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Kapinga, Laura; van Hoven, Bettina; Bock, Bettina B.; Hopkins, Peter

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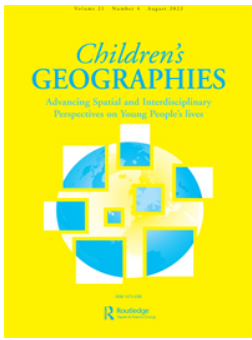
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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Young Muslims' religious identities in relation to places beyond the UK: a qualitative map-making technique in Newcastle upon Tyne

Laura Kapinga <sup>a</sup>, Bettina van Hoven <sup>a,b</sup>, Bettina B. Bock <sup>b</sup> and Peter Hopkins <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University College Groningen, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands; <sup>b</sup>Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands; <sup>c</sup>School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

## ABSTRACT

Transnational relations can play an important role in young people's identity negotiations and transitions to adulthood. In this article, we explore how young British-born Muslims construct and contest their religious identities and experience their changing religious identities from their late teens until their early-twenties. We analyse how places beyond the UK shape their religious beliefs and identities in Newcastle upon Tyne in the North East of England, and present a methodological tool to understand young people's complex and changing (religious) identities and spatialities. We draw on in-depth interviews – including map-making methods – with a small number of young Muslims living in Newcastle upon Tyne whose parents migrated from Pakistan or Bangladesh. This article contributes to youth geographies, by illustrating that when the participants begin to negotiate 'being Muslim' more independently, the spatial orientation of their religious identities starts to change as well. We show that the changing meaning and importance of the places beyond the UK should be understood in relation to other spatial notions when explaining religious identity negotiations of young people. Moreover, the paper provides a methodological contribution in demonstrating how map-making can help to examine young people's identities and changing relationships to places in a transnational context.

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## 1. Introduction

Sales (2012) states that in the UK 'Muslims have been increasingly presented as the alien "other" (40)'. Young Muslims, in particular, are often labelled as problematic, as potentially dangerous, as clashing with the alleged 'British' values, and targeted for their lack of anchoring in the UK (Sadar and Ahmad 2012; Sales 2012; Thompson and Pihlaja 2018). Even for young people born and raised in the UK; their Muslimness is still considered non-British and denotes an undesirable tie associated with their migration and religious background and their parents' country of origin. Anti-Islamic sentiments are present in public discourses, mainstream media, and prominent on the agendas of many populist political parties (Hopkins 2007a; Ali 2008; Thompson and Pihlaja 2018). These simplified and negative stereotypes about Muslims play a role in how young Muslims

**CONTACT** Laura Kapinga  [l.m.kapinga@rug.nl](mailto:l.m.kapinga@rug.nl)

construct and contest their religious and cultural identities as they negotiate their transition to adulthood. Moreover, young people's identity negotiations in relation to places beyond where they are growing up can play an important role in their transition to adulthood; this is an important consideration for children's geographers and researchers interested in the intersections of young people, place and identity. In addition, scholars could usefully (re)consider their methodological approaches and tools and bring in the perspective of 'ordinary' young Muslims to do justice to the various experiences and dynamic identities (Ali 2008; Thompson and Pihlaja 2018). In-depth and nuanced insights on the *spatialities* of young Muslim identities add to efforts to challenge these simplified and exclusionist understandings.

The term *spatialities* refers to identifications with various places through (dis)belonging and identity formation. Identities are inherently relational and shaped by experiences at, or identifications with, various places simultaneously (Koefoed and Simonsen 2012; Lyons 2018). For instance, being portrayed as 'the other', as someone who does not belong – to a nation, a region, a city, a village, a public space, a house, a room, or even an object – influences feelings of belonging, which can lead to identifications with other places (Koefoed and Simonsen 2012). The focus on identifications with places is a fruitful way to gain insights into young people's experiences and identities and how they are embedded in the social context in which these are shaped and negotiated (Blazek 2011).

The academic debates on young Muslim identities sometimes refers to specific places when discussing religious identity negotiation and development (Dwyer 1999; Gale 2013; Hopkins 2007b; Hopkins and Gale 2009). Being Muslim in a Muslim-minority context is often assumed to relate to transnational connections and ties and the number of *young* Muslims is increasing within the UK and other Western countries (Ali 2015). For instance, the 2011 UK census showed that almost half of the residents who identify as Muslim are British-born (Ali 2015). This is largely the result of immigrant parents successfully transmitting their religious beliefs to their children (Phalet, Fleischmann, and Stojčić 2012), and therefore, the religious beliefs of young people are also associated with the places their parents originate from. However, recent research points out that the current generation of young Muslims, practice and experience religion different from those who immigrated (Demeijer and Stoffels 2019; Salnikova and D'Arcus 2019). Young people seem to attach different meanings to Islam and find 'new ways of being Muslim', which is not only associated with their identifications with 'here and there', but influenced by individualisation and globalisation (Duderija 2007; Phalet, Fleischmann, and Stojčić 2012). Hence, 'Muslimness' is sometimes perceived as uprooted, placeless, or associated with transnational relations or communities that speak to a particular individual (Kibria 2008; Ryan 2012). Indeed, Duderija (2007) claims that 'the forces of de-territorialisation and de-culturalisation', which are 'inevitable consequences of the immigrant experience, affect the nature and practices of the religious identity' (153). The everyday local context seems less essential due to de-territorialised ways of identifications (Speck 2012; Frederiks 2016). While acknowledging the influence of forces of individualisation and globalisation, youth geographers have stressed the remaining significance of place, ranging from the local to the transnational, in negotiating religious identities (Hopkins 2007b; Dwyer 2016; Hopkins, Kwan, and Aitchison 2007; Lyons 2018).

