Let's Be Dost!

A journey of transforming this big old world into a little village.

MAYURI SAXENA

Mayuri Saxena

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A journey of transforming this big old world into a little village.

To those who at least once in their lives felt they are alone.

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Content

Abstract

"I love those connections that make this big old world feels like a little village." – Gina Bellman.

There is a sense of comfort to know that people have gone through something as we have. Knowing that you are not alone builds a sense of intimacy between people. We end up with a strong feeling of belonging and affiliation.

My work builds connections and forms communities through collecting and sharing stories, experiences, memories that people are passionate about. I want to remind my users time and again that we are not alone. Our experiences are universal.

My work is inspired from my own experience of solitude, and homesickness. These experiences taught me how important it is to our physical and mental health for a person to be connected socially. *Dosts* (friends) are what gives us motivation to keep going in the present.

One of my key strategies is reminiscing in my work. Research shows thinking about the past helps people focus on the most important thing for a good life: family, close friends, community, and the rituals and traditions that help preserve a social and cultural fabric. This results in an urge to connect.

Introduction

It's been important for me to capture moments in my head or in the forms of pictures and videos. Memories of those moments have always made me feel better. They give me strength, I feel everything is fine, or everything will be okay eventually, like how it was before. I make a mental note of things happening around me, as I know someday, I will be looking at them to feel good. Below are some of the memories that make me who I am today and how I ended up with this Thesis.

My Childhood in My Mind Palace

My favorite memory from childhood includes the smell of my mom's oil paints, the sound that our computer made when my dad sat down to work on his design, the Ghazals (The Ghazal is a form of amatory poem or ode, originating in Arabic poetry) my parents used to listen to while working on their projects. In my childhood, I was always surrounded by art and design. During summer, my sister and I spent all day drawing, doing various DIY projects while listening to the same Ghazals. We also loved writing and drawing daily journals and shared them at the end of the day. I remember feeling so content and at peace. Oh! Summer breaks were the best!

My sister and I had a year gap between us. As a result, we were more like friends doing almost everything together. Also, I was an extrovert; hence I never had any issues making other friends outside. Basically, I had someone or other to go to at home and outside. Not even for a moment, I felt alone. I was a happy (and a dramatic, many called me that back then) kid, entertaining everyone around me most of the time.

Well, a lot of my dramatic skills came from my love of watching television. I couldn't help but stay in front of the TV when I got a chance. So, when my school reopened, I was disappointed that it meant more study time and less entertainment and creative work. I know my parents

always thought I was too lazy to study; however, I used to excel in classes that compelled me to think creatively. One such course was 'Mass Media Studies' in my high school. It encouraged me to think critically and creatively about various media. The course provided fundamental information on the analysis of films, TV, the creative process, design, writing, creative content-making, and technology used in the media and entertainment industry. This course helped me realize what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, to become a multimedia designer.

Memories of My Life Outside Home

I remember the very first day when I moved to Hyderabad for my undergraduate studies. My parents left me in my hostel, and as they walked away, I felt hopeful and sad at the same time. The sadness (overpowering the other) of leaving all my friends and family behind and hope for meeting new people filled me from inside. My first few months were spent just calling my old school friends and my sister, only to feel closer to them. Thinking about it today I realize I have had the habit of holding onto the past since then. Because it gave me the energy to move forward in my life. Eventually, as I settled, I again became the friend-making machine I was. My college life gave me friends for life. I spent very few hours of the day alone.

I felt most gratified, sharing my emotions with my peers and close friends. It was easier to do that because everyone was in the same boat as me. It was easy to empathize with one another. Moreover, it gave me a stable sense of identity and self-confidence.

Memories of Being Away from Family and Friends in India

Once I moved to Pune (a city in Maharashtra, India) for a job from Hyderabad after graduation, lots changed. I started living alone, and my parents and sister were not living in the same country. At first, I enjoyed my own company; but it eventually took a toll on me. My college group of friends moved states away, and we rarely saw each other. Hence, I did the same thing that I did when I left home the first time- spent a lot of time talking to my friends on the phone. But eventually, our conversation grew stale.

Fortunately, my job and gym routine kept me distracted from the issue. But time and again, I did feel sad and lonely. By and by, loneliness grew on me. I often canceled plans on the

weekends to do work. Instead of initiating plans myself, I spent a lot of free time alone, sulking about the fact that I had no one to talk to or meet up with. Danielle Bayard, a friendship coach (author of Give it a Rest: The Case for Tough-Love Friendships), shares, "research tells us in our mid-twenties, friendship circles shrink significantly because our priority shifts." I believe that was one reason I did not improve my situation at that time.

Writing about this now makes me wonder why I did not do anything about my loneliness. Why I didn't do anything to come out of the sadness. I think I did not take it too seriously. I thought it was a phase. We usually think everything is just a phase and it will pass without us doing anything about it. But that's not how it works, and I realized it much later in life.
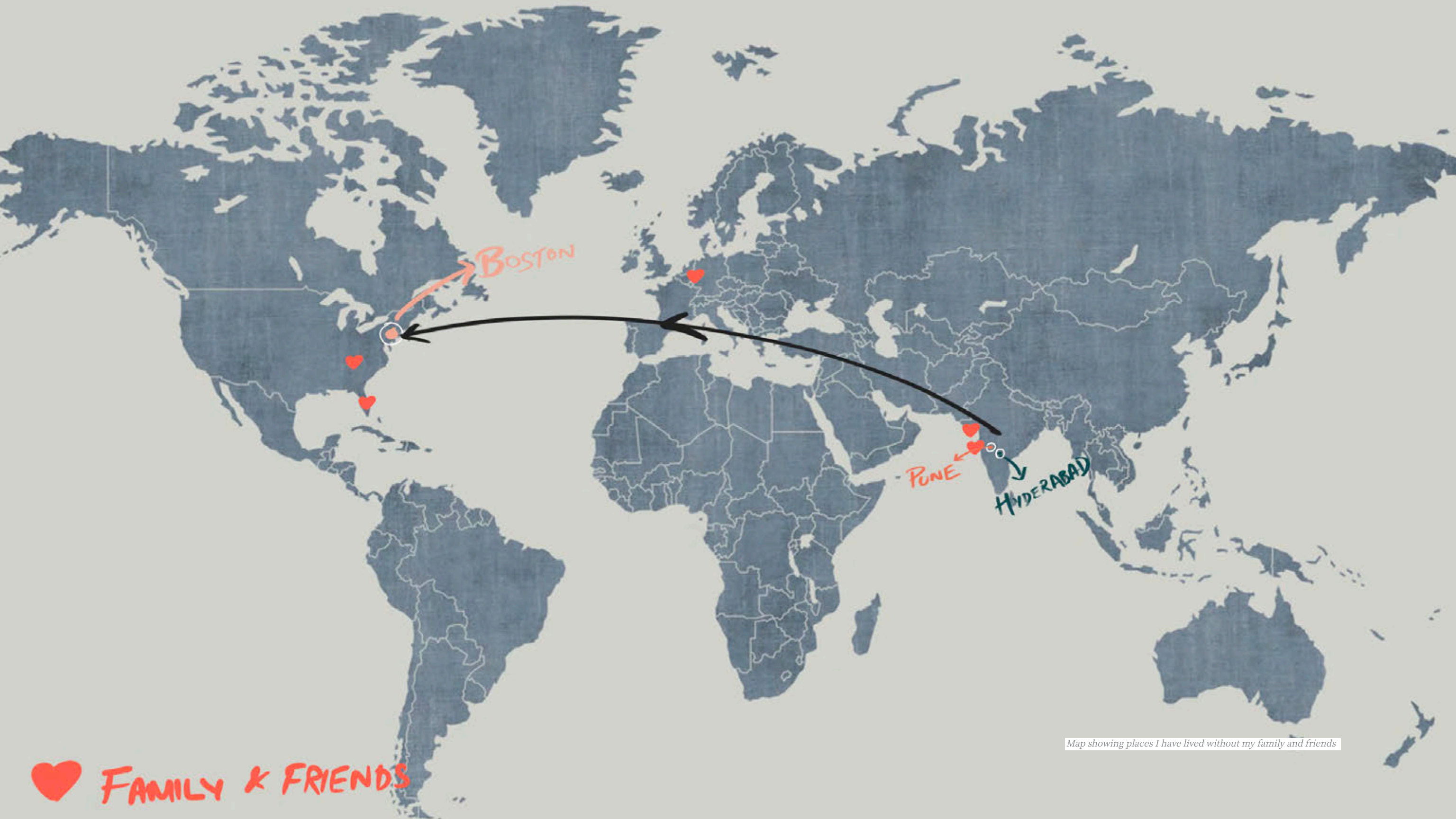

Typical weekend back in India

Memories of Being Away from Family and Friends Outside India

My first kit from MassArt

BOSTON

PUNE

HYDERABAD

Map showing places I have lived without my family and friends

♥ FAMILY & FRIENDS

The Dynamic Media Institute was my first choice for a master's program as the work I saw people do here was astounding and inspiring. The endless possibilities and open-endedness of the projects motivated me to choose DMI. I learned how the programs offer a mix of all the media and latest technology I have always been interested in. I knew this place would provide everything I needed to thrive and become a better designer. While I was utterly (consciously) unaware of my thesis interest, my subconscious was doing its job just right!

One of my first assignments was to think critically about Dynamic Media. How it could be used, "Technology is worth making/using/experimenting with if it helps people" was my conclusion. My subconscious inclination towards helping and supporting people/community came out when I was asked to share projects that inspired me. One of them was a campaign by Coca-Cola, 'Valentine's Day Bus Stop,' a beautiful way to connect people, especially those alone on Valentine's Day. Although I find valentine's day a bit cliché, but this project did catch my eye. It was fascinating to see how they used the occasion to create a chance for new people to meet with the help of technology. It might not only be romantically, but it can turn into a beautiful friendship too.


Coca-Cola Valentine's bus stop
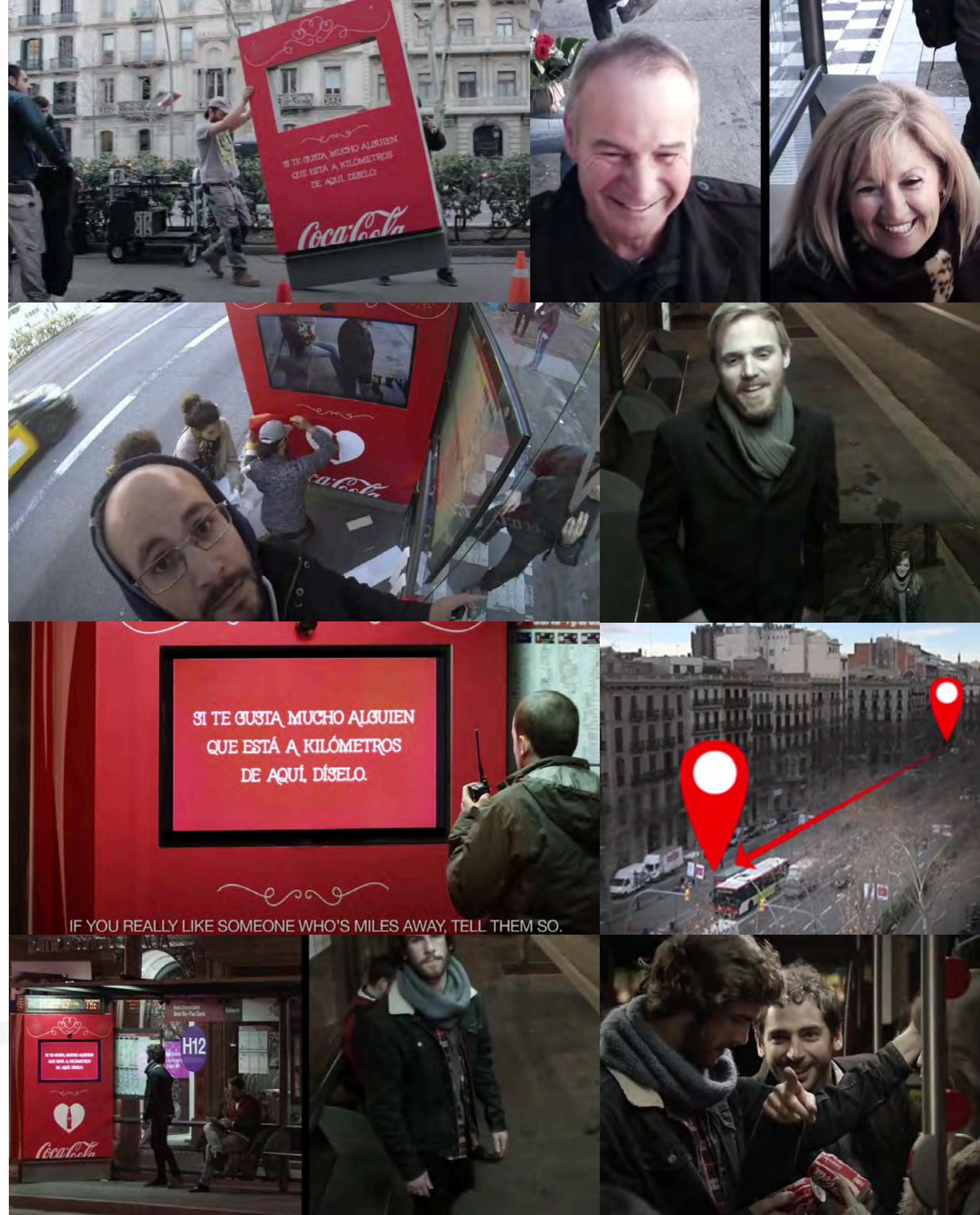
On the other hand, as I moved to a new place, I struggled once again to settle in. Coming to a new place, leaving behind my family and friends, wasn't a smooth ride. Like most international students, I did not have a peer group. I felt alienated. Although my roommates were of the same nationality as mine, I couldn't gel with them. I was either in my room all the time, working on my assignments or working at my on-campus job. As a result, I slipped more into loneliness deeper than how it was in India.

Meanwhile, my father was going through heart surgery, which caused me to withdraw further. I started feeling suffocated by my loneliness. I wanted an escape from all the emotions I was feeling. Then, as they say, "after a long night comes the glorious morning of a new day."

I picked up the phone and finally talked to my close friends from undergrad. I cannot explain in words how relieved I felt speaking to them. Looking at me so disconsolate, they spoke to me about our memorable moments in college. We chatted for four hours straight! Reminiscing was doing its magic again. It was so healing, and it filled me with positivity. That's when I told myself. This is it! It was time to come out of this self-created misery of mine and do something about it. The first thing I did was reconnect with people again, including old friends and new ones. A Harvard study[1] that followed people for some 80 years found that people with stronger connections were the happiest and healthiest. Social relationships over their lifetime were the critical variable that predicted happiness and longevity. Connecting with others again took a lot of effort; I did it anyway. This phase of my life was an epiphany. I realized how important it is to be connected socially. It not only helped me come out of my isolation but also helped me built empathy.

Connecting back with my friends in India
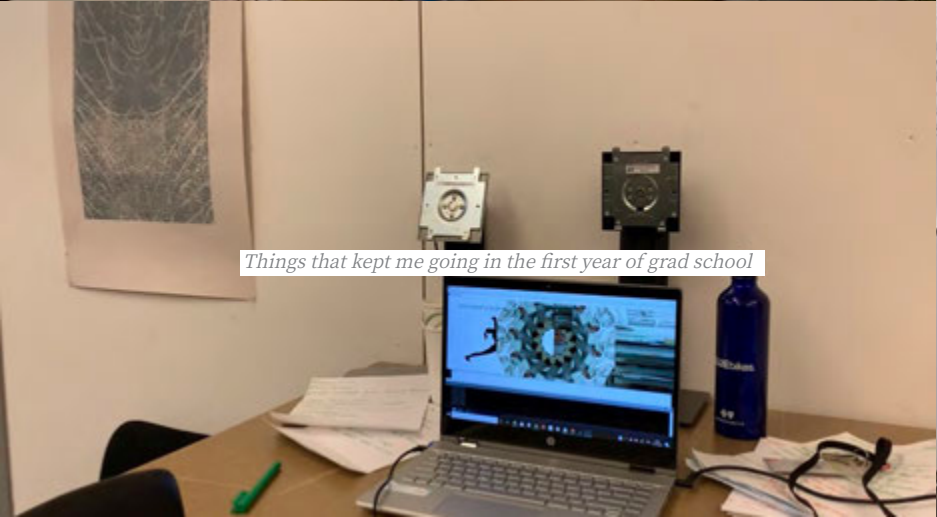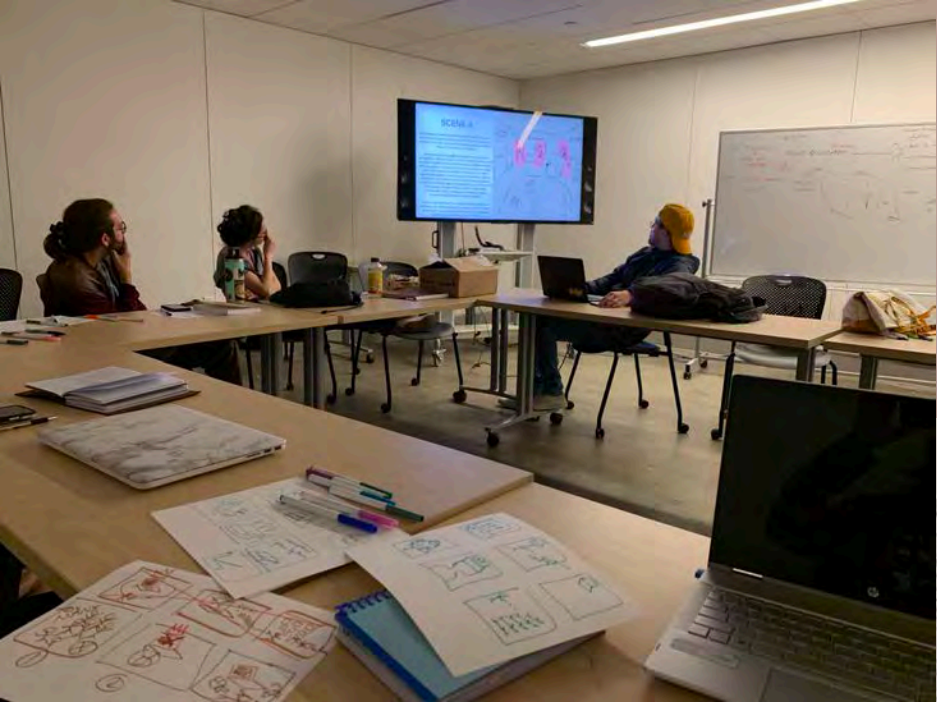
*Things that kept me going in the first year of grad school*

> *"Like ants, bee, penguins, wolves, dolphins and chimpanzees, human beings are social animals, living in close proximity to one another in groups. In fact, the most important feature of the human environment is the presence of other members of our species. Because we lack real predators, the only major threat to humans is other humans. If we did not need other humans so much, it would make a lot of sense to avoid them. Our particular relations with other humans are therefore crucial."*

– Nicholas A Christakis, James H Fowler, Connected.

Reconnecting with people taught me how similar we all are. When I spoke to my friends, for instance, I got to know what struggles they are going through in their lives. I felt better knowing I was not alone trying to thrive through tough times; there were others like me. This realization filled me with positivity, a willingness to connect more, and empathy for them.

Emotional connections are another potent activator of social relationships. As Dr. C Batson (Professor Emeritus Social Psychology) says, "When perspective-taking is particularly geared towards imagining the other person's emotional state, rather than just their point of view, empathetic responses and helping behavior are even more pronounced[2]."
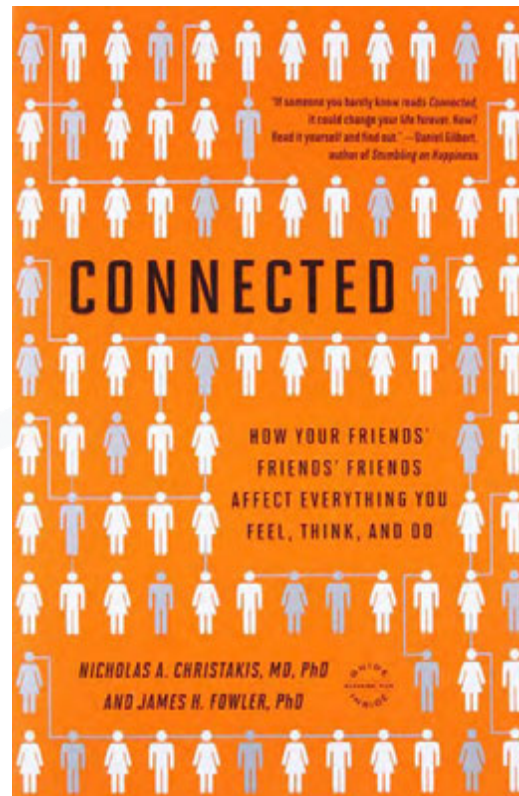
On the Journey of Creating and Cherishing Social Connections

I truly treasure my social connections. Humans tend to forget that we are not alone. Talking to people will help us realize that there is nothing that can't be solved. These connections should be cherished as they will only make us a better person. As this positive change in my perspective happened during my time at DMI, I could only think about creating ways for people to connect socially and how it can result in empathy and relatability. Hence, very unknowingly, most of my studio projects focused on isolation and community building.

One such project was in the AR/VR for Storyteller class. I identified the fear of walking alone at night and how it can be solved using augmented reality. I designed a feature in Bose AR glasses to help people deal with the anxiety of going solo in an unknown place in an entertaining way. The audio-based augmented reality tells the history of unfamiliar homes and buildings to make an area feel more familiar. It also shows the user the footprints of people who walked by recently to reduce the feeling of loneliness. Users can also view or leave behind notes or doodles to make their presence visible to other pedestrians. It was an enjoyable way of fighting isolation and its associated fear, using technology. This project was inspired from my own experience of walking alone at night in a new neighborhood. I could imagine how one must be feeling when they are new to an area and have to go around alone.

This book is a collection of all such projects that have been extracted from my own experience of alienation and loneliness. It makes it more special as I understand the people like me, who have been away from their loved ones and feel socially isolated. Moreover, I use reminiscing and sharing personal stories and experiences as my key strategies to spark connections between people.

Contextual History

Hardships in Life

At some point in our lives, we all have endured some form of hardship. These hardships and coping with them make us human and give deeper meaning to our lives. Hardships could be something personal, related to finances, or loss of loved one, illness, mental issues or maybe in one's professional life. However, I have learned, "at the end of hardship comes happiness,". Like any other person, I have faced some hardships such as solitude, and homesickness. I also feel stuck in the transitional space between something I don't have anymore (like leaving behind the old home in India) and something I am yet to have or discover (like I don't know if, where I live now will ever be my new home). It was tough to keep going, but keeping it going is what I am learning every day.

When I moved to a new country, with everything different around me, including the time zone, I felt like to be in a cold and dark place with no one around and nothing to hold on to except for memories of my home, family, and friends. Reminiscing about memories from the past takes you back to happy times. One can evoke nostalgia to benefit their state of mind in myriad ways. I noticed it improved my mood and stimulated inspiration and motivation to keep going.

Power of Reminiscing

MEMORY LANE

Many people have the natural ability to use memories, perhaps without even realizing it, as a guide to finding meaning in life. When we feel uncertain about the future or our life feels meaningless, we revisit the cherished memories that remind us that life, although sometimes painful and challenging, is also full of experiences that makes it worthwhile. Essentially, these experiences mostly involve family, friends, and other close relations.

Moreover, reminiscing involves sharing thoughts and feelings of one's experiences to recall and reflect upon important events within one's life. The ability to recall and reflect helps people remember who they used to be to help them define their identity in the current moment. The stories of the past provide a source of affirmation and hope[1].

In addition to improving self-confidence reaffirming identity, reminiscing also protects against depression and loneliness. In an experimental study, researchers from Institute of Family Studies (IFS) assigned their subjects' conditions that involved reflecting on a memory or control conditions that involve thinking about more ordinary autobiographical memories. Followed by which, they administered questionnaires that assess different indicators of social connectedness. It was observed that after engaging in nostalgic and reminiscing reflection, people feel more socially valued, loved, socially confident, and optimistic about forming and maintaining close relationships[2]. In another study, 47 nursing home residents, a group (practicing reminiscence) demonstrated improvements in depression and loneliness upon completing various exercises, including sharing memories, life events, family history, and personal accomplishments (Franck, Molyneaux, & Parkinson, 2016). Overall, people thrive from human interaction and meaningful conversations.

Why is Social Connection Important?
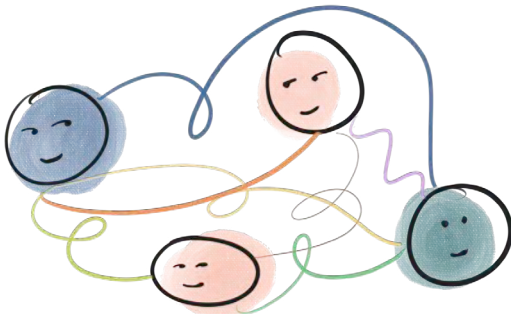
Just as eating veggies, going to the gym, and getting proper rest is essential, so is social connection. Research says that social connection improves our physical and mental health (Dr. Emma Seppala, Stanford Medicine, 2014[3]). Lack of social connection results in more significant health deterioration than smoking, obesity, and high blood pressure. Instead, these connections result in a 50% increased chance of longevity.

