

THE HALAL GIRLS



a support network to ease the
transition for Saudi women returning
home after studying abroad

CONTEXT

—→ My thesis journey began with an interest in transition and transformation. Triggered by my personal transformative year in New York City - I wondered about other people's ways of dealing with change.

I was interested in the experiences of other young Saudi women who come to the US to study. What does their return home look like? How do they balance their evolved principles and values with their identity when they go back to a family and society that hasn't evolved the way they have?

The King Abdullah Scholarship Program began in 2004 for two main reasons. It was a way to strengthen diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and the US through building bonds between their citizens. More importantly, it was a way to academically support Saudi students in order for them to return home and apply their skills and knowledge to a rapidly developing economy.

In 2014, 111,000 Saudi students were studying in the US under the scholarship program, of those, over 40% were women. More women in Saudi Arabia hold academic degrees than their male counterparts and they are gradually entering the workforce. Yet, women still face gender discrimination that is often detrimental to their spirit. This can be especially challenging for women who have studied and have had more equal access to opportunities and more equal treatment as males.

PROCESS

—→ Although I am my own end user - a Saudi student studying in NYC - I was shying away from involving myself in the process. There were two reasons for this disassociation, first was a fear of making thesis too much about myself and creating a heavily biased system as a result. Secondly, similar to many other women - I was in denial that I would actually have to go back to Saudi after graduating.

One of the main reasons Saudi women move back home after graduating comes from fulfilling a societal expectation, but more pressingly, from a parental expectation to return home. It's expected for a young Saudi woman to come back and live with her family; applying her knowledge and experience to the Saudi workforce. But many women (myself included) try to fight the return home by finding jobs abroad as an escape from a conservative society. This escapism is detrimental to the socio-economic future of Saudi Arabia; a country with a youth population of over 50%.

During the first week of March, I went back home to Saudi Arabia for a research trip; it was transformational for me and my relationship to my father. I chose to reframe my approach to being home for this short trip; driven by a combination of grappling with the potential reality of going back home for good, and also genuinely wanting to seek out the gems of Saudi Arabia - I went home with a fresh perspective. I wanted to hear about the

“You don't want to live there [in the US] imprisoned by your fears and assumptions of going back, where's the liberty in that?”

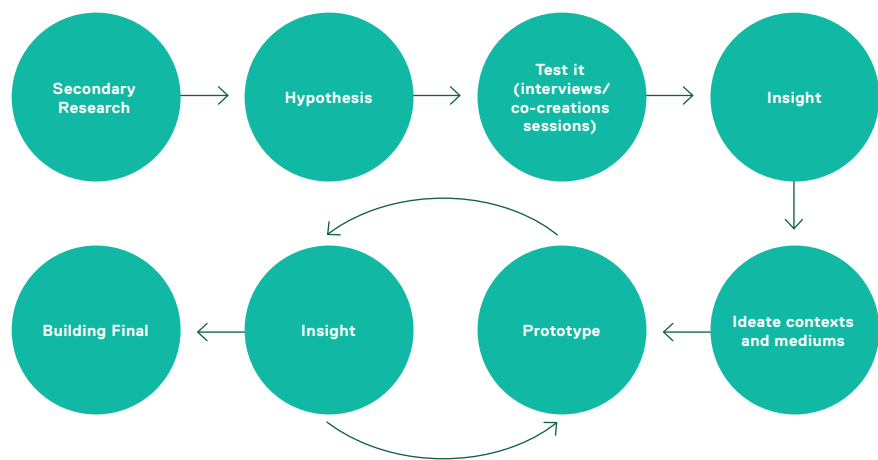
- Rozana Al Banawi, Saudi leadership coach

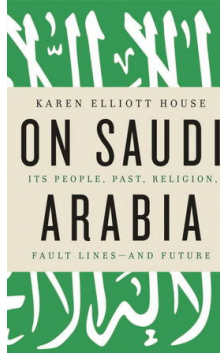
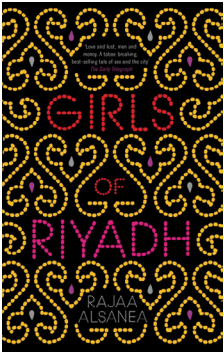
experiences of Saudi women who had transitioned back home after studying abroad; their daily lives, their challenges - on micro and macro levels, and how they make the best out of it.

How might we ensure that what was learned - academically, socially, professionally, culturally - during their time abroad, is sustained, cultivated and balanced with Saudi values once they are back home?

My process is messy and non-linear: structured meandering towards an ultimate goal. The overlap of research and prototyping was very apparent throughout my process. My intention was to create a support community of Saudi women studying in NYC to ease their transition once returning home to Saudi Arabia. Whenever I brought women together for research, it was also an iteration of my final system.

I was introduced to the design process when I began this program, but there are parallels between my undergraduate thesis process; defining my scope, literature review, primary research, analysis and writing the report. But the advantage with this program is the **act of making** and bringing people together. Facilitating and monitoring interactions based on prompts that I designed, has been one of the most rewarding learning experience.





