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An exploration of mindfulness during the Islamic prayer in British and Pakistani Muslims

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ABSTRACT

The present study employed a mixed-method approach to explore Muslims' experiences of the role of attention and mindfulness during the Islamic prayer (i.e. *salah*). A total of 78 Muslim participants took part in the online study, of which 38 were UK-based and 40 were based in Pakistan. Four themes were generated from the qualitative results: (1) *Salah* is used to build and nurture a relationship with Allah; (2) *Salah* as a reminder of the big picture; (3) *Salah* helps lighten the burdens of everyday life; (4) Paying attention enhances the experience of *salah*. The quantitative results showed that prayer frequency, importance of paying undivided attention to prayer, and the religious orientation of *quest* scores positively predicted 36% (adjusted R^2) of the variance in *mindfulness during worship* scores, $F(3, 76) = 14.94, p < .001$. The study has identified a number of psychological functions of the *salah*. The implications of these findings for research and theory within the field of the psychology of prayer are discussed.

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Religious prayers or invocations to God are central to many faith traditions including Islam, where *salah* (prayer in Arabic) forms one of five obligatory pillars. There is a substantial amount of research on the effects of prayer on an individual's wellbeing, and most of this research has been carried out in the Christian tradition. For instance, Bartkowski et al. (2017) found that prayer was negatively associated with anxiety in a US-based Christian sample. Spilka and Ladd (2013) found that prayer enhances coping ability amidst stresses of marriage, family tragedy, illness, and death. Prayer has also been found to help individuals cope with depression (Wachholtz & Sambamthoori, 2013) and recover from substance abuse (Dermatis & Galanter, 2016). More recently, some studies have been conducted on the psychological and physical health benefits of the *salah* (for a review, please refer to Chamsi-Pasha & Chamsi-Pasha, 2021).

Recent research indicates that *salah* offers health benefits similar to those of prayer in Christianity. A study with Muslim couples in the US found that *salah* was perceived to be beneficial in all aspects of marriage and in parent-child relationships (Hatch et al., 2017). Mohamed et al. (2015) argue that *salah*

is so central to lives of practicing Muslims that care workers should be cognisant of helping their Muslim clients with *salah* during the rehabilitation process. The prayer's health benefits have been linked to several factors, including relaxation and mindfulness; Doufesh et al. (2016) conducted a study to assess the impact of *salah* on autonomic nervous activity and electroencephalography (EEG). Their results indicated that during *salah*, individuals were in a heightened state of relaxation with increased parasympathetic activity and reduced sympathetic activity. This study is particularly useful because EEG and physiological measurements offer some of the most accurate real-time assessments of emotional states (Kumar Tripathy et al., 2021). Albatnuni and Koszycki (2020) found that practising *salah* was positively correlated with mindfulness and wellbeing among Canadian Muslim students. Callender et al. (2022) found that female Muslim American immigrants perceived prayer as a coping strategy for stressful times and for managing emotional distress. They also found that *salah* encouraged intentional awareness among the participants.

The concept of mindfulness has historically been seen as being central in the *salah*, and more broadly

in the daily lives of Muslims as Aldbyani (2024) argues in his historical overview of the importance of mindfulness in the public health and well-being amongst Muslims. For instance, Al-Ghazali, a prominent Islamic scholar of the 11th century, wrote about making one's heart present and empty of other thoughts when one stands to pray before Allah (Al-Ghazali, 2010, as cited in Thomas et al., 2017). In Islamic terminology, the concept of mindlessness is called *ghafla* and is something to be avoided during *salah* (Thomas et al., 2016). Muslims are encouraged to be present during their *salah*, to pay attention to the words they are saying and the actions they are doing. *Khushu* is one concept that captures this (Jaffer et al., 2022). It refers to a state of reverence, devotion and humility when one is standing before God. Scholars such as Al-Ghazali argued that the way to achieve this was to remove distractions during prayer (Thomas et al., 2017).

