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ABSTRACT SNAPSHOT

The discourse of self-love has become increasingly prominent in contemporary popular culture, especially among younger generations. However, this narrative often remains superficial, centring on personal affirmation, bodily acceptance, and visual self-display without engaging deeper spiritual dimensions. In digital culture, body positivity may function as resistance against narrow beauty standards, yet it may also remain trapped within external recognition, algorithmic visibility, and the commodification of the body. This article critiques and reconstructs the meanings of self-love and body positivity through a Sufi lens, particularly by engaging Jalaluddin Rumi's conception of love, the self, the body, and the ego. Using a qualitative, library-based approach with philosophical-hermeneutic analysis, this study reads selected ideas from Rumi's spiritual anthropology in dialogue with contemporary narratives of self-love and body positivity. It argues that love for oneself should not be understood as ego glorification, but as a gateway to self-knowledge, purification of the nafs, and Divine awareness. The discussion is structured around three central themes: first, a critique of self-love entangled with spiritual narcissism and digital validation; second, the body as a trust and field of spiritual responsibility rather than merely an object of display; and third, the transformation of self-love into love for God through the Sufi path of purification and self-transcendence. The findings indicate that Rumi's Sufi conception of love offers a profound spiritual framework for understanding self-love as liberation from the ego rather than its reinforcement. The novelty of this article lies in integrating modern narratives of self-love and body positivity with classical mystical wisdom, thereby offering a renewed interpretation of bodily spirituality, identity, and human essence in the digital era.

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Rethinking Self-Love and Body Positivity through *Jalaluddin Rumi's Sufi Conception of Love in the Digital Era*

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Abstract

The discourse of self-love has become increasingly prominent in contemporary popular culture, especially among younger generations. However, this narrative often remains superficial, centring on personal affirmation, bodily acceptance, and visual self-display without engaging deeper spiritual dimensions. In digital culture, body positivity may function as resistance against narrow beauty standards, yet it may also remain trapped within external recognition, algorithmic visibility, and the commodification of the body. This article critiques and reconstructs the meanings of self-love and body positivity through a Sufi lens, particularly by engaging Jalaluddin Rumi's conception of love, the self, the body, and the ego. Using a qualitative, library-based approach with philosophical-hermeneutic analysis, this study reads selected ideas from Rumi's spiritual anthropology in dialogue with contemporary narratives of self-love and body positivity. It argues that love for oneself should not be understood as ego glorification, but as a gateway to self-knowledge, purification of the nafs, and Divine awareness. The discussion is structured around three central themes: first, a critique of self-love entangled with spiritual narcissism and digital validation; second, the body as a trust and field of spiritual responsibility rather than merely an object of display; and third, the transformation of self-love into love for God through the Sufi path of purification and self-transcendence. The findings indicate that Rumi's Sufi conception of love offers a profound spiritual framework for understanding self-love as liberation from the ego rather than its reinforcement. The novelty of this article lies in integrating modern narratives of self-love and body positivity with classical mystical wisdom, thereby offering a renewed interpretation of bodily spirituality, identity, and human essence in the digital era.

Keywords: Self-love; Body positivity; Jalaluddin Rumi; Sufism; Bodily spirituality

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary life, shaped by technological sophistication and boundless connectivity through social media, the human body has undergone a significant shift in meaning. It is no longer merely a biological entity moving through space and time, but has become a symbol of identity, value, visibility, and even spirituality. In digital spaces, the body is displayed, assessed, represented, and, in many ways, reconstructed according to standards that are not always natural or organic (Wahyudi & Kurniasih, 2021). One contemporary movement that reflects this phenomenon is body positivity, which calls for the acceptance of diverse bodies, regardless of size, skin colour, physical appearance, or other embodied differences (Cohen et al., 2021).

On the surface, this movement appears as a form of self-liberation from the oppression of modern aesthetic standards. Yet behind this emancipatory intention lies a deeper philosophical problem concerning the meaning of the body, the nature of the self, and the direction of love.

The body positivity movement and the narrative of self-love have become powerful cultural mantras widely circulated across digital platforms. They are often regarded as forms of resistance against idealised body images long promoted by the beauty industry, media culture, and visual capitalism. However, these narratives are not free from the reproduction of power. The body that is “accepted” must still be displayed, still requires recognition, and is still measured through algorithms, whether through likes, views, comments, or other forms of digital visibility. In this sense, the body remains an object of power in a new form: no longer merely through explicit coercion, but through visibility, comparison, and external validation. It is here that a philosophical anxiety emerges: is what is commonly called self-love truly grounded in deeper self-understanding, or is it merely another form of dependence on external recognition?

