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Indonesian Journal of Psychological Research

The exploration of mystical experiences among religious preachers

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Abstract – The current qualitative study aimed to explore the mystical experiences among religious preachers. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select a sample of (n=10) religious preachers who had encountered at least one mystical experience. The transcendental phenomenological approach was used to capture the essence of the mystical experiences through an in-depth semi-structured interview guide based on five domains: the exploration of mystic features, beliefs, impact on life, sharing of mystical experiences, and the religious and cultural oriented explanations. The modification of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen's model by Maustakas (1994) was employed for data analysis followed through a series of steps such as bracketing, horizonalization of data, a grouping of significant statements to constitute themes (triggers, perceptual experience, symbolism and derived meanings, significant figures, reaction, and the cultural explanation of mystical experiences), textural description and a structural description with verbatim examples was developed. These descriptions were combined to write a composite description that reflected the 'essence' of the mystical experiences and highlighted the causes, characteristics, perceptual experiences, beliefs, and impact. The findings highlighted the subjective nature of the mystical experiences and the need to develop an indigenous formal criterion to identify such experiences.

How to cite (APA 7th Edition)
Irfan, R. & Aziz, A. (2021). The exploration of mystical experiences among religious preachers. *INSPIRA: Indonesian Journal of Psychological Research, 2*(2), 50–70. https://doi.org/10.32505/inspira.v2i2.3390

INTRODUCTION

The word mystic arises from the Greek term *"mystes,"* which means secret, since, during the Hellenistic Age (323 BCE–330 CE), mystical experiences symbolized a special connection with God that was kept secret not publicly revealed. With the passage of time, the concept of mysticism evolved as several religions began to explain this phenomenon in detail. Witte (2007) defines mystical experiences as the subjective transcendent phenomenon that is consciously experienced by an individual but is not mediated by normal cognitive, sensory, or perceptual functions. The term transcendent implies that an individual's mystical content is not readily accessible but is linked with a sense of higher truth, in-depth understanding, and overwhelming emotions, so it involves Extra Sensory Perception (ESP).

Mystical Experiences also have an immense significance in Islam as was a means through which God communicated with humankind. According to Yilmaz (2010), people usually do not receive revelations through angels, but Allah Almighty communicates with humankind through mystical experiences as direct interaction with Allah is not befitting for humankind. Hence, the following communication modes between humankind and Allah Almighty that labeled as mystical experiences have been discussed in the Quran:

"It is not given to any human being that Allah should speak to him unless (it be) by Revelation, or from behind a veil, or (that) He sends a Messenger to reveal what He wills by His Leave. Verily, He is Most High, Most Wise" (Quran, 42: 51, Oxford World's Classics edition).

Further, as these experiences go beyond the ordinary cognitive or sensory-perceptual experiences, they are thus explained by various cultural or religious perspectives. Buddhism believes that Buddha encountered mystical experiences by reaching the transcendent state of Nirvana and acquiring the heavenly eye, which enabled him to foresee the entire world and the cyclic process of rebirth (Sol, 2019).

Max Dessoir put forward the parapsychological theory in 1889, which postulates that the origins of mystical experiences can be attributed to paranormal interactions. Hence, the parapsychological model combines the theories of science and magic to prove the existence of mystical experiences (Rao, 1978). It holds that a spirit goes beyond bodily death, due to which the concepts of reincarnation, mediumship, and Near-Death-Experiences emerge. Haseltine, 2019). Moreover, the Torus Model of Mystical Experience is influential in developing a preliminary understanding of mystical experiences as it explains the permeable boundary of human consciousness, which separated a person from the world of most profound knowledge of human existence. According to this model, the permeable membrane has perceptual windows that allow various factors to creep into consciousness and produce a mystical experience (Witte, 2007).

The psychoanalytic theory suggests that Freud never used the term mystical experience, but he explained this phenomenon under the name of religious experience. In his book titled 'Totem and Taboo,' Freud explains that a religious experience consists of an 'oceanic feeling' where one feels unity with the universe. He assumes everyone encounters a similar mystical experience. Hence, differences emerge only when the individuals start to intellectualize their experiences and start viewing them in the context of religion, due to which it becomes attached to a Muslim, Hindu, Christian, or Buddhist explanation (Segal, 2018). This supports the socio-cultural theory notion that culture also influences the type of meaning that one derives from the mystic

experience. For instance, a religion-oriented community may view the mystic experience as a sign from God while regarded as a sign of psychological illness in other cultures (Cruz, 2013). Therefore, as reality is believed to be individually constructed and experienced, the mystical experiences are constructed, experienced, and explained by individuals differently.

Further, limited research is available on the causes of mystical experiences. Byrd et al. (2000) suggested that Satisfaction in Life (15.4% of variance) and Purpose in Life (6% of variance) proved to be significant predictors of mysticism. On the other hand, Nell (2012) and Devinsky (2013) highlighted that neurological pathology such as head trauma, brain injury, or temporal lobe epilepsy often leads to a mystical experience. Indeed, research indicated that psychedelic drugs effectively generate a state like a mystic experience within an individual (Picard, 2013).

The characteristics of the mystical experiences involve feelings of oneness and ecstasy in a manner that one gains insight (Shrader, 2008), heightened feelings (McCormick, 2014), uplifted perception (Shrader, 2008), passivity (Sol, 2019), and transiency (McCormick, 2014). The prior literature review suggested different mystical experiences, such as Extroverted Mysticism, signified by a sense of unity with the objects that one perceives in the external environment. In contrast, introverted mysticism refers to a sense of unity with one's inner self (McCormick, 2014). In contrast, mystic dreams usually revolve around transmitting a message or teaching by a benevolent entity (Shiva, 2017). Similarly, in Lucid Dreams, the dreamer is consciously aware that he is dreaming while sleeping and may be able to control his dreams (Turner, 2018). Some researchers also categorize precognition as a mystical experience since it allows the person to foresee the future (Padre, 2018). Bulkeley (2009) reflected that important religious figures like God, Angels, Jesus, or Mary were viewed, and light in dreams was viewed as a source of enlightenment or guidance towards the spiritual journey.

