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## **Khat-Chewing in Liminal Leisure Spaces: British-Somali Youth on the Margins**

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### **Abstract**

Khat-chewing, a controversial leisure activity within the Somali diaspora in Britain, has received little attention within the academic field of Leisure Studies. This paper reports on ethnographic research to provide insights into the unique locations where young British-Somali men chew khat, exposing the liminal qualities of such localities. The paper begins with an overview of the contentious position khat-chewing occupies within Somali communities in Britain, highlighting reasons why young British-Somali men hide their association with the leisure practice. The discussion that follows considers how young male khat users conceptualise spatial environments, exposing how these locations temporarily produce a dual sense of privacy and sociality. The ambiances of such temporary leisure spaces remain open to the prospect of discovery, resulting in the use of discretionary tactics to maintain a sense of secrecy. In this context, we discuss how khat-chewing offers a sense of cultural identity and belongingness while also marking young British-Somali men as outsiders - even within their own communities.

### **Keywords:**

Ethnography, Youth, Leisure, Social Spaces, Khat

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## Introduction

This article focuses on the controversies surrounding young British-Somali men and khat-chewing. For those living in the Somali diaspora in Britain, the very mention of this leisure activity stokes heated debate. Drawn in part from 18-months of the first author's ethnographic fieldwork, we examine these discussions through the relationships between khat-chewing and social spaces, investigating how liminal localities are used by young Somali men to provide leisure environments that offer a sense of togetherness and secrecy. The ethnographic fieldnote below documents this complex setting:

I exit the local minimarket to re-join Muhammed and Abdi-Rahman who are leaning against the railings outside. The conversation has moved onto their plans for the evening. Both seem set on chewing khat and are in the process of organising a time and location when, out of the blue, the conversation is brought to an abrupt halt. "Chill out. Offside, offside," states Abdi-Rahman in a hushed voice nodding his head in the direction of the crossroads just down from where we are standing. "Oh right," replies Muhammed, abruptly stopping the conversation. It takes me a couple of seconds to grasp what is going on; as I look behind, I spot a woman, dressed in a brightly coloured traditional Somali garment, crossing the road towards our location. As she walks past on her way to the money exchange next to the minimarket, she glances across towards the three of us and mutters something in Somali. Both Muhammed and Abdi-Rahman respond in kind as she disappears inside the shop, and out of earshot. Abdi-Rahman looks relieved as she disappears out of sight, explaining to Muhammed and myself that the woman is a friend of his auntie. Despite this, there is another question racing in my head; it centres on the use of the term 'offside'. Muhammed laughs at my question, before telling me that the word is code language for danger, explaining how most people in the neighbourhood do not

want to be caught talking about khat in front of women or children. Both men explain how the phrase acts as a code to signify danger, and often used to end conversations about khat covertly. Our conversation moves on to discuss how khat-chewing is a divisive topic within the community, discussing how British-Somali males in their late teens to mid-twenties go to great lengths to hide their association with the leisure practice.

This fieldnote spotlights the precariousness of khat use within such communities, exposing how young British-Somali men seek leisure spaces that can provide a dual sense of communion, with other like-minded individuals while, also forging a sense of secrecy, through reducing the prospect of being discovered by community members who disapprove of khat-chewing.

To develop a greater understanding of these conflicting attitudes, the paper starts by offering an overview of the role khat-chewing plays in the Somali diaspora in Britain, detailing the cultural context and the activities current legal status. This overview outlines the various opinions surrounding khat-chewing, revealing how specific groups view the practice in a negative light, while others see the activity as a legitimate cultural pastime used to develop a sense of cultural identity and belonging. From here, the discussion moves on to unpack the theoretical understandings of how social space, place and liminality are conceived in the works of Erving Goffman (1959), Henri Lefebvre (1991), and Victor Turner (1957; 1969; 1974; 1982; 1987). In this part of the paper, the theorisations of Lefebvre (1991) and Goffman (1959) are discussed to examine how spatial environments influence behaviour through the different perceptions particular groups and individuals place on them. These theorisations are then, in turn, linked with findings from extensive ethnographic fieldwork undertaken from 2014-2015<sup>2</sup> on khat-chewing and liminality. This analysis articulates how

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<sup>2</sup> This paper is drawn, in part, from the lead author's PhD dissertation.

the leisure spaces where young Somali men choose to partake in khat-chewing conform to the concept of liminality discussed by Turner (1987), through producing a sense of communal togetherness associated with ‘front stage’ regions that allow participants to partake in a public performance of cultural expression. While simultaneously, affording users a feeling of privacy, conforming to traditional readings of ‘back stage’ behaviour, helping many avoid the attention of those who would sanction their khat use.