These debates raise questions concerning the *spatialities* of young Muslims' religious identities. For instance, how do young people experience and negotiate their religious identities and beliefs in relation to different places? What is the role of places beyond the national borders? How do young Muslims' religious beliefs, identities, and *spatialities* change over time? And how do we take into account young Muslims' perspectives in researching these issues?

This paper considers these questions through an analysis of data collected in Newcastle upon Tyne, in the North East of England, UK which is the whitest region of England (Nayak 2012). Although home to a relatively small ethnic and religious minority population, important research has drawn attention to this context in relation to debates about racism and multiculturalism, and this paper adds to this growing literature. For example, Nayak (2017) offers important insights into

the embodied encounters of young Muslim women with a Bangladeshi heritage growing up in the North East. Askins (2015) has considered issues of asylum and migration in the region, and Clayton, Donovan, and MacDonald (2021) have recently critically explored experiences of racism and entrapment for those living with hate relationships in the North East. Important for this paper is that racism and Islamophobia have been highlighted as specific concerns for young people in the region (Finlay et al. 2020; Hopkins, Clayton and Tell MAMMA, 2020). This implies that young Muslims' experiences of Islamophobia and racism are likely to play a role in how young people make sense of their Muslim identities. With regard to the study context, (inter)generational negotiations with their families and Muslim communities can be important dimensions in these identity processes as well. This study involves the narratives of young people of Bangladeshi and Pakistani descent. These belong to the largest Muslim communities in the Newcastle upon Tyne, making up respectively 1.7% (Bangladeshi) and 2.3% (Pakistani) of the total population according to the 2011 census (Office for National Statistics 2011). While emphasising that both communities consist of diverse populations, both are previously characterised as close-knit networks, which are relatively independent of each other and of the other communities in Newcastle upon Tyne (Nayak 2017; Sattar, Hannam, and Ali 2013). Besides ethnic ties, the Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities are strongly established as religious communities by the so-called first-generation arriving in the sixties, seventies and eighties (Sattar, Hannam, and Ali 2013). In this context, it is interesting to explore the ways young Muslims experience religion in relation to their parents' generation and how negotiations with various Muslim and non-Muslim 'others' influence their spatialities; for instance, how their religious identities relate to the places where previous generations migrated from. We contribute to understanding the spatial embeddedness of young people's religious identities and suggest methodological tools for such studies. Here, we focus on the question: *How are places beyond the UK related to religious identity negotiations of young Muslims living in Newcastle upon Tyne?* As a point of departure, we explore the narratives of a small sample of young British-born Muslims living in Newcastle upon Tyne, whose parents migrated from Bangladesh or Pakistan. We demonstrate the value of a map-making technique to gain nuanced insights in the changing spatialities and elicit the participants' experiences, perceptions and identities in a transnational context. Data were collected through in-depth interviews complemented with an exercise of map-making, through which participants constructed narratives around places beyond the UK. The paper contributes to the geographies of youthful Muslim identities by illustrating that the young Muslim participants – who begin to negotiate their 'Muslimness' more independently – also change the spatial orientation of their religious identities. We show, for instance, how the meaning of the places beyond the UK changes when moving from an 'ascribed' to a 'chosen' form of religious identity. In this process of increasing independence, the participants navigate various interrelated transnational spatial notions, which seem to be connected to local and everyday places as well. To understand how particular places beyond the UK (for instance, the place where the family migrated from) influence negotiations of making sense of religion, we should approach these relations as inherently connected to various other places.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section two theoretically frames identity negotiations of young Muslims in light of migration experiences. We then introduce the methodology and, in particular, our map-making technique. The fourth section discusses the findings and highlights the changing spatial patterns by demonstrating how participants disassociate religious and cultural identities, which is spatially reflected in the changing relationships to places beyond the UK. Section five concludes and discusses traits for future research to understand young Muslims' spatial identities.

## 2. Muslim identities in a post-migration context

Frederiks (2016: 22) states, 'migration affects and transforms the beliefs, practices and community formation of people who migrate'. Many young Muslims did not move themselves but are born and

raised in contexts where transnational relationships play a role. ‘More than their parents’, McAulife (2008: 128) notes, ‘the individuals of the second generation are mediators of cultural difference, negotiating the parts of identity that link them to two national cultures’. The so-called ‘second generation’ of British-born Muslims are often characterised as having multiple frames of belonging and described as being ‘in-between here and there’ (Fleishmann and Phalet 2016). The migration context shapes the religious identities of people who are born in the UK as well.

