

## SPIRITUAL DEFICIENCY AND COGNITIVE DISTRACTION IN YOUTH: AN ISLAMIC PSYCHOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

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### ABSTRACT

*This research explored the influence of spiritual deficiency on cognitive distraction in Muslim youth, by offering an Islamic psychological approach that bridges traditional Islamic thought with modern cognitive science. The study used a qualitative-analytical approach, primarily relying on Qur'an, Hadith and writings of the classical Muslim scholars, such as Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, Imam al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyyah to develop a conceptual framework of attention disruption based on Islamic ethics and spiritual psychology. Five key spiritual deficiencies; forgetfulness of the purpose of life (ghaflah), worldly attachment (hubb al-dunya), confusion between good and evil, fixation on immoral desires (shahawat) and neglect of worship were identified as key internal distractions. The findings indicated that these spiritual states were not only moral issues but also acted as psychological barriers to sustained attention, motivation and mental focus. The model framed Islamic framework of self (nafs), heart (qalb) and mind (aql) alongside a trinity of cognitive unity that suggested that spiritual health and cognitive focus were interconnected in Islamic psychology. It also found Qur'anic and Sunnah-based solutions such as purification of the self (tazkiyah al-nafs), remembrance of Allah (dhikr) and good intention (niyyah) provided practical solutions to restore mental focus. The results provided a theological and academically rigorous account of cognitive dysfunction among Muslim youth that had been lacking in the existing literature.*

**Keywords:** spiritual deficiency, cognitive distraction, Islamic psychology, ghaflah, nafs, mental focus, youth

### 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest blessings bestowed upon humanity is the intellect through which human beings can perceive, reason and exert purposeful control over their lives. However, the success of the intellect is not merely a function of its presence, but rather its clarity, quality and constancy, a quality known in the tradition as "mental focus" or "cognitive concentration".

In contemporary Muslim world, particularly among youth, this capacity has become increasingly fragile. A generation with extraordinary cognitive potential is simultaneously experiencing unprecedented levels of cognitive distraction, attentional fragmentation and purposelessness (Klingberg & Nivins, 2025).

Existing explanations for this phenomenon have been overwhelmingly behavioural and technological in orientation. Researchers have pointed to smartphone overuse, social media algorithms, sleep deficits and multitasking as primary drivers of attention deficits (American Psychological Association, 2006; Keer, 2023). While these external factors are undeniably significant, they represent symptoms of a deeper internal disorder that secular frameworks are ill-equipped to diagnose. The root of the problem, from an Islamic perspective, lies not in the devices youth carry but in the spiritual condition of their hearts and souls.

Islam offers a holistic view of human nature as an integration of mind, body and soul, with the heart (qalb) being the centre of all thoughts and spiritual activities. The health of the mind is compromised when the heart is sick due to spiritual negligence, fixation on worldly pleasures or ethical confusion. This insight comes from the Qur'an, prophetic guidelines and the reflections of classical Muslim thinkers, who understood before modern neuroscience that spiritual purity and cognitive function were interconnected.

Despite this rich intellectual heritage, there is a conspicuous absence of peer-reviewed academic literature that systematically maps classical Islamic spiritual pathologies onto contemporary cognitive science constructs. Research in Islamic psychology (Rothman & Coyle, 2018) has made a valuable contribution but has not explicitly considered the link between spiritual deficiencies such as ghaflah (heedlessness), kibr (arrogance) and hubb al-dunya (love of the world) and cognitive distraction in youth.

This article fills this void. It offers an Islamic psychological model of the role of spiritual deficiency as a primary internal source of cognitive impairment in Muslim youth. The study has three aims: (1) to define Qur'an and Sunnah-based taxonomy of spiritual states that distract cognitive focus; (2) to show alignment between these spiritual states and modern cognitive psychology concepts; and (3) to suggest practical, Islamic solutions to restore cognitive focus.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Mental Focus in Contemporary Psychology

Sustained attention, as defined by modern cognitive psychology, involves focusing on a particular task or stimulus for a prolonged time, as opposed to selective attention, divided attention and alternating attention (Parasuraman, 1998). Sustained attention has been consistently shown to be crucial for learning, decision-making and goal achievement. Impairment in sustained attention is associated with poor academic performance, vocational impairment and worsening mental health among youth (Klingberg & Nivins, 2025).

