



# The Shifting Trends in Baby Naming: An Anthropolinguistic Perspective on the Popularity of the Name "Muhammad" in England and Wales

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## Abstract:

*This study examines the rising popularity of the name of "Muhammad" in England and Wales through an anthropolinguistic lens. This phenomenon reflects the social, cultural, and demographic dynamics resulting from the growth of the Muslim population in the region. Using a qualitative approach, the study analyzes statistical data and interviews with local Muslim communities to understand the meaning behind the choice of this name. The findings indicate that the name "Muhammad" not only represents religious and cultural identity but also signifies societal acceptance of diversity. This article contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between language, culture, and social change in the context of multicultural societies.*

**Keywords:** Baby naming, anthropolinguistics, cultural identity

## Abstrak:

*Penelitian ini menganalisis peningkatan popularitas nama "Muhammad" di Inggris dan Wales melalui pendekatan antropolinguistik. Fenomena ini mencerminkan dinamika sosial, budaya, dan demografi yang terjadi akibat pertumbuhan populasi Muslim di wilayah tersebut. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, penelitian ini menganalisis data statistik dan wawancara dengan komunitas Muslim lokal untuk memahami makna di balik pemilihan nama ini. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa nama "Muhammad" tidak hanya mencerminkan identitas agama dan budaya, tetapi juga menandakan tingkat penerimaan masyarakat terhadap keberagaman. Artikel ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih dalam mengenai hubungan antara bahasa, budaya, dan perubahan sosial dalam konteks masyarakat multikultural.*

**Kata Kunci:** Penamaan bayi, antropolinguistik, identitas budaya

## A. Introduction

Baby naming trends have long been a dynamic reflection of social, cultural, and political changes within a society. As a universal practice, the selection of a baby's name not only serves as a personal identifier but also reflects the values, traditions, and collective aspirations of a community.<sup>1</sup> In culturally diverse nations like England and Wales, baby naming patterns often act as important indicators of demographic shifts, cultural integration, and the influence of globalization. One intriguing phenomenon that has emerged in recent decades is the growing popularity of the name "Muhammad," which has become one of the most popular baby names in the region.

According to recent reports from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in England and Wales, the name "Muhammad" has consistently ranked among the top baby names for several years.<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon reflects not only individual preferences but also broader socio-cultural dynamics, including the growing influence of the Muslim community in England and Wales. With a Muslim population that continues to grow through migration and high birth rates, the name "Muhammad" has become a significant symbol of cultural and religious identity within the multicultural fabric of British society.<sup>3</sup>

This phenomenon is particularly compelling when examined through the lens of anthropolinguistics, an interdisciplinary approach that connects anthropology and linguistics to explore the relationships between language, culture, and society. In this context, the name "Muhammad" can be seen as a linguistic artifact imbued with deep meanings about the identity, history, and values of the Muslim community. The name not only refers to Prophet Muhammad as a central figure in Islam but also symbolizes the continuity of strong cultural and religious traditions amid the currents of globalization and modernization.<sup>4</sup>

From a socio-cultural perspective, the popularity of the name "Muhammad" in England and Wales reflects several important dynamics, 1) Migration and Demographic Changes This phenomenon illustrates how international migration has significantly transformed the demographic structure of British society. Muslim communities from countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Middle Eastern

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<sup>1</sup> Richard D. Alford, *Naming and Identity: A Cross-Cultural Study of Personal Naming Practices Comparative Studies* (HRAF Press, 1988), 12.

<sup>2</sup> "Baby Names in England and Wales - Office for National Statistics," accessed December 28, 2024, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/babynamesenglandandwales/2023>.

<sup>3</sup> Ceri Peach, "Muslims in the 2001 Census of England and Wales: Gender and Economic Disadvantage," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29, no. 4 (July 2006): 630, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870600665284>.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall, "Identity and Interaction: A Sociocultural Linguistic Approach," *Discourse Studies* 7, no. 4-5 (October 2005): 589, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445605054407>.

nations have become integral parts of British society, bringing their traditions and values, including naming practices.<sup>5</sup>

The popularity of the name “Muhammad” also highlights the role of religion in the everyday lives of Muslim communities in England and Wales. In Islamic tradition, naming a child “Muhammad” is often seen as an act of respect and an effort to emulate the Prophet’s qualities. This underscores how religion remains a vital element in shaping both individual and community identities, even within increasingly secular societies.<sup>6</sup> The widespread use of the name “Muhammad” also reflects how British society is adapting to cultural diversity. Despite challenges related to integration and tolerance, the name’s popularity indicates a certain level of acceptance of this diversity. In this context, “Muhammad” can be seen as a symbol of the evolving multiculturalism in England and Wales, even though debates about the extent of inclusivity persist.<sup>7</sup>