Some scholars expected religion to fade away in successive generations of migrants in the predominantly secular resettlement context, such as the UK (Scourfield et al. 2013; Voas and Fleischmann 2012). Phalet, Fleischmann, and Stojčić (2012) call this the secularisation paradigm in the sociology of religion, which revolves around the broader idea that the ‘importance and impact of religion will decline in modern societies’. While this implies that religion would have become less central for young Muslims born and raised in western societies, there is much evidence for religion being essential or becoming more salient in identity negotiation (Voas and Fleischmann 2012; Ryan 2014). Duderija’s (2007) review on Muslim migrants’ identities links this to migration experiences by adding that ‘this change in the context prioritises religion as a primary locus of identity construction, especially among the western-born generations immigrants’ (153). Previous studies mentioned several reasons for this, which are discussed in the following.

Religion may become a more central part of identity because many migrants play an active role in religious institutions or other social networks to cope with being religious in a predominantly secular context (Peek 2005). Many studies concerning Muslim identities refer to experiences of exclusion due to Islamophobia and anti-Islamic discourses (Peek 2005; Cadge and Ecklund 2007; Voas and Fleischmann 2012; Slooman 2016). These experiences may evoke a ‘reactive religiosity’ in which religious identities take centre stage (Peek 2005; Voas and Fleischmann 2012). Zock (2010) explains that enhanced religious identities can function as a coping mechanism, for instance, when feeling inferior to or excluded from mainstream society. Moreover, religion is not taken for granted in predominantly secular European societies, and thus ‘being’ religious becomes a more conscious decision and a ‘chosen’ form of identity (Alba 2005; Peek 2005). These studies emphasise that religious identities are negotiated in relation to ‘others’ in the societal context in which they reside.

These reactive forms of identity can lead to the establishment, maintenance, or enforcement of relations to places beyond the UK. Koefoed and Simonsen (2012) demonstrate how the exclusionary experiences in the context of resettlement engender feelings of dis-belonging. As a result, people can seek identification with places outside of these societies. Also, Hopkins (2007a) underlines that religious identities in the local context are influenced by transnational forms of identification, such as places of family or ethnic-cultural heritage. For example, Haller and Landolt (2005) and Phalet et al. (2012) discuss transnational religious practises and participation in affairs related to the country of their parents’ origin. While religious practices (doing religion) do not necessarily imply strong religious identities (being religious) (Chan, Tsai, and Fuligni 2015), these transnational religious practices can be formative for religious identities. The literature suggests that religious identities are shaped by the places from where the previous generations migrated.

These transnational identity processes require a discussion of religious identities and ethnic-cultural identities. Several studies focus on the intersections between those two dimensions of identity. Cadge and Ecklund (2007) show that becoming more religious can be explained by the desire to maintain or enforce one’s ethnic identity. Also, Franceschelli and O’Brien (2015) found that young people who enhance their Muslim identity are likely to highlight cultural aspects of their identity. Strong ethnic-cultural identification with places of their parents’ descent might indicate that this relationship informs religious identities too. Other studies show that young Muslims might search for a ‘purer’ form of Islam that explicitly stands apart from their ethnic-cultural background (De Koning 2008; Voas and Fleischmann 2012). Voas and Fleischmann (2012) maintain that identifying primarily as Muslim can be a strategy to overcome struggles resulting from cultural differences between their parents and the society in which they live. In this vein, religious identities can become more salient while young people simultaneously reject the ethnic-cultural views of their

parents (Dwyer 2000; Kong 2010). This form is often perceived as uprooted, de-territorialized and de-culturalised (Duderija 2007; Frederiks 2016). Especially geographers have demonstrated that the ethnic-cultural and religious dimensions of identities intersect and are negotiated in dynamic ways (Dwyer 2000; Hopkins 2007a; Kong 2010; Ryan 2012). Identity negotiation is a dynamic process, which continues throughout the life course. We focus on the period from late-teens until early-twenties. This is a profound phase of identity negotiation since young people often become more self-reflective, search for a role in society, develop future ambitions and try to find out to what groups they belong to (Bezci 2008; Umaña-Taylor et al. 2014). While moving from youth to young adulthood, young people explore and negotiate their religious beliefs (McNamara Barry et al. 2010; Chan, Tsai, and Fuligni 2015). To understand the spatialities of making sense of religion, we need to approach the places as dynamic in their meaning and importance (Kapinga and van Hoven 2020). Hence, we need methodological tools that allow us to capture the dynamic spatialities, experiences, and identities that can change through time and place, and which bring young Muslims' perceptions to the fore. Before presenting how young Muslims perceive places to be related to the development of their religious ideas and identities (Section 4), the following section presents our methodological approach.