Then why do we take these connections for granted? Despite its evident importance for health and survival, sociological research suggests that social connectedness is waning at an alarming U.S. rate. According to a 2018 national survey by Cigna[4], loneliness levels have reached an all-time high, with nearly half of 20,000 U.S. adults reporting they sometimes or always feel alone. Forty percent of survey participants also said they sometimes feel that their relationships are not meaningful and that they feel isolated. This study suggests that one in four people we meet has no close friends. This continuous decline in social connection explains the increase in loneliness, isolation, and alienation. As a result, those who are not connected feel more vulnerable to depression, anxiety, and even suicidal behaviors.

"*A deep sense of love and belonging is an irresistible need of all people. We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved and to belong. When those needs are not met, we don't function as we meant to. We break, we fall apart, we numb, we ache, we hurt others, we get sick.*"
– Brené Brown

Brené Brown (American professor)

A study shows that the same part of the brain is activated during social isolation and rejection as during physical pain (American Psychological Association, 2012[5]). However, we find pride in being independent, pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Psychologists continuously stress that the truth is that a sense of connection is one of our fundamental human needs.

Building and Maintaining Social Connections Without Technology

Before technology become the dominant way to connect, people had different ways to meet one another. Most people preferred to be outside. An active lifestyle was a part of the daily routine. They chose running around to do things other than homework and school work. The primary way for kids to interact with other kids was through playing together in the park and streets. Adults used to use home phones, letters, and get-togethers to interact with friends. Show FRIENDS sets a great example of how people preferred hanging out with each other almost all the time. Concepts like 'pen pals' were prevalent when it comes to interacting with strangers across the world.

FRIENDS TV Show: Where friends become family!

Another exciting way to bring people close was to celebrate festivals together. For example, there are about seven big festivals in India that are celebrated during the year that bring almost everyone from the community together. These festivals are meant to be celebrated together with everyone, and not just loved ones. One of them is Navaratri, a Hindu festival that spans nine nights and is celebrated every year in the autumn. People celebrate dancing for all nine nights together in honor of the goddess Durga. Another such festival is the Holi – Festival of Colors, that celebrates spring, love and new life. Some families hold religious ceremonies, but for many Holi is more a time of fun and playing with dry colors and water with friends and family.

Around the world, such festivals (like La Tomatina, San Fermin Festival in Spain, Oktoberfest in Munich) have been celebrated to unite people.

Holi Festival celebrated in India

Moreover, family board game night, card game night, Sunday brunch were some of the favorite parts of the week for many families and friends. For some, they were a long-awaited escape from a hectic week. It can be a struggle for a lot of families to be on the same page while trying to juggle a million different activities, and that is why games can play an important role in your weekly routine. People in the past have used playing games as a medium (sometimes the only medium) of meeting new people. Outdoor games are a great example. Furthermore, people especially kids and teenagers playing outdoor team sports, are less prone to depression and anxiety. During a study Dr. Joe Austerman with Cleveland Clinic Children's said, "They didn't get as depressed as often as kids that were not engaged in group activities or sports." But I am afraid that technology has made people stick to a confined space rather than motivating them to go out and interact with people. For instance, social media has made communicating with other people so easy that one now doesn't actually need to speak to anyone.

However, for every yin, there is yang.

Indian Festivals: Holi, Diwali, Navratri, Shivratri

Building and Maintaining Social Connections with Technology

Not everyone is on board with technology; some people think its bane more than a boon. However, there is no right or wrong answer to whether technology brings people together or creates a gap between people. When used in a balanced way, it can bring people together in unimaginable ways. I believe technology can bring benefits to humanity.

Major social media channels: where people spend most of their time these days

· **Out of sight, but not out of connection**

Before the invention of the telephone, people only had one way to connect with their loved ones- writing letters. These letters could take weeks or even months to reach their recipients. The telephone changed all that. In industrialized countries, people could call one another at will. And today, social media has revolutionized communication. Families who live on opposite sides of the world can chat or call each other through video or text as if they are in the same room.

· **Community building**

Everyone faces hardships at some point in their lives. And when they hit you, it becomes even more difficult to deal with them if you are alone. But the weight of these hardships is lifted once we start sharing our issues with others. We realize how much we are not alone in this world. The Internet provides countless platforms such as *Facebook* Groups, *Reddit*, *Quora*, among others which allow people to share their problems. It provides solutions, advice, a place to vent and a supportive community.

· **Making common interests visible**

Thanks to the internet and other technologies (e.g., *WhatsApp* groups, *Slack*, *Discourse* Kajabi Community, and *Telegram*), one can connect with people who also have an interest, no matter where they live. Everything's better when it's shared. It's much healthier to chat with people online (or perhaps eventually decide to meet up) rather than be stuck at home thinking that there must be other people out there with similar interests, but not know where they are.

· **Collaboration**

Collaboration brings different people closer together. It unites them for the benefit of a shared objective, project or a mission. Projects like "Jonny Cash Project" by Aaron Koblin are a true example of using technology and providing a platform to collaborate for people worldwide. This project is a hand-drawn, animated music video in which each frame is drawn by a different person. Participants were invited to create a drawing that is woven into a collective music video tribute to Johnny Cash. This shows how one doesn't need to be working simultaneously, in the same room, or even in the same country for working on the same project. People are capable of bringing the project to completion even if they've never even met. It's hard to imagine how such projects would run without technology.

According to an article in Medium, "The Johnny Cash Project is a good example of collaborative storytelling. The concept and execution of this project are perfect. This

Jonny Cash Project by Aaron Koblin

project is a crowd sourcing music video. The Johnny Cash Project — behind every frame is a real person, a fan." Brenna Ehrlich (2010) from Mashable interviewed Chris Milk about the video. Each participant is a piece of small pictures in the whole project. User collaboration contributed to the success of the project[6]."

· **Sharing memories and bonding**

I remember when I moved out of my house for college. My parents used to miss me a lot. I remember sending them my old baby pictures just to put a smile on their faces. Sometimes it's imperative to keep those memories alive to maintain a relationship, or else they begin to fade away. Thanks to technology, we're able to reinforce those bonds over and over again merely by spending some time together going through old photos and sending them to family or friends. There is something beautiful about receiving or sending a remembrance of an old memory from a person you haven't seen in some time. For example, Facebook and Instagram have a feature called 'On this day' where people can share a picture/post they had put up on the same day and let them share it with other friends and followers. The feature also enables the user to revisit when they started following other users (in the tagged picture/ post) or when, in turn, they started following you.

· **Always available**

Platforms like *WhatsApp*, and *Messenger* are available all the time for instant communication. Gone are the days when people used to wait for their mailman to come to their doors with a letter. There are times when we want to be alone- and times when you need people; it is not a want; it becomes essential. Technology can prevent isolation, especially, at times when most needed.

'On this day' feature on Instagram

Inspirations

My work at DMI has been highly inspired and positively influenced by many artists, designers, and projects. These influences include information designers, data artists, photographers, and design organizations. Their work has been a guide for me in understanding humans and their varied perspectives. I also learned how stories are a huge part of humankind that we must be hard-wired to love and absolutely need them. Through many artists' works, I observed that stories could be used to build empathy for each other. When we share a life incident, a memory, an event in the form of a story, it connects us.

· **Giorgia Lupi**

Giorgia Lupi is a New York-based Information Designer. She is considered to be a prominent voice in the world of data. Lupi introduced the concept of Data Humanism. According to her, data is just an instrument that people created to record and archive reality and is always a placeholder for something else. Lupi warns against merely focusing on numbers, technologies, and algorithms when working with data and suggests instead focusing on what data represents: people, stories, ideas, daily experiences. She argues people should reclaim a personal approach to how data is captured, analyzed, and displayed, proving that subjectivity and context play a significant role in understanding big events and social changes.

Her projects like What Counts, Dear New York, Data Portraits, and Collective Wallpaper for STORY captivated my interest. In projects like Dear New York (where users leave messages that appear as virtual sticky-notes, expressing what they've missed about the city or hopes for its future.) and Data Portraits (designed and produced for attendees to spark conversations and connections among them during a TED event.) surprised me how a simple thing like human emotions and behavior can be captured and turned into a visualization using different visual vocabulary. Each of Lupi's projects followed the approach of taking complex human data and simplified it to make something aesthetic.

Some of my projects, such as Humans of MassArt and Friendshipments (Case Study 1 & 2), are influenced by a similar concept of documenting the data created by humans. After looking at her project, I started observing humans as a data-making machine. Moreover, her approach of translating minimal details like 'looking at the watch total number
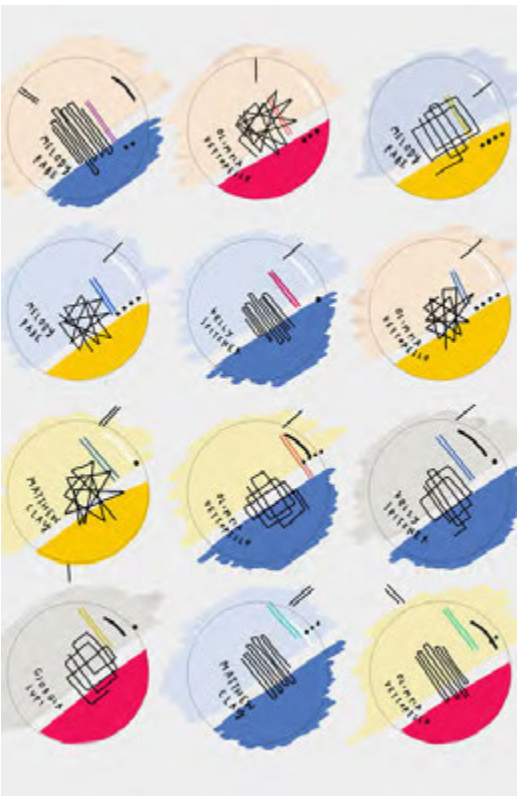
of times in a day' to 'gathering data of all the spaces (external + internal) they passed through' making a project as a personal documentary made me realize how beautiful data can be and it doesn't have to be intimidating.
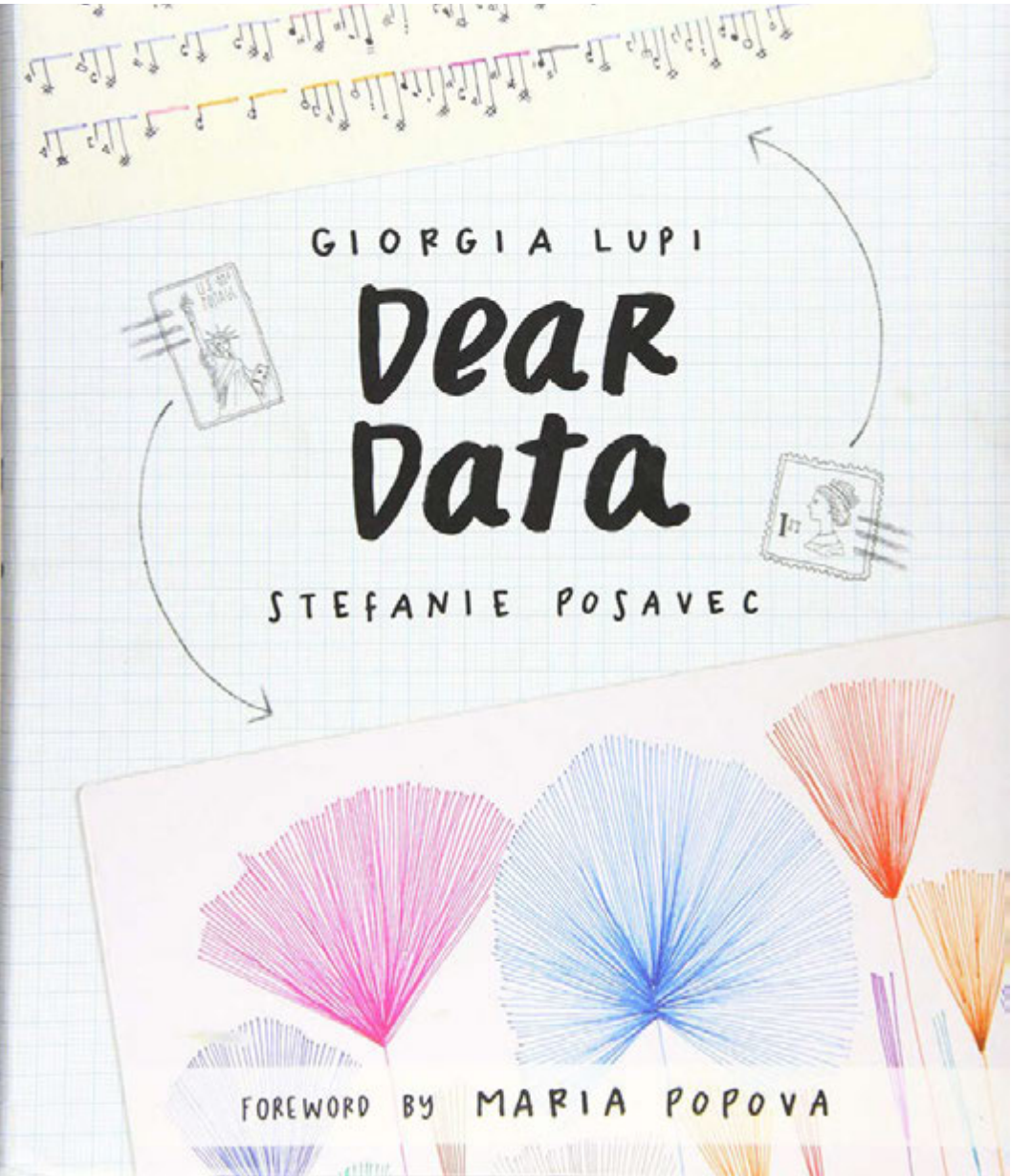
*Dear Data by Giorgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec*
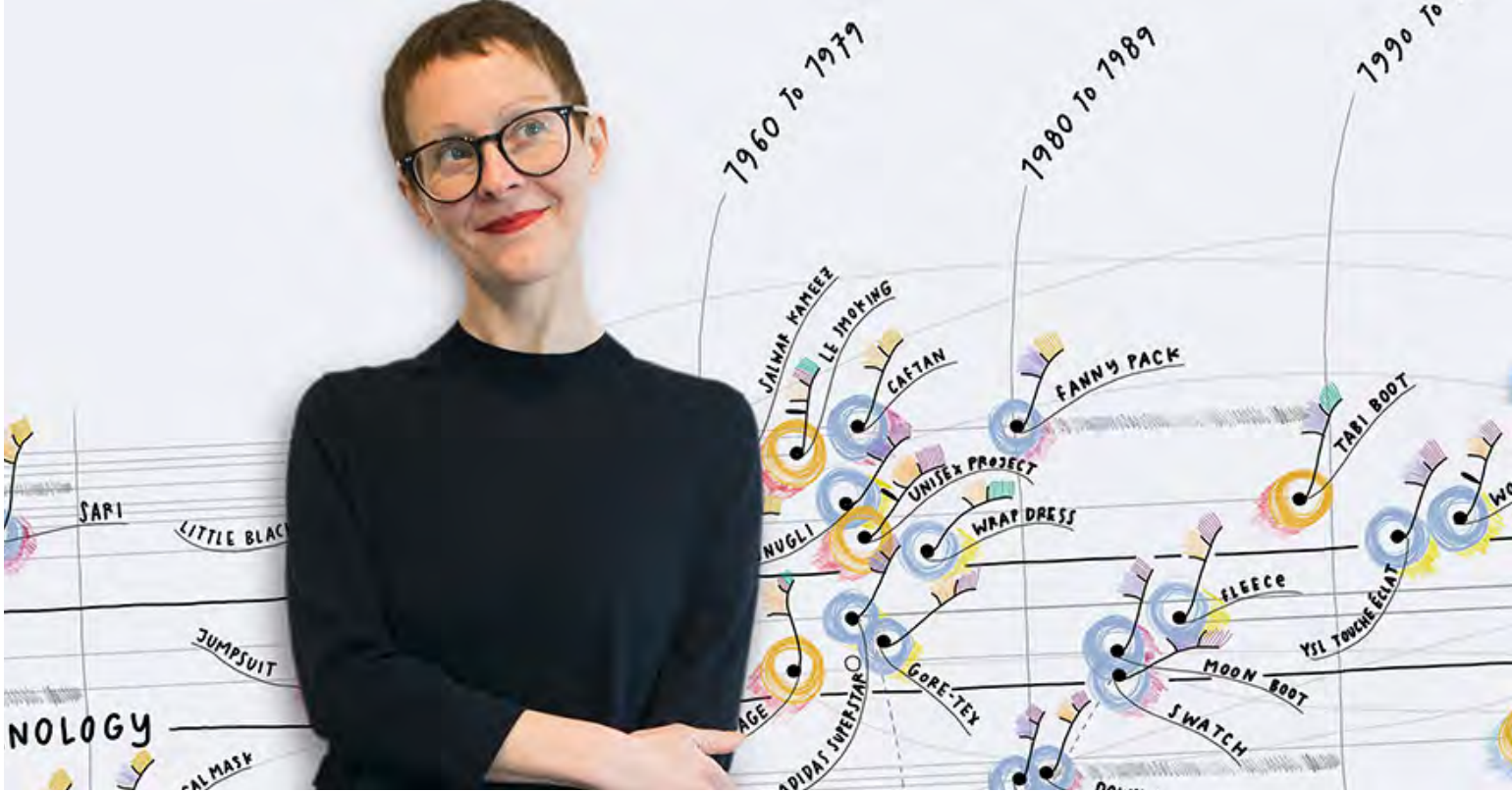

Other Stories

Data Portraits at TED

· *Humans of New York*

Started as a photography project by Brandon Stanton in the year 2010, Humans of New York has now taken the shape of a lookbook into the lives of more than 10,000 strangers living in NYC. "Somewhere along the way, I began to interview my subjects in addition to photographing them. And alongside their portraits, I'd include quotes and short stories from their lives.' This project is a lovely example of connecting to a stranger.
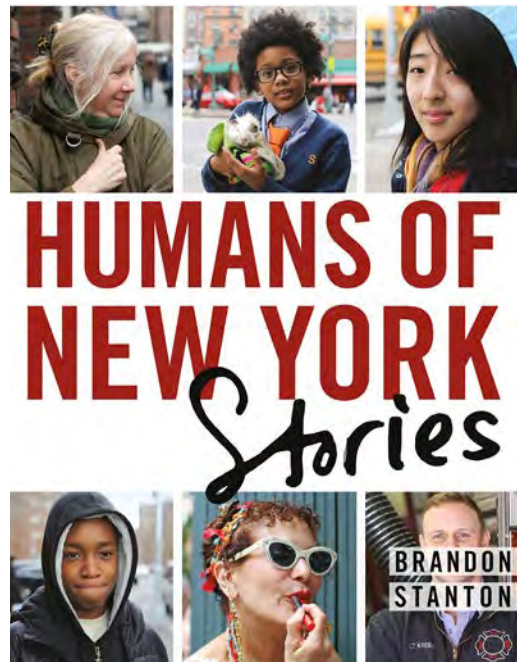
Stephanie from HONY

Humans of New York has launched many highly successful charitable efforts. Following Hurricane Sandy, Stanton traveled to the hardest-hit neighborhood in NYC to photograph the residents, and volunteers who lived through the destruction. It's become a platform for seeking help of any sort.
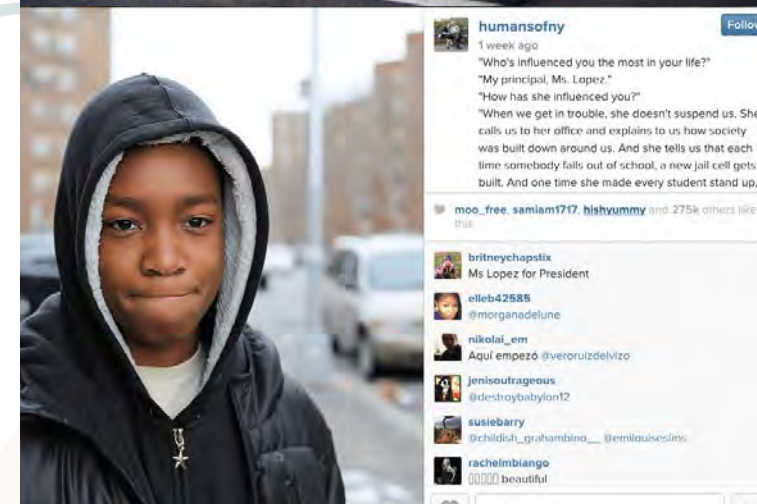
· *HUSH/LISTEN by Hush - Augmented Reality Record of Nostalgic Sounds*

HUSH is an experience design studio based in New York that creates dynamic experiences for different organizations in the world. They made a HUSH/LISTEN project, a record that uses a custom-made Instagram filter and plays an augmented reality musical composition based on its employees' collective experiences and nostalgia. The process was to look for places the HUSH employees called home and the music that defined them there. Using that geographical and musical history data, they designed a record played through the Spark AR platform.

"*The idea to connect the places we've called home with the music that defined those times was a simple methodology to bring back old feelings, and to piece together the places and sounds that formed who we are,*" explained HUSH Creative Partner David Schwarz. "*Since both of those things - places and sounds - are discrete and quantifiable information, we knew they would be a great input into the design process that would provide data points to turn into something special.*"

I found this to be a beautiful way of bringing people together and sharing their personal experiences with others in the company. People were asked to reminisce the most beautiful memory from their childhood and that became the reason of bonding for everyone. Additionally, the AR component was a very fresh take on how the final output can look like. Hence, it motivated me to think creatively about what people reminisce and what different visual forms it can take.
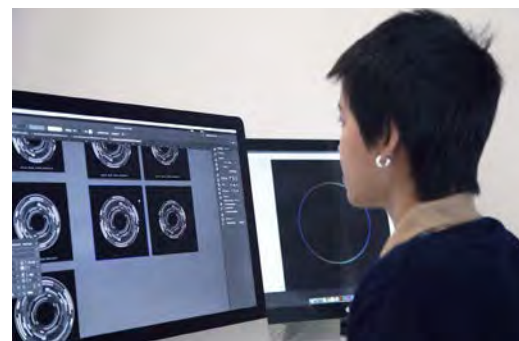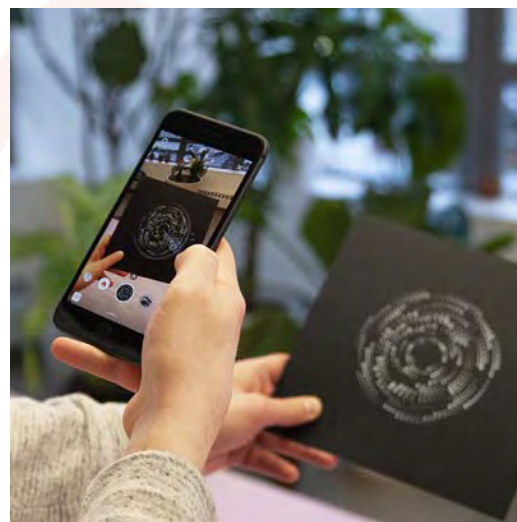

HUSH/LISTEN Record design

HUSH/LISTEN AR filter

· *The Other Story Project*

The project is a museum installation, consisting a collection of real-life stories and personal experiences from locals of a city or who happen to be visiting it for work, family, or leisure. The first cycle of the story collection has been taking place in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The story writers come from different social classes, occupations, locations, and ages; they are fighters, coffee lovers, divorcees, and travelers, they are hopeful, inspirational, and adventurous.