Structured Meandering

- **Reading non-fiction books on the Saudi society**
On Saudi Arabia - Karen Elliot House
Girls of Riyadh - Rajaa Alsanee
- Articles and journals
- **Blogs on Saudi women's experiences living in the US** to understand how they dealt with transition in general
- **Interview with Tony Wang at the International Student Office at SVA** to find out what support systems exist
- **Interview with the Social & Cultural Advisor at the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission** to understand what services are offered for sponsored students after graduating. No alumni network exists to track their progress after graduating
- **8 Interviews with women in NYC and Saudi**
- **4 co-creation sessions** with 3-5 women in each session.

ACTIVITIES + INSIGHTS

September - October 2014

Interviews with women in NYC + Saudi Arabia

Shortly after some desk research I went out and did a lot of talking. I reached out to women who were studying in NYC and preparing to eventually move back home, and to women who had already moved back.

Women in NYC

I wanted to understand:

- what challenges they faced when they first moved to NY
- what transformations they had gone through
- how their parents and friends back home responded to the transformations
- what elements of NY would they take back with them?

“I would take the rawness; the ability to be yourself and yet fit in... In Saudi there's the risk of conforming, to be one of the many and just not stand out; and I think after living here, I'm definitely taking that with me. I'm gonna be one of those people who are gonna stand out, and people will have to accept it. I'm different. I'm not gonna wanna succumb to all the social pressures. It's not easy, but there's a lot of people that are doing it; they're doing what they want, they're standing for their values, even if it doesn't match everyone else's.

- Nourah Al Ammary, SVA Alumni | Moved back in December 2014

Positive deviance: an approach to behavioral and social change based on the observation that in any community, there are people whose uncommon but successful behaviors or strategies enable them to find better solutions to a problem than their peers, despite facing similar challenges and having no extra resources or knowledge than their peers.

I saw Nourah as a positive deviant; her perspective on taking what she learnt from living in New York lead me to my next insight:

**How might we evoke
essences of experiences
that New York City
offers, in order to help
Saudi women transition
between cultures?**

Creating a sense of community and ownership for women in Saudi would offer a more seamless transition back to Saudi.

November 2014

Co-creation session with 5 Saudi women in their mid-20s to mid-30s, living in NYC and intending to eventually move back home to Saudi Arabia.

I invited these women to a co-creation session and asked them two simple questions:

- what are your favorite experiences of living in NY?
- what are the essences of these experiences? i.e. associated emotions

Saudi women studying in NYC appreciate seemingly mundane activities such as opening a bank account or riding the subway, talking to strangers and attending lectures.

The essences of these experiences were underpinned by feelings of independence, belonging, being challenged and having a sense of agency over their day-to-day lives.

After synthesizing, bucketing and analyzing the experiences and associated emotions I realized that the mundane is monumental.

Insight: creating a sense of community and ownership for women in Saudi would offer a more seamless transition back home.

New York is a walking city, connected by public transportation - which evokes a sense of ownership to its people. Contrastingly, Saudi cities sprawl across the desert, connected by highways, filled with cars that women cannot drive. This ultimately creates a sense of dependency and alienation, as opposed to ownership and community. What would it look like to evoke a sense of ownership and community for women in Saudi? It would include a network of women, connected - online and offline - making decisions, supporting each other through their transitions.



5 Saudi women at the co-creation session posting their favorite experiences.

Favorite Experiences	Buckets	
Opening a bank account	Agency, independence, convenience, personal growth	
Registering a company		
Learning woodmaking		
Seamless		
Fresh Direct		
Taking the train somewhere	Movement	
Subway surfing		
Walking		
Crossing bridges		
Biking/Citi Bike		
Meeting new people	Freedom of interactions with people + the city	
People watching		
Dog watching		
Talking to strangers		
Rooftop hangs + BBQs		
The Highline	Public spaces + access	
Farmer's markets		
Flea markets, street fairs, food fairs		
Street art		
Parks		
Picnics		
Museums + galleries	Art, culture + entertainment	
Lectures + talks		
Indie foreign films		
Theatre		
Movies		
Bookshops		
Broadway shows		
Dancing at Output		
Pop-up shops		
Coffee shops		
Karaoke bars		
My Chelsea		Ownership of City
Tour bus w/ visitors		

Associated Emotions	Buckets
Joy	Elements of Surprise
Excitement	
Inspired	
Spontaneity	
Celebrating the City	
Relaxed from nature	
Catharsis/release	Personal Growth
Challenged	
In control	
Agency	
Accepted	
Empowered	
Freedom	
Alive	
Personal growth	
Independent	
Quenched	
Learning	Belonging
Free	
Belonging	
Part of something bigger	
Accepted	
Quenched	
Community	
Blending in	
Just being	

Co-creation session findings: favorite experiences and evoked emotions.

“If I had people with a similar experience; people who just moved back, dealing with the culture shock, the social pressures – and I come to this place and we talk; that might make a difference.”

- Nayla Attar, SVA Alumni | Moving back to Saudi in May 2015

My openness and honesty as a facilitator and participant triggered similar responses amongst other women.

