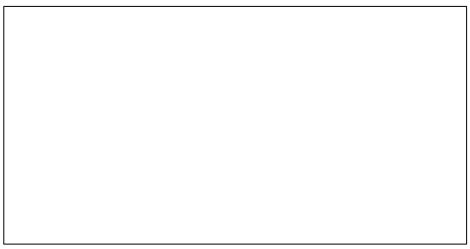

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Khat, community, and cultural expression: the performative experiences of young British-Somali men

Spencer Swain

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Khat, community, and cultural expression: the performative experiences of young British-Somali men

Spencer Swain

Education, Languages and Psychology, York St John University, York, UK

ABSTRACT

This research examines how understandings of identity are formed through the ritual of khat-chewing, a popular leisure activity among British-Somali men, and how this ritual shapes diasporic imaginations. The study conceptualises khat as an embodied aesthetic practice, highlighting its role in fostering community, belonging, and cultural expression. Ethnographic fieldwork within one of Britain's largest Somali communities reveals how khat use facilitates connections to Somaliland and Somali culture while contributing to the formation of 'new ethnicities' at the intersection of migration and nationhood. The findings challenge essentialist notions of identity by illustrating its fluidity. Additionally, the study sheds light on the complex negotiations of 'Britishness' and 'Somaliness' that young men navigate through the practice, reflecting their heritage and contemporary diasporic experiences.

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Introduction

Burdsey (2017) and De Martini Ugolotti (2022) explain that migration involves a continuous negotiation of identity and belonging within host societies, shaped by the interplay between individuals' aspirations, available resources, structural constraints in the host context, and cultural traditions from countries of origin. In response, research on diasporic identities has critiqued rigid nationalist ideologies by exploring how migrants mobilise resources to forge syncretic identities (De Martini Ugolotti, 2024; Thompson, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 2011). These transnational networks and practices are critical in unsettling essentialist understandings of identity, particularly those entrenched in nationalist discourses (Nunn et al., 2021; Vertovec, 2001). Hall (1990) and Werbner (2004) argue that such processes generate hybrid and fluid forms of belonging, directly contesting the reductive notion of static, nation-bound identities. Gilroy's (1993) critique underscores how these ideas counter the imagined authenticity of the nation-state.

> The intellectual heritage of Euro-American modernity determined and possible still determines the manner in which nationality is understood within black political discourse. In particular, this legacy conditions the continuing aspiration to acquire a supposedly authentic, natural, and stable 'rooted' identity. (Gilroy, 1993, p. 30)

CONTACT Spencer Swain s.swain@yorksj.ac.uk York St John University, Lord Mayors Walk, York, UK

Despite these ongoing critiques, migrant youth often find their identities fixed to the margins of host societies, a phenomenon Sayad (2004) refers to as a 'mirror function'. Here, the children of migrants are understood to reflect the unresolved tensions of Europe's (post)colonial past, exposing the silences and erasures that obscure its entanglements with the Other – once the colonised, now immigrants and their descendants (De Martini Ugolotti, 2024). In Britain, these dynamics are intensified by anxieties over cultural authenticity, the resurgence of ethno-nationalist politics, and moral panics surrounding 'open borders' and 'uncontrolled migration', which persistently position migrant youth as outsiders in discourses about national belonging (Ratna, 2024).

Such debates are evident within research on the Somali diaspora, particularly the experiences of British-Somali youth (Mason, 2018). Somali migration to the UK has deep historical roots, beginning in the late nineteenth century when seafarers from British Somaliland[1] settled in port cities such as London, Cardiff, and Liverpool (Carver, 2021). Migration continued through the mid-twentieth century, with Somali workers seeking employment in industrial centres like Sheffield, Manchester, and Birmingham. However, the Somali presence in Britain expanded dramatically following the Somali Civil War in the early 1990s, which forced many to flee conflict and instability. Upon arrival, Somali refugees encountered systemic barriers, including restricted access to employment, language difficulties, racial discrimination, and increasing reliance on the welfare system (Abdullahi & Wei, 2021). Today, Somali communities remain concentrated in economically deprived urban areas, where poverty, inadequate housing, and high unemployment persist (Osman et al., 2015). These socioeconomic conditions contribute to elevated physical and mental health challenges and obstacles to integrating younger diaspora members into British society (Mason, 2018; Sporton et al., 2006). Despite these hardships, Summerfield (2024) explains how British Somalis cultivate a sense of diasporic belonging through affective ties, political mobilisation, and community activism.