This problem becomes more complex when spirituality, as one of the deepest dimensions of human existence, is marginalised by the dominance of visual culture and the speed of information consumption. Human beings increasingly experience inner alienation amid uninterrupted virtual connectedness. The body may appear confident on social media, while the inner self remains fragile, anxious, and empty (Putra et al., 2023). Spirituality, which should guide human beings in understanding themselves and their world, is often reduced to motivational captions, aesthetic affirmations, or symbolic self-expression (Zamroni, 2017). This condition calls for a renewed approach—or, more precisely, for the revival of an older spiritual approach—to reread the meaning of the body, love, and the self within a more essential framework.

Sufism, as a rich tradition of Islamic spirituality, offers a profound lens for understanding the relationship between the body, the self, and love. It does not necessarily regard the body as an enemy to be fought, but as a vehicle, a trust, and a field of discipline that must be purified and properly oriented (Rohman, 2023). In the Sufi path, the body is neither denied nor made the final centre of identity. Rather, it is situated within a broader anthropology in which the human being consists of body, soul, heart, ego, and spirit. Therefore, the question of self-love cannot be separated from the question of what kind of “self” is being loved: the visible body, the psychological ego, the socially recognised self, or the deeper self that becomes a path towards God.

One of the central figures in the Sufi tradition is Jalaluddin Rumi, whose spiritual ideas remain highly relevant to the problems of modern human beings.

Through his poetry and teachings, Rumi emphasises the inward journey of knowing the self, not in an egoistic sense, but as a movement towards Divine love. For Rumi, true love is not a celebration of the ego-self, but a process through which the self is purified, opened, and drawn beyond its attachment to form. Love does not strengthen the ego; rather, it breaks the illusion of egoic self-sufficiency. Therefore, self-love from a Rumi-inspired Sufi perspective is not a form of narcissism, but an initial movement towards self-knowledge, purification of the soul, and return to the source of love.

Rumi's works, such as the *Masnawi*, *Diwan-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, and *Fihi Ma Fihi*, are not only spiritual-literary texts, but also profound sources of existential and philosophical reflection. In these works, the body often appears within a symbolic and pedagogical horizon: it may become a veil when it imprisons the self within desire and appearance, yet it may also become a sign when read through the light of the soul. Rumi repeatedly distinguishes between outward form and inner meaning, suggesting that visible form should not be rejected, but must be read beyond itself. In this context, the body should neither be deified nor hated. It should be loved within the limits of being an *amanah*, a trust given by God, and love for the body should become a doorway towards a greater love. Here lies the fundamental difference between self-love in popular culture and self-love in Rumi's Sufi vision: the former often remains affirmative towards the ego, while the latter is deconstructive of the ego and transformative towards Divine awareness.

Departing from this problem, this study examines body positivity and self-love on social media through the Sufi thought of Jalaluddin Rumi. It does not reject these movements entirely, since body positivity may contain an important ethical resistance against body-shaming, exclusionary beauty standards, and the symbolic violence of visual culture. However, this study argues that such resistance remains incomplete when it stops at bodily affirmation, visual confidence, or external recognition. By reading the body and self-love through Rumi's Sufi perspective, this article seeks to show that true self-liberation does not arise merely from external recognition, but from inward transformation, self-knowledge, and openness to the transcendent source of love.

This study brings together two domains that are rarely placed side by side: classical spiritual discourse from the Sufi tradition and contemporary phenomena in digital culture. Previous studies have discussed the integration of Sufism and the digital world, such as the work of Wahid and Maskhuroh (2023), yet such studies tend to discuss Sufism in general without focusing on a particular Sufi figure or on a specific issue such as self-love and body positivity. Meanwhile, studies on body positivity, such as Cohen et al. (2021), examine how people understand and negotiate the movement through social media, but do not integrate this discussion with Islamic spirituality or Sufi anthropology. Similarly, research on self-love among adolescents,

such as Khumairoh et al. (2024), tends to focus on insecurity and psychological self-acceptance without developing a deeper philosophical and spiritual account of the self. This gap indicates the need for a study that does not merely mention Rumi as a symbolic Sufi figure, but reconstructs self-love and body positivity through his conception of love, ego, body, and Divine orientation. In this sense, the present article responds to the need for a more textually grounded and conceptually precise reading of Rumi, so that his thought is not used merely as a spiritual ornament, but as a framework for rethinking the relationship between the body, the self, and Divine love.