The curator of this project, Fatima Al-Banawi, started collecting stories in her home city, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on Sept 25TH, 2015. Her research explores the dichotomy that emerges from class, privilege, and race and the varied forms of resistance and power structure. Her project attempts to bridge the gap and deepen the conversation between social impact work and art. Through these stories, she tries to share the real world and feelings behind the status quo. I love the simplicity of this project, and it surprises me how it puts light on such important issues of the world she belongs to.
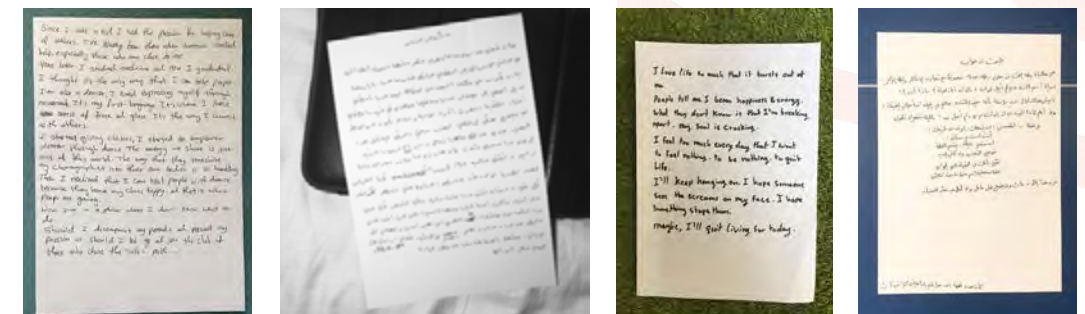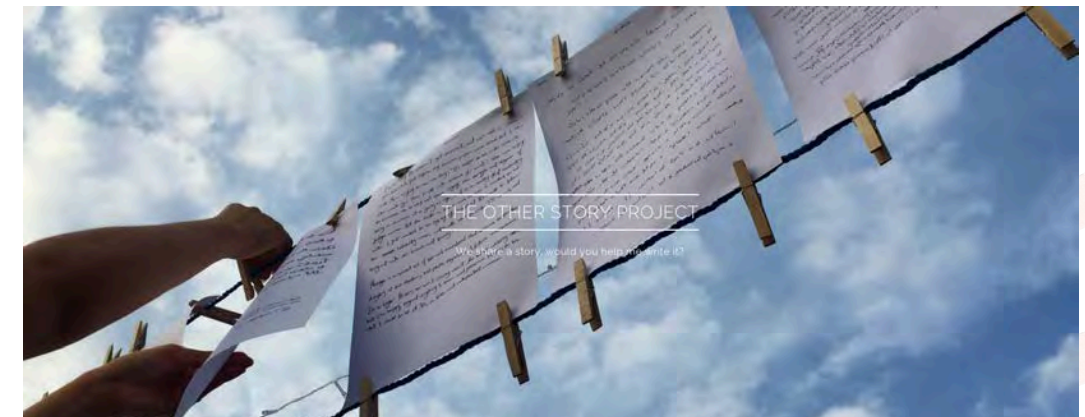
· *Melting Memories* **by Refik Anadol**

Refik Anadol is a media artist and director born in Istanbul, Turkey, in 1985. He is a lecturer and visiting researcher in UCLA's Department of Design Media Arts. He works in site-specific public art with a parametric data sculpture approach and live audio/visual performance with immersive installations. His work explores the dynamic relationship between architecture and media arts with machine intelligence.

His project Melting Memories is a data riven installation that shows the memories of various subjects. These memories have been transformed into algorithms that result in different visualizations. Comprising data paintings, augmented data sculptures, and light projections, the projects as a whole debut new advances in technology that enable visitors to experience aesthetic interpretations of motor movements inside a human brain.

I remember my first reaction when I saw this project. I was amazed by the possibility of turning an invisible thing happening in one's brain into something so captivating! This project never really influenced me directly in any of my projects. But the approach Anadol took in combining art and technology intrigued me tremendously. I want to try my hands on exploring various media to make something as aesthetic as this project.

Melting Memories by Refik Anadol

Case Studies

You Are Here

Introduction

You Are Here is a classic first semester DMI project that challenged us to consider many ways in which dynamic media can be used to create rich and engaging user experiences. The task was to create a meaningful interpretation of the concept You Are Here, expressed in the language of dynamic media. We were encouraged to think broadly about the final forms of this project: installation, interface, mobile application, exhibitions, etc.

First, we were asked to craft a definition of what You Are Here means to us. As it was my first graduate project, I remember feeling overwhelmed and challenged by it. However, I took it as a UX problem and tried to create a meaning for it. The prompt was 'what' or the problem, and I needed to figure out 'why,' 'where' and 'how.' I imagined saying to my users, "you are here in (where) because (why)." I asked myself why anyone would be "Here," why am I here, and the answer I got was for a purpose. Hence, I decided on the purpose for 'why,' and for 'where,' I went for a place/space. Moreover, as the project demanded us to create an experience, I decided that my purpose for You Are Here would also be an experience. Thus, the extension of this prompt for me was, **"You are here in a particular place for an experience."**

Figuring Out The 'Place' and The 'Experience'

While thinking about place, I remember constantly feeling homesick. I gravitated towards my country and culture and naturally added India to my list of places. I started thinking of ways I could create an experience of India.

Brainstorming on concept 'You are here'

India is wealthy in terms of culture. It has 29 states, 22 regional languages, 13 different scripts, seven music varieties, and eight different dance forms. I had to figure out a way for people to experience the true essence of India. My initial idea was to look at various dance forms such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Odissi, Kathakali, etc. I was fascinated with Mudras, which are universal in all dance forms. Mudras are symbolic hand gestures used in Hindu and Buddhist ceremonies and statuary and Indian dance. Mudras are believed to channel natural forces and aid spiritual and mental well-being by enhancing the body's flow of energies.

I was also intrigued by the regional languages of India. I thought there might be a way to make a learning experience for my user. I wanted my user to understand and listen to the pronunciation of generic words such as Namaste (hello), Theek hai (okay), Haan (yes), Nahi (no), pyaar (love). It would have been a nice to learn something new in a very easy manner.

From top left - Indian languages, Baratnatyam dance, Folk music

Initial Idea:

Inspired by languages and Mudras, I came up with two ideas. One was an AR poster experience. I imagined a set of typographic posters in different regional languages in a gallery where people could scan and hear the pronunciation and the English translation of those words. The second idea was to make Mudra a learning experience. People can make different hand gestures by looking at a screen and learning about the specific Mudra. In this way, I wanted to promote the 'learning through doing' process.
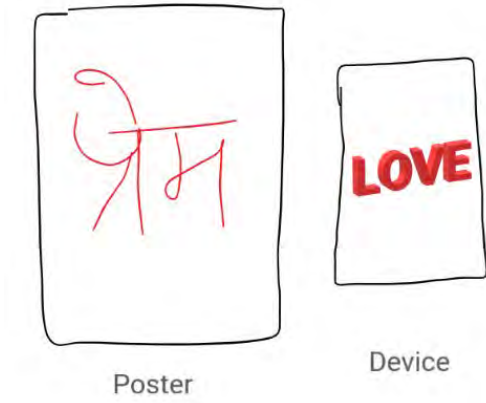
Possible Idea of AR posters

The feedback that I got on these sketches made me realize I wasn't thinking broadly enough. There were many more possibilities. I was asked to consider more on the types of experiences that could help people understand the Indian culture.

Figuring Out The 'Place' The 'Experience' and The 'Medium'

In the next few weeks, I was expected to come up with a fresh take on the theme of Indian culture. I was also hoping to contemporize my approach in some way. I wanted to express the essence of the Indian culture in a modern and unconventional way. I once again considered other things that strongly associate with Indian culture. This time I looked at folk music, paintings, food, and yoga, along with dance and language.

After some research and consideration, I decided on yoga as my inspiration for an experience. Yoga means 'union' or 'yoke' in Sanskrit, which means 'link' or 'connect.' Yoga is an experience of connecting with yourself through calming your mind, relaxing your body, and controlling your breathing.

"*Yoga belongs to the world. But it has a home. India.*"

I finally found my experience - I wanted to create an experience in which my user connects back to himself. It's crucial to connect with ourselves before we connect with others. Margaret Paul (Best-selling author, seminar leader and co-creator of Inner Bonding) in her Huffpost article - Why Connection with Self and Others is so Important[1] (01/28/2013), explains- when we disconnect with ourselves—from who we are and from our feelings and when we are not filling ourselves with love through our spiritual connection, we create a black hole within. The black hole we've made through our self-abandonment becomes like a vacuum, trying to pull love from others. This neediness tends to push people away, so we end up feeling even more unloved. *"We cannot fill up another person. We each need to do this for ourselves and then share our love. We cannot connect on a deep level of love with each other when we are not connected with ourselves"*.

The next step was to think about how I could create this experience. I began listing all the things required in yoga practice, such as breathing, focus, attention, body posture, hand gestures (Mudras), and mandala. mandalas particularly captivated my interest. The mandala symbol is used predominantly in the yoga/ meditation practice. Ancient Hindu scriptures depict mandalas as a period of creativity, of powerful existence, and a sign of a more profound connection with the self and the universe at large. In the modern-day, mandalas have become a popular symbol of meditation, which aids in enhancing focus, silencing thoughts while meditating, combatting stress and anxiety, appreciating the beauty of nature, and forming a greater connection with oneself. Through mandalas, one's physical self-unites with the emotional self.
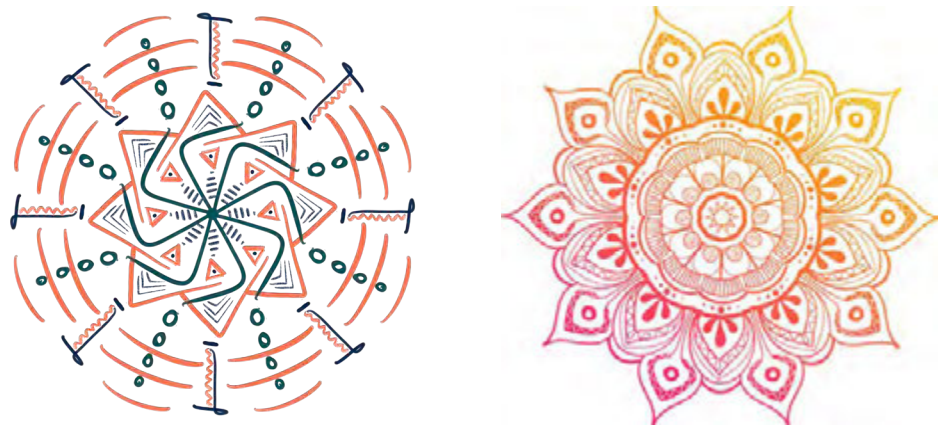
I realized the use of mandala as a medium to connect with oneself would be the most appropriate considering its meaning. The mandala would be a sacred space where the user will have a therapeutic experience.

You Are Here in a Sacred Space to Connect with Yourself

Thinking about this project made me realize how the connection to oneself is a vital source of a healthy mind and body. We often don't see what effects reflective practice can have. What we do instead is, fail to understand our feelings, ignore compassion, and managing them, we lose touch with our humanity. When we don't feel compassionate about our feelings, we may lose the ability to feel compassion for others. Fundamentally, when we carry a black hole within us, we expect others to fill that hole. We end up running away from the responsibility of our feelings and hand that commitment to others. However, that works for a brief period. We cannot fill up another person. We each need to do it ourselves and then share our love with others.

Moreover, the Why Connection with Self and Others is so Important article also mentions, "Just as a child gets depressed when the parent is disconnected and unavailable, so our inner child -- our feeling gets depressed when we are disconnected from them and not taking loving responsibility for them. Furthermore, another cause of depressed feelings is social isolation and the resulting loneliness, which is often one of the results of disconnecting from ourselves and then being unable to connect with others. Many people who have tried to establish connections or intentional communities end up leaving them for the same reason they leave marriages: They don't work unless people are connected with themselves and taking responsibility for their feelings."

You Are Here: The Experience

I considered an audio-visual experience where the mandala will be projected from the ceiling, under which a user will stand and can hear meditative music in the background. As I intended to make this a therapeutic experience, I imagined my user practicing breathing under the projected mandala. The projection would be in sync with the breathing and would contact and expand accordingly.

When I shared this idea with my classmates, they liked it. Additionally, professor Fish McGill suggested as this experience is about an individual connecting with himself, why not make him a part of the mandala. I got so excited to hear this suggestion! It made so much sense for the user to be presented in his mandala. I visualized my users meditating and focusing on themselves while sitting/standing on their Mandala. Moreover, because of the projection, the sacred space will be created around and with the user in it.

Concept idea of You Are Here experience

Designing the You Are Here Experience

I started user testing the concept immediately. I asked my classmates to choose a yoga asana (pose) and shoot a picture in that asana. I then turned those into mandala formation by rotating their image to form a circle. I have to say the visuals were mesmerizing.

The following week when I showed the custom-made mandala, I got a very positive response. Now, I needed to imagine how the user was going to interact with this system. I was asked to make a video abstract showing how the system worked as a part of the final deliverable. I started storyboarding how and what my user would do from beginning till end.

I divided the entire experience into three parts. Part 1 takes place outside a dark room where the user gets to reads about the project and follows instructions on what he needs to do.


Trial Mandala of my classmates

In part 2, the user selects a yoga pose (out of Vriksasana – Tree Pose, Trikonasana – Triangle Pose, Virabhadrasana – Warrior Pose, Padmasana – Lotus Pose), they want to meditate in. After which, the system tells them brief information like the symbolic meaning and history of the pose. In part 3, they enter a small dark room which is the final part of the experience. I imagined the space to be projected with stars all around and meditative music played in the background to give the cosmos vibe. A small screen with a camera would be installed in front of the user to snap an image of the person posing. After a few minutes, the lights in the room would dim, and a projection from the top would project the user's personalized mandala. After some time, the sensors around the room will detect the breathing pattern of the user, and the projection of the mandala would expand and shrink accordingly.

Additionally, as part of the Elements of Media elective's final project, I developed a real-time interactive prototype of the system using Processing. This system lets people choose one of the four Yoga asanas (Vriksasana – Tree Pose, Trikonasana – Triangle Pose, Virabhadrasana – Warrior Pose, Padmasana – Lotus Pose) and creates their mandala by rotating the visuals. It wasn't how I'd imagined it to be. But it was close enough.
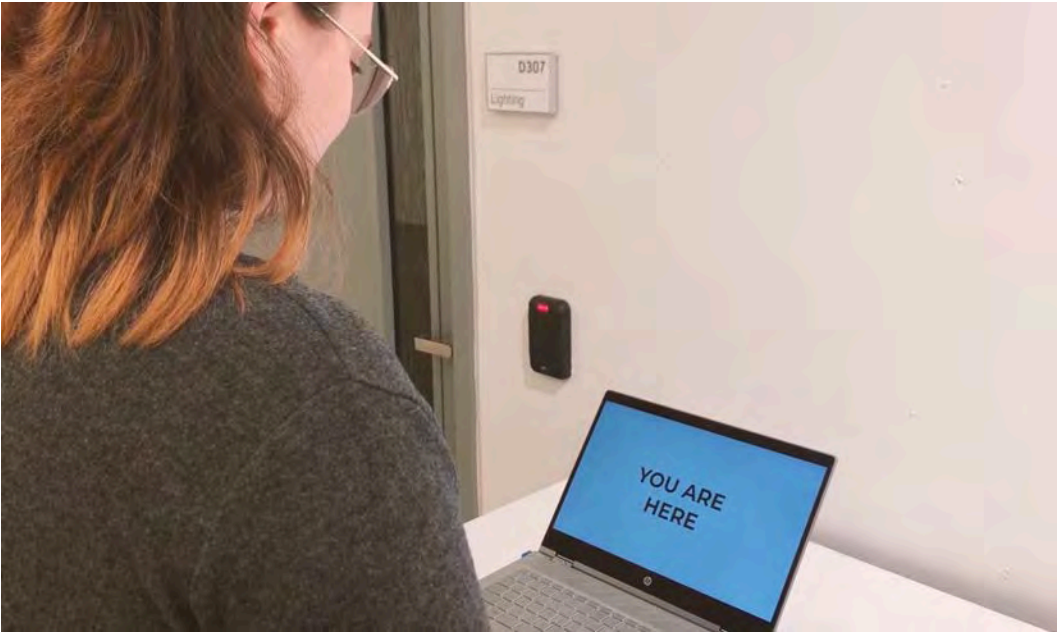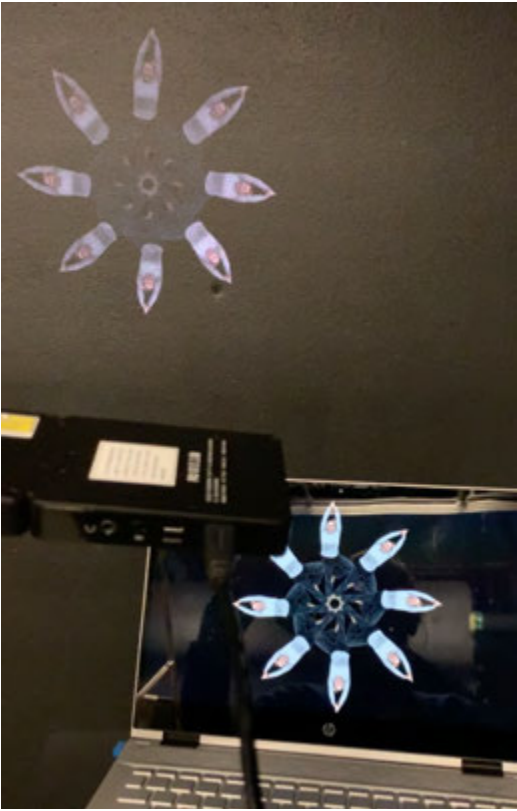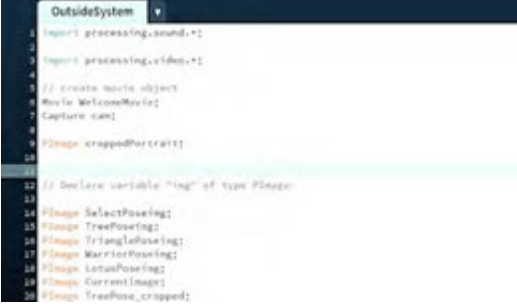

User interacting with the system outside the room
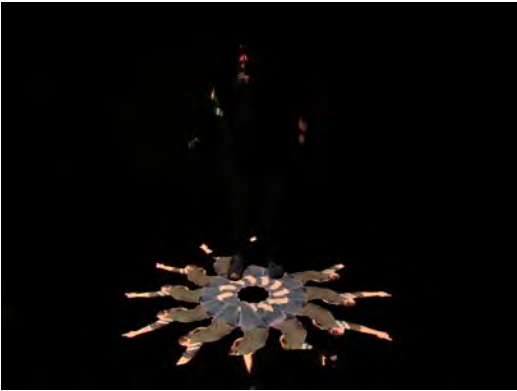
Top: User standing on their Mandala
Bottom: Processing code

Conclusion

You Are Here is set out to create an experience of people connecting with themselves. It started as an idea of creating an intersection between Indian and other cultures. I also created a therapeutic tool.

Putting this project as a case study in my thesis was not in my plan. However, in one of my discussions with advisor Fish McGill, he pointed out how well this project fit. This project is the launching point of my Thesis and needs to be the first case study. Connection to self is honoring one's feelings, emotions, physical and mental needs. One needs to be self-aware first before they reach out to others. In a post-project discussion with my classmate Cailigh McDonald, we talked about how crucial it is to strengthen oneself to better society. Here is an excerpt of the conversation.

Me: With this project, I tried to make a connection between a person back to himself. I hoped to create a sacred space, an environment that stimulates this connection, and I used Mandala as the medium for it. Because Mandala is also used to connect to the universe, that one energy, in the end, it indirectly knits all the people together as they are all getting connected to that one energy.

Cailigh McDonald: The way I see a social connection and hearing you talk about it also gives me another angle. The fact that you go through this process to center yourself and create your Mandala based on yourself and practice is unity. Though a person is focusing on themselves, they contribute to something bigger as it is happening simultaneously. Moreover, there is a mental health side to it too. People meditate or practice building themselves to participate or contribute to society at a stronger level. One needs to make sure that they are a strong pillar, so they can be there to support others or the community.

Designing the Mandala:

The decision to use mandala was a turning point in the project. I have always been attracted to circular shapes. I love how mandala or any circular design symbolizes completeness and unity. I felt the same way when I created personalized mandalas. It felt so complete, Like I covered it all – beginning, middle, and end!
Moreover, it was interesting to see how these designs would always have a factor of

unpredictability associated with them. Each mandala will always look different from another because of the poses, the faces, the expressions of people. At the end of this experience, I had planned to put these mandalas of people on a huge wall, one next to each other, as a beautiful installation. This would symbolize how small and different but an important part we play in creating a beautiful world! My obsession for Mandala in this project extended to other projects as well, where I used it as my visual inspiration. For example, in the Friendshipments project, I made my data visualizations into a mandala form.

Data visualization from Friendshipments project

New Way of Prototyping:

You Are Here was a fascinating project for me as it was the first one in grad school. Initially, I wasn't sure how I would explain my idea, and I did not know much about making a video abstract. It was an exciting process. I remember using all the knowledge I gained in my film appreciation course (back in 2011) of what goes into making a movie. I started with storyboarding, followed by looking for the room's setup and the abstract cast. I understood how important it is to create a clear video that gives people an idea about how the project will work.

Further, we are given so much freedom in how we can make a video. The abstract could be an animation, a real movie with real characters, or a stop motion video. I love how all my classmates choose a different approach. Creating a video abstract was my favorite part of the project.

I also prototyped a small part of the experience using Processing. With Fred Wolflink, I wrote a Processing code that lets the user select a Yoga pose and provides brief information about it on a screen. After some time, the screen turns black for a moment, and the user is asked to go to a particular place. Like my original intention, this code did not take an image of the user. It instead displayed the video of the user and rotated that frame to create a mandala structure. Simultaneously, the system was also connected to a projector placed right on top of the user. As a result, whatever they were doing in front of the camera it was reflected around them on the floor.

The Vagueness of the Concept You Are Here:

You are Here was a vague project concept. That was the most challenging and exciting part of the project. I never worked on such kinds of projects which made me nervous sometimes. I remember going back to the handout given to us in the class, again and again. It said we had to analyze, map, visualize, articulate, and communicate the concept of You are Here.

While working in India, I found myself in a similar situation where I had to create themes for marketing collaterals for annual conferences. I was not given any briefs and just asked to create something new. With minimal inputs and high expectations from my managers, I used to research the conference. The in and out research used to be the starting point of the project. That was when I learned how to come up with a concept when the insight given is very brief.

For this project, as a visual experience designer, my mind instantly thought of making a multi-sensory experience. The experience that I created at the end was with an aim for providing a therapeutic experience. Now I realize why. Subconsciously, I needed that in my personal life. I needed to connect back to myself to feel more stable and settles in my new surroundings then. I believe this project was meant to kick start looking into ourselves to find our subconscious interests.

It's also tricky to answer if this was a successful therapeutic experience because I could not test it. However, upon discussing the project with people, some thought it had potential to become a therapeutic tool.

Special Notes

You Are Here is about *Dosti* (Friendship) with oneself. This *Dosti* means internalizing the practice of empathizing with oneself and be at peace with our feelings. This *Dosti* means connecting back to ourselves to make ourselves stronger. This *Dosti* will then result in contentment from inside as well as stronger bonds with other people. Because when we are strong and at peace from inside is when we can provide for others.
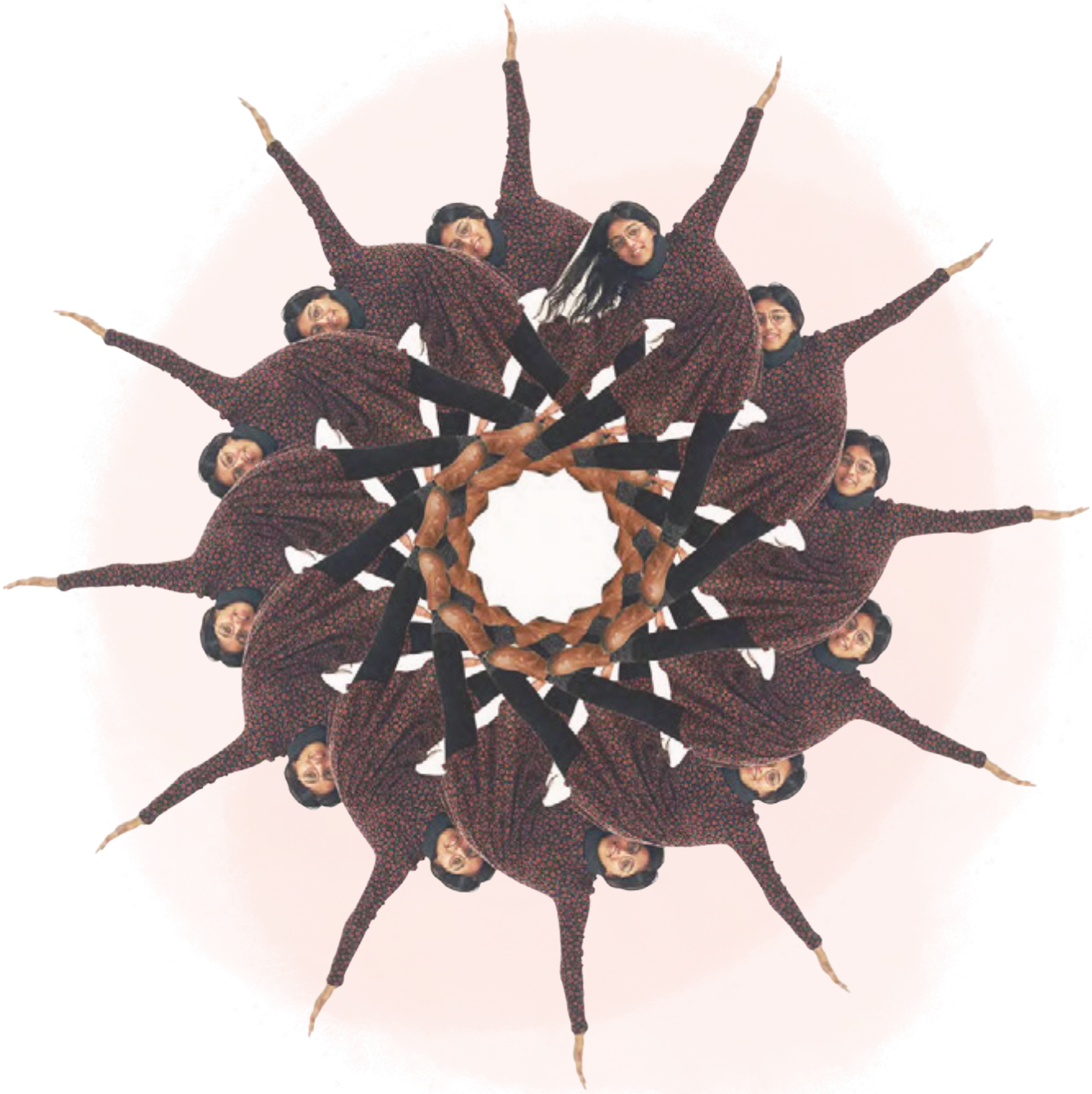
Humans of MassArt

Introduction

During my second semester of graduate school, Associate Professor Martha Rettig introduced us to data visualization for our first big project of the semester, "Human Data". We were challenged to explore how humans, recorded, represented, tracked, and used data. I was exhilarated and felt challenged to start this project.