The theoretical background and literature review suggested that ordinary perceptual experiences have been explored extensively, but the researchers are still in the beginning phases of understanding mystical experiences. The theoretical background and literature review suggest that ordinary perceptual experiences have been explored extensively, but the researchers are still beginning to understand mystical experiences (Wright et al., 2013). Hence, the lack of available literature and subsequently awareness of the mystical experiences often lead to the misinterpretation of such experiences in the context of psychopathology. Johnson and Friedman (2008) highlight the implications of misdiagnosing the spiritual experience as a pathological symptom since it could lead to iatrogenic harm. Clients may feel misunderstood when their spiritual experiences are misinterpreted as pathology, resulting in a negative attitude towards clinical practice, such as not seeking further treatment. Therefore, to reduce this iatrogenic harm the clients encounter, an in-depth understanding of the mystical experiences is required.

Since religion is a central aspect of every individual's life in Pakistan, it significantly contributes to the therapeutic process (Saeed, Gater, Hussain & Mubbashar, 2000). The quacks/native healers offer therapeutic services throughout Pakistan, and as they are given high regard by the ordinary people; as they are often the first choice of treatment. However, research reveals a large discrepancy between faith healers' and DSM's criteria for pathological symptoms (Saeed, Gater, Hussain & Mubbashar, 2000). Hence, mystical experiences need to be explored in detail so that their essence can be understood to differentiate them from psychotic symptoms.

Dardas & Simmons (2015) reflects that spiritual healer often wrongly explain mental illness through the myths prevailing in the Muslim society that focuses on supernatural forces such as the possession by evil spirits *(Jinn)*. Hence, the psychotic symptoms are disguised by the prevailing myths, resulting in the negligence of medical treatment or psychotherapy. So, by understanding the nature of mystical experiences, the myths that hinder the therapeutic process could be addressed, resulting in the health service providers adopting a more focused, empirical, and practical mode of treatment.

Heriot-Maitland & Charles P. (2008) highlight that the self-reports of mystical and psychotic experiences are similar, so it is imperative to differentiate among them. This becomes even more essential in the culture of Pakistan due to the increased accessibility of quacks who are approached by the general people firsthand, and they are usually unaware of the differences between a mystic and psychotic experiences (Qureshi, Nudrat, Shaikh, Babar, 2006). Hence, the lack of awareness nature of mystic and psychotic experiences often leads to a misdiagnosis that leads to adverse clinical consequences for the client (Saeed et al., 2000). Therefore, it is essential to address the lack of awareness among the general population and health care providers associated with the misdiagnosis of mystic and psychotic experiences. This becomes imperative in the context of Pakistan, where spirituality is given great importance by both patients and medical professionals (Jawaid, 2020). Indeed, research has reflected that the marked similarities between pathological symptoms with religious content (like hallucinations and delusions) are usually misinterpreted as mystical experiences, so pathology is usually masked by the mystical experiences (Hanevik, Hestad, Lien, Joa, Larsen & Danbolt, 2017). Therefore, the present research will explore the mystical experiences in detail regarding 'what' they are and 'how' they occur so that they can be differentiated from pathology.

Additionally, the clinical significance of the current study involves making the quacks/spiritual healers and the general population more aware of the nature of the mystical experiences, especially in the context of Pakistan. In this case, where spirituality is given supreme importance, and lack of awareness of the distinguishing features of pathology and mystical experiences exist, people often view their pathological symptoms as mystical experiences, leading to misinterpretations of symptoms and hence pathological consequences. Therefore, the interplay between the spiritual and cultural beliefs are important determinants of a person's well-being, and providing adequate health services to a population with a diverse set of religious beliefs is a challenge for several health care professionals (Bhui, Warfa, Edonya, McKenzie & Bhugra, 2007).

Hence, the prevailing myths embedded in the culture that hinder the therapeutic process could be addressed, like the possession by a supernatural force/Jinn or witchcraft/Sehr (Dardas & Simmons, 2015). Additionally, various awareness campaigns to differentiate mystical experiences and mental disorders can be launched based on this research to provide empirical support for these experiences. Moreover, this research could serve as a basis for developing indigenous tools for identifying mystical experiences and hence screen out clinical patients from those who have encountered a mystical experience. Psychoeducation models for faith healers/health service providers and clients could be developed to make them aware of the defining characteristics of mystical experiences as highlighted by the present research.

Apart from this, previous research conducted on mystical experiences have usually adopted a quantitative approach where close-ended questionnaires have been used, and this phenomenon

has been explored amongst mediums as well as patients, but this phenomenon has not been explored amongst religious preachers (Wright et al., 2013; Struthers, 2000). Moreover, the mystical experiences have been mainly investigated on Christians residing in the West. However, significant religious and cultural differences across different geographical areas may lead to different interpretations of the mystical experiences, impacting the lives of the experients differently. Witte (2007) points out that religion plays a vital role in interpreting the mystical experiences and impacting the experient's life. The data lacks the mystical experiences Muslims encounter as not many researchers have focused on this phenomenon. Hence, the cultural interpretation of mystical experiences needs to be explored among Islamic religious preachers responsible for spreading religion.

Furthermore, research has not been conducted on how Islamic religious preachers utilize mystic experiences as a source of religious guidance and incorporate these experiences in their preaching practices (Chen et al., 2011). In Pakistan, mystical experiences have been considered a result of mental disorders. Additionally, in recent years, it has been highlighted that the quacks often utilize their mystical experiences to play with the psychology of ordinary Muslims. Dandekar and Tschacher (2016) reflect that mysticism has a lengthy history of being misused in the subcontinent to gain popularity, power, shape political opinions, and even treat psychiatric illnesses. Gadit (2003) postulates that due to the poor socioeconomic status, low literacy rate, fragile health care system, the stigma associated with mental illness, and the expensive psychiatric treatments in Pakistan, people often turn to quacks who misuse mysticism to treat psychiatric illnesses. However, there is a need to explore mystical experiences among religious preachers in detail to ascertain the nature and utility of such experiences.

Therefore, this research aimed to address the literature mentioned earlier to provide culture-specific awareness and better understand the phenomenon, especially for the population residing in Pakistan. As the mystical experiences among religious preachers are an understudied topic, it is essential to grasp the language and imagery that participants use to describe this phenomenon. This would help determine how mysticism is perceived and experienced by religious preachers.