### **Khat-Chewing and the Somali Community**

Khat (*Catha Edulis*) is a shrub-like narcotic consumed for recreational purposes by cultures located in the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula (Gebissa, 2004). In Somaliland<sup>3</sup>, khat use is prevalent amongst middle-aged and older males, with women and young men often being prohibited from engaging in the practice. This exclusion is linked to khat’s historical association with religious and political elites who have traditionally consisted of older male tribal leaders (Elmi, 2004; Harris, 2004; Osman and Soderback, 2010; Thomas and Williams, 2013). To this day khat-chewing in Somaliland is associated with this elite, older male demographic (Hansen, 2010), a tradition which influences the dynamics of the leisure activity for those who have emigrated to the United Kingdom. Subsequently, young British-Somali men find themselves prohibited—by parents, religious leaders, and community elders—from engaging in the practice during their leisure time, causing many to hide their khat use as a result. Also, khat’s historical association with male tribal elders has cemented the leisure practice as a male-only activity. Therefore unlike in Yemeni and Eritrean cultures, it is a taboo for Somali women to chew khat (Odenwald, Klein and Nasir, 2011).

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<sup>3</sup> Somaliland is a semi-autonomous state vying for independence from Somalia. Historically, it was a British Protectorate that gained independence in 1960 before unifying with Italian Somaliland to construct the nation of Somalia later that year.

Khat-chewing is undertaken in private spaces, referred to in traditional narratives as the *mafrish*<sup>4</sup> (khat house), with sessions lasting anywhere between four hours, to two days (in extreme circumstances) in length. A piece of khat is comprised of four bundles, consisting of fifteen to twenty sticks, bound together with a banana leaf to keep the contents fresh. During khat-chewing sessions, participants peel the tender parts of the sticks as well as the soft leaves, depositing the contents into the side of their mouth and chewing for a sustained period (Odenwald et al., 2011). Constant chewing causes the substance to congregate into a ball, which is lodged at the side of the mouth, before being disposed of at the end of the session. The process of chewing khat causes the mouth to become flooded with saliva, making the user compelled to swallow; however, swallowing reduces khat's potency. To prevent this, users consume a sweet drink (e.g., a cola), which keeps the mouth fresh by neutralising the substance's bitter taste. In the process of continuously chewing, the chemical dopamine is released into the body, causing the user to experience a mild feeling of euphoria, often leading to intense conversation and debate (Hansen, 2010).

Despite khat-chewing's prominent position in traditional Somali culture, the practice is widely condemned within diasporic communities in Western Europe and North America (Harris, 2004). At the centre of this condemnation, are Somali women's groups who have been vocal in their calls to implement a ban on the substance. Patel (2008) explains how many women see the narcotic as being complicit in men partaking in domestic violence, leading to a toxic environment in many homes. Similarly, many also complain about the waste of limited financial resources on khat, usually at the expense of household necessities such as food, utilities, and clothing for children. These examples fuel the wider belief that many male khat users are relinquishing their duty of bringing in a steady income, looking

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<sup>4</sup> *Mafrish* is sometimes spelt *marfish*; the term is used interchangeably in many sources.

after children, and bonding with their family in an appropriate manner (Harris, 2004; Odenwald et al., 2011).

In June 2014, the British Government bowed to pressure from anti-khat groups within the British-Somali community, formally banning the substance on the premise of the social and psychological problems associated with the narcotic. In doing so, the government went against the findings of their own Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), who had found no definitive evidence connecting khat use with mental health or domestic abuse (Thomas and Williams, 2013). This move led to the emergence of fresh allegations linking the khat industry with one of the major *Al-Qaeda* affiliates operating within the Horn of Africa, *Al-Shabaab*. These allegations asserted that the khat trade, a major source of revenue for countries in the region, was being redirected to fund such terror organisations. This information also warned that *mafrish* were being targeted as recruitment dens to radicalise Somali men against the West by preaching hate and encouraging acts of terrorism (Bell, 2012; Swains, 2012). The validity of such information has repeatedly been called into question, with many interrogating why organisations like *Al-Shabaab* would receive funding from sales of a narcotic that they have banned in all territories under their control (Mckenzie, Leposo, and Kermeliotis, 2012; Travis, 2013).

