

Intersections: Faith, Nation, and Self in Welsh Muslim Experiences

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Abstract

The rise of Islamophobia in the UK, exacerbated by recent anti-Muslim riots, has intensified debates around immigration, national identity, and the lived experiences of Muslim communities. This study explores the identity negotiations of young Muslim women in Swansea, Wales, examining how they navigate religious, gendered, and national identities in a socio-political climate marked by discrimination. Using Berry's (1997) acculturation framework and an intersectional lens, we analyse empirical findings through qualitative methods, including interviews and focus groups. Our research identifies three key themes: (1) the construction and embodiment of religious and national identities, (2) gendered identities and feminism, and (3) the sense of belonging to a collective religious and/or national Welsh identity. The study offers valuable insights for policymakers, community organisations, and educators, providing recommendations to foster inclusivity and challenge discriminatory narratives.

Introduction

The anti-Muslim riots that swept across the UK over summer 2024 caused great distress, leaving neighbourhoods and communities traumatised and minority-ethnic shop owners fearing that they would become the next target of rioters (Gohil, 2024). This violence in towns and cities across England and in Northern Ireland was largely fuelled by misinformation online, growing far right and anti-immigration sentiment, following the fatal stabbing of three young girls at a dance class in the town of Southport, in the north of England (BBC, 2024). The rise of Islamophobia in the UK, spurred on by direct attacks on Muslims and mosques, reflects deeply embedded historical structural biases within British society (Kozaric, 2023). This surge in violence is also closely linked to the portrayal of UK Muslim communities in relation to the current war in Gaza, highlighting the persistent and multifaceted nature of anti-Muslim sentiment (Runnymede Trust, 2024). This unrest brought immigration and what constitutes the 'British identity' into sharp focus.

This makes the aim of this paper particularly timely, as we explore the identity negotiations of young Muslim women living in Swansea, Wales. In recent decades, Muslim women have been seen as either oppressed or socially incompatible with wider Western society (Meer, Dwyer and Modood, 2010). The hijab has been a specific topic of political debate and a visible marker of the 'other' (Arifeen and Gatrell, 2013; Ghumman and Ryan, 2013), making the study of Muslim women's identities vital to combat discrimination. This paper therefore makes a valuable contribution in examining how identities of second-generation Muslim Welsh women are constructed and expressed within everyday spaces and places. Through Berry's (1997) acculturation framework, we evaluate how young Muslim women negotiate both their familial cultural identity alongside their Welsh Muslim identity, as they develop their own sense of self.

Through a mixed-methods study, empirical findings from 30 participants reveal three key emerging themes: 1) the construction and embodied experiences of national and religious identities; 2) gendered identities and feminism; and 3) the sense of belonging to a collective religious or/and national Welsh identity. The aim of this research is to offer practical recommendations to multiple stakeholders, including community and religious groups, healthcare professionals, as well as informing policy.

Muslims in Britain: identity, belonging and national identity

The Rushdie Affair in the 1980s first brought British Muslims into public and academic focus, identifying them collectively through a distinct Muslim identity (Appignanesi and Maitland, 1989). Negative discourses intensified following the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks, framing Muslims as a homogeneous group, and a threat to national security (Allen, 2016), leaving them feeling powerless and excluded. The recent increase in islamophobia across the UK, defined as "anti-Muslim discrimination or racism" (Elahi, and Khan, 2017, p.7), is exacerbated by the media, linking Muslims to terrorism and opposed to British values (Meer, Dwyer and Modood, 2010). Hence, Muslim identity and its relationship to national belonging is one of the most controversial topics surrounding the integration and place of Muslims in the West. Such a contested background often forces Muslims to feel like the 'other', incompatible with being either British or Western (Phillips, 2009). As such, British Muslims navigate identity conflicts by drawing on diverse cultural and social knowledge to interpret their experiences and reconcile tensions arising from cultural change (Sartawi and Sammut, 2012).

A vast amount of academic literature exists on the social construction of identity. For instance, Jenkins (1996) speaks to the establishment of identities through highlighting the “self” as an ongoing (internal) self-definition created in dialogue with external definition. Similarly, identity formation, as described by Hall (1996), is an ongoing process of positioning oneself in relation to both personal and collective identities, shaped by social interactions and the contexts in which they occur (Dwyer, 2000), ultimately reflecting a dynamic negotiation of belonging through active engagement with others (Woodward, 2000). British Muslims frequently turn to imams (religious leaders) for guidance in navigating everyday challenges, highlighting the crucial role of religion in their identity negotiation process (Al-Sharif, 2025), which involves balancing preserving collective religious affiliations while shaping individual identity (Sartawi & Sammut, 2012). Notable markers of Muslim identity—Friday prayers, halal food, hijabs, and beards—along with rising Islamophobia, make the community hyper-visible (Berger et al., 2017; Ghumman & Ryan, 2013; Tariq & Syed, 2018; Arifeen & Gatrell, 2013). Indeed, the constant negative media attention complicates the very essence of Muslim identity (Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins, 2004), impacting on the sense of belonging of second and third generation British Muslims (Parekh, 2006; Modood, 2007). This research is therefore very pertinent in exploring the identities of young Muslim women in the West, as they combat the stereotypes of being Muslims, as well as addressing oppressive cultural practices and negative Islamophobic attitudes.