Mystical experience is a subjective phenomenon that can be perceived uniquely by different people, so it is difficult to grasp the viewpoints of various religious preachers holistically by using a quantitative approach. Hence, a qualitative approach allowed the participants to narrate their experiences freely and allowed the researcher to follow up on their answers in real-time to collect in-depth, meaningful, and relevant data (DeFranzo, 2011). Further, a qualitative approach was employed as it provides an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (that is, mystical experiences) from the standpoint of the participants so that feelings, values, meanings, experiences, opinions, beliefs, thought patterns. Perceptions associated with the phenomenon could be studied in detail (Tiley, 2017).

RESEARCH METHOD

A qualitative approach was utilized to understand the meanings, experiences, opinions, beliefs, and thought patterns associated with mystical experiences among religious preachers. Qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (that is, mystical experiences) from the standpoint of the participants so that feelings, values, and perceptions associated with the phenomenon could be studied in detail (Tiley, 2017). Mystical

experience is a subjective phenomenon that can be perceived uniquely by different people, so it is difficult to grasp the viewpoints of various religious preachers holistically by using a quantitative approach. Hence, a qualitative approach was utilized to allow the participants to narrate their experiences freely and allow the researcher to follow up on their answers in real-time so that in-depth, meaningful, and relevant data were collected (DeFranzo, 2011). As the mystical experiences among religious preachers are an understudied topic, it is essential to grasp the language and imagery that participants use to describe this phenomenon. Hence, a qualitative approach was used to gather in-depth data about how the participants explained their mystical experiences and the context in which they encountered these experiences (Tiley, 2017). A qualitative approach provided insight into the mystical experiences among religious preachers by diving deeper into the phenomenon and uncovering the patterns in thoughts and the opinions of the religious preachers concerning the mystical experiences.

Transcendental phenomenological research design by Moustakas (1994) was employed to conduct this qualitative study as it helped the researcher capture the essence of the mystical experiences comprehensively. The transcendental phenomenological research design involves collecting data from the participants who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation so that a composite description that captures the essence of the phenomenon of all individuals could be developed (Maustakas, 1994).

The epistemological approach was utilized to reduce the distance between the researcher and the participants. The reality of the mystical experiences can be understood in terms of the participant's subjective evidence related to their driven meanings about mystical experiences. Hence, the reality or knowledge would be constructed through the collaboration between the researcher and the participants (Creswell, 2013). Based on the literature review, the formulated assumptions highlighted the experiential domain of the mystical experiences that involved a sense of unity, overwhelming feelings, enlightenment, positivity, ineffability, transiency, sense of immortality, sudden awakening, and the elimination of the fear of death or sin. Additionally, the epistemological assumptions also reflected the derived meanings of the participants, such as viewing the mystical experiences as a means of connecting with the supernatural world and hence a source of guidance and spiritual transformation.

Since the literature review suggests that the interpretation of mystical experiences is highly dependent on the experient's values, a constructivist paradigm was utilized in this research. Constructivists believe that reality exists in multiple contexts, so subjective knowledge obtained from these contexts is value-laden; how the reality is constructed varies for every individual depending upon their values and context (Kuhn, 1962). This paradigm focused on how the experients understood the world around them and how these understandings shaped their interpretations of mystical experiences.

A purposive sampling technique was utilized, and a sample of (n= 10) participants, aged from 20-70 years who had encountered a mystical experience at least once, were selected from Madrassahs and Quran Classes belonging to a Tablighi Jamaat or were an Alim/Allamah, Imam, Mufti or Mujtahid.

The inclusion criteria for research participants was that the Muslims who had encountered a mystical experience at least once and were religious preachers like Alim/Allamah, Imam, Mufti, or a Mujtahid were selected for the study. They could also be a part of Tablighi Jamaat who have engaged in Ijtema (annual gathering) or have done Khuruj (proselytizing tour) for three days

(Seh Roza), forty days (Chilla), or 120 days. There was no gender discrimination as participants of both genders were selected in the study.

The exclusion criteria comprised screening the participants on the DSM-5 Self-Rated Level 1 Cross-Cutting Symptom Measure-Adult, so participants indicating any sign of psychosis or mental disturbance were not selected for the study. Additionally, participants reporting mystical experiences facilitated through intentional practices like recitation of religious verses, Istikhara, or seeking the aid of mediums were not included in the study. Moreover, participants suffering from physical ailments like tumors, stroke, or head trauma injury and a history of drug use, especially psychedelic drugs, were eliminated from the study as they are known to induce a mystic-like state in an individual.

Table 1 Demographics Data

No	Age	Sex	Education	Occupation	Marital Status	Religious Qualification	Type of Mysticism Encountered	Experience as a Religious Preacher
1	51	M	FCPS	Doctor	Married	Mujtahid	Mystic dreams, Introverted mysticism, Precognition	34 years
2	30	F	Intermediate	-	Unmarried	Allamah	Mystic dreams	4 years
3	25	F	BS (Hons)	-	Married	Tableeghi Jamaat	Mystic dreams	9 years
4	50	M	BSc	Engineer	Married	Mufti Silsila	Mystic dreams, Precognition, Introverted and Extroverted mysticism	25 years
5	37	F	BSc	Teacher	Married	Allamah	Introverted mysticism	7 years
6	24	F	BS	-	Unmarried	Tableeghi Jamaat	Precognition, Mystic dreams	7 years
7	56	F	Matric	Housewife	Married	Allamah	Precognition, Mystic dreams, Extroverted mysticism	15 years
8	28	F	Matric	-	Unmarried	Tableeghi Jamaat	Mystic dreams	5 years
9	70	F	F. A	Housewife	Married	Tableeghi Jamaat	Mystic dreams	25 years
10	49	Male	BSc	Teacher	Married	Imaam Tableeghi Jamaat	Mystic dreams	25 years

A demographic information form was used to identify characteristics of the participants that provided the primary biodata, such as age, gender, education, religion, birth order, marital status, and socioeconomic status. Besides the number of children, family system, religious qualification, duration of their experience as a religious preacher, type of mystical experience encountered by the participant, and the family members' information if they were also religious preachers were needed to complete the information.

