# Mediated identities in the cyber world:

# Palestinian students doing higher education abroad

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This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

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## Who am I?

"I am from there. I am from here.

I am not there and I am not here.

I have two names, which meet and part,

and I have two languages.

I forget which of them I dream in.

What about identity? I asked.

He said: It's self-defense.

Identity is the child of birth, but

at the end, it's self-invention, and not

an inheritance of the past. I am multiple"

[Palestinian poet] Mahmoud Darwish bids Edward Said farewell [1]

[1] **Mahmoud Darwish ,** Arabic **Maḥmūd Darwīsh** (born March 13, 1942, Al-Birwa, Palestine [now El-Birwa, Israel]—died Aug. 9, 2008, Houston, Texas, U.S.), Palestinian poet who gave voice to the struggles of the Palestinian people. Mahmoud Darwish bids Edward Said farewell @ Source

## List of Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| BDS | The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement |
| CMC | Computer-mediated communication |
| GT | Grounded Theory |
| HE | Higher Education |
| ICESCR | International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights |
| ICT | Internet Communication Technology |
| NMI | Negotiated Mediated Identities |
| oPt | Occupied Palestinian Territories |
| SNS | Social Networking sites |

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## Abstract

This study is about the self-representation of Palestinian students doing higher education abroad (in the diaspora). It investigates how technology can be used to create an online identity in a way that cannot be done through other more traditional means of representation such as through text or face-to-face. The study relates these issues of self-representation to narratives of students from inside and outside Palestine. Using grounded theory, the study is based on around 20 interviews, which combined with long-term observation, through the medium being observed – social media, generated some interesting findings. The study found that Palestinians pursuing higher education in their media content, involve three elements: (i) a sense of longing and belonging; (ii) constraints and restrictions on their movement in and out of Palestine (referred to in this study as being locked in and locked out) and (iii) the complex virtuality/reality of their self-representation as Palestinians engaged in higher education. Among the stories and communications given close attention in the study, each of these themes is illustrated with great frequency and intensity.

## Relevance to Development Studies

Human development is profoundly related to the development of communication and technology. This technology has dramatically shifted in the last few decades to a point where cyberspace is one of the most expressive resources that can help us reflect our identities and culture due to the vast amount of available resources. This research paper relates to social justice struggles, one of the core themes of the SJP major, centring critically on reproduction of exclusions, identities and symbolic representations of self. Cyberspace can be a space for fighting for social justice and human rights, central to the Palestinian cause. For young Palestinians outside (and inside) Palestine, seeking higher education, these virtual means of communication are more than a way of passing on information; they both shape and are shaped by people's everyday lives. The medium becomes a means for constructing new realities that overcome the painful reality of exile from the homeland and the self.

## Keywords

Self-identities, cyberspace, Palestinians, social media, blockade, Gaza Strip, Israeli occupation, cyberspace, diaspora, homeland, new media.

# Chapter 1: Setting the Scene

## 1.0 Beginnings

This study began with what I observed to be an emerging correlation between higher education opportunities and new identities being formed on-line among Palestinians living both in the diaspora and Palestine. I became aware of this whilst living in Turkey for one year. This was for me a means to ensure I could later study in The Netherlands, starting my Masters at ISS.[2] When I first arrived at Schiphol airport, a family friend was waiting, holding a Palestinian *koffia* (scarf), and a balloon with "welcome home" written on it. They gave me a multi-photo frame of my own family, with photos of different memories centred around a sentence, "Home is where love is".

These things made me start to wonder about the self-identities we construct, around family and home; how other students who go to study abroad shared similar experiences, or had different ways of representing themselves, started to intrigue me. I became fully convinced that this was something worthy of study and investigation, bringing some real-life experiences into the academic production of knowledge. I was also motivated by the belief that it was likely that other Palestinian students had similar experiences to my own of a virtual cyber-space society of students. Yet nobody seemed to have researched the topic. This became an opportunity for me to embark on this study.

Many of the friends I grew up with are now studying in European cities such as London, Brussels or Budapest. They use the internet and social media to campaign online, to support or oppose political issues by sending petitions to their social networks about the cause of fighting for Palestinian dignity. They are mostly socially and politically engaged with issues from back home through social media. The confrontation of the reality that we live daily using a machine as a virtual way of communicating our identities struck me and led me to think in a different way about Palestinian students' identities. By engaging with the online communications of selected Palestinian youth seeking or in higher education, I hoped to reveal something of their self-representations online.