As I began to build and design elements of this community - I explored ways in which women in Saudi could be connected to women in the US. I also wanted to define what content would be used to shape conversations amongst women. I imagined a digital platform that would bring these women together to post articles, discuss topics, share tips and organize events.

December 2014

The Prayer Times

A digital platform with 5-daily notifications insync with the prayer calls, that connects a group of like-minds with information related to Saudi Arabia & NYC.

Considering my limited capacity to build such a robust digital platform, I explored a newsletter option - but apparently “E-mail is already passé.” (The Economist, 2014). Additionally, it would mean being overburdened with too many notifications and it would lose the interactive element of the platform - it remains one-sided where information is curated and provided by me only. When I pitched this idea to one of the women who had moved back to Saudi and was really struggling with her move back she said; “I check Facebook and I get mad FOMO [fear of missing out] – especially on weekends; it kills me. I used to be a lot worse after moving; no it always kills me. Honestly, that would not make me feel better.”

I needed to find an already existing communication platform that would allow for more interactive elements between women within the social network.

January - February 2015

The Halal Girls WhatsApp Group

I prototyped with 6 Saudi women in NYC who didn't all know each other.

Objective: to build trust and kinship amongst these women over shared experiences using an existing communication tool.

Process: sent one daily trigger for a week: combination of passive (quotes, articles, videos) and interactive (questions, sharing images) “What's the biggest transformation you've gone through since living in NYC?”

Insight: My level of openness and honesty as a facilitator and participant triggered similar responses amongst other women.

Proudest moment: when one of the women initiated plan to attend The Armory Show together - which had a Middle East North Africa Mediterranean focus this year.

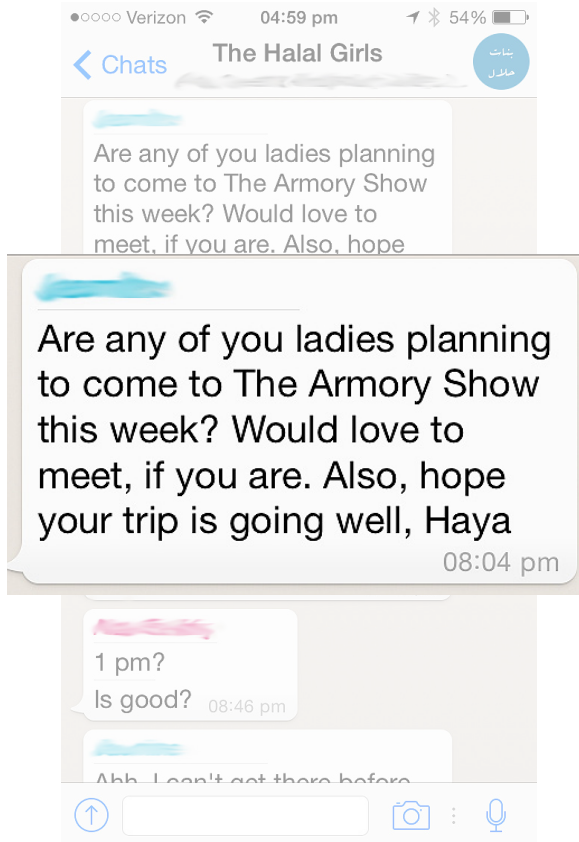
February 2015

WhatsApp Feedback Session

On the coldest day of the year I invited these women to hear their impressions of the WhatsApp group - unfortunately, only three women were able to make it. Nonetheless, the insights were instrumental in further shaping my thesis.

Objective: to uncover their thoughts on the WhatsApp prototype; what they liked, what they didn't like, what motivated them to respond, when would it be the best time of day to send them something, what more they would want.

Because of the diversity of people's daily routines, there isn't one convenient time to receive and interact. Timing and personality types were factors in people's involvement in the conversation. This



One of The Halal Girls initiating a meet-up with other girls to attend an art exhibition.



3 of the 6 women from The Halal Girls WhatsApp group sharing feedback on the experience.

“You don’t want to live there [in the US] imprisoned by your fears and assumptions of going back; where’s the liberty in that?”
- Rozana Al Banawi,
Saudi leadership coach

can increasingly get complicated once women from Saudi Arabia would join. A social network with customized notification settings would work most efficiently and effectively for all members. It is definitely something that they would find useful, as one woman noted; “Seeing people talk made me want to talk; the more personal they got, the easier it was to build trust.”

I also found out that Saudi women studying in NYC have a fear towards returning home. Bringing them together to discuss moving back triggers conversations about their frustrations towards the restricting nature of the Saudi society and traditions. They need a space to voice their frustrations; a more subtle version of misery loves company.

Insight: women who are living abroad and are fearful of their return need to be connected with women in Saudi to offer them tips on how to best navigate the environment.

This could be manifested in a mentorship model that would be beneficial to both mentor and mentee; sharing experiences and learning from one another. Additionally, a mentorship model could also be applied for women who are moving to study abroad, they could be connected to other Halal Girls on tips to navigate their new environment. This creates a holistic and cyclical system that addresses Saudi women’s transitions on both ends.

