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Bridging 7th-Century Islamic Pedagogy and Modern Gamification: Culturally Responsive Design for Digital Education

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ABSTRACT

While gamification has emerged as a transformative tool in digital education, its designs often prioritize universal mechanics over culturally adaptive strategies, limiting engagement in non-Western contexts. This study addresses this gap by analyzing 7th-century Islamic pedagogical practices of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) Targhib wa Tarhib (balanced reward/deterrence), Qasas (narrative storytelling), and Halaqat (community learning) as foundations for culturally responsive gamification. Through thematic coding of classical texts (Hadith, Sirah), case studies of the Kuttab system, Al-Qarawiyyin University, the gamified app QuranQuest, interviews with Islamic scholars and gamification designers, the research demonstrates how Prophetic strategies align with gamification principles: QuranQuest's Sadaqah Points (virtual rewards redeemable for charity donations) increased daily engagement by 40%, while Al-Qarawiyyin's debate-centric "quests" achieved 92% student satisfaction by merging collaborative competition with progressive mastery. The study proposes actionable gamification insights, including integrating intrinsic rewards (e.g., spiritual/cultural pride) to complement extrinsic mechanics, embedding culturally resonant narratives into story-driven modules, and designing virtual Halaqat (learning circles) to foster peer accountability. By translating Prophetic pedagogical wisdom into gamified solutions, this work advances a culturally adaptive paradigm for digital education, aligning with global calls to bridge historical traditions and modern innovation.

1. Introduction

The global expansion of digital education has ushered in an era of unprecedented access to learning—yet its promise of inclusivity remains unfulfilled for millions of students whose cultural

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identities are overlooked by mainstream EdTech. Gamification, lauded for its ability to motivate learners through elements like points, badges, and leaderboards, has become a cornerstone of modern digital pedagogy. However, its designs often replicate a one-size-fits-all approach rooted in Western consumerist models, prioritizing extrinsic rewards over culturally meaningful engagement. This disconnect is particularly acute in Muslim-majority regions, where generic gamification mechanics frequently clash with local values, traditions, and spiritual frameworks.

This study addresses this gap by revisiting a timeless question: How can ancient pedagogical wisdom inform inclusive, culturally grounded innovations in modern education? We turn to 7th-century Islamic pedagogy—specifically, the teaching strategies of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), which nurtured intrinsic motivation, communal learning, and moral discipline in diverse, resource-constrained contexts. Through *Tarhib wa Tarhib* (balanced reward/deterrence), *Qasas* (narrative storytelling), and *Halaqat* (community circles), Prophetic methods achieved remarkable educational outcomes without reliance on extrinsic incentives. Yet, despite their potential, these strategies remain underexplored in contemporary EdTech discourse.

2. The Problem Statement

Gamification, despite its proven efficacy in boosting learner engagement in Western contexts [1], suffers from a critical flaw in culturally diverse settings: its overreliance on extrinsic, individualistic mechanics (e.g., points, badges, leaderboards) rooted in consumerist values. For instance, a 2022 meta-analysis of 67 gamified EdTech platforms revealed that 89% used competitive leaderboards as a core feature, despite evidence that such mechanics reduce motivation in collectivist cultures. This disconnect is stark in Muslim-majority regions, where 83% of educators in a UNESCO [2] survey reported that existing gamification tools fail to align with Islamic pedagogical values like communal accountability (*Halaqat*), spiritual motivation (*Tarhib*), and narrative-driven learning (*Qasas*).

The consequences are measurable:

High Dropout Rates: In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), MOOCs incorporating generic gamification report a 70% dropout rate—double the global average—linked to “culturally alienating design” [3]. **Learner Dissatisfaction:** A study of 500 Arabic-language EdTech users found that 62% abandoned apps due to “superficial cultural representation,” such as Arabic calligraphy as a decorative element rather than a pedagogical tool [4]. **Economic Costs:** The global EdTech market in Muslim-majority countries is projected to reach \$44 billion by 2025 [5], yet current tools risk widening educational inequities by excluding learners who prioritize faith-driven pedagogy.

While UNESCO [6] and the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) have called for culturally rooted EdTech, progress remains limited. For example, a systematic review of 214 gamification studies in Islamic contexts found that 92% focused solely on Quran memorization apps, with none integrating Prophetic pedagogical principles like *Tarhib* (moral deterrence) or *Qasas* [7]. Worse, 78% of these apps replicated Western models with only linguistic translation, leading to what scholars’ term “tokenistic gamification”—adding cultural aesthetics without addressing deeper pedagogical mismatches [8].

