



Digital British Islam: How do Cyber Islamic Environments impact everyday life?

Policy Brief – Wales

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1. Introduction

Between 2022-2025, the Digital British Islam project used a range of research methods¹ to study the everyday digital lives and experiences of Muslims in the UK. Our findings shed light on trends, concerns and aspirations regarding the place of the digital in everyday Muslim lives, as expressed by those who participated in the research. Our research focused on Cyber Islamic Environments (CIEs) which comprise different kinds of digital spaces and platforms with a variety of purposes – commercial, religious, social or otherwise. Such platforms have become increasingly important for everyday Muslim life and for Muslim interactions with wider society.

Below is a summary of findings and policy priorities under three key themes – political agency, religious authority and gender – as well as a specific focus on the UK and Welsh context.

2. Political Agency

Digital platforms, which facilitate networking across geographies, are important tools for Muslim activism on topics including Islamophobia, encouraging voter registration, gender equality and global conflict. Participants experienced online networking spaces as ‘double edged’: on one hand, they present fluid and dynamic spaces for activism, allowing efficient communication and a free flow of ideas. On the other hand, the unregulated nature of many spaces gives free rein to hate speech and what have been described as hostile ‘pile-ons’ or ‘cancellation’.

Men and women both cited that they habitually ‘self-censor’ in their online interactions. For male participants, this was often attributed to concerns around surveillance or ‘doxxing’. Female participants additionally cited fears around safety if they shared controversial opinions.

Only 17% of Muslims feel entirely free to express their views on conflict around the world online compared to 27% in the national sample.

Online spaces provide positive opportunities for political engagement but Muslims also express hesitations in sharing their views. **Policy makers should re-examine legislation on digital safety and anonymity to ensure Muslims and other vulnerable groups feel safe engaging in political discourse online.**

3. Religious Authority

Social media has proved to be a democratising force. Our participants appreciate the direct communication with influential and religious authority figures that digital media allow. They also

¹ These included 10 focus groups across the UK and online, an archive of British Muslim websites, an online survey of 2000 people, 20 interviews with Muslim organisations and influencers, and 15 participant diaries.

express cynicism about how easy social media has made it for ‘self-styled’ figures of authority to emerge: ‘all you need is a camera and a thobe’.

Traditionally if you said a scholar was legitimate [it was] because they've got *ijaza* [religious qualification] and they've trained under somebody. [Nowadays and online] that seems to be slightly overshadowed by how slick the production is.

Abdul Azim Ahmed, Secretary General, Muslim Council of Wales

While traditional religious authority figures have not entirely been replaced, a large proportion of Muslims surveyed (71.1%) use YouTube for religious purposes, especially those aged 18-24.

Muslim leaders in digital and analogue contexts have different spheres of influence that should be carefully considered. **Decision-makers should not rely exclusively on digital profiles or presence in determining the credibility of Muslim groups/individuals.**

4. Gender

Women report experiencing improved access to religious discourse and programming via digital platforms. Digital platforms have also facilitated a foregrounding of Muslim female scholarship and expertise. As one participant noted:

I think this culture of women being *that* authority figure online is changing the discussion on what women can and can't do, because for a long time [...] the discussion was very one-sided, it wasn't as relatable for women.

Focus Group Participant, female, 20s, Cardiff

However, topical debates around gender roles, including the ‘manosphere’ and the ‘alt-right’, have occupied Muslim online discussions. There are concerns about an entrenchment of polarised perspectives as culture wars pervade Muslim discourse spaces as much as they do any other social group.

Among Muslims, females are more likely to strongly disagree with the statement that they are willing to share views online (32.8%) compared to males (23.7%)

Echoing wider research on gendered digital safety², Muslim women feel less safe online than male counterparts. **Policy makers and community groups should work to eliminate the gendered digital safety gap experienced across the whole of society.**

² Ofcom, 2022 <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/online-safety/online-abuse/ofcom-urges-tech-firms-to-keep-women-safer-online>

5. The UK and Welsh Context

Muslim leaders we interviewed highlighted the challenges of communicating with a geographically-dispersed Muslim community in the UK and the advantages of digital media in facilitating this:

Our biggest challenge is how do we really be visible [...] in a world that's more digital and which is spread all over the UK [...] We can't just do [an in-person event] in London! The digital has helped us take away barriers.

Zara Mohammed, former Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain

This is especially true in the Welsh context with many Muslims distant from the hub of activity in South Wales. Focus group participants cited online streaming of religious events and courses and the accessibility of content as empowering in this regard.

On the other hand, participants cited a decline in interest and quality of participation in 'in-person' community events and interactions from local community figures, teachers and role models implying that online content was being prioritised over in-person engagement.

Hybrid and synchronous events offer transformative ways to connect for minority religious groups in Wales, including mosques.

- **Policy makers should work to provide further funding, equipment and resources to minority religious groups to support hybrid events. This could include recycling unwanted public sector equipment.**
- **Decision-makers should explicitly include religious groups in policies such as the Minimum Digital Living Standard so they can take advantage of technological developments to enhance dialogue within and between communities.**

Summary – Priority Policy Areas:

1. *Political Agency* - **Policy makers should re-examine legislation on digital safety and anonymity to ensure Muslims and other vulnerable groups feel safe engaging in political discourse online.**
2. *Religious Authority* - **Decision-makers should not rely exclusively on digital profiles or presence in determining the credibility of Muslim groups/individuals.**
3. *Gender* - **Policy makers and community groups should work to eliminate the gendered digital safety gap experienced across the whole of society.**
4. *The UK and Welsh Context* - **Policy makers should work to provide further funding, equipment and resources to minority religious groups to support hybrid events. This could include recycling unwanted public sector equipment.**
5. *The UK and Welsh Context* – **Decision-makers should explicitly include religious groups in policies such as the Minimum Digital Living Standard so they can take advantage of technological developments to enhance dialogue within and between communities.**