While khat-chewing faces stigma within sections of the British-Somali community and wider British society, there is also considerable support for the practice, especially amongst those who perceive khat to be a traditional form of leisure (Harris, 2004). Central to this argument is the belief that the practice provides a site of togetherness and belonging for members of the diaspora struggling to adapt to life in the West. Here, arguments articulate how the social dynamics of the *mafrish* provide khat users with a network of support (Swain, 2017). Hansen (2010) refers to such acts of sociality as an ‘oral newsletter’, used to provide information and a sense of connection with others in the community, helping many

adjust to life in a hostile foreign environment. The maintenance of this form of sociality plays a significant role in reformulating a feeling of Somali identity, helping to emphasise khat-chewing's symbolic position within Somali culture. This feeling, in turn, induces a sense of empowerment, by helping many users discard the negative stereotypes that have portrayed Somalis living in the UK as 'benefit cheats', 'terrorists' and 'pirates' (Ahmed, 2005; Anderson and Carrier, 2011). Interestingly, the intricacies surrounding the Somali diaspora's perceptions of khat use emphasise the need to investigate the social spaces of young Somali men partaking in the practice. Of particular interest is the manner in which such groups initiate khat-chewing sessions away from the traditional environments of established *mafrish*, outside the gaze of those within their communities who are anti-khat. In order, to be able to explore this tension in greater detail, the discussion now moves on to provide an overview of how such spatial settings have been theorised in contemporary social thought.

### **Conceptualising Social Space**

The process of imagining space has had a long and contentious history within sociology and the wider social sciences, with numerous scholars drawing attention to the different ways in which spatial environments are imagined (Shields, 2006; van Ingen, 2004, Lashua and Kelly, 2008; Soja, 1996). At the centre of many sociological perspectives has been the need to 'understand space, not as a void but as a qualitative context situating different behaviours and contending actions' (Shields, 2006, p. 147). This definition emphasises how spatial environments are socially constructed, building upon the work of Lefebvre (1991, p. 1) who articulated how space started out as a site of study associated with geometrical meaning, conceptualised as empty purely mathematical perceptions that would sound strange in contemporary discourse. Such positivist conceptions of space as pure



‘mental images’ and ‘cognitive maps’, were built on the modernist Neo-Kantian tradition of reducing space and place to contextless assemblages of physical objects planted onto grids of meaning.

The work of Durkheim and Mauss (1963) on social space paved the way for cultural classifications of places and quadrants. This perspective has since been developed to associate spaces with values, representations and meanings (Soja, 1980; 1996). The significance of this has led to the ‘reassertion of space in a new way’ (Peters and Kassel, 2009, p. 21); explained by Shields (1991, p. 30) as ‘a site, zone, or place characterised by specific social activities with a culturally given identity and image.’ Through such thought, the term ‘social spatialisation’ has come to distinguish understandings of space through a synthesis of the sociological imagination and physical science. Such a conceptualisation has helped develop a cultural logic of the spatial expressed through language, actions, cultural constructions and institutional arrangements. Consequently, a cultural understanding of space has emerged (Hall, 1992; Willis, 1993) shaped by a variety of contexts such as gender (McRobbie, 1991) and race (Gilroy, 1992; Puwar, 2004).

Lefebvre’s (1991) ‘dialectics of space’ explains how understandings of space-derived throughout the epoch of modernity evolved through a positivist mindset and were subsequently fetishised as ‘territory’ by geographers, and ‘private property’ by the judiciary. Lefebvre challenges this perception by developing a unifying threefold ‘trialectic’ of space, centred upon 1) spatial practices, 2) representations of space, and 3) spaces of representation. ‘Spatial practices’ denote activities ranging from individual routines to the development of spaces for specific purposes. This understanding is similar to Heidegger’s (1968) perspective of being in the world, a practice he referred to as dwelling. Lefebvre (1991, p. 33) describes ‘representations of space’ as composed through the secret codes, theories, and concepts that enable locations to act as conceived space built ‘through the complex symbols and images of

its inhabitants.’ Finally, ‘spaces of representation’ are those used to re-code and decode space, creating a variety of spatial metaphors signifying social status (e.g., like coming from the ‘wrong side’ of town). This understanding helps develop greater insights into questions of space and the presentation of self, differences in spatial approaches, symbolic orderings of time and space and insights into space’s relationship with social power (Shields, 2006).