While recent studies (e.g. Ijaz et al., 2017) have shown positive associations between mindfulness during *salah* and better mental health, there are to the authors' knowledge no research qualitatively exploring how Muslims who pray view the importance of attention and mindfulness during the *salah*, nor is there currently any research on what Muslims consider key barriers to their attention and mindfulness during their *salah*. The present study primarily aimed to answer these questions. In addition, the present study aimed to quantitatively investigate the associations between religiosity, prayer frequency, religious orientation, and levels of mindfulness during *salah*. Using mixed methods allowed for an integration of the depth of the qualitative findings with the breadth of the quantitative findings, and as such provided a more thorough understanding of the importance of mindfulness during the *salah*. Finally, unlike previous studies which have explored the *salah* experience in either Asian countries (e.g. Ijaz et al., 2017) or in Western countries (e.g. Callender et al., 2022) the present study sought to explore the *salah* experience in participants from two countries, namely Pakistan and the U.K. This allowed for some cultural comparisons of *salah* habits and experiences.

Method

Participants

A total of 78 participants volunteered via an online advertisement of the study and by approaching Islamic centres in the UK and asking them to share the survey with their congregation. The study was

advertised on social media including Facebook and Instagram and shared with the researcher's networks. Only individuals who were over 18 years of age and identified as Muslims could participate, and only residents of Pakistan and the UK were recruited. The mean age of the sample was 27.9 years ($SD=6.29$). There were 16 (20.5%) males and 62 (79.5%) females in the sample. The sample included 38 (48.7%) residents of UK and 40 (51.3%) of Pakistan.

Materials

Participants completed the study online on Qualtrics. The study started with demographic questions, followed by six open-ended questions about the participants' understanding of the purpose of *salah* and their attention during *salah*. The open-ended questions were: 'What to you is the purpose of *salah*?', 'What is the most important aspect of the experience of *salah* to you?', 'What do you pay attention to when you are performing the *salah*?', 'In performing your *salah*, do you struggle with anything in particular? If so, please elaborate?', 'What strategies do you use to keep your attention on the *salah*?', and 'In what ways (if any) does *salah* help you manage your mental health?'. The responses to these questions formed the qualitative data of the study.

To measure participants' mindfulness during *salah*, the *mindfulness during worship scale* (MWS, Yousaf et al., 2022) was used. This scale has good internal reliability, ranging from 0.81 to 0.87, and was validated against existing measures of mindfulness and spirituality. The religious life and orientation scale (RLOS; Voci et al., 2017) was included to assess the degree to which participants saw religion as an *end*, as a *means*, or as a *quest*. This scale is derived from the religious orientation scale (ROS; Allport & Ross, 1967) and the religious life inventory (RLI, Batson et al., 1993). The RLOS is based on the distinction between intrinsic vs. extrinsic ways of being religious. The intrinsic and extrinsic orientations respectively refer to the tendency to perceive religion as the master motive in life, and the use of religion to meet certain needs and *ends*. The RLI built upon the ROS and added the *quest* dimension, which seeks to capture the degree of an open-minded and critical approach to religious beliefs and issues. The RLOS sub-scale reliability for each of the three orientations ranges between 0.71 and 0.86. In addition to the MWS and the RLOS, participants completed questions about their religiosity similar to those used by Yousaf et al. (2022), as well as some questions pertaining to paying attention during the *salah*,

specifically developed for this study. The first four of these were on a Likert scale of '1 (Not at all)' to '5 (Very strongly or Very important)': 'How strongly do you believe in God?', 'How strongly do you identify as a Muslim?', 'How important is your faith to you?', 'How important is it for you to pay your undivided attention while performing your salah?'. One question, namely 'How frequently do you think about improving the quality of your salah?' was on a Likert scale of '1 (Very rarely)' to '5 (Very frequently)', and the final question was 'How often do you pray on average?' on a 6-point Likert scale from '5 or more times daily' to 'A couple of times a month or less'.

Results

Quantitative results

Quest scores were normally distributed as assessed using Shapiro-Wilk ($p > .05$), and there were no significant outliers observed in the boxplot. Levene's test showed there was equality of variances ($p > .05$). There was a statistically significant difference in quest scores between UK and Pakistan, $t(76) = -2.55$, $p = .006$ (one-sided), Cohen's $d = 1.43$, showing a large effect size. Those residing in Pakistan had a higher quest orientation than those residing in UK. The MWS and RLOS scores by country are shown in Table 1.

