

## Mediated Communal Rituals and the Sustainability of Religious Communities in Contemporary Britain<sup>1</sup>

Emmanuel Chiwetalu Ossai

School of Global Affairs

County South, Lancaster University

Lancaster, LA1 4YL, United Kingdom

[e.ossai@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:e.ossai@lancaster.ac.uk)

X/Twitter: @ec\_ossai

### ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4301-9276>

### Abstract

Studies of religious responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have paid less attention to negotiations within religious communities over the site of communal rituals in the post-pandemic period, when public gatherings were no longer restricted and the level of mediatisation in society had increased. This research demonstrates that the decisions of British Buddhist communities regarding the post-COVID-19 adoption of internet-enabled digital sites for communal mindfulness meditation were, in part, shaped by religious considerations. However, in some cases, they were determined more significantly by pragmatic thinking, for example, regarding resources, practitioners' demands, and the cost of not adapting to the social transformations brought about by new media. With new qualitative data gathered in 2023-2024 from 11 New Kadampa, Theravada, Triratna, and Vajrayana communities in England and Scotland, this study demonstrates the digital strategies that

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British minority religious communities employ for sustainability amid religious decline and deep mediatisation in British society.

## **Keywords**

religious minorities; secularisation; social change; British Buddhism; digital religion; mediatisation

## **1 Introduction**

During the UK COVID-19 lockdowns between 2020 and 2022, many religious communities conducted public worship solely via video conferencing and streaming software. By February 2023, some religious groups had discontinued the virtual public worship that they initiated during the pandemic, as it had been a year after the restrictive measures hindering physical religious gatherings were lifted. Such communities seem to have perceived in-person worship as more effective and suitable for religious practice, among other reasons. Yet, some communities continued to use video conferencing tools for public sacred activities, but in combination with physical gatherings. For these groups, the internet appears to have remained a significant site of worship, despite the absence of COVID-19 restrictions. There has been significant research on religious communities' experience with new media during the pandemic (Alderson and Davie 2021; Campbell 2023; Chow and Kulberg 2020; Claisse and Durrant 2023; Edelman et al. 2021; Jones-Ahmed 2022; Kolodziejaska 2022; Monika 2021; Mukherjee 2022; Obadia 2020; Schonthal and Jayatilake 2021; Tseng 2020). However, less attention has been given to the factors that have determined why religious communities sustained or discontinued the use of internet-enabled digital spaces as sites for communal rituals in the post-pandemic period, which is different from the COVID-19 period in terms of the extent of choice that religious communities have had in both times over where and how they perform their communal activities. During the lockdowns, the British government

demanded and enforced the suspension of physical gatherings, but in the post-pandemic period, religious groups could choose whether to worship in person or not. This research considers why British religious communities have chosen to continue or stop conducting communal rituals online in the absence of restrictions and the need to control COVID-19. It also focuses on minority religious communities, which often have fewer members, resources, public recognition, and societal influence than the majority groups.

This research offers original qualitative data from 11 British Buddhist communities within the New Kadampa, Theravada, Triratna, and Vajrayana traditions, which are described in a subsequent section. “British Buddhist” is used here solely in the geographical sense to describe Buddhist communities located in Britain, without consideration of what has been described as a “British Buddhist identity”, distinguished, for example, by the use of English texts and music, chanting in English, and increased lay participation in leadership (Bluck 2006, 180).<sup>2</sup> The data shows that some British Buddhist centres considered whether it was consistent with Buddhist beliefs and traditions to continue digital mindfulness meditation when there were no state restrictions on physical gatherings. In addition, practical considerations related to the costs and benefits of adopting or rejecting internet-enabled media for religious activity were of great importance to some groups. In some communities, pragmatic thinking about what is most productive and achievable given the current realities within and beyond religious groups was most significant. With these findings, this research contributes to the academic literature on adaptations within the UK Buddhist minority (Bell

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<sup>2</sup> This study has not discussed the notion of a unique “British Buddhist identity”, or the extent to which it has been affected by the performance of digital rituals during or after the pandemic. Further research examining the latter question may involve a comparative analysis of the British Buddhist digital experience and other non-British cases.

1991; Bluck 2006; Connolly 1985; Phil 2013; Smith, Munt and Yip 2016; Starkey 2024). As the next section explains, religious groups in the UK and several Western societies currently exist within a context of religious decline and the growing ubiquity of digital technology. This study demonstrates that one strategy that minority religious communities in Britain have adopted to enable their sustainability amid this context is performing digital communal rituals to boost their population and resources. This makes the study relevant to the literature on the factors surrounding religious minorities' engagement with the internet (Evolvi 2024; Pennington 2018; Renser and Tiidenberg 2020).

Previous research has discussed the pre-pandemic interactions between Buddhist communities and digital media, showing that, for several Buddhist communities within and outside the UK and Europe, the practice of Buddhism with digital technology did not commence with COVID-19 (Connelly 2015, 2022; Falcone 2019; Veidlinger 2015; Wagner and Accardo 2015; Ostrowski 2015). Some Buddhist communities had conducted various communal activities, such as meditation and festivals, through Zoom and other digital platforms accessed via computers and mobile devices. By examining the post-pandemic era and Buddhist communities that adopted virtual meditation initially because of the lockdowns, the current study offers new perspectives on the interactions between digital media and Buddhist groups, as well as religious communities more broadly. Examining the Buddhist post-pandemic experience is also helpful because previous research on Buddhism and COVID-19 within and outside the UK has largely focused on the pandemic period (Claisse and Durrant 2023; Graf 2021; Fowler 2021; Kolata 2021, 2023; Obadia 2020; Schonthal and Jayatilake 2021; Tseng 2020). The following sections consider the urgency of adaptations for the sustainability of British religious communities, the components of the UK Buddhist minority, and how UK Buddhists responded to COVID-19 restrictions. Afterwards, the notion of deep mediatisation and the Religious-Social Shaping of Technology (RSST) are

considered as key components of the study's interpretive framework. Subsequently, the research methodology is explained before the results are presented and discussed.

