

How might I empower refugees in moments when identity is compromised?

by Piyali Sircar



Meet Tim Al-Naimi, a first year Civil Engineering Bachelor's student at TU Delft from Syria

MEET TIM AL-NAIMI

"I hate that word [refugee]. I dread the moment in a conversation when I have to say 'refugee.'"

Meet Tim. Tim is 23 years old and from Syria but he identifies as "international" having lived in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. He is fluent in Dutch, has been in the Netherlands for almost three years and is very proud of getting admitted to TU Delft. Tim is very ambitious about his studies and feels that he has a lot to prove, especially as a refugee.

Tim is aware of the stigma associated with the word "refugee" and avoids saying this word because he believes that people perceive him differently. He is eager to dispel any negative connotations with this word. One way he does this is through SYVNL (Syrian Young Volunteers in the Netherlands). Tim is one of the founders of this organization which enables Syrians to use their skills to work on volunteer projects within their new communities - both giving them a sense of



purpose and demonstrating their capabilities to their new neighbors. For Tim, being treated like everyone else, would be a dream come true. During our first interview he kept saying, "I'm just like everyone else!" Tim is aware that his identity is constantly being shaped by new experiences and he feels that being open to new ideas is critical for integrating into Dutch culture. He told me that when his identity is compromised he draws strength from seeing how far he's come in the past two years since he first arrived in the Netherlands. I asked Tim what three words he would use to describe himself, he said:

"I would say I'm international, secular and human."

HOLISTIC RESEARCH APPROACH

Since the beginning of this project I have an immersive approach to understand the refugee crisis from a holistic, systematic perspective. This means that in addition to speaking with 14 refugees, I have attended dinners and meetups with refugees, read literature and spoken with identity specialists. Three weeks ago I organized a screening of 'Salaam Neighbor' at TU Delft.



USER RESEARCH

The conversations I've been having with refugees have been both emotional and enlightening. As a third culture child myself, I am learning a lot about my own identity.



INVOLVE THE COMMUNITY

I organized this screening to examine the crisis from a community perspective and spread awareness: "How do people perceive refugees?" "Are people willing to acknowledge their implicit biases?"



ATTEND EVENTS AND MEETUPS

I've attended dinners, meetups and refugee camps all over the Netherlands but my favorite event was called "The Living Room," a safe haven where people can discuss race and difference issues.

"The feeling of being the 'other' is often intensified when refugees come from countries that are ethnically/racially dissimilar from the host country since their 'otherness' is more noticeable,"

LITERATURE REVIEW

Notable literature includes, several papers by the UNHCR and *Refuge and Resilience* by Laura Simich. The quote above is from a report by the UNHCR.

GENERATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

I used a book called 'Gamestorming' to inspire my creative sessions. Here are some of the methods I used:

- Interviews
- Collage-making
- Brainstorm sessions
- "Campfire" method
- "Identity card" method
- Change charts
- "A day in the life of."



INTERVIEWS (n=14 interviews)
One-on-one



COLLAGES
"Make a collage representing you."



BRAINSTORM SESSIONS
I asked: "Who am I?" and "How do I

QUOTE

"I just wish my mother had someone to listen. If you could create something with human qualities that could be useful."

"Every refugee goes through an identity crisis, where he or she feels completely lost."