Goffman (1959) is useful in helping to investigate how social groups and individuals project spatial meaning through different locations. At the core of this perspective is the way in which social spaces are subject to various forms of impression management. Here, Goffman (1959) explains how environments are built around a constant effort to manage impressions, where behaviours are influenced by cultural contexts or distinct regions. For Goffman (1959, p. 109), ‘a region may be defined as any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception.’ Goffman’s metaphor of the theatrical stage illustrates how these regions are used. The premise behind behaviour in ‘front stage regions’ centres upon the maintenance of proper appearances, following rules and pre-ordained notions of decorum. These rules are defined by the setting, décor, props, and layout of a space, in addition to the characteristics of scene participants with regards to age, gender and ethnicity. In ‘front regions’, behaviours are scripted, preventing individuals from expressing genuine desires, thoughts and feelings, and causing acts to be ‘motivated by a desire to impress the audience favourably or avoid sanctions’ (1959, p. 111). On the other hand, ‘back regions’ provide spaces where individuals can express beliefs and partake in behaviour that would not be permitted within front-stage regions. Here, away from public scrutiny, ‘the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character’ (Goffman, 1959, p. 115). For Goffman, the lines dividing society into front and back regions can be seen everywhere, with the front stage emphasising public performance using socially-accepted roles, while back regions expedite more freedom and expression, in private.

Goffman (1959, p. 135) also wrote about ‘a third region, a residual one, namely, all places other than the two already identified.’ This third region, referred to as the ‘outside’, is characterised by its ability to act simultaneously as a ‘front’ and ‘back stage’ region. It is within these spaces that individuals express behaviours that mesh front and back stage performances, allowing the public expression of secret activities in communal settings. The concept of the ‘outside’ can be advanced further through Turner’s (1974) work on liminality, especially his insights into how spatial environments can facilitate the expression of ‘front’ and ‘back stage’ behaviour without completely conforming to the characteristics of either. Here, Turner’s (1982, p. 27) explanation regarding the potential liminal space has for allowing social positions and identities to become liberated from ‘structural obligations’ is important. Such liminal areas enable individuals and social groups who find themselves constrained by social scripts to become ‘liberated from normative demands’ enabling them to occupy spaces that are ‘betwixt and between successive lodgements’ in the socio-cultural fabric of society (Turner, 1974, pp. 13–14). In this gap between ordered ‘front-stage regions’ and private ‘back-stage regions’, a liminal environment exists that offers a semi-public, semi-private space. The uniqueness of this space can enable leisure practices to be undertaken in a setting that provides a dual sense of communion and privacy.

While liminal spaces exude transgressive qualities, they are also subject to the constant threat of conflict and disturbance. Research conducted within the realm of leisure (see Ravenscroft and Gilchrist, 2009; Sterchele and Saint-Blancat, 2015) highlights the propensity of some localities to be open to transgressive behaviours, particularly within spaces that intersect distinct cultural environments. The consequences of this lead to such localities being managed in different ways by various groups inhabiting them (Scandrett-Leatherman, 1999; Shortt, 2014). In this context, the term ‘management’ is used to articulate the methods employed to reduce the prospect of discovery and potential conflict, thus

minimising the threat of having ‘back stage’ behaviour exposed to the gaze of the wider public.

The work of Shortt (2014) and Thomassen (2012) examines the different types of liminal spaces that groups living on the margin colonise. These include doorways, staircases, and other border zones like alleyways. Augé (1995) conceptualised these areas as ‘non-places’ due to their transitory nature, which allows only a limited amount of dwelling time. The ephemeral context of such localities further illustrates how liminal leisure spaces only present themselves for temporary colonisation (Turner, 1982), exposing those who use such environments to the constant threat of discovery and potential ridicule endorsed by the normative scripts and behaviours upheld in ‘front stage’ regions (Goffman, 1959).

We will return to this theoretical discussion. However, before doing so, we introduce an overview of the first author’s ethnographic fieldwork. From here, the theories of social space discussed above will be threaded into an analysis of the empirical data.

### **Khat-Chewing and the Search for a ‘Temporary *Mafrish*’**

This paper reports in part on eighteen months of ethnographic research by the lead author in one of the largest Somali diasporic communities in the United Kingdom. Participant observations and thirty-five unstructured interviews were conducted during the period to develop understandings of the community. Similar to Willis (1977), the lead author had grown up in this area and was familiar to many of his respondents. He is not British-Somali and thus had to negotiate his insider-outsider status (Woodward, 2008). Similar to the fieldwork of Armstrong (2003) and Carrington (2008), he occupied a position of being both an outsider and insider. Such a dynamic had positive and negative connotations; however, one of the advantages was that his prior experiences of being around khat and traversing the environment of the *mafrish* enabled him to gain access to leisure spaces that would remain

closed to many researchers. While his ethnic identity marked him as an outsider, this allowed him to gather information from a different, critical angle, due to the way individual scene participants felt they had to explain the cultural intricacies of khat-chewing in greater detail.