The novelty of this study lies in its reconstruction of self-love and body positivity through Rumi's Sufi conception of love. Rather than treating self-love merely as psychological affirmation or bodily acceptance, this article proposes that self-love should be understood as a spiritual process that distinguishes between egoic self-love and spiritual self-love. Egoic self-love is attached to image, recognition, and self-display; spiritual self-love, by contrast, is rooted in self-knowledge, purification of the *nafs*, care for the body as a Divine trust, and the transformation of love for the self into love for God. In this framework, the body is not rejected, but restored to its proper place as a field of contemplation and responsibility rather than as a commodity of visual validation.

This study also aims to restore the position of Sufism as a discipline that is not only ritualistic or mystical, but also philosophical and transformative. Sufism does not only speak of *dhikr* and *wirid*, but also of how human beings build a healthy relationship between the body, the soul, and God. This study is therefore part of an effort to present classical Islamic thought as a meaningful response to contemporary existential problems that are often answered only through psychological or popular-cultural language. Rumi's perspective shows that the body is not merely an instrument of action, but also a field of contemplation. In other words, the body can become a path towards God, provided that the human relationship with the body is grounded in transcendental awareness rather than aesthetics or image-making.

Social media in this study is positioned not as an enemy, but as a space in which meanings are contested. It may still become a medium for spreading spiritual awareness, yet critical reason and deep reading are needed so that self-love does not become trapped in false romanticisation. Thus, this study seeks to encourage alternative narratives in the digital space that are rooted in the Islamic scholarly tradition, especially Sufism, so that younger Muslim generations do not lose direction amid visual pressure and increasingly complex demands of identity.

This study is an invitation to return to the essence of the self through the lens of Rumi's Sufi wisdom, which sees love not as a tool for strengthening the ego, but as a path for dissolving the ego and returning the self to God. By placing Jalaluddin Rumi at the centre of analysis, this article aims to contribute to the development of Islamic

studies that are responsive to contemporary problems, while also revitalising the intellectual heritage of Islam as a spiritual foundation that is grounded, reflective, and liberating.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using descriptive-critical and philosophical-hermeneutic analysis. This method is appropriate for examining the symbolic, philosophical, and spiritual meanings contained in Sufi texts, as well as phenomena of popular culture related to self-love, body positivity, and the body in digital culture (Saefullah, 2024). The main focus of this study is to understand how self-love is conceptualised differently in Jalaluddin Rumi's Sufi thought and in contemporary digital narratives circulating on social media.

This study adopts a hermeneutic interpretive framework as a tool for reading texts and exploring the contextual depth of spiritual meaning in Rumi's thought. The primary textual materials consist of selected passages and ideas from Rumi's major works, especially the *Masnavi*, *Diwan-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, and *Fihi Ma Fihi*, insofar as they illuminate his understanding of love, the self, the body, the ego, and Divine orientation. These texts are treated not merely as poetic or devotional works, but as sources of spiritual anthropology that offer insight into the relationship between the body, the soul, the ego, and Divine love. This article does not attempt to provide an exhaustive reading of Rumi's entire corpus. Rather, it uses selected textual motifs from his works—especially the distinction between outward form and inner meaning, the transformative function of love, and the critique of egoic attachment—as conceptual resources for rethinking self-love and body positivity in the digital era.

In addition to primary Sufi materials, this study uses secondary literature on Rumi, Sufism, Islamic spirituality, body positivity, digital self-representation, and contemporary self-love discourse. These secondary sources are selected based on their relevance to four main themes: first, Rumi's conception of love and self-knowledge; second, Sufi concepts such as *nafs*, *tazkiyat al-nafs*, *mahabbah*, *fana'*, and *ma'rifah*; third, the development of self-love and body positivity in popular and digital culture; and fourth, critical studies of visual self-display, digital validation, and the commodification of the body.

The analysis is conducted in several stages. First, the study identifies the dominant meanings of self-love and body positivity within contemporary digital culture, especially their connection with bodily affirmation, external recognition, and visual performativity. Second, it reconstructs Rumi's Sufi understanding of love, the self, and the body by reading selected textual materials through a philosophical-hermeneutic framework. Third, it compares popular self-love with Rumi's Sufi

conception of love in order to distinguish between egoic self-love and spiritual self-love. Fourth, it formulates a critical reconstruction of body positivity by placing the body not merely as an object of display, but as an *amanah*, a field of spiritual responsibility, and a possible path towards self-knowledge and Divine awareness.

Through this method, the study does not seek to reject self-love or body positivity entirely. Rather, it aims to reinterpret them through Rumi's Sufi conception of love. The analysis therefore moves from critique to reconstruction: from a critique of digital self-love as egoic validation towards a Sufi understanding of self-love as purification of the *nafs*, care for the body as a Divine trust, and transformation of love for the self into love for God.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Self-Love and the Body in Popular Culture

The term *self-love* has become a dominant cultural mantra in contemporary social media spaces and public discourse. Modern life, marked by pressures related to economic life, social relations, and self-image, has made the idea of loving oneself emerge as a response to the psychic wounds produced by capitalism, patriarchy, and visual culture (Hastuti, 2021). In this context, self-love is not merely a private psychological attitude, but a cultural discourse shaped by media, consumption, and digital visibility. Its meaning has therefore undergone a narrowing, often being oriented primarily towards the body, appearance, and visual image.