This paper examines the role of khat use in shaping young British-Somali men's perceptions of identity and belonging in the diaspora. Framing khat-chewing as an embodied cultural tradition reveals how this form of leisure serves as a site of aesthetic formation (Spaaij & Broerse, 2018), facilitating diasporic imaginations and fostering social cohesion. By analysing khat-chewing as a form of embodied leisure, the paper interrogates how it functions as a performative space where diasporic consciousness is negotiated and enacted. In doing so, the article engages with broader discussions on the intersections of leisure and diaspora, drawing parallels with research on music (De Martini Ugolotti, 2022), cricket (Fletcher, 2015; Joseph, 2014), and football (Burdsey & Doyle, 2022; Ratna, 2014; Spaaij & Broerse, 2018). The paper first contextualises khat-chewing within Somali cultural traditions before engaging with theoretical perspectives on diaspora. It then outlines the research methodology before presenting findings looking at khat's influence on identity and belonging among young British-Somali men.

Khat-chewing and Somaliness

Khat-chewing, a popular form of recreation in Somaliland and across the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, involves the communal consumption of the shrub *Catha Edulis* (Hansen, 2013). When chewed, the tender leaves release cathinone, a mild natural stimulant absorbed through the cheek lining, inducing alertness and sociability (Burdsey,

2006). Hansen (2013) explains that beyond its recreational use, khat serves as a potent symbol of patriarchal masculinity, deeply ingrained in the social and cultural hierarchies of Somaliland society. Predominantly a male ritual, khat consumption occurs within the exclusive confines of the *mafrish*—male-only spaces akin to café-style lounges (Hansen, 2010; Swain et al., 2025). Like alcohol in Western contexts, khat acts as both a social lubricant and a tool for maintaining power structures. Within the *mafrish*, masculinity is performed and reinforced through hierarchical knowledge production, with storytelling, debate, and oral tradition serving as mechanisms for asserting intellectual dominance (Anderson et al., 2007). These spaces not only facilitate socialisation but also actively sustain patriarchal authority by consolidating male networks and excluding women from key spheres of influence. Harris (2005) explains how the performative aspect of khat-chewing extends beyond mere consumption, representing a ritualised assertion of Somali male identity. Consequently, who chews, in whose company, and in what setting are markers of social status and cultural legitimacy. Through this process, khat-chewing in Somaliland has been understood as a central resource in solidifying male authority and reinforcing power structures that shape personal and collective identities (Hansen, 2010).

Khat consumption is a vital cultural link for Somali men in the diaspora, particularly in Northern Europe, North America, the Middle East, and East Africa (Anderson et al., 2007; Carrier, 2017; Klantschnig & Carrier, 2018). For older Somali men, chewing khat transcends mere recreation; it is a symbolic practice that reinforces their connection to their homeland and preserves a sense of cultural continuity in foreign environments. In these transnational settings, khat-chewing acts as an anchor, helping users navigate the alienation and systemic barriers they face, such as racism, Islamophobia, and high unemployment (Markussen, 2020). According to Anderson et al. (2007), in the absence of familiar social structures, the *mafrish* has become a sanctuary, offering camaraderie, nostalgia, and a reaffirmation of Somali masculinity. However, khat use within Somali diasporic communities is highly contested. Women's advocacy groups have long criticised the practice, arguing that it contributes to social and economic instability by encouraging male neglect of familial responsibilities, increasing financial strain on tight household budgets, and exacerbating domestic tensions (Patel, 2015; Swain, 2017). Similarly, conservative Islamic factions, particularly those influenced by *Wahhabism*, reject khat as *haram* (forbidden), claiming it induces intoxication and moral decline (Klein, 2013). Despite these criticisms, many Somali men view khat as a vital part of their cultural identity, resisting assimilation pressures from Western societies and conservative religious teachings.

The political landscape surrounding khat further complicates its role in Somali diasporic identity. Although the UK's Advisory Council for the Misuse of Drugs (Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs [ACMD], 2013) dismissed claims that khat poses significant harm, sustained lobbying from anti-khat groups, coupled with unverified allegations linking the khat trade to militant financing of organisations like *Al Shabaab*, led to its prohibition in the UK and several Western nations (Caulfield, 2016; Thomas & Williams, 2013). These bans have criminalised a longstanding cultural practice, further marginalising Somali men and reinforcing perceptions of their community as a social problem. The contested position of khat within the diaspora highlights the liminal space in which young Somali men construct their identities (Swain et al., 2024). This situation underscores how these young men are caught between cultural

preservation and socio-political pressures. In this context, chewing khat is a performative act of resistance, a claim to belonging, and an assertion of Somali male identity in exile (Kallehave, 2001). Understanding these dynamics can contribute to broader scholarship on the role of leisure in migrant identity formation, particularly within diasporic communities (Spaaij & Broerse, 2018).