Throughout, ethical protocols were upheld to maintain the anonymity, confidentiality and safety of the research participants and the name of the community (Bryman, 2001). To this end, the names of all those who contributed to the research are anonymised, and the fictitious community name of ‘Brampton’ is used. Khat-chewing elicits controversy both within the Somali community and outside it. Due to the lead author’s experience in the area we were aware of debates surrounding the legal and moral status of khat-chewing. Subsequently, the lead author/field researcher avoided partaking in the consumption of khat due to issues of its illegality and to also prevent alienating anti-khat groups from participating in the research. These challenges were managed during the field work by liaising with law enforcement and local community leaders (Bucerius, 2013) to inform these groups about the research agenda and to reassure them that at no point would the study involve the consumption or distribution of khat.

The fieldwork explored how and where young British-Somali khat-chewers faced barriers to accessing *mafrish* located within the centre of Brampton, as these spaces were the preserve of older Somali men. While members of the community spoke about a youth *mafrish* in Brampton, its small size and inconsistent opening times meant the location was unpopular. Subsequently, many younger males—e.g., those in their late teens and early twenties—found themselves excluded from entering established *mafrish* in the community, denying them access to more traditional khat-chewing environments.

Even for those old enough to gain access to established *mafrish*, the fear of being discovered by older community members who could inform relatives about their khat use

deterred their attendance. One research participant, Osman (22, Student), explained why the younger demographic were wary of exposing their khat-chewing habit to older members of the community:

It's linked to being shamed, especially for the younger generation, if your family see you chewing or know that you chew, it is seen as being very bad, a bit like underage drinking, and they will be upset with you and will look down on you. So, it is something they hide through going to places where they think most people won't go. It's like when you go to the pub, and you try to drink underage, it's seen as being bad, you know like underage drinking in a car park or behind a bush; it's something that if they do it, they have to hide it. You find that the younger generation doesn't have a place to go, if you go to where the elders chew then it often tends to be more spacious and more relaxed, overall a better environment because it is something that is more accepted for them to be doing.

Similarly, another participant, Faizal (21, Unemployed), spoke about his reluctance to enter more traditional *mafrish* for fear of word getting back to his mother:

First of all, it's an age thing; I don't want to be chewing with guys that are double my age. But the thing that I am most scared of is if I am spotted by someone who knows my mum. I mean, that would be terrible; she is anti-khat and if word got back to her that I was chewing, well then I would be in trouble. It is better for me to chew in secret than risk someone spotting me and word getting back home.

The importance of maintaining a level of privacy and secrecy was evident in the forthcoming fieldnote. Here, the lead author wrote about the different techniques formulated by younger khat users to hide their association with the leisure practice:

Muhammed is stressed, but finds solace in the fact that he is going to be chewing tonight; he pulls out a dark blue plastic bag from underneath his top. He opens it, revealing its contents to me. Inside the bag lies a piece of khat wrapped in a banana leaf – to keep it fresh – along with a packet of Juicy Fruit chewing gum and a Shani cola. “Cost me about twenty pounds all this”, he says, gesturing towards the bag before carefully placing the carrier along with its items underneath his navy blue hoodie, using the elastic waistband on his grey jogging bottoms to keep the parcel in place. Once fully secured, the contents become invisible to the naked eye. We continue our walk out of Brampton, up the hill towards the neighbouring area Little Thorpe, and the location of the high rise flats that will be our eventual destination. On our way, I ask Muhammed why it is that khat-chewers conceal their contents in such a manner. He explains to me that covering khat bundles makes the contents less visible to both the police and members of the local community. Pausing for a moment, he goes on to state how, if anyone were to see him carrying a dark blue plastic bag around Brampton on a Saturday night, they would suspect that he was on his way to chew: “It’s those in the community who would know more than the police – trust me the old women don’t miss a trick.” Muhammed continues to stress the importance of keeping khat bundles hidden, informing me of the different methods used by members of the community to avoid being caught: “Some guys shove it down their trousers, but it can sometimes stick out and look obvious or even come loose when walking. Others hide it in their sleeves, but it (the khat bundle) can still come loose if you’re shaking an elders hand, I wouldn’t want to risk that.”