Muslim women: identity formation and negotiations

To add further complexity, women from minority-ethnic groups encounter profound challenges shaped by the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and religion (Arifeen and Gatrell, 2013; 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2016; Tariq and Syed, 2018). Intersectionality, as defined by Crenshaw (1991), examines how socially constructed categories interlink within wider, societal power and structural systems, contributing to unique experiences of marginalisation. Identities, through an intersectional lens are viewed as transformative: created within, and moulded by, wider societal phenomena (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016).

One of the most widely discussed topics when considering Muslim identities is the hijab (Arifeen and Gatrell, 2013; Ghumman & Ryan, 2013) with many European countries moving towards banning full face veils in public places, such as France (Goksedef, 2023). The hijab has become one of the most critiqued topics in feminism, being seen as a symbol of oppression (Meer, Dwyer and Modood, 2010; Al Wazni, 2015). However, as growing numbers of Muslim women turn to the hijab as a symbol of their Islamic identity, the number of Muslim youth asserting their Islamic identities has grown (Haddad, 2007; Modood, 2007). This has sparked an interest in the debate of feminism contrasted with religious freedom, with the position of Muslims in a non-Muslim society seemingly incompatible (Staeheli and Martin, 2000).

Extensive research exists on Muslim identities in the West (e.g., Dwyer, 2000; Phillips, 2009) and emerging studies on Muslim women’s intersectional workplace experiences (e.g., Tariq and Syed, 2018; Arifeen and Gatrell, 2020; Kele et al., 2022). However, little is known about how Muslim women navigate and share their everyday embodied experiences within broader religious and national contexts (Berger, 2017; Al-Sharif, 2025), especially in less urban areas like Wales (Jones, 2010). Focusing on Swansea, this study addresses the gap in research on young Muslim women in non-urban settings. Using Berry’s (1997) acculturation framework, we examine their nuanced identity negotiations between host and familial cultures.

Theoretical framework

Mindful of the diverse identity characteristics of our participants, we adopt an “intersectional sensibility” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1243) – a recognition of the interplay between identity and power – throughout our theorising. As our conceptual framing, Berry (1997) suggests four main acculturation strategies: assimilation (full adoption of the host culture and rejecting the original culture); separation (a rejection of the new host culture, fully preserving the original); integration (maintaining original culture while interacting with the host culture); and marginalisation (dual rejection of both the new host and original cultures). This last approach may be associated with an increased risk to psychological distress, due to the lack of cultural cohesion with others and loss of an identity template (Yoon et al., 2013). While Rudmin (2003) critiques this model over its reductionism and overreliance on structures, as opposed to processes, of identity, Yoon et al. (2013) found that integration had the best outcome vis-a-vis mental health outcomes. Of course, this strategy requires mutual accommodation from both the acculturating group and the host society (Berry, 1997).

Research methods

Overview of context

According to the 2021 UK census Islam is the second largest religion at 6.5 % of the total population (Office for National Statistics, 2023). Most Muslims live in England with around 66,947 living in Wales (2.2%). The focus of the study is in Swansea, the second largest city in Wales. Its significance partly stems from it being a smaller urban area with diverse landscapes and a Welsh focus. This contrasts with most of the research on this topic, which has been conducted in urban cities, with large population of Muslims (Whittaker, 2019; Dwyer, 2000; Hopkins, 2004). Records from the 2021 census show that the non-white ethnic population in Swansea is 8.6% (20,400), with the largest minority religion in Swansea being reported as Muslims (7,694, or 3.2% of all people) (Swansea Profile, 2021).