Reading an important text on Grounded Theory by Strauss and Corbin (1990) I was struck by the following statement:

"Imaginative researchers who are wrestling with unusual or creative use of materials will, at times, depart somewhat from "authoritative" guidelines for procedures. Having said this, we strongly urge grounded theory investigators to adhere to its major criteria unless there are exceptional reasons for not doing so" (Strauss and Corbin 1990:20).

This statement made me think that using grounded theory might be a worthwhile departure from the usual way of conducting research in the social sciences through theorising in advance. By putting the focus on the Palestinian students doing higher education (HE), who use it as a tool for seeking liberty and freedom

[2] The International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of Erasmus University Rotterdam in The Hague.

has affected by my standpoint as a young Palestinian student living and studying in the Netherlands. Even though the focus group of this research are students now located in different countries all over the world, they are literally scattered on the map like stars in the sky, and their common goals of pursuing higher education sent them far away from their homeland. These diasporic students currently live under different educational systems and authorities, but there are some concerns, sentiments and stories, and points of reference that connect them all together. Through exploring the medium by which they mainly communicate, the Internet, I hope to get a better picture of the shapes formed when these scattered stars (i.e. young Palestinians) doing higher education, are connected.

## 1.1 Higher Education as inspiration for young Palestinians

Education is one of the most fundamental aspects of a human being's development, opening new horizons of thinking about the self and who we are, around questions of identity. In the poem by Mahmoud Darwish at the start of this study, we can see that education appears as an instrument to bring about wider socio-economic changes. Employers may see HE as preparing their future employees for the labour market. Yet HE can also be an instrument of personal transformation and discovery – an end in itself. Either way, the role of higher education is particularly important for Palestinian students as a vehicle for bringing about societal change and identity-building and (re)construction. Through trying to access higher education, young Palestinians take part in creating new forms of mediated hyper-cultural and societal narratives. This raises different questions about how Palestinians' self-identities are transmitted, constructed, reconstructed and represented through narratives and themes communicated in the on-line world. One of my informants, Mariam, studies in Germany and reflects on her personal journey. In her own words:

As young Palestinians, we are faced by huge responsibility for bringing about changes in our lives, pursuing higher education opportunities across borders and walls challenging a reality of brutal occupation and colonisation" 3

The focus of this study is on the Palestinian students who are doing higher education both outside Palestine as well as those who are trying to access offers from universities abroad, including scholarships, but cannot leave the Occupied Palestinian Territories (oPt). Those 'locked out' and 'locked in', due to movement restrictions imposed by the Israeli blockade, include those studying for Bachelors, Masters and PhDs, or equivalent degrees outside Palestine, as well as those seeking to do so. Arguably, for them, having higher educational opportunities brings about a significant new phase in their personal development at a micro level. At the same time, it is a means to contribute positively at the macro-level to development in their home-country, for the benefit of their community.

According to Idris, education generally, at any level, can be "…the milestone of a nation's development. Education provides knowledge and skills to the population, as well as shaping the personality of the youth of a nation" (Idris 2012:443). Here the concern is both with how having HE opportunities can foster a student's individual sense of identity on-line, and how mediated identities

[3] Interview with Mariam, a Palestinian student from Gaza studies in Germany.

help construct new forms of shared identities as well. Using the example of social media, this investigation demonstrates that education can be both a provocation and a reason for reinforcing oppression, in different ways. The focus is on how groups of young people reflect on their higher educational aspirations and experiences, and how students outside Palestine especially, construct different forms of mediated identities in the cyber-world of social media. This process is discussed in some depth in chapter three.

Education might open unprecedented chances and be a key to move into different parts of the professional and geographical world, to seek a decent job or to find different kinds of success in life. This can give some kind of satisfaction and enables individuals to self-actualise. HE can also be a goal for its own sake, as a form of personal development.