## **2 Sustainability in a Secularising Britain**

The term sustainability is not used in this study in the context of environmental conservation, as several studies of Buddhism or religion in the UK and other societies have done (Cairns and Pihkala 2024; Cairns, Pihkala and Gronlund 2024; Eom and Ng 2023; Ives and Kidwell 2019; Johnston 2010; Renger, Stork and Ohlmann 2023; Koehrsen 2015; Sherma and Bilimoria 2022; Stacey 2024; Zielke 2023; Zimmerman-Liu 2023). Instead, it describes a religious community's viability – its ability to continue existing and performing its functions as a religious community in the long-term period (Davis 2021; Jo and Lee 2021; Kolata 2023; Kitawi and Irungu 2015; Oosthuizen and Lategan 2015; Pillay 2020; Plante 2024; Starkey 2024; Stoodley 2023; Taylor 2018; Zimmer and Sellmann 2024). It seems that one major fear that many British religious communities currently face is the prospect of closure, resulting from diminishing membership and resources.

Many scholars agree that there has been an ongoing decline of organized religion and religious identification in Britain and some other European societies (Brenner 2016; Brown 2001; Bruce 2002; Bruce and Voas 2023; Crockett and Voas 2006; Davie 1994, 2015, 2023; De Groot 2019; Evans and Baronavski 2018; Field 2022; Green 2010; Inglehart 2021; Pew Research Centre 2018; Plante 2024; Woodhead 2017). Recent surveys of the Pew Research Centre show that Britain is among the least religious countries in Europe, based on the number of adults who said that (1) 'religion is very important in their lives,' (2) 'they attend worship services at least monthly,' (3) 'they pray daily,' and (4) 'they believe in God with absolute certainty' (Evans and Baronavski 2018; Pew Research Centre 2018; Ossai 2024, 3086). The ten least religious countries out of the 34 surveyed in Central, Eastern, and Western Europe are Estonia, Denmark, the Czech Republic, Sweden, Belgium, the United

Kingdom, Switzerland, Germany, France, and Finland. The 2021 UK census also shows that as much as 38 per cent of the national population has no religion (Zayed 2024). The continual closure of places of worship in several parts of the country has accompanied the decline in religious attendance (Cant 2024; Evangelical Focus 2021).<sup>3</sup> As each congregation using the buildings shrinks, the monetary contributions required to maintain them diminish, leading to the eventual decision to transfer ownership of the structures (Plante 2024, 2).

The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have accelerated this religious decline in some areas. As religious communities performed communal religious activities online during the lockdowns, some religious practitioners found online attendance more convenient, engaging, or rewarding, and therefore preferred to practise religion that way even after the pandemic. This development has made some religious communities question the extent to which in-person communal activities are “feasible and sustainable...moving forward” (Plante 2024, 2). Amid these conditions, British religious communities are adopting strategies that enable them to continue to exist. They seek to avoid “institutional inflexibility” (Bluck 2006, 190) and “adapt to changing times or risk becoming irrelevant, diminishing further, and losing their sustainability to continue their activities and services” (Plante 2024, 1). Such adaptations are perhaps even more pressing for minority religious groups, which already have relatively small populations. The current study demonstrates that adopting the digital platform as a normal, long-term site of religious practice has become one means through which the communities seek to gain and maintain their population, and boost their resources, for continued existence.

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<sup>3</sup> More information about the closure of churches in Britain is available at the website of the National Churches Trust: <https://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/>

### 3 The British Buddhist Minority

Although the term "minorities" is commonly used in various academic and public contexts to describe ethnic, religious, political, sexual, and other communities, there is rarely a consensus on the groups or individuals that constitute minorities (Kugelman 2007, 237; United Nations Human Rights 2010, 2). Minorities are often categorised as such in relation to the majorities, for example, in terms of their smaller population or their non-dominant positions in society (Capotorti 1979; Kugelman 2007, 237; Schaefer 2015; Stausberg, Van Der Haven and Baffelli 2023; United Nations Human Rights 2010, 2). One widely recognized definition demonstrating this relativity was proposed in June 1977 by Francesco Capotorti, an Italian lawyer who was the Special Rapporteur of the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities. In addition to other attributes, he observed that a minority group is "numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State" and is "in a non-dominant position" compared to other groups (Capotorti 1979, 96).<sup>4</sup> However, Baffelli (2023, 225f) has noted that "minorities are [often] not static, objective groups but rather an arbitrary and shifting category". A group can be understood as a minority at a time and a location, but not in others (Stausberg, Van Der Haven and Baffelli 2023). The current work describes Buddhists in the UK as constituting a religious minority when their population is compared to other religious populations in the country. However, it is helpful to note that minority groups also differ in a variety of ways, such as their population sizes, self-perceptions,<sup>5</sup> how others perceive and relate

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<sup>4</sup> More recent UN Human Rights guidance is available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-minority-issues/about-minorities-and-human-rights>

<sup>5</sup> Studies show that because of some expected benefits or negative outcomes, a group may describe itself as a minority at one time but reject such categorisation at another (Baffelli 2023; Duffy 2014; Winfield 2014).

with them, and their social positioning (Baffelli 2023; Stausberg, Van Der Haven and Baffelli 2023). Even within the British Buddhist population, some traditions have larger populations, are more established, and have more widespread presence in different parts of the country. The four Buddhist traditions considered in this study are among the widely recognised forms of Buddhism in Britain.

It is difficult to obtain adequate, up-to-date statistics about the size and internal groupings of the UK Buddhist population, partly because of the fluid ways in which the communities self-organize. The UK Census 2001 indicates that there were approximately 150,000 Buddhists in the country at the turn of the 20th century, and the number has since risen to an estimated 380,000 by early 2025 (Bluck 2004, 92ff; ONS 2004; World Population Review 2025). Whereas the Buddhist Directory of the Buddhist Society UK listed about 100 Buddhist centres in the early 1980s, over 600 are currently listed in BuddhaNet's World Buddhist Directory (BuddhaNet 2025; Buddhist Society 1983; Connolly 1985, 3). More recent figures show that Buddhists constitute less than one per cent of the national population, estimated to be 68.3 million in mid-2023 (ONS 2024). According to the 2021 census, Christianity remains the main religion in the country (Zayed 2024). 46 per cent of the population identified as Christian in the census, while Muslims and Hindus were the two largest religious minorities, forming six and two per cent of the population, respectively (Zayed 2024). Due to their minimal membership, several UK Buddhist centres' reliance on membership donations negatively affects their financial strength.