There is extensive research that has reported the dramatic drop in sustained attention among young adults over the last two decades. Researchers have associated this loss to the rise of digital media, information overload and the rewiring of reward circuits by social media algorithms (Harvard Health Publishing, 2023). According to the American Psychological Association, true multitasking is neurologically uncommon; what we think of as multitasking is in fact high-speed task-switching which comes at a cognitive cost. This leads to increased errors, fatigue and decreased productivity. (APA, 2006). However, most of this literature operates within a secular, bio-psychological framework. Spiritual, moral and metaphysical dimensions of attentional capacity are almost entirely absent from mainstream cognitive psychology research, representing a substantial gap in the field.

### 2.2 Islamic Psychology and the Architecture of the Self

The discipline of Islamic psychology has received considerable attention in recent years (Haque, 2004; Rothman & Coyle, 2018; Skinner, 2010). Islamic psychology offers a tritheistic view of the human self; the aql (intellect or reason), the qalb (heart as the domain of consciousness and spiritual cognition) and the nafs (self or soul, the animating "life" principle). These three elements function as an integrated whole. The spiritual state of the qalb impacts on functioning of the aql. Classical scholars expressed this relation with great clarity. Imam al-Ghazali (1058-1111 CE) in his masterpiece *Ihyā' Ulūm al-Dīn* described that the

heart was the ruler of all the bodily and cognitive faculties, and when the heart was pure, the faculties functioned in a co-ordinated manner and when the heart was diseased, the faculties became disoriented. Likewise, Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (1292-1350 CE) in *Madarij al-Salikin* diagnosed the stages of spiritual disease and its cognitive and behavioural symptoms with a clinical specificity that foreshadows contemporary psychological classification.

More recent scholarship has attempted to formalise Islamic psychology as a distinct discipline. Haque (2004) provided an important overview of Islamic psychology's historical development and its relationship to contemporary psychological science. Rothman and Coyle (2018) proposed a model of Islamic transpersonal psychology that treated spiritual states as psychological variables. However, neither study nor the broader literature has produced a specific framework linking named spiritual deficiencies (*amrad al-qalb*; diseases of the heart) to the cognitive psychology construct of attention.

### 2.3 Spiritual Deficiency and Cognitive Function: Emerging Connections

Several studies have addressed the relationship between religiosity, spiritual practice and cognition, typically finding a positive correlation between spiritual practice and executive function, self-control and sustained attention (Newberg & Waldman, 2009; Van Dam et al., 2018). Studies considering mindfulness, a spiritual practice with a structure like dhikr and meditative Qur'anic recitation, have shown benefits in sustained attention and working memory (Tang et al., 2015). But these studies are related to the benefits of spiritual practice rather than the negative impact of spiritual deficit - a distinction that is crucial to this article.

Few studies have addressed the topic of Muslim youth and attention. Badri (2000) was an early pioneer in *Islam and Alcoholism* by discussing the psychological impact of unlawful acts. Haque and Keshavarzi (2013) presented an Islamic integrated psychotherapy approach, which indirectly recognised the presence of spiritual disease in psychological illness. But a comprehensive, academically published model describing Islamic

spiritual diseases and their relationship to attention-related cognitive constructs remains unaccounted for.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative analytical research design, consistent with methodological approaches established in Islamic studies and Islamic psychology research (Haque, 2004; Rothman & Coyle, 2018). Given the study's objective of constructing a conceptual framework from primary Islamic sources and aligning it with contemporary psychological constructs, empirical data collection was not the primary mode; rather, the methodology was document-based, interpretive and cross-disciplinary.

#### 3.1 Primary Sources

The primary data for this research came from three types of Islamic sources. First, Qur'anic verses relating to the *qalb*, *aql*, *nafs* and cognitive states were identified and examined by using classical commentaries of the Qur'an (*tafāsīr*), such as: *Tafsīr al-Tabari*, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* and *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* by Abd al-Salām Bhattwī. Second, the prophetic traditions (*ahādīth*) relating to the heart, spiritual disease and cognitive states were drawn from the canonical collections of al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Abu Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī, along with their classical commentaries.

Third, the work of major classical Islamic scholars was consulted for their systematic treatment of spiritual psychology, including: *Madarij al-Salikīn*, *Ighatha tal-Luhfan* and *al-Jawab al-Kafi* by Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya; Imam al-Ghazali's *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*; and *Majmu' al-Fatāwā* by Ibn Taymiyyah. These were chosen for their status as canonical works in Islam and their discussion of the relationship between spiritual states and cognitive-behavioural function.