### 3. Methodology: a map-making technique

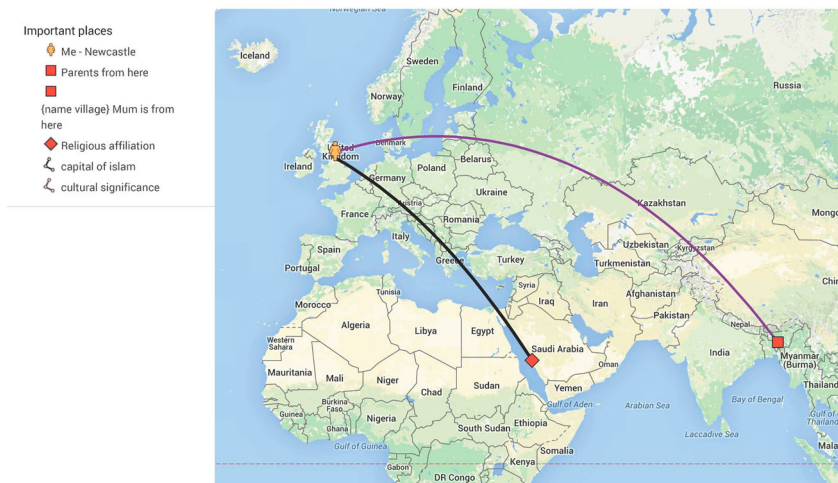
To explore the changing spatialities and religious identities of young Muslims and, particularly, their relation to places outside of the UK, we adopted a qualitative approach. Data were collected through interviews complemented by a map-making exercise. We conducted eight in-depth interviews in Newcastle upon Tyne in North East England. The interviewees self-identified as Muslim and were British-born while their parents migrated from Pakistan or Bangladesh to the UK. Their ages ranged from 17 to 24. Several recruitment techniques were combined including contacting gatekeepers and calls on group pages on social media. Depending on the participants' preferences, the interview locations varied from cafes or community centres to libraries. It is important to note that the participants differed in many ways, such as in gender (one male and seven female participants), but also in what they considered important religious practices, in their (religious) ambitions and beliefs, personal interests and relationship with their parents. While these social identities and backgrounds influence identity negotiations and experiences of 'being Muslim' at particular places (see for instance Dwyer 1999 and Ryan 2012; on gendered experiences of Muslim women), this paper focuses on the youth and Muslim aspects of their identities and aims to find common spatialities among the young Muslims participants.

In-depth interviews enabled us to gain nuanced understandings of the participants' perceptions and identities embedded in their social context (Hennink et al. 2020). To elicit the participants' perspectives, the interviews revolved around places that the participant themselves considered important to whom they have become. We focused initially on places beyond the UK while emphasising how those places shape their identities and lives *in* Newcastle upon Tyne. As Hopkins (2007a) noted, 'focusing on accounts of location, dislocation and translocation means that research participants will be able to recount notions of belonging and so tell a story about the social categories that they use to locate themselves in particular spaces and times' (Hopkins 2007a, 62; based on Anthias 2002). We used the notions of Anthias (2001) by providing space for participants to go beyond the national scale when considering or referring to significant places. Widening the scale was important to enable the participants to go beyond the places usually considered as powerful hyphenated identity markers (e.g. British-Pakistani). We paid attention to the changing relations to these places by addressing past, present and potential future connections to understand how their religious ideas and identities developed. This approach generates data that reflect dynamic religious identity negotiations and challenges the more traditional essentialist and static conceptualisations of religious identity (Power 2013).

The first author conducted the interviews. All interviews started with questions that encouraged participants to talk and were useful in setting the informal tone of the interview. Three pilot interviews were held to refine the interview guide. The key questions were structured around a map-making process, addressed in the next paragraph. During the map-making, participants were encouraged to discuss the places that they were adding to the map and to share the associated stories and experiences. They explained *why* they added certain places or how their meanings differed or changed over time. They elaborated on the places by referring to family stories, to memories, to feelings that those – sometimes imaginary – places engendered, resulting in a detailed description. In the end, future (religious) ambitions were discussed by asking for places beyond the UK that might become important over time which elicited a natural closure to the narratives.

During the interviews, the participants created maps on which they indicated places that were, are, or might become important in shaping who they are and want to be. The interviews and map-making initially focussed on all possible relations to places beyond the UK, which informed their identities and lives in Newcastle upon Tyne, without explicitly asking for relationships that informed their religious beliefs or identities. When the participant did not address religious ties extensively, we probed this topic later, referring to all places they created on the map so far. [Figure 1](#) shows Shahana (19) ('me' on the map) situated in Newcastle upon Tyne, who considers three places outside of the UK important for who she is (i.e. the village her mother was born in, the town her parents migrated from, and Mecca). Participants were asked to assign symbols, names and short descriptions to the places they pinpointed on their maps, which sparked further conversations, for instance, about why particular places became more or less important for them over time. They also indicated their relationship to those places by drawing lines that they could describe by naming and colouring them (i.e. cultural significance in the map of Shahana). This process of map-making revealed how the meaning of places and relations to places changed over time. It generated narratives that provided insights into the dynamic and ongoing character of identities by reflecting on the past, discussing the present, and looking forward to the future (Worth 2009; Stock 2014). Discussing their identities in relation to places outside of the UK while situated in the Newcastle upon Tyne, enabled us to gain insight into the changing identities and transnational connections of our participants. In their narratives, the participants referred mainly to cities or villages outside of the UK. This map-making technique allowed participants to go beyond the relatively static yet

### Participant 1: Shahana (Female, 19) Newcastle, UK



**Figure 1.** Map by Shahana (19).



powerful social constructs of identity that people generally use to describe their identities, such as the national scale (Anthias 2001; Hopkins 2007a).