Diaspora, identity performance, and aesthetic formations

Research into diasporic formations and their relationship with the performance of identity challenges the notion of 'homogenised and static' national identities, emphasising the fluid and dynamic process of migrant identity formation (Clifford, 1997; Shen & Rowe, 2025). Following this tradition, Vertovec (2000) conceptualises diasporas not merely as dispersed populations but as complex processes of 'cultural production, formation, and consciousness' that transcend fixed territorial boundaries. This perspective reframes diasporas as evolving networks shaped by intersecting cultural flows, manifesting in literature, music, sport, and other cultural resources. In this context, khat-chewing exemplifies a transnational practice that traverses multiple 'routes', fostering a sense of belonging among geographically dispersed communities (Hall, 1994). Gilroy (1993, p. 85) asserts that such forms of diasporic affiliation and identification 'cannot be confined within the borders of the nation-state', underscoring the limitations of nationalist frameworks in capturing the lived experiences of diaspora. Consequently, rather than viewing migration as a rupture, such scholarship positions it as an active site of meaning-making, where cultural flows reconfigure identity beyond conventional geopolitical constraints.

Understanding diaspora as a social form or communal entity requires engaging with dispersion processes from a central location, maintaining a sense of homeland (e.g. the nation of origin), and developing an understanding of home (e.g. a sense of belonging) (Brah, 1996). Anthias (2001) explains how this is achieved through social networks, memory sharing, economic strategies, and communication. These forms of cultural connection enable diasporas to represent a consciousness that emphasises identity, whether through experiences of racial subordination or pride in one's cultural heritage. Hall's (1994) work on the African Caribbean diaspora explores how immigrants may have little actual attachment to a physical homeland but possess a strong sense of identity through imagined connections to other places and times. He describes such communities as sharing identities developed through the 'imaginative rediscovery' of a heritage that figures Africa as a motherland, passed down through 'memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth' (Hall, 1994, p. 395). These identities are 'constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference' (Ibid). Through this perspective, a diasporic consciousness is shaped through interactions with other ethnic groups, complicating fixed notions of minority and majority status. Brah's (1996) concept of 'diaspora space' problematises these binaries, revealing how power operates multidimensionally. This perspective exposes how migrant communities, like the Somali diaspora in Britain, navigate both racial victimhood and exclusionary practices, as well as cultural pride in their homeland.

Conceiving diaspora as a form of consciousness resonates with Brubaker's (2005) notion of diaspora as a *category of practice* rather than a fixed identity (Joseph, 2014).

This perspective shifts attention from static markers of belonging to the dynamic ways individuals enact diasporic life. Scholars such as Hylton and Lawrence (2016) and Swain et al. (2018) draw on Goffman's (Goffman, [1959] 1990) dramaturgical framework to analyse how diasporic subjects stage and negotiate identities across 'front' and 'back' regions (Goffman, of social life. While this performative lens illuminates how impression management mediates public and private selves, it often privileges representation over the material and affective dimensions of community. In contrast, Spaijj and Broerse (2019) advance Meyer's (2009) concept of *aesthetic formation* to explore how diasporic belonging is cultivated through embodied, sensory, and affective engagements. Meyer's study of religious environments demonstrates that communal life emerges not merely through shared imagination, as in Anderson's (1991) work on 'imagined communities', but through tangible forms, such as architecture, sound, gesture, and ritual that allow a sense of community to be experienced. Extending this insight, Spaijj and Broerse emphasise that diasporic attachment is sustained through visceral, multisensory experience. This framework is particularly salient for understanding khat-chewing, an embodied leisure practice that materialises belonging through shared sensory and emotional intimacy (Swain, 2021; Swain et al., 2021). Subsequently, rather than treating diaspora as an abstract identity, the concept of aesthetic formation reveals how everyday practices of consumption, sociability, and sensation generate lived forms of diasporic consciousness and collective attachment.