Research

As the prompt was based on humans, I started observing people around me- people I shared my physical and virtual space with. I kept asking myself questions like: what do we do most often, what do humans love the most, how do we spend our day, what are the activities we take part in, what food do we consume, where do we come from? I forced myself to think about the subject at work, at home, while going to bed or cooking. I was inspired by focusing on the activities we do every day.

I also looked at various data artists such as Mark Hasan, Jer Throp, and Giorgia Lupi. Their viewpoint on data art inspired me to think about stories as data and how the translation of collected data into visuals can be mesmerizing. While looking at a TED talk by Jer Throp on 'Making Data More Human,' something struck me. The projects he created focused on how the narratives, stories humans leave behind can gain more meaning. Moreover, this data that we leave behind has a significant value as it helps to build empathy with the people involved. His projects *Openpaths* is one such example. It's made with the purpose of people to see the traces they leave behind. It's for them to store the history they created on their own.

"We inhabit a world where data are being collected about us on a massive scale. These data are being stored, analyzed, and monetized primarily by corporations; there is a limited agency for the people whom the data actually represent. We believe that people who generate data through their day-to-day activities should have a right to keep a copy of that data[1]," says Jer Throp.

"By placing data into a human context, it gains meaning. And it's tremendously important because it's our histories that are being stored on our devices. Also, when we put data in a human context, it builds empathy for people involved in this data which in turn results in

fundamental respect which is missing in large part of technology." Explains Throp.

There are lots and lots of stories to be found in complex data sets." – Mark Hasan
"

I remember, I was at work and heard two of my colleagues discussing an incident when they were a student at MassArt. The conversation kept going with more such stories and life experiences. I realized how we all have so many stories to share and how we keep sharing them. That was an epiphany for me.

During our first week of class, we were asked to come up with our definition of 'Human Data'. Here is how mine goes: "Human Data is a collection of stories that belong to each individual to create an eternal pattern. This data plays a role in amusing, inspiring, and creating interrelatedness." I noticed how stories had been an integral part of the human race. Life experiences are the common thread that ties people from every culture, race, and sexuality together. These stories can change people's lives and make them more empathetic and tolerant of each other. Hence, I decided I want to collect stories in the form of human data.

Human data is collection of Stories

Inspiration

The next step of this project was to think about its visualization for the collected data. I started looking for inspirations. I discovered three different kinds of representations that fit well with my project. The first was data visualization through words. Work like Ben

Rubin's 'And That's the Way It Is,' fits well in this category.

Ben Rubin's And That's The Way It Is

The project translates the spoken language of televised evening news into written fragments. The layering of information – textual and visual, contemporary, and historical- engages the viewers in multiple ways: cerebrally, as a distilled source of information, or viscerally, as a purely visual experience of luminescent crescendos and diminuendos[1]. As those lines were reporting news, the pace they were running up and down or side to side is such that users could choose one and follow it like a teletype. I enjoyed this project due to its prodigious nature. It was inspiring to see how he made use of the surface he was projecting on. The grid structure of text not only made it visually compelling but it was very well thought out.

The second category I identified was data visualization through colors, wherein I found the works of Fernanda Viégas, Martin Wattenberg[2], and Leslie Roberts. To celebrate WIRED magazine anniversary in 2008, Fernanda and Martin were commissioned to visualize its history and culture. The magazine was famous for its bold colors. Making use of those (and with an algorithm), Fernanda and Martin created a visualization for every palette used in 15 years of cover art in the form of colorful concentric circles. Those circles were so captivating and such a treat to look at. I loved how the magazines' detailed cover pages were transformed into these minimal color blocks, one inside the other. These artists did a great job of compactly visualizing

WIRED 2008

the last 15 years.

Similarly, Leslie Roberts's[3] work is famous for translating words into visual language. She is a data artist based in Brooklyn, NY. Her work involves paintings that are collections of ambient found language like street signs, junk mail, agreement, emails, labels, and much more. I was astounded by looking at this visual representation of text. They looked so cool! It compelled me to ask if I could translate the stories into such visuals.

I was married to the idea of a user interacting with my project. I did not want the visualization just to be a piece to look at. I wanted my user to be a part of the collection in a fun way. I wanted to create an experience for my user, as I thought they might forget these visual forms of stories after several days. However, if they had an experience of them, they might never forget them. That brings me to my third category, data visualization, through interaction.

A project called 'Re: MARK' by Golan Levin and Zachary Lieberman[4] was a perfect example of the amalgamation of voice analysis technology, motion sensing, and real-time computer animation to create an interactive experience. It required two participants whose speech is converted into whimsical animated letters and shapes that float upwards from the user's head's shadow. It symbolized the idea of letters coming out of the speaker's head on the screen. I found it to be an intriguing example of speech taking a visual form. At DMI, I am always motivated to explore new technologies and use them in experimental ways. This project inspired me to do the same and try my hand at creating something interactive.

Potential Idea:

Following the research week, we were asked to come up with some potential concepts for our project. My first potential idea was related to mapping a student's emotions. Inspired by my own experience and the idea of struggles designs students face while in school, I wanted to create a platform where students can share how they feel at a particular area in the college. Using an interactive installation at various places around the campus, students

WAITING Leslie Roberts

can choose which emotion they feel, such as 'bored with college life, need a break, future is bright and hopeful, anxious about the future, etc.' The idea was to create a data visualization and observe what students are going through in real-time.
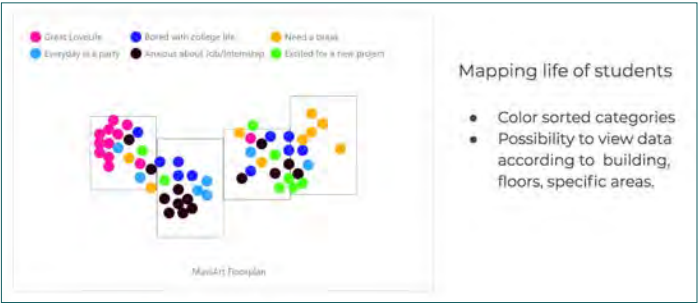
Potential idea 1

The second idea was inspired by Re: MARK by Golan Levin and Zachary Lieberman. I wanted to create a shared space where the prompt was to share a preferred childhood story/incident. I wanted to motivate my viewers to share and have a good time learning about each other. This would be a fun way to interact with various narratives. The concept was to transform the audio into text/ visual form on the screen with audio recognition technology. I had also planned to use different fonts to differentiate between people.

I visualized these stories to be projected on a big wall in a gallery space as it was in the project, "And That's The Way It Is." Seeing others' stories would have motivated people to share and talk about their lives openly.

Potential idea 2

After sharing my research with my classmates, they were intrigued by the idea of collecting stories in the form of data. However, there were some practical issues with the ideas I suggested, such as placement of the piece around the campus and timeline of the project. It was also just the beginning of the corona virus pandemic; therefore, I was asked to

revisit my ideas considering accessibility and feasibility.

During our discussion, one of my classmates suggested that I look at the project called '& Other Stories' by Giorgia Lupi[5] as an inspiration. It was a data-driven fashion collection where stories of three female trailblazers were translated into graphic patterns and embroideries. I was once again astounded by the possibilities of forms data could take.

However, I was looking for more out of this project. Quoting Jer Throp, "What we are looking for a lot in data is patterns. When we find that pattern, something goes off in our brain, and one of the ways that gets translated is 'that's beautiful!". I wasn't aiming to create just a beautiful representation of the collected stories; I aimed to archive and share them with others in its most natural form.

Stories stay forever, even when the person is gone, they are still powerful enough to amuse and inspire many people at the same time. For this project I decided to focus on the eternal nature of these stories so that even when the storyteller is gone, their experiences live forever.

Final Concept

During the next few weeks, my plan was to revisit the concept visualization of collected stories. I remember one day while scrolling through Instagram; I read a post by 'Humans of Bombay' about a young couple. It instantly struck me how I could utilize a platform to share the stories. I started looking for more inspiration that aligned with this idea of archiving and sharing real life narratives. Just as platforms like 'Humans of New York,' 'Humans of Bombay,' and many others focus on a particular place and people who belong to that place, I decided to focus on MassArt and its community.

While thinking about my explicit audience, I recalled when I was unfamiliar with the place and people, as a new student in school. MassArt is not a place where you see people around very often, especially when you have night classes. Moreover, my late working hours at the studio made me feel alienated. I realized a gap of interaction there; I felt my project could fill that gap. I needed to create something for people who felt the same way as me. Something that can comfort them at the time of need. A platform that fills the void of solitude.

Knowing that you are not alone in a place or a situation is very reassuring. Taking this inspiration forward, I decided to create a mobile application, which would be the most accessible and suitable platform for these times, with my explicit audience being people from the MassArt community. The application was for the community of MassArt interested in sharing, archiving, and listening to people's real-life experience at the college. Moreover, I wanted to create a feature of tagging these stories to particular locations to feel more attached to the place and the storyteller.

Humans of MassArt — Experience of the Application

In real time, as a person walks into a particular location, he will be acquainted by Humans of MassArt posters with a QR code on them. As the user scans the code, a link attached to the code will take them to the page to view the list of all the stories tagged to that location. The application has three options in the navigation bar at the bottom, i.e., Home, Recording, and Search. The home screen includes top stories, recently added stories, and a list of recommended stories. The idea was to keep everything in one place for the user.
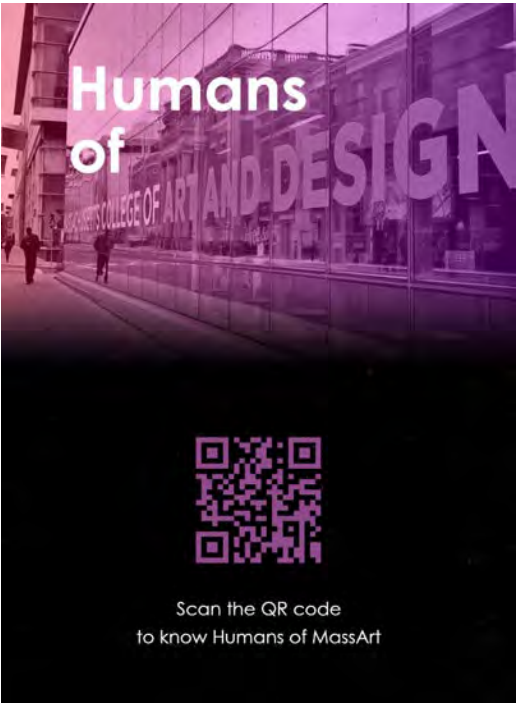
HoM poster with QR code

Link to browser

Meanwhile, Search works with location or with the name of an individual or the kind of story, the user might be interested in, for example, a love story.

Anyone who is visiting the campus can access the Home and the Search tab. However, to record a story, a person will have to log in using MassArt credentials. Only MassArt community members can record their stories.

In terms of interaction, the application is very intuitive. Once the user enters his/her credentials, it takes them to the recording screen. Once the user is all set with the recording, He/she is required to fill in details regarding the recording like Name, Location, etc. Users can also edit them by going to their 'My Stories' page, which is generated automatically when they log in.

Humans of MassArt — Interface of the Application

Now that everything was coming together conceptually, it was time to think about how the application would look and work. To begin with, I decided on the name 'Humans of MassArt' (HoM). For the project purpose, the application would be web-based.

In terms of the application's user interface, I wanted to use the colors that translated the vibe of an art school. In my design practice, I start with studying the latest trends. Trends at that time included minimalism, a splash of gradients, high play of typography, and colors palettes influenced by Pop Art. Out of these, my first choice was gradients. While working on various mobile applications in the past, I was stringently asked to use solid colors like blue and orange with a light theme. This was because the applications were for the Networking and Security domain.

Above: Home screen

Below: Search screen
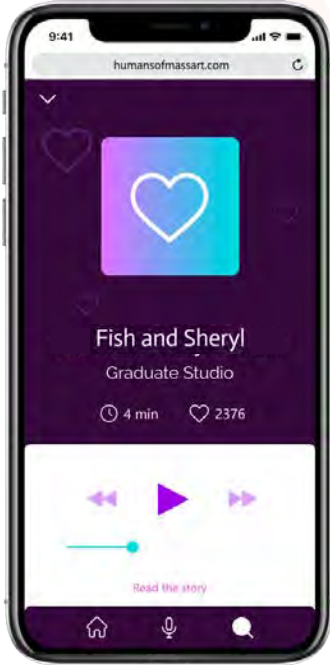
Left: Recording audio screen

Right: Play Mode
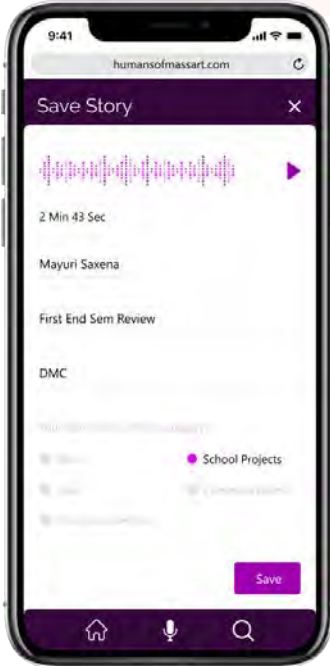
Left: Save story screen

Right: My stories screen

I never got a chance to experiment. And I didn't realize how comfortable I got in not trying something new. So, I decided to break my comfort zone and try out gradients.

Moreover, I opted for a dark theme taking inspirations from music applications like Spotify and YouTube Music. Working on a dark theme was yet another kind of style I never used. Choosing the purple as the primary color was a very impromptu idea. Also, purple conveys moods like imagination, spirituality, sensitivity, and has an amiable sense to it.

I used Figma to make my high-fidelity mockups as it allows us to project our screens on to a specific device, and one can also make a working prototype showing the user flow. When I showed the designs to my classmates, they were pleasantly surprised to see how finished the screens looked. I found that in terms of the UI, my users were quite satisfied.

Conclusion

Through this project, I learned that human data is a pool of metadata. This project compelled me to look carefully at the metadata that we create every day, every second. My main focus was on collecting this metadata in its most native form: stories. I was driven by the idea of stories bringing us together by making us empathetic towards people. Moreover, when two people have a conversation with each other and share their life experiences, they form a new data set. Data that I call 'relatedness and intimacy.'

Humans of MassArt acts as a data harmonizer that contributes to surfacing this metadata (of stories) of various individuals to build connections. Humans, biologically, cognitively, and physically thrive on social relations. They are wired to love, be loved, and to belong. Humans of MassArt stimulates this process of creating social connections. Through this project, I intend to remind people that they are never alone and that they belong.

While thinking about this project afterward, I realized it is a space where people can know each other, whether or not they ever meet one another. Space where the present meets the past in its way and listeners becoming a part of the bygone through going back in time. It's like I created my little time machine.

I took advantage of the eternal nature of real-life narratives. I was astounded that these stories are so powerful that they can live forever in a place. However, I feared the stories being manipulated over time; hence, I decided to keep them in their native form. Here for

example Kat Martin a DMI student shares her experience of working in the Grad studio on a project.

Me: what's the most memorable experience you had on campus of MassArt?

Kat Martin: Probably, when I was working on my You are here project, I was all alone at the studio, blasting music and working. I was also video calling many of my friends and family, kind of live streaming what I was doing. I remember being here till late, two days in a row, plaster everywhere. I was in so much flow. After so long, I felt nice working on something hands-on. Unfortunately, I had to leave the place soon as I had to catch the last bus.

While working on this project, I found that creating human connections and knowing about others' experiences can help people in so many ways. It provides us with the strength to keep going. Moreover, I decided that highlighting this concept of establishing social connections to create relatedness through dynamic media will be the core of my work. As an extrovert in an all-introverted family, I know it takes a lot of courage to approach others while socializing. Hence, I wanted to create a platform to make this process trouble-free for them.

During data collection for this project, I learned about people's lives and their backgrounds. For example, while listening to Kat Martin's story about spending time alone at the grad studio, I realized how much she enjoys being in her own company and talk to her family and friends while she works. Her work time is her time to connect with loved ones. Such stories they shared with me made me feel like I was a part of their experience. When we share a life incident with someone, we give them a piece of our soul. The piece stays with them and eventually becomes a part of the listener. Likewise, listening to the collected stories, I felt like I got to know these people a little more than I knew. I was never a part of any of them, yet I felt connected and related to them. These stories also motivated me to share them further with others to acquaint them with each other and build intimacy between two strangers.

Due to the project timeline, I could only interview 2-3 people; hence, if I have to work on this project again, I would continue collecting more people's experiences by interviewing them. I imagine this project to be a working application one day, with many stories and experiences that live forever. I envision people using it whenever they feel out of place or

see what's been going on with people.

Another challenge that I'll have to work on is integrating a voice recorder into the application. I'll reach out to people who can help me build this platform with all the required features. I would also like to conduct a user test to see how it works for my real audience, which will give me a better understanding of what needs to be improved.

Spin-off Projects:

This project inspired me to think about other ways to connect people indirectly and directly. Faceless Portraits[6], Raise Your Fist, and Realm of Distortion are such projects that I did during my time at DMI, which I will discuss as my other case study. They are yet another collection of stories and life lessons that some people want to share. For example, Faceless Portraits is a book of my friends and family's digital portrayals, with audio messages tagged.

Special Notes

A place is full of invisible stories and incidents. We can't see them, but I wish I could. I wish I could be there when those incidents were happening. I wish I were a dost of those people who were involved in those narratives. I would have felt less alone and more belonged to those places. Humans of MassArt was born with this exact intention of making people acquainted with new places, people, and narratives. This acquainting is a step towards Dosti with places and people.

This project provides a way for people to be dost with not just people who are no longer there but also the place through sharing narratives. In my experience, when we hear these stories, we organically find things that are common between them and us. This helps us feel connected in some way or the other.

I remember the first time I stepped into room 271 in the North building of MassArt. I have always loved that room because I was told about so many incidents that took place there. So many people have used that room. I felt connected to that place even more, when I heard that it was an art studio before. No wonder it smelt like my mom's oil paints (mentioned in the introduction chapter). I instantly felt I belonged there.

Raise Your Fist

Introduction

"*Acts of resistance are fundamental for human rights and democratic society. In an electoral democracy, protest provides an essential voice for minority groups. We don't realize it, but we can change the system by voicing our opinion and rebelling against our problems.*
The act of resistance can either result in winning or make us realize that we are not alone. Either way, eventually, it has the power to bring a change." - Disobedient Design Fall 2020

Raise Your Fist is a platform created for people to voice their opinion in support or disagreement with a social cause. I worked in collaboration with Cheng Qui, my classmate at DMI, on this project.

Our vision was to create a community of like-minded people who could freely share their thoughts and perspectives about the causes they care about.

Background

In the Disobedient Design class (taught by Martha Rettig and Sofie Hodara), we were asked to look for different protest symbols. The one that Cheng and I selected for our research was a raised fist. A raised or a clenched fist was first depicted by *Honoré Daumier*. It was inspired by the Revolution of 1848 that saw the overthrow of King Louis-Philippe's monarchy. Daumier, who was in Paris during the time known as the "*Bloody June Days,*" was moved by the people's intense passion and used the raised fist to symbolize their "strength, determination and will to fight."

Every time I look at this symbol, it fills me with so much vitality. The clenched fist that shows one's power right before it breaks through. The stiffness of the fist depicts the pent-up emotions. Looking at many such fists in the air shows the unity between people and how they are better together. This symbol has been used in many protests. For example, the Black Power Salute: at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City became the site of one of the most highly publicized (and criticized) uses of the raised fist. The raise fist was used as a symbol of standing strong and gathering together to fight for equality for the LGBTQ community following the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting, it was used by the protesters. Most recently, the raised fist was used in the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 was as a symbol of resistance and defiance.

Project Development

Raise Your Fist project has developed in multiple phases. Starting from the initial idea of Lino posters to an audio & visual recording website, and then a dynamic media creative platform. All three phases compelled us to think critically about our user's needs and our goals for the project.

Phase 1 - Lino Protest Poster

In Phase 1, we were asked to design protest posters. Protest posters are widely disseminated visual representations of messages intended to spark change or express discontent. Posters can transform the landscape and can speak up in times of social turbulence. They have the power to amplify one's voice in a community. That reminded me of how a raised fist symbolizes the same. Hence, I instantly decided to use it in my posters!

Corita Kent's Make love, not war

Emory Douglas's All Power to the People

While looking at different examples of famous protest posters such as Emory Douglas's *All Power to the People* and Corita Kent's *Make Love, Not War*, I noticed they did a great job representing their state of mind through creative visuals. For instance, the upside-down font text used in *Make Love, Not War* reflects the chaos and aberration of the world around the artist. However, I wanted to make something different. I wanted my posters to be a platform for people to come and share what they want to, their problems, and their emotions. My design included a fill-in-the-blank selection. They were four by six-inch mini-posters with a Lino stamped, raised fist, and type (asking I have a problem with…) printed on them. I made the participants the co-creator of the posters, so they could both speak-up and be heard.

Lino Posters

"LOVE LOVE LOVE THIS! I want to see them plastered around MassArt!" – Martha Rettig, Associate Professor of Design.

"This is great!!! Love the interactivity. I don' t think this piece is finished. I think you need another block and another call to action- one that instead of looking at what' s wrong, calls on your audience to consider a better future." – Sofie Hodara, Assistant Professor, Disobedient Design.

The feedback I got in class made me realize the potential of this project. I imagined a wall full of such posters where people can freely fill in the blank. However, the prompt that I provided was limited. I was hoping that people not just write their problems but also write something positive or hopeful, as Sofie suggested.

I continued working on this project by making more posters on the letterpress. This time I decided to make them bigger and place them in public places. But the pandemic derailed my plans. So, I started thinking of ways to make it digitally possible.

Phase 2 - Audio & Visual Recording Website

I started the digital phase of the project by looking at various platforms which collected data in the form of snippets. I found few digital platforms (such as Dear New York) that had a similar approach of asking people for something specific in a very concise manner. Users of the platform were asked to share a brief experience, story, or wish associated with it with a context given.

Inspiration

· **Dear New York - Pentagram**

Dear New York is an online experience created especially for New Yorkers to capture their feelings and memories of the city after the Covid-19 pandemic. The Pentagram design team created a simple content framework developed around the prompts "I miss you for..." and "I hope you will become...", inviting users to contribute their reflection on both a nostalgic past and an ideal future.

Dear New York website by Pentagram

The responses were in the form of a post-it which can be viewed with the 'walk a block' button on the website. This button lets the user toggle through 20 different urban photographs of the city. These images act as simple yet reminiscent backdrops for the post-its.

I found Dear New York' s prompt to be broad enough to capture all kinds of sentiments, related to Covid-19 or not. This project was an excellent example of what I was hoping to do. The individual input was very brief, but the message behind this collaboration was so meaningful. Moreover, I loved how people' s voices were being used for recording the event. Pentagram made good use of the pandemic which everyone was going through the same thing and could bond over!

"As time progresses, "Dear New York..." will continue to collect messages and grow in even greater richness and depth, becoming historical evidence of our collective response to Covid-19. The design team hopes that, even as New York City enters Phase 4 of its reopening, the project will continue to serve as an emotional record of this unprecedented moment in time." – Stated on Pentagram website[1].

Excited to take my project to another level, I reached out to Cheng and shared this idea. Upon discussion, we decided to collaborate on this project as it aligned with our individual thesis topic.

The next step was to think about the two essential things: incorporating the raised fist symbol and getting people to write their responses. We thought of creating a feature that allows a user to take an image of himself raising their fists. Using people's raised fist images, we tried to make this virtual experience close to a real protest experience. We wanted to recreate the experience of people walking together on the street, raising their fists in the air. Meanwhile, we started collecting people's responses through user testing.