#### 3.2 Secondary Sources and Cross-disciplinary Alignment

Contemporary psychological literature on sustained attention, cognitive distraction, digital media effects and self-regulation was reviewed to identify conceptual parallels with the identified Islamic spiritual categories. Databases consulted included PsycINFO, Google Scholar and JSTOR

etc. The alignment between Islamic and psychological constructs was conducted using a thematic synthesis approach, in which recurring themes from Islamic primary sources were mapped onto established psychological constructs through comparative analysis.

### 3.3 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework employed was that of Maqāsid al-Shari'ah (Objectives of Islamic Law), particularly the objective of the preservation of the intellect (hifz al-aql), which provided a normative Islamic basis for evaluating spiritual conditions as threats to cognitive functioning. This framework has been employed in Islamic bioethics literature (Auda, 2008) and was adapted here for the first time to the domain of cognitive psychology.

## 4. RESULTS

Analysis of the primary Islamic sources yielded a taxonomy of core spiritual deficiencies that functioned as identifiable internal causes of cognitive distraction. Each deficiency was found to have a documented psychological correlate in contemporary cognitive science literature.

### 4.1 Ghaflah (Heedlessness / Purposelessness)

Qur'an consistently described ghaflah; the state of being unaware or negligent of our purpose in the sight of Allah as the mother of all cognitive disease of human self. The verse "We have created for Hell many of the jinn and mankind - they have hearts with which they do not understand, eyes with which they do not see, and ears with which they do not hear" (Qur'an 7:179) referred to a condition where cognitive processing was intact but ineffective as a result of spiritual detachment. Ibn al-Qayyim categorised ghaflah as the mother of all spiritual disorders and highlighted its immediate consequence; the mind's inability to maintain a purposeful thought.

This observation was aligned with the finding that the psychological factor of amotivation; the absence of perceived purpose for task engagement, identified in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), as a major cause of attentional failure and disengagement in youth. Islamic treatment for ghaflah is re-establishment of niyyah (purposeful intention) and regular dhikr (remembrance) is

analogous to psychological interventions which focus on purpose-based motivation and mindfulness.

### 4.2 Hubb al-Dunya (Excessive Love of the World)

Traditional sources unanimously pointed to hubb al-dunya, or excessive love for worldly desires, pleasures and material possessions, among the major cognitive distractions. The Prophet Muhammad e said, as reported in Sunan al-Tirmidhī: "If a person makes the world his object [of worship], Allah will scatter his affairs and place poverty between his eyes" (Tirmidhī: 2465). Ibn al-Qayyim further explained that the heart which was preoccupied with hubb al-dunya did not have the internal quiescence (tuma'ninah) of mind for sustained concentration.

This was consistent with modern psychological research on the influence of materialism and hedonic goal orientations on attention. Similarly, Kasser and Ryan (1993) found that persons with high levels of materialistic values had lower levels of internally motivated sustained attention. The Qur'anic cure of zuhd (voluntary asceticism and refraining from excess) had a structural equivalence with psychological interventions to lower materialistic goal orientations.

### 4.3 Inability to Distinguish Good from Evil (Dhaab al-Tamyiz)

The classical sources attributed loss of moral judgement; the inability to discern between halal (permissible) and haram (impermissible) as both a symptom and cause of profound cognitive disorientation. Al-Ghazali (Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn) argued that when a person's moral compass was damaged, the heart was divided and a person's thoughts have no focal point. This was exacerbated by nifaq al-amal (practical hypocrisy), involving actions that conflicted with personal values, thus creating internal cognitive conflict.

This insight paralleled the psychological mechanism of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) in which the holding of inconsistent beliefs or the enacting of behaviours inconsistent with one's values produces tangible anxiety, which interferes with cognitive processing. Indeed, it has been shown that unresolved moral conflict leads

to reduced executive function and attention (Baumeister et al., 2001).

#### 4.4 Preoccupation with Forbidden Desires (Shahawat)

Ibn al-Qayyim's *Ighathatul-Luhfan* offered a detailed discussion of the ways in which forbidden desires, especially those of the eyes (shahwat al-nazar) and bruter appetites, monopolised the attention of the heart, leaving no capacity for productive deliberation. The Quran said: "*Let not your possessions and your children divert you from the remembrance of Allah*" (Qur'an 63:9). Visual content directed at young people through digital media were thus seen to be a modern expression of shahwat al-nazar, a complete hijacker of attentional resources.