A step-wise multiple regression was conducted with the MWS score as the dependent variable. Independent variables included the importance of faith to the participant, their degree of belief in God, how strongly they identified as a Muslim, how frequently they prayed, how important it was for them to pay undivided attention to salah, and the scores for the end, means, and quest orientations in the RLOS. A scatter-plot matrix was used to confirm linearity of associations. There was no multicollinearity, as assessed using the tolerance levels (> 0.1) and the correlation matrix. Residuals were observed to be normally distributed in a histogram and were not correlated as checked using the Durbin-Watson (value between 0-4). Prayer frequency was the strongest predictor (adjusted $R^2 = 22.4\%$), followed by importance of paying undivided attention during the

salah (adjusted $R^2 = 9.4\%$), followed by means orientation scores (adjusted $R^2 = 3.7\%$). These three predictor variables collectively accounted for 36% (adjusted R^2) of the variation in MWS scores, $F(3, 76) = 14.94$, $p < .001$.

Qualitative results

Data were imported from Qualtrics to NVivo for qualitative analysis. Qualitative data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (TA) as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022), and an experiential approach was adopted. This approach takes participants' responses at face value instead of critically examining them for latent meaning. In the first step after data collection, familiarisation notes were made on the open-ended responses. Codes to collect similar data together were then created. These codes included items such as 'gratitude' for when participants mentioned using salah to thank Allah, or 'seeking help' when they said salah allowed them to ask Allah for what they wanted. After coding through all the data, the researcher generated initial themes while thinking about how the codes were related to one another. In this step, the researcher created notes as a way to clarify these relationships. In the fourth step, the initial themes were checked against the coded data and were further refined to capture more nuanced aspects of the dataset. The researcher also thought about how the themes related to one another, whether overlaps between themes were redundant or if they served to capture the multifaceted nature of the data. In the fifth step, theme names were finalised, and, for each theme, short descriptions were written to aid clarity and, at a later stage, report production.

Braun and Clarke (2022) place reflexive TA somewhere between a methodology and a method. The approach was used for this study because it allows flexibility and acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity and the interpretive nature of the analysis.

Using TA, four main themes were identified. These were:

1. Salah is used to build and nurture a relationship with Allah
2. Salah as a reminder of the big picture
3. Salah helps lighten the burdens of everyday life
4. Paying attention enhances the experience of salah

The first theme depicts how Muslims utilise the obligatory prayer to form, maintain, and nurture a

Table 1. Mean scores for the MWS and the dimensions of end, means, and quest on the RLOS.

Variable	United Kingdom	Pakistan
	Mean Score (SD)	
MWS	3.30 (0.51)	3.16 (0.44)
Religion as an end	5.82 (0.86)	5.55 (0.82)
Religion as a quest	2.86 (1.35)	3.69 (1.51)
Religion as a means	4.30 (1.19)	4.13 (0.99)

connection with *Allah*. The various forms this relationship takes are described under this theme. The second theme expands on the idea of *salah* as a valuable reminder to Muslims about what really matters—namely, the afterlife. The third theme explores how *salah* helps Muslims shift their perception of their difficulties. Finally, the fourth theme considers how Muslims perceive attention and concentration to be central to a meaningful *salah*. These themes are examined in depth below.

Theme 1: *Salah* is used to build and nurture a relationship with Allah

This theme explicates how *salah* serves as a way for Muslims to nurture and express their relationship with Allah. *Salah* is mandatorily prescribed upon Muslims five times a day. While many participants acknowledged that Muslims had been commanded to pray, they nonetheless viewed *salah* as serving more functions than mere fulfilment of duty. Some believed these functions were the very reason *salah* was made obligatory. In other words, these functions were the '*hikmah*'—wisdom—behind the *salah* (P. 51).

One of these functions was to build a connection with Allah. For many participants, it was the single most important aspect of *salah*.