Screening questions determine whether respondents fulfill the required demographic criteria of the research, so it enables the researcher to collect data from respondents who will provide helpful feedback that aligns with the study's research objectives (Burns & Bush, 2000). The

primary screening questions were developed on the inclusion criteria and exclusion criteria. The questions inquired about the age of onset of mystical experiences, education, and designation of the religious preachers like an Alim/Allamah, Imam, Mufti, Mujtahid, or belongingness to the Tablighi Jamaat. Additionally, the basic screening questions determined the drug usage and the presence of any psychiatric disorder by using DSM-5 Self-Rated Level 1 Cross-Cutting Symptom Measure-Adult.

The current study defined a mystical experience as the conscious phenomenon of extrasensory perception in which individual experiences overwhelming emotion and attains an in-depth understanding of the world through a sense of unity with the universe. He may also sense the presence of God or a supernatural deity while encountering a mystical experience (Sol, 2019; Witte, 2007). The data was collected through the in-depth semi-structured interview guide to extract detailed and rich information from the participants. The semi-structured in-depth interview guide was chosen as it allowed the researcher to gather detailed information about the participant's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors during the mystical experience from the standpoint of participants (Tiley, 2017). The interview guide comprised of two main/lead questions that were further divided into 5 open-ended and semi-structured questions with probing questions to extract richer information (Spradely, 1979). The domains of the interview guide were extracted from the thorough theoretical background, literature review, and field tests, so it comprised of Exploration of Mystic Features (Bulkeley, 2009), Beliefs (Quran, 102: 5-6, Oxford World's Classics edition), Impact on Life (Byrd, Lear & Schwenka, 2000), Sharing Mystical Experiences (Chen, Qi, Hood & Watson, 2011) and Religious and Culture-oriented Explanations **(**Edgar, 2006). It was developed in Urdu and English language to ascertain the cultural factors.

Further, field tests were conducted by consulting two experts to assess the semi-structured interview guide regarding language comprehension, wording appropriateness, and questions' clarity level (Bille, 2010). The reviewers were thanked, and the suggestions were incorporated. A mock interview was conducted with a peer to ensure that the questions comprised appropriate wording that was easy to understand and extracted the desired information so that the feasibility of the interview guide could be ensured (Van & Hundley, 2002).

Initially, a pilot study was conducted on a sample of two religious preachers who had encountered a mystical experience to assess the feasibility of the main study (Bille, 2010). Informed consent was obtained from the participant, and the interview was conducted for an approximate duration of 30-45 minutes and audio recorded. The participants were satisfied with the sentence structure and comprehensiveness of the questions.

After piloting, the main study was conducted on a sample of (n=10) religious preachers who had encountered at least one mystical experience. Institutional approval for conducting the research was obtained from Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select the participants from various Madrassas and Religious Institutes. Initially, the contact visits were conducted, and the researcher visited numerous religious institutes in Lahore and explained to the relevant authorities about the purpose of the research to obtain permission, to build a rapport with the willing participants, and screen them as per the inclusion criteria that were drafted based on the literature review.

The willing participants were provided with written informed consent, and they were thoroughly briefed about the aims and the objectives of the study, their willingness to participate,

confidentiality, rights to withdraw from the research, and audio recording. They were further screened on the DSM-5 Self-Rated Level 1 Cross-Cutting Symptom Measure-Adult (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and the Basic Screening Questions. The screened participants were asked to fill the Basic Demographic Information Sheet, and the interviews were then conducted. All these steps were executed in a language preferred by the participants. Individual interviews were conducted to minimize the discomfort experienced during group self-disclosure (Kendall, 2008). This allowed the researcher to understand the mystical experiences encountered by religious preachers. More than one interview was conducted for 40-60 minutes approximately at a time and place convenient for the participants. The data collection was ended after the saturation of themes. The modification of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen's model of data analysis by Maustakas (1994) was employed in this research as it aided in extracting in-depth information about mystical experiences so that the essence of this phenomenon could be comprehensively captured (Maustakas, 1994).

The proposed data analysis technique is comprised of multiple steps. Bracketing involved the researcher describing the phenomenon under investigation (that is, a personal account of encountering mystical experiences) in great detail so that the researcher's personal experiences could be set aside and the entire focus of the study could be directed towards the participants. The data obtained from the participants was then reviewed to develop statements about how the participants experienced the phenomenon under investigation. This process is known as the horizonalization of the data. The process was followed by grouping the significant statements into meaningful units called 'themes.' Afterwards, a textural description of 'what' happened during a mystical experience and verbatim examples was drafted. Similarly, the structural description of 'how' the mystical experience occurred revolved around the setting and context in which the mystical experience occurred. These descriptions were combined to write a composite description that reflected the 'essence' of the mystical experiences (Maustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2013).

Peer review refers to how an expert checks the researcher's work to ensure the validity and reliability of the research. It aids in maintaining the integrity of the scientific work and improves the quality of the research (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers, 2002). In order to achieve these quality standards, the research data was continuously verified by the assigned research advisor throughout the research process, and the suggested changes were in-cooperated in the research accordingly. Additionally, the research data was further reviewed by two experts to ensure that the data met all the standards and considerations proposed by the experts.

RESULT

The modification of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen's data analysis model by Maustakas (1994) was utilized for data analysis. It aided in extracting in-depth information about mystical experiences among religious preachers so that the essence of this phenomenon could be comprehensively captured (Maustakas, 1994). Maustakas (1994) postulates that bracketing must be practiced before analyzing data as it allows the researcher to see the phenomenon with a fresh perspective, without any personal biases. Bracketing involved the researcher describing the phenomenon under investigation (that is, a personal account of encountering mystical experiences) in detail so that the researcher's personal experiences could be set aside, and the entire focus of the study

could be directed towards the participant's experiences. Therefore, the researcher used the approach of reflective meditations so that prejudgments freely came in and left her mind. Firstly, she recalled being in a state of trans where the physiological component involved not being able to hear or see anything clearly around her. The physical effect involved her hand automatically moving to perform a specific function, and the duration of this state was about five minutes. Her belief associated with this experience was that it was a reward from God for fulfilling His commandment. She positively reflected on this incident and set it aside by trying to disconnect from it until she encountered a sense of closure. Then she focused on the participant's responses and concentrated entirely on their responses without letting her biases creep in. Hence, the participant's responses were viewed freshly, as if for the first time.