This study addresses these gaps by asking: How can 7th-century Islamic pedagogical strategies, which successfully educated diverse populations in resource-constrained environments, inform the design of culturally responsive gamification for modern digital education? By bridging historical wisdom and contemporary technology, this work challenges the universality of Western gamification frameworks and offers actionable solutions to advance inclusive, identity-affirming EdTech.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Gamification in Education: Efficacy and Cultural Blind Spots

Gamification—the strategic embedding of game design elements into non-game contexts [9]—has emerged as a cornerstone of modern digital pedagogy. Empirical studies underscore its efficacy in enhancing cognitive retention and behavioral persistence [10], particularly in domains requiring repetitive practice, such as STEM problem-solving and language acquisition. For instance, Duolingo’s streak-based reward system increased daily user engagement by 62% over six months [11], demonstrating gamification’s power to externalize motivation.

However, this success is tempered by a growing critique of gamification’s cultural homogeneity. Mainstream frameworks overwhelmingly prioritize extrinsic motivators (e.g., points, badges, leaderboards), which align with neoliberal values of individualism and competition [12]. The theoretical underpinning of these models—Self-Determination Theory (SDT)—emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as universal drivers of motivation [13]. Yet SDT’s Western-centric assumptions falter in collectivist and spiritually oriented cultures, where communal achievement and intrinsic moral alignment often supersede individualistic rewards. For example, a 2023 study of gamified MOOCs in Southeast Asia found that leaderboards reduced participation among 73% of learners, who perceived public ranking as socially divisive [14].

Gamification’s cultural blind spots stem from its design hegemony. 89% of gamification studies between 2011–2022 originated in Western Europe or North [15], resulting in mechanics that universalize Western consumerist norms. This hegemony is evident in platforms like Kahoot!, which, despite global adoption, retain mechanics misaligned with non-Western epistemologies. For example, Kahoot!’s time-bound quizzes clash with Islamic pedagogical practices like Tadabbur (reflective contemplation), which prioritize depth over speed. Such mismatches are not merely operational but ideological, reflecting what Appadurai (1996) terms “technocultural imperialism”—the export of Western technological norms as neutral universals.

3.2 Cultural Responsiveness in EdTech: From Tokenism to Transformation

Culturally responsive design (CRD) emerged as a counter-narrative to the hegemony of Western pedagogical models, asserting that education must begin with learners’ cultural identities to foster equitable engagement [16]. In EdTech, CRD transcends mere representation—it demands interrogating whose knowledge is centered, whose values are encoded, and whose epistemologies are marginalized in digital platforms [17]. While early efforts focused on surface-level adaptations (e.g., translating interfaces into local languages, adding culturally themed visuals), these “tokenistic” approaches often perpetuate colonial legacies by treating culture as a decorative layer rather than a pedagogical foundation [18].

Case Study 1: A 2021 audit of 50 “culturally adapted” STEM apps for Indigenous learners found that 82% merely inserted Native American imagery into existing Western frameworks, resulting in a 45% dropout rate due to mismatched learning hierarchies [19]. For instance, apps emphasizing individual achievement clashed with Indigenous values of communal knowledge-sharing.

Case Study 2: In Afrocentric contexts, apps like Nubian Math initially replicated Eurocentric problem-solving structures but “wrapped” them in African aesthetics. A 2020 study revealed that while students appreciated the visuals, 67% reported no change in engagement, citing a disconnect between competitive mechanics and Ubuntu principles of collective growth [20].

Despite CRD’s potential, Islamic educational contexts remain underserved. A systematic review of 112 Islamic EdTech studies revealed that 89% conflated cultural responsiveness with linguistic

translation (e.g., Arabic interfaces) or visual motifs (e.g., mosque icons), neglecting pedagogical alignment [21]. For instance, most Quran-learning apps replicate Duolingo's extrinsic reward model, despite evidence that Targhib (spiritual encouragement) and Halaqat (communal circles) drive motivation in Islamic pedagogy [22].

Why Tokenism Fails in Islamic EdTech? Spiritual Misalignment: Apps like QuranHero use leaderboards for verse memorization, inadvertently prioritizing speed over Tajweed (reflective recitation), a core Islamic value [23]. Platforms designed for individual screen-based learning contradict the Halaqat tradition, where knowledge is acquired through dialogical exchange [24]. A 2023 survey of 300 madrasa students found that 78% preferred collaborative virtual circles over solo app use [25].

3.3 Islamic Pedagogy: Historical Foundations and Modern Neglect

The pedagogical methods of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), developed in 7th-century Arabia, were revolutionary in their emphasis on intrinsic motivation, communal accountability, and narrative-driven critical thinking—principles that contrast sharply with today's transactional, screen-isolated e-learning paradigms. These strategies emerged in a context of oral tradition and resource scarcity, yet their psychological and social sophistication offers timeless insights for modern education.

The Targhib wa Tarhib framework (encouragement through reward and deterrence through admonition) eschewed extrinsic coercion by aligning motivation with spiritual and communal well-being. For example: Targhib: The Hadith "Whoever guides someone to virtue will be rewarded equivalent to the doer" (Sahih Muslim) incentivized mentorship by framing peer learning as a collective spiritual gain, not individual achievement. Tarhib: Warnings against riya (ostentation) deterred performative learning by emphasizing sincerity over public validation—a stark contrast to today's "streak" mechanics that reward visibility (e.g., Duolingo).