Phase 1 of User Testing the Concept:

We began by asking ourselves why we were creating this project. We agreed that we are raising our fists through this project because we have a problem with people feeling powerless about voicing their opinions on social issues. We were looking to design a way for people to fight back or share their emotions and stories. Furthermore, inspired by the Dear New York project, our focus was on creating a minimal and direct questionnaire. Thus, the two prompts provided were "I am…" and "I raise my fist because I have a problem with…". We used Google forms to collect the responses.

User's responses on Google Form

Due to the prompts given, we noticed that most users had a negative connotation attached to the cause. They only stated the problems because we only asked for a problem. I instantly remembered Sofie's feedback of calling on our audience to consider a better future. I don't think we were making people feel better by just asking them about problems. So, we decided to do more user testing. This time we had to think about broader questions.

Phase 2 of User Testing the Concept:

The second phase started by looking at other activism platforms for inspiration. The most relevant we found were *'Taking IT Global'* and *'Dosomething.org.'* Both tools are youth-driven. People join volunteer, social change, and civic action campaigns to make a real-world impact on the causes they care about. Moreover, users get to share their passion and reasons for why they want to support a cause through a short questionnaire of 3-4 questions.

We decided to take a similar approach and added a few more questions. We were hoping to get a more comprehensive response this time. These responses would then help us connect all dots as to why people support or have a problem with a cause and why they would like to raise their fists.

We provided the following four questions this time:
· "I am…"
· "I raise my fist because I have a problem with or I support…"
· "Why does this issue matter to me?"
· "How did I become aware of it?

This time, we gave our users a set of causes (such as education, gender rights, politics, freedom of expression, mental wellness, etc.). In the previous user testing, people did not get the context quickly. We observed that platforms like Taking it Global provided a list of causes for people to choose from. It helped people to think about each of them carefully before responding. In one of our meetings with Jeff Bartell, he also mentioned using a different user testing style to make it more interesting. Hence, we decided to use Miro (a collaborative whiteboard software) this time.

Each cause had a particular color post-it assigned to it. We asked people to select the cause
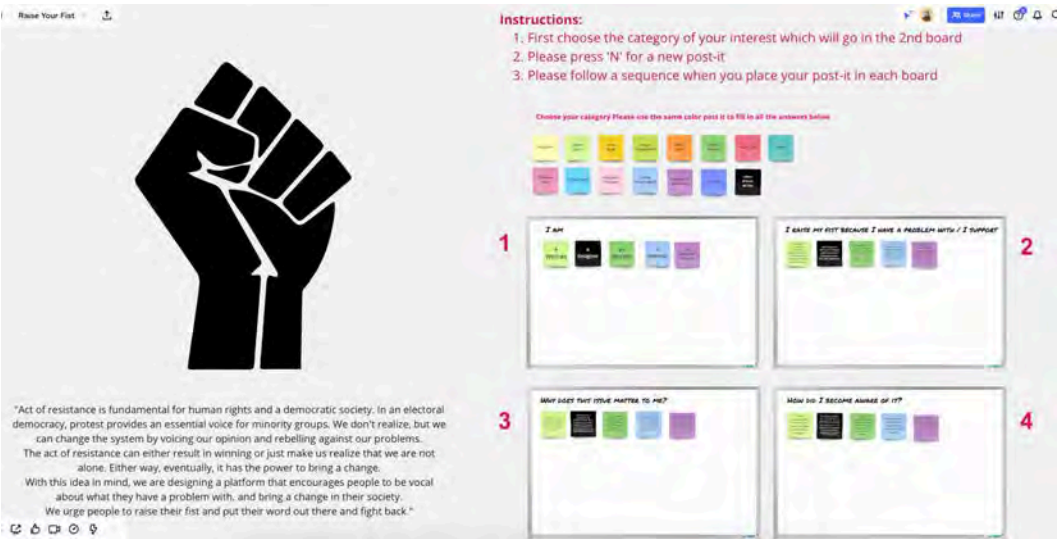

User's responses on Miro

and use the same color post-it for the answers. The responses were more detailed this time. One could clearly understand where the user was coming from. For instance, an educator would want to raise their fist at the issue of inadequate access to mental health services and related resources for everyone. They believe it should be a human right. This issue matters to them because they have seen it happening in their own life and the lives of those they care about. It's been a while since they have been looking for a solution.

Meanwhile, Cheng and I settled on creating a website for this project as it was the most accessible medium for everyone. The next step was to think about ways to incorporate the raised fist symbol. We wanted user's raised fists to be recorded and become a part of their posts. Looking at various photo blogs like Humans of New York (project by Brandon Stanton), we thought of incorporating a selfie with a raised fist feature. With a webcam, people would have to click an image of themselves with their raised fists. Only after that, would they be allowed to fill in other questions.

Furthermore, we decided to incorporate the feature of voice recording along with typing the responses. It would give more freedom to our users as they voice their emotions and opinions.

Website Design - User Experience

To begin with, we created a basic user flow using Invision Freehand. Once the user lands on the home page, they will choose to view other people's responses or add their own. If they decide to add their own, they are asked to click a picture of themselves with the raised fist. In the initial phase, we also kept sketching the fist for people who might not be comfortable putting up their images. (We took this inspiration from the Johnny Cash project by Aaron Koblin where participants illustrate each frame of the song Ain't No Grave) Once they do that, they can record their answers and hit submit or review them.
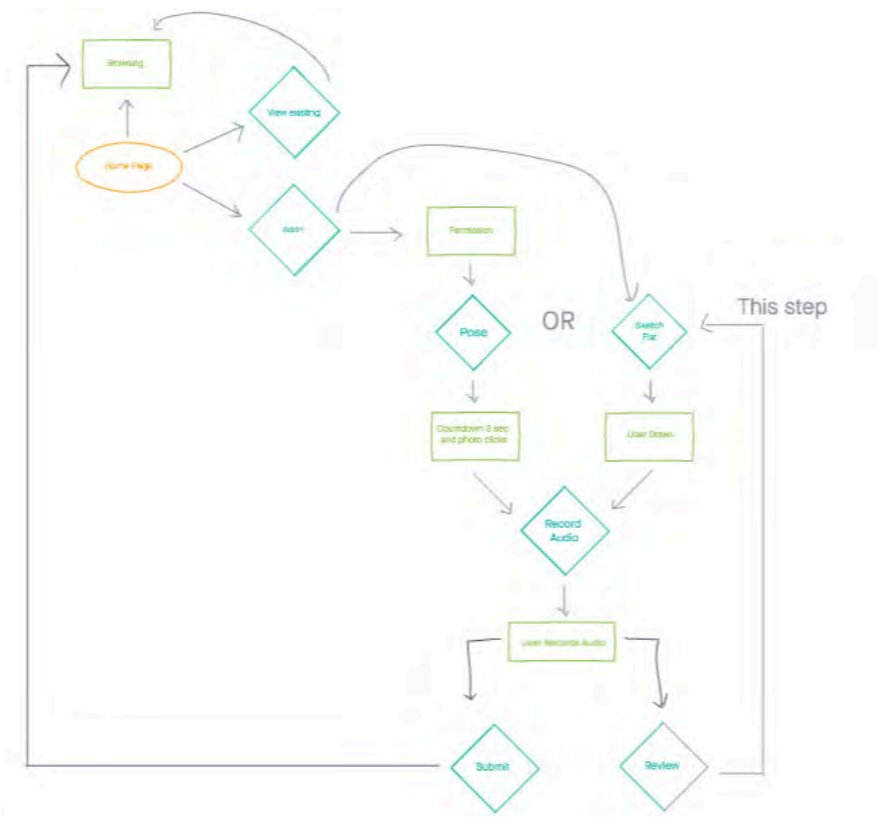
User flow made in InVision

Wireframing

Once we had the primary user flow ready, we developed detailed wireframes, which had options like toggling between voice recording and writing the responses and the user's

image. During one of our advisor meetings with Fish McGill and Jeff Bartell, they asked us a vital question. "What will happen after people respond to your questions." We realized that we did not consider the "what next" part of the project? It was essential to provide some call to action for people; hence we decided to add a link to charities, campaigns, additional literature related to the specific cause.

It would be a great way of connecting various organizations directly to people who want to be a part of a campaign but might not know where to start. It can also help two or more people build their virtual community to talk about these issues and share stories to feel better.


Home Page
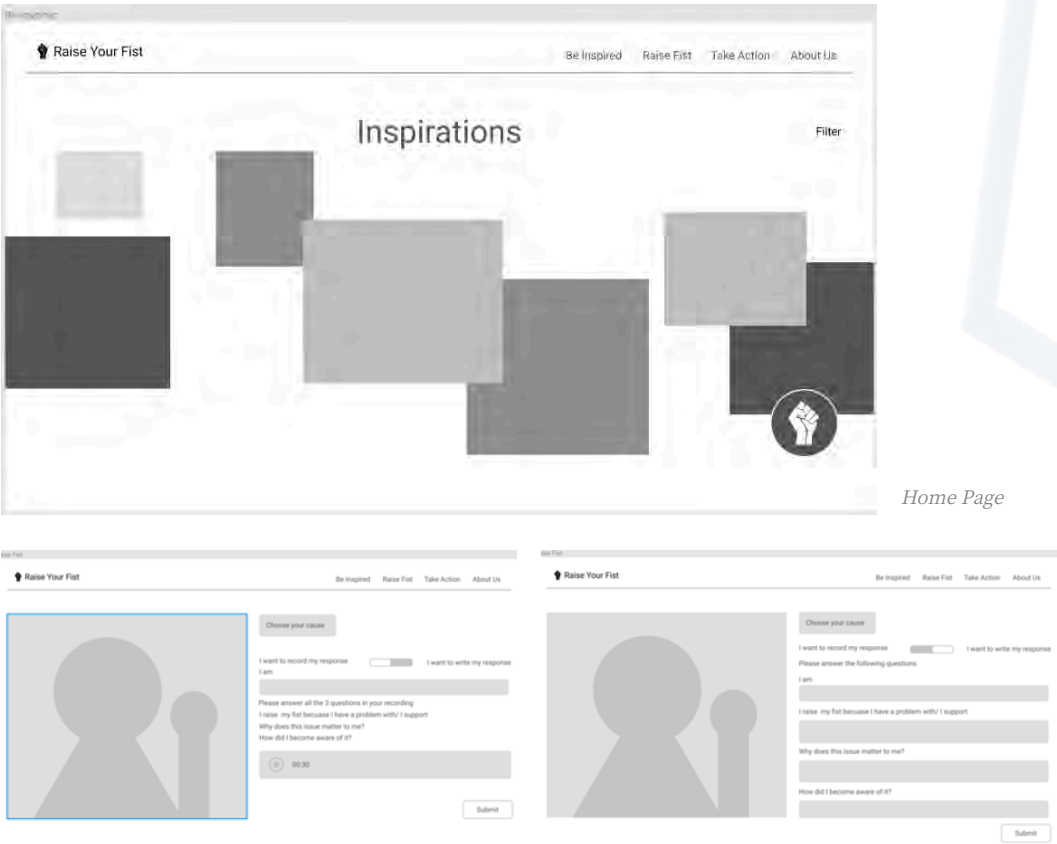
User selects to record the response


User selects to write the response

User Interface

We created a moodboard for the website while designing the UI. The keywords we decided on was clean, bold, and dark theme. According to the 2020 UI trends, dark UI themes were predicted to grow in 2020. More than visual appeal, a dark theme with proper contrast can help eye strains[2]. Considering the right contrast with the dark theme and the meaning (happiness and optimism of enlightenment and creativity), we selected Yellow as the primary color. We chose line icons overfilled icons with Lato (Google Font) font to make a clean UI.

For prototyping the UI, we used Figma. At this stage, we made some changes from the wireframes in terms of the user flow. Once a user lands on the website, they are given three options- Be Inspired, Raise Fist, and Take Action. Be Inspired tab has a timeline of other people's posts. Users can see the images of people with raised fist, and once they click on them, they can see the entire post. The timeline can be filtered according to causes and mediums.
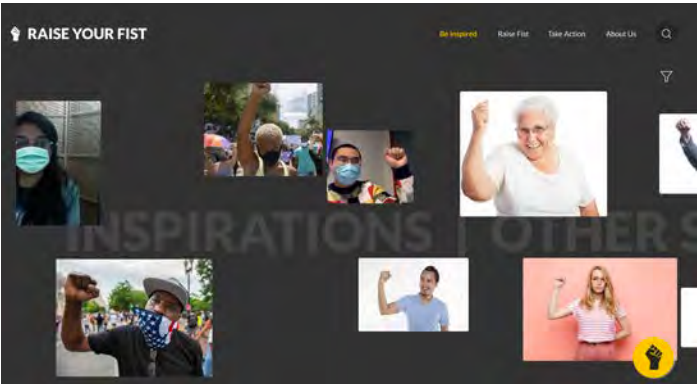
Home screen with horizontal scroll
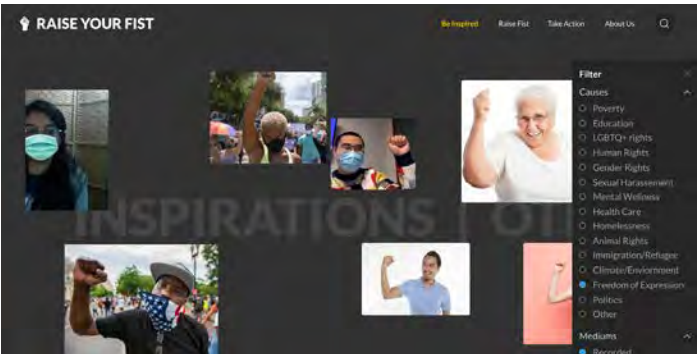
Home screen with filter

In the second tab, Raise Fist, the user is asked to select a cause from the list of causes given. They can also add their own using the 'other' option. Step two is to choose a medium of writing the response or voice recording the response. Next, the user is asked to take a picture of themselves using their webcam with a raised fist. We also provided a mask filter for people who were uncomfortable photographing their faces.
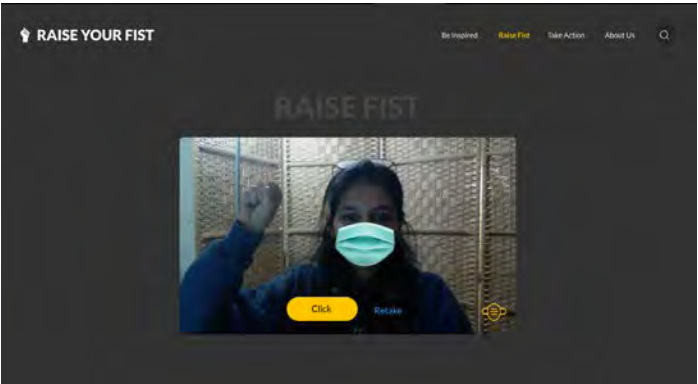
Mask filter

The third and last part of the website was Take Action. This feature is a call to action for the users. Users can select a cause and take any action on it. For example, one can post a charity link that is working on the cause. This will help people get connected with the organization they might not find elsewhere. Moreover, one can add additional literature and suggestions to make people aware of others who have worked in the same field. The aim was not only to make a self-reflective tool where people can share how they feel and their experiences but also make a difference.
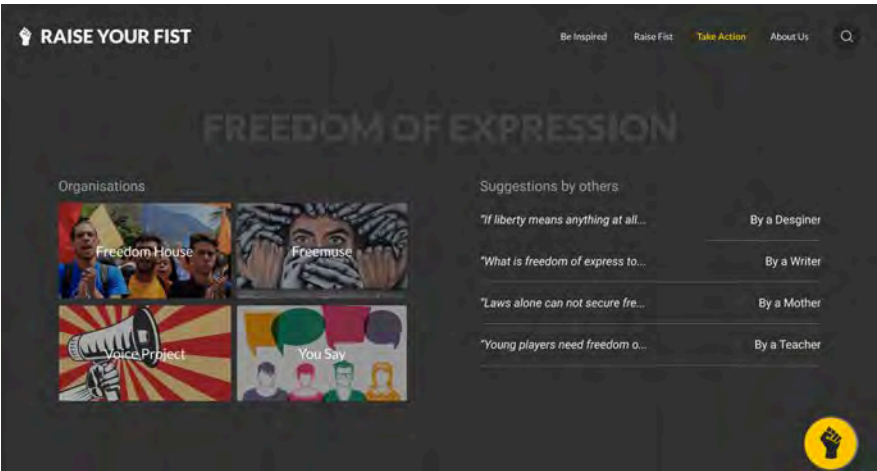
Take Action screen

Feedback

During Fall 2020 reviews, the project received mixed feedback. Many people had questions on how this project connected with themes of reminiscing and social connections. Some feedback that influenced me to work on another version for this project are the following:

· **Comment 1**

"While looking at other projects, it made me curious if this project has a way also to connect people. Like where people can communicate with each other." – Nicole Tariverdian (Interactive producer at RLMG).
She also pointed out that my projects give the user a participatory creative role to play. It made me question if I was limiting their creativity with just two mediums of response.

· **Comment 2**

"Thinking about the Raise Your Fist project, I had some fundamental questions like, who is the audience for it, and what are the fundamental entry points for that range of audience, and that got me thinking about considering the introvert and extrovert personality types as that duality are within all of us. For instance, I might be someone who looks at this platform and says, 'Yes! I am going to raise my fist. However, later might feel otherwise and push back. So maybe thinking about all sorts of entry points, places and spaces would be helpful." – Ravi Jain (Senior Associate Director, Digital Media & Web | Short Form Video Evangelist)

Ravi's comments got us thinking about making our user comfortable with what they are asked to do. There might be a situation where users might feel apprehensive for many reasons. One, their data is going to be over the internet. Second, there might be repercussions. I needed to consider other ways to make this experience more inclusive, pleasant, and less stressful.

Phase 3 - Creative Dynamic Media Tool

After a break from this project, we resumed working in the spring semester. Asking ourselves what we wanted to achieve in the end turned out to be helpful. I was personally hoping for these outcomes:
·   The user feels better after sharing their frustrations.
·   Users get to express themselves openly with creative freedom.
·   Users learn to empathize with others.

On a side note, I have been a persistent user of the Instagram's story feature. With such limited features, one can do so many things. And that was it! I imagined something similar; what if we gave people a creative tool to make something using any media, be it audio, video, 3D, 2D art, or images. It would be a therapeutic tool that helps people communicate freely without any constraints. We set about user-testing this idea.
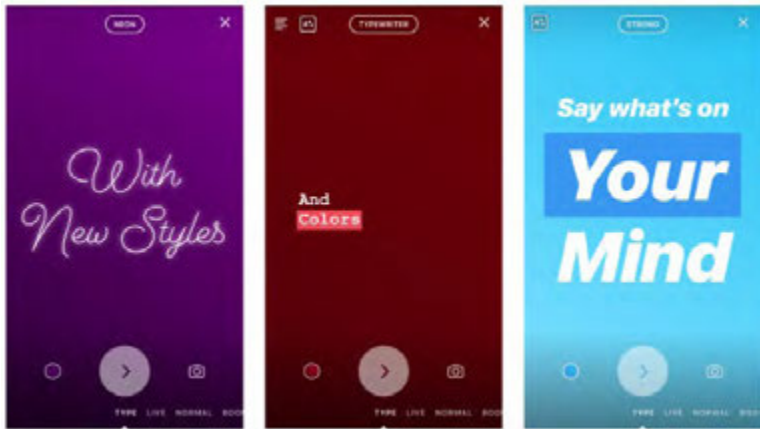
Instagram stories features

Phase 3 of User Testing the Concept:

We asked people to create artwork using any media (drawing, photography, zines, videos [5-10 sec], collage, music composition) on any/specific social causes. *"Through your artwork, express what you feel about that social issue, share your experience, and emotions associated with them."* This time we divided our users into two groups. We provided the first group with a list of causes, and no causes for the second group.

The responses that we got were so creative! People made short videos, animations, collages; one also painted a canvas bag with a social message.

Moreover, we also asked these people how they felt doing this activity; the responses confirmed that we were on to something special.

"I had a plain canvas bag; I have wanted to do some artwork on it for so long. Thanks to your project, I got to do this finally!" – Sanchitta Mahapatra

"It was a thing in my head for a long time, but I was lazy to do it, so thank you so much. It was fun, and I probably won't do it if you didn't ask me," - Yunus Ersoy

Personas:

The next step was to create personas- which helped us to recognize different user needs. This process was missing from our previous two versions. Following are the three personas that we created:

· **A high school student**

· No experience with professional tools like Photoshop or Illustrator.
· Have a passion for making a difference in society.
· Is looking for inspiration, designers, and artists.

Artwork by users

- **A graphic designer/illustrator**

- Wants to explore 2D visuals and music.
- Believer of activism through art.
- Wants to connect with like-minded people to support a cause.

- **A 3D artist/ designer**

- Wants something more accessible and simpler to use.
- Looking for a rapid prototyping platform.
- Able to use custom made assets.

We developed a new user flow for our revamped platform, including features like comment and share. This platform was a making tool as well as a viewing tool. Creators could add their artwork (which they made using other platforms) by uploading their dynamic media pieces or could create one using our tool. In terms of the UI, we did not make many changes apart from changing the theme from dark to light.
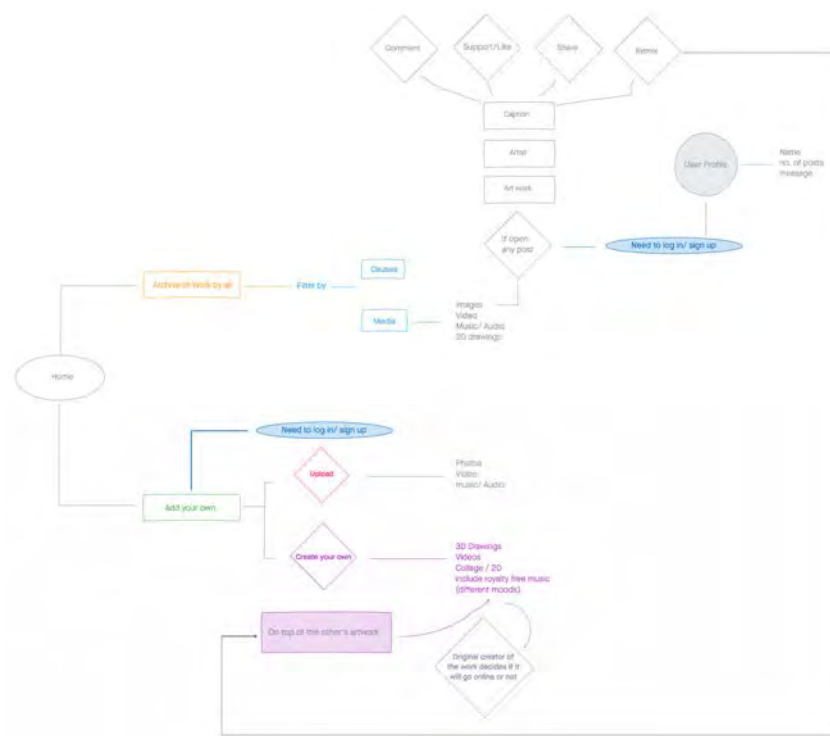
User Flow of the creative tool

In another advisor meeting with Martha Rettig and Jeff Bartell, we were asked a very thought-provoking question- "how is RYF 2.0 different from other social media platforms". At this point, the two things that made our tool different were the making part, and its focus was purely on social issues. Moreover, we added features like making minimal 3D sketches and providing space for mixing different media such as visuals with audio. However, we were not satisfied with just that. We wanted to make it more exclusive in terms of bringing people together. We added a feature called "Remix."

The remix feature lets the user remix someone else's artwork to show their support for the cause. For the remix version, they could only use our tool to draw or make something on top of the original artwork. We were excited to add this feature as no other platform does that.

Artwork being remixed

Soon we realized as issue of approval and disapproval of 'remixed' artwork. We might get into a situation where people can misuse the remix feature and ruin the artwork. Our solution was to grant the original maker, along with other community members, the right to approve or disapprove of the artwork. These members will be the people who have made artwork on the exact cause. It would be like jury duty. However, no one would know who these people are and who approved or disapproved of their work. We decided to do this while thinking of a hypothetical situation. As the first time made artworks are not monitored and if someone for example, posts homophobic artwork, our original plan is to

have other people remix it and point out how they are wrong. But, if the remixed work is approved by the owner of the original artwork, the person posting homophobic artwork can just turn down the submission of people trying to correct their bigoted artwork. Hence, if it's instead approved by community members (including the original creator), say 11 community members will create a safety net around the work. It will be a fair system. They each get a notification, and by the statistic of whether they approved or not, we approve a remix work that way.
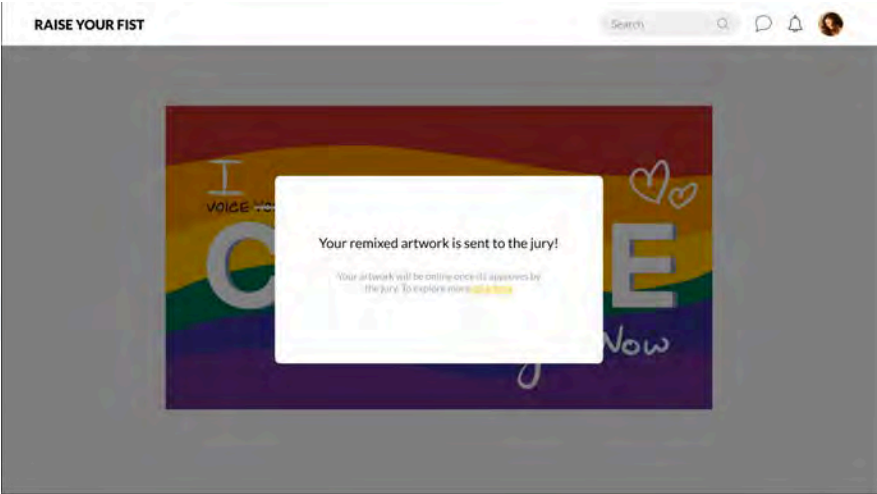
Artwork sent to jury

Website Design

The website's Home page has two parts; one is the archive of all the posts. On the top of the page, the user can find a vertical scroll of all the causes such as mental wellness, animal rights, LGBTQ rights, etc. user can quickly select any of them to view related artworks. Below those cards, one can use filters or sort the list of artworks.