Perspectives on this will differ from one person to another, as the study will show. In some contexts, the way Palestinian students look at higher education opportunities from a Palestinian lens may be in some ways similar and in other ways quite different in nature and dimensions from how other students coming from developed countries may experience the same process. Those who have not experienced the intense forms of oppression, occupation and the lack of freedom of movement of most Palestinians in the oPt, might be surprised, for instance by the ambiguous comment of Alhammami, one of the young people who communicated with me during this study. He is doing his Master's degree in the US, and wrote:

"Education is supposed to bring quality, social prosperity and stability but this is not just the case for Palestinian students, it's a turning point where you have to compromise about ultimate sacrifices and enduring physical separation from your family". [4]

Given that Palestinian students are not only being provided with effective understanding and knowledge, but are also required and expected to in turn contribute back to their own societies, his quotation points to the way mutual ethics shape collective and individual identities of young Palestinians enduring exile. In such a discourse, the embedded inequality that prevents Palestinian students from practising their rights to HE, also demand their later contribution back to improve the quality of Palestinian society and economy, and to support other Palestinian students later on.

## 1.2 New Media as Spaces of Resistance and Transformation

New media, and social media, both connect and continually expose individuals to the agonizing choices that have to be made in every aspect of their contacts and daily lives by those separated from their homes and families. In line with Daniel Memmi (2006) this study starts from the premise that:

This includes Palestinians, especially in the blockaded Gaza Strip, where social media plays a very vital role and shapes an important aspect of sculpting the Palestinian students' identities.

Herring (2015) argues in her research that self-presentation online takes place mainly through the personal profiles of the social media, in which users

[4] Interview with Mohammed Alhammami, 24, from Gaza, studies at Southern Illinois University

can create a personal profile and visually and virtually display connections to their social network. According to one source, there are "3,007,869 Internet users" in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip alone (Internetworldstats 2017) in territories that are 5,860 $km^2$ (size of the West Bank and 360 $km^2$ (Gaza. Khoury in her work highlights that "Palestinians are now the largest group of users of the Internet in the Arab world." (Khoury 2007:17).

People forcibly separated from having physical connection with their families and their own real social networks make up for it by staying connected (yet knowing they are also disconnected), being both here and there, freed from occupation yet also strangled between virtuality and reality. This is particularly painful for Palestinian students, who may pass through long periods of frustration and depression, before eventually experiencing educational success. The more positive aspects of virtual reality in the wider experience of HE was reflected on by one of the 20 or so Palestinian students I interviewed for this study:

"For Palestinian students, technology and media platforms are spaces that provide a place of belonging, appealing feelings of home and escape from reality. Constructing new realities of resilience and existence. It is a space that serves as a channel used by students to convey their values, norms, and unseen reality."[5]

This study starts from this insight, to investigate how technology can be used to create an online identity in a way that cannot be done through other more traditional means of representation such as through text or in face-to-face communication. As has been observed: "the internet is being discovered as a rich resource for researchers in many respects: as a field of study, a research tool and a means for scholarly communication" (Pauwels, L 2005:604). The online author has ownership of their self-image and shapes their own identity through methods that are constantly emerging and developing. This paper explores how the representation of self is being formed, shaped and represented in a technologically limited, but quickly spreading medium, specifically in social media forums, mainly facebook and personal blogs. There is enormous academic and policy literature on the landscape of social media and its influence on human interactions, communication and identity representations. My own contribution quite modest, and will be to highlight the self-representations of some young Palestinian students studying abroad, or seeking to do so, who originally come from the conflict zones of Palestine, mainly the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

Hanafi (2005), Mavroudi (2008-2007), Hammer (2005) and Khoury-Machool (2007) have all devoted attention to young Palestinian people who are shaping new identities in the diaspora. However, none of these studies specifically explored the issue of how such visible and invisible meditated identities of Palestinian students have emerged in mediated form through the cyber world. I am interested in this topic because it challenges traditional ways of thinking about identity construction under Israeli colonisation and occupation as being about 'resistance'. By creating new forms of identity representations in the unstable and reconstituted spaces of the online world of social media, the study looks at the old problem of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict from a different perspective that has not been fully explored before. Before delving deeper into the research questions and how the study will be conducted, I first want to locate

[5] [5] (interview with Sondos Qadri, a Palestinian student from Gaza lives in Canada).

this research in its context by laying out the general background of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as it informs the focus of the research questions and objectives.