Table 2 Theme and Meaning Unit

Themes/Meaning Units	Meaning Units
Triggers	The advent of a religious mentor
	Reward from God and Divine help
	Negative emotions
	Remembering deceased
	Desire and need for a mystical experience
	Absence of a particular pious behavior
	Random occurrence
Forms of Perceptual Experience	Attractive force
	Familiarity with behaviors, people & places
	Gradual realization of experiencing a supernatural phenomenon
	Physiological perception
	Cognitive component
	Emotional experience
	Sensory experiences
	Time perception
	Ineffable phenomenon
	Noetic nature of experience
	Surpasses logic
	Connection with Unseen World
	Burning due to lack of praying
	Interaction with significant figures (Angels, Religious personalities, deceased people, and so on)
Cultural Explanation, Symbolism, and Derived Meanings of mystical experiences	Shopping Mall perceived as lost in worldly life
	Religious Personalities as means of guidance
	Darkness
	Hunger
	Walking
	Lost item
	Paper
	Praying
	Colours
Reaction	Selective disclosure of experiences
	Impact

The data obtained from the participants was then reviewed to develop statements about how the participants experienced the phenomenon under investigation. One hundred thirty-two statements known as horizons or textural meanings (Maustakas, 1994) were written down to identify a wide variety of mystical experiences. It included the phrases of the participants as well

as complete sentences. Each significant statement possesses equal weightage, and these statements were significant, non-overlapping, non-repetitive, and independent as they had not been grouped in any manner. The rationale behind the horizonalization of data was to understand how the participants viewed the mystical experiences (Creswell, 2013).

The researcher carefully reviewed the significant statements that emerged, and similar statements were grouped to form meaningful units called "themes" with their corresponding descriptive themes. Four main themes emerged regarding how participants encounter mystical experiences: triggers, forms of perceptual experience, cultural interpretation, symbolism, and derived meanings of mystical experiences and reactions. The verbatims of the participants were translated into English, and to maintain the accuracy and originality of the participant's verbatim, two experts reviewed their translations. These themes reflected the experiences of the participants.

The theme of triggers emerged from the participant's responses that showed the factors responsible for the initiation of mystical experiences. The participants reported several factors that were responsible for the initiation of mystical experiences; one participant highlighted the advent of a religious mentor to be a significant factor in the initiation of mystical experience: "I was not a religious person, just like an ordinary man or an ordinary boy…and then something you know happened, something means that some good people approached me, and they convinced me, and then I saw a mystical dream."

Other participants believed that mystical experiences start when one needs help, so Allah divinely helps him: "We experience the negative feelings several times, and Allah helps you in such situations where you are stuck, and Allah shows you the way. He gives you the outlet through a mystical experience. So, this is an extraordinary experience you come across."

Perhaps the most significant factor in determining the initiation of mystical experiences was experiencing negative emotions. Many participants reported that when they experience despair because of the materialistic world around them, they encounter mystical experiences that boost them up emotionally. Similarly, when a participant is desperate or frustrated, he encounters a mystical experience. One participant reported that she encountered a mystic dream depicting the deceased when she was upset because of the death of her relatives: "I was distraught because of his death, but then I experienced the mystic dream in which he gave me the message that he is at peace, so I should not despair over his death."

Other participants reported that they usually encounter mystical experiences when they are distant from Allah, so they feel guilty or upset, and thus these experiences help restore the relationship with God. Similarly, one participant reported that she was confused about religion, so she encountered a mystical experience: "Whenever you are confused about religion, Allah shows you the things that are invisible to the human eye."

Some religious preachers reported that an intense desire to encounter a mystical experience was also a significant factor in initiating such an experience. In contrast, other participants reported that the mystical experiences occurred when he needed them like if he did not perform a particular pious behavior, you encounter these experiences occur that guide you: "If I do not perform a particular pious deed like praying, then mystical experiences are repeated reminders for me to perform that act."

The majority of the participants believed that mystical experiences are a reward from Allah, so if they follow the commandments of Allah, they were rewarded through such an experience. Others believed that these experiences occur randomly without any specific trigger: "Sometimes you come across these experiences randomly even it is not your aim to encounter such experiences."

All in all, the participants reported several factors that were responsible for the initiation of Mystical Experiences like the advent of a religious mentor, need for the divine help, negative emotions, remembering deceased, the desire to acquire a mystical experience, absence of exhibiting a magnificent deed, reward from the God and random occurrence. Hence, all these factors and their significant statements provide evidence about the participants' views regarding the triggers of mystical experiences.

The mystical experiences of all the participants were unique and varied significantly. Nevertheless, these experiences were usually perceived as a vivid phenomenon that was means of a connection with the unseen world. The participants reported that these experiences were perceived to be accurate, but they surpassed logic. "It was dark everywhere, but I knew that it was real; even in the mystic dream, I could tell that this dream is real, it was an infrequent phenomenon, and you could not provide a logical explanation for it."

The mystical experiences lasted for only a brief time, ranging from specific seconds to a few minutes, and involved auditory perception where they could hear voices from divine, pious, and significant figures. The visual perception involved seeing these figures even with open eyes after sudden awakening. In contrast, the physiological changes involved increased heart rate, sweating, thirst, hunger, crying, and sudden awakening, "I was lying on the bed, and I saw him entering my room when I opened my eyes. It was a great feeling, and I could feel sweat all over my body."

The cognitive and affective component involved initial feelings of surprise followed by the gradual realization of the presence of mystical experience. "Initially, I could not understand why it was getting so dark, but I gradually realized that this darkness engulfed me because I do not pray." The familiarization with certain people, places, and behaviors witnessed during the experience, "That place was so dark that I could not see anything, but I knew that place."

