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Abstracting Intention in Islamic Research: Insights from al-Ghazali's Epistemological-Ethical Framework

MOHD SYAHMIR ALIAS*¹ & MOHAMMAD ZULFAKHAIRI MOKTHAR²

ABSTRACT

Within hadith literature, a sound narration warns that the corrupt intention (niyyah) of a Muslim scholar may lead to condemnation in the Hereafter. This ethical concern highlights the central role of intention in Islamic intellectual life and provides the backdrop for examining its meaning in the pursuit of knowledge. Al-Ghazali, an eminent figure in Islamic thought, conceives intention not merely as a moral imperative but also as an epistemic condition shaping the orientation and ultimate purpose of knowledge. Although his conception of intention has been widely discussed in theological and practical contexts, its potential as a foundation for research remains largely overlooked. Consequently, the epistemological and ethical dimensions that could guide Islamic research are often underdeveloped, with discourse tending to emphasize paradigmatic alternatives rather than the spiritual and intellectual orientation that gives research its integrity. In response, this article examines al-Ghazali's perspective on intention and its implications for the practice of Islamic research. Two objectives guide the study: first, to delineate al-Ghazali's account of intention; and second, to assess its implications for research as an ethical practice. Using qualitative thematic analysis of al-Ghazali's key texts, the study finds that intention consists of knowledge ('ilm) and will (iradah), both of which must be harmonized to achieve sincerity (ikhlas). The findings highlight research as a spiritually grounded activity in which etiquette (adab) and passion ('ishq) yield enduring benefit (barakah), reaffirming the epistemic and ethical unity of the Islamic scholarly tradition.

Keywords: *Adab, al-Ghazali, epistemology, ethics, intention.*

Introduction

Research is uncovering the truth and acquiring knowledge. Knowledge holds significant importance in Islam, and research, as one of the facets of knowledge acquisition, should draw inspiration from the teachings of the Quran and hadith. In the Quran, the fundamental role of knowledge is to draw scholars (ulema) closer to God Most Exalted, as His words affirm, ". . . in fact, the only ones who worry and fear (disobeying the orders of) Allah from among His servants are those who are knowledgeable" (Faṭir 35: 28). Sayyid Qutb (2000) emphasis that God Most

¹MOHD SYAHMIR ALIAS*, Ph.D. (Corresponding Author), Senior Lecturer at the School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 USM, Pulau Pinang, MALAYSIA. Email: syahmir@usm.my [ORCID ID: 0000-0002-8768-9888].

²MOHAMMAD ZULFAKHAIRI MOKTHAR, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer at Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Selangor Branch, Puncak Alam Campus, 42300 Puncak Alam, Selangor, MALAYSIA. Email: zulfakhairi@uitm.edu.my [ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6208-1139].

Exalted elevates the status of true scholars in comparison to those who lack knowledge, provided they exhibit piety, vigilance, and a profound devotion for Him.

The status of a scholar, as mentioned in Surah Ali 'Imran (3: 18), is placed after that of the angels. This verse conveys the message that Allah governs the world with justice, and this governance involves both angels and knowledgeable individuals. According to al-Qurtubi (2006a), God Most Exalted point out the importance of the testimony He receives about His oneness, which comes in succession from both angels and scholars, to honor this group. The Holy Prophet Muhammad also emphasized the significance of scholars by stating, "Truly, scholars are the heirs of the prophets..." (narrated by Abu Dawud hadith no. 3157). It is evident from the Quran and hadith that scholars are a group esteemed by God Most Exalted and the Holy Prophet and continue to receive blessings from Him.

While the Quran and hadith literature frequently commend the virtues of scholars, particularly those devoted to the pursuit of knowledge and truth, it is equally important to recognize that certain hadiths also warn that scholars may be among the three categories of people destined for hell on the Day of Judgment. The other two groups include martyrs and those generous in their charitable giving. To illustrate, the Holy Prophet once elaborated in lengthy hadith with specific excerpt as below:

وَرَجُلٌ تَعَلَّمَ الْعِلْمَ وَعَلَّمَهُ وَقَرَأَ الْقُرْآنَ فَأَتَى بِهِ فَعَرَفَهُ نِعْمَةً فَعَرَفَهَا قَالَ فَمَا عَمِلْتَ فِيهَا قَالَ تَعَلَّمْتُ الْعِلْمَ وَعَلَّمْتُهُ وَقَرَأْتُ فِيكَ الْقُرْآنَ. قَالَ كَذَبْتَ، وَلَكِنَّكَ تَعَلَّمْتَ الْعِلْمَ لِيُقَالَ عَالِمٌ. وَقَرَأْتَ الْقُرْآنَ لِيُقَالَ هُوَ قَارِئٌ. فَقَدْ قِيلَ ثُمَّ أَمَرَ بِهِ فَسُحِبَ عَلَى وَجْهِهِ حَتَّى أُلْقِيَ فِي النَّارِ

Translation: "Then will be brought forward a man who acquired knowledge and imparted it (to others) and recited the Qur'an. He will be summoned, and Allah will prompt him to reflect upon the favors bestowed upon him, and he will acknowledge them (admitting that he enjoyed them during his life). Then, Allah will inquire: What did you do in return for these blessings? He will respond, I pursued knowledge, shared it, and recited the Quran to seek Your approval. Allah will respond: You are not truthful. You pursued knowledge to be called a 'scholar,' and you recited the Qur'an to earn the title of a 'Qari' (Qur'an reciter), and indeed, that is what was said. Subsequently, a judgment will be issued against him, and he will be dragged with his face downward and cast into the Fire..." (narrated by Muslim hadith no. 3527)

According to the hadith, although this group outwardly seeks knowledge and aims to teach it, in the end, they will not be included in heaven due to their ulterior motive, which is to gain recognition. In essence, this group's true intentions have a profound impact, known only to God Most Exalted, as His words state: "... He (God) knows what they conceal and what they reveal. Indeed, He knows all that lies within the chest" (Hud 11: 5). In the context of this verse, the term "chest" (*as-ṣudur*) is used, and in reality, the heart (*al-qalb*) resides in the middle of the chest. At the core of *al-qalb* lies *al-fu'ad*, the eye to the heart, which perceives and comprehends enlightenment (*al-ma'rifat*) and secrets (*al-asrar*) (al-Ḥakim al-Tirmidhi 2003; Syamsuddin 2009). These aspects form an integral part of the discussion concerning intentions.