I believe that Salah is a spiritual experience made *farḍ* [obligatory] upon Muslims so they can have those windows throughout the day to reconnect with Allah (P. 26)

Participants perceived *salah* as having various purposes in addition to (re)connecting with Allah. To some, *salah* was a chance to ask Allah for forgiveness, seek His help in their lives, and express their gratitude to Him. Others believed it was meant to allow believers to express devotion to Allah and submit to His will. Whatever the purpose, *salah* was seen as the medium through which the believer's intention would be relayed.

To concentrate on nothing else but the communication I have with Allah. To be 100 percent in conversation with Allah. (P. 37)

These aspects of the *salah* capture the idea that, for Muslims, the relationship with God is multidimensional. It is a connection between the Creator and the created, the Giver and the asker, the Merciful and the transgressor, between the Highest Power of all and the all-too-human believer who feels the need for this spiritual connection. In all these aspects, *salah* becomes a medium through which these *trans-actional* acts are conducted (James, 1982/1902).

It becomes the manifestation of the believer's multifaceted conceptualisation of Allah. It allows them to appear before their God as a human who, despite there being an obligation, stands there to nurture a relationship with the One. One participant put it in the following words:

The purpose of Salah indicates your submission to Allah. Allah doesn't need us to pray Salah it is necessary for us to show our love, obedience, respect, submission, and humbleness to Allah. The Salah has been a necessary and compulsory part of my life as I have grown up. (P. 23)

Theme 2: *Salah* as a reminder of the big picture

This theme captures the sentiment that *salah* offers a sanctuary away from the trials and tribulations of this world by reminding the believer of the temporary nature of this world and the infinitude of the afterlife, the *akhirah*. It acts as a 'spiritual pitstop' (P. 29) along the journey of life. Engagement in this worldly life is juxtaposed against a spiritual connection to the Divine. In this dichotomy, this life assumes a less important position, and the worries and stresses that accompany it similarly shrink in the believer's perception.

It gives clarity and perspective to everything that happens in life, minimises the problems in my mind and shifts focus to the purpose of life, hereafter and seeking reward for difficult times. It also majorly has helped me to deal with emotions like anxiety, sadness, regret, confusion and feeling lost. (P. 49)

This participant explains that by providing clarity and perspective, *salah* imbues their struggles with a different significance: they become a means for a reward in the hereafter. Viewed as such, difficulties of life serve a purpose that is greater than life itself, i.e. the *akhirah*. This is the big picture that *salah* directs attention towards. As an obligatory activity prescribed at five times throughout the day, *salah* reminds the believer about the finite nature of this life 'multiple times in the day' (P. 29). In doing so, it highlights the *akhirah* as the goal and purpose of this life.

It [salah] gives me a way to reflect on the important part of existence - the finite nature of it all - and streamline my thoughts. (P. 27)

Salah also becomes a tool in the believer's arsenal against the pull of this world. One participant expressed the purpose of *salah* in these words:

To ground myself in a world whose currents are steadfast upon dragging you away and tossing you in a whirlpool of doubt/confusion and restlessness. Salah helps me avoid all that. (P. 40)

The metaphor of the world pulling one into doubt and confusion, and *salah* providing protection and grounding against it succinctly captures the sentiments of many of the participants. The word 'world' is often translated as *dunya* in Arabic. *Dunya* literally means 'lower' or 'lowest'. However, it often signifies this world, placing an emphasis on the temporary nature of life here. This emphasis captures the dichotomy of this world and the afterlife—*dunya* and *akhirah*. One participant disclosed how, to them, the physical actions in *salah* reinforced the irrelevance of the life of *dunya* in comparison with that of the *akhirah*.

The back of the hands facing the rest of the world reinforces how insignificant/irrelevant the worldly life is. (P. 40)

Theme 3: Salah helps lighten the burdens of everyday life

This theme captures the sentiment that *salah* helped participants let go of their problems and worries, as though handing them over to someone else. For many, *salah* served them by providing a space for them to voice their sorrows. This was a space where the Listener was fully attentive to their concerns, and they were certain that they had been heard. Some likened the experience to that of attending therapy.