Now that I knew the value of The Halal Girls for Saudi women studying abroad, I needed to find out what would benefit women who had already transitioned back to Saudi. I also wanted to understand what challenges they faced with moving back, and how they dealt

with such changes. I chose to do these exercises in a group setting for two reasons:

- there is power in building upon each other’s ideas which strengthens the value in each session’s outcome
- my research methods should be aligned with my mission; bringing women together to build trust and support one another.

March 2015

Co-creation session in Jeddah

With 4 women who moved back at various times; from 4 years ago to 2 weeks prior.

Objective: to gather coping mechanisms to common challenges they face when they moved back to Saudi.

Activities: When facilitating a workshop it is important to be aware of the energy each activity evokes. With that in mind, I planned out the best way to manage energy levels and ensure that we left on a positive note. While also ensuring that I get the most out of my time with these women.

I began with an **ice-breaker of what you miss most about the US and what you love about being in Saudi**, which naturally led to a conversation of what they appreciate and what they struggled with. I listened, took notes on post-its, directed the conversation and linked their points to pre-prepared problems that I had heard about in my interviews and printed on postcards.

I then asked them to note down **what would you keep, lose or add to Jeddah** on post-its; one thing per post-it. It was a combination of an individual and collective activity where they wrote their thoughts on post-its and shared them on three posters. The “add” poster gave a sense of what would enhance

Jeddah. This poster also sparked conversations about what already exists - mostly only known through the grapevine. This allowed time to share what events they regularly go to and what similar things already exist; in one case it allowed for an exchange between two women to plan to attend conversational French classes at the Saudi-Francophone Society.

For my next activity, I asked:

what would you write in your journal ten years from now?

They wrote stories that valued convenience, independence, ease, freedom, limitless options of things to do, public and shared knowledge and spaces.

Objective: to allow women to imagine their future selves in the context of the future of Saudi Arabia. These stories allowed me to extrapolate what these women value and crave to have in Saudi.

My final activity was for them to fill out cards on what they **wish they knew before moving back, what did they know, and what advice would they give to someone moving back?**

This translated their experiences and challenges into advice for women who are planning on moving back.

Insight: being a gender-segregated and conservative society, Saudi women crave a space - virtual or physical - for artistic, performative and intellectual self-expression. These settings would occur in private; only found through the grapevine to ensure that it remains a trusted network.

I hosted this session at a young female Saudi entrepreneur's office; a testament of the potential and influence Saudi women have.



What I wish I'd known:

how easy it is to get on a plane and jump somewhere for a weekend.

What I knew:

"how hard it would be to "re-depend" on drivers and not being able to just "walk out":

What I would share:

Keep an open mind - try to stay positive.

What I wish I'd known:

how backwards we are in some things

What I knew:

That my family would support me no matter what and they did

What I would share:

Keep an open mind, it is tough but you really do meet great people + my main advice is network

What I wish I'd known:

That talking to my parents is not so hard.

What I knew:

That there wouldn't be privacy.

What I would share:

That it's not so bad if you're there for family.

What I wish I'd known:

What I knew:

There are a lot of restrictions

What I would share:

Try to take short trips on weekends

What I wish I'd known:

How much I'm going to miss the little things about living abroad.

What I knew:

It's ~~not~~ not easy moving back in with your parents.

What I would share:

Stay motivated, stay positive, Find a job/hobby/routine that would make you want to jump out of bed in the morning.

What I wish I'd known:

* That I should have kept myself busy from the start w work/sym.

What I knew:

* won't be Easy!!
* That it can be depressing for a long time

What I would share:

* Have an Open mind
* Look at the bright side
* Get busy & start working

Wish cards from 6 women in the sessions in Jeddah & Riyadh.

“Thank you so much for this, the activities were so much fun and reflective - you really made me reconsider my approach to being back home. I’m excited to branch out and explore what Jeddah has to offer.”

- Saudi woman at co-creation session in Jeddah.
Moved back from San Fransisco in September 2014

The most difficult point in a woman's transition home usually occurs when they return home after their first trip away. How might we flip this low point by allowing them to reframe their relationship to their city?

March 2015

Co-creation session in Riyadh

With 5 women who had moved back at various times

I had a similar plan as the Jeddah session, but they had wholly different vibes. Jeddah, being a coastal city - its people and law enforcement are much more relaxed, open-minded and hospitable. Riyadh - the capital - is more conservative, boxed off, more private and insular. I didn't realize the extent of the impact on people's approach and thinking.

Overall, there was a sense of restrained thoughts; an air of frustration and desire to let out their anger. Similar to my experience - I offered women the space to let out those frustrations. This had a negative impact on my own experience of facilitating the sessions - I felt like I was wasting their time and there was much negative energy being created in the room. While I tried to bring them back on track, I found it difficult to hold the space as effectively. Additionally, some of the women arrived over an hour late due to driver difficulties - although it's common in Saudi - I felt bad for wasting the rest of the women's times. Nothing a little thank you card and Mast Brothers Chocolate can't fix.

Objective: to understand 5 women's emotional journeys through milestone events from when they decided to move back to Saudi until today.