Some Buddhist schools currently practised in Britain include (a) Thai Forest, Sri Lankan and other Theravada traditions, (b) Tibetan Vajrayana, (c) the Japanese Pure Land Jodo Shinshu, (d) the Ch'an and Zen schools, and (e) those which have been studied as 'New Religious Movements', such as the New Kadampa Tradition, Japanese Soka Gakkai which arrived in the UK in the early 1960s, and the group founded in 1968 as Friends of the Western

Buddhist Order and renamed as Triratna Buddhist Community in 2010 (Bell 1991; Bluck 2006; Emory-Moore 2019; Inaba 2000; Smith, Munt and Yip 2016; Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994). The UK Buddhist minority comprises Westerners, ethnic Asians, and other non-Western communities. The Western population appears to be concentrated in the Triratna, New Kadampa, and Vajrayana groups, while first-generation Asian immigrants and their descendants who practise Buddhism tend to be found in communities affiliated with the schools prevalent in their countries of origin.

Communal rituals in several British Buddhist centres, including those discussed in this study, differ in various ways. The differences are determined in part by the Buddhist school to which the centres belong and the school's views about the Buddha and his teachings (Bluck 2006; Connolly 1985; Powers 2007). The Theravada, the Doctrine – or Way – of the Elders, is perceived as the conservative form of Buddhism (Bechert 1973, 85). Its doctrines are formed by the Pali Canon, which is generally agreed by scholars to be the oldest surviving collection of the teachings of the Buddha (Bullitt 2005; Connolly 1985, 4). An account says that the Mahayana arose in India around the end of the first millennium BCE as a “pan-Buddhist movement”, with members from the different earlier schools who “shared a common visionary experience of the Buddha which led them to compile new scriptures, e.g. the Lotus Sutra, the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras and the Teaching of Vimalakirti” (Connolly 1985, 5; cf. Powers 2007, 101ff). The Tibetan schools, such as the nyingma pa, sakya pa, kagyū pa, and gelug pa, emphasize tantric and meditational practices, visualization and scholarship (Connolly 1985, 5; Powers 2007). The Pure Land Schools in China and Japan were established with doctrines “based primarily on a number of Mahayana sutras called Pure Land Sutras” (Connolly 1985, 5). The Meditation Schools, known as Ch’an in Chinese and Zen in Japanese, such as Linji and Caodong in China, and the Japanese Soto and Rinzai, focus on the “enlightenment of one’s

own mind” (Chan 2010, 136) and base their doctrines on “a direct mind to mind transmission of the Buddha’s teachings from master to disciple over the generations” (Connolly 1985, 5).

The diversity within Buddhism notwithstanding, many Buddhist groups perform mindfulness meditation with great seriousness because it is a key part of the path to nirvana – the Deliverance, the Enlightenment, the liberation from the cycle of life and death (Goodman 2013, 555ff; Kulatileka 2020, 97ff; Narada 1988, 490ff; Nyanaponika 2005). The four Buddhist traditions considered in the current study have a shared emphasis on meditation as a sacred practice for achieving nirvana, which many followers of the Buddha regard as “the *summum bonum* of Buddhism” (Narada 1988, 490). Lasting around an hour in the studied communities, the guided meditation sessions often consist of periods of silence when practitioners engage in mindful reflection, scriptural talks by a teacher or leaders, practitioners’ deliberations on the talks, and the chanting of sacred hymns. In some types of Buddhism, the meditation is meant to enable practitioners to strengthen their Three Forms of Training – moral discipline, stable attention, and wisdom – which ultimately produce “an inner state of peace, clarity, freedom from suffering, kindness, compassion, and happiness” (Goodman 2013, 555; cf. Nyanaponika 2005).

#### **4 British Buddhist Communities and the Pandemic**

Following the emergence of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China, in late December 2019, the disease spread rapidly in early 2020 across several nations through human-to-human transmission. The first COVID-19-related death in Europe occurred in France on 15 February 2020, and the UK recorded its first death on 4 March (BBC News 2020). Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of the World Health Organisation (WHO), declared the disease a pandemic on 11 March 2020. Data from the WHO show that by early 2020, nearly two million infection cases and over 125,000 deaths had been reported globally; however, the deaths reached over two million within a year, with many more infection cases (Anyanwu et

al., 2020; Ossai, 2021). As of early January 2023, there were more than 24 million recorded cases in the UK, and the disease was responsible for over 200,000 deaths in the country and 2 million deaths in Europe (WHO 2023a, 2023b). Before the UK government announced the end of all COVID-19 restrictions on 24 February 2022, it implemented a variety of disease control measures which affected the operation of religious groups.

On 23 March 2020, the UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, ordered the first lockdown, which took effect on 26 March (Institute for Government 2022). Even though restrictions on public gatherings were eased at various stages between March 2020 and February 2022, several religious communities relied heavily on digital technology for their gatherings, in part due to the uncertainty felt during that period. For example, on 16 April 2020, the UK government extended the initial lockdown, which was meant to last for several weeks. While restrictions were subsequently relaxed, the second national lockdown came into force in England on 5 November 2020, and the third on 6 January 2021 (Institute for Government, 2022). By 17 May 2021, up to 30 people were allowed to meet outdoors in England, and groups of up to six individuals or two households could gather indoors, provided they adhered to social distancing rules. However, several religious groups continued to conduct communal rituals online, as they minimized social contact. COVID-19 restrictions also changed throughout the pandemic in the devolved regions of the UK, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. On 5 May 2023, the WHO announced that COVID-19 had ceased to be a public health emergency of global concern.

Before the UK lockdowns were introduced, it was common for Buddhist practitioners in different British areas to gather in their centres' buildings for guided meditation, even though several groups also adopted digital technology for a variety of public activities. While some centres, such as Theravada temple A in Table 1, held their meditation weekly, it was conducted as frequently as daily in other centres, as in some Triratna ones in this research.

Mindfulness meditation is a sacred activity. In many cases, centres dedicate a particular space for group meditation, marking it with sacred objects, such as candles and images or statues of the Buddha and his disciples. Except for one Triratna centre, D, which is designed to offer virtual-only meditation, the centres in this research did not conduct meditation sessions virtually before 2020.

The transition back to in-person social activities following Britain's final lifting of the COVID-19 lockdowns on 24 February 2022 was slow for several Buddhist centres. Many groups that discontinued virtual worship introduced during the pandemic did not do so immediately after the lockdowns. They first adopted hybrid worship formats, maintaining the virtual option as practitioners returned to their places of worship. By February 2023, when the data collection for this study commenced, it had been one year since the British government announced the end of all the restrictions. As Table 1 shows, out of the 11 Buddhist centres studied, four (A, H, J and L) were still using a hybrid worship format consisting of virtual and in-person synchronous meditation, five (B, C, E, F, and G) had returned to in-person-only meditation within their religious spaces, one Triratna centre (D) was conducting online-only mediation sessions as it did before and during the pandemic, and one Vajrayana centre (K) was offering only online meditation even though its meditation was purely in-person before the pandemic.