The use of such innovative tactics illustrates how Brampton represented a complex spatial area governed by strict codes of conduct that influenced how residents presented

themselves to one another. Lefebvre (1991) work on the ‘dialectics of space’, was especially helpful here toward understanding how young Somali males conceptualised the social space around them, and how this interpretation, in turn, influenced the types of behaviour expected of them by other residents. This viewpoint helped highlight how many in the community understood Brampton in a way that went beyond its definition as a physically-defined geographical area and instead revealed how the locality represented a cultural space defined by codes of knowledge. These codes, in turn, helped shape behaviours, e.g., in delineating who could embody a khat-chewing identity while traversing the spatial domain.

For the young Somali men in this study, this meant hiding any connection they had with khat-chewing while navigating the neighbourhood, due to the wide-held perception within the community that they were too young to be partaking in the leisure activity. Adherence to such behaviour highlighted how Brampton was interpreted by local young British-Somali men as a space where certain performances and etiquettes had to be upheld. The manner in which these scripts were followed, as evidenced through the innovative tactics used to hide khat use in a variety of creative ways, exposed how the social space of Brampton conformed to a ‘front stage’ region (Goffman, 1959). This observation helps explain why young khat users navigated the cultural space around them in the way that they did, revealing the efforts to keep their association with khat a secret from those within the community who would sanction such behaviour. The next section details how specific groups addressed this problem by creating temporary *mafrish* located in the ‘back stage’ settings of their community, a tactic designed to alleviate their compliance with such rigid behavioural scripts.

### **Khat-Chewing on the Margins: Exploring the ‘Temporary *Mafrish*’**



To escape the prohibitions regarding their association with khat-chewing, many young Somali males set up temporary *mafrish* in make-shift spaces located on the margins of their community. Abdi-Aziz (22, Unemployed) spoke about some of the different locations that he had seen used as a temporary *mafrish*:

Some of the places that are used are really weird; it's a situation where there is just a lack of places to go. Many of the more obvious places are located in the centre of the community, and there is always the threat of being seen either going in or while you are in there by someone who knows your family. That is why people are using spaces like tower blocks, playgrounds and car parks. They are places that nobody associates with khat.

Similarly, Mukhtar (24, Student) provided a rationale as to why such unusual spaces were chosen to chew khat:

If you are a young man, you don't want your parents or anyone else outside your mates to know that you chew. That is because if these certain people find out, they will be disappointed and angry. So you, therefore, have to go somewhere where nobody else you know goes. You can't, for instance, go to a youth club and chew because somebody might see you, but you can go to a friend's house that is private; the problem is at that age not many people have access to houses. So you have to find places that are private, and people won't see you. For instance, in the tower block on the staircase is a place where nobody will see you, the same thing with playgrounds. You need warmth, shelter and privacy.

The dynamics of such spaces were documented in the lead author's field notes. Here, it was interesting to see how the temporary *mafrish* provided privacy, while also exposing the group to the constant prospect of discovery:

The Little Thorpe tower blocks, located on the outskirts of Brompton, and their relationship with khat-chewing are not new to me. I have seen sessions take place here before; however, the location remains so unusual that it still feels rather surreal to think that such a leisure activity is undertaken here. As Muhammed and I approach the tower block nearest the road, we wait as usual for a resident to enter the building before slipping in behind. Soon enough a short, stocky man makes his way towards the entrance and enters the glass panelled door, as it slowly shuts Muhammed carefully wedges his foot in it, stopping the door from locking shut. We loiter at the entrance until the man enters the lift to ascend the building before moving into the ground floor foyer. Muhammed walks over to the lift shaft and presses the button to hail one of the two elevators in operation. After the lift's arrival, we both rush inside, making sure nobody can follow behind us. Muhammed turns towards the control panel and presses the button for the top floor.

The doors open and we make our way onto to the landing. I follow Muhammed through the double glass doors leading to the staircase, on making our way through we are greeted by the sight of six British-Somali males looking back at us. The group are happy to see us and shake our hands; they are sitting two to a step facing towards the mini-landing in-between the floors, where two of the group sit leaning against the wall with their legs sprawled out. Jumpers are used to cushion their seats from the hard-stone floor underneath. As is typical with khat-chewing sessions, a range of condiments are in the vicinity, consisting of Juicy Fruit chewing gum, Shani cola and the blue plastic bag that has been used to transport the khat. These blue bags are also being used as a bin for any discarded pieces of khat or excess rubbish, helping to reduce any mess and evidence of the group being

there. Similarly, another interesting aspect of this session is the way in which members of the group sitting near the bannister of the staircase keep peering down between the floors looking for signs of any activity that may compromise their position. On two separate occasions, I observed members of the group peer over the staircase in haste at the sound of noise from somewhere down below, on both occasions, such events elicited intense curiosity followed by complete silence. In both circumstances, the noise was determined by the group to be nothing more than someone on the floors below using the staircase to exit the building. However, the use of such a tactic and their behaviour in the ensuing moments after hearing the noise exposes both the transient setting of the space and the well-rehearsed reactions exhibited by the group to the threat on their privacy.