## 1.3 The context: Colonisation and Occupation

The Israeli security policies have turned the oPt into fragmented and separated cantons that are divided from each other as well as from the outside world. This makes it difficult for people inside to see their families or relatives outside who are 'locked out' and for them to travel freely in and out. This is in direct contravention to international humanitarian and human rights laws. The dispersal of the Palestinians after "al-Nakba 1948", the catastrophe in Arabic, has made it almost impossible to achieve sovereignty for Palestinians where they are able to practice their national identity with dignity. Al-Dajani (2013) argues in her work that the ongoing conflict enforces a national identity on the Palestinian diaspora even though:

"The continued conflict that has prevented Palestinians from achieving statehood, Palestinian identity in the diaspora subsists in a unique space where it is contained and shaped by the forces of displacement, statelessness, and invisibility" (Al-Dajani, 2013).

Since Zionist migration to Palestine began, and since the start of the Nakba, mass exodus of Palestinians, have provoked large scale crises, which are political, social, and economic - existential. These crises had the unintended effect of creating an intense valuing of both knowledge in general, and education in particular, especially among Palestinians in exile who had lost everything except the power of the mind and the weapon of the pen. As noted by Jamil Tahi, "Palestinians have become cognizant of the value of education and skilled job training for their survival both in exile and under occupation" (Tahi 1985:32). Under the Palestine Authority, opportunities for higher-level education are restricted, so that most young Palestinians are eager to leave in order to improve their chances of accessing HE outside Palestine, as well as to break the fear, terror and practical challenges imposed by the Israeli blockade and the apartheid wall.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights clearly states in Article 26[6] that: "the right to education is a fundamental human right and basic to human freedom". Israel has ratified the ICESCR[7], which also states that: "Education is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights". Despite this, Israeli colonisation polices continue to impose sovereignty over the Palestinians, undermining their identities and violating the right to education, at primary as well as secondary and higher levels.

Like every other young Palestinian from Gaza, my own life has been profoundly influenced by violence and prolonged period of political instability, and the pervasiveness of oppression and injustice. The economic and military blockade of the oPt, particularly the Gaza Strip, and the prolonged structural and physical violence it has brought with it, has divided Palestinians socially and geographically from one another for decades. From a personal perspective, as a

[6] Universal Declaration of Human Rights

[7] The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)

Palestinian who grew up in the Gaza Strip, experiencing and living through several wars and Israeli attacks, on a daily basis I have seen the effects on Palestinians' self-identities, and the dehumanizing and inhumane effects of everyday occupation. I have personally experienced the situation of total blockade, where the Israeli government decides who enters and who leaves the Gaza Strip - "the third most densely populated polity in the world" (Thomas 2011:25) - and who remains, locked inside, and where the Egyptian regime controls all non-Israeli border crossings. To sum up this situation, these injustices and violations are the rule, since:

"Palestinians have lived for decades under military occupation, suffered severe restrictions of movement and faced internal divisions. Today, they watch a 703-km wall being built through and around their home" (Nicolai 2007:22).

Scholars like Randa (1999), Schulz (2003) and Nicolai (2007) argue that the ongoing and Western-supported Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, brings with it the image of Israel as a state for the Jewish population alone. The counterpart of this security state is the prolonged and deepening humanitarian crisis for the entire Palestinian population in the oPt. This is particularly harsh for Gazans, subject to the most severe limitations on trade, on movement and on health services. An ongoing siege, whilst living in a war zone, and the limited accountability of the Israeli state to the international community, means that human rights norms are flouted daily, and that thousands of Palestinians have been injured and lost their lives.

In this way, occupation has broken down former identities of Palestinians, after suffering physical danger but also prolonged power cuts, shortages of food and water, checkpoints and armed patrols. This multifaceted, ongoing struggle has even led to many international aid agencies withdrawing humanitarian support, amidst increasing insecurity and instability that restricts the media, closes hospitals, and damages schools and universities. According to OCHA:

"In June 2007, following the takeover of Gaza by Hamas, Israel imposed a land, sea and air blockade on the Gaza Strip, which intensified earlier access restrictions" (OCHA website: 2016).

OCHA further remarked that: "1.9 million Palestinians in Gaza are 'locked in', unable to access the remainder of the occupied Palestinian territory and the outside world" (OCHA website: 2016). The expression 'locked in' will be an important one in this study, combined with 'locked in', which is its counterpart. Since people from occupied Palestine have been denied basic human rights and economic prospects, have severe restrictions on their freedom of movement and are denied the most basic services, leaving the OTP can appear both a betrayal of "sumud," and a means to continue resistance.