Abu Ḥamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111), one of the most influential scholars in Islamic intellectual history, devoted substantial attention to the nature of intention (*niyyah*), which he understood as both a moral imperative and an epistemic condition orienting human action toward truth and sincerity. For him, intention was not a mere verbal declaration but a profound state of the heart integrating knowledge (*ilm*) and will (*iradah*). This integration determined the sincerity (*ikhlas*) of one's pursuit, whether in worship or in scholarship. In *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (al-Ghazali 1957a; 1957b), he linked the authenticity of human action to its orientation toward God Most Exalted, thereby extending the significance of intention beyond ritual contexts to encompass intellectual and practical endeavors alike.

Building on this foundation, several studies have examined al-Ghazali's conception of intention across different domains. Mujiburrahman (2011) compared al-Ghazali's and al-Suyuti's perspectives on intention phenomenologically; Nurul Hidayah et al. (2023) emphasized the relevance of intention to sincerity in Islamic education; Devi Khairina Zahidah et al. (2025)

explored its role in the ethics of scientific practice; and Mian (2022) highlighted its theological grounding in divine grace. Other applications include consumer behavior (Azmawida Abdullah et al., 2021) and Islamic pedagogy (Ary Antony Putra, 2017). More recent contributions deepen this discussion by extending al-Ghazali's intention framework into new contexts. Erdoğan and Eryücel (2024) contrasted Ibn Sina's rationalist account of divine revelation with al-Ghazali's mystical one, illustrating how al-Ghazali consistently grounds epistemology in divine will and spiritual experience rather than abstract rationality.

Likewise, Possumah (2024) highlights how al-Ghazali's reflections on livelihood interweave with normative responsibilities such as religious, moral, and social, to show that human pursuits must remain ethically intentional and socially responsible. Complementing this, Hemida (2024) highlighted Sufi conception of governance as an isomorphic order between self, cosmos, and polity, further pointing to an Islamic tradition that anchors practical and intellectual pursuits within ethical frameworks. More recently, Malik and Kocsenda (2025) analyzed miracles in Ash'ari theology, where al-Ghazali is noted for linking divine action to theological explanations. This resonance suggests that, for al-Ghazali, miracles—like intention—derives its value not from human causality but from divine will. Collectively, these works affirm the epistemic and ethical significance of intention, yet they do not address its potential as a methodological foundation for research.

Parallel to these discussions, an expanding body of literature has sought to articulate distinctively Islamic approaches to research methodology. Wan Mohd Khairul Firdaus (2017) argued that conventional methods fail to capture the epistemological and spiritual dimensions of Islamic knowledge, while Shahir Akram Hassan (2019) proposed a framework for development studies grounded in Islamic theology, epistemology, and worldview (*taṣawwur*). In a similar vein, Gul (2019) proposed an Islamic research methodology for strategic management, rooted in Quran, Hadith, and Islamic logic, emphasizing a *tawḥidic paradigm* that integrates revelation with human reasoning across the research cycle. Marina Abu Bakar et al. (2022) emphasized the role of Islamization in shaping contemporary Islamic research, and Fayadh and Hamoud (2025) traced its evolution from the classical to the digital era.

More recently, Siti Aishah Zainudin, Shahir Akram Hassan and Wan Mohd Khairul Firdaus (2024) conducted a systematic review of fatwa-based research designs, identifying this as an emerging methodological branch that integrates Islamic epistemology and worldview into the research process. Alternative approaches have also been suggested, such as study circle (*ḥalaqah*) as a communal method of inquiry (Ahmed, 2013) and jurisprudential techniques like derivation (*istinbat*), extraction (*istikhrāj*), and independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) (Humaira Ahmad et al., 2023). Collectively, these contributions reflect an increasing recognition of the epistemological gap between Western-derived methodologies and those grounded in the Islamic intellectual tradition.

Despite these advances, al-Ghazali's conception of intention has yet to be systematically integrated into the discourse on Islamic research. While intention is often acknowledged as a spiritual prerequisite, its epistemological and ethical dimensions—how it shapes the orientation, purpose, and integrity of research—remain underexplored. Islamic research methodology has emphasized paradigmatic alternatives but rarely engaged with intention as theorized by al-Ghazali, while studies of al-Ghazali's thought have not translated his conception of intention into methodological terms. This study addresses that gap by abstracting al-Ghazali's epistemological-ethical conception of intention and applying it to the practice of Islamic research, thereby reconnecting intellectual pursuit with its ethical and spiritual foundations.

Therefore, the article aims to explicate the concept of intention as elucidated by al-Ghazali and subsequently evaluate its theoretical implications in Islamic research. To achieve these goals, the study employs qualitative research design combining library research and interpretive textual analysis. Primary data consist of passages drawn from two sections of *Iḥya' 'Ulum al-Din* that address the intention in depth: *Kitab Sharḥ 'Aja'ib al-Qalb* (al-Ghazali, 1957a) and *Kitab an-Niyyah wa al-Ikhlāṣ wa aṣ-Ṣidq* (al-Ghazali, 1957b). These texts were selected based on their direct topical relevance to *niyyah* (intention), *ikhlaṣ* (sincerity), and *iradah* (will), their

authoritative status within al-Ghazali's corpus, and their centrality in classical discussions of epistemology and ethics (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). The interpretive textual analysis followed the six-step framework of thematic analysis outlined by Kiger and Varpio (2020, adapting Braun & Clarke, 2012). First, we familiarize ourselves with the data through multiple close readings of the selected texts, noting initial impressions, recurring motives, and possible thematic connections. Second, passages were coded line by line, focusing on key analytic categories such as *'ilm* (knowledge), *iradah* (will), *ikhlaṣ* (sincerity), *'ishq* (passion), *adab* (etiquette), and *barakah* (blessing). Both semantic (explicit) and latent (implied) meanings were coded, with a provisional codebook developed to ensure consistency. Third, related codes were grouped into broader categories to identify potential themes that captured the epistemological and ethical dimensions of intention.

Fourth, the emerging themes were reviewed at two levels: within-theme coherence and cross-theme comprehensiveness. Weak or overlapping themes were revised, merged, or discarded as appropriate. Fifth, the themes were defined and named to clarify their essence and analytic contribution, with illustrative quotations chosen to ground the analysis in al-Ghazali's own language. Sixth, the results were synthesized into a coherent narrative that situates al-Ghazali's conception of intention within his broader philosophical thought and draws out its implications for Islamic research. This combination of careful selection, systematic codification, and interpretation provides a rigorous basis for reconstructing al-Ghazali's conception of intention and abstracting its implications for Islamic research. The findings are presented in two parts: first, a discussion of intention in al-Ghazali's thought, and second, an abstraction of his epistemological-ethical conception of intention in the context of Islamic research.