I asked them to map out their emotional journey from when they decide to move back to Saudi until the present. These maps included milestones and associated emotions.

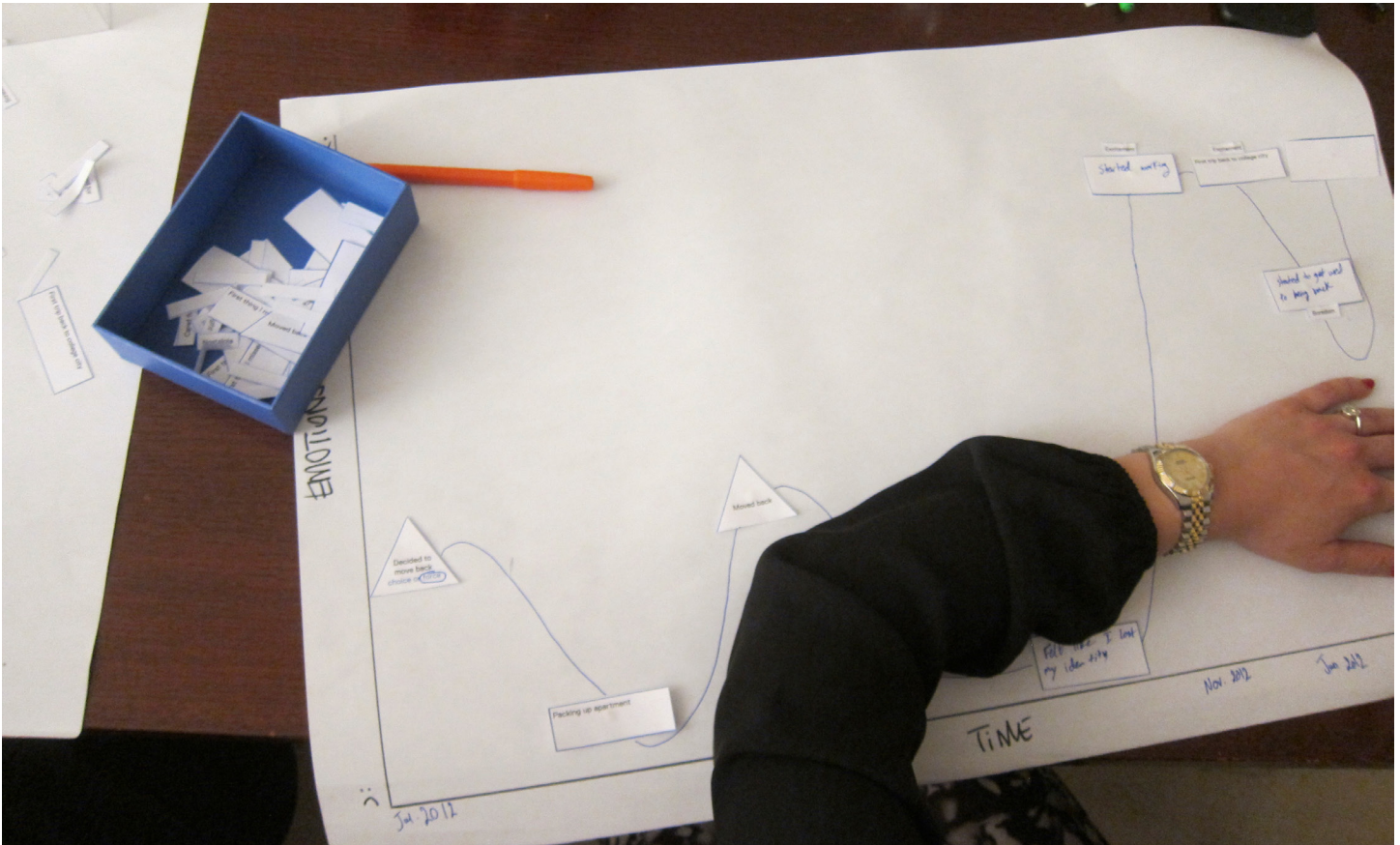
Insight: while each emotional journey varies, there are overlapping patterns; their biggest dip is when

they return home after their first trip away. The stark contrast of environments between where they travel to and where they live is a confirmation and realization of what is lacking in Saudi Arabia.

Hypothesis: In order to prepare for the inevitable frustration that occurs after their first trip away, Saudi women can reach out to The Halal Girls to support each other through the transition by reframing their relationship to the city.