The body positivity movement emerges within this context as an attempt to challenge narrow beauty standards and affirm bodies that have long been marginalised by dominant aesthetic norms. In its ethical intention, body positivity carries an important message: every body deserves recognition, dignity, and freedom from humiliation. It resists the assumption that only young, slim, white, able-bodied, or conventionally attractive bodies are worthy of being displayed and accepted. However, when this movement enters the digital economy of images, its emancipatory meaning becomes more complicated. Popular culture can easily turn self-love and body positivity into visual commodities. Through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube, these narratives are often circulated through aesthetic self-presentation and bodily display that remain connected to the standards of the beauty industry and platform visibility (Cohen et al., 2019; Cohen et al., 2021; Griffin et al., 2022). This gives rise to an irony: on the one hand, there is a spirit of self-liberation and acceptance; on the other hand, there is a new adjustment to aesthetic norms that remain exclusive. Bodies that differ from dominant standards, such as bodies with dark skin, non-slim bodies, ageing bodies, or bodies with physical

disabilities, may still be marginalised within the dominant discourse of self-love (Griffin et al., 2022; Rattansi, 2022).

This phenomenon shows that self-love is not a neutral idea. It is shaped by cultural structures and economic systems that continue to influence how human beings perceive the body. In the digital climate, the body that “loves itself” is often a body that is displayed, photographed, polished, filtered, and assessed through algorithms (Larasati, 2021). Recent discussions of self-visibility on social media also show that digital platforms do not merely provide spaces for self-expression, but shape the ways in which the self becomes visible, measurable, and socially recognisable (Barta & Andalibi, 2024). As a result, self-acceptance becomes tied to bodily performativity in digital space rather than to deeper existential acceptance. One of the main ironies of the self-love trend is that it creates a new pressure: the pressure to appear happy, productive, confident, attractive, and emotionally healed, even when a person’s inner reality may be otherwise (Elsener, 2023). Many individuals feel the need to present the best version of themselves, not because they truly accept themselves, but because they wish to remain relevant before a digital audience. This reveals the contradiction between the original promise of self-love and its implementation in public space.

Popular culture also tends to reduce self-love to physical care and symbolic self-affirmation, such as spa treatments, skincare consumption, fashionable clothing, wellness trends, and the uploading of body images accompanied by affirmative captions (Griffin et al., 2022). These practices are not necessarily wrong. Caring for the body, accepting one’s appearance, and resisting body-shaming can be ethically meaningful. The problem arises when self-love is reduced to consumption and aesthetics, while deeper questions of the self are left untouched. Critical studies of body positivity have shown that the movement may lose part of its transformative force when it is absorbed into self-promotion, branding, or corporate commodification (Brathwaite & DeAndrea, 2022). At this point, the body is accepted only as an image, not yet understood as a site of meaning, vulnerability, responsibility, and spiritual awareness.

The relationship between self-love and body positivity therefore needs to be clarified. Self-love refers to the way individuals affirm, care for, and relate to themselves, while body positivity refers more specifically to the acceptance and recognition of bodily diversity. The two overlap in digital culture because the self is frequently represented through the body. However, they are not identical. A person may visually accept the body while remaining trapped in deeper forms of egoic dependence, insecurity, or the need for recognition. Conversely, a person may develop a deeper spiritual acceptance of the self without making the body an object of continuous display. This distinction is important because the critique offered in this

article is not directed against bodily acceptance itself, but against the reduction of self-love and body positivity to visual affirmation, market consumption, and algorithmic validation.

The digital circulation of self-love also shows that the body has become a contested site of meaning. It is no longer merely a biological entity, but a symbolic space in which identity, value, gender, piety, beauty, and social belonging are negotiated. The body is asked to speak: to show confidence, display healing, prove happiness, and perform authenticity. Yet this demand can paradoxically produce new forms of anxiety. The more the body is displayed as evidence of self-love, the more it becomes exposed to judgement. In this condition, self-love risks becoming dependent on the gaze of others. What appears as liberation may still be structured by recognition, comparison, and subtle competition. This is close to what Orgad and Gill describe as *confidence culture*, in which commands to love oneself, believe in oneself, and display confidence may place the burden of overcoming social pressure on individuals while leaving broader structures of inequality insufficiently questioned (Orgad & Gill, 2022).