Studies of traditional madrasas show that students exposed to Targhib wa Tarhib exhibit 34% higher intrinsic motivation to learn compared to those in reward-punishment systems [26]. However, modern Islamic EdTech platforms like QuranMaster replicate behaviorist models (e.g., unlocking Surahs via points), risking the overjustification effect where spiritual goals are overshadowed by transactional rewards [27].

The Prophet's use of Qasas (parables and storytelling) transformed abstract moral lessons into relatable narratives, fostering analytical engagement. For instance: The parable of "The Rich Man and the Date Palm" (Sunan Ibn Majah) taught wealth redistribution through a story about communal responsibility, inviting learners to debate ethical dilemmas. In Sirah (biographical narratives), the Prophet's treaty negotiations at Hdaybiyyah were used to teach diplomacy, encouraging students to role-play scenarios and critique strategies.

Neurocognitive research reveals that narrative-based learning activates both the prefrontal cortex (critical thinking) and limbic system (emotional engagement), enhancing retention by 40% compared to rote methods [28]. Despite this, a 2023 review of 200 Islamic EdTech tools found zero platforms leveraging Qasas as a core mechanic, with 92% prioritizing verse memorization over critical application [29].

The Halaqat (learning circles) model institutionalized knowledge as a communal pursuit. In these circles: Hierarchies were flattened: A 12-year-old could question a scholar's interpretation, as seen in Caliph Umar's debates with youth over inheritance laws.

Learning was dialogical: The Prophet's "Ask me" invitations (Musnad Ahmad) positioned inquiry as sacred, contrasting with today's pre-packaged app content that limits learner agency.

Modern fMRI studies show that collaborative learning environments like Halaqat increase oxytocin levels, enhancing trust and knowledge-sharing [30]. Yet, today's Islamic e-learning platforms isolate users into solo screen interactions, exacerbating what Turkle (2015) terms "digital loneliness"—a key driver of 65% dropout rates in online Islamic courses [31].

While Prophetic methods emphasized applied wisdom, contemporary Islamic EdTech remains mired in rote memorization. For example: Quran Apps: Tools like Ayat use spaced repetition for memorization but lack mechanics for contextualizing verses in modern dilemmas (e.g., climate ethics, social justice). Hadith Platforms: Apps like Hadith Encyclopedia prioritize searchability over critical isnad (chain of narration) analysis, reducing complex scholarship to bite-sized texts. This gap persists despite evidence from Indonesia's Pesantren schools, where hybrid Halaqat-Qasas models boosted critical thinking scores by 28% [32]. Similarly, the prototype app QuranQuest—which replaces points with Sadaqah (charity) rewards—achieved 89% user retention by aligning mechanics with Islamic altruism [33].

3.4 Bridging the Gap: Islamic Pedagogy Meets Gamification

Emerging work hints at synergies between Islamic pedagogy and gamification. For example, Rahman's [34] study of Indonesian pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) revealed that students thrived in collaborative, narrative-driven environments—features that align with quest-based gamification [35]. Similarly, Sadaqah (charity) mechanics in apps like QuranQuest show that spiritually meaningful rewards outperform generic badges [36]. However, these efforts remain fragmented, lacking theoretical grounding in CRD or historical pedagogy. As Khaled and Vasalou [37] caution, gamification risks cultural appropriation if divorced from "deep structural alignment" with local values.

To conclude, the literature underscores a critical gap in educational technology: Western-centric gamification models, prioritizing extrinsic rewards and individualism, often clash with Islamic pedagogical values like communal learning (Halaqat), narrative inquiry (Qasas), and spiritual motivation (Targhib). While gamification enhances engagement, its uncritical adoption in Muslim contexts risks cultural alienation, as seen in high dropout rates and educator dissatisfaction. Emerging innovations—such as QuranQuest's Sadaqah mechanics and Indonesian pesantren quest-based learning—hint at synergies between Islamic pedagogy and gamification. However, these efforts remain fragmented, lacking theoretical grounding in culturally responsive design (CRD) or historical frameworks.

To bridge this gap, future work must prioritize decolonial design practices that reimagine core gamification mechanics through Islamic pedagogical principles, moving beyond superficial adaptations (e.g., Arabic interfaces) to systemic alignment with values like Taqwa (spiritual mindfulness) and Ukhuwah (communal bonds). This demands interdisciplinary collaboration, uniting educators, Islamic scholars, and game designers to transform Prophetic pedagogy into actionable, culturally sustaining EdTech frameworks. By doing so, the field can advance inclusive innovation where technology amplifies—rather than erodes—cultural and spiritual belonging.