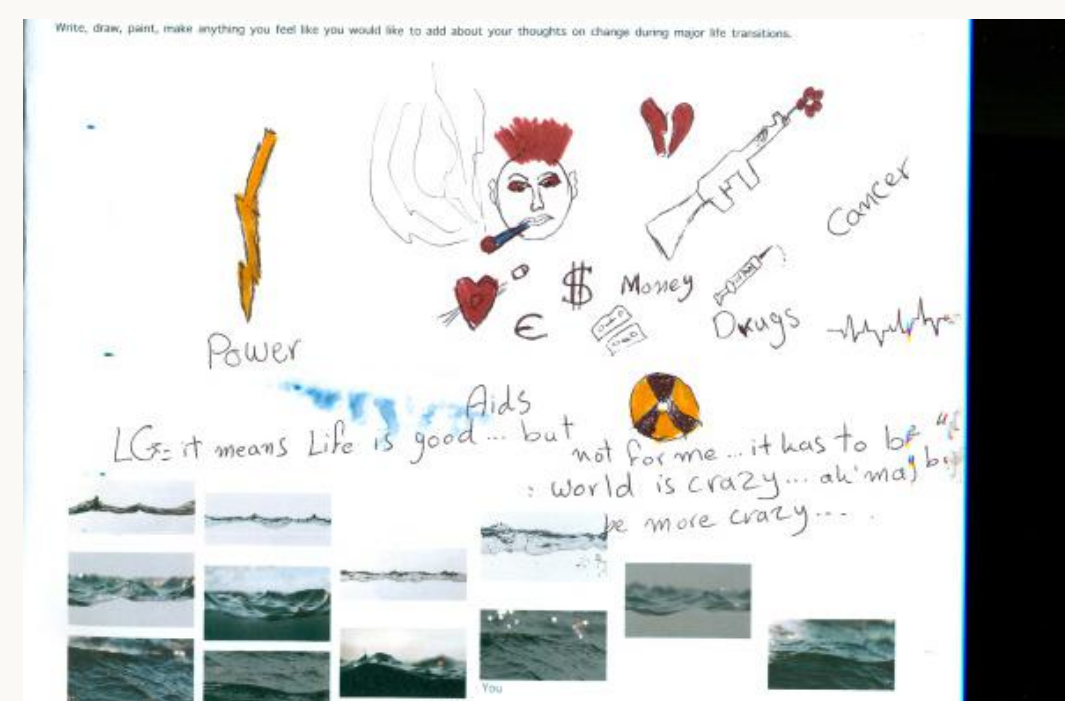
"CAMPFIRE" METHOD
Participants use a word or phrase to inspire a story.



"IDENTITY CARD" METHOD
"Make an identity card for yourself."

QUOTE

"We are always on the news. We are always on the TV. In some way or another we are champions of the TV and we don't like that. When you see all those people just watching your story and saying 'I feel really sorry for him.' No! I don't want anyone to feel sorry for me."



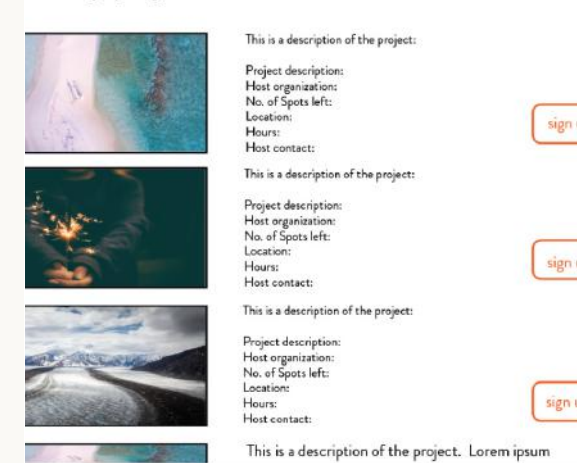
CHANGE CHARTS
"How do you experience change?"

INTERACTION PROTOTYPING (ROUND ONE)

Identity is personal.

And everyone experiences change differently. Refugees use different categories of words to describe themselves and have unique methods of empowering or lifting themselves up when their identities are compromised. But I realized that for many people empowerment was closely tied and maybe even contingent upon generating awareness about who they are. For my first round of interaction prototyping I started with three very different design directions to see what happened.

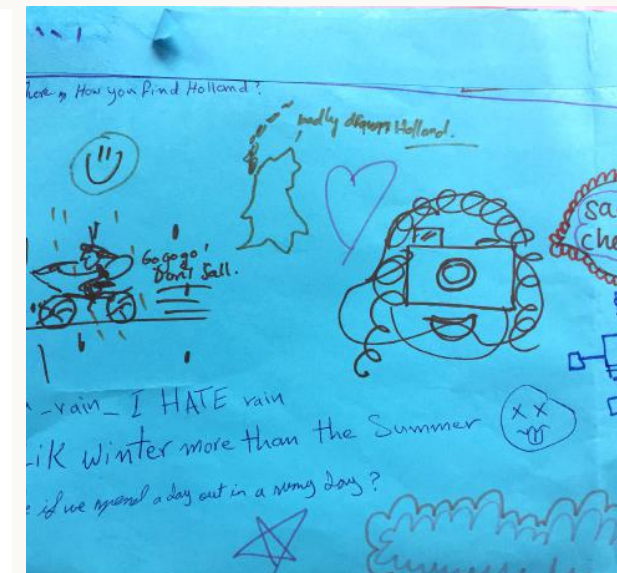
2: Browse a list of community projects / initiatives.



