LET'S WALK TO SAUDI

SAUDI STUDENTS' SELF-REPRESENTATION ON FACEBOOK.COM

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates issues of representation from multiple perspectives, but particularly those of the self and *other* as occurring in the West and in Saudi cultures. It also critically reflects on the methodology, conceptual thinking and artistic process of working on the thesis project *Let's Walk To Saudi*. Popular cultural media and the role it plays in creating and perpetuating stereotypes was the initial motivation behind the thesis and was central to the media-based project. Artists and practitioners have begun to investigate similar issues within the context of art production using social media as a form of participatory art practice. An analysis of comparative art projects are included in the examples that contextualize *Let's Walk To Saudi*.

      Let's Walk To Saudi is a project that established an online community platform on Facebook enabling Saudi students around the world—there are more than 80,000 internationally—to share unedited stories about their experiences abroad, and receive feedback from others in the form of writings, photos, audio, and video clips. The project began by inviting Saudi students studying abroad to represent themselves, challenge themselves to face their fears, rethink cultural boundaries, and question their own preconceptions towards others, while also considering the others' (Westerners') preconceptions about Arabs and Muslims. The thesis explores cultural, political and social forms of representation and self-representation between home and abroad. By using social media, the project explores and encourages better communication, increases awareness about individuals from other cultures, and ultimately sets out to challenge stereotypes.

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PREFACE

On January 14th, 2011, and after twenty-eight days of protests in Tunisia, President Zine El

Abidine Ben Ali officially resigned and left the country, in what was known as the 2011

Tunisian Revolution. On February 11th, 2011, and after more than three weeks of public

protests, the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak resigned from office as a result of determined

popular protest, known as The Egyptian Revolution of 2011. Both revolutions were known as

the Facebook revolution.

When Wael Ghonim—who played a key role in organizing the January 25 protest in Egypt—

was asked about the revolution he said:

"This revolution started online. This revolution started on Facebook."

(The Huffington Post).

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INTRODUCTION

In the past six years, the government of Saudi Arabia granted scholarships enabling more than 80,000 Saudi students to attend universities and colleges in different countries around the world. More than 30,000 of these students went to the United States and Canada, and 15,000 to the United Kingdom. More students will leave to study abroad during the next four years, as part of an education strategy by the Ministry of Higher Education (M.O.H.E.) to informally and partially introduce the world to Saudi culture and identity, and also to introduce Saudi youth to the world. As one of these students, I have been given the opportunity to experience the Canadian/North American culture and examine many of the ingrained preconceptions about North American and Western culture. Previous to this opportunity to study abroad in Canada at Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Vancouver, I had minimal interaction with people from the West. The opportunity for Saudi students to study abroad provided for direct experiences with Western lifestyles and exposure to the forms of mass media that originated and became popular in the West. Through exposure to forms of mass media, Saudi students abroad have developed an understanding about how Westerners perceive Arabs and how Arabs perceive Westerners.

As one of these students now living within a Western context, I decided to use social media as a form of cultural and social engagement with Saudi students studying abroad. This thesis and the artistic project *Let's Walk To Saudi* thereafter referred to as "the project" explores forms of communication with Saudi students in

order to reveal as much about ourselves as about the West. In the past three years that I have spent studying in Vancouver, between 2008 – 2011, and before starting to work on *Let's Walk To Saudi*, I developed a research thematic to reflect on my geographical displacement. My critical thinking revolved around self-representation and my experiences as an international student coming from Saudi Arabia. A project that started with a simple idea of creating a match-cut based video of people walking around the world towards Saudi Arabia, then evolved into a much more critical project. Sharing this sense of displacement through forms of social media, I was able to establish and explore common situations, and this made it easier to compare the experiences of other Saudi students with my own, to hold diverse discussions based on our individual encounters, and therefore engage in a more nuanced perception of the community, where each one of us now live in order to pursue our studies abroad.

When I started my studies in Vancouver, I began to produce artworks that explored this new home away from home. The three projects that I developed were an important beginning to understand how I could dialogue with and represent this new sense of place, learning and culture.

Ahmad, Who and How is the first project I developed for my research thematic. This short self-reflective documentary was a way to share my story of moving from Saudi Arabia to Canada, and the mixed feelings that I had as I moved. This video work took a rather nostalgic look at the people who had influenced me both as a child and as a grown-up. In the documentary, I show images of my country, family, and culture. The work ends with messages from family and friends as I leave the

country.

The Wisdom Box is a sculptural installation with an audio-visual component. This Plexiglas box is supported on one of its corners, and it has Arabic calligraphy prints on five sides, and on the sixth side a video projection with sound. The prints on the box were "wisdom" sections taken from different Arabic classical poetry. I felt that these poems would have values that different cultures could share. The video was an abstract edit of the process of writing those lines showing the beauty of the Arabic letterform, along with some classical Arabic instrumental music.

Nice to Meet You Ahmad! is a video installation documenting different people in my surroundings trying to pronounce my name correctly—as I do. In the process of recording their responses, I asked them to give me their best shot of saying "Ahmad". Every time my name was mispronounced, it became a reminder that this was not where I belonged. The harder they tried, the worse it got and the more confirmation I received about my geographical and cultural displacement.
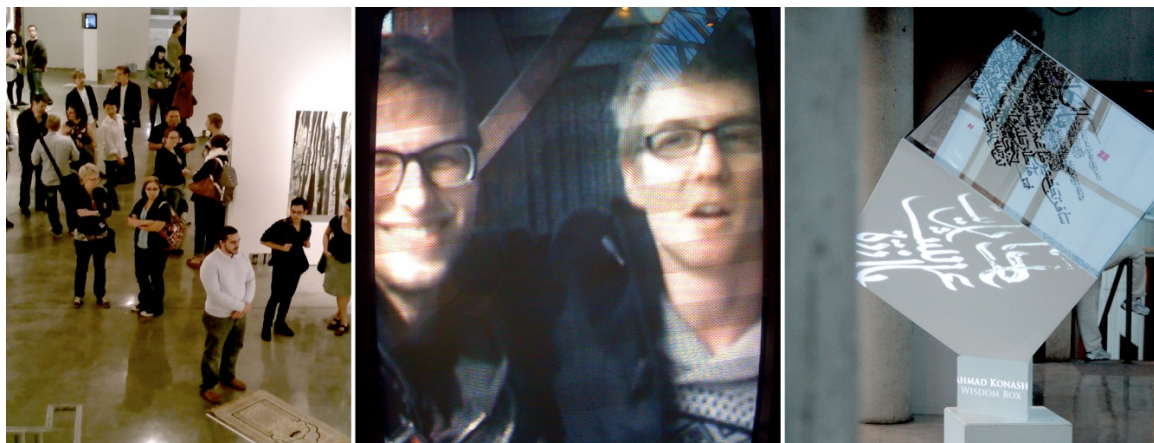
Fig.1: Left to right:
Ahmad Konash, *Allaho Akbar,* 2010. Performance at the Concourse Gallery. Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Photo: Waleed Rabia.
Ahmad Konash, *Nice to Meet You Ahmad!* 2010.Video installation at the Concourse Gallery, Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Photo: Ahmad Konash.
Ahmad Konash, *The Wisdom Box.* 2009. Plexiglas 12"x12"x12", audio, video Installation at 1612 Gallery, Vancouver. Photo: Ahmad Konash.

In *Allaho Akbar*, a performance piece, I called for prayer and performed the "sunset prayer" in a gallery space, trying to reclaim "Allaho Akbar" as a term that means, "God is greater". This term is frequently used in the Islamic culture, especially in prayers. I wanted to draw attention to this cultural reference, as it has largely lost its original meaning, and instead currently is associated with—and only with—terrorist attacks. A prime example of association involves Arid Uka, who was the suspect in the March 2, 2011 shooting at the Frankfurt airport that killed two American airmen. He shouted "Allaho akbar" as he emptied his handgun aboard an air force bus. This phrase became associated with the action of the terrorist (CBS News).

These projects informed how I began to explore and construct a thematic of self-representation. I represented my name, my family, my friends, my culture, my language, and my beliefs. These projects led to making the work *Let's Walk To Saudi* as a continuation of the thematic of self-representation, but on a larger scale. The project expanded to include other Saudi students abroad who were asked questions and then responded using social media as a form of communication to share their experiences, stories, and thoughts about how geographical and cultural displacement significantly influenced the way they perceive themselves and others.

I was also influenced by Jehane Noujaim's documentary, *Control Room (2004)*, about the war on Iraq. In the film, an American soldier talks in an interview about how he felt seeing images of his fellow American soldiers injured. He compared this to how he felt when he saw the worse injuries of the Iraqi civilians received every single day on the news. He explained that his sympathy towards the soldiers

was far greater because he related to them, whereas he barely felt sympathy for the Iraqi civilians. An interest in telling stories about everyday Saudis—by letting others into our lives—became a priority for this project. *Control Room* illustrated to me how many Westerners were unable to relate to events in Iraq. My intention was to offer possibilities for people to relate to each other and see things from a totally different perspective. The need for Saudis to gain self-representation, and the means by which they could be engaged in self-representation through the use of social media are amongst the central questions that this research investigates.

SAUDI, ARAB, MUSLIM

In this thesis, I investigate how terms such as Muslim, Arabs and Saudi are used. While they should not be understood as equivalent, they often act as synonyms as people can belong to all three groups at the same time.