From a linguistic standpoint, the variations in spelling and pronunciation of the name “Muhammad” in England and Wales add an interesting dimension to this phenomenon. Spellings such as “Muhammad,” “Mohammed,” or “Mohammad” reflect efforts to adapt the name to the English phonetic system while showcasing the flexibility of language in accommodating cultural diversity.<sup>8</sup> These variations also highlight strategies adopted by Muslim communities to maintain their cultural identity while integrating into broader society.

In an anthropolinguistic context, it is essential to recognize that names serve not only as individual labels but also as “cultural texts” that can reveal broader social, political, and economic dynamics. The name “Muhammad,” for example, reflects various facets of identity, from religious identity to ethnic and national identities. Studying this phenomenon offers deeper insights into the interplay between language, culture, and social change in multicultural societies.<sup>9</sup>

In conclusion, the popularity of the name “Muhammad” in England and Wales is not merely a statistical phenomenon but a complex socio-cultural one. It encapsulates dynamics such as migration, cultural integration, and the role of religion in shaping individual and community identities. From an anthropolinguistic perspective, this phenomenon provides an opportunity to understand how names can mirror broader social changes. Through an in-depth analysis of the popularity of the name “Muhammad,” this article aims to further explore the relationship between language, culture, and society within the multicultural context of England and Wales. Furthermore, this study seeks to

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<sup>5</sup> Steven Vertovec, “Super-Diversity and Its Implications,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 6 (November 1, 2007): 1029, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870701599465>.

<sup>6</sup> Jocelyne Cesari, “When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and in the United States,” n.d., 48.

<sup>7</sup> Tariq Modood, *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea Themes for the 21st Century* (Polity Press, 2007), 85.

<sup>8</sup> Joshua A. Fishman and Ofelia Garcia, *Handbook of Language & Ethnic Identity, Volume 1 Handbook of Language & Ethnic Identity: Disciplinary & Regional Perspectives* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 213.

<sup>9</sup> Alessandro Duranti, *Linguistic Anthropology* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 64.

answer: 1) How do religious values and migration influence the popularity of "Muhammad" in England and Wales? 2) What role does the name play in preserving Muslim identity within a multicultural context?, and 3) How does the non-Muslim majority perceive this trend, and what does it signify about societal inclusivity? By addressing these questions, the research aims to unravel the anthropolinguistic interplay between naming practices, cultural identity, and social adaptation in a multicultural society.

## B. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative approach focusing on descriptive-analytical analysis to provide an in-depth understanding of the socio-cultural phenomena behind the popularity of the name "Muhammad" in England and Wales, situating it within the context of anthropolinguistics. The qualitative approach, combined with a descriptive-analytical method, aims to explore the phenomenon in a detailed and comprehensive manner based on the data collected.<sup>10</sup> This approach is particularly relevant for unraveling the social and cultural complexities surrounding the popularity of the name "Muhammad," as it facilitates the interpretation of meanings behind statistical data.

An anthropolinguistic framework is used as the primary analytical lens to achieve this. This framework enables the study to link linguistic aspects to the social and cultural dynamics of communities in England and Wales. Through this perspective, the research goes beyond merely presenting empirical data; it also provides a broader socio-cultural analysis to uncover deeper meanings embedded in the phenomenon.

The data sources for this study comprise two main types: statistical data and qualitative insights from interviews and observations. Quantitative data were gathered from official reports published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in England and Wales. These reports provide valuable information on the most popular baby names, including the frequency and distribution of the name "Muhammad" across different years and regions. Such data is crucial for identifying naming trends and understanding demographic patterns.

In addition to the quantitative data, qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with members of local Muslim communities in England and Wales. Informants were purposively selected, including parents who named their children "Muhammad," religious leaders, and community members actively involved in socio-cultural activities. Furthermore, observations were conducted to delve deeper into the social and cultural contexts influencing naming practices. These observations involved participating in Muslim community events, such as religious celebrations and educational activities, to understand better how religious and cultural values shape naming traditions.

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<sup>10</sup> John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (SAGE, 2013), 45.