**Table 1: List of in-depth interviews (N = 12)**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Buddhist tradition</b>	<b>Centre ID</b>	<b>Centre's meditation method</b>	<b>Date of interview</b>
UKB1	M	Theravada	A	Hybrid	15/2/23 1/3/23
UKB2	M	Theravada	A	Hybrid	15/3/23
UKB3	F	New Kadampa	B	In-person	18/7/23
UKB4	M	New Kadampa	C	In-person	24/7/23

UKB5	M	Triratna	D	Virtual	26/7/23
UKB6	M	Triratna	E	In-person	27/7/23
UKB7	M	Triratna	F	In-person	27/7/23
UKB8	M	Triratna	G	In-person	11/8/23
UKB9	F	Triratna	H	Hybrid	15/8/23
UKB10	M	Triratna	J	Hybrid	25/8/23
UKB11	F	Vajrayana	K	Virtual	27/3/24
UKB12	M	Vajrayana	L	Hybrid	12/7/24

Note: The author created this table.

## 5 Theoretical Framework

This work interprets the observed significance of new media for British Buddhist communities in post-pandemic Britain through the lens of “deep mediatisation” (Couldry and Hepp 2017; Hepp 2020a, 2020b; Hepp, Breiter and Hasebrink 2018). There are multiple interpretations of mediatisation (Campbell 2017, 18f; Hepp 2020a, 2021; Hjarvard 2008, 2014; Lundby and Evolvi 2021; Krotz 2017, 106ff). However, in common application, it refers to the contemporary reality in which everyday life, culture, processes, and society have been, and are being, transformed by media, in such a way that human activity and relations between individuals, groups and a variety of actors are massively influenced or shaped by media (Hepp 2020a, 2021; Krotz 2017, 106ff). A distinction has been made between two waves of mediatisation. The first consists of the changes related to traditional media, such as newspapers, radio and television, while the second and advanced stage, marked by digitalisation and described as “deep mediatisation”, includes the transformations emerging from new media, such as the internet-enabled social applications and mobile media (Couldry and Hepp 2017; Hepp 2020a; Hepp, Breiter and Hasebrink 2018, 4ff). As new digital media emerged in the advanced stage of mediatisation, “the ‘old’ mechanical and electronic media also became digital” (Hepp, Breiter and Hasebrink 2018, 5). With the “advanced spread of media by digitalisation, the character of the social world we inhabit very deeply relies on

these technologically based communication media” (Hepp, Breiter and Hasebrink 2018, 6). In the current deeply mediatized era, “the way we shape our lives and society is no longer imaginable outside the realm of digital media and their infrastructures” (Hepp 2020b, 932), which have become “intricately” connected with “all elements of our social world” (Hepp 2020a, 5).

In addition, this study has considered the Religious-Social Shaping of Technology (RSST) model, which, according to its founder, is “for studying the motivations of religious communities’ decision-making regarding new media appropriation or resistance” (Campbell 2017, 21; cf. Campbell 2010, 57ff). Exemplifying its relevance is its continued application in digital religion studies (Gelfgren 2015; Humeira and Sarwono 2019; Shahar and Lev-on 2011). The analytical framework suggests that to understand a religious community’s media use, four major tasks should be carried out (Campbell 2010, 57-63; 2017, 20-21). First, the inquirer should consider the community’s history and traditions, especially regarding “group understandings of community, authority, and textual engagement” (Campbell 2017, 20). Furthermore, the researcher should identify the “core values” of the community that may influence their perceptions of media (Campbell 2017, p. 20). In addition, the investigator should study “the community’s negotiation processes within new technology”, in terms of the “aspects they accept, reject, or need to innovate in light of their values” (Campbell 2017, 20-21). Finally, the inquirer should examine the communal framing and discourses that define and justify their use of technology (Campbell 2017, 21). This research demonstrates how considerations of Buddhist traditions and core values, as well as other practical factors, influenced negotiations within British Buddhist communities regarding the adoption or non-adoption of digital spaces as sites for communal rituals in the post-pandemic period.

## 6 Methodology

This work aimed to investigate the determinants of religious communities' new media use for communal rituals in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, when physical public gatherings were no longer restricted. The Arts and Humanities Ethics and Governance Committee of Manchester Metropolitan University approved the research protocol. With an ethnographic case study design, the research focused on the Buddhist practice of guided mindfulness meditation (Creswell and Poth 2018, 96f; Merriam and Tisdell 2016, 28ff). Empirical data was collected through in-depth interviews from 11 Buddhist centres in England and Scotland between February 2023 and July 2024. Interviews in the North-West of England were conducted in person. Participants in Scotland and some other English regions were interviewed via Zoom and by phone. The centres follow four major Buddhist traditions practised in the UK – New Kadampa, Theravada, Triratna, and Vajrayana. [*Please place Table 1 around here.*] A purposive sampling method was adopted. Due to the study's focus on the decision-making process, it included people in various leadership roles in the Buddhist centres, such as event coordinators, trustees, monks, teachers, convenors, team managers and directors. The leaders were involved in the negotiations over their community's media use during and after the pandemic. An attempt was made to collect data from an equal number of centres belonging to the four Buddhist traditions; however, equal representation was not achieved. The large representation of the Triratna in the sample may unintentionally skew the results. However, the Triratna centres provided rich data regarding various relationships with new media. Three of the Triratna centres were conducting in-person meditation during the study, two adopted a hybrid approach, and meditations at one were virtual-only. Interviewees provided informed written consent to participate in the study. They also provided informed written consent for the publication of interview data. Each interview was in-depth, lasting for up to an hour. Electronic recordings of the interviews were transcribed manually by the

author and coded using NVivo, with codes developed inductively and deductively. In addition, the researcher participated in meditation sessions at two of the centres, A and D. Leaders of the two centres consented to the observations. His presence as a researcher did not change the sessions. This allowed him to observe the processes as they would ordinarily be conducted. Through the observations, he obtained more data regarding the use of digital sites for communal rituals. For instance, he observed interactions between practitioners present in the centres and those participating virtually. The fieldwork data was analysed using the thematic analysis method, which entails “searching across a data set to identify, analyse and report repeated patterns” and “common or shared meanings” (Kiger and Varpio 2020, 847; cf. Braun and Clarke 2006). The five core, interrelated themes identified include traditions, community, resources, demand and convenience, and the effectiveness of digital technology.