The way geography is taught in Saudi Arabia—at least when I was in school—was with a focus on Saudi Arabia, Arabian Gulf countries, the Arab world, the Islamic world, and the rest of the world. I'm one of 1.6 billion Muslims, one of 360 million Arabs, and one of 25 million Saudis. The Islamic world, consisting of around 1.6 billion people and spanning from Indonesia to West Africa, is spread across many different nations and ethnic groups connected by religion and a shared sense of belonging. The Arab world refers to Arabic speaking countries, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Arabian Gulf in the east (Persian Gulf), and from the Mediterranean Sea in the north to the horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean in the southeast, consisting in all of around 360 million people.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a country that occupies the majority of land on the Arabian Peninsula located at the southwest part of Asia. It is separated from Egypt by the Red Sea on the west coast and from Iran on the east coast by the Arabian Gulf. A fairly young country, it was founded in 1932 and is ruled by a monarchy—a royal family. Saudi Arabia is looked at as the *forte* of the Muslim world, as it has Makkah and Madinah, two of the three holy cities within Islamic belief. The population is around 25 million; Saudi Arabia has, amongst the Gulf countries, the largest population of nationals, with some 60 per cent of this population under 25 years of age (Shoult 305).

A HISTORY OF MISUNDERSTANDING

Saudi-American political relations have been evolving ever since the first meeting between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz, the founder of Saudi Arabia, on February 14, 1945, at Great Bitter Lake, Suez. The country was less than 13 years old. The speed of this East-West evolution increased dramatically after the first Gulf War in 1990, and even more rapidly after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York.

Given the length of this relationship, one would think that by now we would see a more sophisticated representation of Arabs and Muslims in Western media. This is not the case; images remain negative, misrepresent, and are largely stereotypical. A discussion jointly made in a gathering with my fellow Saudi students studying abroad would usually end up by praising for a while the West's organization, infrastructures, and systems. But then, we would also wonder why Westerners know so little about other cultures, especially Arab cultures.

Cultural representation within forms of pop-culture media, especially film and television, have played and continue to play a huge role in forming stereotypical preconceptions and then perpetuating these stereotypes, a phenomenon that is certainly not specific to the representation of Arabs. It is the case with a lot of other cultures. Hollywood film in particular is a powerful twentieth-century medium that has contributed to stereotyping American ethnic groups. Examples of narrative forms used in stereotypical representations include rapid physical movement, exotic appearances, and violent confrontation (Washburn qtd. in Rollins,

Hollywood's Indian ix). Edward Said discusses popular cultural representation in his book *Covering Islam*. The book boldly states a position in the subtitle: *How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World.* Since we are investigating pop culture media and how this is interpreted within an art project, it is appropriate to reference one of the most important artists within the visual pop art movement, Andy Warhol, and how he refers to mainstream film. He mentions in his autobiography, "It's the movies that have really been running things in America ever since they were invented. They show you what to do, how to do it, when to do it, how to feel about it, and how to look how you feel about it" (Bockis 56). Before the era of television, and film images, Western artists, such as Delacroix, Jerome, and novelists who wrote about the Orient, such as Disraeli and Gustave Flaubert, reveal that the Western representation of the Orient had very little to do with what the Orient was (Said qtd. In Jhally, On Orientalism).

Working from first hand experience of living abroad and through observations, stereotypes and ignorance from both sides have been part of my experience, and have triggered the project. Therefore, I have an opportunity to interpret culture and place not just from films or books, but also from lived experience I was exposed to different sets of images about the West and Westerners; media was constructing most of these images. There were images that showed Americans as good-looking super heroes, freedom fighters, and saviors of the planet! These images were mainly from Hollywood movies and cartoons, such as "Super Man," Indiana Jones, G.l. Joe, and James Bond. On the other hand, there were images that portrayed Americans as manipulating hostile invading killers;

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these images were mainly from Arab news. Although I grew up with these images, I now question why these differences exist and why they are continuing to be produced and reproduced. Representation remains largely very generic when addressing images about Arabs due to the homogeneity of representation that arises from both Hollywood and Western news media. Arabs, and Saudis specifically, are almost always portrayed as violent, hateful, wealthy, camel riding, hairy terrorists! There are no variation, rather always standard consistent imagery.

The idea of the "other" and the representation of that other—is not new. In an interview with Edward Said on Orientalism, he revisited the term, saying that it is not exclusive to the Orient, but is essentially the culture of representing the other whom ever that might be (Said qtd. In Jhally, <u>On Orientalism</u>). Going back to the standard or classical definition that he refers to in his book *Orientalism*, Said writes:

> Orientalism can also express the strength of the West and the Orient's
> weakness—as seen by the West. Such strength and such weakness are
> as intrinsic to Orientalism as they are to any view that divides the world
> into large general divisions, entities that coexist in a state of tension
> produced by what is believed to be radical difference. (45)

In the documentary *Reel Bad Arabs*, Jack Shaheen studies the history of Hollywood's representation of Arabs, and he concludes, "Arabs are the most maligned group in the history of Hollywood. They are portrayed basically as sub-humans, untermenschen. These images have been with us for more than a century" (Shaheen). Robert Fisk interprets these images in a different light. Having lived in the Middle East as a war correspondent for the past 40 years, he has

acquired a different view than most people, living either inside or outside this

broad geographical area. He identifies representation, which is most culturally

relevant, in his analysis of Hollywood films. He writes:

> You only have to watch the Arab slave-trader film *Ashanti*, again filmed in
>
> Israel, and starring Roger Moore, and (of all people) Omar Sharif, to see Arabs
>
> portrayed, Nazi-style, as murderers, thieves, and children-molesters. Anti-
>
> Semitism against Arabs—who are, of-course, also Semites—is par for the
>
> course in movies. (Fisk 164)

There are many examples from films. The movie *Taken* (2009) shows that the

prostitution business in Paris is mainly run by an Albanian mob marked by crescent

tattoos on their arms. The main customers are Arab princes and other Arab royals.

In contrast, *The Transformers* (2007) show Arabs as nomads, living by raising chickens

in a world full of destruction. An Arab viewer can't help but be affected by these

scenes and question: why has the word and image of the Arab become such a

disgrace? Is it that bad to be an Arab? Is it a synonym for something bad? These

cinematic images, when coupled with the representations of Arabs in Western

news, only produce and advance more racial profiling, more ignorance, and more

discrimination. One of the few positive images of Arab representation is by the

Canadian comedian Russell Peters. He blames the local —North American— news

for perpetuating stereotypes about Arabs by showing an Arab man, then an

explosion, and suggests some kind of a hidden message.

> The only images that reach the news are of angry protesters speaking harsh
>
> Arabic. But they never show everyday Arabs on TV because they are "boring."

They only show the crazy shouting ones. Basically all they're showing you of

the Arab world are the rednecks of the Arab world, that's why their Arabic is

so bad.

(Peters qtd. in Yousifmagdi, Arabs Jokes)

These misrepresentations exist not only in movies and television, but are also

circulated on the Internet. A Facebook group called, "Stop the Islamization of

Australia," is one of many web pages perpetuating hate and phobia against Arabs

and Muslims around the world, and this message of fear can clearly be felt when

reading some parts of the group's description:

All throughout Australia's cities a new reality is rising: entire Muslim

neighborhoods where very few indigenous people reside or are even seen.

And if they are, they might regret it. This goes for the police as well. It's the

world of headscarves, where women walk around in figureless tents, with

baby strollers and a group of children. Their husbands, or slaveholders if you

prefer, walk three steps ahead, with mosques on many street corners. The

shops have signs you and I cannot read. You will be hard-pressed to find any

economic activity. ("Stop The Islamization Of Australia")

Is this ignorance one sided, or do Arabs also use stereotypes when talking about

and representing North Americans? Arguably, the issue is even deeper than that,

and more convoluted. The misrepresentation and lack of understanding actually

comes from both sides. Arabs, just like North Americans, are misinformed and

misrepresent the other side. Intriguingly, but sometimes also overwhelmingly, the

misrepresentation continues to come from Hollywood.

When looking at some of the examples where Westerners have been represented, or portrayed in the Arab media, one would argue that there is misrepresentation there too. The character Ms. Anita in the Egyptian film *The Danish Experiment* (2003) is a blond Danish girl who travels to Egypt as a personal trainer, and attempts to familiarize and then expose the men in the film by exploiting their sexuality; that is all she communicates—sex. Mr. Adam in the Kuwaiti play *Bye Bye London* (1981) is a hotel and casino manager, who plays the role of a deceptive, manipulative person who ends up taking money from all the Arab tourists staying in his hotel in London. Mr. John in the Saudi television show, *A Story Everyday* (2000), plays the role of the foreign expert, a very minor role that portrays the Western character as the expert in technology and industry. In a typical Arab movie, television show or play, there are not many representations of Westerners, but whenever they are present they portray usually ethical and moral deterioration, sexuality, and technological advancement.