Methods

This article draws on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork within one of the UK's largest Somali communities in Northern England. The study centres on the narratives of young British-Somali men and their lived experiences. It also includes insights from a broader community cross-section, such as elders, women, anti-khat activists, and professionals from youth services, social work, and local government, all of whom have a stake in khat regulation and its social impact. Drawing on Bucerius's (2013) research on second-generation migrants in Germany, this study examines migration, identity, and social integration. Most young men interviewed were born in Somaliland and arrived in the UK as children, while others came from Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands through secondary migrations. A smaller group was UK-born to parents who fled the Somali Civil War. Their socioeconomic statuses varied, from students and young professionals to those in precarious labour or unemployment.

The ethnographic fieldwork (Gobo, 2008) comprised fifty-one semi-structured interviews, three focus group discussions (each involving four to six participants), and extensive participant observation over 18 months. Fieldwork settings included khat-chewing sessions, community gatherings, and everyday social interactions. It is important to state that the researcher did not use khat during observations for legal and ethical reasons. Specifically, refraining from chewing khat was necessary to avoid breaching UK law, as khat has been classified as a controlled substance since June 2014; engaging in its use would therefore have constituted an illegal act. This decision shaped the researcher's positionality and influenced trust-building with participants. While abstention initially created a sense of distance, it prompted reflective discussions about legality, morality, and cultural identity, enriching the

ethnographic engagement in unexpected ways. To ensure anonymity, the neighbourhood has been pseudonymised as 'Brampton', and all participants selected their own pseudonyms – avoiding arbitrary or humorous ones to prevent reproducing colonial or racial hierarchies (Fletcher, 2015; Ratna, 2014).

Adopting an ethnographic approach highlighted the complexities of researcher positionality (Coffey, 1999), particularly given the researcher's identity as a white British male. This biographical proximity fostered familiarity with several respondents, mirroring Willis's (1977) experience studying working-class youth culture. However, the researcher's non-Somali identity required an ongoing negotiation of insider-outsider status (Woodward, 2008). Armstrong (1998) and Carrington (2008) observed that liminal positionality can offer advantages and constraints contingent on spatial and social dynamics. In this study, longstanding social ties, particularly with former schoolmates, provided privileged access to participants who might otherwise have been unreachable. Conversely, the researchers' white British identity sometimes functioned as a barrier, shaping interactions and, at times, limiting trust, thereby influencing the scope of inquiry (Fletcher, 2014). This research acknowledges the ethical and epistemological tensions inherent in white scholars narrating the experiences of minoritised communities (Duneier, 2004; Young, 2004). Aware of this situation as a white, middle-class man writing about individuals from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, the researcher sought to represent their narratives with nuance, respect, and accuracy. Beyond ethical responsibility (Lawrence & Hylton, 2022), this work aims to inform policymakers about migrant youth's lived realities and drive meaningful social change (Rollock et al., 2015). Given Northern England's history of racial inequalities and exclusionary white masculinity (Fletcher & Swain, 2016), amplifying Brampton's Somali community voices is both urgent and necessary.

Khat-chewing and the mafrish as a diasporic meeting place

A prominent theme that emerged from the narratives shared by research participants was the role of khat-chewing as a meaningful, though temporary, gathering space for young British Somali men living in the UK. Participants spoke about how visiting the *mafrish* offered a unique opportunity to engage with others, forge social connections, and cultivate a shared Somali identity.

> My mum told me how khat played a major part in my dad's and granddad's lives. Chewing became big here in the 80s and 90s when a lot of Somalis arrived here. A lot of Somalis chew because of the civil war because there was no work, and many were forced into exile. I think many felt useless and came together to support one another. (Osman, 22, khat user, young professional)

> It's like how English people use the pub; well, khat is our cultural thing. You chew khat and tell stories that go hand in hand with the Somali tradition of passing on stories orally. (Ahmed, 24, khat user, unemployed)

The sense of belonging and social connection fostered by khat use was a key reason young Somali men frequented these gatherings, during which many spoke of the *mafrish* as a vital space for social interaction. Interestingly, many community members noted that

the *mafrish* served as a platform for socialising and learning, bringing together young British-Somali men with diverse migration experiences.

> It (mafrish) is a space where people try to keep their identity; it is something (khat-chewing) that has always been done back home, and it is something that they are so used to and something that brings everyone together. It is that idea of something to unite around. (Abdullah, Somali, Social worker)

In this context, the research gained insight into how the *mafrish* functioned as a diasporic meeting place, facilitating users' interactions and connections with others with similar experiences. Interestingly, this connection was informed by participants' cultural interest in Somali culture and traditions, a point highlighted by Murad (documentary filmmaker on khat):

> The reason for chewing khat is tradition, I would see them playing music that had originated from back 'home'. So, 19/20-year-olds are playing traditional music in the background while chewing. These guys would have never listened to Somali music before, but they would put it on when they were chewing. That really interested me.