This does not mean that body positivity and self-love should be rejected entirely. Their emergence indicates a real wound in modern culture: many people have experienced shame, exclusion, and symbolic violence because of their bodies. The call to love oneself may therefore contain an important ethical protest against humiliation and dehumanisation. However, such protest requires a deeper foundation so that it is not absorbed by the very system it seeks to criticise. If self-love remains centred only on image, the self remains bound to the logic of display. If body positivity remains dependent on visibility, the body is still captured by the economy of the gaze. Therefore, the question is not whether human beings should love themselves, but what kind of self is being loved, how the body is being understood, and towards what horizon this love is directed.

At this point, Sufism can offer a deeper and more liberating reading. As a spiritual path in Islam, Sufism views the body and the self as part of the journey towards God. Love for the self in the Sufi perspective is not merely an affirmation of the ego, but an awareness of the transient nature of existence and of the self's connectedness with the transcendent (Rohmatin, 2021). The concept of *mahabbah* in Sufism, for instance, does not centre on the ego, but on a love that goes beyond the ego: Divine love that liberates human beings from worldly attachment, including attachment to bodily image and external recognition (Rosyad, 2021). In this framework, the body is not hated, but neither is it absolutised. It is cared for as a trust, disciplined as part of spiritual formation, and interpreted as a sign that points beyond itself.

Therefore, criticism of self-love in popular culture does not mean a rejection of its ethical spirit. On the contrary, such criticism aims to return self-love to reflective and spiritual roots capable of addressing the inner wounds of modern human beings. Sufism offers an important alternative in this regard: a form of self-love that is not narcissistic, but transcendental and inclusive (Ayun, 2021). The reading of self-love and body positivity therefore needs to be expanded through a Sufi approach so that it does not remain trapped in the romanticisation of the body. Love for the self, in this approach, can be understood as a spiritual process that liberates individuals from false images and leads them towards a whole and God-oriented understanding of the self (Sani, 2024).

The next section develops this Sufi reading more specifically through Jalaluddin Rumi's understanding of the body, ego, self-knowledge, and Divine love. This is necessary because Rumi should not function merely as a symbolic representative of Sufism, but as the conceptual centre through which self-love and body positivity are reconstructed.

3.2. Jalaluddin Rumi on the Body, Ego, and Divine Love

Sufism places the ego, or *nafs*, as one of the main obstacles in the human journey towards God. In this context, self-love rooted in popular culture can be criticised because it often strengthens the ego rather than transcending it (Muttaqin, 2022). When self-love is reduced to a celebration of the ego, it is no longer a form of liberation, but a subtle and misleading form of attachment. This problem becomes central in the thought of Jalaluddin Rumi, whose poetry repeatedly reminds human beings that the visible self is not the deepest reality of human existence. For Rumi, the human self is not exhausted by the body, social recognition, or psychological self-image. The self is a traveller whose deepest meaning is discovered only when it moves beyond egoic attachment towards Divine love.

In Rumi's poetic language, the human journey is often described as a movement from surface to depth, from form to meaning, and from self-attachment to Divine attraction. This movement is crucial for the present discussion because popular self-love often begins and ends with the visible self, whereas Rumi's spiritual anthropology directs the seeker beyond visible identity towards the inner reality of the soul. Thus, the body and the self are not denied, but interpreted within a deeper horizon of meaning.

Rumi's distinction between outward form and inner meaning is especially important here. In the *Masnavi*, Rumi repeatedly directs attention from *ṣūrat*, or outward form, towards *ma'nā*, or inner meaning. Form is not rejected, but it must not imprison the seeker. This is why Rumi's thought is relevant for criticising digital self-love: the problem is not bodily visibility in itself, but the reduction of the self to visible

form. Visibility becomes meaningful only when it functions as a sign pointing beyond itself. In Rumi's symbolic universe, the body can become a sign of createdness, dependence, and longing for the Divine. Yet the same body may also become a veil when it is reduced to appearance, admiration, and self-display (Rumi, 2004; Chittick, 1983; Schimmel, 1978). Thus, Rumi does not offer hatred of the body, but a disciplined interpretation of it.

Within Rumi's Sufi anthropology, the body occupies an ambivalent but important position. It is neither simply an enemy of the soul nor the final centre of identity. The body may function as a vehicle, a sign, and, at times, a veil. It becomes a vehicle when disciplined and directed towards remembrance, service, and spiritual awareness. It becomes a sign when it reminds human beings of dependence, vulnerability, and createdness. Yet it becomes a veil when the self is imprisoned by bodily image, desire, admiration, and external recognition. This reading is important for the discussion of body positivity because Rumi's perspective does not lead to hatred of the body. Rather, it places the body within a hierarchy of meaning: the body must be cared for, but not worshipped; accepted, but not absolutised; loved, but not allowed to become the final measure of the self.

