al., 2024). This operational workflow encompasses several rigorous stages: establishing the research theme and identifying the subjects, determining the appropriate research setting, selecting robust data collection techniques, analyzing the gathered qualitative data, drawing validated conclusions, and compiling the final research report.

## **Results**

### **Empirical Profiles of the Subjects**

The field findings indicate that the two Generation Z subjects, MS (a university student) and AS (an employed professional), implement self-reward practices with distinct modalities, patterns, and underlying motivations.

Table 1  
*Profiles of the Subjects*

| <b>Subject (Initial)</b> | <b>Status</b>         | <b>Profile</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MS                       | University Student    | As an active student facing intense academic and social environments, MS utilizes self-rewards primarily for relaxation and psychological recuperation following peak academic stress. After completing demanding milestones, such as finishing major assignments or securing satisfactory grades, MS engages in spontaneous, short-term rewards. These include watching movies, gaming, purchasing preferred foods or beverages, and spending leisure time with peers. MS also occasionally allocates budget for consumer items like clothing, books, or gadgets, as well as brief nature-based excursions (e.g., visiting beaches or mountains). Because MS is still adapting to the university ecosystem and time management, these self-rewards are predominantly spontaneous and lack long-term structured planning. Nevertheless, MS reports feeling highly motivated and personally validated through this practice. |
| AS                       | Employed Professional | Operating within a highly competitive corporate environment characterized by strict targets and heavy workloads, AS adopts a more deliberate, structured, and reflective self-reward strategy. AS utilizes self-rewards as a mechanism for self-development and emotional stabilization to prevent occupational burnout. Common practices include scheduled short vacations, professional skincare treatments, purchasing desired high-value items upon achieving specific corporate targets, and investing in workshops or training for personal growth. For AS, self-reward functions not merely as passive entertainment, but as a deliberate boundary-setting tool to balance personal needs with professional obligations.                                                                                                                                                                                             |

The data reveal that both subjects heavily emphasize interpersonal connectedness within their self-care routines. For instance, gathering with friends to share life experiences, organizing group dinners after completing projects, and participating in community networks are frequently utilized as collective self-rewards that offer emotional support and solidarity.

However, both subjects face explicit internal and external challenges in practicing self-reward. Externally, high academic and professional demands heavily restrict their personal time, forcing them to frequently compromise sleep and leisure, which culminates in mental exhaustion. Internally, the psychological pressure to remain self-reliant and supportive toward others often creates a conflict between individual self-care and social obligations. Furthermore, financial constraints pose an obstacle, exacerbated by the misconception that self-rewards must always incur high costs. This misconception occasionally drives individuals to dismiss the practice or stigmatize it as an act of selfishness. Consequently, when self-rewards are executed without self-control, they inadvertently lead to task procrastination and financial overspending.

## Discussion

The empirical findings demonstrate that self-reward operates as a tangible, contemporary manifestation of self-care among Generation Z. Grounded in modern psychology, self-care is defined as an individual's capacity to deliberately manage basic physiological, emotional, and spiritual needs to sustain health and well-being (Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2018; Gonzalo, 2014). While previous generations often viewed self-appreciation in rudimentary terms, modern youth perceive it as a conscious, holistic strategy to maintain emotional equilibrium within a fast-paced digital era.

The divergence between MS and AS underscores that the application of self-reward is highly contextual and contingent upon an individual's life stage. For students, it acts as a spontaneous coping mechanism against academic burnout, whereas for professionals, it serves as a structured self-regulatory mechanism to maintain work-life balance. When practiced mindfully and proportionally, self-reward acts as a preventive and restorative mental health tool, enabling young adults to acknowledge their psychological boundaries and restore depleted emotional reserves.

From the lens of positive psychology, the observed self-reward behaviors heavily align with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This framework posits that intrinsic motivation and psychological health depend on the fulfillment of three core needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. *Autonomy* is manifested in both subjects' freedom to self-regulate and determine how and when to reward themselves. *Competence* is reinforced when rewards are explicitly tied to the successful completion of milestones or professional targets (particularly prominent in AS's profile). *Relatedness* is fulfilled through shared recreational activities and social circles that provide vital emotional buffers.