Such insights demonstrate how cultural spaces facilitate interest in Somali history, society, and language in both the homeland and the diaspora.

As Anthias (2001) reminds us, feelings of belonging to the diaspora are often based on an imagined, intangible connection to other dispersed people who share a national, cultural, and/or ethnic background. Through such thinking, the research found that khat use cultivated an imagined sense of belonging amongst young Somali men in what Meyer (2009, p. 5) refers to as a 'real' lived environment. The following fieldnote demonstrates how users drew on various diasporic (and local) resources during khat-chewing sessions, including Somali cultural artefacts such as flags and symbols, language, music, and historical knowledge that helped to fashion a tangible and visceral experience of the diaspora.

> The room exudes nostalgia and cultural pride, representing a carefully curated reflection of traditional Somali culture. The *mafrish* is anchored by a black leather sofa positioned near the door, offering a view of various personal photographs that chronicle the lives of 'two and a half' (Abdi's uncle) and Abdi during his younger years. The images in Somaliland feature families gathered outside white-bricked buildings, their flat roofs standing stark against a barren desert backdrop. This visual story of the family is enhanced by the presence of a small Somaliland flag on the wall, its three horizontal stripes – green, white with a Black star in the centre, and red – proudly displayed, evoking a powerful sense of national identity. A crimson rug lies at the centre of the room, its intricate Arabic inscriptions and mosaic pattern suggesting the deep cultural significance of the space. The ornaments scattered throughout the room carry a Somali aesthetic, further enhancing the sense of cultural immersion. A wooden face mask, hanging above the T.V., gazes down with an imposing presence, while a stone-carved model of a woman in robes, engaged in baking, next to a picture of the Arsenal football team from the early 2000s, occupies a prominent spot on the fireplace. The room is filled with the sweet aroma of incense, a detail that immediately evokes a sense of tranquillity and connection to traditions. This is the setting for a deeply rooted cultural practice – the khat-chewing ritual, which unfolds in a space where every object, photo, and decoration reflects a deeper connection to Somali heritage. As the session begins, Abdi and the dozen other men in the room prepare the leaves meticulously while sitting cross-legged on the floor, their slow, deliberate

> movements mimicking traditional Somali customs. The act of chewing khat is more than a simple indulgence. It is a communal act marked by conversations, stories, and a deep connection to the past. This practice, undertaken in a space filled with symbols of Somali culture, reinforces a sense of community and identity while maintaining continuity with cultural heritage. (Fieldnote – khat-chewing session - evening)

The *mafrish* can be seen here as an opportunity for users to engage in aesthetic embodied connection with Somali cultural identity. Although this session took place in a council flat, the room was transformed into a diasporic space through prominent symbols associated with Somali culture. Consequently, the *mafrish* can be interpreted as a site of socialisation into Somali culture and tradition for second-generation British-Somali youth who may have fewer opportunities for direct exposure to Somali culture than their parents.

Interestingly, the ties fostered through such leisure developed into a sense of imagined belonging, around which a community and connection were forged. This point was unpacked by Faizal (student), who explained:

> We refer to khat houses as dungeons, which feel like another society. It feels like another world to the rest of the community. It is a different way of thinking and a different outlook on life. That is because nothing else matters if you have the khat and companionship the chewing session brings.

Whereas other research on transnational diasporic ties centres on a shared sense of imagined belonging, chewing khat regularly enabled social ties to develop into established face-to-face relationships. Moreover, the opportunity to collectively experience and perform sensory-aesthetic Somali practices, such as tasting khat, speaking Somali, listening to Somali songs, and being surrounded by aesthetic images and symbols of Somali culture, helped foster a sense of community and togetherness around a shared idea of the diaspora.

Khat-chewing and the aesthetic formation of Somaliness

The forms of identification and belonging enacted through the materialised perceptions of diasporism in khat-chewing sessions can be further interpreted by situating the lives of young British-Somali men in North England. Throughout the research, participants were more consciously aware and proud of their Somali identity and heritage in the *mafrish*, aligning with other research examples (Fletcher, 2015; Joseph, 2014) that show how this increases their sense of belonging to, and 'roots' in, the homeland and Somali diasporic communities. In this context, the mafrish offered a space to interact with people with similar experiences.