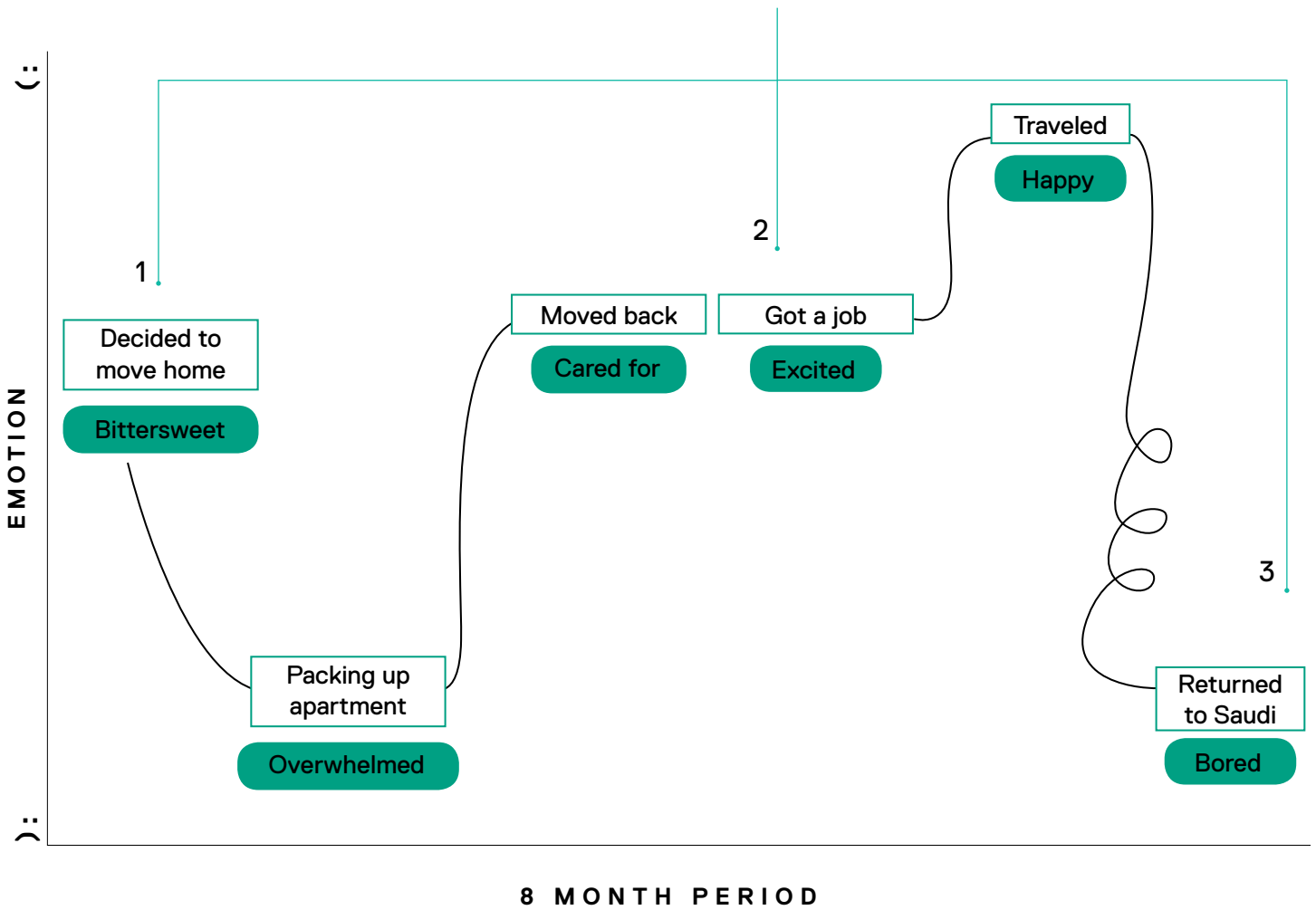


Women participating in the Keep-Lose-Add activity.