## C. Results and Discussions

### The Popularity of the Name “Muhammad” in England and Wales

The name “Muhammad” has seen a significant rise in popularity in England and Wales in recent years. According to data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), in 2023, “Muhammad” became the most popular name for baby boys in the region, with 4,661 babies given this name. This marked the first time “Muhammad” topped the list, overtaking “Noah,” which previously held the number one position.

The rising trend in the popularity of “Muhammad” is not a sudden phenomenon. Since 2016, the name has consistently ranked among the top 10 most popular baby boy names in England and Wales. In 2017, it surpassed “William” in the rankings, reflecting steady growth. Furthermore, variations in spelling, such as “Mohammed” and “Mohammad,” contribute to the high number of babies bearing similar names, highlighting the cultural and ethnic diversity within England and Wales.

The primary factor influencing the popularity of the name “Muhammad” is the role of religion and culture in naming practices. In Islamic tradition, naming a baby boy “Muhammad” is an expression of respect and reverence for Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who is regarded as the ultimate role model for Muslims. The name itself means “praiseworthy” in Arabic, symbolizing parents’ aspirations for their children to emulate the noble qualities of the Prophet.

In addition, the growing Muslim population in England and Wales has contributed to this trend. The increasing size of the Muslim community, driven by both migration and natural population growth, has brought cultural practices, including naming traditions, to the forefront. Choosing the name “Muhammad” reflects a strong religious and cultural identity and a desire to preserve heritage within a multicultural society.

On the other hand, the popularity of “Muhammad” also signifies a level of acceptance and cultural integration within English and Welsh society. Despite challenges related to integration and tolerance, the fact that “Muhammad” has become the most popular name illustrates a degree of openness toward cultural and religious diversity. This aligns with efforts by both the government and society to promote inclusivity and multiculturalism.

It is worth noting, however, that the popularity of the name “Muhammad” is not confined to England and Wales. In many countries with significant Muslim populations, this name frequently ranks high on lists of baby names for boys. This indicates that naming traditions involving “Muhammad” are a global phenomenon, reflecting the widespread influence of Islamic culture.

Overall, the popularity of the name “Muhammad” in England and Wales reflects the complex interaction between religion, culture, and demographic dynamics. Statistical data and naming trends highlight how religious and cultural identities are maintained and expressed through naming choices and how multicultural societies adapt to and embrace such diversity. This phenomenon

provides valuable insights for anthropolinguistic studies in understanding the interplay between language, culture, and identity in the context of globalization and migration.

### **Identity and Cultural Representation: “Muhammad” as a Symbol of Muslim Identity**

The name “Muhammad” holds profound significance within Islamic tradition. Etymologically, “Muhammad” originates from an Arabic root meaning “praised” or “praiseworthy.” The name was first bestowed by Abdul Muttalib, the Prophet Muhammad’s grandfather, who hoped that his grandson would be praised both on earth and in the heavens.<sup>11</sup> This hope materialized, as the Prophet became renowned for his exemplary character and was revered by many.

In the modern context, the name “Muhammad” continues to serve as a symbol of identity for Muslims worldwide. Naming a child “Muhammad” reflects Muslim parents’ respect and love for the Prophet and their aspiration for their child to emulate his praiseworthy attributes. Across the globe, including in Western countries, “Muhammad” is recognized as a symbol of moral excellence and integrity.

In England and Wales, the growing popularity of “Muhammad” over the past few decades underscores the increasing visibility of the Muslim community. Recent reports confirm that the name is among the most popular for baby boys, reflecting the expansion of the Muslim population in these regions. This phenomenon not only demonstrates reverence for the Prophet but also reinforces the religious and cultural identity of Muslim communities within a multicultural setting.

Naming a child “Muhammad” also functions as a declaration of identity and pride in Islamic heritage. In societies where Muslims are a minority, such as in England and Wales, using this name can be seen as an effort to maintain and affirm religious identity amidst the currents of globalization and cultural assimilation. The name “Muhammad” becomes a unifying symbol for the global Muslim community, transcending geographical and ethnic boundaries.<sup>12</sup>

However, the increasing use of “Muhammad” in Western countries is not without challenges, particularly concerning stereotypes and prejudice against Islam. Surveys indicate that negative perceptions of Muslims in England are influenced by various factors, including media representation and global events. Despite this, many Muslim families continue to choose “Muhammad” as a reaffirmation of their identity and beliefs. Ultimately, “Muhammad” functions not

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<sup>11</sup> “Filosofi Pemberian Nama ‘Muhammad’ pada Rasulullah SAW,” NU Online, accessed December 28, 2024, <https://jateng.nu.or.id/keislaman/filosofi-pemberian-nama-muhammad-pada-rasulullah-saw-sXLTb>.