Data collection

Data collection entailed a multi-stage qualitative approach. All fieldwork was conducted face-to-face, creating an informal and flexible environment where participants could feel comfortable. This approach was crucial, given the potentially sensitive and emotionally charged nature of the topics discussed. The participants were selected via purposeful and snowball sampling from youth centres and local mosques, through reaching out community groups, personal networks. This approach ensured a diverse sample of young Muslim women who were actively engaged in their communities and willing to share their experiences. The first fieldwork stage comprised of a 6-question questionnaire survey. Thereafter, 30 face-to-face semi-structured interviews took place, lasting approximately an hour each. The sample selection involved 30 young Muslim women, aged 18–30, from the city of Swansea, justified through data saturation and thematic richness. All the Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full directly after the interviews. Lastly, 3 focus groups took place, using visual imagery (Rose, 2012) to support discussions around identity. Participants were asked to send pictures of items that represented their identities prior to the focus group, which was optional, and 15 participants chose to do so. Each focus group lasted about two hours, allowing participants to freely exchange ideas (Morgan, 1997), facilitated by the researcher. Participants, who were colleagues, friends, or acquaintances, ensured smooth discussions (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). The first author, a Muslim woman living in Swansea and known to participants through a Muslim youth organisation, conducted the research. Her ‘insider’ status (Brewer, 2000) fostered trust and rapport, enabling deeper engagement.

Data analysis

Once the responses from the questionnaires and focus groups were transcribed, the results were then coded based on the emerging themes. Due to the vast amount of detailed information collected through this qualitative research, template analysis (King, 2004) enabled more efficient organising of data, linking emergent themes to the broader scholarship on identity formation. Some of the themes were as a direct result of the way that the questions were structured in the questionnaire survey, for example, “Which identity do you most strongly associate with?” Other themes were identified from the way in which participants responded to open ended questions.

While the interviews were being transcribed, the identified topics were sectioned into general themes. The notes were then read through and further reread, and responses marked with colour coded patterns, thereby making it easier to analyse and organise the data. This was done using coloured highlighters on printed hard copies of the transcribed questionnaire surveys and focus group responses, with specific colours assigned to themes, enabling a comprehensive, albeit time-consuming, study of emerging themes (see Table 1).

Findings

Emergent findings centre on three themes: 1) the construction and embodied experiences of national and religious identities; 2) gendered identities and feminism; and 3) the sense of belonging to a collective religious or/and national Welsh identity.

- There is significant contestation within the British Muslim community regarding the nature of their collective identity and interests. (Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins, 2004).
- Religious Identification: A strong dual identity is associated with lower religious (Muslim) identification, which in turn leads to reduced religious political mobilisation (Martinovic and Verkuyten, 2014).

Concluding remarks

By applying Berry’s (1997) acculturation framework, this study has sought to provide critical insights into the complex identity negotiations of young Muslim women in Swansea, highlighting the ways in which they navigate the intersections of religious, national, and gendered identities within a socio-political climate increasingly shaped by Islamophobic sentiment. The anti-Muslim riots that spread across the UK in the summer of 2024 serve as a stark reminder of the urgent need to address deeply rooted structural biases that continue to marginalise Muslim communities. As misinformation and far-right rhetoric fuel social divisions, this research underscores the significance of understanding identity construction among second-generation Muslim women to foster greater inclusivity and social cohesion.

Empirical findings reveal that young Muslim women engage in active negotiations between their familial cultural heritage and their evolving Welsh Muslim identities. This process is mediated through everyday spaces and interactions, where visible markers of identity, such as the hijab (Arifeen and Gatrell, 2013; Ghumman and Ryan, 2013), become sites of contestation and affirmation. The findings highlight the importance of religious and national belonging in shaping the lived experiences of participants, as they challenge dominant narratives that frame Muslim women as either oppressed or incompatible with Western values (Meer et al., 2010). Rather, this study demonstrates the agency of young Muslim women in constructing hybrid identities that reconcile faith, feminism, and national belonging.

Moreover, the research identifies significant policy implications. Considering the recent socio-political turmoil, there is a pressing need for government bodies, educators, healthcare professionals, and community organisations to engage in meaningful dialogue with Muslim communities to foster understanding and reduce discrimination. Policy interventions must move beyond superficial multiculturalism and instead promote structural inclusion, ensuring that Muslim women have the necessary platforms to articulate their experiences and contribute to societal narratives about British identity.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a broader academic discourse on identity, integration, and Islamophobia in contemporary Britain. The rise in anti-Muslim sentiment, exacerbated by global geopolitical events and domestic socio-political anxieties, underscores the necessity of research that amplifies the voices of marginalised communities. By centring the experiences of second-generation Muslim Welsh women, this research not only advances theoretical understandings of identity negotiation but also offers practical pathways for fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

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Table 1: Thematic Participant Matrix – Berry’s Acculturation Model