In the spring 21 reviews, Jan Kubasiewicz (Founder of DMI) asked me a very intriguing question regarding the UI of the website. "Is there a sorting mechanism? As it's a database of work, so is there a way to find things where I can see a string of history of one particular work with multiple interventions? Imagine this database has a lot of artwork it's growing every day; how do you plan to solve the problem of sorting?". So, we decided to add a filtering and sorting system.
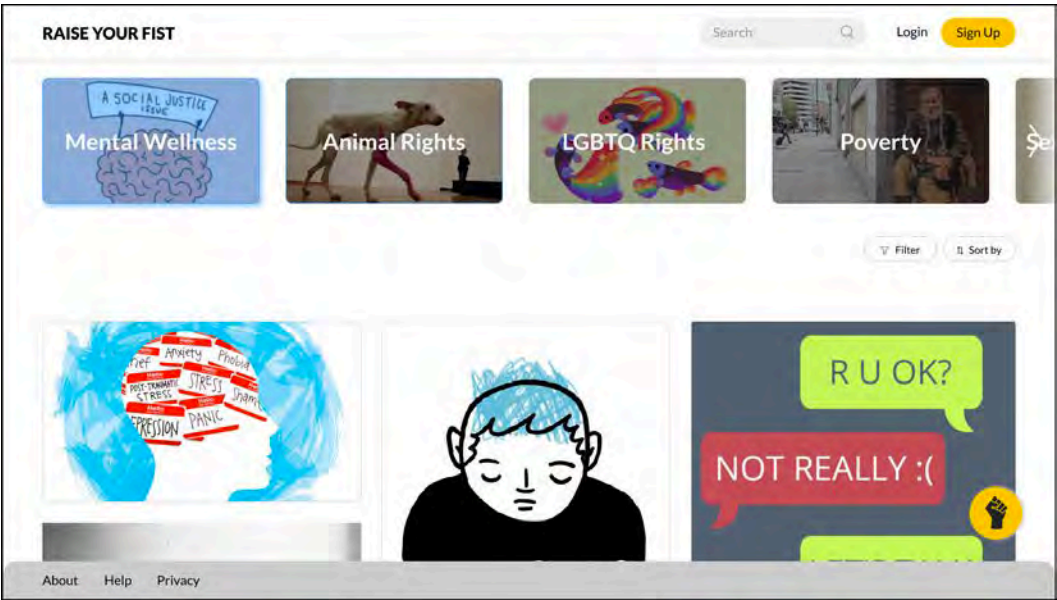
Home screen showing artwork related to mental wellness
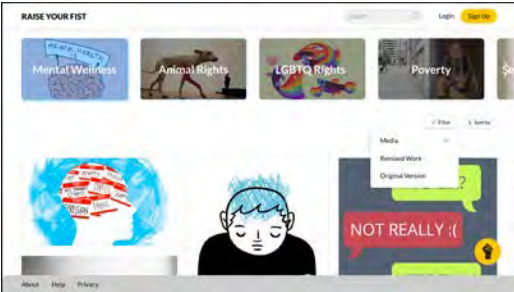
*Home screen with filters button selected*
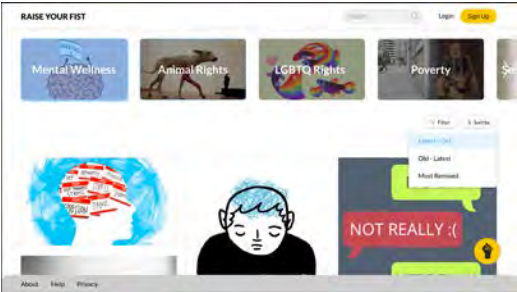
Home screen with sorting button selected

One can use filters like media (that includes 2D, 3D, animation, video, and music), remixed work (that shows all the remixed results in that cause), and the third filter we have is original versions (this includes the work that has not been remixed at all). When the user clicks on a remixed artwork, they can see the entire chain of the remixed works, with the latest remixed version in front and the original work at the end. Moreover, each artwork is highlighted with a different color for pro and against the cause. For example, blue is for the cause, and red is against the cause.

The user can find a floating button of raised fist at the bottom corner to add his artwork

on the platform. The user is given two options: either add pre-made work or make their own using the tool we provided. One can add any sorts of files like PNG, JPEG, MOV, MP3, and MP4. On the other hand, if they chose to create their artwork, they will be taken to a whiteboard by default.
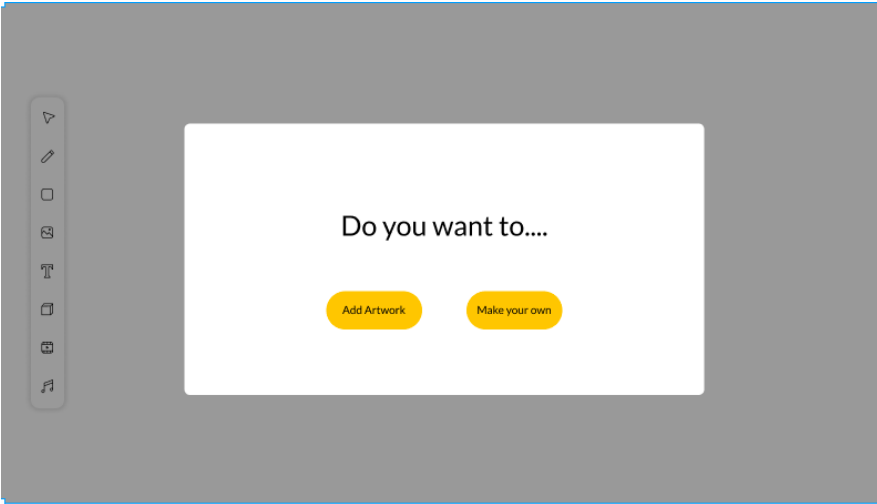
By default screen when user clicks on raised fist button

The tools provided are basic and inspired by digital art-making platforms like Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop, and Invision Freehand. There are tools like pencil, shape, images, text, 3D, audio, and video. Once the user creates his piece, he can put a caption, specify the media used, the cause is chosen, and toggle if the work is against the cause or for it.
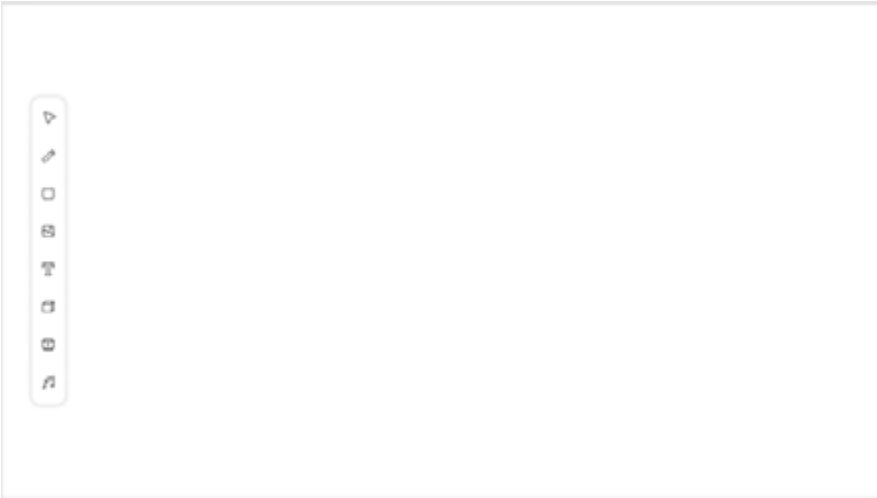

By default artboard

We did not get a chance to user-test the final version. However, we did walk through the entire system for some people to get their feedback. They did agree that this platform can connect people through art which can be very beneficial and relieving.

"*The one thing about human nature is that they always have an opinion. One cannot not have an opinion, no matter negative or positive. Your platform is a tool that makes that happen. When you comment or remix work, it helps you validate your opinion as well. In that context, it's a powerful tool given when taken in the right direction.*" - Iladeep Bharadwaj.

"*I really like the idea of using art and creativity to express emotions. I feel it's a strong platform because, in the past 2-3 years, lots of revolutions have happened online. For example, the BLM movement has had so much significance, and we know so much about it because people put up things related to it so often everywhere. It looks like your platform is very easy to use, where people can express themselves so easily. It also helps people to share it with so many people at the same time. Through sharing your work, one gets exposure and that results in something good happening to the world!*" - Tanisha Bhatt (an art instructor).
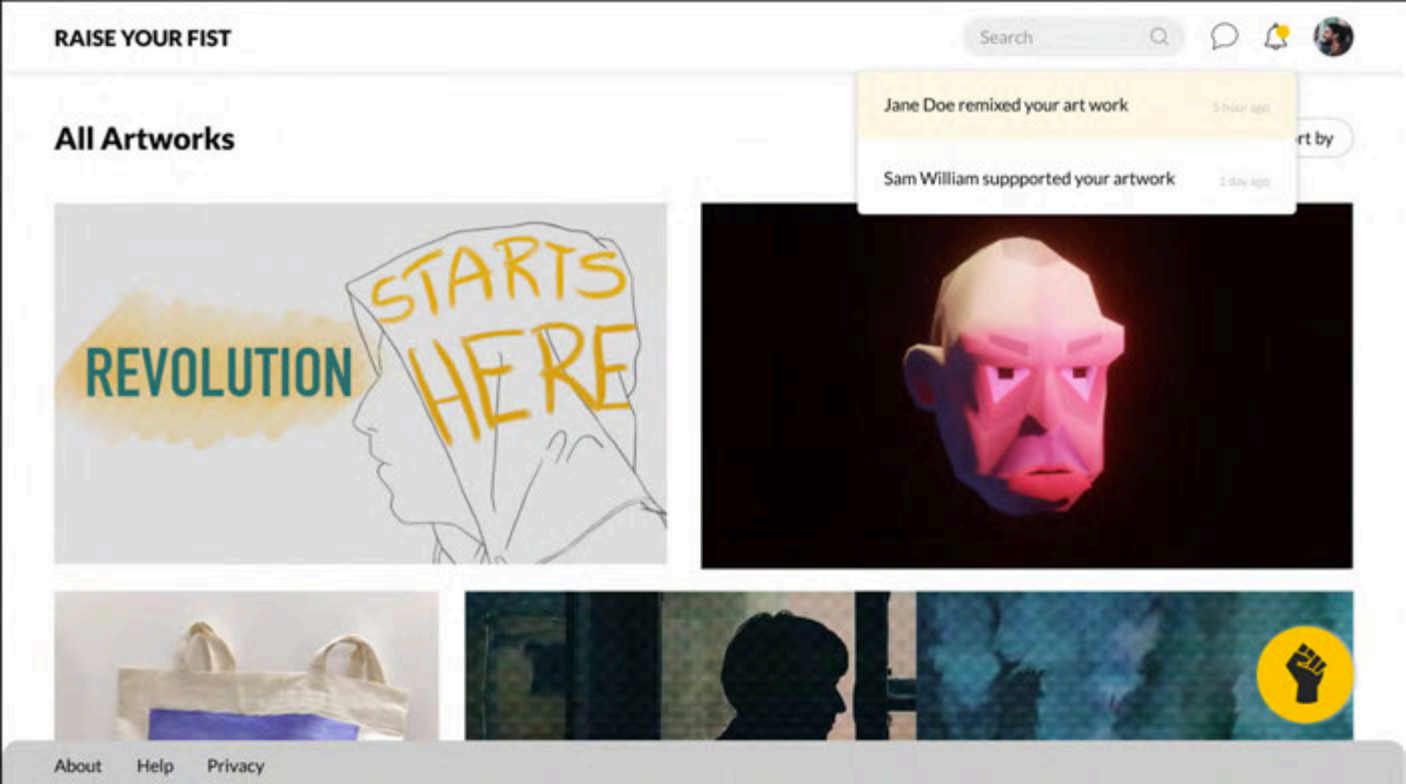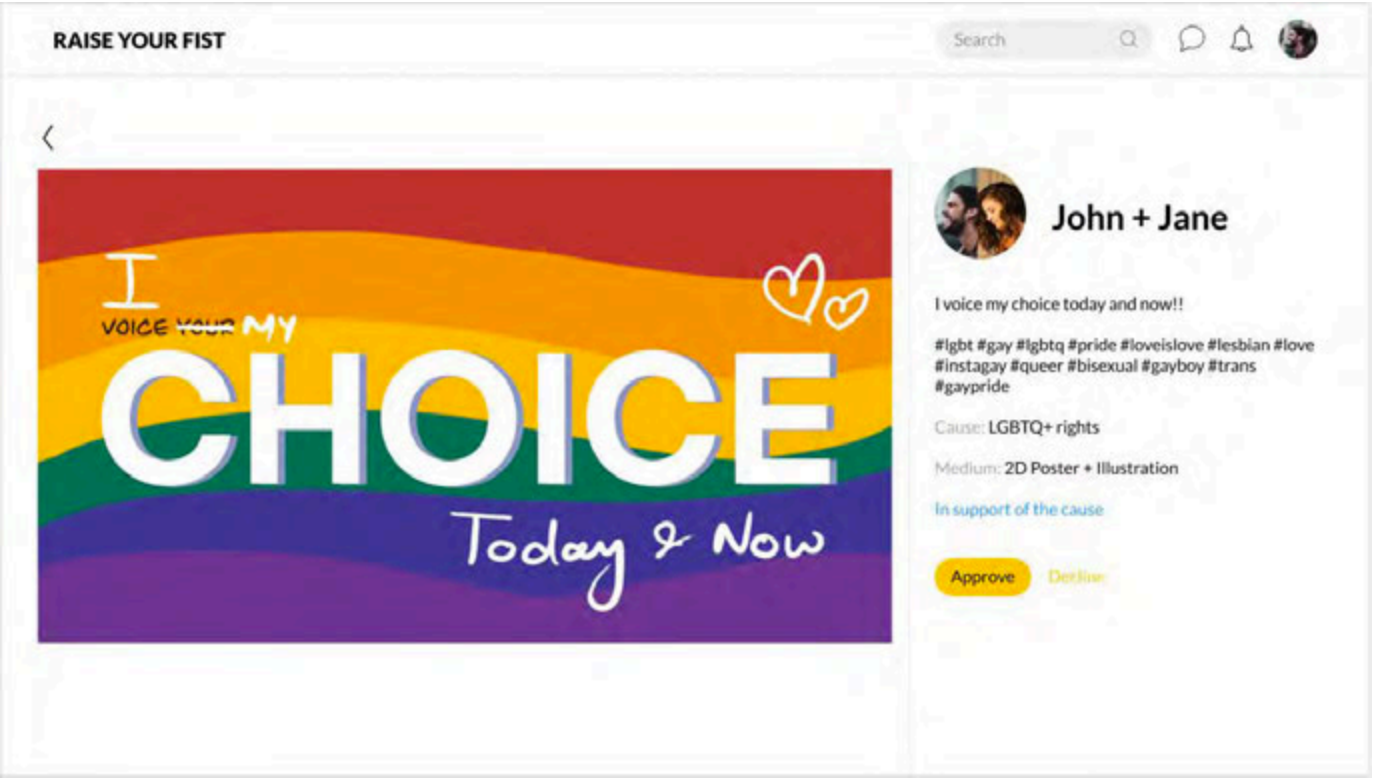
Notification screen

3D asset uploaded screen

Upload music screen

Approval screen for the creator of the original work

Raise Your Fist in Relation to My Hypothesis

In the Spring 21' mid-semester review, Martha commented, "I'd love to hear more about your new direction in Raise your Fist and how that connects to reminiscing and memories for you." To which I answered, "with this new approach, we had two things in mind; one was to make use of people's skills and giving them creative freedom to express their thoughts on the cause. The second was to bring out their own experiences that influence these thoughts and emotions, things they might have heard from people or things they might have seen happening to their loved ones. This was one reason why we asked people how they became aware of this issue in our second phase of the user testing. For example, in our final user testing, one of the participants mentioned they wanted to create something about Turkey's political situation as he has been witnessing crimes in his daily life."

"I decided to make something about Turkey's political situation. In the past years We faced corruption, bad management in education systems, racists discourses from the government, crimes against human rights, anti-LGBTQ groups supported by the president, inequality in women's rights, femicide, bad economic planning, the last and most important one is injustice in the judicial system.

Although I personally witness these crimes in my daily life, and they are apparent, the president and the government deny accusations. I don't mean that president R. T. Erdogan makes every mistake, but he supports people who committed a crime. Additional to that, sharing and revealing these kinds of crimes are mostly ended up in jail. Their rules control media, and people against him or his rules are punished in various ways, as we see in countries that are ruled by dictatorships.

I make this small animation to remind myself nothing is permanent, and I believe he will be questioned fairly in the eye of law one day. I would like to think that I will see the day when he will be gone." – Yunus Ersoy

With reference to my thesis, I intended to bring out the stories and real-life experiences of people which influenced them to create artwork. These stories would help people understand other's perspectives and empathize with them. This platform would bring like-minded people together, not letting them feel alone. Moreover, memories can provide a lot of strength when we look back. With this platform, people would transform their unpleasant experiences into expressive artwork. This will result in improving their moods and in the future, the memories of their struggle will change into something positive.

Conclusion

Raise Your Fist was a long journey. Cheng and I had moments of disappointment, where things just did not work according to how we expected, along with moments of success and appreciation. There were many things we learned from our 2-semester long journey, among them:

Do Not Get Married to Your First Idea:

This project started with creating Lino posters. I had never imagined it would take the shape of a dynamic media creative tool. Honestly, I was only interested in making posters originally. However, as I discussed the idea and my intention behind this project with other people, I understood it's okay to switch gears. In fact, it's essential if we want to make a better version than what we had imagined. In the end, the journey from version 1 to the final version is what made it so special.

If I had only left this project by making Lino posters, I would have restricted people by limiting the medium to just a paper and pen. Then we made the same mistake in the second version by giving only two options- writing and voice recording. As rightly mentioned by Ravi Jain in the reviews, thinking about people and their multiple entries points to this platform was undoubtedly vital.

Art and design are supposed to be the best way of expressing one's emotions. It allows you to express feelings in a healthy way. People also feel more freedom and less stressed when it comes to art and design. Moreover, it makes our life more meaningful and help see the world in a different way. Hence, it was important to give a lot of creative freedom to our users.

Trust your User:

Our users in this project have played a significant part. Our progress wouldn't have been possible without those three phases of user testing. Doing user testing the right way, at the right time with the right set of people reduces the risk of creating a wrong product, thereby saving time, money, and other precious resources. If done at an early stage when the product idea is before the prototyping stage, one can learn a lot and can quickly fix things. For example, after our 1st phase of concept user testing, we instantly identified the need of providing more questions to get real content out of people. Rapid concept user testing in all three versions turned out to be very beneficial in our case. We were able to figure out problems and think of appropriate solutions quickly. It also helped us in making more and better iterations in less time.

Furthermore, we also realized the right ways of user testing were also equally essential. For example, for the second version (audio-visual recording website), we used Google forms and Miro (digital whiteboard software) and noticed people were more interested in working on Miro. As a tool, it had more options and more space to experiment. We also gave our users a list of causes and experimented with the format of the testing. I believe that was an important factor in its success.

Similarly, while working on the final version (the creative dynamic media tool), users enjoyed it the most as there were no constraints. They were given the freedom to observe their environment and act upon it, and it worked! We gave people a choice to write a short description as well for viewers to know their emotions in detail. Our users made and explained their pieces so beautifully. One of my favorite pieces was a video of a rainbow silk scarf flying in the sky with this caption –

"8th-ish December 2015: My friends and I were going back home post-dinner when this 14-year-old guy just stopped us and handed me a rose and asked me to buy it. Knowing he probably picked it up from a grave, I laughed and tried handing it back to him when my friend said I should probably buy it for myself since my birthday was coming up. As soon as he heard the word birthday, he snatched the rose back, and before I could say anything, he quickly handed me another one- which I later on realized was the best one from his bunch. He wished me a happy birthday, refused to take the money, and tried handing me another rose before running away. That was the first (and the only) time I've been given flowers, and at that moment, I realized the dead don't need flowers or sympathy. It's the living we should be kinder and more sympathetic towards." -Tanisha Bhatt.

We Achieved More Than We Expected:

The ultimate aim was to spark connections between people and build community. However, we achieved more than we expected. When we gave the task of making a creative piece, people were happy to do it. They were looking for an opportunity like this to create something that will express their emotions. Furthermore, when we showed the final website to our classmates, they told us it not only makes them empathetic towards artists but also evokes various other emotions.

"Your goal of connecting people and building an artist community is well accomplished here. If I am an activist artist, I would like to post on your website because I am posting among people like me and feel safer. That's

important to me, as it's going to be visited by people who think like me. This experience will make me feel safer, supported, and heard.

If you see work on anti-racism in museums, and I can feel different. However, at this platform, I feel more connected as everyone is like me. So as an artist, this platform works.

Moreover, when you showed me the artwork that you got from your friends and classmates. I felt a lot of emotions. It was not just about being empathetic. It was more than that. I agreed with some pieces, and I would disagree with some, like the 'poisoning the patriarchy' piece – I think it was too aggressive. So, I feel as a viewer; one can feel triggered and might feel it's debatable. These pieces compelled me to think about certain ones more than others; it made me think why some works triggered me, why some did not. The point is looking at these powerful pieces, triggers various emotional responses.

And I want to say that this should not be the measure of your success. People might feel something by looking at your platform or not. It's similar to saying a person goes to an art gallery and has to feel connected and relatable to the art. Your purpose of making and putting specific content makes this platform successful. - DMI classmate (TZ).

This thorough feedback on our platform by our classmate made me realize what makes this platform successful. The safety people would feel posting things on the website is one point.

This platform also felt like a place of dialogue; for an artist, it's a place to see how other people express their ideas to have some departure for their own thoughts. As an activist, it a place for inspiration for how to communicate with people and share. "It's like having a cup of coffee and discussing with friends," shares TZ. TZ also jokingly mentioned how he imagined this as a physical gallery of such works and if he could put it in his resume as an achievement. I loved that feedback, and it made me so proud of Cheng and myself.

Future Plans:

I genuinely feel there is more we can do in this project. I would want to continue working on two things: The first would be how to increase accessibility in terms of devices. We created it for the desktop, and we are interested in making a mobile tool. With mobile accessibility, we can also integrate features like augmented reality and virtual reality as other media. I am excited to explore different kinds of media. The second thing would be the tool to be more collaborative so people can create work in real-time together.

Experience of Working in Collaboration:

Cheng and I have been working in collaboration since day one at DMI. What I enjoy about working with Cheng is his thought-provoking attitude and his perspective towards things. He taught me how I should think from 360 degrees about an idea. He always had a counter-question for us to discuss, and I always enjoyed those.

Moreover, we were a good team. We both brought very different thoughts and skills to the table, and we knew how to make use of them. We both understood what was required and never failed at it. I am genuinely going to miss working with him and our hours and hours-long discussions over not just work but also some very random things!

Special Notes

A *Dosti* (friendship) becomes special and stronger when people have shared interests, ideas when they ask each other difficult questions and provide each other an opportunity to express and share their feelings. When you become friends with someone, you support them, empathize with them, and give them feedback. Raise Your Fist let's one do the exact thing.