There are instances when renowned Arab scholars, or religious leaders, followed by the extremist segments of society, undertake a more aggressive approach. For example, Sayyid Qutub, a modern Arab scholar was sent to the United States by the Egyptian government in 1948 to study their educational system for application in Egypt. He studied abroad for three years—just like me, and he writes of his experience:

It is the case of a people who have reached the peak of growth and elevation in the world of science and productivity, while remaining abysmally primitive in the world of the senses, feelings, and behavior. A people who have not

exceeded the most primordial levels of existence, and indeed, remain far

below them in certain areas of feelings and behavior. (Qutb 3)

One would clearly feel that the representation of the West is equally stereotyped, generalized, and misrepresented. However, misrepresentation needs to be closely considered as usually backed up by historical conditions, especially those rooted in colonialism within the Arab World**.**

Professor and writer, Abdullah Alnefisi studied in the same school, Victoria College (an English school in Cairo), as Edward Said. Both men have also studied abroad in the United States. Said has a more Western way of iterating his thesis to a Western audience, while Alnefisi has kept his Arabic style, and his target audience is Arabs. What is interesting is that both seem to reach the same conclusion. Colonial power took a toll on nations struggling within imperialistic oppression. "It is not an exaggeration to say that before the sudden OPEC price rise in early 1974, 'Islam' as such scarcely figured, either in the Western culture or in the Western media. One saw and heard of Arabs and Iranians, of Pakistanis and Turks, rarely of Muslim" (Said, <u>Covering Islam</u> 36). It is not very often that one finds Said on television in the States discussing his ideas with the public directly. One has to take a university course and read the book to have access to his insight. On the other hand, Alnefisi, whose televised public lectures are instantly accessible to the Arab public, has a far more extensive and wider-reaching ground. For example, this excerpt, translated by this author from Alnefisi's public television broadcast, defines five stages that Arab-West relations have passed through:

1. The Hostility period: campaigns that were characterized by violence. This

period's main effect was to break the people of the region and their

connection to their history.

2. The Segmentation period: mainly the Sykes–Picot and other Agreement over

dividing the Arab Homeland.

3. The Westernization period: consisted of selecting from the elites, educating

them according to Western culture, then imposing them in power positions

back at their countries.

4. The economical dependency period: where the Arab oil wasn't for them

anymore.

5. The keystone period: when they brought the Zionist entity to the region, to

maintain the effect of the previous four stages. (Alnefisi qtd. in

boammarcom <u>Arabs Before</u>)

Such lectures or images, regardless of their accuracy or content, help build a

representative picture in the minds of the receivers, which feed into an already

established stereotype about the West. Both Alnefisi and Said self-represent their

ideas, but each from within his own approach. One could say that the main

difference between them is that Said has produced a discourse to educate the

West, and as all his writings are in English he is not well known in Arab countries. I

never read any of his writings until I came to Canada. On the other hand, Alnefisi's

approach is directed towards Arabs, as a university professor, as well as a media

personality. On television, he often tackles topics such as history, politics, and Arab

relations with the West specifically the United States.

Terry Jones is the pastor of a small church in Gainesville, Florida, who

announced on the ninth anniversary of the September 11 attack the "International Burn a Koran Day" He encouraged church members to burn hundreds of copies of the Qur'an. Although Jones has admitted that he has not read the Koran, he defended the plans saying the Koran is "full of lies" (Musharbash and Peters).

People like Jones and Qutub exemplify why stereotypes are still being perpetuated and kept alive into the twenty-first century. For an Arab or a Saudi, Jones represents America and the West, because of his sensationalist approach. He received a lot of media attention and consequently encouraged an increased level of protest and hateful behavior against Arabs in America. Ironically, due to his racist message during this very complex event and difficult time in history, the types of communication and attitudes that Americans hold against the Arab and Muslim world have not improved.

SAUDIS AND SELF-REPRESENTATION

To self-represent, to portray oneself as an image accessible to a wide audience or network of social engagement by putting oneself in front of a camera, is not common back home in Saudi Arabia. This is especially true for women. This reality was observed in the documentary *Where in The World is Osama Bin Laden* (2008) as filmmaker Morgan Spurlock attempts to interview two high-school students, but they were unable to talk for they were monitored by their teachers, and they were also unfamiliar with a culture of readily expressing an opinion (Spurlock). The Saudi government continues to restrict freedom of speech and press, although there has been an increase in freedom of the press over recent years (U.S. Department of State).

Is there a need for this platform; where Saudi students can begin to engage in self-representation? What would be the effects of this personal practice, this social activity? As Saudis, we claim that the world should know more about us, but at the same time, it takes a very long time to get a visa to visit Saudi Arabia, that is if you end up getting one at all. People cannot visit Saudi Arabia easily, the only other way is for students, or others, to begin to engage the world, and within this process form new exchanges and relationships of communications through our own use of media.

What have we done, so far, to represent ourselves as Saudis, or even as Arabs? Other than a few attempts by the Arab media and some Arabic figures, no serious self- representation by Arabs or Saudis has gained much momentum! Attempts

were made by Mostapha Akkad, the Syrian-American filmmaker, through his two films *Mohammed, Messenger of God* (1977) and *The Lion of the Desert* (1981). Also, the Egyptian director Yousif Shaheen produced the film *Destiny* (1997). Additionally, one of the very few serious Arab news sources, the *Aljazeera* news channel, has made concerted efforts towards Arab self-representation. *Aljazeera English* was launched in 2006 to be the Middle East's voice to the West and began broadcasting in Canada in May 2010, but not yet permitted in the United States. Other than these few examples, Arabs are largely introduced to the world through questionable representation —the Western media.

More recently, other groups that have taken the lead in representing Arabs are extremist groups; those associated with individuals such as Osama bin Laden and his allies, and dictators such as Muammar Gadhafi of Libya and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and their official national media outlets mainly concerned with protecting the regimes of those countries. These often violent and inflammatory groups are largely disregarded because of their radicalism, and so leave little ground for discussion. When combined with representations from the West these radical views contribute to support stereotypes.

Danya Alhamrani, a Saudi filmmaker, undertook one of the very few recent examples of collaborative representation when she invited Anthony Bourdain, the host of *No Reservation* (a travel T.V. show) to visit Jeddah, in Saudi Arabia. She managed to get her hometown selected for the "FAN-atic" episode of the show, where fans pitch their ideas for where the host should visit next. The show featured many aspects of the everyday life of a Saudi working family, the street life,

the food, and the larger family. An episode that started with a question of what can one do in a country where one cannot drink alcohol, ended with a more sophisticated image of that country. Yes, it is the country where women are not allowed to drive, and a country that is hot most of the year, but it is much more than just that (No Reservations).

Not to simplify a complex subject, but I propose that a way can be found to highlight the diverse spectrum of our culture. The first step is the long journey "we" Saudis need to take to represent ourselves. Opportunities have already opened up—especially in the world of social media networks—and are waiting to be used, engaged, and explored. Media has played an important role in dividing the world, "The more insistent we are on the separation of cultures, the more inaccurate we are about ourselves, and about others" (Said, The Myth). One must be able to represent oneself, individually rather than react defensively as a group. Change must come from within before it comes from the outside.

Let's Walk To Saudi is one of these attempts to take advantage of the accessibly of social media networks to create a number of self-representative pieces, as part of the larger contribution to increase awareness for both "sides", that is people in the West and in Saudi Arabia.

In contextualizing the project, I found that there were not many attempts of self-representing through media work by Saudis. I have looked at some of the practices where people have tried to self-represent, and attempt to reach out and to create a wider spectrum of understanding. In addition to the previously mentioned examples, I refer to Danya Alhamrani's episode of *No Reservations* (2008)*,* and Akkad film, *Faith Walks the Land*,

a documentary that is still under development by Iman Salam, a Muslim Arab-American film maker who explores the activity of walking within urban space to initiate and advance communication. Salam decided that she would walk into small American towns and organize events where people are welcome to come, ask, learn, and discuss issues about Islam. This is an open opportunity to speak up, to engage with familiar or unfamiliar knowledge, and try to understand more about cultural differences.

Naif al-Mutawa, a Kuwaiti writer, created *The 99* comic books, with superheroes from the Muslim world, joining forces with DC's *Justice League of America*, having them fight side by side with Superman and the rest of the League. The controversy over whether Marjane Satrapi's animated film, *Persopolis,* represents the Arab/Muslim world or not (she grew up in France as a part of the Iranian Shah's family) demonstrates how scarce and fragile self-representation is.

When analyzing these examples, it becomes clear that self-initiated projects directed toward the need for self-representation is a response to the long history of misunderstanding between Arab/Muslim cultures and Western cultures. Some of the techniques that have worked for these projects include the use of humor to compare different cultures, and invitations to the other to visit and experience the place—to picture place and engage with the culture. Iman Salam adopted a confrontational and challenging style in her approach, which was coupled with her willingness to open up and self expose. Al-Mutawa's direction was different, he tried to take a stand against others' claims, but at the same time empower youth through creating work for a large audience. *Let's Walk To Saudi* attempts to bring forward these concepts of opening up and self-exposure.

SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS, PARTICIPATORY ART PRACTICE,

AND SELF-REPRESENTATION

In this section of the thesis, the conventions of social media networks in general (Facebook, YouTube) and participatory art practices will be investigated to discover how, when combined, these can be of use to *Let's Walk To Saudi*. In addition, examples of current practices that took advantage of social media platforms will be studied in order to situate the project in the area of social media and participatory art practices. Utilizing online social media networks leads to participatory art projects that can bring better communication and increased awareness. This is the aim of *Let's Walk To Saudi*.