For the map-making process, we used digital GoogleMyMaps or printed sheets during the interviews. GoogleMyMaps offers an online and free tool in which personal digital maps can be created on the world map template (Figure 1). GoogleMyMaps provides possibilities for zooming in and out and adding symbols, lines, titles, and descriptions and images. Most interviewees enjoyed making digital maps. For example, Kamil (22) said: 'Wow, that is cool', and Shahana (19): 'This is cool. I've never done this before'. A disadvantage of GoogleMyMaps was the necessity of an internet connection, which was not sufficient in every interview location. Therefore, in four interviews, alternative printed sheets with a world map were used, which provided some freedom in drawing, but mainly presented the national scale and did not enable zooming in or out (Figure 2).

Since the map-making was an integrated part of the interviews, the maps and interview transcripts were analysed together. As a starting point for the analysis, we identified how the participants' relations to the pinpointed places changed over time and how those relations shaped (religious) identity negotiations. We used deductive coding strategies, for example, to label identity dimensions or relations to places, such as 'being' and 'doing', and 'past', 'present', or 'future' meanings. Inductive coding was used, for instance, to categorise the (changing) meanings of places on the maps and analyse 'feelings of independence' that were central to our findings. Our data analysis provided nuanced insights into the spatial dimensions of making sense of religion and identity formation.

We guaranteed confidentiality and voluntary participation. Before the interviews, informed consent and confidentiality regarding the maps and transcripts were discussed and agreed upon with the participants. After sharing their stories, these agreements were re-assessed to check whether participants changed their mind or wanted to point out specificities regarding confidentiality. As a result, participants chose pseudonyms, and detailed personal characteristics – such as the names of villages where their parents were from – were removed from the transcripts and maps.

Furthermore, we attempted to be reflexive on our positionalities throughout the designing, conducting, and writing up this study and the broader research project. As researchers, we are in the position to produce knowledge about politicised minorities as outsiders while being part of that

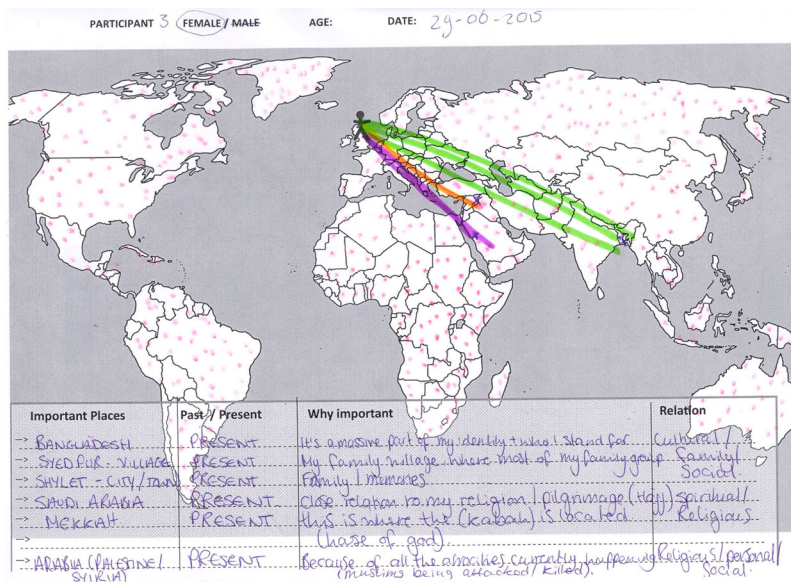


Figure 2. Map by Tee (22).

sociopolitical context ourselves. The first author who asked the questions and made the initial interpretations is a non-Muslim, non-religious, white researcher, in her late twenties. Listing our similarities and differences with the participants, however, does not reflect a critical engagement with how our positionalities influenced the qualitative research process and knowledge production. We found that also our relationship with religion as a research subject, biographies, power dynamics and relationships with the participants need careful consideration. Hence, elsewhere, we engage with these issues and advocate for enhancing reflexivity in collective positionality meetings as an integral part of the qualitative research cycle (Kapinga, Huizinga, and Shaker 2022).

#### 4. Spatially embedded religious identities: places beyond the UK

The participants' narratives and maps show that they consider various places beyond the UK as important in terms of how they construct and contest their identities. The analysis highlights commonalities that contribute to understanding the spatial embeddedness of how young Muslims make sense of religion. In this section, we focus on how participants associate their religious identities and beliefs to places beyond the UK. First, the relations to the places their parents migrated from reveal that religious identities change when people become more independent. Participants perceive this as a move from an ascribed to a chosen religious identity when becoming more independent (Section 4.1). We continue to explain how religious and cultural dimensions become (spatially) disassociated in that process (4.2). After that, we show that relations with places beyond the UK are anchored in the everyday context (4.3).

##### 4.1. From ascribed to chosen religious identities when becoming independent

Among our participants, religion has become increasingly important over time. Religion became more central for who they are around their mid-teens when participants experienced an increase in independence and actively negotiated their religious and cultural identities. Tammy (17), for example, stated: 'I was getting older, becoming more independent, and finding out who I was myself'. During the interviews, participants talked about this phase referring to changes in, for example, their social lives and the relationships with their parents; the freedom to make their own decisions; their future plans and ambitions in transitioning from education to work or changing educational programmes (Bezci 2008; Worth 2009). This increased independence coincides with the period in which they start to negotiate religion more actively. The stories of the participants resonate with Chan, Tsai, and Fuligni (2015): 'With an increase in autonomy', they note, 'young adults are able to engage in more independent decision-making apart from their parents, who have served as one of their primary religious socialisation agents' (1563). In the narratives, this agentic and active negotiation of (religious) identities, relatively independent from their parents, emerged when participants explained their connections with places outside Newcastle upon Tyne.