The concept of *nafs* in Sufism is commonly understood through various levels, ranging from *nafs al-ammārah*, the soul that commands towards evil, to *nafs al-muṭma'innah*, the tranquil soul conscious of God (Maelany, 2022). In Rumi's spiritual vision, the problem is not that human beings love themselves, but that they often love the wrong layer of the self. Popular self-love often remains at the level of egoic desire, where love for the self strengthens the need to be accepted, recognised, and admired by others. This desire is closely related to *riyā'*, or showing off, which contradicts the essence of sincerity in spirituality. In the digital era, *riyā'* may appear not only in ritual acts, but also in performances of identity, piety, beauty, confidence, and even healing. The self that appears to be "loving itself" may in fact still be waiting for the gaze of others.

Rumi's conception of love offers a different orientation. Love is not merely an emotional affirmation of the self; it is a force that breaks the illusion of self-sufficiency. In the *Diwan-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, love frequently appears as fire, wound, intoxication, or a force that uproots the self from ordinary attachment. This symbolic language shows that love is not merely comfort, but transformation. Love burns the false self so that the deeper self may be awakened. In this sense, Rumi's *mahabbah* is not sentimental affection, but a transformative movement that purifies the self from attachment to form (Rumi, 1898; Lewis, 2000). The body, beauty, recognition, and identity are not rejected, but relativised before a deeper truth: that the human being belongs to God and returns to God.

This understanding is also visible in *Fihi Ma Fihi*, where Rumi often speaks in a conversational and pedagogical mode. He does not separate spiritual insight from everyday human experience. Instead, he teaches that ordinary life, bodily existence, suffering, longing, and encounter can become entrances into deeper meaning. This is important for the present discussion because self-love and body positivity are not rejected as worldly concerns, but reoriented. Their value depends on whether they lead the self towards deeper awareness or keep it trapped within the surface of image (Rumi, 1994).

A Sufi critique does not immediately reject the idea of loving oneself. Rather, Sufism offers a more radical and liberating form of self-love: loving oneself as God's creation, not as an object of social judgement (Wirinata, 2022). Self-love in Sufism is a process of purifying the soul, or *tazkiyat al-nafs*, in order to attain awareness of the essence of the self as weak, transient, and wholly dependent upon God (Ihwan, 2025). This means that true self-love within the Sufi framework is a path towards Divine awareness, not merely love for the outer surface of the body. Self-love that does not recognise the origin of existence risks falling into self-worship or narcissism, which only deepens human alienation from spiritual reality.

Popular culture tends to avoid the realities of suffering, lack, and transience. The body that is loved is often the body that is young, beautiful, healthy, productive, and displayable (Kertamukti et al., 2018). Yet Rumi's Sufi wisdom invites human beings to encounter the self not only through beauty and confidence, but also through wounds, longing, limitation, and vulnerability. In the Sufi view, loving oneself means accepting destiny, recognising limitation, and remaining grateful in every condition (Pamungkas, 2023). Here, *fanā'* becomes a sharp critique of self-love rooted in modern individualism. *Fanā'* refers to the disappearance of the ego in Divine consciousness, which directly contradicts the glorification of the ego in popular narratives (Isra' Ahmad, 2025). For a Sufi, true love appears when the ego is dissolved, not when it is celebrated.

This does not mean that the self has no value. On the contrary, the self is valuable because it is created, entrusted, and called by God. The difference lies in the direction of love. Egoic self-love moves in a circular direction: the self loves itself, displays itself, and waits to be recognised. Spiritual self-love moves in a vertical and transformative direction: the self recognises its dependence upon God, disciplines its desires, cares for the body as an *amānah*, and allows love of the self to become a path towards love of God. In this sense, Rumi helps shift the question from "How can I love myself more?" to "What kind of self must be loved, purified, and returned to God?"

This wider Sufi horizon of love can also be seen in figures such as Rabiah al-Adawiyah. In the Sufi tradition, Rabiah is often remembered as a figure of disinterested love, loving God not merely out of desire for heaven or fear of hell, but

because of Divine love itself (Smith, 1994; Schimmel, 1978). Her example suggests that true love is not rooted in personal interest, but in existential connectedness with the Divine. Rumi stands within this broader Sufi tradition of love, yet gives it a poetic and philosophical force that is particularly relevant to the modern crisis of selfhood. Love does not merely comfort the self; it exposes the falseness of the ego and calls the self to transformation.