I am an introvert, so I struggle in expressing my feelings to people. *Namaz* (the *salah*) is extremely important for me since I pray like Allah is always listening and understands me without having to say anything. (P. 12)

Beyond just providing a place to vent, the *salah* also alleviated participants' anxieties because they knew that having explained what ails them to the Ultimate Power in the universe, they had secured His aid. Many participants expressed their faith that Allah would respond. This relates, again, to how the relationship with God is firmly rooted in the belief that God is an active participant in the connection.

I know that Ultimate power is listening to me and will answer. (P. 19)

Still, an answer was not always deemed necessary by the participants. It was enough to know that whatever would happen would be in their best interests. With this faith, the believer was able to take a step back from their troubles, especially ones that they had been feeling helpless or hopeless about.

It [the experience of *salah*] is spiritual. I feel heavy if I haven't prayed. Once I pray, I feel lighter. I share my

concerns/good news, etc., I don't necessarily need answers back - it's nice to be listened to knowing that something good will come of it. (P. 78)

This aspect of *salah* was particularly useful in allowing the believer to disengage from their problems and accept circumstances out of their control. As one participant put it:

It establishes what is in my locus of control and pacifies me in times of distress by affirming the belief that Allah is there to listen and respond. (P. 7)

Relatedly, many participants reported feeling at peace during and after *salah*.

Theme 4: Paying attention enhances the experience of salah

The final theme expounds on the conceptualisation of *salah* as an attention-demanding activity. *Salah* was believed to be an obligation, a manifestation of one's purpose in this world, a way to connect with God and thank him, etc. However, for *salah* to fully be all of these things, to be fully realised, attention was considered a crucial input.

If I can pay attention to what my friends are saying and they feel relief while talking to me, imagine it being so much more legit during *salah* because you are talking to God and He is listening to you, and He can give you beyond just relief. (P. 14)

A few participants mentioned the concept of *khusu*, the Islamic ideal of adopting humility and presence of mind during *salah* (Thomas et al., 2017). A *salah* performed without being aware of the presence of God was imperfect. The best *salah*, as inferred from participants' explications of the struggles faced during *salah*, was one where the individual was absorbed in the *salah*, free of distracting thoughts about worldly matters. The ideal *salah*, therefore, necessitated a temporary severing of the connection to the 'outer world' (P. 26). This was often a struggle.

I have a very short attention span and it takes everything in me to be able to enjoy my *salah*. My mind keeps wandering and I have to bring it back over and over again. (P. 21)

Participants noted various techniques of doing this. Some paid attention to the words they recited during the *salah*. Arabic, the language in which the Quran is written and recited, is not commonly spoken in Pakistan or in the UK. Most of the participants, therefore, would not have understood it. Some mentioned how the challenging task of memorising and

reciting in a different language was an obstacle to being fully attentive. Other, however, felt that it facilitated their paying attention to what they were saying.

I memorize different *azkar* (recitations) and *duas* (supplication) and then I read them in *salah*. As Arabic language is difficult to memorize so those Duas help me to keep my full attention in *salah*. (P. 23)

Regardless of fluency with Arabic, most participants noted that being slow and mindful about what they were reciting was an effective strategy to remain mindful during *salah*. Any understanding of the meaning of recited verses was an added boost and contributed to the believer's experience of the presence of Allah and the connection with Him.

Additional strategies used to maintain focus during prayer included visualising Islamic imagery. Some participants imagined themselves praying in front of the *Haram*, the holiest site in Islam visited by millions every year, located in Saudi Arabia.

Focussing on the prayer mat, trying to picture myself in the *haram* of *Masjid-e-Nabvi* (mosque of the prophet) or Makkah as I stand in prayer. It's an attempt to extract myself from my current surroundings to be in a setting where the only purpose of being is praying to Allah. (P. 3)

Irrespective of the technique used, participants communicated that giving *salah* their full attention was worth striving for. For some, it became easiest during the act of *sujood*—prostration—when participants felt closest to Allah. This suggests that there may be an association between feeling close to God and paying attention to the *salah*.