The participants described their parents' religious beliefs and practices as related to the places they migrated from (those places are called 'family places' in Section 4.2). They mostly referred to local places on the maps, such as villages, cities or regions, and some mentioned the houses where their parents grew up. Those places became familiar to them through family stories or visits, and often a combination of both. The participants described their parents' religiosity as very similar to the religious traditions, beliefs and practices in these places. These were transmitted to the participants' during their upbringing, which they generally described as a valuable basis. However, the maps demonstrated that they distinguished their religious understandings and identities from the places their parents had migrated from. The points on their maps elicited explanations about their *own* religious views, which developed over time when becoming more independent from their families.

Using the maps, participants reflected on how the meanings of places beyond the UK had changed over time and how, simultaneously, they began to develop an understanding of religious

practises and identities on their own terms. In this process, the participants felt that 'being' religious was a conscious decision that became increasingly salient to them in the present. In the past, religion was embedded in family life. The following quotes by Tee and Nida illustrate this.

**Tee (22):** It's only in the last couple of years, say the last three or four years or so, I like ... looked into my religion a lot more. Because growing up, I only knew what my parents told me about religion, but now, when I'm more independent and stuff, I looked into it myself.

**Nida (early-twenties):** Yes, like before I didn't know what Islam meant to me [...]. So I already got sixteen or seventeen when I first practised Islam properly. Not because my mum told me to do it, like: "read the Koran", because you have to read the Koran. I wanted to read it by myself at that age, and that's when my identity started developing from being a Pakistani Muslim in Britain, to like a being a British Muslim who is Pakistani.

When referring to herself as a British Muslim who is Pakistani, both Nida's cultural and religious identity are named, but her careful selection of words emphasises her choice to 'be' Muslim, rather than to 'do' Islam (Voas and Fleischmann 2012; Franceschelli and O'Brien 2015). While Nida refers to the national scale – 'British' and 'Pakistani' – religious identity is not necessarily associated with 'nationality' or 'national identities'. The national scale is the dominant identity marker in the UK context and generally used to describe identities (e.g. Pakistani and British). Indeed, the narratives and maps demonstrate that participants negotiate identity through places on smaller scales, as explained at the beginning of this section, which evokes more nuanced insights on identities (see Anthias 2001; Hopkins 2007a). Discussing the maps and the places their family migrated from enabled them to express the differences between their own and their parents' religion. Coming back to Nida's quote, we see a shift from an 'ascribed' to a 'chosen' form of identity (Peek 2005). Thus, as part of this shift, participants dissociated religious understandings from their parents' beliefs and the places they moved from. We now elaborate on those (changing) spatialities by focusing on the disengagement of religious and cultural dimensions of religion (Section 4.2) and the importance of the everyday context in negotiating religious identities (Section 4.3).

#### 4.2. *Disassociating religion and culture*

The narratives and maps demonstrate how participants begin to unravel religion from culture when experiencing more independence from their parents. In discussing the places on their maps, participants separate the previously intertwined cultural and religious dimensions of their identities. All maps visualise at least two types of places. One can roughly be described as related to family and the other as religious. Both those types, either related to family and religion, were put forward as important for who they are and have become, however, in somewhat different ways.

The family places were places their parents migrated from, as discussed in Section 4.1. Participants described those places with terms like 'their culture' and 'their cultural heritage'. They did not identify religiously with these places but associated these with their parents' ways of 'being Muslim'. For themselves, family places were mainly important in the past, but participants stress that this tie remains essential for who they are since it reflects their cultural background. At the time of the interview, they connect their religious understandings and beliefs to the religious types of place; predominantly Islamic holy places such as Mecca, or on a smaller scale, the Kaaba. Besides, some participants mentioned Medina or the 'Ummah' (the notion of a transnational Islamic community). Those places had become more prominent in the last few years, which echoes the move from the ascribed to a more deliberate identification as Muslim, as discussed in Section 4.1. The participants also identify with these religious places, even though they (except Tammy) had never visited Mecca in person. Those places and the transnational community of the Ummah helped them talk about how religion and spirituality matter to them. Arida's quote illustrates how participants try to make sense of their relationships to these Islamic places outside Newcastle upon Tyne. She explains:

**Arida (23):** How can you be attached to somewhere that you've never been? How can you be attached to something that you've never seen? But I just feel like that. [...] It is where I would like to say I'm more related to than to Bangladesh. Bangladesh is culturally and ethnicity wise [...] it is rooted there, but I would say my attachment spiritually and to like my soul is to God and is to God's house. So I would like to go there even more. Even though I've never been, I'd say my attachment there is something beyond, like I can't describe it.