Furthermore, integrating these practices enhances overall psychological well-being, which encompasses both transient pleasure (*hedonic well-being*) and the realization of human potential (*eudaimonic well-being*) (Ryan & Deci, 2001). According to Ryff's (1989) multidimensional model, individuals with high psychological well-being exhibit self-acceptance, positive social relations, and optimal environmental mastery. Through mindful (*mindful*) self-rewards, both MS and AS actively cultivate *environmental mastery*—the capacity to govern external demands, create harmonious personal spaces, and mobilize surrounding resources to achieve life goals.

Despite its therapeutic benefits, the data warn that self-reward possesses a dual nature. If decoupled from self-awareness and self-regulation, the practice can degenerate into a justification for structural laziness, chronic procrastination, or destructive consumptive habits that induce secondary financial stress. Hence, for self-reward to remain a sustainable self-care strategy, it must be enacted proportionally and tailored strictly to actual emotional and cognitive needs, rather than serving as a purely escapist or compensatory behavior.

These findings carry substantial practical implications for designing contextual mental health interventions within educational institutions and corporate organizations. Rather than fostering a hyper-productive culture that triggers mood disorders and diminishes quality of life (Hernandez et al., 2018), institutions should establish healthy institutional self-care frameworks. Recommendations include incorporating institutional mindfulness training, introducing structured "mental health days," and organizing self-reflection workshops that deconstruct the capitalistic misconception of self-reward, shifting the focus from material consumption toward healthy, non-destructive self-appreciation. Furthermore, these insights offer counselors, psychologists, and policymakers a nuanced understanding of Gen Z's emotional vocabulary, enabling the development of support systems that genuinely resonate with the lifestyle of the digital generation.

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Despite its critical insights into contemporary self-care strategies, this study possesses several limitations that warrant acknowledgment. First, as a qualitative case study utilizing two primary subjects, the empirical findings cannot be statistically generalized to the entire Generation Z demographic globally or nationwide. Second, both subjects operate within the same geographical location and urban ecosystem, which inherently shapes their socio-economic realities, accessibility to specific commercialized self-rewards (such as specialized skincare clinics or nature excursions), and socio-cultural pressures. Consequently, these localized findings may not fully capture the self-reward dynamics of Gen Z individuals living in rural areas or different cultural settings. Future research would benefit from expanding the sample size across diverse geographical landscapes and employing mixed-method designs to quantitatively validate the correlational boundaries between mindful self-reward, financial literacy, and long-term psychological well-being.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that self-reward plays a pivotal role as a modern self-care strategy in enhancing the psychological well-being of Generation Z. Amidst increasingly complex academic and professional pressures, this practice serves as an adaptive mechanism that enables young adults to manage stress, restore emotional equilibrium, and maintain mental stability. Gen Z perceives self-reward as an authentic expression of self-appreciation that fosters intrinsic motivation and cultivates a deeper awareness of personal boundaries. The empirical evidence demonstrates that the implementation of self-reward among Gen Z is highly diverse, heavily contingent upon their individual adaptability, occupational or academic workloads, and the quality of social support they receive. Ultimately, the efficacy of this practice is dictated by internal factors—such as mindfulness, emotional regulation, and self-control—complemented by a supportive external social environment. When executed deliberately, proportionally, and mindfully, self-rewards yield substantial benefits, including heightened self-confidence, increased achievement motivation, and enhanced social harmony.

Conversely, when decoupled from self-regulation, excessive self-reward poses a psychological risk, potentially devolving into consumptive behavior, task procrastination, and diminished productivity. Therefore, it is imperative for Generation Z to remain conscious of their personal limits and the intrinsic purpose of self-reward, ensuring it functions strictly as a tool for reflection and recuperation rather than a mechanism for avoidance or escapism. When applied appropriately, self-reward fosters sustainable mental health, reinforcing the core dimensions of psychological well-being, namely self-acceptance, positive social relations, and environmental mastery. Overall, self-reward represents a cornerstone of contemporary self-care that aligns with the technologically driven values of Generation Z. This method underscores the critical balance between productivity and mental health, demonstrating how the younger generation navigates a fast-paced era through self-validation. By integrating mindful and healthy self-reward practices, Generation Z can cultivate a more balanced, resilient, and meaningful lifestyle conducive to long-term psychological well-being.

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