This tool not only askes my user the question 'Let's be *Dost*?', but it also creates occasions when you need to be there for your *Dost*. Where at times, you would agree with them and support them, or you would express your own emotions on their ideas.
It's not like any other social media where you send a request, and you become friends. This platform is where you first understand the person, explore if you have anything in common, and begin your conversations. This project is my attempt to make the virtual friendship as natural as possible, where people get to know what matters to others, which becomes the reason for their connection.
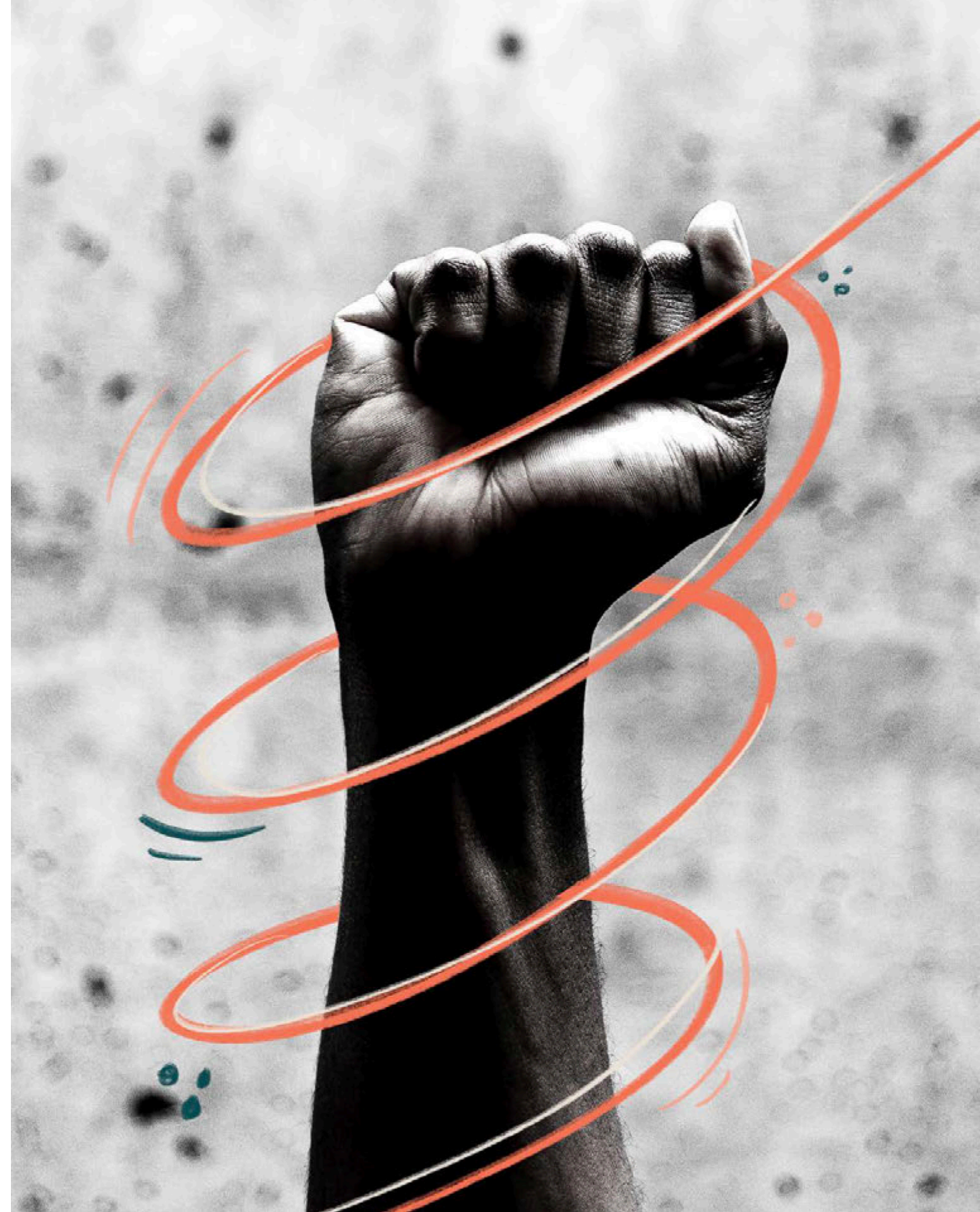
Friendshipments

Introduction

Friendshipments is a social experiment that explores and highlights the importance of embracing the differences and similarities between people.

"The color of our skin is not a weapon"

"I can't breathe"

"Color is not a crime"

"We all bleed the same color"

MY ETHNICITY IS NOT A VIRUS

TIME FOR FACTS NOT FEAR

ALL LIVE'S MATTER

DEFEND THE POLICE NOT DEFUND

KEEP AMERICA GREAT

Research

The year 2020 was strenuous. People witnessed various unfortunate events, from the Australian wildfire to the US president's impeachment and the Pandemic to Black Lives Matter protest. The global outrage affected me in a way I never felt before. I was confused thinking about what causes people to see differences between one another that results in injustice.

During this time, I took an elective called Intercultural Lab for Artists. "Intercultural Understanding (IU) is the orientation to any meaningful encounter across differences in which all parties involved recognize each other's complexities, specificity, and dignity." States Marika Preziuso (Associate Professor of World Literature & Program Coordinator of Liberal Arts Department at MassArt). The readings we did in class shared a critical investigation of identity - the identity (ies) of the artist, writer, the subject in work, and the intended audience - in the context of racial, cultural, gender, and linguistic differences. The class prodded students to practices in empathetic inquiry, cognitive estrangement, mindful journaling, reparative revisions, and forming creative habits to develop a sense of trust in our art so that it can hold space for all our emotions and experiences with compassion and levity.

The course work centered around the art and culture of the Black community. I learned about artists and writers like Wangechi Mutu and Audre Lorde, whose work is dedicated to gender constructs, sexism, classism, racism, heterosexism, and homophobia. One particular striking project was Adult Female Sexual Organs, wherein Mutu uses a Victorian medical diagram as an archetype of biased anthropology and sexual repression. The head is a caricatured mask – made of packing tape; its material refers to bandages, migration, and cheap 'quick-fix solutions. Mutu portrays the inner and outer ideals of self with physical attributes clipped from lifestyle magazines: the woman's face being a racial distortion, her mind occupied by a prototypical white model[1]. This and many such projects propelled me to see the victims of racism and other social injustice from a more empathetic perspective.

Adult Female Sexual Organs by Wangechi Mutu

"We are only as blind as we want to see" – Maya Angelou

I realized how we humans tend to look at the differences first rather than bonding over the most basic things about our humanity. We always find reasons to set each other apart. It made me wonder why people only notice the differences first. Is it because we are wired that way? We have far more similarities than differences. We analyze people before they even start speaking. I wonder if this is a correct way to unveil someone's true essence and personality.

Briana Bell in her article Why We Need to Focus on Our Similarities Rather Than Differences states, "We are a multifaceted being who don't belong to a single category. We are so diverse and under constant change with the ebb and flow of life that it is nearly impossible to be one concrete, cast in one category indefinitely[2]." So why do we still do this? How we cannot peer into another's mind and innermost thoughts to see their true essence, passions, flaws, or apprehensions? Which is why we settle by judging the person's exterior appearances.

With this unsettling realization, I decided to do something about it. I wanted to make a system that, for once, doesn't make a person focus on differences but instead draws attention towards the similarities. We miss out on the connections we share and things that unite us when we focus on external factors. My hope was that when focusing on similarities in one another we could embrace the disparity, which results in sparking a connection between people. Anatomically, we are perfect matches of the same species with all of the same emotions and the ability to feel pain and joy.

Inspirations

While discussing this idea with my advisor, Professor Fish McGill, I told him I wanted to create a new identity for people that looks beyond a person's appearance. He suggested that I look at "Data Portraits at TED," a project by Georgia Lupi. Georgia Lupi is an information designer who uses data as a lens to better understand our human nature and every aspect of our society. I believe that I share Lupi's passion for discovering overlooked everyday details and elements that make us human.

"Data Portraits at TED" was once a project that transformed personal data to foster

spontaneous and serendipitous connections between people. For the Target space at TED 2017 in Vancouver, Lupi with her team designed and produced unique visual data portraits of the attendees: visual designs based on answers to simple, fun but evocative questions that they turned into wearable buttons.

"*During the breaks from talks, I was present in person at the Target space to rapidly turn people's answers to the questionnaire into unique hand-drawn data visualizations using my iPad. The visualizations were then immediately transferred to a print server, where our team created wearable buttons[3]*" - Giorgia Lupi

Data Portraits at TED by Giorgia Lupi

To save time and effort, an app by Accurat was created to replicate Lupi's designs, styles, and calligraphy, so, if people were in a hurry, they had the quicker alternative of filling out the questionnaire on the app to get their buttons. In both cases, each attendee walked out with a physical copy of their Data portraits and received a digital copy via email, ready to be shared online. A visual legend to interpret the data always accompanied the portraits.

I was in love with this project. It was like creating a whole new visual identity for a person that was not significantly different from one another. It was also so ironic that these were called data portraits (which were similar looking) in contrast to real human portraits (which always look different from one another).

Another project that inspired my work was 'What counts,' an interactive installation for the Museum of New York City by Pentagram. The exhibition explores and highlights the importance of the 2020 Census. The exhibit focused on the historical legacy of census taking and features contemporary artistic responses to the concepts of counting, government appropriation, an individual versus collective identity[4].

The idea was to conceptualize, design, and develop an interactive, multimedia installation
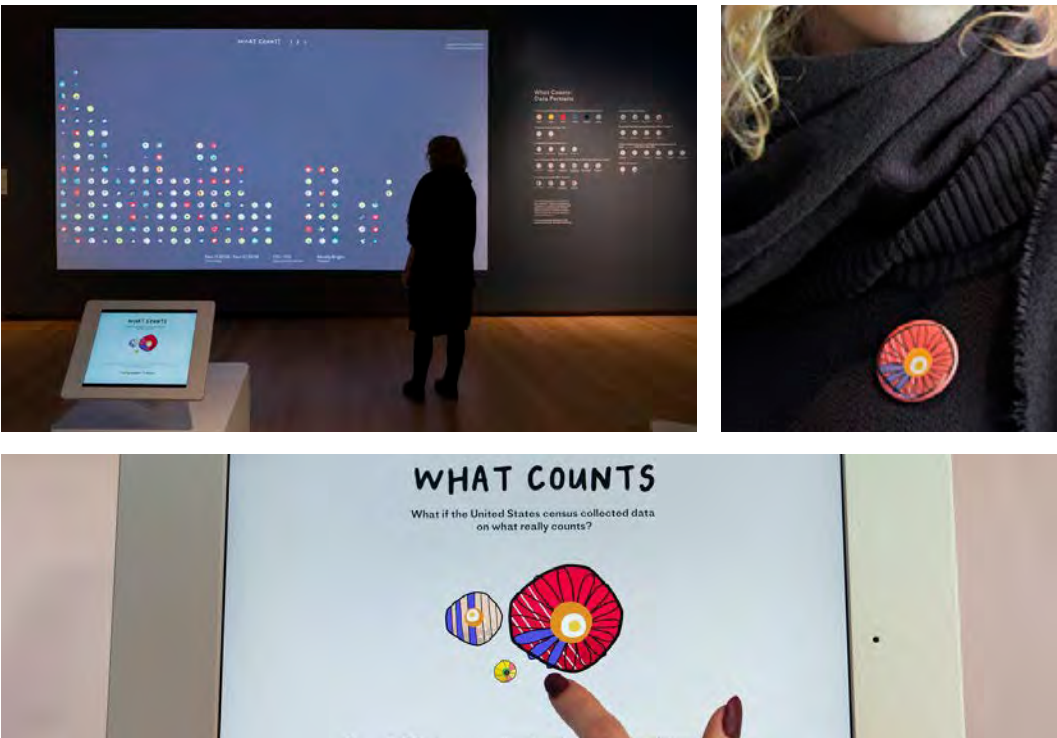
What Counts by Giorgia Lupi

for the exhibition that seeks to raise new questions. Such as how individuals have been traditionally categorized by the US census and how one can reimagine personal data, gathered and communicated in more emotional, human way.

"*Subverting the banal, utilitarian questions asked in the actual U.S. census, the survey instead poses more intimate questions, such as "How do you define home?", "Compared to your actual age, do you feel young or old?", and "Do you feel that what you currently have in life is 'enough?'"* - Giorgia Lupi

This project was most beneficial in terms of the types of questions I could ask in my projects. It was so inspirational to see Pentagram purposefully designing the data portraits as hand drawn and imperfect to deliberately contrast with the clinical bar charts and scatter plots that are usually visible in census data. This way, it shaped the formal data into a more natural and human form. Participants were given wearable buttons with their customized data portraits printed on them.

Concept

These projects inspired me to do something in data collection and visualization. My goal was to create a personalized visual identity that belonged to my subjects, but was not based on the typical data points of race, color, and gender.

Taking inspiration from 'What Counts' and other such surveys online, I thought of questions such as, "I would describe myself the best as?", "I define home as?", "I am most hopeful about?", "My workspace is?", "I believe the future is?". These questions had about two to eight options to choose from. To collect the data, I used Google Forms.

I sent out the survey to people I shared my virtual and physical spaces with, including my Facebook, Instagram followers, roommates, and classmates. It gave me a wide range of people who did not know each other at all.

What Counts by Giorgia Lupi

My next step was to think about the visualization. I wanted to make something as aesthetic as the visualizations of Giorgia Lupi's. I made a number of variations using different colors, shapes, positions, rotation indicating a different response. However, I was very displeased by the outcome; I took a step back to see where I was going wrong, and I observed that I was trying to be someone else. The most critical part missing from these visualizations was 'me.' I decided to start fresh, and then I recollected my long-lost love for mandala.


User Mandala for 'You Are Here' project

Mandala means circle in Sanskrit. It is a spiritual and ritual symbol in Hinduism and Buddhism, representing the universe. The circular design symbolizes the idea that life is never-ending and everything is connected. I first used the concept of mandala in my first semester at DMI for a project called 'You Are Here.' My idea was to create a sacred space for my users to experience a greater connection to themselves and the universe with their mandala.

These forms have always been so captivating for me. I love the essence of integrity they express. I finally knew how I wanted to designs my visualization. The correlation between the meaning of mandala and the representation of a person made a lot of sense.

Step one was to create my visual vocabulary (as suggested by Stefanie Posavec and Giorgia Lupi in the book Observe, Collect, Draw.) With the help of various drawing exercises suggested in the book, such as drawing emotions through simple shapes, drawing different rhythms in my body, drawing line and shape variations, I got into the flow of creating simple, yet captivating design elements for my visualization. The book was indeed a guide for me. Following the strategy suggested in the book, I made each Mandala ring customized, for example, for the question 'What I am most hopeful about?' all the answers were a visualization of my emotion towards those options for example 'personal finances' was anxiety, whereas 'gender equality' was anger and 'greener planet' was uncertainty.
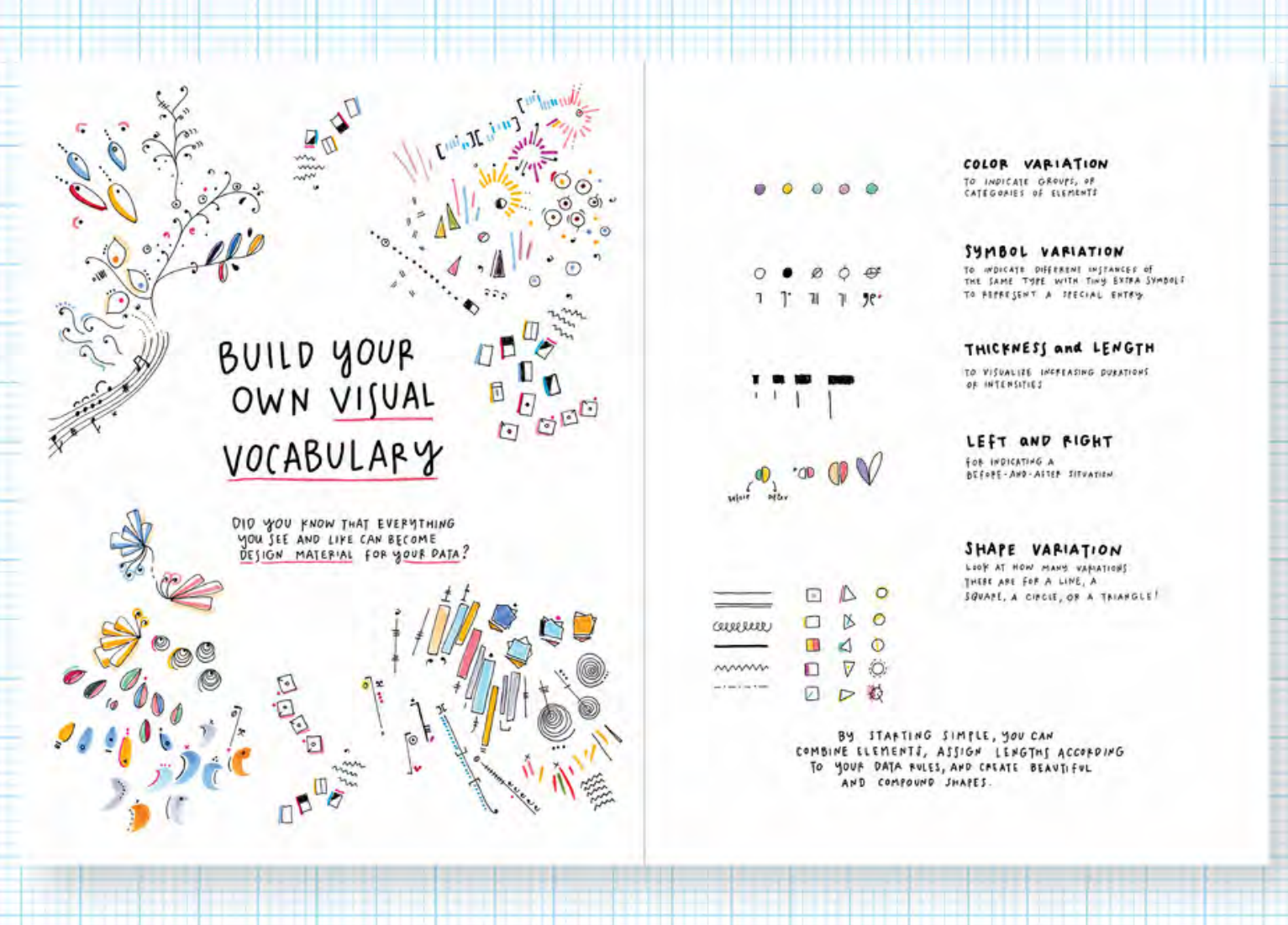
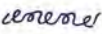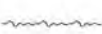*Observe, Collect, Draw! by Giorgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec*

The mandala symbolized the beauty of one's identity and how we are different yet the same in many indiscernible ways. Looking at about 15 visuals together made me feel proud of what I created. Due to the repetition of colors, and other elements in each ring, they all appeared similar yet different. The most beautiful part about looking at all these mandala together was the blend of distinction and resemblance in them. That's exactly how we humans are. Our difference and similarities are what makes us beautiful!

While discussing my project's progress with my advisor, he suggested I take this project a bit further by conducting interactions between my users. While in the TED conference, people had the choice to roam around and converse on their own, but, thanks to the pandemic, I had to make sure that happened virtually. Hence, I decided to conduct about 20-30 min Zoom (call) interactions.

1. I would describe myself the best as

A — Responsible and reliable
B — Imaginative and creative
C — Reserved and introspective
D — Ambitious and Driven
E — Compassionate and empathetic
F — Adventurous and courageous

2. I am most hopeful about

A — Personal finances
B — Gender equality
C — Greener planet and sustainability
D — Artificial intelligence
E — Artistic Expression
F — Better life for future generations

3. I define home as

A — Where I currently live
B — Where I was born
C — Where my family and friends are
D — I am still looking for one

4. I Prefer

A — Past experience
B — Being in the moment
C — Future hopes

5. My work space is

A — Minimalistic
B — Covered in photos/ momentos
C — Covered with paper and work stuff
D — Preferably couch or hammock

6. I am

A — Morning bird
B — Night Owl

7. future is

A — Bright
B — Grim

Legend explaining how to read data Mandala

User's Mandalas who took the Google Form survey

Zoom Interactions

I conducted three interactions with three different personality types, i.e., Extrovert + Extrovert, Extrovert + Introvert, Introvert + Introvert. I thought it was profoundly important to consider the personality types to observe how comfortably the interactions can occur.

The conversation between Extrovert + Extrovert, Extrovert + Introvert was free-flowing, where people bonded over things like art, the pandemic, and most importantly, their own cultures. I witnessed a budding amicable relationship between people.

The interaction between Introvert + Introvert was a bit of a challenge, on the other hand. While researching more about introverts, I realized it might help to have an ice breaker at the beginning and during the interactions. I divided my interactions with some generic ice-breaking questions, which give a sense of their personalities. For example, "How do you define yourself: adventurous or let's just stay at home please?", "What will be the last thing you would do if it were your last day on Earth?". As a part of the participants' feedback, I was maybe in a hurry during the sessions. The participant felt they did not get enough time to think about the questions. I guess I was too nervous about this particular interaction.

Looking at everyone's happy faces, my subject's feedback, and their willingness to interact more, I think the Zoom interactions were quite a success. They not only made new friends sitting in 2 different corners of the world but also embraced the fact of looking beyond the external differences. I witnessed so much positivity and lightness in the Zoom room. I realized that we all want love and happiness; it's what connects us because every human being desire this on some level. I remember feeling so proud of myself. I was glad to play a small part in making people in different corners of the world meet and unite.
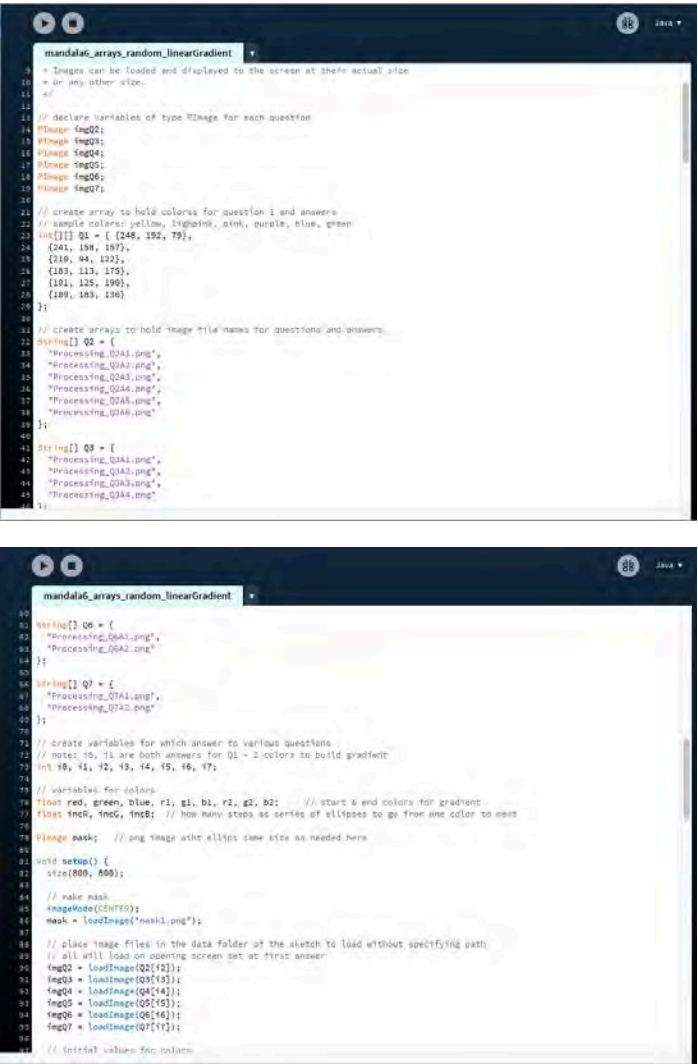
Zoom Interactions with users

"When I took part in the meeting and saw your work, I realized this is such a cool way to connect with someone in such a platonic way. Whereas with apps like Bumble and Tinder, etc., there is always a sexual undertone to it. But this is such a nice way to connect with some who you might otherwise never meet your whole life. I had such a great time discussing different perspectives and having an open conversation. It was incredible!" – A participant from the Zoom interaction.

"Mayuri, Tanisha and I met over zoom where Mayuri first introduced us to each other, then we were free to just start talking. It was such an interesting experience because essentially, I had been dropped into this unfamiliar conversation with someone who I don't know at all. But I was confident that I had certain connections with Tanisha because our Friendshipment mandala aligned. An hour went by so quickly and we actually went over time because we had so much to talk about. It was a great way to make new friends and talk to new people especially now that we don't have much chance to go out and have in person conversations any more. - Cheng Qiu

Processing Code

I received about 94 responses through the Google Form; as excited I was to create all the 94 visualizations manually; I knew it would take a lot of time to do so. I decided to write a code on Processing program that will directly read the Google sheet data. Thanks to the integration of Google Forms and Google sheets, the Form turns into tabular data in Google sheets. I then took the data on an excel sheet and inserted it in the processing code for it to read.

Processing Code

Conclusion

Lets Make Friends NOT war!

My intention was to make a difference in people's perspective that resulted in improved relations. With so much chaos in the world, Friendshipment is like a breath of fresh air we all need. Working on this project made me believe, that it's okay to have differences as it makes us, who we are. During my mid-semester review Jeff Bartell mentioned, "You are considering and celebrating what makes human, human." It's essential to embrace each other's perspectives and look beyond them. Through my interactions, I realized we all possess differences; however, in the end, we are more alike than we probably realize. We are all connected in some way or another; it's just we need to have open minds for it. The day we start doing it, we will all live in harmony.

On the Journey of Being Friends

The Zoom interactions become the biggest highlight of this project. They were not a part of the plan initially; however, they were the only way to test my visualizations and their effect on people. At the end of the interaction, I felt like I was doing something benevolent to make this world a better place. My intention was a pure one, to make two people know each other, understand each other, and relate to each other.