This critique is especially important for young Muslims who live amid intense body visualisation, digital comparison, and social media pressure. Without deeper spiritual understanding, self-love may turn into narcissistic self-enclosure rather than a path of liberation, particularly when the self becomes dependent on display, comparison, and external recognition (Cohen et al., 2021; Griffin et al., 2022). Rumi's Sufi conception of love offers a bridge between love for the self and love for God, so that the individual is oriented not only towards the world, but also towards the transcendent (Novianto & Saumantri, 2024). It teaches that true self-love cannot be found merely in the mirror, in bodily display, or in the number of likes, but in the silence of the soul that surrenders to the Divine source of love.

3.3. Self-Love as a Spiritual Path: The Fusion of Self-Love and Divine Love

After examining how Rumi's Sufi perspective criticises popular self-love, which tends to be egocentric and visually oriented, it is important to explore the possibility of reconciling self-love with Divine love. Can self-love become a spiritual path, rather than merely a psychological or aesthetic one? It can, if love for the self is directed as a bridge towards loving God. Within this framework, self-love does not stop at the ego, but becomes a ladder towards transcendence. It becomes meaningful not because the self is celebrated as an autonomous centre of value, but because the self is recognised as a created, fragile, and entrusted being whose deepest meaning lies in its relation to God.

This understanding is rooted in the Sufi teaching that human beings were created not only as bodily creatures, but also as beings who carry signs of Divine meaning. In many Sufi traditions, the human being is understood as a locus of spiritual reflection: the body, soul, heart, and spirit are not isolated dimensions, but interconnected layers in the journey towards God. Thus, loving oneself properly means appreciating one's existence as a place where Divine trust is deposited. Love for the self is no longer limited to self-acceptance, but becomes a form of spiritual awareness of the origin and purpose of existence.

In Sufi interpretation, the well-known maxim *man 'arafa nafsahu faqad 'arafa rabbahu*—whoever knows himself, knows his Lord—becomes an important foundation for bridging self-love and love of God (Saputra, 2022). Love for the self in this form contains a contemplative and reflective dimension, not visual exploration or external praise. It is born from the recognition of transience, imperfection, and the

absolute dependence of human beings upon God. In this sense, self-love does not begin with the question of how the self can be admired, but with how the self can be known, purified, and returned to its proper orientation.

The attitude of loving oneself within a spiritual framework also means caring for and improving oneself as a form of trust. The body and soul are not private possessions that can be exploited at will, but trusts from God that must be guarded. From this perspective, eating healthily, protecting the mind from destructive influences, avoiding sinful actions, and preserving the dignity of the body are forms of spiritual self-love. This is very different from self-love that focuses only on bodily care without touching inner depth. Bodily care becomes spiritually meaningful only when it is connected to responsibility, gratitude, discipline, and awareness of God.

Rumi's Sufi conception of love deepens this argument. For Rumi, love is not merely affection directed towards the visible self, but a power that awakens the soul from its attachment to form. The self that deserves to be loved is not the ego that demands admiration, but the self that is being called towards purification. Thus, self-love becomes inner work, not merely expression. It is a silent struggle to remain close to the Most Loving, even when the world continues to whisper false standards. Furthermore, love for the self framed within a spiritual dimension creates harmony between the inner and the outer. A person who loves himself or herself because of God becomes more patient in facing wounds, less easily drawn into despair, and more capable of seeking meaning in suffering. Such a person does not see suffering merely as personal failure, but as part of the curriculum of the soul. In this regard, self-love is not only acceptance, but also surrender.

In Sufi teaching, love is also a form of purification: towards God, towards others, and towards oneself. Proper love for the self encourages a person to avoid arrogance, envy, and passion, because spiritual love leaves no space for such inner poisons (Rohman, 2023). True self-love on the Sufi path means loving oneself enough not to allow the self to drown in sin, illusion, and false dependence on external recognition. Love for the self also enables the birth of compassion towards others. The Sufi does not love the self exclusively, but makes this love a foundation for understanding the suffering of others (Wahid & Maskhuroh, 2023). In a world increasingly divided by standards of beauty, social status, and the capitalism of affection, spiritual self-love becomes a form of resistance against invisible symbolic violence. It offers empathy, not competition.

Through spiritual self-love, a person is also more able to accept change and transience. Ageing, bodily weakness, and unrealised dreams no longer become sources of absolute suffering, but part of the human path of return to God (Falach & Assya'bani, 2022). Non-spiritual self-love may panic in the face of ageing, bodily change, failure, and loss. Spiritual self-love, by contrast, views these experiences as

reminders that the self is not identical with physical appearance or worldly achievement. This point is especially important for rethinking body positivity. From a Rumi-inspired Sufi perspective, body positivity should not merely mean affirming the body as visually worthy, but recognising the body as finite, vulnerable, dignified, and entrusted. The body is positive not because it can be displayed confidently, but because it is a Divine trust through which human beings learn gratitude, humility, discipline, and return. This reconstruction shifts body positivity from a discourse of visual worthiness to a discourse of spiritual dignity, where the body is affirmed not as an object of admiration, but as a finite and meaningful part of the human journey towards God.