Al-Ghazali's Concept of Intention

Black (1998) defines conceptualization as the mental process through which individuals grasp an object or idea's fundamental essence, be it truth or quiddity. Within the scope of this article, the discourse on conception resulting from this conceptualization process, which we aim to emphasize, is intricately linked to the concept of intention. Intention is a facet seeking to ascertain its actual essence, but it encounters limitations, as seen from al-Ghazali's perspective. Lacey (1996) expounds upon these constraints, where he elucidates that the term "concept" typically retains a broad connotation and accepted explanation. Consequently, this article places its focus squarely on al-Ghazali's concept, which he meticulously outlined in his works, "*Bayan Ḥaḥiqah an-Niyyah*" (Explanation of the Reality of Intention) and "*Bayan ma Yu'akhidh bih al-'Abd min Wasawis al-Qulub wa Hammuha wa Khawaṭiruha wa Quṣuduha*" (Explanation of Things Taken by the Servant from the Whispers of the Heart, Its Ambitions, Its Path, and Its Purpose). In this section, the discussion proceeds in four parts: first, the definition of intention; second, the phases through which intention develops; third, the key components that constitute intention; and finally, a critical comparison between al-Ghazali's conception of intention and modern theories of intention.

Definition and the Essence of Intention

Intention, in terms of the word's meaning, refers to the primary cause behind the occurrence of an action. Put differently, whether an action is accepted or rejected hinges on the intention behind it. Intention also embodies the purpose (*al-qaṣd*) that springs from the consciousness of the heart or soul to undertake something of one's own volition. Because every action is driven by intention, it becomes the guiding purpose and significance of the deed, determining the ensuing reward as either good or bad (al-Nawawi, 1988). From a linguistic perspective, intention is defined as a purpose either preceded or accompanied by a will. From a Sharia standpoint, intention signifies the yearning to act, followed by the actual act, all to seek God's favor (al-Asyqar 2002). A brief exploration of the essence of intention reveals its profound connection to willpower, encompassing elements such as purpose (*al-qaṣd*), determination (*al-'azm*), and aspiration (*al-mashi'ah*) (al-Asyqar 2006).

In a sound hadith, the Holy Prophet said: “Allah forgives my ummah what his heart (*anfusahā*) whispers or says as long as he has not done or talked about it” (narrated by al-Bukhari hadith no. 6171). Although this hadith uses the word *anfusahā* (root: *nafs*), which means “soul,” it can also be translated as “heart”. This refers to the view of al-Ghazali (1957a) who concluded that “heart” (*al-qalb*), “spirit” (*ar-ruh*), “soul” (*an-nafs*) and “intellect” (*al-'aql*) is united in its meaning which is “subtle substance” (*latifah*). The difference occurs because of the difference like the activity that always occurs. The description of al-Ghazali (1957a) was formulated by al-Attas (1995) and the formulation can be summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The Difference between Heart, Life, Soul, and Intellect

Subtle Substance (<i>Latifah</i>)	Nature Activities
Heart (<i>al-qalb</i>)	Involved in receptivity of the light of guidance
Spirit (<i>ar-ruh</i>)	Involved in returning to its original realm
Soul (<i>an-nafs</i>)	Involved in governing the body
Intellect (<i>al-'aql</i>)	Involved in thoughts and opinions

Thus, the things that are “whispers or says” mentioned in the hadith above demonstrate that intentions are forged within the human heart, serving as a passage within it. Furthermore, this hadith underscores that nothing within the human heart incurs punishment unless put into action, as God Most Exalted is cognizant of all that resides in the human heart. Regarding the term “human heart,” al-Ghazali (1957a) elucidated that it does not pertain to the physical heart, but rather denotes subtle substance (*latifah*), divine (*rabbaniyyah*), and spiritual (*ruhaniyyah*) – in essence, the “spiritual heart.” This spiritual heart possesses knowledge and comprehends all matters, whether commands or prohibitions from God Most Exalted. Moreover, it maintains a profound connection with the physical heart, given that the spiritual heart’s understanding initiates bodily movements through the physical heart. Therefore, fundamentally, intentions take shape within the spiritual heart and are intricately linked with the physical heart in composing the execution of one’s intentions.

Phases of Intention

According to al-Ghazali (1957a), there are four phases (*aḥwal*) that the heart must undergo before an action can be carried out. The first phase, which resides within the heart, is known as the thought or the word of the heart (*al-khaṭir/ḥadith an-nafs*). This encompasses opinions, ideas, objects, or thoughts that swirl within the mind. All human actions originate from this phase, which generates a sense of self-love, subsequently fostering a solid desire and culminating in an intention characterized by self-awareness and commitment to act before finally setting the limbs in motion. These four sources of heart-crossing are: first, sourced from God Most Exalted; second, sourced from angels; third, sourced from the self; and fourth, sourced from the devil.

The second phase marks the consequence of heart-crossing, resulting in a desire or natural inclination (*al-raqhbah/mayl al-ṭab'*) to execute what has crossed the heart. The third phase encompasses the decision-making process of the heart or determination (*ḥukm al-qalb/al-i'tiqad*), which involves determining whether the action will be carried out. At this stage, the intention or purpose is not fully realized if obstacles preventing the action are not removed. The fourth phase signifies the firm establishment and unwavering determination of the intention (*taṣmim al-'azm wa jazam al-niyyah*) to act. This stage encompasses what al-Ghazali (1957a) refers to as the decision to act (*al-fi'l*), the intention (*al-niyyah*), and the purpose (*al-qaṣd*). For a more in-depth exploration of this fourth stage, he (1957a: 40) elaborates as follows:

قد يكون له مبدأ ضعيف، ولكن إذا أصفى القلب إلى الخاطر الأول حتى طالت مجاذبته للنفس تأكد هذا الهم وصار إرادة مجزومة فاذا انجزمت الإرادة فربما يندم بعد الجزم فيترك العمل وربما يغفل بعراض فلا يعمل به ولا يلتفت إليه وربما يعوقه عائق فيتعذر عليه العمل.