These mystical experiences led to change in the participant's thoughts and emotions. This was accompanied by internal peace and satisfaction, feeling an attractive magnetic force within the body, realization of direct connection with God, and a drastic shift in one's emotions and thoughts that became more positive. "Suddenly, there was 360 degrees shift in my thought. At first, I had complaining and conflictual thoughts, but they changed into peaceful ones, and I felt an overwhelming sense of peace and internal unity."

The participants reported that their Mystical Experiences constituted viewing significant figures like Angels, Prophets, Sahaba Ikraam, Islamiyat teachers, or other religious personalities who were a source of inspiration and guided them via such an experience. Deceased family members or friends who were close to the participants were also seen as giving a particular message to the participant or indicating information about their afterlife. Therefore, the Mystical Experiences involved participants viewing significant figures and receiving daily messages they would not have encountered.

The theme of symbolism was highly evident in the participant's responses as the context, figures, and objects encountered during the Mystical Experience were believed to possess a particular individualized meaning. The meanings attributing to such experiences were either

attributed by themself or the religious scholars *(Ulma Ikram)*. The mystical experience was believed to possess a particular meaning. For example, when a participant saw the burnt faces of certain relatives, she believed it symbolized the lack of performing the praying ritual by those family members. However, later *Ulma Ikram* interpreted it as a lack of praying by herself, not the family members, "Within the mystic dream, I realized that the people whose faces are burnt do not pray, but later, the religious scholar who interpreted my dream told me that this dream signifies the lack of prayers performed by me, not other people."

Therefore, burning or watching others pray signified the lack of prayers, darkness represented one's grave, walking indicated reaching closer to one's destiny, the lost item was interpreted as having the wrong purpose in life. Whereas a shopping mall, lights or noise symbolized worldly attractions and hunger was perceived as soul searching, "The hunger signified that I was searching for something that I did not have; the true essence of my soul, so the hunger was the quest of finding my soul and through it, the Divine God."

A paper signified that the participant should recite more Surahs and Duas. The most prominent colors in this experience were usually white and green, which symbolized peace and religious purity. Similarly, almost all the participants reported that some of the society value these experiences, and the rest do not believe. The participants reported that society, including the religious scholars, usually value such experiences highly as they view such experiences as a sign from Allah so that the participants could establish a closer relationship with Allah. In contrast, some participants reported that those who do not believe in Mystical Experiences attribute such phenomenon to psychological problems, emotional instability, or lies, "Those who know religion and firmly believe in mystical experiences view it as a sacred phenomenon symbolizing a communication pattern with the Divine whereas unknowledgeable individuals often mock the people who claim to have such an experience."

The reactions of the participants were centered on the avoidance of the sharing of these Mystical Experiences with others as they reported this matter was between Allah and themselves, so it should not be shared with others even while preaching religion, as the content of their preaching should not be based on their personal experiences. However, it should only be based on Allah and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). "We usually do not discuss mystical experiences while preaching Islam because our preaching has to be very pure as it has to convey the message of Allah and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) only."

However, there were a few exceptions in the disclosure of mystical experiences by religious preachers as the conditions under which they shared such experiences with others involved the situations in which they thought that such experiences would benefit others or were confused about their experience. So they consulted a person possessing more excellent religious knowledge than themselves or an Alim to interpret their experience and guide them, "You should not share these experiences with others unless you feel that someone is in a similar state of confusion that you had encountered before the mystical experience, and hence the disclosure of this experience would benefit him."

"You can disclose your mystical experience to a very learned person like an Alim who possesses the ability to analyze your experience and hence guides you, so if you are confused about your mystical experience, you may seek help from a competent religious scholar." The participants' reactions to such experiences involved significant personal transformations inclined

towards religiosity, daily life changes, and religious practices. They started worshipping Allah with greater devotion, and there was a significant degree of increase in their religious practices, "My life completely changed after the mystical experience as I became a better person and felt a new zeal in my religious practices." Additionally, such experiences also influenced the participants' social life as their interactions with others improved and they became more tolerant. Conclusively, the Mystical Experiences impacted the daily life, social life, and the participants' religiosity in a positive manner.

Maustakas (1994) proposed that the formulation of themes should be followed by a description of 'what' happened during the experience. Hence, a textural description was formulated in which the description of the religious preachers regarding 'what' happened during the mystical experience was developed that involved the participants' cognitive, emotive, and physiological experiences.

A textural description of 'what' happened during a mystical experience and verbatim examples were developed. Participants described the Mystical Experience as a unique and vivid phenomenon that surpassed logic and was regarded as supernatural. They described themselves as being initially confused for a short period, after which they became more aware of the physiological, emotional, and cognitive changes that they were encountering during the mystical experience. The physiological changes of crying, increased heart rate, need for hunger and thirst were evident. Auditory perceptions were common, although the sound source could not be identified. All of them experienced elated feelings with the transcendence of space and time. The mystical experiences lasted for only a few 'seconds' or 'minutes.' The visions they encountered during the mystical experiences had symbolic importance as personalized meanings were derived from them. The significant figures seen during the dreams were Angels, Prophets, and religious leaders, who were a source of inspiration for the participant.

Similarly, a structural description of 'how' the mystical experience occurred revolved around the setting and the context in which the mystical experience occurred (Maustakas, 1994). The Mystical Experiences usually occurred after the advent of the religious mentor, and when the participants needed help, Allah guided them through such a phenomenon. The participants reported a wide variety of negative emotions that pre-disposed the participants towards encountering such an experience like 'desperation,' 'frustration,' 'feeling helpless,' 'feeling upset,' 'confusion,' and 'guilt' for not executing the commandments of Allah properly. Other factors involved the participants missing the deceased. A strong need or desire to encounter a mystical experience can also trigger it. Almost all the participants claimed that such experiences occur when there is a gap in the relationship to Allah. Also, such experiences are a reward from Allah, so they usually occur after committing a good deed. Despite all these factors, some participants said that these experiences could occur without any cause or situational factor as they are random. The textural and structural descriptions were combined to write a composite description that reflected the 'essence' of the mystical experiences encountered by religious preachers (Maustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2013).