I observed that we humans need just a little push to learn and accept other people. Once we are in a social environment, we have an inbuilt ability to start looking for common things to talk about. That is exactly what happened in those Zoom calls. I just had to give them a little push; the rest they figured out on their own. Moreover, the visualizations played a huge role in making people see their differences and similarities side by side prompting them to talk about them very openly and embrace them simultaneously. For instance, in the interaction between two extroverts, they discussed the importance of being with family and friends and bonded over their memories associated with it. Furthermore, they shared their opinion on how they feel about the future as one said it will be bright and one says it's going to be grim.

While many social media platforms bring people together, there is always a curtain to hide the one's real identity. Whereas in my project, these mandalas translate people's

preferences and choices. This might not be possible with existing platforms. I hope to conduct more such interactions to see what can go wrong and improve this experience for my users.

Mandala: An Outcome of Continuous Exploration

My continuous urge to look for my style was the driving force. In the first semester, Professor Martha Rettig used to always emphasize the importance of continually making. The processes of constant making helped me in designing the mandala. With every iteration that I made; I was getting surprised by the outcome. As suggested by Georgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec in their book, "trust your visual vocabulary. Once you decide on the elements, trust the sequence, trust the structure".

While showing the visualization to my users, they were curious to know what each ring symbolized and how I decided on the elements. Hence, I made sure I send the visual legend to explain each element that was used in their mandala. I received great feedback from my classmates when they saw that I reintroduced mandala's concept. Speaking at our mid-term reviews, Tim Scholl said, "The personal mandala is really beautiful. It would be incredible to see how people might maintain some level of ownership of them, like if you get a little token of experience when it is over."

After working on this project, I was so excited to take up other data visualization projects. I am currently working on collecting data on "how many movies/ series I watch on Netflix, Amazon" in my personal time. My data visualizations include lines that translate the emotions I felt after watching a movie/ series. Shapes represents the number of main characters, and colors represent the genre.

Late nights with Processing

Special shout out to Fred Wolflink and Shraddhesh Bhandari, who have helped me the most in coding. Coding was not part of the original plan. Nonetheless, I am glad I did work on it, as it made the data visualization process more convenient and time-efficient. My friend Sharddhesh has helped me write the basic code and enlightened me with making the code shorter and more straightforward. I found I enjoyed coding and look forward to learning more. As a designer, I realized that coding helps temper my ideas with realistic parameters. Once I understood the infrastructure of how my mandala will form, I had an

easier time knowing how and what might work and what might not work. For example, my initial idea was to rotate each element circularly to create a ring. However, my friend suggested that it would be easier to make high-resolution PNG images with each ring variation, which can then be placed on top of the colorful circle. This way we saved a lot of time.

Special Notes

Friendshipments is a pure example of what I ask in my thesis – Let's be *Dost*? It was, in fact, the title of my Zoom interaction that I conducted with the participants. Friendship doesn't see color, race, gender, or any features that set us apart. Friendship is the purest bond that two or more people share. This project stimulates that bond. It removes all the factors that make us different and surfaces what is alike. This project reminds me of how innocently we used to tie friendship bands to friends on Friendships day. I believe we need more of that. We should learn from that childhood experience and have an innocent, unbiased perspective towards people. This will make our world a better place, and we will end up with more *Dost*!

Conclusion

"The conclusion is the introduction to what's coming next." - Fish McGill

A 'roller coaster ride' would be an understatement to describe the last two years. More like being on a roller coaster without even knowing that you are on one, unprepared for the ups and downs. However, there are so many things I am grateful for that happened during my time at DMI. The most significant one is learning about myself and my interests. My time at DMI allowed me to peek into myself to see who I am and the reason for my existence. I am not saying I completely understood myself, but I have begun my journey of awareness and exploring myself and my work interests.

Back in India, I never got any opportunity that compelled me to align my work with what I truly believe in. Things work very differently in India. I have always found myself to be trapped in the pre-defined system of work. I still remember telling my friends back in India (who are also designers) that one needs to explore the education systems outside our country. It's undoubtedly more exploratory and empirical.

At DMI, I not only found subjects that captivated my interest, but I also got an opportunity to work on those subjects. The rigorous writing, mapping, and diagraming exercises helped me discover my subconscious interests that influence my daily life and actions. Without these findings, this thesis wouldn't have come to fruition.

It makes me so grateful because I covered an entire journey of encounters with different situations, failures, realization, and transformation. This thesis is a collection of projects extracted from my own experience of alienation and loneliness. It also helped me understand people around me better and be empathetic towards them.

Realization

My thesis work made me realize how important one's memories and sharing of those memories are for an individual to survive, especially in a new environment. The sketch below shows my realization of how reminiscing, and sharing those feelings and stories associated with that reminiscing, builds a relationship between people. When we share these stories, the bonds we make are the ultimate sources of happiness for a human being. All my case studies suggest different ways through which I made people connect. Some

became physically (or virtually) connected, whereas some got acquainted with each other without meeting. For example, in Humans of MassArt, through the web-based mobile application, community members can leave behind their presence for future members. This way, even though they don't meet physically, people will still know each other. In the Friendshipments project, I made sure people meet each other face-to-face through Zoom interactions.
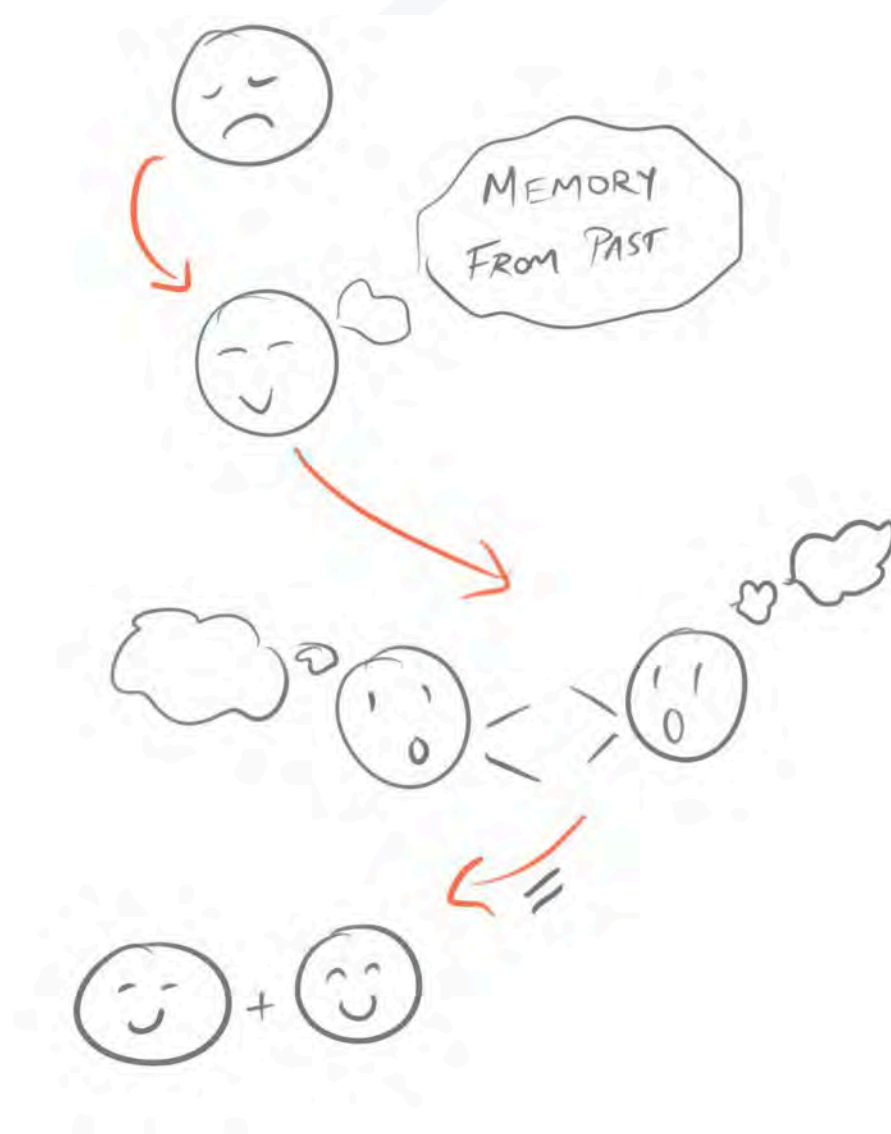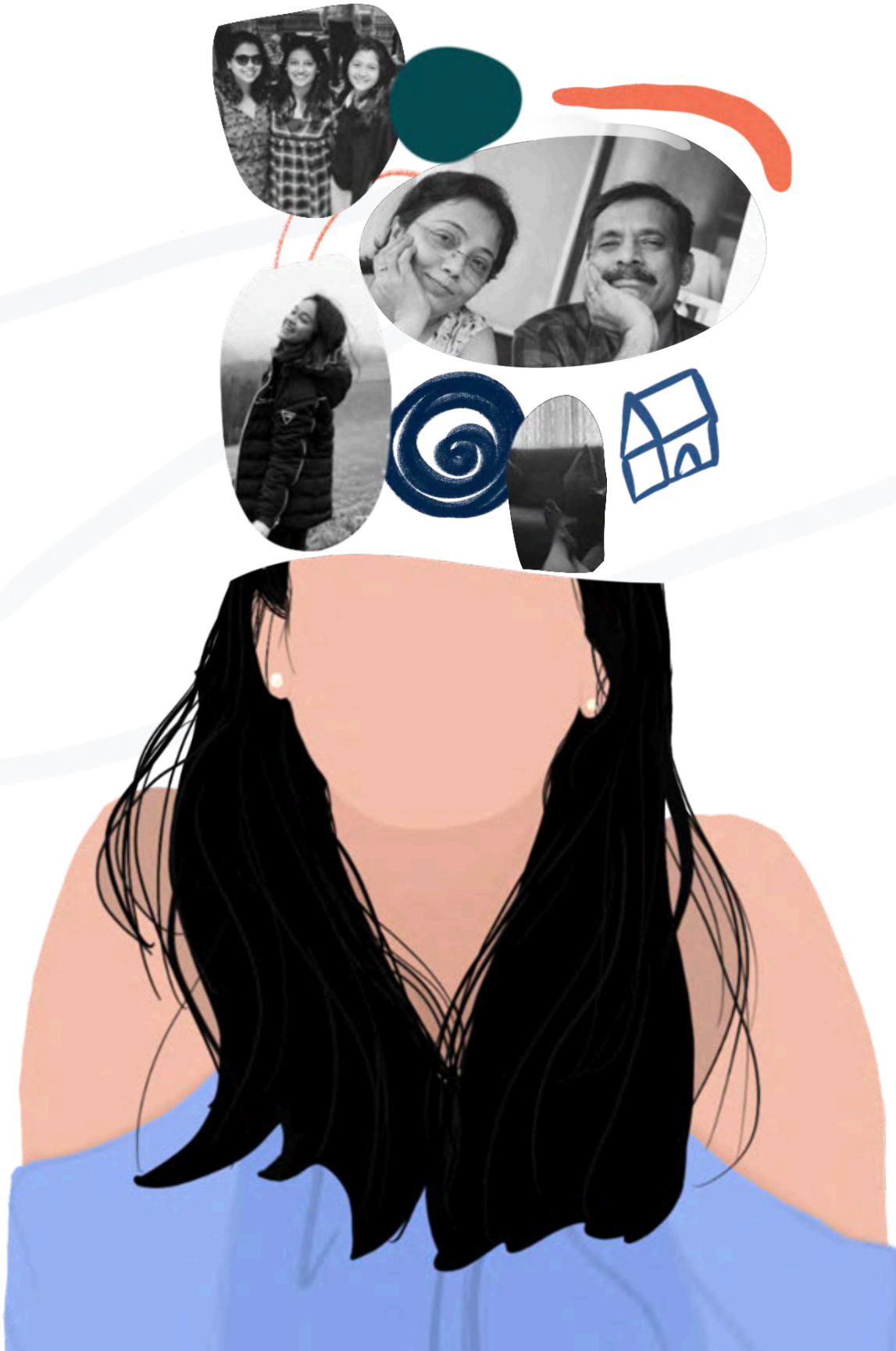

Illustration showing how reminiscing make one happy and results in bonding between people

This realization helped me in my work and helped me personally to come out of my loneliness and self-created isolation. I looked at my projects as a way of therapy that I could provide to people who had similar experiences.

Many people did share similar feedback with me. They shared that my projects offered clear experiences with deep pensive takeaways. Such as, making people meet depending on their choices and preferences, looking beyond original identity (Case study – Friendshipments). Similarly, with the Raise Your Fist project, I provided a platform for people to express their emotions and feel better through sharing.

Transformation in Me and My Work

After coming to the US, a lot changed. Well, almost everything changed. That includes my relations, people around me, time zones, place, and myself. While writing this conclusion, I feel a bit of ache in my heart; however, it also fills me with pride. I have become a more confident, self-aware, and self-sufficient individual. Moreover, as Joe Quackenbush used to say in our meetings, I have become an expert on a subject matter.

I have understood what contributes to a person feeling alienated and how social connections can help them come out of it. I have become more empathetic and open to various perspectives of people. This not only helped me in my personal life but also as a mentor. During these two years, I have also mentored students as a graduate assistant. My research helped me look at students from an unbiased viewpoint. At various times I had an opportunity to practice what my research stated. When I shared my own experiences with students, it helped them open up regarding their feelings and ultimately made them feel better. I could see how talking to people makes so much difference.

On the other hand, I feel so content exploring the world of dynamic media. You know that feeling when you find something you did not realize you wanted. It's something like that. I knew I wanted something like that, but not exactly what. After coming to DMI, I completely understood- this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. The experimental projects challenged me to think about dynamic media in vivid ways and translate non-visual experiences into visual forms.

All my case studies do the same. In all of them, I turned people's past and present experiences, real lives, identities, and thoughts into visual forms through applications

(Humans of MassArt), data visualizations (Friendshipments), and interrelated media artwork (Rise your fist).

I intended to make people learn and understand in the most potent form. In the paper Mapping the Experience of Dynamic Media, Jan Kubasiewicz states, *"Images are one means of representing information — different obviously from a numerical and verbal description. Yet logic, not imagery, communicates the true intention. Application of logic tied strategically to visual form — in other words, visual logic — creates a unique way of interacting with information for both designers and users. By viewing, reading, and scanning visual patterns — static or dynamic — and by selecting subjective paths through the content of maps and diagrams, users learn in their own unique way."*

Moreover, the visualization of any content or information supports abstract thinking and better understands the context. According to Jan, "*Understanding combines the rational and the emotional: the knowledge frozen in words and numbers, and the knowledge vested in sensory experiences. The best examples of visualization are always charged with imagination — and often with poetry. Visualization extends to discovery. These images can teach us something, as their forms seem inseparable from the information they convey and the knowledge they create or reveal.*[1]"

For instance, with the project Raise Your Fist, people's artwork were influenced by their emotions and experiences. In the initial versions, we only allowed users to state their feeling and experiences verbally. However, as soon as we incorporated a visual medium into it. Viewers were able to understand the emotions much better, which triggered various emotions into them!

Top Three Lessons

·   **Things Never Go According to Plan:**

The MOST important and very first thing I learned is things don't go as planned.

I had planned to have a big social group when I come to the US. And exactly the opposite happened.

I thought I would have a happy relationship despite a very long long-distance. Guess what,

I had a terrible break-up.

I am going to travel so much with my friends once I become a student again. Then, COVID happened, forcing us to stay away from each other.

I had planned to stay late in the grad studio to work, but I had to switch to work from home.

The list can go on and on for all of us: relationship, life milestones, work, career, place to live. I realized things almost never go according to the plan. David Kadavy (author of Mind Management, Not Time Management, The Heart to Start & Design for Hackers) states in his article Things Don't Go as Planned. That is the Plan "When things don't go as planned instead of fighting it, make that part of the plan."

The one fantastic thing that I noticed when we don't fight the unplanned situations, we get a new set of information. And we can use that new information to make new plans. That new information can be precious. It can lead to a better plan than the original plan.

I did not have a big social group, but I found out the reason for it and created a thesis work that helped people like me.

I had a break-up, but it made me stronger and gave me a chance to learn so much about myself.

I did not travel much, but COVID helped me think about my work and creating social connections more critically than ever.

I couldn't go on campus – well, I am still sad about it. But the silver lining is I did not have to step outside in the Boston snow!

I am not saying we should not have a plan. But sticking to a plan at all costs can lead to frustrations and disappointment because too many unexpected things can happen. There are many factors beyond our control. And I also know that things take longer when they don't go according to our plan, but the solution is to remember that there is a high possibility that they won't. One should always be open to "okay, now what can I do...?". That's what I did. During my first version of *Raise Your Fist*, I couldn't hang

posters around the campus. I thought of alternative ways to make this tool available. I am confident that the final version is 100 times better than the original idea.

· **Collaboration and Keep Making is the Key:**

From the very first day at DMI, Martha Rettig and Fish McGill always emphasized making. I initially did not take this approach too seriously, but trust me, I realized the importance of 'keep making' very soon. While working on various projects, I found myself getting stuck so often, and the only way I could resolve the creative block was through making. Now when I say making, I don't mean just drawing. I suggest using any kinds of mediums that interest you. It can be digital software, coding, social media apps like Instagram, Twitter, paper mockups, origami, etc. For example, while working on the Raise your Fist project, I started making these mini reels using Instagram stories on the concept raise your fist. I was aimlessly exploring the platform to get surprised. I just had faith that something will strike. And that's exactly what happened. Going back to my first lesson, sometimes it's okay not to have a plan, but just go for it. Sometimes, all our creative minds need is to wander freely for it to come up with new ideas.

· **Look With-in and Outside, Observe to Get Inspired:**

"Always keep your eyes open. Keep Watching. Because whatever you see can inspire you." – Grace Coddington

Almost all of my projects at DMI have been inspired by what was happening around me. Things that were making me happy and bothering me made me feel I needed to do something about them. For instance, for *Humans of MassArt*, the inspiration I needed came to me while sitting in the Grad office, listening to two people talking about their experience at MassArt as students. Whereas, for *Friendshipments*, I remember being so disturbed because of the racial discrimination protests taking place at that time.

Steven Gilliland (writer) states in his blog *Inspiration is all around you!* "Inspiration is all around us; we just have to look harder. But where do we get inspiration from? Is it in glorious epiphanies and after life-changing events? Or is it in the little, everyday things that we tend to gloss over and ignore? It's both. But inspiration from the little everyday things is easier to come by – one has to look for it a little harder."

My research work made me believe that designers need to be keen observers. Observation is a fundamental way of understanding the world. When we look at something around, we should focus, analyze reasoning and memorize. This helps us comprehend what we feel about it, and as a result, we act upon it. This process helped me a lot while I worked on my projects. This way, I was able to justify my actions and work better.

I am a Dynamic Media Designer

At first, I had a very vague idea about the dominance of dynamic media in an individual's life. We are constantly surrounded by the different changing media all the time. But looking into it and making constructive use of it as a designer was my major take away from this 2-year long journey.

I am a visual thinker, and I always aimed to make visual experiences for people. Before DMI, they were only on screen where users interacted with them. At DMI, I got the opportunity to let the user physically interact with the visual stimulus. For instance, in the You Are Here project, I created a physical experience for the users of connecting to themselves. Users could feel and see the process happening around them.

Throughout my journey, I realized there are three fundamental questions that dynamic media designers should ask themselves while creating an interaction (these interactions can be a human to computer, human to artifacts, and human to human). Bill Verplank asked these questions in his diagram of "Designing Interactions." The first is 'How do you do?'. It's a question that focuses on the action the interface offers to the user. For example, in my *Humans of MassArt* Project, the action is to record and listen to the location-based stories, or in Raise Your Fist, the action for people is to make artwork to support a social cause. The second question is 'How do they feel?'. This one relates to the feedback the interface gives to the user. For instance, the *Raise Your Fist* and *Humans of MassArt* projects were meant to make people feel less alone, safer, and more connected. And the third question is 'How do you know?' a question about learning and understanding the interface. A successful interaction results in seamless understanding for the user. One should understand what and how it needs to be done while interacting. For example, in the *Humans of MassArt* project, I carefully thought about how the user will use it. To access the audio recording of people, one needs to be in that specific location and access it through a QR code. Whereas, in the *Raise your Fist*, a user was given a clear direction

of how they can show their support to a cause by either making their artwork remixing someone else's piece.

My Future Plan

During my last few weeks at DMI, I had an incredible interview session with my advisor Fish McGill where he asked me a number of questions that helped me think about a day in my future. The interview exercise was based on the 'Declaration of a Remarkable Life' created by Milton Glaser and Debbie Millman. It was so ironic because I remember having a similar discussion with him in the first semester. To my surprise, some of my aims did not change at all. I loved this exercise as it gave me complete freedom to think and wish. The only rule was envisioning a life that one would have if they perused everything they wanted, knowing they would succeed. I was asked to dream and think big, ten years from this day. Following is an excerpt of the interview that points out some of my plans regarding future work.

FM: We are going to talk about the spring of 2031. How do you envision your career to be? Do you see yourself working in a small team, large team? What kind of people are you working with?

Me: I would want to work in a design house that is technology-oriented. Maybe a big company with other departments, but the innovation and design team should hold a lot of importance. I also would like to work with interns and fresh graduates because they are a great source of inspiration. I believe the new talent and enthusiasm (because they are happy and motivated to contribute) make a company keep up with the market. It also helps an organization to look at things from a fresh perspective. I would like to empathize with new people in the industry as I would know that it's a struggle to get an opportunity. Hence, I would want to help or give back to society by assisting students in working and gaining experience. If my organization could afford it, I would have every semester mandatory (PAID) internship programs.

FM: Who are these people that you work with? What are they like? Men, women? What do you see in that regard?

Me: A perfect mix of everyone. I want to quote Gina Bellman again from my thesis statement- *"I love those connections that make this big old world feels like a little village."*

I would love to have that kind of environment in my workplace. People from different cultures, origins will be together in a post-COVID world, working under one roof. That's how I envision my future team.

FM: So, what are you making? What are you working on at work? Who knows what we will be doing in 10 years; like ten years ago, we were beginning to develop extensive networks for people to share things? People were deciding if they should make websites or some other kind of platform to connect people. And we have come so far. What are your thoughts on which kind of industry or fields you want to contribute to? Or what kinds of projects you see yourself working on?

Me: I still remember talking about this to you while walking on campus back in fall 2019. And I will stick to the same thought that I want to work in the entertainment industry. Because I know that's where I belong. I know for a fact that I'll work on my full potential in that industry. I am not sure what exact role I would be playing, but it will have something to do with movies, television, production, and visual effects. Oh! Netflix is my dream place at this point in time. When I met Dave Schlafman (Director of Design, interactive experience at Netflix, and alumni of MassArt), he spoke about television development. My instant thought was, oh my god; THIS is what I want to do! It was a perfect mix of design, narrative, filmmaking, and production. It has its complexities, it's thrilling, there is so much design thinking attached to it, and the most important- the end product is an entertainment piece! What else do I need? I am open to anything; I am excited to see where this vision and interest take me. But yes, my ultimate goal will resemble something like this.

FM: This is amazing. I can see this industry gets you very charged creatively. What is it about this kind of work that excites you as far as being a designer, to be part of that world?

Me: Okay, this might sound very dramatic, but I feel in my past life I was either an actor, a director, or maybe a spot boy/girl who spent a lot of time on the shooting floors or film studios. I remember my first visit to a film studio which was Prabhat studio (the first film studio in India). Many iconic movies have been shot there, which makes it a prestigious studio in India. The first time I walked into that studio, I could imagine the movie scenes of those iconic movies being filmed at different corners for that studio. That place had so many narratives and memories and incidents attached to it. Those people, narratives, incidents that took place there make it the place so special. I cannot describe that feeling

in words. I just felt like I was home. It's where I was born. And I had never felt that way before. It was a whole new feeling altogether. So, this feeling motivates me. I want to feel this emotion more often in my life. There is a high possibility that I would be getting the feeling of contentment in such a field of work.

Finally, to summarize, I feel this thesis has been a journey of self-discovery more than anything. The challenges I faced, the work I did, the people I met, the students I mentored, the classmates I worked with helped me find the path I can take to be a successful designer who truly believes in something. I would like to end this book with something Jan Kubasiewicz told us in the very first class.

"The creative process is a journey for discovery. And the quality of that discovery, will be a criterium of how people will be responding to your artifacts. Moreover, it will be a criterium of how you will judge your own work yourself. The journey for discovery is usually challenging, often very difficult, but keep going."

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Let's Be Dost : A journey of transforming this big old world into a little village.

This book is set in Adobe Indesign with typeset in: HelloFont ID TongZhiTi (Adobe font) for headings and Noto Serif TC for body text.
The cover of this book was designed using Procreate with type set in Noto Serif TC for sub heading and Lato along with personalized font (created by the author) for heading.

Cover Page Story: The image used was clicked by the author in a small town called Warangal (a city in Telangana state, India). She, along with her classmates, visited the city to learn the famous local leathercraft. This image symbolizes the meeting of different people at the intersection, which we call "life."