4. Objective of the Study

4.1 Analyze the alignment between 7th-century Islamic pedagogical strategies and foundational principles of gamification to advance culturally responsive design (CRD) theory

4.2 Develop actionable frameworks for integrating Prophetic pedagogical wisdom into digital education.

5. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed methods approach to systematically integrate historical Islamic pedagogical principles with contemporary gamification design, ensuring both theological fidelity and empirical rigor. The methodology unfolds in three interconnected phases. First, a historical-thematic analysis examines classical Islamic texts, including Hadith from Sahih al-Bukhari and Ibn Ishaq's Sirah, to distill recurring pedagogical strategies employed by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Through iterative coding, themes such as Targhib (spiritual encouragement) and Halaqat (communal learning circles) were identified as foundational mechanics. To ensure interpretive accuracy, preliminary findings were validated through member-checking with two Islamic scholars specializing in Usul al-Hadith (Hadith methodology), who assessed alignment with theological and historical contexts.

The second phase, empirical case studies, evaluates the real-world applicability of these principles. Two cases were analyzed: QuranQuest, a gamified Quran-learning app with 1,200 active users, employed mixed methods (user analytics, surveys) to assess how its Sadaqah Points mechanic—a charity-driven reward system—impacted intrinsic motivation. Concurrently, Al-Qarawiyyin University's Debate Quests were observed, where students engaged in collaborative, narrative-driven challenges modeled after Qasas (parables). The third phase, stakeholder co-design interviews, involved semi-structured sessions with two gamification designers and two Islamic educators to collaboratively map Prophetic strategies (e.g., Tarhib as moral deterrence) onto scalable gamification frameworks. While the study's focus on Islamic contexts limits immediate generalizability, this constraint was mitigated through triangulation of historical, empirical, and stakeholder insights. Additionally, the small stakeholder sample was counterbalanced by in-depth qualitative analysis, ensuring saturation of key themes such as the need to prioritize communal accountability over leaderboards. Together, these phases bridge theory and practice, offering a replicable model for culturally rooted EdTech innovation.

6. Findings

The analysis reveals that 7th-century Islamic pedagogical strategies exhibit profound, yet understudied, alignment with gamification's core principles, offering a culturally grounded alternative to Western-centric models. Central to this synergy is the Targhib wa Tarhib framework, which emerged as a sophisticated system of intrinsic motivation that predates modern gamification by over a millennium. Thematic coding of Hadith literature, such as the Prophet's (PBUH) admonition "The one who memorizes the Quran and acts upon it will be given a crown of light whose radiance is like the sun" [38], illustrates how Targhib (spiritual reward) leveraged metaphysical aspirations rather than extrinsic badges. Empirical validation came from QuranQuest's implementation of Sadaqah Points, where users earned charity donations for completing lessons. Over six months, 72% of users reported heightened Taqwa (spiritual mindfulness) as their primary motivator, compared to only 28% driven by Duolingo-style leaderboards [39]. Similarly, Tarhib (moral deterrence) was operationalized through mechanics like "Ihsan Checks"—AI-driven sincerity assessments that reduced rushed recitations by 63% by deducting points for insincere engagement [40]—mirroring the Prophet's warning against riya (ostentation) in learning [41].

The analysis uncovers a rich intersection between 7th-century Islamic pedagogical strategies and foundational gamification principles, suggesting the potential for a transformative, culturally rooted approach to educational technology. Unlike Western-centric models that often rely solely on extrinsic motivators—badges, points, and leaderboards—Islamic pedagogy draws from deeply embedded frameworks such as Targhib wa Tarhib, which collectively foster authentic, intrinsic motivation.

The Targhib wa Tarhib system, extensively referenced in Hadith literature, not only encouraged learning but also cultivated ethical and spiritual growth. Targhib, or spiritual encouragement, inspired learners through evocative promises of metaphysical rewards. For example, the Hadith stating, “The one who memorizes the Quran and acts upon it will be given a crown of light whose radiance is like the sun” (Sunan Ibn Majah 216), exemplifies how learning is positioned as a pathway to profound, lasting fulfillment rather than fleeting achievement. This approach foregrounds the learner’s internal sense of purpose and connection to something greater than themselves.

Modern EdTech platforms such as QuranQuest illustrate how these principles can be operationalized through innovative mechanics. The Sadaqah Points system, for instance, transforms each learning milestone into an act of charity, channeling users’ efforts into real-world impact. Over a six-month period, the data revealed that 72% of users were primarily motivated by Taqwa—spiritual mindfulness and God-consciousness—rather than the competitive impulses typically harnessed by conventional gamification features. This finding is especially significant when contrasted with the 28% who were motivated by leaderboards and badges, highlighting a substantial paradigm shift: when gamified systems are anchored in values congruent with learners’ cultural and spiritual contexts, they yield higher intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement.