Translation: “Determination may have a weak starting point (*mabda'*), but when the heart remains attentive from its initial spark until it resonates within the soul, determination transforms into unwavering willpower (*anjazamat al-iradah*). Sometimes, regret may

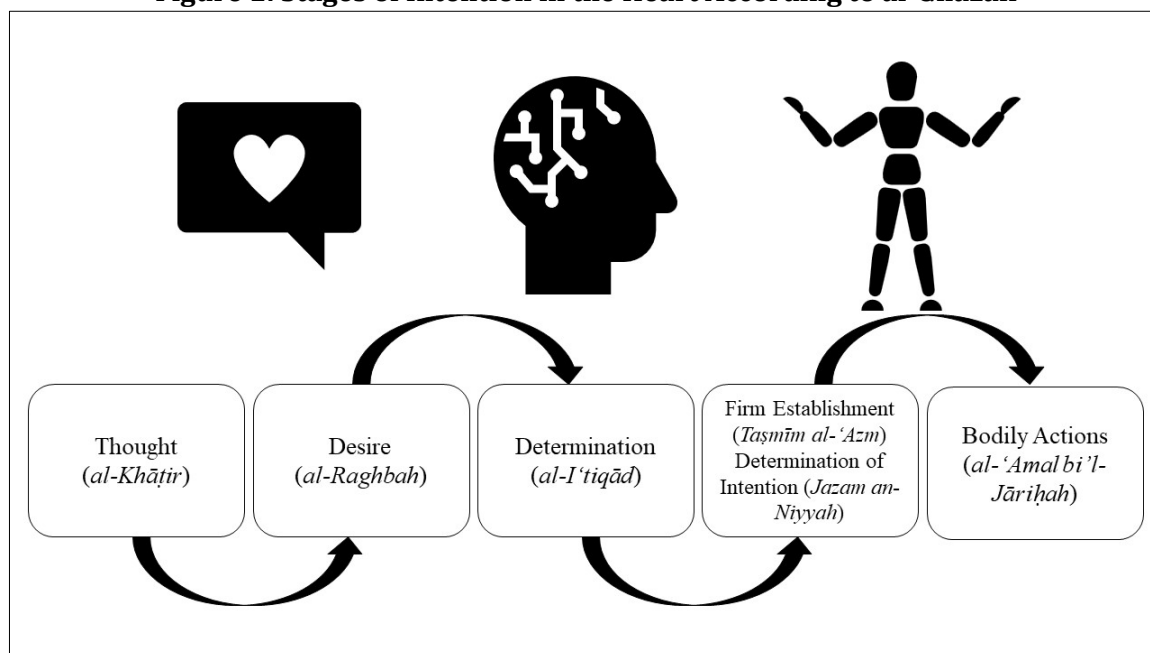
surface after a decision, leading to the abandonment of action. This could also result from negligence, causing one to forsake the endeavor unnoticed. Perhaps obstacles obstructed progress, prompting the abandonment of the task.”

Al-Ghazali’s reflection highlights the dynamic process by which human intention develops into purposeful action. He begins by acknowledging that determination (*al-‘azm*) may originate from a weak or uncertain starting point, such as a fleeting thought or an initial emotional impulse. However, when the heart remains fully present and attentive—nurturing that initial spark—the determination deepens and becomes internalized. Once it resonates within the soul and becomes rooted, this determination evolves into unwavering willpower (*anjazamat al-iradah*), a firm and conscious commitment to act.

Yet al-Ghazali also warns that the path from intention to action is not always linear or guaranteed. Regret may arise after one has made a decision, which can cause hesitation or even complete abandonment of the act. This illustrates the fragility of human will when it is not reinforced by clarity and sincerity of purpose. Moreover, negligence—failing to remain vigilant—can subtly disrupt one’s efforts, leading to an unnoticed withdrawal from the intended task. Obstacles, whether internal (such as doubt or fear) or external (such as circumstances or constraints), may also interrupt the momentum and cause one to abandon the goal altogether (Mujiburrahman 2011).

In essence, al-Ghazali presents a nuanced account of the moral psychology of action. Intention is not merely a momentary impulse but a process that must be nurtured with attentiveness and sincerity. The execution of an act, then, is the culmination of this inner journey: beginning with a thought in the heart, solidifying through spiritual resolve, and finally manifesting through physical action. This inward-to-outward progression is reflected in Figure 1, which visually illustrates the continuum from intention to embodiment in Islamic ethical praxis.

Figure 1: Stages of Intention in the Heart According to al-Ghazali



Components of Intention

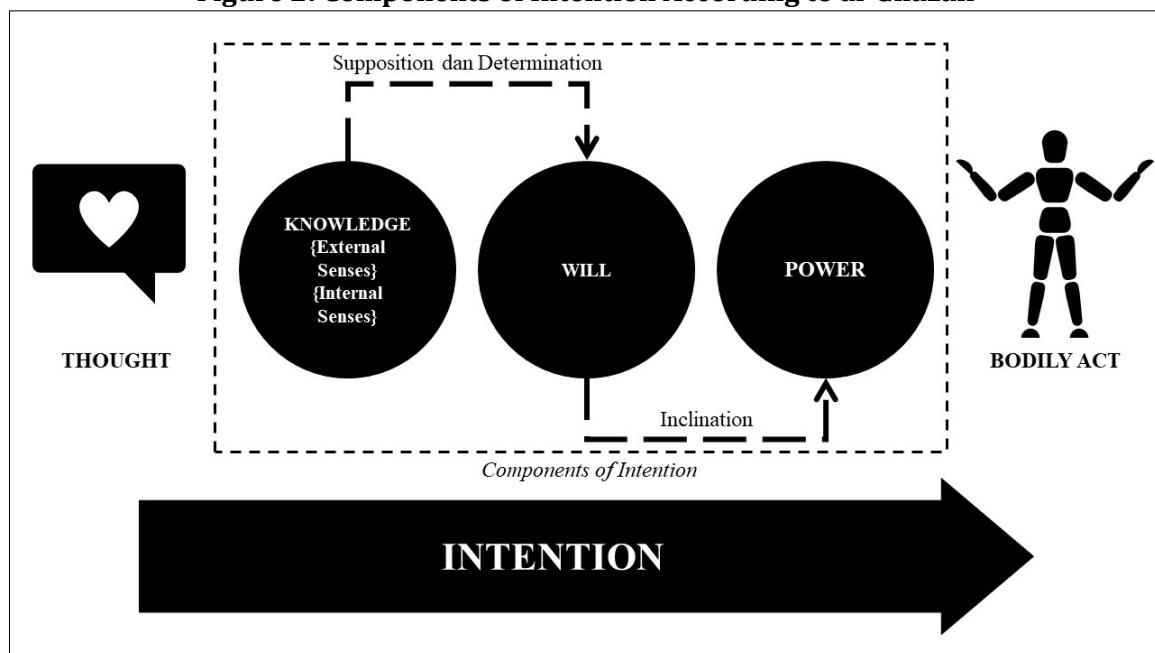
As per al-Ghazali (1957b), humans possess a profound capacity for choice and effort, offering them the freedom to either embark on a movement (*al-ḥarakah*) or remain in stillness (*as-sukun*). Intention plays a pivotal role in bringing these efforts to fruition through action. Intention resides within the heart and is influenced by two fundamental components: firstly, knowledge (*‘ilm*), and secondly, will (*iradah*). Meanwhile, actions are subject to the element of power (*qudrah*).