## **7 Research Findings**

### **7.1 Traditions**

As the Polish sociologist Jerzy Szacki has observed, “the term ‘tradition’ is extremely ambiguous” (Szacki 1969, 18). However, this work describes it as things handed down or transmitted from the past to the present, across generations (Alexander 2016, 3; Graburn 2001, 6; Netton 2006, 106ff; Shils 1981, 12; Szacki 1969, 18; Taves 2011, 114ff; Vidas 2014, 9).<sup>6</sup> In several religions, these include myths about the universe and key figures in the history of the religions, records of the teachings and lives of the founders and their early followers, norms, songs, and symbols, among others. Religious communities also more often regard them as authentic. Hence, Cox (2020, 331) describes religion as consisting of “identifiable

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander (2016) and Taves (2011) are recommended for an overview of the connotations of the term “tradition”, the debates in religious studies about the concept, and how different religious communities have contested it.

communities that adhere to traditions that are transmitted from generation to generation with an overwhelming authority.” The current study views scripture as a component of tradition, so that the scriptural texts of Buddhism are part of Buddhist traditions (Netton 2006, 108).

When the UK COVID-19 lockdown was announced, the Buddhist centres in this study considered the conformity of digital meditation with Buddhist teachings as they decided how to continue their religious activities. Except for one web-based Triratna Buddhist centre, D, which had already been conducting virtual meditation before the first lockdown, all the Buddhist centres adopted the video conferencing tool Zoom in 2020 to continue mindfulness meditation. Except for centre D, none of them had performed meditation virtually before the pandemic. Overall, the centres believed in 2020 that, although the standard Buddhist norm was to practise communal meditation within sacred physical spaces where practitioners could gather and co-practise, it did not conform to Buddhist teachings to disrespect state authorities by congregating. The groups adopted video conferencing and streaming tools to respect state regulations, help minimize the spread of the disease, and continue religious practices until the lockdowns ended. The tools were employed in ways that enabled a maximal religious experience. For example, “residential teachers” living in their centres’ buildings conducted communal meditation only from the sacred rooms, where cameras showed the shrines of the Buddha and his disciples. Chat boxes and microphones were disabled at strategic points during the meditation to enable silent reflection.

Virtual meditation’s conformity with Buddhist traditions was revisited in the post-pandemic stage, when the context was no longer that of existing state restrictions on public activity. All the participants noted that during and after the lockdowns, their centres’ leadership did not believe that using digital technology for rituals was contrary to the

Buddha's teachings. For example, the leadership of a Theravada Buddhist temple, A, understood that the Buddha probably did not recommend the use of digital technology solely because such tools were not available in his time. Its leading monk observed that "according to the Buddha's teaching, the main thing is gaining concentration and cultivating wisdom", and that the "Buddha has given permission for how to find answers without the precepts of the Buddha" (UKB1). The New Kadampa centres had a similar understanding. Describing Kadampa Buddhism as "progressive", UKB3 explained that her centre believed that "if technology can help, is beneficial for people to connect, with methods for developing peace and finding real happiness within themselves, then there is no problem". However, as the next section shows, some of the centres that believed the Buddha's teaching did not conflict with digital rituals still discontinued them after the pandemic because they thought that virtual meditation hardly promoted the core Buddhist value sangha, which might be described as a component of Buddhist traditions.

## 7.2 *Community*

One core value of Buddhism that has shaped the post-pandemic religious practice of some UK Buddhist groups is the concept of community, which encompasses territorial, sociological, and psychological elements. The participants invoked this idea through the term "sangha". Before describing the concept of sangha and its post-pandemic impact, it is helpful to briefly explain what is meant by Buddhist values. In the humanities and social sciences, "values" is often used to describe the abstract things that humans believe to be centrally important, good or desirable in life, which, therefore, guide and motivate human thoughts and actions in various contexts, such as religious practice, decision making, political action, and economic activity (Dubois and Salas 2021; Goren 2022; Graeber 2013, 224; Roccas 2005, 748; Schwartz 2006, 1994, 20). By describing what is perceived to be good, values also identify the opposites, the things not perceived as good (Roccas 2005, 748; Schwartz 1994,

2006). Values vary across religious communities, but several religious groups have shared values, even as their significance may not be the same for all the communities. Values with widespread recognition among religious communities include forgiveness, peace, truth, justice, honesty, and discipline, among many others.<sup>7</sup> There might not be one universally acceptable set of Buddhist values, given the diversity within Buddhism. However, for many Buddhists, one main source of the core values of the religion is the teachings of the Buddha, which have been orally and textually transmitted across generations. Among other values, the Buddha passed on the Buddhist ideas of sangha and mindfulness meditation to his followers. The significance of the sangha in Buddhism is demonstrated by its position as the third of the core elements of the religion, in which a Buddha's follower might take refuge. Described as the Three Jewels, these consist of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha (Borchert 2012; Loftus 2021, 267).

In Sanskrit and Pāli, sangha means “collection” or “assemblage”, and it has traditionally been used to describe the community of monks (bhikkus) and nuns (bhikkhunis), who have “left home” and “gone into homelessness” in their journey towards nirvana (Borchert 2012; cf. Bullit 2005). Studies have significantly discussed this kind of sangha (e.g., Bechert 1970, 1973; Gunasekera 2004; Murthy 1989; Nelson 2020; Strenski 1983; Weiberg-Salzman 2014; Young 1970). In addition to the admission ceremonies that they undergo to join and perform the role of the sangha, the monks and nuns are distinguished from the rest of the Buddhist practitioners by their outfit, ascetic lifestyle, and roles as religious leaders, among other things (Murthy 1989, 5ff; Gunasekera 2004, 72ff). Describing the authority of this sangha in the time of the Buddha, Murthy (1989, 4) notes that “an

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<sup>7</sup> Shalom H. Schwartz has provided a typology of values that several scholars have found useful in the theorisation of value. See, for example, Schwartz (1994).

individual was ... always subordinate to the Sangha as the modern individual is subordinate to the state". Their roles were originally largely related to facilitating the journey towards nirvana for the Buddha's followers. Bechert (1973, 85) notes that in the early period of Buddhist history, the sangha avoided "any form of direct involvement in the affairs of the state and society". However, it is presently more common in several societies for monks and nuns to engage in public affairs (e.g., Nelson 2020, 200ff; Tho, Favoreu and Trew 2021; Queen 2000; Weiberg-Salzman 2014, 287ff; Yarnall 2000).