Attention and focus is [are] difficult to maintain, it is a constant but fulfilling struggle. (P. 52)

Discussion

Quantitative findings

The results of this study showed that, on average, participants were more *end*-oriented than *quest*- or *means*-oriented. The *end* dimension of the RLOS captures the extent to which religion is internalised in one's life (Voci et al., 2017). It assesses how relevant religion is for one's sense of self and for one's dealings in life. This implies that, both in the UK and in Pakistan, the participants of this study perceived religion as a 'master motive' in their lives (Allport & Ross, 1967, p. 434), that is, an *end* in itself. The Pakistani participants scored higher on the *quest* orientation. Since the *quest* dimension captures the extent to which individuals approach religious and existential

questions with openness, it appears that the Pakistani sample was more open and ready to face religious doubts and existential questions in all their complexity. In terms of predicting the MWS scores, the only RLOS orientation to do so was the *means*. The two other significant predictors were prayer frequency and the importance of paying undivided attention during the *salah*. Each of these predictors was positively associated with MWS scores.

Ventis (1995), in a review of 197 studies about religious orientations and mental health, reported that the *end* orientation was found to be positively correlated with four conceptions of mental health that included freedom from worry and guilt and a sense of personal competence and control. However, no significant association was found with (1) self-acceptance and self-actualisation, and (2) open-mindedness and flexibility. Although data for the *quest* orientation was limited in this review, it still appeared positively associated with (1) and (2) above. In the same review, being oriented to religion as a *means* appears to have no positive association with any aspect of mental health. On the contrary, in 48 of the studies reviewed, it had a negative association with some dimension of mental health. Other researchers have come to similar conclusions about the *means* orientation (Ghorbani et al., 2017). In the present study, *means* orientation scores were positively correlated with MWS scores and were a predictor of mindfulness during worship. This appears to be a contradiction to what the literature on religious orientation and mindfulness suggests: higher means scores should be associated with poorer mental health and, by extension, lower MWS scores. One way to explain this unexpected finding is to use Pargament's (1992) idea of a unified expression of religion. He points out a dichotomisation of *means* and *ends* of religion and suggests that people, including researchers, view the two as having an inherent value difference; for instance, Allport and Ross (1967) in their characterisation of the *extrinsic*, or *means*, orientation as an immature form of religiosity. Pargament (1992) argues that all religion is 'used' by its followers. In support of this assertion is the finding that the *end*, *means*, and *quest* orientations is each associated with a different style of religious coping (Pargament et al., 1992). The *means* orientation was related to reduced self-blame for crises and the idea that good deeds and pleading would help the situation. *End* and *quest* orientations were both linked to viewing crises as opportunities to grow. Ghorbani et al. (2017) also found that an extrinsic social orientation, captured

by two items in the RLOS *means* subscale, is significantly correlated with both positive and negative religious coping. Similarly, an extrinsic personal orientation, captured again by two questions in the RLOS, is correlated with positive religious coping. These authors suggested that an extrinsic social orientation appeared to be maladaptive for Muslims only within certain psychosocial contexts. These findings point towards a complex relationship between the *means* religious orientation and mental health, especially for Muslims.

Prayer frequency and the importance of paying undivided attention during the *salah* were also significant predictors of the MWS score. These results are in line with the findings of Yousaf et al. (2022) who developed the MWS. Moreover, Maltby et al. (1999) have suggested that prayer frequency is one of the strongest factors in mental wellbeing, which fits with the present findings, given the previously established positive association between prayer and well-being (Albatnuni & Koszycki, 2020).

Qualitative findings

The qualitative part of this study investigated whether and how mindfulness features in the *salah*, and how *salah* may help Muslims' mental health. The themes generated indicate that there are various commonalities between mindfulness and *salah* and that *salah* is perceived as being an aid to mental wellbeing.