Regarding the first component, knowledge, humans are endowed with both external and internal senses (*al-ḥawass al-zāhirah wa'l-bāṭinah*). The external senses encompass the five senses: hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch, whereas the inner sense pertains to the spiritual heart (*al-qalb*), which also encompasses the intellect (*al-'aql*). These two categories of senses serve as the conduits through which humans attain guidance, knowledge, belief, and wisdom from God Most Exalted. However, knowledge alone is insufficient to generate intention without motivation. Without a driving force compelling a person to desire something, their limbs will remain inert, devoid of the impetus to pursue their goals.

Hence, a second essential component comes into play when shaping intention: the will. Desire stems from the heart's response to things a person perceives, aligning with either a state (*al-ḥal*) or an object (*al-mal*). The will acts as a reinforcing force, propelling one toward a specific aim. Therefore, al-Ghazali should not be misunderstood as equating a desire for something with the actual intention to pursue it (Mian 2022). He (1957b) provides an illustrative example using food perceived by human senses. Mere observation of food will not lead to consumption unless a compelling inclination (*al-mayl*) and desire (*al-rahbah*) are integral facets of the will. Consequently, intention functions as the intermediary state (*aṣ-ṣifah al-mutawasiṭah*) between the will (*al-iradah*) and the ultimate cessation of inclination and desire (*ḥukm al-mayl wa'l-rahbah*).

When a decision has been made, the third element to realize the intention is power. The execution of an act (*al-'amal*) occurs when the power works to move the limbs (*tahrik al-a'da'*) to perform the behavior as desired by the heart. Power is needed to move the body parts and is basically influenced by exhortation (*al-da'iyah*), which is the thing that strengthens a specific behavior so that it should be done. Thus, this caller is influenced by knowledge (*al-'ilm*) and cognition (*al-ma'rifah*) or supposition (*al-zann*) and determination (*al-i'tiqad*) which strengthens inclination, desire and will. This is because the summoner reinforces the decision of the will after knowing the compatible things. Next, breaking the tendency affects the ability to move the limbs to an action. Thus, from the discussion of these elements of intention, this article can summarize the explanation by presenting it through Figure 2.

Figure 2: Components of Intention According to al-Ghazali



Critical Comparison between al-Ghazali and Modern Theories of Intention

Al-Ghazali's multi-stage account of intention presents it as a dynamic spiritual process that begins with a thought in the heart, moves through desire and determination, and culminates in firm resolve. Intention, for him, resides in the spiritual heart and requires the harmonization of knowledge and will to achieve sincerity. Within this framework, intention is not merely a psychological precursor to action, but an epistemic and ethical condition oriented toward God and ultimate truth. By contrast, modern psychology approaches intention through empirical and predictive models, most notably the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1973) and its extension, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1985). The choice of these frameworks is significant because they represent the most widely cited and empirically tested accounts of intention and behavior in contemporary scholarship. Both theories provide a structured, predictive model of how human actions emerge from attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. TRA posits that behavioral intention is the immediate determinant of action, shaped by an individual's evaluation of the behavior and perceived social pressure (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1973), while TPB adds the recognition that intention alone does not guarantee action without sufficient ability or opportunity (Ajzen, 1985). In these models, intention functions as a rational calculation balancing personal evaluation and social influence.

Placed in dialogue, several points of convergence and divergence emerge. Both al-Ghazali and TRA/TPB affirm that intention mediates between internal dispositions and outward actions. Yet, while TRA/TPB conceptualizes intention as a probabilistic predictor of behavior, al-Ghazali views it as a moral-spiritual state whose sincerity determines the worth of the act before God. Similarly, TRA/TPB emphasizes rational evaluation and social norms, whereas al-Ghazali foregrounds the purification of the heart, sincerity, and alignment with divine guidance. TRA/TPB also recognizes that intention may fail to translate into action due to external constraints such as skills, resources, or barriers. This resonates with al-Ghazali's insight that intention may weaken through regret, negligence, or obstacles—though for him these are not merely practical but also spiritual, requiring vigilance (*muraqabah*) and perseverance (*ṣabr*). Finally, in ethical terms, TRA/TPB treat intention instrumentally, as a predictor of observable behavior, while al-Ghazali treats it normatively, as the locus of moral accountability. In Islamic thought, this distinction is decisive: outwardly identical acts may differ radically in value depending on the sincerity of intention (Mohammad Zulfakhairi Mokhtar, 2021). To clarify the comparison, the key alignments and contrasts between al-Ghazali's conception of intention and the TRA/TPB frameworks are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Comparison of Al-Ghazali's Conception and TRA/TPB Models of Intention

Aspect	Al-Ghazali's Concept of Intention	TRA/TPB Models of Intention
Nature	A spiritual and moral state of the heart integrating knowledge and will. Determines sincerity and moral worth before God.	A rational predictor of behavior shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (in TPB).
Process	Multi-stage: thought → desire → determination → firm resolve. Vulnerable to regret, negligence.	Linear sequence: attitudes and norms → intention → behavior (TRA); with perceived control added in TPB.
Determinants	Internal: knowledge, will, sincerity, purity of heart. External obstacles are viewed as moral-spiritual tests.	Internal: beliefs and evaluations. External: norms and perceived control (skills, resources, barriers).
Function	Normative: confers meaning, sincerity, and divine accountability to action. Identical acts differ in value.	Predictive: estimates likelihood of behavior; focuses on probability, not moral worth.
View of Agency	Humans act through knowledge, will, and divine guidance; accountable before God.	Humans act as rational agents influenced by evaluation of consequences and social context.

Implications	Intention is epistemic-ethical foundation of scholarship; sincerity essential for validity and barakah.	Practical for predicting and influencing behavior; limited in addressing sincerity or spiritual orientation.
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Conceptualizing the Intention in Islamic Research from al-Ghazali's Epistemological-Ethical Perspective

Intention is the foundational element when embarking on any task, including research. It intertwines with determination, representing a resolute commitment to perform a task to the best of one's abilities (Azmaida Abdullah, Mohd Murshidi Mohd Noor & Syarifah Md Yusof, 2021). It is essential to ensure that this intention remains in harmony with Islamic principles and does not infringe upon Islamic decree. Intention also establishes a connection between the individual and God Most Exalted (*ḥabl mina'Llah*) as well as fellow human beings (*ḥabl mina'l-nas*). It extends beyond internal thought or an initial declaration before commencing a task. Instead, it embodies a profound resolve to execute the task with utmost excellence, yield maximum benefits, and seek the pleasure of God (*maḥḍati'Llah*) (Muhammad Syukri Salleh 2003; Nor 'Azzah Kamri & Siti Fairuz Ramlan 2015).