<sup>12</sup> “Arti Nama Muhammad: Makna Mendalam Dan Popularitas Global - Feeds Liputan6.Com,” accessed December 28, 2024, <https://www.liputan6.com/feeds/read/5756474/arti-nama-muhammad-makna-mendalam-dan-popularitas-global?page=2>.

only as a personal identifier but also as a collective representation of Islamic values. Its use reflects the Muslim community's commitment to preserving their traditions and values while engaging with and integrating into broader society.

### **The Influence of the Muslim Community in Shaping Social Patterns in England and Wales**

The Muslim community in England and Wales has played a significant role in shaping local social and cultural patterns. With a growing population, this community has contributed to various aspects of life, from the economy and education to politics. In the field of education, the Muslim community has established various Islamic educational institutions aimed at providing education in accordance with Islamic values. This education not only focuses on religious understanding but also on the development of social and professional skills to contribute to the broader society. Additionally, many public schools in England have adopted curricula that reflect cultural diversity, including offering Islamic religious education options.

In the political realm, the presence of Muslim figures in important positions has enhanced the representation and influence of the Muslim community. A notable example is Sadiq Khan, who became the Mayor of London in 2016. Sadiq Khan's election demonstrates that the Muslim community is capable of actively participating in British politics and promoting more inclusive policies. This involvement helps create a society that is more open to cultural and religious diversity.

Furthermore, the Muslim community enriches the local culture through art, music, and cuisine. Islamic festivals, such as Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, have now become part of the cultural calendar in several cities across England and Wales. These events not only strengthen bonds within the Muslim community but also attract participation from non-Muslim members of society, creating cultural bridges that reinforce social harmony.

However, the Muslim community in England and Wales also faces challenges, including Islamophobia and discrimination. Some surveys reveal negative perceptions of Muslims, influenced by stereotypes and fears of terrorism. Despite this, the Muslim community continues to strive to build harmonious relationships with the wider society through interfaith dialogue and participation in social activities.

Overall, the Muslim community in England and Wales has made significant contributions to shaping local social and cultural patterns. Through various initiatives and active participation in public life, they have not only maintained their religious identity but also contributed to building a more inclusive and diverse society.

## Social Change and Anthropolinguistics: Multiculturalism and Inclusivity in Society in England and Wales

England and Wales have evolved into complex multicultural societies, influenced by immigration from various parts of the world since the mid-20th century. Migration from countries such as Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh has played a significant role in shaping the cultural diversity that exists today. Multiculturalism not only reflects the existence of various ethnic communities but also how these groups interact within a larger social structure.<sup>13</sup>

In this context, names such as "Muhammad" have become cultural representations that reflect the religious and social identity of the Muslim community. The increasing use of this name indicates two things: the Muslim community's effort to preserve their cultural heritage and a growing societal openness to diversity. According to data from the Office for National Statistics, the name "Muhammad" has consistently ranked at the top of the list of the most popular baby names in England and Wales over the last decade, reflecting the growth of the Muslim population and its influence on society.

On the other hand, public policies in England also support inclusivity. Schools, for example, adopt curricula that reflect cultural diversity, including religious education relevant to the Muslim community. This step helps create space for the Muslim community to express their identity while reinforcing multicultural values.<sup>14</sup> However, the journey toward an inclusive society has not always been smooth. Barriers often emerge in the form of stereotypes and misunderstandings about the Muslim community. A study by Modood shows that, despite progress in accepting cultural diversity, negative views of Islam remain a significant challenge. Media narratives that often associate Islam with extremism also influence the perceptions of the majority society.

Nevertheless, the efforts of the Muslim community to actively participate in social, economic, and political life have helped alter these perceptions.<sup>15</sup> In politics, for instance, the representation of Muslim figures such as Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, demonstrates that the Muslim community can contribute positively to the wider society.

Overall, multiculturalism in England and Wales reflects a process of two-way adaptation. On one side, the majority society learns to accept diversity, while on the other, the Muslim community navigates its identity within a multicultural society. This phenomenon underscores the importance of an anthropolinguistic approach in understanding the relationship between language, culture, and social change.