This behaviour is unusual compared to the more conventional *mafrish* settings that I have visited, but given the circumstances, it seems a sensible precaution in helping to remain anonymous. To this end, the preoccupation with staying hidden can be seen in the choice of location, situated in-between the top two floors of the tower block. The use of such a site is well thought out, given that anybody living in the upper part of the building would be more likely to use the lift than walk up such a large number of stairs. Alternatively, anybody living at the bottom of the building would probably be unaware of or highly unlikely to physically encounter the khat-chewing session taking place on the floors above them. As I look around, I gain a greater appreciation of the way Muhammed and his friends use this location to provide themselves with a space that offers room for communal togetherness and privacy.

The use of such a space highlights the steps taken by young Somali men to conceal the temporary *mafrish* from the prying eyes of their community and others in wider society.

Again, the work of Lefebvre (1991) is useful in understanding how the group re-conceptualised this spatial environment, to conform to the cultural dynamics of a khat-chewing session. The reformulation of an ordinary space like a staircase to comply with the cultural dynamics of a *mafrish* further illustrates how locations are reimagined through the sociocultural meanings attributed to them by particular individuals. In this case, the group of young British-Somali men conceptualised the staircase as a spatial environment that allowed them to partake in a khat-chewing session. Here, aspects of the temporary *mafrish* conformed to more traditional khat-chewing settings by providing a communal space where users could meet, sit, and converse with one another. However, differences in the mood of the session, evidenced by the preoccupation with looking out for potential trespassers also exposed how the location radiated an aura of secrecy.

This desire to inhabit a private setting was seen in the unique position of the temporary *mafrish*, located on the outskirts of the Somali community and in-between the top two floors of a residential tower block. Such a location facilitated a momentary feeling of privacy, as the *mafrish* was far enough away from the Somali community to reduce the probability of being discovered by someone who might inform a family member. Similarly, being nestled in a space between the top two floors of a large residential tower block reduced the likelihood of coming across residents living in the building, as most would be more inclined to use the elevator than traversing the stairs. Subsequently, the temporary *mafrish* fits the characteristics of a classic ‘back stage’ region (Goffman, 1959), due to the privacy it afforded the group, which in turn allowed users the chance to escape the cultural scripts that govern their behaviour in Brampton.

### **The Liminal Qualities of the ‘Temporary *Mafrish*’**

To think of the temporary *mafrish* as conforming solely to the characteristics of a ‘back stage’ region would be understating the uniqueness of this cultural space. While many of the performances associated with the temporary *mafrish* did conform to traditional ‘back stage’ behaviour, others were more indicative of ‘front stage’ regions. Examples of this were evident in the sense of communion generated from chewing in a group, an undertaking that afforded a particular presentation of self-associated with those present on the staircase. The manner in which such conduct mirrored the cultural practices undertaken in traditional *mafrish* (Hansen, 2010) exposed the significant role this space played in constituting a site of cultural expression. Such a sophisticated use of space can be conceptualised further through Goffman’s (1959) notion of the ‘outside’ in the way that the temporary *mafrish* represented a site that mixed the privacy associated with ‘back stage’ regions with public forms of cultural expression undertaken in ‘front stage’ regions. This elaborate display of ‘front’ and ‘back’ stage behaviour showed how the temporary *mafrish* embodied a distinct spatial region that fluctuated between public and private presentations of self. The distinctiveness of this space was commented upon by Suleiman (42, Youth Worker):

We refer to such *mafrish* as ‘the dungeon’ because it feels like another society. People who go and chew in those kinds of spaces are almost cut off; it feels like another world. That is because as long as they have their khat, the companionship that the chewing session brings, and their privacy, then they are not bothered about anything else.

Similarly, another participant spoke about the balance between keeping such sessions private yet public enough to comprise a small communion of fellow khat users without compromising the secrecy of the meeting:

Muhammed (21, Student): It is important to trust the people who you chew with, you cannot be chewing with someone who runs their mouth about the locations that you are using. That could cause serious problems because nobody wants anyone to know. That's one of the reasons we use a secret language to communicate in the presence of people who we don't want knowing our business. It's like a code language.