> It (khat) always involves stories; it is like a conversation over tea, but this time, you are getting more talkative because of the khat. That causes more buzz and flow in the conversation . . . we talk about everything: religion, politics, and the things going in the local area. One thing they like to talk about is who they know. So, they will talk about a particular tribe and the person who knows all the different surnames, and then they prove their knowledge of the past and their homeland. It proves that you are aware of your culture. That is looked upon very well. (Ahmed, 21, khat user)

This aspect of diasporic connection was also observed numerous times in the *mafrish*, as the following fieldnote shows:

> As I settle into the *mafrish*, I begin to observe its inner workings, quickly realising that this space is far more than just a place to chew khat—it is a cultural hub, a bridge between past and present, home and diaspora. The first thing that strikes me is the rhythm of conversation, which consistently revolves around Somaliland. Discussions range from nostalgic recollections of its history to hopeful projections of an eventual return. Beyond personal aspirations, history takes centre stage. The men around me display a deep, almost encyclopaedic knowledge of Somali clan structures, particularly the Isaaq tribe and its sub-clans, Habr Je'lo and Habr Yunis. I find myself welcomed into these intricate discussions, the *mafrish* doubling as an informal classroom where lineage and political legacies are passionately debated. It becomes increasingly clear that the *mafrish* is more than a social space; it is a site of cultural reproduction. Here, hierarchy is subtly established not through wealth or status but through knowledge of history, clan politics, and belonging. In the *mafrish*, the currency of respect is the ability to narrate the past, to anchor oneself within a rich and ever-unfolding Somali identity. (Fieldnote, khat-chewing session - evening)

This connection to Somali culture helped users build a sense of community and social capital, enabling them to get to know one another and engage in dialogue.

In addition to creating a sense of belonging to the 'homeland', the *mafrish* also functioned as a site where a strong sense of transnational belonging could form. As scholars examining the relationship between leisure and diaspora (Burdsey, 2006; Yazici, 2024; Zhu et al., 2024) have noted, cultural events serve as a conduit for cultural flow between the homeland and the dispersed diasporic community. The research found that the *mafrish* served as a site around which global encounters were but one aspect of the transnational lives many of them led. Here, chewing khat helped many users feel part of a broader Somali consciousness after migrating to the UK from other European countries.

> Both Akim and Abdi-Shakur express mixed feelings about the shifting identities of the Somali community in the city as they sip their coffee. On the one hand, they view the emergence of a more syncretic urban culture as positive, noting that it has helped ease tensions between Somalis and other ethnic groups in the city. On the other hand, they voice deep concern over what they see as a detachment from traditional Somali values and cultural knowledge. Akim describes how Somalis who grew up outside the area are sometimes mocked when they visit Broomhall to pray or play football and labelled as 'Euro Trash' by their peers and elders. This perceived cultural disconnect is particularly frustrating for Abdi-Shakur, as it reminds him of his struggles after migrating to the UK from Holland. He recalls the embarrassment of being teased for his broken Somali: 'I remember how I was teased; when I first came from Holland, my Somali was atrocious. But these guys don't even care – that's what annoys me. I tried hard to learn, proving I hadn't lost my culture. For me, chewing khat helped – I'd sit in the *mafrish*, listening, picking up words, and feeling more Somali with each session. But these guys don't even try'. For Abdi-Shakur, khat sessions were more than just a social ritual; they were a means of cultural reclamation, a way to reconnect with a cultural heritage he was desperate to be a part of. (Fieldnote: khat and identity formation – Local coffee shop)

While others spoke about the role of the *mafrish* in helping them connect with family members and broader Somali culture on their return to Somaliland, Abdi-Rahman highlighted this perspective by discussing how chewing khat and engaging in traditional Somali customs helped him connect with family members in Somaliland. 'I felt that my

cousins respected me a lot more when they realised that I could chew (khat); that shocked them, and they invited me out with them to chew . . . it allowed me to fit in more and feel comfortable in the *mafrish* out there (in Somaliland)'. While Sahra, someone who described herself as anti-khat, admitted that many young British-Somali men used khat as a way of 'maintaining a connection with their homeland, they are just following what they see their fathers and uncles doing'. These transnational connections, whether temporary or long-lasting, play a significant role in fostering a sense of belonging within the global Somali diaspora. While for many this sense of transnational belonging is most visibly expressed through the shared symbolism of khat-chewing, others extend their engagement far beyond this practice, incorporating the broader cultural dynamics of the mafrish into their daily lives, for example, through language or historical knowledge. In these spaces, cultural expressions such as music, alongside deeper historical and political discussions about Somali identity, contribute to a more nuanced form of transnational belonging. Crucially, transnational and nation-based forms of belonging are not mutually exclusive but intersect and enrich one another. As Joseph (2014) discusses in her study of Caribbean cricket cultures in Canada, transnational engagement bridges diaspora and host cultures. This connection, in turn, can strengthen one's sense of belonging to the diaspora and the nation, demonstrating that these forms of identity are not opposed but can coexist in complementary and mutually reinforcing ways.