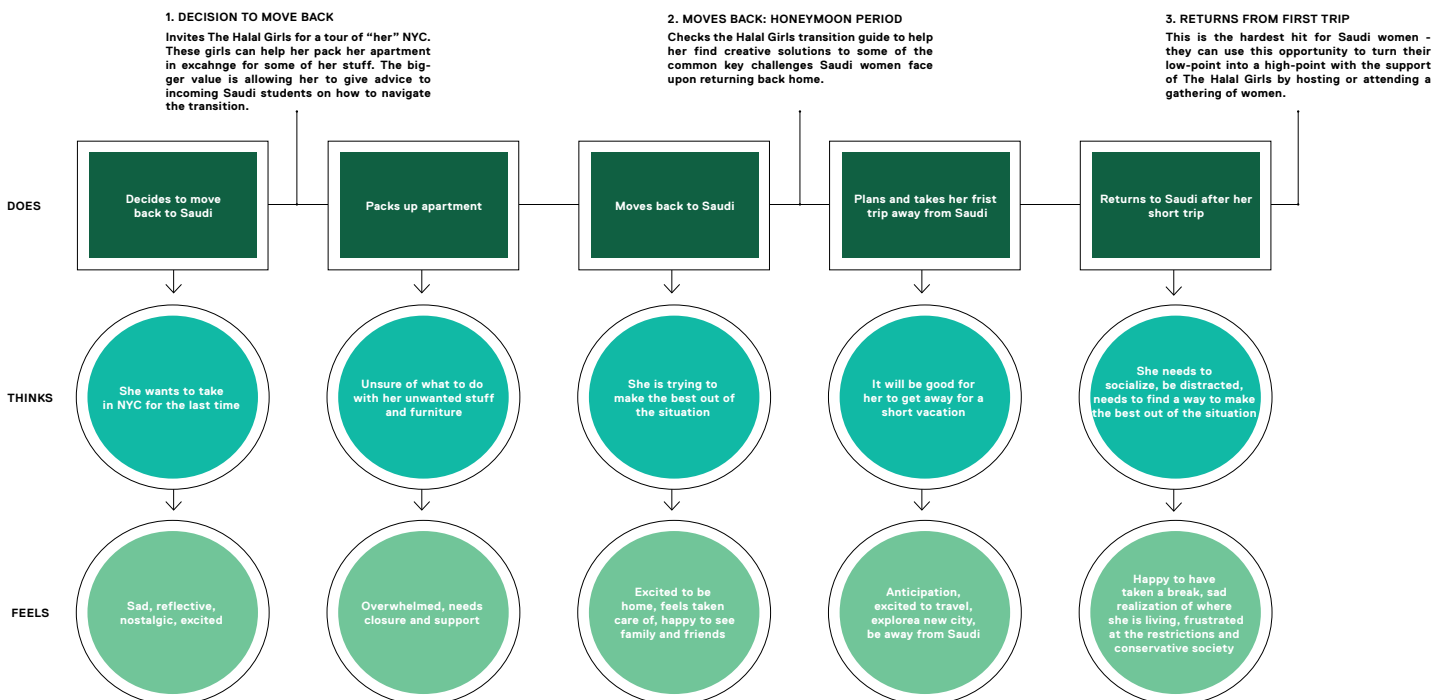


One woman mapping out her journey home on an emotional timeline.

What are the points for The Halal Girls to support each other through their transitions?

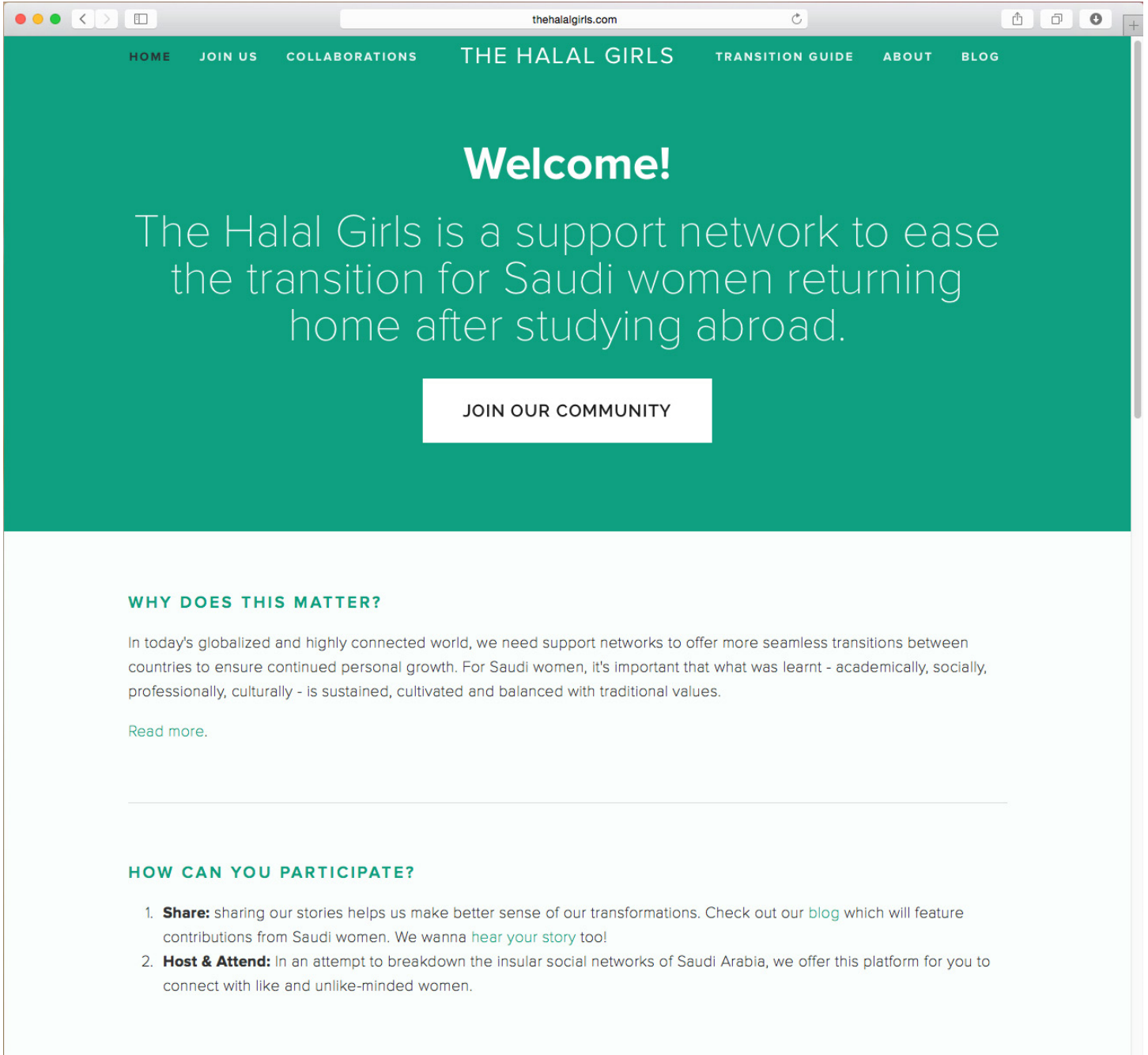


What are the activities that The Halal Girls can do together to get to build trust and support each other?