The meaning of the religious places is distinguished from the family-related places as participants associate the latter with their cultural background and explicitly not with religion. The spatial separation becomes apparent in their maps. Discussing the changing role of those places while growing up also demonstrates that religion and culture do not necessarily develop together. For our participants, religious and cultural dimensions do not become simultaneously more or less dominant as some studies suggest (Cadge and Ecklund 2007; Franceschelli and O'Brien 2015). Interestingly, the participants' narratives nuance suggestions about religious identities being primarily related to the parent's home country (Haller and Landolt 2005). It shows how religion and culture are spatially separated and follow their own (spatial) trajectories when becoming older. In a sense, the explorative findings on the increased importance of the transnational relations to 'religious places' and transnational communities such as the Ummah, echo that the ways of being Muslim are individualised and globalised (Duderija 2007; Kibria 2008; Phalet, Fleischmann, and Stojčić 2012). However, in the next paragraph, we emphasise that the dissociation between culture and religion, as explained here, should not be confused with de-territorialisation or de-culturalisation of religious identities.

### 4.3. *Anchored in the everyday context*

While this study initially revolved around places beyond the UK, the participants' narratives remained inherently connected to the local context in Newcastle upon Tyne. The data suggest that participants' relations to places such as Mecca are negotiated in the everyday context. Here, it becomes clear that the participants use different spatial notions to make sense of religion. Mecca seems to be related to negotiations on other spatial levels, such as in the everyday context and also the places where the participants' parents migrated from as discussed before (Section 4.2). Whilst religious identities of young people are increasingly seen as de-territorialised and de-culturalised (e.g. Frederiks 2016) and the participants' maps, indeed, highlight transnational connections to places beyond the UK, those relations are challenged, negotiated and confirmed in the context and territory of their everyday life (Dwyer 2000; Hopkins 2007b; Zock 2010). In other words, the disassociation between religion and culture and the associated changing transnational spatialities (see Section 4.2) can be explained by navigating religion in their place of residence. The following illustrates that the participants negotiate their religious beliefs and identities in the predominantly secular British local context.

While explaining their relations to places beyond the UK, several participants explained that the secular everyday context matters in developing what religion means to them. They perceive this context, in which they are born and raised, as the reason for the difference between their own and their parents' beliefs and understandings of religion. Islam is not historically embedded in British society in contrast to the societies where their parents grew up, which are often imbued with Islam. Identifying with a minority religion in the UK influences the development of their religious identities. Shahana (19) shares that this context enables her, and other British-born Muslims ('we' and 'people' in the quote below), to establish a more 'original' or 'genuine' understanding of Islam.

**Shahana (19):** I think what we will remember is that Islam is technically a newish religion in England; it is something that migrated. Because of that, we had to go back to its roots. So, we often think that religion is much more original here, much closer than it was for example, in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, it is going through oral history. [...] But here, cause we have had to start at fresh [...] people had to go back to the original rulings, original scriptures sort of [...] and because of that the focus on just one culture has gone [...].

Ironically, I think in Bangladesh, for example, if I had lived there, it [religious identity] wouldn't be that important because it would have been contained within my own culture, you know.

Other participants' stories also indicate that the predominantly secular socio-cultural context provides a place to negotiate a more 'genuine' form of Islam (see also De Koning 2008; Voas and Fleischmann 2012). This underlines the importance of the place and culture in which a deliberate and 'chosen' form of 'being Muslim' is being developed. These findings challenge the notion about 'Muslim identities' referring to 'pure Islam' being associated with de-culturalised and de-territorialised notions of religious identities. While indeed religious identities seem to be orientated towards 'religious places' such as Mecca, at the same time 'being Muslim' become increasingly associated with 'British' dimensions of identity. This is exemplified with Nida experiencing a shift from 'being a Pakistani Muslim in Britain, to being a British Muslim who is Pakistani', as addressed at the beginning of this finding section. When participants identify as 'British Muslim' this refers to the disassociation between their religious identity and their ethnic-cultural background, but does not mean their religion is 'de-culturalised'. Based on our exploratory findings, religious identities seem to be *re*-culturalised since they respond to the everyday context in the UK.

The spatial anchoring of religious identity in the predominantly secular context is also emphasised by experiences of negotiating religion at specific local places in the everyday context. Several participants share experiences of religious identities becoming more salient when they start to negotiate religion in different local places they encounter when becoming older. Tee explains:

**Tee (22):** By having joined this sort of groups [Islamic charity organisations], I feel like my relations with religion, myself, and with other people – in terms of Islam – is a lot stronger, because then I can negotiate religion, I understand it more and learn from other people.

Tee creates her own understanding of 'being' religious when being able to move beyond their parents' places (such as the home) or her parents' culture (the religious community centres or mosques). In this case, Tee explores, develops and gives meaning to her religious identity in places where she meets Muslim peers that work for the same charity organisation. While our data did not allow for an in-depth analysis of various local and everyday places since the main focus of our project was on places beyond the UK, the narratives constructed around the maps revealed that these changes are inherently connected to exploring religion in the everyday context when becoming more independent during this phase in the participants' lives. Tee's quote shows that these places (such as the charity organisation) do not necessarily have to be the institutionalised or formally religious places, such as mosques. This resonates with work on the post-secular secular city in which religion is considered to be integrated in the urban contexts in various ways; both fixed and dynamic, visible and invisible (see for instance; Cloke and Beaumont 2013; Burchardt and Westendorp 2018; Della Dora 2018). Follow-up research is needed in order to explore how and where the religious identities in Newcastle upon Tyne are mobilised, what role the institutionalised places and other everyday places play and how this is embedded in, and attributed to, the urban in which structures of belief and non-belief are entangled (Della Dora 2018).