Brit-ish? Khat, Somaliness and hybridity

The aesthetic formations of the Somali diaspora challenge fixed notions of belonging and reveal dynamic, transnational cultural exchanges shaped by migration and adaptation. In this context, social identities are continually 'in process' and therefore context-specific. Hall (1992, p. 277) reminds us of this point by explaining how the idea of a 'fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy', stating how, in situations where 'systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with – at least temporarily'. The young British-Somali men in this study constructed their identities through symbolic markers shaped by personal and social factors, challenging static notions of identity. This fluidity offers deeper sociological insights into the formation of diaspora identity. Examining their diverse histories and migration trajectories enabled the research to critically explore khat's role in shaping identities and sense of belonging.

Through this lens, the research began to position the concept of 'diaspora' as a connection between groups that 'derives from an original but maybe removed homeland' and which forms new identities 'on a world scale which crosses national borders and boundaries' (Anthias, 1998, pp. 559–60). At the same time, as Brah (1996, p. 183) points out, such communities represent 'composite formations made up of many journeys to different parts of the globe, each with its own history, its own particularities'. Understanding the identities of young British-Somali men necessitated situating them within broader African, Muslim, and Black diasporas, while acknowledging the divergences shaped by their settlement in Britain compared to other global locations, such as Europe, North America, and the Horn of Africa. Drawing on Hall (1990) and Gilroy (1993), the research moves beyond essentialist national identities by exploring how

'Britishness' and 'Somaliness' intersect. It is a process that reveals a syncretic approach to identity, unravelling the dynamic relationship between origins and settlements, aligning with Robertson's (1995) notion of 'glocalism' to demonstrate how global and local forces shape diasporic identities. The following field note highlights this point:

> I sit with Mukhtar and a few other young British-Somali men, the conversation flowing around their daily routines and cultural practices. As I ask about their relationship with khat, Mukhtar, casually chewing a piece of Juicy Fruit gum, begins explaining the ritual of khat consumption. 'When we chew khat, the bitterness is just too much sometimes. Back home in Somaliland, they usually use sugary drinks like soda or even just sweet tea to balance the taste. But here, it's different. Most of us, we use Juicy Fruit gum instead. The sweetness in the gum neutralises that bitterness instantly. It's just something we've adopted here.'I pause, reflecting on the significance of this. Juicy Fruit gum, a distinctly Western product, contrasts sharply with the sugary tea used in Somaliland to neutralise khat's taste. The shift from sweet tea to gum represents a cultural adaptation, where a symbol of Western consumer culture subtly influences their diasporic practices. Mukhtar's casual reference to the gum not only highlights the adoption of Western consumption patterns but also subtly reflects a re-negotiation of cultural practices that are fluid, adaptable, and uniquely British-Somali in their adaptation. The practice of chewing gum to neutralise the bitterness of khat thus stands as an everyday example of the convergence between Somali cultural rituals and Western cultural influence, underscoring the complexities of identity in the diaspora. (Location: A small gathering spot in Brampton, late afternoon)

It is crucial to acknowledge transethnic identity formations and their impact on younger diaspora members in Brampton (Anthias, 2001; Pasura, 2010; De Martini Ugolotti, 2022). Such insights demonstrate how not all parts of the diaspora 'sustain an ideology of "return"' (Brah, 1996, p. 180) and instead help to locate the identities of young British Somali men as grounded not only in their parents' cultures and traditions but also in the globally mediated consumer spheres of music, fashion, and other consumer staples that saturate their personal and urban landscapes in the West.

Such findings reject essentialist reductions of identity, in which khat signifies solely Somaliness or in which Western consumer culture equates with Britishness. Identities are neither fixed nor unproblematic; they emerge from intersecting cultures, histories, and migrations (Gilroy, 1993). This hybridity is evident in how young British-Somali men chew khat – neutralising its bitterness with gum while also using such gatherings to watch sports like football; the following insight from Jama (student, khat user) demonstrates this point: 'the *mafrish* is also where I go to watch Chelsea games ... It is a great environment to watch football because everyone banters with each other'. While Duale (unemployed) spoke about how different *mafrish* are rated using the symbolism of football leagues, 'you have got the premier league, places that are comfy to chill in, and then you have league 2 locations like tower blocks and playgrounds that are a bit more spit and sawdust type places, you know last resort' – such narratives illustrate the entanglement of diasporic cultural expressions with symbolic aspects of the host society.