ONLINE COMMUNITY PROJECT PLATFORM
Sign-up for short-term community projects.



PUBLIC SPACE "HAND" INSTALLATION
A hand that connects people within a neighborhood.



PUBLIC SPACE COMMUNITY COLLAGE
A public canvas to express oneself.

"Refugees need the feeling of being understood. They need their feelings to be validated."

The quote above is from Identity Specialist and Psychiatrist Jacques van Hoof. Even though it was the most abstract concept, refugees enjoyed the initial encounter with someone in the community that the hand created; however, they craved deeper connections. Even though few have been able to articulate it, I have observed the therapeutic effects of storytelling through my research.

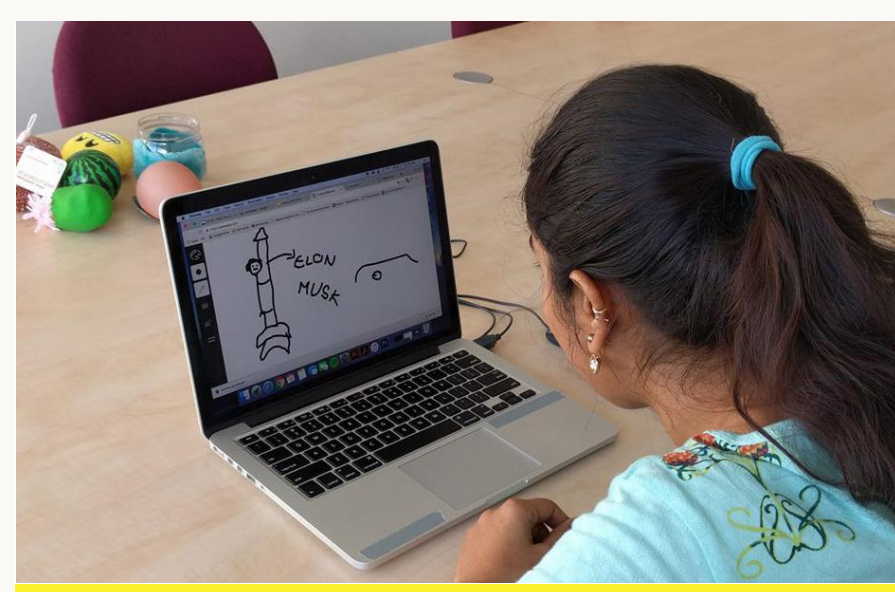
INTERACTION PROTOTYPING (ROUND TWO)

Storytelling as a medium to empower and educate.

After exploring different methods of empowering people (e.g. engendering a sense of pride, recalling milestones), I've elected to empower refugees through storytelling. I dissected my desired interaction into constituent parts (trigger/bad feeling, **initial interaction with object**, **prompt for deeper interaction with object**, engagement during storytelling and exit interaction, which should leave the refugee feeling empowered.) **I focus on parts in bold.**



TEST INITIAL INTERACTION TEXTURES
Participants were asked to interact with seven objects of varying textural properties to understand what is inviting, comforting and engaging.



TEST DEEPER INTERACTION PROMPTS
Participants were asked to respond to a series of five storytelling prompts varying in medium and content to understand which ones are most effective and engaging.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND DESIGN REQUIREMENTS

Initially the object should comfort the refugee, invite touching, feel nice, be ambiguous to encourage exploration and react to the actions of the user to give the user a sense of control.

Next the object needs to prompt the user to tell an empowering story in a specific and personal way.

During the storytelling activity, the object should engage the user by listening and reacting to the story and involving the body as much as possible.

Finally the interaction should result in the creation of something. This attaches a goal to the storytelling activity and gives the user a sense of purpose and pride.