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<sup>13</sup> Khansa Khalisha, "Islamophobia and Public Policy in the UK: A Constructivist Understanding of PREVENT" (Universitas Gadjah Mada, 2020), 3–4, <https://etd.repository.ugm.ac.id/penelitian/detail/192829>.

<sup>14</sup> Waqar Ihsan-Ullah Ahmad and Ziauddin Sardar, *Muslims in Britain: Making Social and Political Space* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2012), 58.

<sup>15</sup> Modood, *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea Themes for the 21st Century*, 56.



## Perception of Non-Muslim Society on the Popularity of the Name "Muhammad"

The popularity of the name "Muhammad" in England and Wales has become a subject of widespread discussion among non-Muslim communities. Most urban society, particularly the younger generation, tends to view this trend as part of cultural diversity that enriches social life. In a survey conducted by YouGov, the majority of respondents stated that the diversity of baby names, including Islamic names like "Muhammad," reflects the inclusiveness of modern society.<sup>16</sup>

However, this perception is not always positive. Some non-Muslim communities, especially those living in rural areas, may view this trend as an indication of social change that threatens traditional British values. Phillip, in his research, notes that some groups consider the increasing use of Muslim names as a sign of the "foreignness" of the Muslim community, which is perceived as less assimilated into the local culture.<sup>17</sup> This perception is often exacerbated by media narratives that link Islam with security and immigration issues.

From an anthropolinguistic perspective, perceptions of the name "Muhammad" reflect the dynamics of cross-cultural relationships. This name carries significant symbolic meaning, not only for Muslims but also in the context of intercultural relations. It is explained that names like "Muhammad" often serve as symbolic tools of communication that reflect cultural identity, but they can also trigger stereotypes within the majority society.<sup>18</sup>

One way to address this challenge is through multicultural education and interfaith dialogue. When non-Muslim communities have the opportunity to understand the traditions behind the name "Muhammad," they tend to become more accepting of its presence as part of the collective identity of English and Welsh society. Additionally, the presence of public figures with the name "Muhammad" who succeed in various fields helps break stereotypes.<sup>19</sup> For example, Muhammad Ali, the legendary athlete, became a symbol of courage and integrity admired worldwide.

Although challenges remain, the trend shows that non-Muslim perceptions of the name "Muhammad" are becoming more positive. The younger generation, growing up in a multicultural environment, tends to be more accepting of this diversity compared to previous generations. This reflects significant social change, where cultural and religious identity is no longer seen as a barrier but as an asset in building an inclusive society.

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<sup>16</sup> "Multiculturalism: Explore the Latest Public Opinion about Multiculturalism," accessed December 28, 2024, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/explore/issue/Multiculturalism>.

<sup>17</sup> Deborah Philips, "Parallel Lives? Challenging Discourses of British Muslim Self-Segregation," 2006, 27, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1068/d60j>.

<sup>18</sup> Modood, *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea Themes for the 21st Century*, 23.

<sup>19</sup> Steven Vertovec, "Transnationalism and Identity," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27, no. 4 (October 1, 2001): 578, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830120090386>.

## D. Conclusion

Social changes and anthropolinguistic dynamics in England and Wales reflect the complex process of adaptation within a multicultural society. The popularity of the name "Muhammad" is not merely a demographic phenomenon but also an important symbol of Muslim identity and cultural representation in an increasingly diverse community. This name reflects the Muslim community's efforts to preserve their religious and cultural heritage while simultaneously illustrating how English and Welsh society is gradually adopting values of inclusivity and diversity.

Multiculturalism serves as a foundation that enables various cultural groups to interact and influence one another. Public policies supporting diversity, along with the active involvement of the Muslim community in social and political life, contribute to creating a more inclusive environment. However, challenges persist, particularly regarding stereotypes and negative perceptions still held by some segments of the non-Muslim population. This trend also highlights the critical role of multicultural education and cross-cultural dialogue in fostering greater understanding. With the increasing positive representation of Muslims in various fields, non-Muslim perceptions of the name "Muhammad" and the Muslim community as a whole tend to improve.

In conclusion, the popularity of the name "Muhammad" in England and Wales is not only a reflection of the growth of the Muslim community but also a symbol of broader social change. In an anthropolinguistic context, this phenomenon demonstrates how language, culture, and identity are interconnected in shaping patterns of interaction and inclusivity in modern society. This process, though not without challenges, offers hope that diversity can become a strength in building a harmonious and respectful community.

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