In his article *Small Change*, Malcolm Gladwell questions whether social media networks can lead to actual change or not. Social media connections between people in communities are often considered "weak ties," which seldom lead to "high risk" activism. He argues that even though social media networks are great sources of new ideas and information, it is the strength in the ties that are inherent to its effectiveness (Gladwell). Gladwell's stance became outdated a month ago (January 2011), during the events of the Facebook-driven revolutions that took place in Tunisia and Egypt. The Egyptian revolution was coined "The Facebook revolution" (The Huffington Post).

Engaging publics physically in the discussion of political and social issues has been part of participatory art practices since the 1960's. Ever since then there was a drive to give more emphasis to the act of collaboration, the collective dimension of

social experience rather than the distinction between the performer and the audience, professional and amateur, production and reception (Bishop 10). By participating in such projects, the aim was to empower active members by the experience of physical or symbolic participation, and help them find and determine their own social and political reality. (Bishop 12)

In his book, *Here Comes Everybody The Power of Organizing Without Organizations,* Clay Shirky explains that in most of social media projects mentioned in the book share a success in fusing three main components, a plausible promise, an effective tool, and an acceptable bargain with the users. He explains:

> The promise is the basic "why" for anyone to join or contribute to a group. The tool helps with the "how"—how will the difficulties of coordination be overcome, or at least be held to manageable levels? And the bargain sets the rules of the road (260).

Analyzed together, these three characteristics helps to understand both successes and failures of groups on social media networks.

What do social media networks in general share? What characteristics now make them such effective tools of communication? Lev Manovich explains*:*

> To get the discussion started, consider two principal tendencies of Web 2.0. First, in the present decade we have seen a gradual shift from a majority of Internet users accessing content produced by a much smaller number of professional producers to a growing number of users accessing content produced by other nonprofessionals. (Manovich qtd. in Frieling, <u>The Art of Participation</u> 68)

This shift from professionally produced content, to user-generated content marked a milestone in the history of media production, "The explosion of user-created content —sometimes referred to as participatory or social media— on the web since 2005 has unleashed a new media universe" (Manovich qtd. in Frieling, <u>The Art of Participation</u> 67). The term media is not exclusive anymore to mass media, television, and film. Users can generate "media" and share it, distribute it, and have millions of hits. Manovich continues that, importantly, after being merely a publishing medium in the 1990s, the web became more of a communication medium. He writes: "Communication between users, including conversations around user-generated content, can take place in a variety of forms besides email, including posts, comments, reviews, ratings, gestures and tokens, votes, links, badges, video" (68).

When dealing with large groups, where most of the members do not know each other, members are not tightly connected to one another

> As a result, such groups are better able to produce what James Surowieckihas called "the wisdom of crowds." In his book of that name he identified the ways distributed groups whose members aren't connected can often generate better answers, by pooling their knowledge or intuition without having to come to an agreement. (Shirky 267)

In such an environment, self-representation and freedom of speech have a place to happen, a platform to be used for experience. To present and represent does not just occur occasionally by a small group of people, but also can now flourish over a population dispersed throughout a country, in fact the world.

Instead of having thoughts, experiences, and ideas arise and then go nowhere, people now can interact and communicate with each other and this form of relationship can be accessed anytime from anywhere.

As Frieling writes: "To engage with a work requires a willingness to be intrigued or challenged by its implicit and explicit rules of behavior. A participatory work thus needs an environment that makes possible the actual enactment of these rules" (Frieling 40). One of the places where one can find the specific audience that matches this form of engagement is on the Internet. Participatory art practice can be defined as art that is constituted only through the participant's activity, which is by entering an artistic situation and actively becoming part of it (Frieling 33, 36). Social media networks are unique to past forms of communication as they can provide an environment for participatory engagement to take place. The establishment of the Facebook group page was essential to the success of the project, and it is the site where participatory engagement is now made possible.

Within contemporary art history, there are participatory art practices that are applicable to *Let's Walk To Saudi*. Harrell Fletcher and Jon Rubin's work are the most relevant. Their work shows how committed and interested they are in engaging non-art audiences and marginalized groups. Open calls for participation are a seminal aspect of their artistic production. In 1998, the artists set up a copy stand in the lobby of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and asked the permission of visitors to copy photographs from their wallets. The finished piece, entitled *Pictures Collected from Museum Visitors' Wallets,* is a selection of ten enlarged and framed prints created from these photos (Frieling152).

One can learn a few lessons of engagement from this example. The artists went to where people were situated instead of extending invitations to come to them, and they rewarded the participants by showing and respecting their wallet photos, and including these in the next step of presentation, an exhibition.

Evan Roth's *Inbox Victory* (2008 – present) also examines the idea of "sharing the moment" with others who have been through the same experience. In this project, the shared moment is the joy of having no unread messages in their email inbox folders. He explains on the project's page: "share in your victory? All you want is a high five, a pat on the back, and a 'job well done soldier' and yet most likely all you are left with is an empty room and a cold cup of coffee. It is an initiative that says 'You deserve that high five!' And here is how you get it" He then describes, in three simple steps, how to be a part of this support community (*Inbox Victory*). The most important lesson of engagement that I learned from this project is to try and make participation in the project as easy and clear as possible.

The New York based conceptual artist, Rachel Perry Welty, created a Facebook-based performance, *Rachel is,* and on March 11, 2009, every sixty seconds from 7:35 a.m. to 10:56 p.m., she attempted to faithfully answer the Facebook status question, "What are you doing right now?" (*Rachel Is*). While participatory engagement was not very visible in this project, it did take form through readers' comments. The significance of this example demonstrates that people became engaged in this project through social media.

BumpList by Onah Brucker-Cohen and Mike Bennett is a mailing list that aims to re-examine the culture and rules of online email lists. *BumpList* only allows for a

maximum amount of subscribers so that when a new person subscribes, the first

person to subscribe is "bumped" or unsubscribed from the list; once subscribed,

you can only be unsubscribed if someone else subscribes and "bumps" you out.

BumpList actively encourages people to participate in the list process by requiring

them to join repeatedly if they are bumped off (Frieling 186). Keeping the

participants engaged on a regular basis, in addition to challenging and rewarding

them are the key lessons learned from this project.

These lessons and ideas are acquired from analyzing each project separately,

but one aspect applies to all participatory engagement: if one does not provide

specifics, participants would be lost. Focusing on the task, the question, the

request, and the audience is crucial to the framework of engagement and the

success of the project.

For my thesis project, I initially wanted to create an installation by which I could represent Saudi youth, a work that allows the viewer to relate and identify with Saudis. The use of social media networks was introduced as a tool and a medium where experiences can be shared and collected. The goal was to collect these materials, and then create the installation where these materials are edited, translated, and then exhibited. These two parts (the installation and the social media network) make up the project, *Let's Walk To Saudi*.

This project invites and engages participants through an online Facebook community of Saudi students, who like myself are studying abroad. The project asks them to participate and share with the online community their stories in the form of videos, pictures, audio clips, or writing. These stories are based on responses to questions, topics and directions that I post on the project's Facebook group page, or that I send to the members of the group on a regular basis (see Appendix 1).

As the main target audience of the project is made up of the Saudi student abroad, the project proposes a unique platform for Saudi self-representation. In addition to the stories collected through answering questions, another part of the project is based on video/photographic pieces sent by the participants responding to a set of directions sent to them. These directions are discussed later in this section. One of the intentions behind the project is to build an archive of students' stories and experiences, and then produce a multimedia video work to be

exhibited in a gallery (referred to at the end of this section with the working title

The Saudi Multimedia Wall).

Fig.2:
Ahmad Konash, *Let's Walk To Saudi.* Facebook group. February 14, 2011. Screenshot.
http://www.facebook. com/group.php?gid= 207463662779

The project's platform encouraged Saudi students abroad to counter

preconceptions about the Saudi culture and to challenge stereotypes about non-

Saudis. This was achieved by soliciting a diverse spectrum of representations and

experiences not typically familiar to either Saudis or people from other cultures,

societies and places. By sharing this pool of diverse stories, the students

challenged themselves to face their fears, rethink cultural boundaries, and question

their own preconceptions towards others, and the broader public, and to question

non-Saudi misconceptions towards them. This project presented an invitation to

Saudi youth, who did not grow up in the culture where they were now living as students abroad. Within the terms of representing oneself, they had to shift from a defensive *blaming* position to one of proactive informative *affirmation*.

For the non-Saudi audience, who are not participating in the social media project *Let's Walk to Saudi*, the project *The Saudi Multimedia Wall* will be available for viewers based on the findings of *Let's Walk To Saudi*. This work will be showcased in a local gallery space for a broad gallery going, largely non-Arabic speaking public. This work strives to present a spectrum of Saudi youth, a group not usually seen on television nor in fact in any kind of mass media. This work will allow the non-Saudi viewer to relate and identify, perhaps for the first time, with the Saudi students as subjects, and in doing so know more about where they come from and how their language and culture looks and sounds.