Hitting Home

Their first vacations cement their move back; emphasizing what they lack in Saudi.



April 2015

The Halal Girls Website - www.thehalalgirls.com

I created this website:

- to attract a diverse range of Saudi women
- for women to write and share their experiences
- to be used as a platform for women to coordinate events

Women have the have the option to **host or attend events** that would occur on a monthly basis in each city.

From the women who have signed up to be Halal Girls, they have voiced a desire to attend a varied range of events:

- salon-style gatherings —→ intellectual stimulation
- movie screenings & follow-up discussions —→ exploration of film and culture
- skill-sharing workshops —→ to expand their skill-sets
- just hanging out —→ meeting new people in a casual yet structured environment

The value lies in the **impact** of such gatherings in improving the role of women in the Saudi society through **evoking essences** of independence, ownership, belonging and being challenged

Launched in April 2015
1,500 unique visitors
27 women signed up
From major cities in Saudi Arabia, USA, UK & Europe

Transition Guide

A transition guide that offers coping strategies for key challenges that Saudi women face upon returning home. The guide includes antidotes gathered from Saudi women throughout my research and will continue to grow as more women are included in the conversation.

Value: allowing for constant improvements that women can take at a personal level while supporting other women as they tackle challenges.

Blog

A platform for women to write about their experiences and share them with other women.

Value: women can learn about their challenges through externalizing their emotions and by sharing their thoughts they are reaching out to an audience who is going through similar struggles.

Transition Guide

- 1. **Preparing:** when you decide to move back, before you leave.
- 2. **Picking up:** your first few weeks and months back.
- 3. **Coping:** finding ways to make the most out of living in Saudi.
- 4. **Communicating:** having clearer conversations with your parents and family.

1. PREPARING: GOING HOME IS BITTERSWEET

Leaving a city brings sadness of goodbyes and excitement of something new - which shifts our relationship to the city and it's people; guided by a sense of closure.

This is the first chance to call on your Halal Girls



Take them out on a half-day **tour of "your NYC"**. This will give you ownership over your city - something that is lacking in Saudi because of the legal and urban landscapes.



Host a **moving out party**. Packing up your apartment can be emotionally and physically draining. Invite some Halal Girls to help you pack in exchange for things that you don't want.

—→ Learnings

Feminist First

On a personal level, the largest impact this project has had on me is unleashing my inner feminist. It's a combination of being in a cohort that is majority female and working closely with Saudi women. DSI has offered me a community of support and collaboration; which I am passing forward to The Halal Girls. I also realized that there is much power in tapping into the already existing versatility and resilience of Saudi women navigating patriarchal societies. The writings of contemporary female writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Rebecca Solnit and Roxanne Gay have heavily influenced by thought process and design.

Facilitation vs. Frustration

I gained incredible amounts of confidence as I hosted and facilitated sessions. While I spent a lot of time planning and role-playing activities and discussions, I also had to remind myself that things don't always go as planned. With great difficulty, I learnt how to allow for conversations to gravitate where the need is. For these sessions, they often gravitated towards expressing fears and frustrations about moving back home. I learnt how to balance the space for venting with constructive ways on dealing with those frustrations.

At the most basic level, there is a desire for intellectually stimulating conversations in social settings in Saudi. There is also a real desire to connect with more women in spaces that offer self-expression; through art, comedy and performance. Because it is such a private society, access to information is difficult, and can be most effectively shared through trusted networks of people. With the sessions that I hosted and the community I created; I am hoping to add more of such conversations into the social and cultural landscape of Saudi Arabia. Change in Saudi is a reluctant evolutionary process; it has to start underground and slowly permeate through the society. This can begin to happen with a community of Saudi women who can support, grow and evolve with each other and drive change towards a more just society.

—→ Next Steps

I am in conversation with some Halal Girls who nominated themselves to host these gatherings in Saudi. We are working together to create guidelines and session plans for upcoming sessions. I envision them to happen on a monthly basis in each city. I will also work with a developer to build a social network aspect of the website - making it more robust and interactive. Wherever this community lives, it will stand on the principles of easing transitions between countries, supporting the sisterhood and constantly learning from one another.

—→ Thank Yous

The Halal Girls would not be what it is today without the guidance of my incredible thesis advisor Tina Park. Thank you for always giving me critical feedback that pushed me in the forward and for teaching me how to be critical of my own work and the work of my peers.

Thank you to my friends, family and advisors for supporting me through this process. And a super special thanks to: the DSI crew, Cheryl Heller, The Core Four, all the wonderful women who prototyped The Halal Girls with me; especially, Nourah Al Ammary, Nayla Attar, Rasha Shihabi, Jo, Alaa Balkhy and Christa Guerra.

SHUKRAN