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Religion	Education	Profession	Household	Berry’s Category	Indicators
Abida	18	Bengali	Single	Studying A levels	Student	Mum and dad	Integration	Strong Muslim & Welsh identity with Bengali culture at home.
Fadila	30	Bengali	Muslim	BA	Makeup Artist	Husband and daughter	Integration	Describes herself as Muslim and Welsh Asian
Faiza	18	Bengali	Single	Studying A levels	Student	Mum, dad, brother and sister	Integration	Muslim and Welsh identity markers with strong Bengali values.
Fariha	19	Libyan	Single	BA	Student	Mum, dad and 4 younger siblings	Integration	Islam governs life; Libyan culture is secondary but retained. Engages with Welsh society
Fatiha	26	Bengali	Married	GNVQ	Case worker	Father in law, three sister-in-laws and husband	Integration/ Separation	Strong Bengali culture limited to family duty; religion is secondary
Fatina	30	Bengali	Single	Completed GSCE’s	Case worker	Mum, dad, brother and sister-in-law	Integration	Strong Welsh identity; Bengali culture limited to family duty; religion is peripheral
Hamida	22	Bengali	Muslim	Completed GCSEs	Carer	Mum, brother, sister-in-law, four nephews	Integration	Identifies as Muslim, Bengali, Welsh, British
Hana	18	Mixed (Welsh/ Pakistani)	Muslim	Studying A-levels	Student	Mum, dad and sister	Integration	Values religion and Welsh identity equally
Hadil	24	Bengali	Single	BA	Insurance Advisor	Mum and brother	Integration	Hijab as primary identity; blends Welsh and Bengali with Islamic focus
Hadiya	18	Bengali	Single	Studying A levels	Student	Mum, dad	Integration	Welsh, British and Muslim identity markers
Hajar	18	Yemeni	Single	Currently studying BEng	Student	Mum, dad and three siblings	Integration	"Muslim Welsh student"; Welshness is primary, Yemeni identity is situational.
Hala	26	Bengali	Single	Completed GCSE’s	Insurance Advisor	Mum, dad, two brothers	Integration	Blends Islamic, Welsh, and British identities; selectively engages with Bengali culture.
Maliha	18	Bengali	Muslim	Currently studying BA	Student	Mum, dad and brother	Integration	Embraces both Welsh/British and Bangladeshi/Muslim identities, actively engages in both.
Mona	23	Pakistani	Single	BA	Case worker	Mum, dad and three brothers	Integration	Prioritizes Islam and Welsh identity but separates from oppressive cultural norms.
Nada	24	Sudanese	Married	BSC	Medic	Husband	Separation	Prioritizes Islam and Muslim identity; rejects non-Islamic practices.

Rahima	18	Iraqi	Single	Studying A levels	Student	Mum, dad, two sisters, husband and baby	Integration	Blends Arab, Muslim, Welsh, and British identities; Enjoys blending Arabic and Welsh culture.
Rana	30	Bengali	Married	BA	Case worker	Husband and two sons	Integration	Strong Welsh identity; Bengali culture limited to family duty; religion is peripheral.
Sara	27	Bengali	Muslim	BA	Youth Worker	Mum, dad, sister	Integration	Wears Western clothes with scarf; proud of Welsh identity
Sadaf	28	Bengali	Muslim	BTEC	Assistant Medic	Mum, brother	Assimilation	Does not wear hijab, avoids looking different
Saba	27	Pakistani	Muslim	BA	Youth Worker	Mum, dad, brother and sister	Assimilation	Primarily identifies as Welsh; refers to ethnicity only when asked
Shakira	18	Bengali	Single	Currently studying BA	Student	Mum, dad and sister	Integration	Islamic and Bengali values with Welsh identity
Shaista	28	Pakistani	Single	BSC	Medic	Mum, dad and sister	Integration	Strong Pakistani and Welsh values with Islamic lifestyle choices
Safa	28	Bengali	Single	BA	Administrator	Mum, sister and niece	Assimilation/ Separation	Adopts British/Welsh feminist identity; rejects Bengali culture but retains hijab.
Safia	28	Pakistani	Single	BA	Accountant	Mum, dad, brother, sister-in-law, three nephews and nieces	Integration	Blends Welsh, Bengali, and Islamic identities seamlessly
Sakina	18	Pakistani	Single	Studying A levels	Student	Mum, dad and sister	Integration/ Separation	Prioritizing Islam over Pakistani
Samira	23	Bengali	Single	BA	Case worker	Mum, four siblings	Integration/ Separation	Rejects Bengali culture; identifies as Welsh but separates from non-Islamic norms.
Tasnim	18	Bengali	Single	Studying A levels	Student	Mum, dad, sister and brother	Separation (some integration)	Strong bicultural identity, critical awareness, engaged socially and culturally.
Zahra	24	Libyan	Single	BA	Case worker	Mum, dad, brother and sister	Integration	Strong bicultural identity, critical awareness, engaged socially and culturally.
Zubeda	27	Mauritius	Single	BEng	Engineer	Mum, dad and sister	Integration/ Separation	Prioritizes Islam and Welsh identity; rejects non-Islamic Mauritian practices
Zeba	20	Gambian	Muslim	Studying BEng	Student	Mum, siblings	Separation	Wears African prints, asserts cultural pride