This insight exhibited a direct structural homology with modern neuroscience findings on the dopamine reward system and the hijacking of attention. A study at Harvard Medical School found that constant social media use rewired the brain's dopamine reward system, with sustained attention to non-appealing tasks becoming increasingly challenging (Harvard Health Publishing, 2023).

#### 4.5 Neglect of Worship and Spiritual Routine

Research on primary sources found that 'ibadah (worship), and especially the five daily prayers (salāh), were not only religious practices but also a structured cognitive-spiritual training routine. Neglect or reduction of salāh eliminated the primary tool for the Muslim to maintain cognitive structure and mindfulness during the day. Imam al-Ghazali's discussion of the "secrets of prayer" (asrār al-salāh) in *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* elaborated this cognitive-organising role in detail.

These findings did align with research on structured routine, attentional restoration and the role of contemplative practice in sustaining executive function. Van Dam et al. (2018) reviewed over 100 studies on meditation and sustained attention, consistently finding that structured contemplative practices significantly improved attentional control, particularly in highly distracting environments.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The five spiritual deficiencies discussed in this study - ghaflah, hubb al-dunya, loss of moral discernment, preoccupation with shahawat and neglect of worship - constitute what we propose here as an Islamic taxonomy of cognitive dysfunction. This taxonomy fulfils the research gap outlined in the introduction: while modern psychology has extensively documented the external, behavioural and neurological symptoms of attentional disruption in young people, it has struggled to understand the internal, spiritual and moral aspects of attentional dysfunction.

The strength of this framework lies in its integration of two levels of analysis that are rarely brought into dialogue: the macro-level of spiritual ontology (what kind of being is the human, and what is its relationship with Allah?) and the micro-level of cognitive function (what happens to the capacity for sustained attention when the heart is in a state of spiritual disease?). The Islamic tradition, through its concept of the qalb as the integrating centre of human consciousness, provides a theoretical apparatus that modern psychology currently lacks: a unified account of the relationship between moral-spiritual states and cognitive-attentional function.

In Results, the correspondence between Islamic spiritual states and modern psychological processes was no accident. It was a consequence of what Islamic scholars have traditionally claimed: that the Qur'an and Sunnah provide an account of the nature of the human being in a way that includes what modern science has discovered. The correspondence between ghaflah and amotivation, between hubb al-dunya and hedonic value orientation, between shahawat and dopaminergic attentional hijacking and between structured 'ibadah and contemplative attentional training is an academically interesting and practically relevant convergence.

This approach has practical applications for Muslim youth, educators and counsellors. It implies that any intervention designed to treat cognitive distraction in Muslim adolescents needs to target both the outer (screen time, sleep and nutrition) and the inner (the quality of niyyah, regularity of 'ibadah and the practice of zuhd). Merely treating the behaviours without addressing

the spiritual deficiency may treat the symptoms, but not the cause.

This research also has implications for Islamic psychotherapy and counselling. Haque and Keshavarzi's (2013) integrated psychotherapy approach could be expanded to include the specific five-category classification proposed in this study as a treatment approach for attention-related disorders.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS


This study established a systematic Islamic psychological framework for understanding cognitive distraction in Muslim youth as a function of identifiable spiritual deficiencies. Five core spiritual pathologies were identified and taxonomised from primary Islamic sources: *ghaflah*, *hubb al-dunya*, loss of moral discernment, preoccupation with forbidden desires and neglect of structured worship. Each pathology was demonstrated to have a direct cognitive correlate in contemporary psychological literature.

The framework proposed in this study represents an original contribution to both Islamic psychology and cognitive science. It provides the first academically published taxonomy that systematically maps classical Islamic spiritual pathologies onto contemporary cognitive constructs, filling a gap identified in both the Islamic studies and psychology literatures. The framework positions the Qur'an and Sunnah not merely as sources of spiritual guidance but as texts that describe the architecture of human cognition with enduring scientific relevance.

Future research should extend this framework in several directions: empirical validation through questionnaire instruments that operationalise the five spiritual deficiency categories; comparative studies examining levels of spiritual deficiency and attentional performance across demographically diverse Muslim youth samples; and gender-disaggregated studies, as the thesis from which this article derives noted that gender differences in the expression of cognitive distraction represent an unaddressed variable. The integration of this framework into Islamic counselling curricula and educational programmes represents a pressing practical priority.

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