Scholars such as Back (2013) and Ratna (2020) argue that framing cultural questions through rigid dichotomies fails to capture the complexities of diasporic life. In Brampton, young British-Somali men construct identities at the intersection of global and local forces, transcending ethnic, cultural, and national boundaries. These evolving identities reflect increasing commonalities with multi-ethnic peers while, at times, diverging from familial generations. An example of such divergence was provided by many in the

community but summarised succinctly by Samaya (female, anti-khat), who stated how khat was also a site of contestation within the community – 'many people in the community are against khat, like for me khat is not a connection with Somaliland, it is a place where men go to forget about their problems, it is a hazard to the community, not a help'. This type of narrative, which refers to the gendered power dynamics associated with khat, demonstrates how an 'imagined' distance has emerged – between their British lives and ties to Somaliland, Western commodities, and traditional consumption patterns, and between asserting British citizenship while maintaining Somali cultural connections. In this context, it is evident how diasporic customs not only shape understandings of identity and belonging but also highlight socio-political transformations in Britain, where fluctuating notions of belonging and legality challenge identity construction. This fluidity underscores the tension between inherited cultural narratives and the evolving realities of transnational life.

Conclusion

This paper explores the relationship between khat-chewing and the formation of diasporic communities. Building on the concept of aesthetic formation, it examines how the Somali diaspora's collective imagination is actualised through the creation of specific spaces, objects, and embodied practices (Meyer, 2009). While diasporas are often viewed as deterritorialised or spatially dispersed, the aesthetic formations discussed here demonstrate how they are also actively reconceptualised. By engaging in khat consumption and frequenting the *mafrish*, young British-Somali men use these activities to understand their ethnocultural identity better and reflect on 'who they are' in more tangible ways. Khat use facilitates the performance of diasporic practices – such as speaking Somali, specific consumption rituals (e.g. the art of chewing khat), and community discussions – and fosters the materialisation of a diasporic space. In doing so, these practices help cultivate a sense of belonging and community, transforming abstract feelings of diaspora into concrete, lived experiences.

This study, situated in Northern England, examines khat use as a distinctive diasporic aesthetic practice. By focusing on how material practices shape identity, it highlights khat's role in fostering collective belonging among members of the Somali diaspora. While the findings illuminate these dynamics, they are not generalisable to all diasporic groups in the UK or beyond, given the diverse experiences of migrant backgrounds. The study primarily considers ethno-national belonging, offering limited engagement with the intersecting roles of gender, class, and tribal affiliation (see Harris, 2005, Patel, 2015; Swain, 2021). However, these intersections are vital, as critiques of diaspora (Anthias, 1998; Brubaker, 2005) show how internal divisions are expressed through aesthetic forms. Drawing on the concept of aesthetic formation, the research frames diaspora as a lived, negotiated practice. Material practices surrounding khat also reveal the enduring symbolic and social ties to the Somali homeland (Summerfield, 2024), particularly within the *mafrish*.

This research builds on existing studies by highlighting how leisure spaces offer young migrants emotional security and a platform to perform identities beyond narrow national frameworks. For young British-Somali men, the *mafrish* emerged as a vital performative space, enabling self-expression, intersubjective dialogue, and community formation.

Informed by Valentine et al. (2009) and Mason's (2018) studies of multicultural British-Somali identities, the aesthetic practices associated with khat-chewing bridged local and transnational identity narratives, fostering belonging across Somali and British cultural domains. Contrary to populist claims that ethnic leisure spaces promote segregation (Ratna, 2024), this study positions the mafrish as an integrative hub. Consequently, leisure scholars interested in migration should pay greater attention to everyday, culturally embedded practices, such as khat-chewing, that serve as signifiers of belonging, identity, and community formation, thereby revealing the nuanced social functions of diasporic leisure.

Note

1. Somaliland is a self-declared independent region of Somalia, maintaining de facto autonomy since 1991, though it lacks international recognition. Somaliland was a former British protectorate until 1960.

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Notes on contributor

Spencer Swain is an Associate Professor in Social Sciences and Education at York St John University. His research covers issues of migration, inequality and social justice.

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