## 5. Conclusions

This paper explores how places beyond the UK relate to young Muslims' religious identities in the context of Newcastle upon Tyne. The findings demonstrate that young people start to explore and negotiate their religious beliefs independently from their parents around their mid-teens. We show that the participants orientate their religious identities to different places beyond the UK and argue that understanding how these places shape religious identities requires an approach that takes various dynamic spatial notions into account. In other words, these identity negotiations should not only be explained by focussing on, for instance, the places where their parents migrated from or in relation to any other single place beyond the UK. These places beyond the UK change in importance and meaning in interconnected ways.

During the period of becoming independent, the participants in this study started to disassociate their 'ways of being Muslim' from the places their parents migrated from. These family-related

places, often villages and towns, lose their religious significance, yet these remain important for their ethnic-cultural identities. At the same time, 'religious places', such as Mecca, become increasingly important places for the participants' negotiation of 'being Muslim'. While the importance of these particular places might be specific to these participants and this study context, the findings demonstrate that young Muslims' religious and cultural identities do not necessarily follow the same trajectories. Besides, they also underline the changing character of young people's religious identities and the agentic negotiation of young people's religious identities and beliefs (Thompson and Pihlaja 2018). The findings, in particular, illustrate that various places beyond the UK, on different levels, play an interconnected role in navigating ones 'Muslimness' during this period.

Furthermore, the transnational relations beyond the UK seem to be connected to negotiations in the local and everyday context. While the interviews were structured around places beyond the UK, the participants' narratives suggest that these transnational forms of identification are anchored and reflected in the local and predominantly secular British context.

Previous literature raises questions about the significance of place in the context of today's globalised religious identities of young people, especially those with a migration background (Duderija 2007; Phalet, Fleischmann, and Stojčić 2012; Speck 2012; Frederiks 2016). The contribution of this paper lies in demonstrating that religious orientations to places beyond the UK, which are often associated to 'globalised' and 'uprooted' religious identities (Kibria 2008; Ryan 2012), are inherently (inter)connected to other spatial notions through which young people navigate their religious identities. This study implies that transnational notions of identifications as Muslim, do not mean that places become irrelevant, nor do religious identities become 'placeless'. The interconnectedness between various transnational places, and relations between transnational and more local spatialities of religious identity negotiations, are promising in further researching the dynamic and agentic ways in which young people negotiate their religious identities today.

The findings challenge the simplified and stereotyped notions of young Muslims, which are prominent in public and academic debates in many European societies today. It demonstrates that transnational identifications 'of being Muslim' do *not* imply that religious identities are non-British or detached from the local society, notions often used to 'enstrate' young Muslims from being British.

Further research on the changing spatialities in the everyday context is needed to enhance our understanding of how young Muslims make sense of religion through time and space. In this paper, we only showed that young Muslims identity negotiations beyond the UK are anchored in the everyday context, but not how those local spatialities change and what the role of different types of everyday places is. While youth geographers have demonstrated that young people's everyday geographies change when transitioning to young adulthood and that new places will contribute to shaping their identities (Valentine, Skelton, and Chambers 1998), the role of religion needs more attention in these processes. In these future studies, also the intersections between 'being religious' and other social identity markers, such as gender, class and ethnicity need to be explored to explain how everyday experiences influence the changing spatialities of negotiating religion. New encounters in those local places can play a vital role in developing a personal understanding of religion and navigating religious identities (Ryan 2014; Kapinga and van Hoven 2020).

Lastly, this paper contributes methodologically by advocating for a map-making technique to capture how young Muslim identities are navigated through time and place; a response to concerns about misrepresenting young Muslim identities in academic research (Ali 2008; Thompson and Pihlaja 2018). We advocate for the use of maps as an integrated part of in-depth interviews and a fruitful form of qualitative data collection for children and young people who have migrated or have a history of family migration. The use of maps elicits the focus on different spatialities, through which participants construct their narratives around 'location, dislocation and translocation' that could tease out complexities and dynamics of identity processes (Anthias 2002; Hopkins 2007a). It allows them to elicit who they were, are, and want to become. The narratives and maps help bring in the participants' perspectives and various spatial notions since they pick and choose

what places they consider relevant. In our case, this resulted in stories that *also* focused on the everyday instead of only on our initial interest in transnational relations and places on various spatial levels. In this study, we created the maps using the digital format GoogleMyMaps and printed maps. However, this digital format raised practical challenges, mostly related to the internet connection. The alternative printed maps – with a world map template – showed the value of more freedom and flexibility in drawing for constructing the narratives but were less helpful since these highlighted the country borders and elicited places on other scales. Other bases for the map-making technique need to be explored, such as mental mapping, in which the participants draw on an empty sheet of paper (Kapinga and van Hoven 2020). These techniques are valuable for revealing identifications with various spatialities that prompt in-depth insights into changing senses of belonging and identities.

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## ORCID

Laura Kapinga  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1727-6997>  
 Bettina van Hoven  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6800-8602>  
 Bettina B. Bock  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8108-7766>  
 Peter Hopkins  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0445-9217>

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