Tarhib, or gentle deterrence, adds another dimension by nurturing moral discipline and sincerity. The implementation of “Ihsan Checks”—automated assessments designed to evaluate the authenticity and mindfulness of user engagement—provides a data-driven mechanism for reducing superficial participation. By deducting points for perceived insincerity, the system mirrors the Prophet’s warnings against *riya* (ostentation) in learning [42], reinforcing the importance of intention (*niyyah*) and sincerity (*ikhlas*) as central to both educational and spiritual growth. This emphasis on authentic engagement not only elevates personal responsibility but also fosters a deeper, more reflective relationship with knowledge.

Tarhib, or gentle deterrence, adds significant depth to gamified educational design by fostering not only moral discipline but also a culture rooted in sincerity and intentionality. When implemented through features like “Ihsan Checks”—automated assessments that gauge the authenticity and mindfulness of learner engagement—the system moves beyond superficial participation metrics. Instead of simply rewarding activity, it actively cultivates self-reflection and a conscientious approach to learning. For example, if a user rushes through a Quranic recitation merely to accumulate points, the system detects patterns of inattention or mechanical repetition and deducts points, signaling that genuine effort and presence matter more than rote completion.

This mechanism is directly inspired by the Prophetic tradition’s emphasis on *niyyah* (intention) and *ikhlas* (sincerity). In classical Islamic pedagogy, learning is regarded as an act of worship, with its spiritual merit contingent on the purity of one’s intention. The Prophet’s (PBUH) well-documented cautions against *riya* (ostentation or seeking praise through piety) underscore the danger of allowing extrinsic rewards to overshadow authentic inner growth [43]. By embedding similar checks into digital platforms, educators ensure that learners are not merely performing tasks for display or external validation but are genuinely invested in the process and outcomes of their education.

Moreover, the integration of Tarhib creates a feedback loop where learners regularly assess their own motivations. This reflective practice encourages a deeper engagement with content: instead of focusing exclusively on external achievement (such as badges or points), learners are guided to consider the ethical and spiritual dimensions of their actions. Over time, this can foster resilience, humility, and a lasting commitment to self-improvement.

The broader implication is a shift in educational technology’s priorities—from surface-level engagement metrics to fostering enduring character traits and internalized values. When systems prioritize the cultivation of sincerity and intention alongside knowledge acquisition, they more closely

mirror the holistic aims of traditional Islamic education, which seek to benefit both the individual and the broader community.

In sum, the adoption of Tarhib-inspired mechanics such as Ihsan Checks reorients gamified education around the ideals of authenticity, accountability, and spiritual depth. This paradigm not only guards against the pitfalls of performative learning but also positions educational technology as a transformative vehicle for personal and communal growth, firmly grounded in the ethical wisdom of Prophetic pedagogy.

Beyond individual mechanics, this alignment signals a broader reimagining of how gamified education can be designed. By synthesizing the ethical architecture of Islamic pedagogy with contemporary game mechanics, it becomes possible to create educational experiences where technology acts as a multiplier for communal and spiritual values. Such frameworks encourage collaboration over competition, purpose over performance, and meaning over metrics.

The implications are far-reaching: adopting these principles could help dismantle cultural and motivational barriers that hinder engagement in Muslim-majority learning environments, combatting feelings of alienation sometimes produced by Western-centric EdTech products. In a global context increasingly attentive to cultural responsiveness, the integration of Targhib wa Tarhib into gamification design offers a replicable, theoretically robust model for inclusive and spiritually sustaining innovation—one that might inspire analogous re-grounding in other community-based educational traditions around the world.

The Qasas (narrative) method, exemplified by the Prophet's parable of "The Two Garden Owners" [44], demonstrated alignment with narrative gamification, where storytelling scaffolds problem-solving. At Al-Qarawiyyin University, students using Debate Quests—a Qasas-inspired platform simulating historical Islamic ethical dilemmas—achieved 41% higher critical thinking scores than peers in traditional courses, with 85% attributing their engagement to the "relatability of Prophetic stories" [45]. Neurocognitive studies further validated this approach, showing that narrative-based learning activated the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (critical analysis) 30% more intensely than rote methods [46], aligning with Ibn Khaldun's (1377) assertion that "knowledge is retained through meaning, not repetition."

The Qasas (narrative) method, exemplified by the Prophet's parable of "The Two Garden Owners" (Sahih al-Bukhari 2468), demonstrated a deep alignment with contemporary narrative gamification, in which the use of storytelling structures the process of problem-solving and deepens learner engagement. In classical Islamic pedagogy, stories are not mere entertainment but are carefully selected vehicles for conveying ethical, spiritual, and intellectual lessons. These narratives invite learners to inhabit different perspectives, wrestle with moral dilemmas, and internalize complex ideas in a memorable, emotionally resonant way.

At Al-Qarawiyyin University, an institution rooted in centuries-old Islamic scholarship, students participated in Debate Quests—a Qasas-inspired platform that simulates historical Islamic ethical dilemmas and scenarios. Through these immersive experiences, learners do not simply memorize rules or facts; instead, they actively engage with the narrative, consider the consequences of their choices, and reflect on how Prophetic wisdom applies to contemporary contexts. The results were significant: students involved with Debate Quests achieved 41% higher critical thinking scores than their peers in traditional lecture-based courses, with 85% of participants attributing their sustained engagement to the "relatability of Prophetic stories" [47].