Before continuing the discussion, we need to clarify the concept of Islamic research. This type of research adheres to four guiding principles. First, it must be consistent with the Islamic worldview and uphold Islamic ontology. Second, it should be rooted in Islamic epistemology, combining self-evident knowledge, research-based knowledge, reasoning, and revelation. Third, it should be guided by a comprehension and application of Islamic axiology, which encompasses both ethical values—such as sincerity (*ikhlas*), justice (*'adl*), humility (*tawadu'*)—as well as aesthetic values—such as harmony (*tawazun*), loveliness (*jamal*), and clarity (*wuḍuḥ*)—ensuring that the research process and its outcomes are not only morally grounded but also reflect the beauty and refinement encouraged in the Islamic tradition. Finally, it should be grounded in the Islamic scholarly tradition, whether by drawing upon its historical legacy, engaging with contemporary contributions, or both (Mohd Syahmir Alias 2016; Siti Aishah Zainudin, Shahir Akram Hassan & Wan Mohd Khairul Firdaus Wan Khairuldin 2024). This framework sets the stage for a deeper exploration of the philosophical foundations that underpin Islamic research.

Building upon our earlier exploration of al-Ghazali's perspective on intention, it becomes evident that knowledge and will constitute the pivotal components of intention when undertaking an action. In the specific context of research endeavors, a pertinent question emerges: What kind of knowledge must a researcher possess before embarking on their research journey? This article addresses this query by positing that such foundational knowledge is closely tied to *adab* (Islamic etiquette), which reflects both the ethical orientation, and the epistemic discipline required for sincere and purposeful research within the Islamic tradition. This assertion finds resonance in the wisdom of a venerable Muslim scholar from the past, Ibn al-Mubarak, who aptly conveyed:

طَلَبْتُ الْأَدَبَ ثَلَاثِينَ سَنَةً، وَطَلَبْتُ الْعِلْمَ عِشْرِينَ سَنَةً، وَكَأَنِّي يَطْلُبُونَ.

Translation: "I dedicated 30 years to the study of *adab*, and only 20 years to the pursuit of knowledge. One ought to commence with the acquisition of *adab*, then embark on the quest for knowledge." (al-Jazari 2006: 399)

In this passage, Ibn al-Mubarak stresses the vital significance of mastering and applying *adab* as a preliminary step before delving into acquiring knowledge in various fields. Consequently, the question arises: What exactly does "*adab*" entail? Al-Attas (1980) provides a comprehensive definition, characterizing *adab* as the "recognition and acknowledgment of the reality that knowledge and being are ordered hierarchically according to their various grades and degrees of rank, and of one's proper place concerning that reality and to one's physical, intellectual and spiritual capacities and potentials." Principally, *adab* serves as a protective shield, preventing individuals from making erroneous judgments.

In essence, al-Attas' definition (1980) also unveils a pivotal component: wisdom or the capacity to discern and comprehend. In Islam, wisdom, or "*hikmah*," is a concept intricately connected to the divine will of God Most Exalted. This connection is vividly portrayed in Surah al-Baqarah (2: 269), which conveys that "Allah bestows wisdom upon whomever He wills, and whoever receives this wisdom indeed gains a great bounty. However, only those endowed with sound judgment (*ulu al-albab*) can truly derive lessons from it." Malik Ibn Anas further elucidates wisdom as a profound understanding, contemplation, and insight into the way of life ordained by God Most Exalted, and its practical implementation (al-Qurṭubi 2006b).

Al-Ghazali (1957a) emphasizes that the pursuit of knowledge in Islam is inseparable from *adab*, which he considers the moral and spiritual discipline that gives knowledge its proper form and function. For both the student and the teacher, *adab* cultivates humility, and safeguards the heart from pride. Without it, knowledge may become a cause of spiritual downfall rather than elevation. In the context of Islamic research, then, *adab* is not merely etiquette, but an epistemological foundation—ensuring that the process of inquiry remains aligned with truth, sincerity, and the higher purposes of knowledge. In fact, al-Ghazali outlines ten key duties for students of knowledge: first, the student must first purify their intention, seeking knowledge solely for the sake of God; second, they must reduce worldly distractions that hinder sincerity; third, they should avoid arrogance and remain humble, particularly toward teachers and peers; fourth, they must respect and serve their teacher, recognizing them as a guide to truth, fifth, consistency and discipline are essential, marked by patience and structured effort; sixth, one should begin with foundational knowledge before engaging in complex matters; seventh, knowledge must be internalized—understood and applied, not merely memorized; eighth, spiritual knowledge that nurtures the soul should be prioritized over purely technical learning; ninth, learning must be accompanied by practice, worship, and reflection; and finally, knowledge should be shared ethically, with sincerity and without pride.

Within the context of Islamic research, a researcher should carefully consider these principles as a guide to strengthening and cultivating *adab*—the ethical and spiritual discipline essential for maintaining balance between intellectual rigor and inner sincerity throughout the research process. Morality (*akhlaq*), which includes commendable behavior (*maḥmudah*) and reprehensible behavior (*madhmumah*), is an established aspect within the realm of *adab*. These behaviors align with the degrees of Islamic jurisprudence, known as *al-aḥkam al-khamsah*, encompassing obligations, recommendations, requirements, disapprovals, and prohibitions. These legal categorizations draw their authority from the Quran's revelations and the Holy Prophet's teachings (Haron Din 1990; Muhammad Rashidi Wahab & Mohd Faizul Azmi 2013; Mohd Hidayat Mahadi et al. 2023). Hence, it becomes evident that when considered in its entirety, *adab* significantly shapes the conduct and outlook of a researcher who adheres to the guidance outlined in the Quran and the hadith (Asmawati Suhid 2009). This features the pivotal role of *adab* as prior knowledge in cultivating virtuous intentions among researchers.

In addition to the significance of prior knowledge, which is the *adab*, in shaping research intentions, it is imperative to recognize the pivotal role played by the will (*iradah*), as expounded by al-Ghazali (1957b). Consequently, this article contends that within the Islamic research context, one should be rooted in sentiments of passionate love (*ishq*) and preoccupation or deep engagement (*ishtighal*) to fuel the research endeavor. The will born out of a deep sense of affection has the potential to awaken divinely intuition or inspiration (*ilham*), signifying a profound inner impetus in the pursuit of research. Al-Ghazali (2001: 247-248) provides valuable insights on triggering this intuition, emphasizing that one should maintain a meaningful connection through contemplation (*tafakkur*) with their subject matter. He states that:

والتعلم يحتاج إلى التفكير، فإن الإنسان لا يقدر أن يتعلم جميع الأشياء الجزئيات والكليات وجميع المعلومات، بل يتعلم شيئاً ويستخرج بالتفكير من العلوم شيئاً.