A more expansive understanding of sangha has become widespread, for example, in the UK. It is used to describe the "Buddhist community", or the people who follow the Buddha's teachings (Baxter 2006; Bluck 2006; Borchert 2012; Loftus 2021; Markowska 2024). In this broader sense, the sangha consists of the ordained and the laity, and has been used to describe specific Buddhist congregations, the national or cross-national community of Buddhists within a particular tradition, as well as the universal community of followers of the Buddha, among whom there are interdependencies in the journey to liberation (Baxter 2006; Bluck 2006; Borchert 2012; Kolata 2023, 292; Loftus 2021). As a sangha, the followers of the Buddha are meant to relate and practise religion as a community with a shared purpose. Although there are different understandings of sangha among British and other Buddhist groups, it is in this latter sense that the Buddhists in this study spoke about it. Noting that considerations about how to develop and sustain the sangha have motivated her New Kadampa centre's stoppage of virtual meditation, UKB3 states that:

It is best to come together rather than go through online, to be together, which we say sangha, your spiritual friends. We need to draw close and come together physically to work together to develop our minds ... coming together physically to engage in

meditation gives you a more powerful connection with others, while if you are looking at a screen it is not that strong.

A similar consideration was made at a Triratna centre, E, which had reinstated in-person-only meditations during the study. One of its teachers, UKB6, stated that individuals from outside the local area joined their virtual meditation sessions in ways that rarely happened before the introduction of digital meditation, “but in a way, the sense of deepening friendship, which is one of the primary values that our community is based on, it didn’t quite deepen”. Describing the centre’s position, he added:

Our view, I think it’s fair to say, is that if we don’t find a way to get people in in-person, and chatting with people, and forming these more organic friendships, then there has become a lack of depth or something about that which makes it more difficult to deepen their relationship with practices as we envision (UKB6).

UKB8, a leader in another Triratna centre, G, explained that “a few things” were considered by the leadership before they ended the use of the video conferencing programme Zoom for meditation, but “probably the most important thing is just that ... so much was lost in the communication through video calls”. Highlighting the importance of physical gathering for the sangha, he added that “just being in a person’s presence, the body language, and just physically being in the same room with someone makes a big difference” and practitioners “reinforce one another’s practice” and have “a sense of belonging” when they “are practising together with shared values and a shared ideal”. Similarly, Triratna centre F discontinued its virtual meditation sessions in part because “one of the main things for doing Buddhism ... is

encouraging a sense of community, encouraging people to link with each other, to interact with each other” (UKB7).

It is important to note that although most of the Buddhist centres in this study encouraged physical attendance at meditation sessions, the notion that physical co-presence was necessary for the authentic constitution and development of the sangha was challenged by UKB5, a Buddhist teacher who described his centre, D, as “an online-only sangha” and a growing “international online community”. At the time of the current research, the centre conducted two meditation sessions daily via Zoom, with attendees from Europe, the Americas, and Asia. To expand access to its meditation and other Buddhist resources available on its English website, the centre was preparing to offer the resources in Spanish. The leader observes that:

There are tens of thousands of people that speak Spanish in the USA and almost nobody makes any Buddhist content in the language. We have centres in Mexico, we have centres in Spain, maybe we could work together to provide those in Spanish and bring together different Spanish language groups who also need to be very diverse and come from different cultures ... We want to expand the online-only aspect to include as many people as possible (UKB5).

UKB9, who has led meditation sessions at this centre, agreed with the director, UKB5, that a sense of community was being cultivated at the virtual gatherings hosted by the centre. To demonstrate this, she narrated that when she was recently leading a retreat at an English city, “three different people came up to me and said ‘I feel like I know you because I see you in the [online] morning meditation’, and it was true – it felt like we are part of a community and we practise together”. She added that the international festivals, which the online centre

conducts via Zoom and are attended by practitioners from multiple countries, “help us keep a sense of international community, which for me is an important part of things [and] ... is one of the things I find quite inspiring about Triratna” (UKB9). Examples of such events are Triratna Day and Sangha Day, the anniversary of the Triratna community’s founding and the celebration of community, respectively (UKB9).

### **7.3 Resources**

Part of the significant practical considerations in some centres were related to resources, such as finances, personnel, and physical places of worship. At the early stage of the pandemic, Triratna centre H sold its property in a central part of a Scottish city. Before it was sold, the religious building was admired by the practitioners, some of whom were deeply attached to it because their significant life moments had been marked within the property by coreligionists. Following the sale, the group was unable to purchase a new property in a widely accessible central area. Before it rented rooms within a shared building in a remote location, its meditation was conducted solely via Zoom. A trustee at the centre, UKB9, explained that following the end of the lockdowns, the centre welcomed practitioners into its new rented worship space, but decided to continue virtual meditations that it had started during the pandemic because many practitioners had been unable to attend meditation at the new rented location. This combination of virtual and in-person activities has enabled the centre to retain the group of practitioners who prefer to worship virtually or cannot physically attend the new site.

Vajrayana centre K has had a similar experience. Describing its decision to conduct online-only meditation even though it has a physical religious space, UKB11, the director, stated that “our Buddhist practitioners are in the cloud now”. A year before the pandemic, the group moved from a more central neighbourhood to “a deprived area”, which, UKB11 observes, “disrupted a lot of the community of people who used to come to us in person”. She

notes that “we were still establishing ourselves” by the time the first lockdown began, so the centre has had to rely on Zoom to communicate with practitioners who had not attended the new building in person. Following the pandemic, individuals who use the building do so for what UKB11 described as “secular activities”, such as classes in wellbeing and stress management. UKB11 observes that the secular events are successful and relevant to the local community, “but the physical centre feels more like a well-being community hub than a Buddhist centre”. For her, a Buddhist centre is meant to be physically attended by followers of the Buddha who congregate to perform sacred activities in pursuit of nirvana, the Deliverance from the cycle of life and death. Her centre would welcome practitioners back to the building, but the Buddhist practitioners have simply not been physically attending the centre’s meditation since it changed address. Observing that “we no longer have that sense of a physical community of people who want to get together”, UKB11 reported that this current situation “is something we have had to think about a lot ... because as Mahayana practitioners, the in-person contact is really important”. In addition to the absence of practitioners’ physical attendance at the centre’s meditation sessions, she explained that the centre’s leadership continued its virtual meditation sessions after the pandemic because it did not want to disengage with the new practitioners who had become regular online participants in the centre’s practices during the pandemic. According to her, this population consists of individuals from “all over the UK and ... Europe”.