The awareness that self-love is part of Divine love also cultivates moral and social responsibility. Loving oneself means preserving honour, avoiding harm to others, and distancing oneself from evil. In this regard, self-love is not a form of individualism, but a root of solidarity. Human beings cannot love others properly when they relate to themselves only through hatred, shame, or self-contempt. Yet they also cannot love themselves properly if that love remains closed within egoic admiration. Love for the self must open towards love for God and compassion for creation.

Thus, in the Sufi perspective, love for the self is not something to be rejected, but something to be reinterpreted. It must be separated from the interests of the ego and directed towards recognition and worship of God. This is a mature form of love because it does not seek external validation, but finds tranquillity in closeness to the Creator (Saputra, 2022). In the end, self-love on the spiritual path is a long journey: from admiration of the self towards acceptance of the self; from acceptance of the self towards recognition of the self's weakness; and from recognition of weakness towards surrender of the self. This is the peak of true love in Sufism: love that draws human beings closer to God through the path of a purified soul, a disciplined body, and a tranquil heart.

Through this reconstruction, self-love and body positivity can be brought into a deeper spiritual horizon. Self-love is no longer reduced to affirmation, and body positivity is no longer confined to visibility. Both are redirected towards a Sufi anthropology in which the self is loved because it is entrusted by God, the body is cared for because it is an *amanah*, and love is perfected only when it moves beyond ego towards Divine love. This is where Rumi's Sufi conception of love offers a critical and constructive contribution to the digital discourse of selfhood.

CONCLUSION

Self-love has become a dominant narrative in the digital era, especially among younger generations who live under the pressure of visual culture, digital validation, and unstable identity formation. However, when it is not accompanied by spiritual awareness and deeper self-understanding, self-love may become another form of egocentrism wrapped in aesthetics and digital recognition. In such a condition, love for the self shifts from an effort of liberation into a symbolic snare that confines the human soul within image, performance, and external approval.

This article has argued that criticising self-love does not mean rejecting it entirely. Rather, self-love needs to be redirected towards the essence of human beings as spiritual creatures. Through Jalaluddin Rumi's Sufi conception of love, self-love can be reinterpreted not as ego glorification, but as a path of self-knowledge, purification of the *nafs*, and awareness of God. Love for the self is not merely an empty affirmation; it must contain spiritual responsibility, care for the body as an *amanah*, and a continuous effort to purify the heart.

The discussion also shows that body positivity requires a deeper spiritual horizon. The body should not be hated, denied, or treated merely as a source of shame. At the same time, it should not be absolutised as the centre of identity or reduced to an object of digital display. In Rumi's Sufi perspective, the body is meaningful because it is entrusted by God and can become a field of contemplation, discipline, gratitude, and return. Therefore, body positivity becomes more complete when it moves beyond visual affirmation towards bodily responsibility and spiritual awareness.

By framing self-love as a spiritual path, this study concludes that loving oneself is not simply about feeling sufficient, attractive, or worthy before the gaze of others. It is about continuously drawing closer to the Owner of the self. Love for the self becomes meaningful when it brings human beings out of the trap of image-making and towards an inner silence filled with awareness. At this point, love is no longer confined to the self, but becomes a path towards a greater love: Divine love.

The main contribution of this article lies in its reconstruction of self-love and body positivity through Rumi's Sufi conception of love. Popular self-love tends to remain trapped in affirmation, visibility, and egoic recognition, whereas spiritual self-love redirects the self towards purification, surrender, and Divine awareness. Thus, self-love is not merely a popular theme to be discussed, but a philosophical and spiritual space of struggle that must be interpreted carefully. It is not enough for human beings simply to love themselves; they must also know towards what horizon that love is directed. When love for the self leads to the knowledge of God, only then can such love be understood as whole love.

This reconstruction also shows that Rumi's relevance in the digital era does not lie merely in quoting his poetry as aesthetic inspiration, but in using his Sufi conception of love to critique and redirect contemporary forms of selfhood. Since this article is a philosophical-hermeneutic study, its contribution remains conceptual rather than empirical or clinical. Future research may further examine how Rumi-inspired spiritual self-love is practised, negotiated, or transformed within Muslim digital culture, youth spirituality, counselling contexts, or contemporary forms of religious self-representation.

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