The essence of the experience highlighted that the mystical experiences are usually initiated by the presence of a religious mentor who provides spiritual guidance to the participants. Whenever one needs Divine help or has a solid desire to encounter such a phenomenon, mystical experiences usually occur. They are also triggered by negative emotions of guilt, frustration, helplessness, confusion, and desperation. They are a reward from Allah usually bestowed on the

participants to improve their relationship with Allah. However, the mystical experiences sometimes occur randomly, without an apparent cause. A mystical experience is a very vivid phenomenon that cannot be explained logically and is thus described as being 'supernatural.' It may involve an initial period of confusion followed by a gradual realization about what is happening during this experience. It may often involve the physiological component of experiencing increased heart rate, thirst, hunger, and heightened feelings that usually lead to sudden awakening. During the mystical experience, voices may be heard, and cognitions may be changed. The time duration of such an experience may vary from a few seconds to minutes, and some participants may not perceive the time passing. All the elements are shown during such an experience symbolize something like darkness may reflect grave while the colorful lights may reflect the worldly life. Significant figures like Angels, Prophets, deceased people, and religious leaders who are a source of inspiration may also be seen who may be seen as giving a particular message to the participant.

DISCUSSION

The literature review establishes the relationship between the current study's findings and prior research on mystical experiences. The results of the current qualitative study highlight the essence of mystical experiences by showing 'what' the participants experience (textural description) and 'how' they experience such a phenomenon (structural description). The participants' description of the mystical experiences was obtained from their significant statements clustered together to generate themes. It highlighted the various triggers of the mystical experiences that have been supported by prior literature. The Torus Model of Mystical Experience provides an in-depth insight into the triggers of the mystical experiences and defines such experiences holistically. The operational definition generated from this model and the theoretical framework defined mystical experiences as the conscious phenomenon of extrasensory perception. An individual experiences overwhelming emotion and attain an in-depth understanding of the world through a sense of unity with the universe. He may also sense the presence of God or a supernatural deity while encountering a mystical experience (Sol, 2019; Witte, 2007).

Similarly, the literature review reflects the various types of mystical experiences encountered by people belonging and their reactions. These participants belonged to different religions, cultures, and contexts. Hence, the current qualitative study captures the essence of the mystical experiences comprehensively and explores the cultural and religious-oriented explanations in the context of Pakistan and Islam.

Following the participants' demographics, it was concluded that all participants who had encountered mystical experiences were aged above 20 years and had been a religious preachers for almost four years. All the participants were Muslims residing in Lahore, so they offered similar cultural and religious explanations for such a phenomenon. Nevertheless, their mystical experiences were unique as some participants had visions while others experienced mystic dreams or introverted mysticism. All the participants attributed the advent of such an experience with Allah.

The researcher carefully reviewed the significant statements in the current qualitative study, and similar statements were grouped to form meaningful units or themes. Five main themes

emerged regarding how participants encounter mystical experiences: triggers, perceptual experience, symbolism, derived meanings, significant figures, reaction, and cultural explanation.

The first theme of triggers emerged in the present study, highlighting that negative emotions such as guilt, confusion, frustration, desperation, and the absence of a particular behavior are essential factors for initiating mystical experiences. This finding has been supported by Nosek et al. (2014), who showed that negative emotions and the failure to perform a particular action are significant predictors of the advent of mystical experiences. Similarly, Wright et al. (2013) confirmed the results of the present study that remembering the deceased people increased the chances of a mystical experience as one usually views a deceased person in their dreams once they miss them or need their help, so they appear in dreams to guide the participants via divine messages.

The perceptual experience of the religious preachers encountering mystical experiences has been supported by research conducted by Chen et al. (2011), who explored mystical experiences among 139 Chinese religious preachers, mainly Buddhist monks, nuns, and Chinese Chans. Thematic coding revealed the different themes associated with the participants' experiences, like the theme of timelessness supports the findings of the current study where the participants reported that the transcendence of time occurs. Hence, they are unable to recognize the time as passing away. Similarly, the characteristic of ineffability highlighted by Chen et al. (2011) is also evident in the present study as the participants reported that the mystical experiences were difficult to describe since they surpassed logic. Other characteristics of noetic quality, positive affect, and sacredness reflected by Chen et al. (2011) were also evident in the present study. The emotional component in the current study where the participants reported that they felt a combination of both negative and positive emotions after the mystical experience has been supported by the research conducted by Wright et al. (2013), which highlighted that the mystical experiences were either pleasant, disturbing or a combination of both. Lange & Thalbourne (2007) highlighted that both negative and positive affect have been related to mysticism as such insightful experiences make an individual more mindful of their mistakes leading to negative affect, while at the same time they possess the healing power, thus generating the positive affect. However, as the present study explores mystical experiences in the context of Pakistan and Islam, it offers a different explanation of the consequent feelings of the participants. It differentiates between the positive and the negative effect by signifying that mystical experiences reflect a connection with the Divine and always lead to positive affect. However, the cultural connotations attached to such experiences where others may not believe in the verbatim of the experient or label him as mentally ill produce negative feelings of sadness, anxiety, and depression.

Another theme that emerged described the 'Reaction' of the participants where the participants reported that they shared such experiences with very few people since they considered these experiences to be personal as they represented a unique and secretive relationship with God and were hence not meant to be shared with others unless it helped in the propagation of Islam or benefitted the society. Therefore, these mystical experiences had immense personal and religious significance, profoundly impacting the participant's daily life, social life, and preaching practices. This has been supported by research conducted by Edgar (2006), who explored the impact of mystical experiences on religious preaching practices using a case study approach. The impact of the mystical experiences of the well-known Taliban leader

named Mullah Omar was investigated in detail, and it was found out that mystical dreams defined behaviors, timeliness and course of a particular action, leadership style, and the number of his followers. This research supports the findings of the current study regarding the impact on the behaviour of religious preachers. They start engaging in an increased degree of religious practices and improve the quality of interaction with others after a mystical experience. However, the current research found that all the participants claimed that they did not support sharing such experiences with others, whereas the research conducted by Edgar (2006) involved Mullah Omar openly sharing his mystical experiences with the public. Hence, there is a slight contradiction in the participants' sharing experiences, as highlighted by the current study and the prior literature. In contrast, research conducted by Nosek, Kerr, Woodworth, Wright, Grant, Kuszczak, and Depner (2014) supports the results of the present study that mystical experiences are 'spiritually transforming' as they usually lead to the establishment of a closer connection with God.