> Analyzing how broadcast media transformed culture, Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) articulated that the properties of media change social environments and, thus, influence people and their behavior. He examined how broadcast media's ability to rework scale reconfigured publics, altered the roles that people play in society, complicated the boundaries between public and private, collapsed distinct social contexts, and ruptured the salience of physical place in circumscribing publics. Just as many of the affordances of networked media parallel those of broadcast media, many of the dynamics that play out in networked publics are an amplification of those Meyrowitz astutely recognized resulting from broadcast media. (Boyd 48)
>
> Why was Facebook.com so useful to *Let's Walk to Saudi*? What features are

needed to serve the project the best, and are they found in this social media? Launched in 2004, Facebook can be defined as a social networking website that allows users to register for free and have their own profile pages. Users may add other users as friends, exchange messages and have conversations. In addition, they can create or join common interest user groups, organized by workplace, school, or college, or other bodies. In their profiles or group pages, users can post videos, pictures and written notes. Users can also interact with other posts by ranking, sharing, or commenting on them. "Groups need technical means for both public and private conversation, as well as opportunities to be together in ways that allow the social and emotional interactions that build strong ties" (Haythornthwaite 139). In addition, the tool in which these interactions happen need to have –as Danah Boyd defines it– four significant properties, or abilities: persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability. "Persistence is where the content is automatically archived. Replicability is where content can be duplicated. Scalability is the potential visibility of content in networked publics is great. Searchability is where content can be accessed through search" (46). With the capabilities that Facebook provides, and in-order to collect and communicate with the participants, the decision to use Facebook as the primary means of communication, rather than go with a custom made website, made good use of an already established portal. "New tools are not always better. New tools, in fact, start with a huge social disadvantage, which is that most people don't use them, and whenever you have a limited pool from which potential members can be drawn, you limit the social effects" (Shirky 269)

After researching participatory art practices, I knew it was important to engage participants through a medium that offered ready access and familiar means of communication. As of February 2011, there were more than 5,000,000 active members on Facebook, and approximately 70 percent of them are outside the United States (Facebook). These members are a readily available group familiar with the means of navigation and interaction through this media portal. Facebook has documented that its users spend over 700 billion minutes per month on Facebook. It just seemed obvious that Facebook would be the medium to use for the project. The technological infrastructure of Facebook supported the criteria for the project, which was to have ease of posting videos, picture, and notes so other users could interact with these through commenting, ranking, or just sharing with friends.

Facebook can be considered as a continuation of popular culture media and film, the same culture that played the biggest role in creating cultural stereotypes. But importantly, "This universe is not simply a scaled-up version of twentieth-century media culture. Instead, we have moved into the new realm of social media" (Manovich qtd. in Frieling, <u>The Art of Participation</u> 67). And while often the same old pop cultural references and cultural productions are being consumed and recycled, it is necessary to consider how such experiences are redefined, as it is no longer a one-way mode of consumption. "Today we are seeing new kinds of communication in which content, opinion, and conversation often cannot be clearly separated" (Manovich qtd. in Frieling, <u>The Art of Participation</u> 75). Gladwell remarks that Facebook enables and is imperative for a new "diffusion of

innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration". He writes: "Facebook is a tool for efficiently managing your acquaintances, for keeping up with the people you would not otherwise be able to stay in touch with. And lets us use the power of these kinds of distant connections with marvelous efficiency" (Gladwell).

The logo that I have created for the project resembles a figure with a speech bubble, walking on a circle, approaching Saudi Arabia. The description following the logo is a translated version of the Arabic post on the project's group page.

Fig.3: The logo of the project *Let's Walk To Saudi*.
Slogan Reads: "Share your story". Designed by Ahmad Konash.

This is a place where we, scholarship students can meet to share, express and ponder upon our own experiences. It's an invitation to evaluate our experiences as students studying abroad, to re-examine the thoughts we once had before coming here and measure them up against the ones we

have now. It is a space that we give each other to listen, discuss, argue, and respect one another. Everyone's participation is welcomed as long as it does not show disrespect to other participants. It is finally a place where we get to know ourselves through our own eyes rather than those of others. In summary, the project aims to accomplish four things:

1. Get to know one another, where we live and how we see the place we are living in through Saudi eyes.

2. Share the experiences of pain and joy that scholarship students come to have with regards to living abroad.

3. Gain back the right to introduce ourselves as Saudis, Arabs and Muslims based on our own perspective rather than on the perspective of others. The two art works therefore provide for a platform for tackling often difficult contradictory issues, from how Saudis represent themselves, as well as how we have come to see ourselves as one comprehensive nation with cultural differences but also with a great sense of oneness. We also intend to draw on how we are different as individuals, having our own experiences, dreams, goals, culture and ways of life!

(This last point is particular pertinent to the multimedia wall project).

FACEBOOK PROJECT PAGE STATISTICS

As of March 28, 2011

More than 1,200 group members.

104   Videos

120   Photos

52   Audio clips

630+ Text comments

1   Blog submissions

1   short film (Homestay)

2   group officers.

Officers

Bashayer Al-Zaidi
PR

Zeeko Alsedais (University of Alberta)
Publicist

Members

6 of 1,261 members   See All

Ahmad Aseeri

Anwar M. Al-Olaqe

Zezo Ghalib

Ghadeer Sabhan

Saleh Al-hammad

Abdulaziz Baroum

Fig.4:
The information column on the *Let's Walk To Saudi* Facebook group's page.
February 28, 2011. Screenshot.

METHODS OF ACQUIRING DATA, REFLECTIONS

In-order to facilitate and encourage participation, and also to promote the project as having a group-interactive approach, a set of methods and techniques were developed and changed as the project evolved, and as I learned more about this area of practice. To evaluate the outcomes and to further understand how this form of communication serves a specific type of exchange, I reflect on how these methods evolved, and what did and did not work. In addition, I provide some examples of how the project functioned, in order to make the project itself engage in a form of self-reflection or critical thinking. In doing so, the totality of the project, and its framework for future projects becomes informative.

The project's Facebook page, with directions and questions, as well as most of the submissions, are written in Arabic, as not all of the participants can speak English. This puts the respondents at ease so they would not have to worry about the language barrier, but could just focus on telling their stories. I use a number of strategies provided by Aaker and Smith, in their book *The Dragonfly Effect* in order to provide insight into my project and its outcomes. The book is one of the latest on how to use social media to drive social change. Focusing and identifying a single concrete and measurable goal is the first step. The second step is: to "Grab Attention," cut through the noise and get someone to look. Once that is achieved, engaging and creating a personal connection is the next step. Enabling others to actually take action would be the last step of the process (Aaker 9).

The main method of participating in the project is through the Facebook group's page, where participants can post their contribution directly to the "wall" of

the group. However, if the participant did not want their name/nick name to appear on the group's page, they could upload the contribution to a password protected designated ftp server, the specifics of which were sent to the participant upon request.

Participating in the project took place in two parts. The first is purely visual documentation that can be submitted in any medium and would show the place/country/city the student is in. This picturing of place is the visual story of the participants as seen through Saudi eyes. The second part is verbal stories and experiences. These submissions are facilitated through responses to a set of questions and discussion topics that are asked on a regular basis to the group members, or as responses to other members' posts and comments.

For the first part of the project, a set of directions was sent to all members. The directions were written with extreme detail, with usually over 10 lines of writing. I received too many confused messages from the members asking about details, or saying that they did not fully understand the idea, and I received only about three submissions. So I looked back at some of the participatory engagement examples, such as *Inbox Victory,* where the steps of the project were described simply in three lines. My new set of directions changed:

- On the first day that you feel you are missing home, use a video camera and "WALK".

- Walk towards home/Saudi Arabia.

- The walk does not have to be on foot, it could be in any kind of vehicle.

- The clip should not exceed 10 minutes in length.

Photos from lets walk to Saudi – حكاية مبتعث – مشروع ماشي السعودية

Photo 44 of 54   Back to Group · See All Photos   Previous Next

lets walk to Saudi – حكاية مبتعث – مشروع ماشي السعودية   Photos 54 photos

Prev 1 2 3 4 Next

برضو في الترين في برايتون

Added April 5, 2010 · Like · Comment

👍 2 people like this.

Arwa Alalawi باهوووو ليه كدا مسرع لابسرع ارا ماسمع كلامك
اديني الوو وانا اوريكي شووعلوو هههههه
April 5, 2010 at 12:02pm · Like

Abrar ALalwi هههههههههههههه حلووووووه بارووو لا ارا سرع دوقي ع
بابا يديلو قسيمه هع هع
April 5, 2010 at 2:01pm · Like

Areej ALalawi والله مرا فلة ترا دا كلو اليوم ون شاء الله بكرة نرجع
مدينا
April 5, 2010 at 2:10pm · Like

Abrar ALalwi ترجعو بالسلااااامه يارب روحنا وجينا ساالمين واكلنا خلااوة
نارجين والا ابسكريم مخروش ع قولت جي جي هع هع
April 5, 2010 at 2:19pm · Like

Areej ALalawi هههههههههه
April 5, 2010 at 2:50pm · Like

Mnoo ALalwi لا يا جبجي قوللو بـــسرع عشان تحسو بالحماس.
April 5, 2010 at 3:00pm · Like

Areej ALalawi هع هع
April 5, 2010 at 3:01pm · Like

Added by Areej ALalawi
to the group "حكاية مبتعث –
مشروع ماشي السعودية – lets walk
to Saudi"

Share
Tag This Photo
Report This Photo
Remove This Photo

Fig.5:
Top left: *Let's Walk To Saudi* A
sample of the pictures
submitted to the group for
the visual documentation
part, and the discussion
around it. Screenshot.

Top right: *Let's Walk To Saudi*.
A photo album page from
the group. Screenshot.