The spiritual dimension of *salah* is evident from the oft-repeated statement that *salah* helped participants 'connect with Allah'. Williamson (2018) notes that this sense of connection to the transcendent is what lends *salah* its spiritual character. While there is little consensus on the definition of spirituality, many definitions of it consider connectedness to something beyond the self—something transcendent—and something that informs and is informed by one's worldview, their organising principles of life, their purpose in life (Speck, 2005). *Salah* is conceived as a communication between Allah and the believer. Like William James (1982/1902) said, believers perceive prayer as a medium through which something is 'transacted' with God (p.401). The current research shows that, despite acknowledging the obligatory nature of *salah*, Muslims perceive it as an opportunity to engage in conversation with Allah. *Salah* offers a multitude of ways to connect with Allah: through offering praise, adoration, and gratitude, and seeking help and forgiveness. Doufesh et al. (2014) found that when Muslims prayed *salah*, their EEG

showed increased parasympathetic activity and reduced sympathetic activity, as happens during states of relaxation. In contrast, these changes in EEG were not observed if participants only mimicked the actions of *salah*. This evidence supports the assertion that it is the spiritual nature of prayer—this connection with God—that induces a change in the believer. It therefore makes sense that, to many participants in this study, the connection with Allah was the most important aspect of *salah*. Without this connection, *salah* has 'little spiritual value' (Williamson, 2018, p. 553).

Spirituality is known to predict wellbeing and has significant overlaps with religion (Bento, 2000, as cited in Speck, 2005). It is also related to purpose in life (Campbell, 2003, as cited in Speck, 2005), which forms part of the second theme generated in this. *Salah* offers a way for Muslims to reorient themselves towards the afterlife, or *akhirah*, and reminds them of their purpose in life, which is to submit to Allah. Islamically oriented investigations of spirituality find that it is a dimension of health in addition to the physical dimension (Sadat Hoseini et al., 2015). This conclusion also signifies that, from an Islamic perspective, an illness offers the opportunity for spiritual growth. This is relevant to the present study as the findings suggest that Muslims (re)turn to prayer in times of distress and may even 'feel heavy' (P. 15) if they have not prayed in a while. This indicates that a disconnect from the transcendent leads to feelings of discontentment. Since spirituality, in many of its definitions, relates to connectedness with a higher power, then it can be posited that more mindful praying, where one feels close to God, is more conducive for spirituality and, in turn, for wellbeing through spirituality. These findings are echoes of the findings by Ijaz et al. (2017) who discovered that a more mindful *salah* was associated with better mental health outcomes. It is relevant here that many participants felt closest to Allah during prostration, or *sujood* because it implies that the physical dimension of *salah* has an impact on its psychological aspects.

Prayer is understood to aid mental health in various ways: it enhances coping with stressful issues, including marriage, family tragedies, illness, etc. (Spilka & Ladd, 2013, as cited in Williamson, 2018). It also enhances the ability to regulate one's own emotional states (Pizarro & Salovey, 2002). The results of this study support this assertion as several participants echoed it. *Salah* offers a way for the believer to break away from their troubles and seek refuge with their Creator and Benefactor. This is essentially what the

extrinsic personal items of the means subscale capture—comfort and security (Voci et al., 2017). Combined with the result that the *means* score predicted mindfulness during prayer, these findings offer a different perspective on the current understanding of religious orientations. Perceiving religion as a *means* may aid, not hinder mental health, contrary to a dominant perspective in literature (e.g. You & Lim, 2019; Ghorbani et al., 2017). It may be that, in this study, the extrinsic personal dimension of the *means* subscale was a major contributor to the *means* score. This would explain the relationship between the *means* scores and the MWS scores.

This study also finds several connections between *salah* and mindfulness. The fourth theme generated through thematic analysis depicts some common features. One of the commonalities is breath focus (Levinson et al., 2014). Several participants in the current study mentioned breath focus as an aid they used to pay attention to prayer. For many participants, absorption in *salah* was a crucial feature of a ‘good’ *salah* and required their minds to be free of tasks unrelated to the *salah*. This relates to another aspect of mindfulness, described as ‘regular or sustained consciousness of ongoing events and experiences’ (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 223). Additionally, *salah* was perceived to be an aid for emotional clarity and emotional regulation, which are also outcomes of mindfulness. Participants also noted that they were more aware than usual of their bodily states during *salah*, especially during *sujood*. This, also, is a feature of mindfulness in terms of being aware of both, the body’s physical state and its internal one (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Awareness of the internal state during *salah* can be gleaned from participants’ assertions that they felt close to Allah during *salah*. Focusing attention on specific objects is one technique through which mindfulness is cultivated (Shapiro et al., 2006). This is similar to participants’ exposition of how directing their attention towards the recitations uttered during *salah* helps them to pay more attention to the activity. Directing attention in this way aided participants in cultivating a sense of connection and closeness with Allah. Another commonality between *salah* and mindfulness is the idea of continually bringing attention back once the mind has wandered.