Translation: "Study needs contemplation, for humans cannot learn all the particulars (*juz'iyat*) and universals (*kulliyat*) and all known things. Rather he learns something and gains some types of knowledge by contemplation."

Thus, it becomes evident that a researcher must harbor an intention to cultivate a profound interest in the subject they are studying. Al-Ghazali (1957a) draws a distinction between two types of knowledge: one that is general and distant (like seeing someone from afar), and another that is particular, experiential, and internalized (like seeing someone up close). He likens this deeper form of knowledge to the kernel (*al-lubbab*) as opposed to the shell (*al-qishr*). This deeper knowledge matures not merely through mental reasoning, but through direct experience, inner realization, and emotional involvement—particularly through passionate love. Al-Ghazali illustrates that knowledge matures not only through reasoning but through inner experience and emotional intensity. He identifies *'ishq*—passionate love—as a transformative force that moves the knower from surface understanding to embodied realization. He deliberately chooses the word *'ishq* to indicate an overpowering emotional and existential state that leads to deeper, experiential knowledge (*dhawq*). Al-Ghazali (1957a: 102) said:

أن يدرك الإنسان الشيء جملة ثم يدركه تفصيلا بالتحقيق والذوق بأن يصير حالا ملابسا له، فيتفاوت العلمان ويكون ... والأول كالظاهر، والثاني كالباطن... بل للإنسان في الشهوة والعشق وسائر الأحوال ثلاثة أحوال متفاوتة وإدراكات متباينة: الأول تصديقه بوجوده قبل وقوعه، والثاني عند وقوعه، والثالث بعد تصرمه.

Translation: “That a person first comprehends something in a general sense and then comes to understand it in detail—through investigation (*al-tahqiq*) and experiential taste (*al-dhawq*)—such that it becomes a state intimately connected to him. Thus, the two levels of knowledge differ: the first is like the outward (*zahir*), while the second is like the inward (*batin*)... Indeed, man has, with regard to desire (*al-shahwah*), passionate love (*al-'ishq*), and other inner states, three distinct stages and varying degrees of comprehension: the first is believing in its existence before it occurs, the second is during its occurrence, and the third is after it has passed.”

In the context of Islamic research, this suggests that a researcher’s journey is most fruitful when it is driven not merely by curiosity, but by a deep existential longing for truth. The *'ishq* for knowledge compels the seeker to internalize what is known, transforming research into an act of both intellectual and spiritual devotion. From the interplay of the two intention components inherent in the Islamic research context—knowledge, guided by *adab*, and will, rooted in *'ishq*—a subtle yet profound consequence emerges sincerity (*ikhlas*). As articulated by al-Kharraz (1937), sincerity manifests when an individual performs a task with God Most Exalted in the heart’s control, a steadfast commitment to their purpose, and an earnest supplication to God Most Exalted for assistance in every endeavor. In essence, pure intentions beget sincere research, and this sincerity bequeaths enduring implications through the benefits derived from research outcomes. These long-term implications are encapsulated in the concept of blessings, representing the positive outcomes derived from something beneficial and capable of guiding others (Nor Hanani Ismail 2018). In an ideal scenario, sincerity paves the path to success for individuals striving to attain the noble objectives of uncovering truth and delivering justice (Haron Din 1991; Shuhairimi Abdullah 2000).

In Islamic research, sincerity holds immense significance as it paves the way for God’s guidance, a clear indicator of the blessings bestowed upon the research endeavor (Nor Hanani Ismail 2018). As devout servants of God Most Exalted, researchers are duty-bound to approach their research endeavors with unwavering sincerity, treating their scholarly pursuits as a form of worship aligned with God’s decree. This aligns perfectly with the divine injunction conveyed in the Quran, “They were not commanded except to worship Allah, [being] sincere to Him in religion, inclining to truth, and to establish prayer and to give zakat. And that is the correct religion” (al-Bayyinah 98: 5). This verse from Surah al-Bayyinah (98: 5) serves as God’s counsel to His devoted servants, urging them to dedicate all acts of worship exclusively to Him. Consequently, in Islam, research that attains the worship status necessitates a pure and unwavering intention (*niyyah khaliṣah*) as its foundational cornerstone.

The culmination of one’s intention in undertaking Islamic research is not confined solely to the research itself but extends beyond the research’s completion. It encompasses God’s

response to the conduct that has transpired. In this context, each bears personal responsibility for their actions, as al-Ghazali (1957a) emphasized. Consequently, every action is accorded with its due consequence—whether in the form of sin or reward. However, it is essential to note that sin and reward are determined at an earlier juncture—during forming intentions. This principle is rooted in the teachings of the Holy Prophet, whose words underscore this concept, conveying:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَتَبَ الْحَسَنَاتِ وَالسَّيِّئَاتِ، ثُمَّ بَيَّنَّ ذَلِكَ، فَمَنْ هَمَّ بِحَسَنَةٍ فَلَمْ يَعْمَلْهَا كَتَبَهَا اللَّهُ عِنْدَهُ حَسَنَةً كَامِلَةً، وَإِنْ هَمَّ بِهَا فَعَمَلُهَا كَتَبَهَا اللَّهُ عِنْدَهُ عَشْرَ حَسَنَاتٍ إِلَى سَبْعِمِائَةٍ ضَعْفٍ إِلَى أَضْعَافٍ كَثِيرَةٍ، وَإِنْ هَمَّ بِسَيِّئَةٍ فَلَمْ يَعْمَلْهَا كَتَبَهَا اللَّهُ عِنْدَهُ حَسَنَةً كَامِلَةً، وَإِنْ هَمَّ بِهَا فَعَمَلُهَا كَتَبَهَا اللَّهُ سَيِّئَةً وَاحِدَةً