The themes of significant figures, symbolism, and derived meanings in the present qualitative research have been supported by research conducted by Bulkeley (2009). He aimed to investigate the psychological understanding of mystical dreams through interviewing 100 participants living in North Eastern United States who were asked to report the dream while paying attention to minute details like the characters, settings, colors, and emotions in the dream. The thematic analysis reflected the eight significant features of mystical dreams, which support the current study results. The first feature was associated with death where the participants viewed a deceased loved one, while the second theme involved direct references to Christianity as critical religious figures like God, Angels, Jesus, or Mary were viewed. These findings support the present study results, where they also reported to have seen significant figures like Angels, Prophets, and Religious Leaders. Similarly, Bulkeley's (2009) research highlighted the theme of symbolism where the participants viewed light as a source of enlightenment or guidance towards the spiritual journey. This is consistent with the current study results in which participants associated green light with guidance and colorful lights with worldly life.

The last theme that emerged concerning cultural explanation, the participants in the current study reported that certain people in the society give much weightage to the mystical experiences while others did not believe in such a phenomenon. This is consistent with Garside's (2000) findings who explained the participants' beliefs regarding the existence of the mystical experiences. However, the current study also explored the reasons for such beliefs. It concluded that in the context of Pakistan and Islam, religious scholars or devotees emphasize the importance of mystical experiences because they view it as a source of Divine guidance, and hence when they embark on this quest to experience a mystical phenomenon, they may take the aid of mediums or indulge in religious practices like Istikhara. In contrast, people who do not possess adequate knowledge about Islam view these experiences as unrealistic and hence may attach labels of mental illnesses to ones who experience those. Additionally, sure participants also offered an Islamic explanation to the lack of disclosure to the mystical experiences where they quoted the hadith that reiterates the divine nature of the phenomenon and hence discourages its disclosure to the public. The excerpt of this hadith has been attached as follows: 'Abu Salama replied: I used to see (such horrible dreams) that I fell ill. I saw Abu Qatada who also said: I used to see dreams which made me sick until I heard Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: Good dreams are from Allah, so if any one of you sees which he likes,

he should not disclose it to one, but whom he loves, but if he sees something which he does not like he should spit on his left side thrice and seek refuge with Allah from the mischief of the satan and its mischief (i.e., of the dream), and he should not relate it to anyone, then it would not harm him' (The Hadith, n.d.)

Conclusively, prior research offers strong support for several findings of the current qualitative study. The solid empirical evidence supports various elements of the themes that emerged in the current study; triggers, perceptual experience, symbolism, and derived meanings, significant figures, reaction, and cultural explanation. Although the current study explores the essence of mystical experiences in detail, there is still a need to look at other research highlighting this phenomenon in different contexts and among preachers of different religions.

Although this research addressed a vast research gap as the mystical experiences had not been widely investigated among Islamic religious preachers, especially in Pakistan, there were certain limitations in this research. Each participant was interviewed only once. Hence, the data obtained may be limited due to the lack of rapport between the researcher and the participant. Also, it was a bit difficult to approach male religious preachers since most of the Madrassas and religious institutes were segregated where the males avoided any interaction with the female researcher due to the gender difference, and the sample was restricted as only those religious preachers who belonged to Madrassas and religious institutions located in Lahore were selected. Moreover, since mystical experiences are highly personal that represent a special connection between Allah and the experient, not all the religious preachers were willing to share such experiences.

Since the Mystical Experiences are highly varied and subjective, there is a dire need to develop proper identification criteria for such experiences concerning the Eastern culture. The identification criteria developed in the West may not be applicable in the east due to the significant religious and cultural differences that may lead to different interpretations of the mystical experiences, impacting the lives of the experients differently. Hence, it is recommended that identification criteria related to the eastern culture should be formally developed.

CONCLUSION

The results of the current qualitative research describe the essence of the mystical experiences as it reveals 'what' the participants experience and 'how' they experience it. It highlights that the mystical experiences usually start due to a presence of a religious mentor, a dire need, intense desire, and negative emotions. The characteristics of the mystical experiences involve it being a vivid phenomenon that is beyond human comprehension and logical explanation. It is accompanied by auditory perception, increased heart rate, thirst, hunger, and heightened feelings that may lead to sudden awakening. Significant figures like Angels, Prophets, deceased people, and religious leaders may be seen. Symbolism is highly evident in such experiences, and these experiences have a substantial impact on the religious preachers' religiosity, daily life, social life, and preaching practices.

A qualitative study utilizing the transcendental approach was used, so the participant's viewpoint obtained an in-depth description of the mystical experiences. This resulted in the phenomenon's essence being captured holistically and comprehensively. The sample comprised different types of religious preachers like Mufti, Allamah, and members of the Tableeghi Jamaat.

These participants had encountered different types of mystical experiences like mystic dreams, visions, and introverted mysticism. Hence, the current research focused on a wide array of types of religious preachers and mystical experiences so that in-depth data could be obtained and hence the essence of the mystical experience could be captured holistically.

The literature review and the societal perception hold a controversial view about the existence of mystical experiences. This research was conducted on ten religious preachers encountering mystical experiences. Hence, the current research validates the existence of mystical experiences. Mystical experiences have not been widely investigated among Islamic religious preachers. Additionally, they have not been explored in the context of Pakistan. Therefore, the current qualitative study addressed this research gap, and it could serve as a basis for future researches on the mystical experiences to be conducted in Pakistan.

This research identified 'what' happens during a mystical experience and 'how' the participants experience it, so the triggers, perceptual experiences, and societal beliefs were explored in detail. This data helps to understand how mystical experiences are perceived differently in the Eastern culture compared to the West.

The current research highlighted that some participants encounter fear, anxiety, and sadness after a mystical experience, so it contributed towards the field of clinical assistance where the experients could be offered assistance. The current study highlighted the essence of the mystical experience encountered by religious preachers. Hence, it provided an in-depth understanding of 'what' the participants encountered during such an experience and how they encountered it. The present study explored the mystical experiences of religious preachers in detail as it explored the mystic features, beliefs, impact on life, sharing mystical experiences, and religious and culture-oriented explanations.

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