With the new instructions, the submissions increased, and the more submissions I
got, the more examples members saw, and so then more participants engaged.
For the second part of the project, a set of twenty-two questions was sent out to
the members asking them to discuss issues or tell stories raised by the questions.

Gladwell touched upon the question of how to get more people involved,

"By not asking too much of them. That's the only way you can get someone you don't really know to do something on your behalf" (Gladwell). That example made me shift to another strategy. Instead of sending out all the questions at once, a single question was sent every week. This did not only get a discussion happening, but it started a dialogue among the group members and kept the members engaged as they saw other members replying to their posts, people whom they did not necessarily know.

A shift towards accepting not only video clips, but also audio clips, pictures, and even text notes and comments as a form of participation took the number of participants to a higher level. It also pushed for a dialogue to happen between the group members as they self-represented, argued or agreed. I noticed though, that most written and voice submissions were from female students, as they chose not to appear on camera.

Fig.6:
Let's Walk To Saudi. A discussion between group members on the question: "Would you stay in the country in which you are studying ? Or would you rather go back to Saudi?" Screenshot.

Stemming from the concept of going to where people are instead of asking them to come to me spurred the "photo booth" sessions. I attended events that had Saudi students present and asked them to enter the booth and respond to two questions. Using a webcam, I recorded these responses and then posted the videos to the project after having them sign a release form on the group's page. At the first event, I received 27 videos. I attended a second event in October 2010 in Toronto, but this time instead of setting up a booth, I walked around with my camera and asked a single question about "homestays" and the experience of living with a host family. This time there were more than 35 participants. A short documentary called *Homestay* was produced from that material, translated, subtitled in English and posted on the group's website.

The site also included my personal responses to both elements of participation, and engaged in the discussions that are happening, not as the creator of the group, but as a member of it. I think that by participating as a member, others may then have felt less intimidated about participating in the project. The successful outcome now was the engagement of new participants with text comments that included many new stories. What occurred was a more open response. The participatory engagement was not seen as having just one appropriate response, but open ended as in everyday life, nuanced and varied.

The question of the production value of the submissions versus the content of them was an issue for me while working. It raised the question, "What role do aesthetic concerns play when an artist claims to have a real impact on communities, inter-subjective actions, political agendas, and networking tools?" (Frieling 36).

Press play for higher quality video

In this video: No one.
Added about 11 months ago · Like · Comment

Abdulaziz Almuwallad, Mohammed Obaidullah, Ziyad AlGhannam and 5 others like this.

Mohammed Ali
April 7, 2010 at 10:02pm · Like

M Bin Khalil good job buddy nice story :D
April 7, 2010 at 10:17pm · Like

Maha Watchmerchant
...See More
April 7, 2010 at 10:25pm · Like

Raneem Bajunaid ♥ :-)
I would say that the officer didn't just mistaken Iran with Saudi...I would say that he was trying to see your reaction to his statement that is it!
Other than that, yes we know way too much about them than they know about us,yet we still...See More
April 7, 2010 at 10:38pm · Like

Ahmed Alghamdi

[HQ] ! قصة : سؤال عالحدود
Added by Ahmad Konash (videos)
3:18

Share

View in Regular Quality
Tag This Video
Edit This Video
Delete Video
Embed this Video

New Project

0:02 / 4:40

Press play for higher quality video

In this video: No one.
Added about 11 months ago · Like · Comment

Mohammed Al-Surf Keep in mind that my Mom is an American citizen...
April 8, 2010 at 1:56am · Like

KJjsvyiwejrbfcvy Kjhf Kjnsv Uuyebr
April 8, 2010 at 3:15am · Like

My experience [HQ]
Added by Mohammed Al-Surf (videos)
4:40

Share

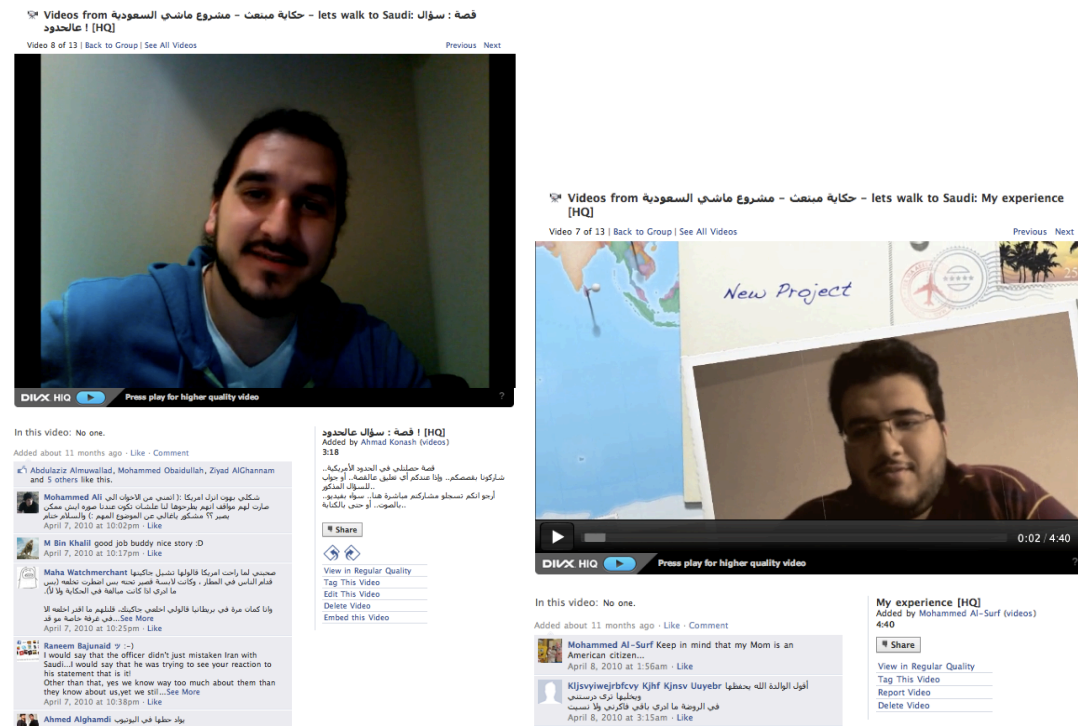View in Regular Quality
Tag This Video
Report Video
Delete Video

Fig.7:
Left: *Let's Walk To Saudi*. A sample of my participation in answering one of the questions about crossing the borders. I got more than 20 responses to this video. Screenshot.
Right: *Let's Walk To Saudi/*. The video response of a member telling the other group members about his encounter at the American border. Screenshot.

When low quality submissions made the group members feel more at ease, they became more ready to participate, and a rise in the number of submissions was noticed, but not many new members joined. However, when the higher production quality film entitled *Homestay* was posted on both Facebook and YouTube, it opened up a wider distribution and the number of new members that joined the group rapidly increased. There were more than 1,500 views on youtube.com and more than a 25% rise in the number of members on the Facebook group in less than 3 months. The nature of Facebook allows for invitations to be sent to friends, and then friends are able to invite their friends, and so on, to help promote the group. One side effect of this process was that most of the group members ended up being from Canada.

Another approach to promote the group, was to find videos/blogs/projects by Saudi students which already existed and ask the creators to share them on the project's website wall and to join the group. However, not much increase in member numbers was gained from this approach. Rather, it provided community building by joining and participating in other people's projects while inviting their community members to join my group.

Having used Facebook for more than three years made it easy for me to technically manage the group, but it was the administration of contacting members and responding to them that was the challenge. Recognition of the submission and the participant's effort is absolutely crucial, it can be as simple as a click on the "like" button, a comment posted in relation to their participation, or sharing the content with the whole group. When submissions were sent directly to me through the ftp server, or by email, I replied or sent a thank you note, or at least a confirmation of reception. When that wasn't done, usually a message would follow from the participant asking if there is a problem or if I had received the files usually with a tone of disappointment. I ended up writing a template as a thank you note and a confirmation of receipt stating when and where their participation might appear.

Dealing with a large amount of people online means interacting with many personalities, interests, and perceptions. It is not as straightforward as one would think. As part of the research, I was required to be cleared by ECUAD's Research Ethics Board (REB), because I'm dealing with human subjects and their well-being as participants was REB's main concern. Going through that process shed light on

aspects that are important to keep in mind when dealing with interactive situations using media:

- it's important to let the participant know how much time it might take them to participate
- make sure to be as precise as possible on what you want from them
- give them all the options that are available, so they don't feel pressured participants should know that it is voluntary to join
- privacy issues to be addressed keeping in mind the nature of the medium
- members need to know that they can withdraw or delete their submissions
- the intention of the artist should be clear regarding their participation
- keeping members in the picture and providing them with updates is crucial

All these points are explained in detail in a consent form that was submitted to the Research Ethics Board (see Appendix 2).

As a way of managing the group, I got a couple of members to contribute as "officers". Now I am starting to let go of the group, and slowly let them take over as I leave it up to them to run the show. Perhaps they will develop it even further and continue with the intention of the group. By appointing contributing officers it gives the members the perspective that they are co-owners rather than just participants. There were many other issues that arose, such as community dynamic, authorship and storytelling and these became relevant as change took place and as I turned over ownership of the project to the group itself.