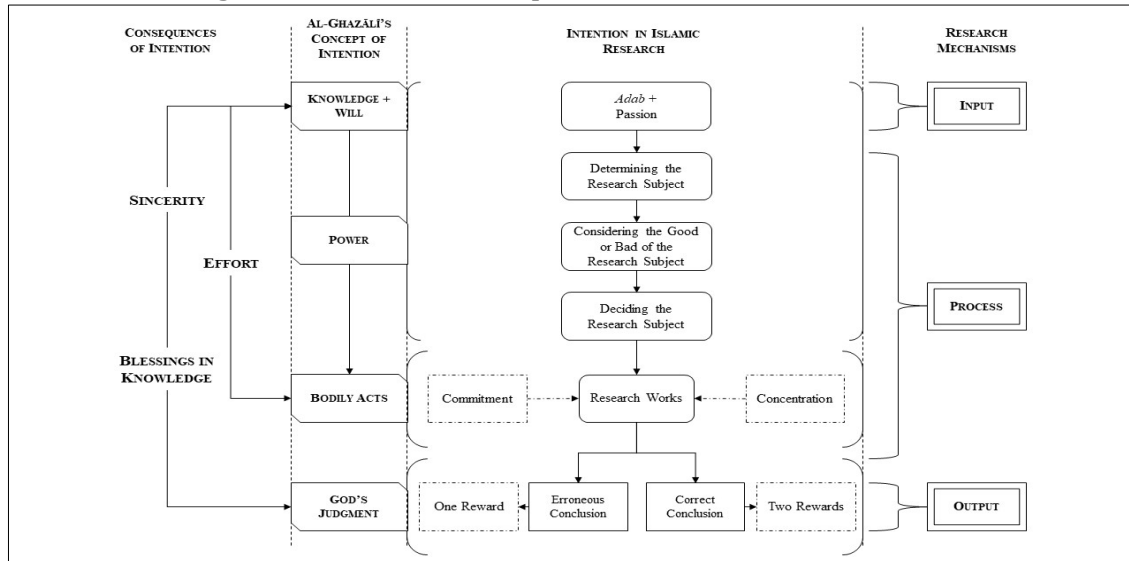
Translation: “Whoever resolves to carry out a virtuous act but fails to do so will have that intention recorded by Allah as a full-fledged good deed. On the other hand, if someone intends to perform a virtuous deed and then accomplishes it, Allah registers it as a reward ranging from tenfold to many times over, possibly even up to seven hundred times. Conversely, if an individual intends to commit a wrongful act but refrains from doing so, Allah records it as a complete good deed. However, if they intend and commit the wrongful act, Allah records it as a single transgression.” (narrated by al-Bukhari hadith no. 6010)

When driven by sincere intention, a researcher is eligible for a favorable reward from God Most Exalted. While a researcher wholeheartedly believes that the knowledge they are pursuing in their research emanates from God Most Exalted, deeply motivates them to approach their research with unwavering dedication. While maintaining a steadfast commitment to discovering the truth is paramount, it is essential to acknowledge that researchers are not immune to errors when formulating arguments, presenting evidence, or drawing conclusions. In light of this, rectifying one’s conclusions, even after exerting considerable effort in conducting a thorough study, holds significance from an Islamic standpoint. This concept finds clarity in a hadith of the Holy Prophet, which states:

إِذَا حَكَمَ الْحَاكِمُ فَاجْتَهَدَ ثُمَّ أَصَابَ فَلَهُ أَجْرَانِ وَإِذَا حَكَمَ فَاجْتَهَدَ ثُمَّ أَخْطَأَ فَلَهُ أَجْرٌ

Translation: “When a judge adjudicates a matter and exercises *ijtihad*, and he is correct, he will receive two rewards; but if he is mistaken in his judgment, he will still receive a reward.” (narrated by al-Bukhari hadith no. 6805)

Expanding upon this hadith, al-Zuḥayli (1986) references another hadith that permits *ijtihad* following consultation of Quranic argumentation, hadith, and ultimately, *ijtihad* based on reasoning (*ijtihad bi'r-ra'y*). However, within the context of research, the critical takeaway centers on the significance of the researcher’s unwavering commitment. Even if errors arise, the importance lies in the commitment demonstrated throughout the research process. Moreover, if mistakes emerge after the research is concluded, God Most Exalted still rewards the researcher for the conclusions drawn, provided that the initial intention was sincere, the effort was earnest, and the concentration was in total attentiveness. All these factors contribute to the acquisition of blessings in knowledge. In the grand scheme, the assessment of al-Ghazali’s perspective on the concept of intention within the realm of Islamic research is visually represented in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Al-Ghazali's Concept of Intention in Islamic Research

From the comparison between al-Ghazali's concept of intention and the accounts of intention in TRA/TPB in the above section, an important divergence becomes clear. Modern theories of motivation and decision-making emphasize predictive utility—explaining how attitudes, norms, and perceived control shape behavior. In contrast, al-Ghazali situates intention within an epistemological-ethical horizon, where “sincerity,” “knowledge,” and “will” determine not only the occurrence of action but its moral worth before God. This comparison not only places al-Ghazali within a broader intellectual discourse on motivation and action but also demonstrates how his insights enrich and challenge the limits of secular models in framing research methodology. From the perspective of Islamic research, this highlights a neglected dimension: while modern models can inform behavior prediction, they do not address sincerity, divine accountability, or the pursuit of blessing.

Al-Ghazali's perspective on intention outlines a comprehensive process, encompassing multiple stages from the initial stirrings of thought to the final realization in action. When these stages are infused with sincerity, rooted in heartfelt devotion, and guided by a deep understanding of *adab*, they reflect an integrated epistemological-ethical approach to knowledge production. Within this framework, research is not pursued as an end in itself but as a means of spiritual refinement and societal benefit, governed by intention. Passion for truth, combined with reverence for the method and purpose of inquiry, transforms research into a sincere act of worship.

The contribution of this study lies in extending al-Ghazali's conception of intention beyond ritual and moral philosophy into the realm of Islamic research methodology. It shows that integrating his insights provides scholars with more than technical guidance: it offers a framework that unites epistemology and ethics, ensuring that research remains spiritually grounded, morally sincere, and socially meaningful. Such a perspective not only fills a critical gap in the discourse on Islamic research but also offers contemporary Muslim scholars a way of aligning intellectual work with devotional service (*ibadah*), elevating research itself into a sacred endeavor.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author's Contribution Statement

1. **Mohd Syahmir Alias and Mohammad Zulfakhairi Mokhtar:** Contributed jointly to the conception, design, analysis, and writing of this article.
 2. **Mohd Syahmir Alias:** Led the development of the conceptual framework, the textual interpretation of al-Ghazālī's works, and the final synthesis of findings within the context of Islamic research methodology.
 3. **Mohammad Zulfakhairi Mokhtar:** Contributed to the methodological design, literature review on behavioral theories, and comparative analysis section.
- Both authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Ethics Statement

This study is based on textual analysis of published scholarly materials. It did not involve human participants, animals, or confidential data, and therefore did not require ethical approval. All sources have been appropriately cited in accordance with academic and publication ethics.

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