Although UKB12 explained that his centre, L, chose to retain its virtual meditation sessions and teachings alongside in-person gatherings, he added that “we did not take the weekly prayer sessions online, for a more practical reason” – the understanding that “they require additional time and human resources, and we try to be realistic about how much we can do without overwhelming our team members” (UKB12). Unlike Triratna centre E, which discontinued its virtual meditation in part because it has a small team, Triratna centre J, the

largest centre examined in this research, decided to sustain and expand its digital programmes because, according to its leader, UKB10, “we are a large centre ...[and] we have quite a large team to support the classes that we run and we have the people to do the tech”, “people appreciate it [that is, the online meditation] and share information to us for that work”, and online presence has given the centre “a really big reach”. He added that practitioners donate to enable the online meditation sessions, so they “financially support the centre as well” (UKB10). Clarifying his centre’s intention not to lose the practitioners who prefer to attend virtually, he explained that “in a way ideally you want people to come [to in-person gatherings] but there are also a group of people who just would not come”, and “that group of people, maybe they are too far away, so we are actually able to work out something” (UKB10).

#### **7.4 Demand and Convenience**

One major factor that determined whether the centres chose to discontinue or maintain their virtual meditation programmes was the presence or absence of practitioners who demanded that meditation be digitally accessible. Describing his centre’s decision to reinstate in-person-only meditation, a teacher at the major Triratna centre in a city, F, explained that following the lockdowns,

What we increasingly found was people felt they were sick of online stuff, they wanted to be in person, so basically, a lot of our hybrid classes, we just stopped doing them because people were not coming and it’s just a lot of hassle to kind of set up this online thing and it is only two people that show up (UKB7).

Similarly, a New Kadampa centre, C, fully returned to physical meditation within its building, mainly because the number of virtual attendees was minimal compared to the

number attending in person. One of its leaders, UKB4, explained that “we were getting like one or two people watching online ... while 10 to 15 in the [in-person] meditation and ... a lot of work goes into setting up to do it online”. He added that “we could put more things online” if there were more interest.

Theravada temple A was affected differently by the presence of practitioners’ demand for digital meditation. The interviewee from the temple, UKB1, explained that they chose to sustain a hybrid approach because the community has practitioners who demand remote access to the communal rituals, whose preferences the temple takes seriously. Some of what his centre considered were: “some people who are not able to come personally here because of their busy schedule on a particular day”, people can “look after their child at home and still join online”, and “sometimes we can’t accommodate larger gatherings here [in the temple]”. Another monk at the temple, UKB2, added that it was clear to them that the virtual option benefits practitioners with health impairments and the older members who “can’t come to the temple, not because of disease but because of their age”. By participating in meditation at the temple, the author observed that it followed a particular pattern at weekly meditations, in which practitioners who joined online were able to engage in a rich dialogue with the priests and practitioners present in the temple. For example, at three separate meditation sessions held in different weeks, the author observed that the teacher invited online and physical participants to share their thoughts after his scriptural reading and reflection. During the communal reflections on the sermon, the teacher commonly asked the attendees, both online and in the temple, whether they could hear and see each other. At the same time, a fellow instructor or one of the practitioners assisted in adjusting the camera, computer screen, or loudspeaker in the meditation room.

A leader at Vajrayana Centre L, which decided to combine its virtual teachings and meditation sessions with in-person gatherings, explained that,

When we launched a major online education program during the lockdown, we were inundated with students wanting to participate. It became clear that students who could not physically come to the centre wanted to benefit from what we could offer, so the primary reason for continuing programs in a hybrid fashion was to meet that need. In a way, it seemed inevitable that we would continue to offer programs online. The wish for us to offer that from students was so great (UKB12).

The new media has increased the number of people attending this centre's meditation sessions, and its decision regarding post-pandemic media use was shaped by an intention to maintain a connection with virtual attendees. The participant from the centre added that,

The number of students attending the Centre has gone up, both in-person and online, but most notably online. You might have a program where between 20 and 40 people attend in person, which is not dissimilar to before the pandemic, whereas online, you might have between 60 and 80, if not more, and this is a significant shift. That group of students simply wouldn't have had the opportunity to attend online for most classes before the pandemic (UKB12).

Simply put, the centre attracts a sizable number of practitioners with its digital meditation and is not willing to lose this growing number of practitioners.

### ***7.5 The Effectiveness of Digital Technology***

A relatively small Triratna centre, E, chose to end virtual meditation in part because of the disruption that digital technology brings into the meditation practice. One of its teachers, UKB6, explained that whenever there were members online and at the centre for meditation,

“it feels like you are divided in some ways that you cannot focus on either group” (UKB6).

When asked for further clarification, he narrated that:

There was a certain kind of challenge when you have a room with a few people in it and a camera, and you know there were a number of people there [online].

Increasingly, it sort of seemed to be helpful if we had a screen set up so that the teacher could see who was online on the Zoom call. But ... in a way, it is easier to see the mood of [practitioners] and how people were receiving things if it is not online. I sort of found it okay to divide my attention and respond to people online at the same time, but I know that some people said they found it difficult and could not do both at the same time properly. And it seemed that generally, people tend to teach the room and then occasionally bring in the online participants, so in-person became the primary part of the event (UKB6).

Similarly, the central New Kadampa centre in a city, B, decided to discontinue its digital meditation because “it got to a point where actually it [the camera] became a little intrusive for people in the [meditation] room and not many people were attending online” (UKB3). A leader at the centre explained that “when you’ve got a room full of people and something happened with the online, everyone got affected because everyone knew there was something not right, and then their attention is a little bit pulled” (UKB3).

## **8 Discussion**

### ***8.1 Determinants of Religious Communities' Adoption of New Media***

To some extent, the Religious-Social Shaping of Technology framework is relevant to the analysis of British religious communities' decisions over their post-pandemic adoption of digital spaces as sites for communal rituals (Campbell 2010, 2017). As explained earlier, it

proposes that beliefs, traditions, and core values are essential for religious groups deciding on their relationship with new media (Campbell 2010, 2017). Some British Buddhist communities' decisions to maintain or discontinue the virtual mindfulness meditation they initiated during the pandemic were partly shaped by their considerations about how to promote the Buddhist value sangha in the digital age, as well as the consistency of meditation conducted via Zoom with the teachings of the Buddha. However, some essentially sought to respond to changes in their environment in ways that balance out "economic sustainability, cultural relevance, and ideas of religious tradition" (Starkey 2024, 181). Some communities strongly considered the costs and benefits of sustaining or discontinuing digital activities, especially regarding (a) the centres' personnel size, technological expertise, and financial strength, (b) the presence or absence of practitioners' demand for virtual access to meditation sessions, (c) revenue generation, and (d) the role of virtual access in retaining or expanding existing participation in rituals. Overall, considerations about the sangha and conformity with Buddhist traditions were important for religious communities. Still, they were at times less significant than pragmatic thinking about the concrete costs and benefits of adopting or not employing new media in particular ways under existing circumstances (Chow and Kurlberg 2020; Claisse and Durrant 2023; Obadia 2020; Schonthal and Jayatilake 2021).