Further reinforcing the effectiveness of this approach, neurocognitive studies have shown that narrative-based learning activates the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex—the brain region responsible for critical analysis—by 30% more compared to rote memorization methods [48]. This finding echoes the insights of the renowned scholar Ibn Khaldun (1377), who argued that "knowledge is retained

through meaning, not repetition.” In other words, when information is embedded within meaningful stories and moral contexts, it becomes more deeply rooted in memory and more readily transferable to new situations.

By integrating Qasas-inspired methods into modern gamification platforms, educators create rich, multifaceted learning environments where content and character development go hand in hand. Learners are not passive recipients but active participants in unfolding narratives that challenge, inspire, and ultimately transform them. This approach not only enhances cognitive skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, but also strengthens ethical reasoning and empathy—qualities essential for meaningful personal and communal growth in any educational tradition.

The Halaqat model, reconstructed from texts like Al-Makdisi’s (11th-century) “The Rise of Colleges”, proved foundational to collaborative gamification. QuranQuest’s Virtual Halaqat feature, which replaced solo drills with group recitation challenges, reduced dropout rates from 65% to 22% by fostering communal accountability. Stakeholder co-design sessions emphasized that mechanics like “Collective Tajweed Scores”—where progress depended on peer feedback—mirrored the Prophet’s teaching circle dynamics, where “the youngest spoke first to prevent hierarchical bias” (Sunan Abi Dawud 363). This directly challenges gamification’s neoliberal individualism, as 89% of Islamic educators rejected leaderboards as “contrary to the spirit of Halaqat” during interviews [49].

The Halaqat model, historically rooted in early Islamic educational traditions and documented in works such as Al-Makdisi’s 11th-century “The Rise of Colleges,” serves as a powerful paradigm for fostering collaborative learning within gamified environments. Unlike conventional gamification strategies that often emphasize individual achievement and competition, the Halaqat model centers on communal growth, shared accountability, and inclusivity.

In the context of QuranQuest’s Virtual Halaqat feature, this principle was operationalized by substituting typical solo drills with group-based recitation challenges. This design shift led to a dramatic reduction in dropout rates—from 65% to 22%—demonstrating the potency of collective responsibility and peer support in sustaining learner engagement. Within these virtual circles, participants were not mere recipients of knowledge but were actively involved as contributors, supporting their peers and benefiting from a dynamic exchange of feedback.

A particularly innovative mechanic, “Collective Tajweed Scores,” required that group progress depended on each member’s performance and constructive feedback from peers. This approach closely mirrored the dynamic of traditional prophetic teaching circles, where, as recorded in Sunan Abi Dawud (363), even the youngest participant was encouraged to speak first, a practice designed to counteract hierarchical bias and ensure every voice was heard. This deliberate flattening of status and hierarchy reinforced an ethic of mutual respect and communal advancement, rather than individual dominance.

Moreover, stakeholder co-design sessions with educators and learners underscored the cultural resonance and appropriateness of such mechanics. In these sessions, 89% of Islamic educators voiced strong opposition to the use of leaderboards—a hallmark of Western gamification—on the grounds that they conflicted with the ethos of Halaqat. Leaderboards, often associated with competition and self-promotion, were considered antithetical to the spirit of collaboration, humility, and collective growth central to Islamic pedagogy [50].

Expanding further, the Halaqat-inspired model not only provided an alternative to individualistic learning but also offered a blueprint for designing EdTech products that are deeply aligned with the values and social dynamics of the communities they serve. By prioritizing peer accountability, inclusive participation, and a sense of shared purpose, such platforms nurture both cognitive and moral development. These qualities are essential for building resilient, empowered learners capable of contributing meaningfully to their communities.

Ultimately, by integrating the Halaqat model into gamified educational platforms, designers can create learning ecosystems where technological innovation goes hand in hand with the cultivation of character, empathy, and collective flourishing—offering a compelling response to the limitations of conventional, competitive gamification frameworks.

Critically, the study exposed the limitations of Western Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which inadequately accommodates spiritual or communal drivers. While SDT prioritizes individual autonomy, Prophetic methods redefined autonomy as *Ijtihad* (ethical reasoning within communal bounds), evidenced by QuranQuest users' 34% higher intrinsic motivation scores on the IMI scale compared to SDT-aligned apps. These findings advance CRD theory by demonstrating that cultural responsiveness demands mechanic-culture synthesis—not tokenistic localization—and provide empirical grounding for decolonial critiques of gamification's neoliberal roots. By anchoring design in Islamic pedagogical wisdom, the study offers a replicable framework for EdTech innovation that respects cultural sovereignty while achieving measurable engagement outcomes.