After running this participatory social media project, I can say that starting with asking people easy questions and easy tasks is a very effective strategy. After they get

engaged in the project, asking them more difficult questions, more elaborate tasks gets more acceptable. It is extremely important to get myself involved in the project, the more I comment, post, like and ask, the more participants are engaged. But I cannot expect participants to take over the job of keeping other members engaged. Finally, I make sure to let the participants know why they are doing what they are doing. It is important to keep reminding them of the purpose and the goal and the intention of the project. If that is not done, the potential for losing members will start to increase.

Other than being a participating, instigating member of the group, *Let's Walk To Saudi*, I also took on the role of the moderator. It is essential to set some rules, and to make sure that everyone knows what to encounter during the exchange (Shirky 271). After the member H.T. insulted the member W.M. by making fun of her, and the way she was talking, and that she shouldn't have published anything online if she is a "nobody", the member W.M. contacted me personally asking me to take out her video saying that "I don't need this, it was a participation, and if people didn't like it, then we might as well take it out". What was interesting that there were more than seventeen likes on this video, and more than twenty-three positive comments on the video. "Human nature has turned out to be fairly context sensitive; given the opportunity to misbehave, and little penalty for doing so, enough people's behavior becomes antisocial enough to wreck things for everyone" (Shirky 283). The insulting comment was deleted, a public and a private notification were sent to the member who misbehaved, and was asked to apologize, "every social system must have some way of establishing community norms and explicit policies if it is to survive" (Preece and Shneiderman 23).

FINDINGS OF LET'S WALK TO SAUDI, PARTICIPANT'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Firstly, I mentioned that the project consists of two parts, first directions were sent to Facebook page members, requesting visuals from them, but then in the second part, the participants engaged in answering questions and discussions about sentimental, social, and sometimes political topics. A full list of the questions —in Arabic— can be found as a note on the group's page (see Appendix 1). Some questions resulted in more responses than others. Below are some of the questions and answers, and a reflection on them. These particular contributions were chosen to be included here as they were the most relevant to issues of stereotypes, preconceptions, and self-representation, and they addressed different areas of exploration in the research. The answers below came in the form of video clips, audio clips, or writing. My reflections on the questions and answers were usually shared with the members as a part of my engagement in the discussion. These findings are just some of the components that will be used in the making of *The Saudi Multimedia Wall*.

Note: the italicized part after the question is the participant's answer, and the initials refer to the author's name. The indented portion following is my comment in the form of findings on the answers by the participants.

• What is your family's point of view about your trip?

N.B. They were happy that I would finally do something good in my life. The whole family came with me to the airport. Everyone was crying.

B.Z. They were actually the ones that encouraged me to go, to Canada specifically.

This seemed to be a very common answer, that their families were happy for them, some more than others. Worry from the family's side seemed to be more apparent with the female students who were leaving the country.

• Did you face any kind of discrimination because of how you look / talk / practice religion? *Airport*?

M.A. Yes, someone in the airport in the States stopped my mother and me after telling us that we are "special". We were thoroughly searched. They emptied all our baggage, took swabs for explosive detection. After they were done, we had to pick up our own stuff, and then were taken to an interrogation room. We waited there for 2 hours; most of the people waiting in that room were Arabs. We were interrogated and my mom got shouted at. All the questions were suggestive that we have bad intentions in America. I live in Australia now, and I haven't faced any sort of these issues.

This seemed also to be a common case with American borders, maybe not all were this extreme, but profiling and ignorance seemed to be the key issues addressed in this question.

• How do you think we deal with discrimination from non-Saudis in airports, for example?

A.K. I haven't really thought about it this way. Let me think. Well, if the person is "white" they will probably be welcomed into the country. He's probably working in ARAMCO, but if the person were Indian or so, he would probably not be treated well, not interrogated though, just not treated well.

It was interesting to see that not so many people answered this question, or other questions about preconceptions we, as Saudis, had about the people of the country that we're living in. It seemed like a large number of the participants have not thought about discrimination or biased ideas about others, but rather they focused on identifying themselves as the victims or the oppressed. Some participants who have been away for more than three years said that they were expecting North American life to revolve around "cool vs. nerd/geek high school life, dorms, proms". This image disappeared when the member lived in North America for a few years, and were able to meet people there.

- What were the first question, and the most common question you were asked?

N.B. Can you marry four wives? Will you marry four wives? How can you manage four wives?

E. A. How come some Muslim women cover their face, some their hair only, some not even hair?

W.A. Business or Pleasure?

A.A. How do you find the girls here?

T.A. (quoting directly) *where r u from? - well, im from saudi arabia*

oh where is that?, is it in afghanistan?, the capital city of iraq? - mmmmmm no no

me: ok do u know dubai? oh ya i know dubaaaaaai! - we r neighbors :) - oh thats cool man

And the list goes on. The main observation that we can draw is that the questions are one of three kinds, either ignorant, stereotypical, or just wanting

to know more. All three kinds are asking about basic things. We Saudis have not done much to represent ourselves, instead of giving up or being annoyed when asked these kinds of questions.

- What is the most difficult thing in being away from home?

T.T. Here, everyday is like the other, between schoolwork, and homework, I don't really have a life; I question the importance of my presence here sometimes. The most difficult day was when I heard that my grandmother passed away, I wanted to go back right away, but they would have her buried by the time I would make it there.

This was an answer by a female student. She recorded her answer, sent it anonymously and as she was talking she started to cry. For her to share this sad moment with the group made me appreciate that she would confide in the group.

- Would you consider staying in this country, or do you want to go back to Saudi?

A.A. I really have thought about staying in Australia and living here. I really like the culture of respecting others' opinions despite if I agree with that thought/opinion or disagree. Another point is no one forces themselves on my personal matters, unless you asked for their opinions. However, I cannot leave my mom and sister back home alone. If they would agree to immigrate to Australia, then I would be happy to stay here.

But on the other hand, I have lived and learned in Australia in order for me to—one day—go back to Saudi and develop it to be a better country. But then there are lots of things that would stand in my way and the biggest one is how to change people's minds and perspectives in life.

Its a hard question and still there are many thoughts I would like to discuss but can't.

M.S. Do you think that people who actually want to stay in those countries would say something on the group's wall?

A.S. I do not want to live permanently in the States; however, I would love to stay as long as I can here. It's a good place to get work experience, and peace of mind.

M.M. I don't think about staying here, I have a responsibility towards my country, I have been sent and paid for by my country, and I have to return the favour. The country invested in us, we should invest in it. But if I lost this sense of responsibility, I might stay for a while here, as I see a clear organized life, beautiful weather, and nature, and I have more freedom here in Canada, as a woman, than I have back home.

> This last question was one most answered, but at the same time, it was the most controversial. It was obvious that everyone had at least thought about staying on if not considered it deeply. It seems as though there is a yearning for the people in Saudi more than the country and this is what would make them want to go back to their families or to their responsibilities. It seems that the idea of staying in the country of current residence is more popular for women than for men.

Looking back at the most discussed questions or comments, it seemed that the goal of having the project challenge participants to face their fears and sit in front of a camera was met. Having the students question their own preconceptions towards others was also one of the challenges posed by the project. This goal was met as well when one of the participants started addressing a question about racism against Saudis in the West by dealing with our own tribal/urban racism

inside Saudi Arabia. Such questions and more started a dialogue that is not very common, some of the members of the group share nothing else other than being a student abroad with other students; they would probably never have had such a discussion with each other in another setting.

NEXT STEP, THE SAUDI MULTIMEDIA WALL INSTALLATION

The next phase of *Let's Walk To Saudi* is to target the Western audience. An assembly of video monitors, video projections, and headphones will display parts of stories, images, and sounds from the Facebook page. These components will be edited, translated into English, and presented as a multimedia installation, *The Saudi Multimedia Wall,* where sound, text, and video are brought together. This installation will depict a poetic translation of the Facebook archive, in addition to the videos collected from the photo booth sessions.

The installation will encourage increased awareness to relate and identify with an English-speaking audience so they can learn more about where Saudis come from, their culture and society, and how their language looks visually and sounds. One of the components of installation will be the documentary video *Homestay that* was produced as a byproduct of the photo booth session that took place in Toronto.

Homestay acts like a mini-version of *Let's Walk To Saudi*. It has achieved part of the project's intentions by providing documentation of a wide spectrum of experiences, better communication between the students and host families, and potentially improved awareness about the Saudi student and his or her experiences studying abroad. The film can be found online at
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHmaAgWNiIg

Homestay is composed of a series of interviews asking many different Saudi students about their experiences in living with host families in Canada. The

experiences are diverse, and while the students revealed conditions of prejudice against them, others revealed prejudices against their host families. For example, some were happy with having to clean their own washrooms and do the dishes, while others weren't. *Homestay* is in Arabic but is also available with English subtitles. The feedback I got from viewers made me believe that the project's goal of broadening knowledge and understanding was achieved. Below are a few responses to the video posted on-line:

Fig.8:
Let's Walk To Saudi. Homestay, a short documentary as it appears on the Facebook group and part of the discussion generated around it. Screenshot.

> "ENJOYED IT, it covers different sides, views, diverse cases around the topic".

> "Thank you Ahmad for the great testimony. Likewise, as a provider, many Saudi's have become my brothers and sisters".

> "I see these students walking around, I never knew what's going in their heads, until now!"

> "It made me wonder what the screening criteria is to become a homestay host? The experiences of the students were so mixed! A good homestay seemed to add a lot of value to the overseas experience though".