Interviewer: It must be a hard balance to achieve?

Muhammed: It is, you have to keep the location private enough, so people who you don't want finding you won't find you. Then you want enough people there to enjoy the experience of chewing, at the end of the day nobody wants to be chewing alone.

This mixing of 'front' and 'back' as 'outside' regions in the distinctive spatial environment of the temporary *mafrish* echo through Turner's (1969) concept of liminality. It was observed in this space how young British-Somali males felt a sense of 'liberation from the regimes of normative practices and performance codes' (Shields, 1991, p. 84) that influenced their behaviour while navigating front stage regions like Brampton. Similarly, it was also documented how such spaces provided a dual sense of privacy and communion, through allowing groups to converge in private settings, allowing khat users to undertake a form of cultural expression with other like-minded individuals while remaining hidden from those who might sanction such behaviour. The liminal environment of the temporary *mafrish* illustrates how certain spaces can facilitate the merging of 'front' and 'back' stage acts to provide a communal space where cultural expression can be publicly expressed while maintaining a sense of privacy by hiding such acts from all but a select few. In other words, such spaces converge to provide the benefits of 'back-stage' regions, through offering a sense

of privacy, while simultaneously facilitating a public display of cultural expression to the small group gathered in the space.

However, it is also important to remember how such environments are unstable and open to potential change. As Turner (1974, p. 14) explains, liminal spaces can be transitory and volatile, constituting sites where ‘almost anything may happen.’ Consequently, the act of occupying a liminal space, such as a staircase, can include the constant threat of discovery and disruption. As the research field notes documented, those occupying the *mafrish* had to manage the space, evidenced by choosing a part of the tower block that reduced the prospect of being discovered, leaving no rubbish as evidence of their presence, and keeping a constant lookout for residents. However, the stability of this environment was always subject to change, revealing similarities with Auge’s (1995) work on ‘non-places’ by documenting the fleeting qualities of such localities. This importance was highlighted in the field note (above), which showed how members of the temporary *mafrish* had to be quick to respond to the threat of discovery and therefore develop tactics to reduce the probability of being caught. Such a dynamic situation was displayed in the way members of the group were prepared to evacuate the space at a moment’s notice upon hearing noises that could compromise their position.

What is of particular interest here is the manner in which such liminal spaces represent sites of uncertainties and contradictions that offer potential benefits as well as dangers to their users. Such spaces provide young British-Somali men with a sense of liberty, allowing them to partake in a leisure activity that many in their community sanction them for partaking in, yet those who occupy such localities are still navigating an unstable environment, positioned on the margins of ‘front’ and ‘back’ regions. The precariousness of such spaces makes the threat of discovery and the potential conflict that this can bring an ever constant possibility. These spaces are non-traditional (using a stairwell as a *mafrish*) but used

to engage in a traditional cultural practice (chewing khat); they are outside of the community, yet constitute a kind of community of their own; they are engaged in by young people whose participation marks them out as claiming an adult practice, without an official ‘adult space’ in which to practice it.

## Conclusion

To conclude, we have documented the role of liminal leisure spaces in the lives of young British-Somali male khat users by providing insights into how temporary *mafrish* are set up on the margins in-between scripted lifeworlds. At its core, the discussion has considered how khat users perceive different spatial environments, using Lefebvre’s (1991) ‘dialectics of space’ to articulate how certain localities became associated with various cultural meanings and representations. From there, the analysis focused on how these spatial locations were coded and decoded by the research participants, incorporating the work of Goffman (1959) and his concept of ‘front’, ‘back’ and ‘outside’ regions. Here, it was evident that some young Somali men in Brompton found themselves regulated by cultural scripts that influenced their behaviour, leading them to find a liminal space where they could partake in khat-chewing. This space was observed in the form of a temporary *mafrish* located in a residential tower block on the edge of the Somali community. Here, we discussed how adapting such environments allowed young Somali males to partake in a khat-chewing session that facilitated the duality of a public form of cultural expression, while also providing a sense of privacy from unwanted scrutiny. The liminal qualities of this space highlighted the transgressive qualities of the temporary *mafrish* by, on the one hand, providing a unique locality that enabled participants to participate in the leisure practice of their choice, while, on the other, exposing how the site was open to the constant threat of



discovery. Such an insight, then, highlights the importance of future investigations in analysing the manner in which other leisure spaces are used to escape the normative demands of society. Notably, the ways in which different marginalised groups use such localities forge a dual sense of privacy and togetherness to escape ridicule or discrimination.

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