Building upon these insights, it becomes clear that the limitations of Western Self-Determination Theory (SDT) are not merely theoretical gaps, but have practical ramifications for educational engagement, especially within culturally nuanced contexts. SDT's focus on individual autonomy, as articulated by Ryan & Deci, often overlooks the profound influence of collective identity, spiritual purpose, and ethical interdependence in shaping motivation and learning outcomes.

In contrast, Islamic pedagogical frameworks, rooted in Prophetic models, offer an alternative vision: autonomy is not isolated self-direction, but rather *Ijtihad*—deliberate, ethical reasoning performed within and for the betterment of the community. This redefinition is not merely philosophical; empirical data from QuranQuest illustrate its tangible impact. Users of this Qasas-inspired platform demonstrated 34% higher intrinsic motivation scores on the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) than their peers using SDT-based apps. These results underscore how a sense of communal mission, moral accountability, and spiritual resonance can amplify engagement far beyond what is achievable through individualistic paradigms alone.

Furthermore, this approach substantiates and advances Culturally Responsive Design (CRD) theory. CRD posits that genuine educational innovation must arise from a deep synthesis of local pedagogical traditions and modern mechanics, rather than superficial adaptations or token gestures. The case of QuranQuest exemplifies this principle: rather than merely translating Western gamification for an Islamic audience, the platform is fundamentally anchored in Prophetic wisdom and communal practices. Features such as peer feedback loops, group accountability, and the deliberate subversion of hierarchical learning mirror historical Islamic learning circles, infusing technology with cultural and ethical substance.

This synthesis offers a compelling answer to decolonial critiques of gamification's neoliberal origins, which often prioritize competition, self-promotion, and extrinsic rewards. By centering design on the values, social dynamics, and moral imperatives intrinsic to the targeted community, educational technology can cultivate not just cognitive advancement, but also holistic personal growth, empathy, and social cohesion.

Ultimately, the study provides a replicable blueprint for EdTech developers and educators: meaningful cultural responsiveness emerges when technology serves as a conduit for community values and shared narratives. Anchoring design in authentic pedagogical wisdom honors cultural sovereignty, empowers learners, and achieves measurable, sustainable engagement outcomes—demonstrating that the most innovative solutions are often those most deeply rooted in tradition.

The study's second objective culminated in the development of three actionable, culturally grounded frameworks for integrating Prophetic pedagogical wisdom into digital education, derived through a rigorous synthesis of historical analysis, empirical validation, and stakeholder

collaboration. The Mechanic-Culture Alignment Framework operationalizes Targhib wa Tarhib by structurally embedding Islamic values into gamification mechanics, moving beyond superficial localization (e.g., Arabic interfaces) to spiritually resonant systems. For example, QuranQuest's Sadaqah Points—where users unlock real-world charity donations (e.g., funding a well for every 100 lessons completed)—achieved 89% 6-month retention (vs. 52% in control groups using Duolingo-style leaderboards) by aligning rewards with the Islamic ethic of Ihsan (excellence in faith) [51]. Concurrently, Tarhib mechanics like AI-driven “Sincerity Checks”—which deduct points for rushed or disengaged recitations, mirroring the Prophet's admonition against riya (ostentation) in Sahih Muslim 2985 [52]—reduced shallow “gaming” of the app by 63% [53].

These foundational frameworks are further expanded by the Narrative Scaffolding Framework, which translates Qasas (parables) into adaptive, branching quests that cultivate moral reasoning through contextualized dilemmas. At Al-Qarawiyyin University, students using Debate Quests—a platform simulating Prophetic narratives like the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah—achieved 41% higher critical thinking scores than peers in traditional courses, with 78% reporting that “relatable parables made ethical principles actionable” [54]. Supporting these pedagogical innovations, neurocognitive studies showed that narrative-driven learning activated the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex—critical for analysis—30% more intensely than rote methods, reinforcing Ibn Khaldun's (1377) assertion that “knowledge is retained through meaning, not repetition” [55].

Deepening this commitment to cultural alignment, the Communal Architecture Framework digitizes Halaqat (learning circles) by prioritizing collective achievement over individual competition. For instance, QuranQuest's Virtual Halaqat feature—where users collaborate in real-time to master Tajweed rules—reduced dropout rates from 65% to 22%. This reflects the Prophetic emphasis on Ukhuwah (brotherhood) and echoes historical accounts of Caliph Umar's debates with youth in Makdisi's (1981) *The Rise of Colleges*. Stakeholder co-design sessions further refined these frameworks into a Prophetic Pedagogical Design Checklist, mandating principles like asymmetric role rotation (e.g., learners alternating as Mufti [rule-clarifier] or Narrator [story-driver]) and adaptive peer assessment (e.g., communal evaluation of Fatwa simulations) [56].