Having *The Saudi Multimedia Wall* in English will complete the circle of Saudi students' self-representation, not just among themselves, but also to an English speaking audience. As a future plan, the whole piece could be translated to other languages, and be shown in other parts of the world where Saudi students are

present.

Submissions can be divided into two categories, the first one is walking videos and pictures, where participants walked towards Saudi Arabia and taped their walking journey. The second category is the stories that participants had submitted in the form of videos, audio, and text. These stories were gathered by having the participants answer questions, or engage in a dialogue. My roles as the artist was to collect, edit, and translate these contributions, and select from them what served the purpose of the project the best. The main selection method was to have a diverse collection of different stories and experiences, in addition to the submission's quality. I definitely took the role of the artist where I self-represent myself through others' self-representations.

CONCLUSION

After almost a year of working on this project, looking back at the discussions that took place between participants and seeing how some of the participants were eager to tell their stories, while others shied away, one can only conclude that different people go through different experiences. None of those experiences should be used to stereotype, generalize experience, or look at a group of people from a single perspective. It was obvious that the more time a student spent in a country, the more they realized how diverse it was and how nuanced the culture could be.

Looking at some of the answers made me question the willingness of some participants to share their experiences and to accept the comments of others. Some participants were more willing to give and take rather than merely say what they wanted to say and then leave.

Overall, the stories that the students shared confirmed the importance of self-representation and the importance for a learning process that arises for both the students and people from the host country, including those at institutions of study. A common obstacle facing many students was the language barrier. Some said that they wanted to explain certain issues to the communities in the host countries but were not able to because of their inability to speak the language fluently. The process of self-representation is an important one confirmed by the opportunities that arise when a facilitating platform is available. Considering some of the comments received about *Homestay*, self-representation within social media

leads to better communication, which in turn can lead to improved understanding and increased awareness about other cultures.

The need for Saudis to self-represent is an obvious one, and in the past year, more and more youth are getting involved in the scene of cultural production, even though it is still mainly targeting the local community. Saudi youth now increasingly recognize that blaming others for not knowing about them is no longer a valid excuse.

People in Saudi Arabia now—especially after the Middle-East revolutions—realize the potential that lies in the use of social media networks, and are more familiar with the use of these tools to promote change, and to self-represent. It is important to keep in mind that it is after all, only a tool; it has its strengths, but it also has its weaknesses.

I found that on a personal level the project achieved its intended goals. The project allowed broad communication as I was able to meet and interact with people whom I wouldn't have otherwise had an opportunity. These were people from my own country and community, and yet I realized I knew little about their diverse opinions and interests. So the project was not just about communicating with the other, or the host country but about communicating to people from our own culture. It is far easier for us to generalize, and stereotype when dealing with people whom we know little about.

"Lo! Allah changeth not the condition of a folk until they (first) change that which is in their hearts" (Qur'an:13:11)

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THE QUESTIONS:

Please discuss the issues raised by the following questions, either by video recording, audio recording, or as simple as writing a comment:

- Why did you choose this country?
- Why did you leave the country?
- What is your goal behind getting this scholarship?
- Did you leave anything behind? a job opportunity/spouse/kids/parents?
- What is your family's point of view about your trip?
- Did you ever consider leaving, and going back home?
- Who are your buddies, did you know anyone before coming here?
- Did you face any kind of discrimination because of how you look / talk / practice religion? Airport?
- Have you been asked about your belief? What's allowed and what's not/ alcohol/sex? How did you respond?
- Now, and after you spent this time there, do you think it was a good idea to come here? Why?
- What's your impression about the other Saudi/Arab/Muslim residents of your city?
- Have you been asked if you are rich? Do you have a luxurious car? do you have an oil well in your backyard? Do you ride camels? Know any of the Binladens?
- What does the word "home" mean to you?
- Did you ever consider your current residence city to be "home"?
- What is the most difficult thing in being away from home?
- Did you ever feel that you are a representative of Saudi?
- What would you take -if anything- back home with you from here or from the experience?
- What was the best day/experience you've had in this trip and what was the worst?
- If you miss someone / a place / something in Saudi, who / where / what would that be?
- Did you ever wake up thinking that you were in Saudi?
- Did you ever feel homesick?

FOR GIRLS ONLY:
- Have you ever been asked about women rights/freedom in Saudi? Driving / hijab (veil) / male dominance? What was your answer?
- If you are married, how does your husband feel about you studying? is he studying too? Have you been asked about the marriage system in Saudi?
- How did you respond?
- If you wear a headscarf, were you asked why? And how come you are educated, and still wear it?

Invitation / Consent Form

Date: **March 1st 2010**
Project Title: **Let's Walk to Saudi**

Principal Investigator: Faculty Supervisor (if applicable):
Ahmad Konash, Grad student   **Julie Andreyev, Associate Professor**

Emily Carr University of Art and Design   **Faculty of design + dynamic media,**
778-386-7499 – akonash@ecuad.ca   **Faculty of graduate studies**
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The Content of This Invitation/Consent Form will be posted on the front page of the Facebook group, and available for people to read before they join the group. [In Arabic]

INVITATION
You are invited to participate in a study that involves research. "Let's walk to Saudi" is a facebook based that has initially started on March 2010. The purpose of the study is investigating issues of stereotypes, self-representation, and representations by popular media.

"Let's Walk To Saudi" is a project that engages an online community of Saudi students studying abroad, asking them to participate and share with the community their stories in the form of videos, pictures, audio clips, or even pieces of writing. These stories are based on responses to questions and topics posted on the project site and sent to the participants on regular basis by myself. In addition to the stories collected through answering those questions, another part of the project is based on a video/photographic piece sent by the participants responding to a set of directions sent out to them.

WHAT'S INVOLVED
As a participant, you will be asked to share your experiences, and thoughts about topics that get raised on our page, the purpose is to keep a dialogue going, and an invitation to think, and analyze, and notice what has changed in you perception about the place, and the people you are living amongst to have a better understanding, and to find a support group where we can share our thoughts, aspirations, even our feelings and get feedback from others who have experienced similar experiences.
Participation will take approximately 15 minutes of your time for each participation you will find the description of the nature of participation underneath each entry/post, feel free to have a video response, an audio response, or even a written response.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS
Possible benefits of participation include the opportunity to be a part of the making and showcasing of an art piece + a documentary showcased in scholarship destinations/countries. The two pieces will tackle how Saudis represent themselves as well as the idea of how we have come to see ourselves as a one, comprehensive nation with its cultural differences and great sense of oneness. We also intend to draw on the idea of how we are different as individuals, having our own different experiences, dreams, goals, culture and ways of life There also may be risks associated with participation, to shift from a defensive position to one of informative affirmation.
Please note that these questions might cause distress and/or anxiety; so if you feel uncomfortable answering any of the questions, please feel free to skip it.
Other potential risks might include the act of someone copying your entries/comments/pictures/videos, and re-using them in other places, without your knowledge, but that is a common risk using any online medium.
As you might also know, facebook.com is a website that is accessible by public, and might be monitored by authorities, and if you enter an entry that might not please some of the authorities, you might be in some sort of questioning, so please be aware of that, as the project will not hold any responsibility on that front.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Participants' names will not be displayed, however, their voices, or faces (depending on the form of participation) will be included.

Data will be kept for as long as the facebook group will remain. The group will still be running even after the findings are published, as one main reason for such a project is to create this support community and sharing of thoughts.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this study is voluntary, keeping in mind that the medium of collecting and sharing your participation is taking place on [facebook.com]. So please note that if you do not want your name/identity to be exposed, do not post the file directly to the wall, you can send me the file, and I will anonymously post your participation as received.

This is a public group, and by the nature of facebook, anything you share here is viewable by public, if you ever wish to withdraw, or delete your entry, feel free to "delete" whatever you don't want to share. your profile should only be viewable to people you allow according to your facebook privacy settings you choose. I will not be storing any of the videos on my computer up until March 2011, however others might be able to, so make sure that you do not post something until you are sure you want to share it. Your participation is highly appreciated, however, you do not have to participate.

Participations with children should only be accompanied by and posted with the presence of at least one of their parents/guardians.

PUBLICATION OF RESULTS

Results of this study may be published in reports, professional and scholarly journals, students' theses, and/or presentations to conferences and colloquia, shows, public lectures, publications, websites, or any other medium needed. In any publication, data will be presented in aggregate forms. Quotations from interviews or surveys will not be attributed to you without your permission. Images of you will not be published without your permission.

At the end of March 2010, a compilation of some submission will be done, and shared in a gallery space at Emily Carr University, Vancouver, Canada as a part of a media arts piece.

Feedback about this study will be available to all the participants by the end of May 2011. and all the members of the group will have access to the published work on the facebook page: http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=207463662779

CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact the Principal Investigator or the Faculty Supervisor using the contact information provided above. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at the Emily Carr University of Art and Design File# 2010092814 If you have any comments or concerns, please contact REB Coordinator, Holly Schmidt at ethics@ecuad.ca or the Office of Research and Industry Liaison ORIL@ecuad.ca

CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time.

If you decide to accept the invitation and join the Facebook group, as well as to participate, the assumption that consent has been given, and that you understand all the above information.

(no need to write your name nor to sign)

Name: _____ Signature: _____
Date: _____

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.