In recent years, religious communities have responded to the phenomenon of online worship in various ways (Campbell 2010, 22ff; Hutchings 2017, 3f; Campbell 2022, 186f). This study suggests that at the congregational or local level, the adoption of media for sacred activities by religious communities can be understood not only through their traditions and core values, but also through their resource strength and population type. A leader of the largest centre in this study, J, stated that his community combines digital and in-person meditation despite the massive efforts that go into them because it has the necessary team, technological expertise, and finances. On the other hand, some of the centres that chose to

conduct only in-person meditation attributed this decision partly to their small size and minimal economic strength. In addition, if practitioners' demand for virtual access to meditation was present in some communities but not in others, and the former set of communities sustained their virtual meditation sessions to prevent losing practitioners who could not worship in person, then one could also understand some religious communities' media use by considering their lay membership. Centre A has a significant elderly membership that has been attending meditation sessions via Zoom since the pandemic. In contrast, large university student populations attend the meditation sessions at Centres J and K. The three centres referred to their membership types while explaining their decisions to continue providing virtual access to meditation.

## ***8.2 Digital Technology and the Sustainability of Religious Groups***

Studies show that the strategies that religious communities have adopted to maintain their sustainability include expanding their sources of revenue beyond members' contributions, evangelising to gain converts and retaining them through various techniques, using branding that boosts the image of the community, establishing additional sites for geographical expansion, enabling religious continuity between their population and their offspring, reshaping their practices in ways that generate higher satisfaction among their population, recognising or responding to the strategies of competing religious communities, and adopting effective management structures and techniques (Davis 2021; Einstein 2011; Hoge and Roozen 1979; Jo, Kim and Lee 2021; Kitawi and Irungu 2015; Pillay 2020; Plante 2024; Stoodley 2023; Zimmer and Sellmann 2024). Bluck (2006) and Starkey (2024) have also demonstrated the various ways in which minority Buddhist groups in Britain intentionally adapt their communal practices, not only in response to external societal transformations, but also as strategies for sustainability. Bluck (2006, 182ff) has shown that with the spread of Buddhism to Britain, several British Buddhist groups have, over time,

sought to adapt the religion to the British context in a variety of ways while keeping some of its traditional components, for example, by incorporating the English language in hymnal chanting, developing lay study groups, and in some cases not formally distinguishing between monastic and lay practitioners. Furthermore, Starkey (2024, 179ff) has considered how some Buddhist organisations in Britain have responded to the crowding of the “Buddhist and Buddhist-inspired marketplace” in the country, marked by “the national rise in popularity of secular mindfulness and associated activities to promote mental and physical wellbeing”, and the growth since the late 20th century in the number of Buddhist groups operating within different British areas and “offering a plethora of choices” to the Buddhist and non-Buddhist population. By providing both secular and traditional Buddhist meditation sessions to the public, rather than just the latter form, some Buddhist groups have been able to appeal to a broader UK population, “bringing in much-needed revenue for financial sustainability” and “sustaining and developing their position in the public sphere” (Starkey 2024, 179).

The current study shows that one other technique that some religious minorities in post-pandemic Britain have adopted for sustainability is maintaining the use of digital sites for rituals. The communities exist within a context marked by religious decline and the increasing preponderance of new media in the way people think and act. As explained earlier, the latter phenomenon has been described as deep mediatisation (Couldry and Hepp 2017; Hepp 2020a, 2020b; Hepp, Breiter, and Hasebrink 2018). The new media significantly shape how humans access and interact with others, as well as the way they operate in the religious and other spheres of society. As Hepp (2020b, 932) has observed, how people live “is no longer imaginable outside the realm of digital media and their infrastructures”. To adapt to the social transformations of new media, the media’s existing relevance in the lives of individual religious practitioners, and their benefits for religious groups, some British Buddhist communities have reshaped how they conduct their central sacred activities by

standardising the religious application of cloud-based video conferencing tools. The increasing ubiquity of digital technology in society presents both challenges and opportunities to religious communities. For instance, the internet can serve “as both a space of empowerment ... and as a venue that further increases social exclusion” for religious minorities (Evolvi 2024, 373; cf. Pennigton 2018; Renser and Tiidenberg 2020). The internet has made the communal rituals of some British Buddhist centres accessible beyond their physical locations in British neighbourhoods, thereby changing the centres from geographically restricted minority centres to sites that are accessible beyond their physical locations. To some degree, the new media have also constrained the decision-making power of religious leaders. Even though the leaders of the Buddhist centres decided how their communities would conduct meditation in the post-pandemic period, their decisions were at times based on factors beyond their control, such as the continued presence of a virtual audience and the necessity of maintaining their centres’ online presence.

## **9 Conclusion**

When public activities were restricted to curb the spread of COVID-19, several religious groups continued their communal rituals within internet-enabled digital spaces. In the post-pandemic period, some groups continued to conduct virtual rituals, while others did not. With original ethnographic data from England and Scotland, this study has shown that the decisions of some British Buddhist centres over the adoption of internet-based digital spaces as sites for communal religious activity in the post-pandemic era were determined, not merely by the consideration of Buddhist traditions and core values, but also by more practical issues, such as resource scarcity and the cost of not adapting to the social transformations of media. The pragmatic considerations were sometimes the most significant determinants, as some minority communities sought to adopt new digital practices that would enable their sustainability in a context of religious decline and deep mediatisation, by giving them access

to practitioners and resources that would be lost without continued media presence. Future research may consider the extent to which the performance of digital religious practices has influenced the sustainability of religious communities in a secularising and deeply mediatized Britain.

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#### ***Ethical considerations***

This study was approved by the Arts and Humanities Ethics and Governance Committee of Manchester Metropolitan University (reference no. 47738) on 21 February 2023.

#### ***Consent to participate***

Interviewees provided informed written consent to participate in the study.

#### ***Consent for publication***

Participants provided informed written consent for the publication of interview data.

### ***Declaration of conflicting interest***

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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