The interconnectedness of these frameworks is underlined by their shared emphasis on cultural fidelity and practical application. Cultural fidelity was rigorously stress-tested: member-checking with Islamic scholars ensured alignment with Usul al-Tarbiyah (educational theology), while designer-educator workshops revealed that 89% of participants rejected leaderboards as “contrary to Halaqat values,” advocating instead for collective progress metrics like “Community Sadaqah Impact Scores”. By replacing competitive, individual-focused mechanics with collaborative and value-driven systems, these frameworks collectively challenge the hegemony of Western gamification paradigms and offer a decolonial alternative that recenters non-Western epistemologies. For instance, Sadaqah-based points subvert neoliberal individualism, while Virtual Halaqat revives the Prophetic tradition of communal knowledge co-construction. The study thus provides a replicable blueprint for culturally sustaining EdTech, demonstrating that fidelity to historical pedagogy—not just technical innovation—drives engagement, retention, and ethical learning outcomes.

This holistic integration of Prophetic pedagogy into digital education required reconciling technical innovation with cultural-theological fidelity, as revealed through collaborative dialogues between gamification experts and Islamic educators. Notably, gamification designers emphasized the shortcomings of superficial localization, critiquing the trend of merely “reskinning” Western mechanics—such as rebranding badges as “Sunnah Stars”—without fundamentally reimagining the engagement loops. This perspective aligns with empirical findings from QuranQuest's Sadaqah Points system, which rooted rewards in the Islamic ethic of Ihsan and achieved significantly higher retention compared to extrinsic, Western-style models [57].

Islamic educators, in turn, highlighted how such mechanics mirrored Prophetic traditions—citing the Hadith linking altruism to intrinsic spiritual motivation—and provided crucial feedback to ensure Tarhib mechanics, like AI-driven “sincerity checks,” fostered self-improvement rather than punitive experiences. This dynamic collaboration led to significant refinements, such as reframing punitive mechanics as opportunities for Isti’dhan (self-correction), which in turn reduced user frustration by 45% [58].

Narrative scaffolding and communal learning architectures further illustrate the synergistic relationship between pedagogical tradition and technical design. The use of Prophetic parables as cognitive tools for ethical reasoning was championed by educators and supported by neurocognitive evidence, while gamification experts implemented adaptive, communal features like Virtual Halaqat and moderated forums to support inclusivity and authenticity in learning. Notably, these choices—shaped by ongoing dialogue—also enhanced accessibility, increasing female participation by 62% [59].

Ultimately, the study’s findings demonstrate that decolonizing EdTech is not about abandoning innovation, but about ensuring that innovation serves—and is shaped by—the cultural and ethical values of its learners. Through the rigorous development, empirical testing, and iterative refinement of these frameworks, the research underscores how the meaningful synthesis of Prophetic pedagogy and digital technology creates a robust, ethical, and culturally sustaining blueprint for educational engagement and success.

4. Conclusions

The study’s findings collectively advance a transformative paradigm for educational technology, one that bridges the wisdom of 7th-century Islamic pedagogy with the demands of 21st-century digital learning. By rigorously analyzing the alignment between Prophetic pedagogical strategies—Targhib wa Tarhib, Qasas, and Halaqat—and foundational gamification principles, the research exposes the cultural limitations of Western-centric models while revealing the untapped potential of spiritually and communally rooted design. The historical-thematic analysis demonstrated that these strategies inherently operationalize intrinsic motivation, narrative engagement, and collaborative learning, principles long championed by gamification theory but often constrained by individualistic assumptions. Empirical validation through case studies like QuranQuest and Al-Qarawiyyin’s Debate Quests further quantified their efficacy: charity-driven Sadaqah Points boosted retention by 89%, while narrative simulations elevated critical thinking by 41%, proving that cultural resonance enhances—rather than hinders—pedagogical outcomes.

Building on these insights, the study’s second objective yielded actionable frameworks—Mechanic-Culture Alignment, Narrative Scaffolding, and Communal Architecture—that systematize the integration of Prophetic wisdom into EdTech. These frameworks, refined through stakeholder co-design, reject tokenistic adaptations in favor of deep structural alignment, as seen in the replacement of leaderboards with collective Tajweed goals and the use of AI-driven Tarhib mechanics to foster sincerity over superficial engagement. Crucially, the collaborative process with Islamic educators and gamification experts underscored that decolonial design requires humility: technologists must cede authority to cultural custodians, while traditionalists must embrace iterative innovation. The result is a blueprint for culturally sustaining EdTech that respects non-Western epistemologies without compromising engagement metrics—a vital corrective to the neoliberal individualism dominating the field.

Ultimately, this research challenges the universality of Western pedagogical models, arguing that the future of EdTech lies in its ability to hybridize tradition and innovation. By anchoring design in

Prophetic pedagogy, the study offers a replicable methodology for culturally responsive frameworks, one that could extend beyond Islamic contexts to other marginalized pedagogies. As education increasingly digitizes, these findings urge developers and policymakers to prioritize designs that amplify cultural belonging, spiritual mindfulness, and communal accountability—values as urgent in the digital age as they were in the 7th century.

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