However, two crucial qualities of mindfulness are the non-judgemental and non-reactive nature of present-moment awareness (Baer et al., 2004). Mindfulness also incorporates a curiosity about the world and one’s experiences—it encourages a ‘beginner’s mind’ (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 35–60), as though experiencing an event for the first time. It is unclear from this research

whether those qualities are present in *salah*. Nonetheless, these characteristics might have been present in the observation that *salah* allowed participants to disengage from their worldly troubles and stresses. In a way, *salah* helped them to step back from what worried them and to gain clarity about their crises.

While it is important to assess common features of mindfulness and *salah*, it is equally crucial to gauge whether Muslims would be receptive to mindfulness-based interventions. While this was not an objective of this research, nor was it mentioned to participants, it was noted that several participants mentioned mindfulness of their own accord. This complements the results by Thomas et al. (2016) where Emirati participants spontaneously connected teachings in a mindfulness programme to Islamic concepts including the ritual of *salah*. This is critical evidence that Muslims may be receptive to mindfulness-based interventions because they believe they already practice it in their religion. The current study may help practitioners in finding the right methods to bring up the ideas of such intervention or to even offer mindfulness-based therapy within a religious, *salah*-related context.

Other ways in which Islamic teachings relate to mindfulness is through the concept of *ghafla* or mind wandering which in mindfulness practice is considered to be an opportunity to cultivate attention by practicing bringing the attention back to the task at hand. In the present research, a few participants mentioned having to bring their attention back to *salah* when they noticed they had been distracted. This concept is part of the idea that paying attention is an integral aspect of *salah* for Muslims, and many Muslims have strategies for achieving this. Thomas et al. (2017) offer insight into bridging concepts between Islam and mindfulness. One of these is the concept of *khushu*, which refers to being conscious of and attentive to God’s presence during prayer.

Limitations and Future directions

While previous research conducted on attention and mindfulness during prayer have predominantly been of a quantitative methodology (e.g. Chamsi-Pasha & Chamsi-Pasha, 2021), the present study sought to provide some more depth to the investigation of attention and mindfulness during the prayer. While the quantitative measures of mindfulness during prayer such as the MWS (Yousaf et al., 2022) provide a good measure of habits and preferences, they do not provide a narrative that comes directly from participants who engage in prayer. The present study has shown that there is

meaningful overlap between measures such as the MWS and the statements that participants generate themselves. For example, individuals expressed the extent to which they are aware of the attentional lapses during prayer, as well as what strategies that they employ to improve their attention and mindfulness during their worship. Moreover, the present study has established the various ways in which individuals see their prayer as therapeutic, for example through communication with God. Future research can further explore the various emotional states that result from either a state of mindfulness during prayer or when individuals feel that they are unable to achieve the ideal state of attention and mindfulness during prayer. One might predict that the perception of attentional lapses could result in a form of religious cognitive dissonance similar to what has been found in religious individuals who feel that they do not perform their religious duties sufficiently (e.g. Yousaf & Gobet, 2013).

A limitation of this study is that no measure of mental health was included, thus no relationship between the MWS scores and mental wellbeing could be inferred. There is also the possibility of sampling bias in the survey as a majority of the participants were recruited by word of mouth through the researcher's network. Also, participants from the two countries were not matched in terms of educational background or religiosity, which may explain the differences in the *quest* scores. Moreover, the sample consisted mostly of women so may have limited generalisability to men. Future research should use more varied samples from different countries, as well as include measures on mental health, well-being, and spirituality.

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Data availability statement

Data available on request through the corresponding author.

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