Not least, Israel's occupation of Palestine and restrictions on movement is damaging generations of students, either locked into the oPt, or locked out of them once they leave. Somehow these young people have to maintain their aspirations to achieve higher educational successes in the face of deliberate obstacles placed in their way by the Israeli state, at each stage of their journey. These students are the keystone of this research. I seek to understand their perspectives and their forms of mediated (and often hidden) resistance, through self-identification on-line. The study examines their communications, in an effort to understand how they negotiate self-identities on-line in the face of such odds.

## 1.4 On the way: Research Objectives and Questions

For the sake of developing a clear structure, I present the research objectives first, followed by the questions. Both have been constantly refined and redefined on the way, during the process of conducting this grounded investigation. Since the study was based entirely on qualitative data gathered through a journey of investigation, the flexibility of objectives and questions was built into the whole approach. The main objective was to investigate and analyse how Palestinian HE students abroad negotiate their realities in the world of virtuality. How have they expressed the tensions between belonging and longing for home, between being locked out and the locking in of others, and how they manage to negotiate new hybrid forms of identities in exile and in the oPt?. The objectives can be broken down as follows:

1. To analyse how Palestinian students in the diaspora negotiate realities through virtual media in settings of occupation and siege.
2. To identify representations of ways of belonging and longing through media content on social media, in a context where they are either locked in or locked out from Palestine.
3. To determine how forms of dissonant identities are incorporated, resisted or transformed by students' media interactions and representations.

The main question is:

**How do Palestinian students "do higher education", and negotiate their mediated identities in exile, using new social media (e.g. facebook and blogs)?**

Three sub-questions address various aspects of this central question:

- How do Palestinian students negotiate their Higher Education realities through virtual media, given the occupation of Palestine?
- How does physical separation by visa restrictions imposed through the Israeli occupation blockade affect the mediated identities of these young Palestinian students, on-line?
- How do Palestinian students in the diaspora manage their dissonant identities in terms of media content, to make sense of the fragmentation imposed by occupation?

Reflecting on where I grew up, the Gaza Strip, a small city facing life threating experiences, I realise I have been living most of my life in a war zone. After living in different countries that are not my own and to which I am not sure I belong, only then have I become entirely conscious of how abnormal those events were and their effects on me. Finding links between other Palestinian students' on-line mediated identities and how these are embedded in their daily lives and struggles, means I can engage personally with participants and with relevant literature that enables me also to make sense of my own fragmented and fractured experiences as a Palestinian.

## 1.5 Justification and Motivation

As explained above, this research investigates how physical boundaries imposed by Israel's occupation in Palestine, can sometimes be overcome by students who go into exile to gain higher educational opportunities and acquire qualifications abroad. More specifically, the study investigates how technology is creating online identities in ways that would be very difficult, if not impossible, face-to-face. The focus of my study is about self-representations by Palestinian students through social media. With a focus mainly on English-speaking countries, I interviewed and observed on-line communications of sstudents originating from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and located in different countries, especially Australia, the UK and the USA. The geographical focus here was in part to ensure that Palestinian students were those who could communicate reasonably well in English. Hence, most communication was in English, the main language medium convenient between all members of my focus group as it's the main medium of their education outside Palestine. For this group, however, speaking English was an important medium for talking about their education and for references to elements of their cultural and social self-identification on-line.

The intention has been to treat social media as both a medium and a common tool and arena for various forms of self-representation. My focus group were students doing higher education abroad, most now physically separated from their organic social networks in Palestine. They used social virtual media as a way of representing their identities. This work has been partially inspired by Miriyam Aouragh's book "Palestine Online: Transnationalism, the Internet and Construction of Identity". Aouragh (2011) in her contribution views multi-sited ethnographic research as especially suited to understanding internet-mediated forms of communication, taking the example of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan. Her book offers an understanding of different experiences of the refugees using virtual media to practice their national and other forms of social identities, against the backdrop of Israeli occupation.

My research is based mainly on data gathered and analysed during on-line investigation, with the focus on identities negotiated through virtuality. Through and across the sense of longing for home, and belonging in the diaspora, or of being locked in or locked out of Palestine, it was expected that new and hybrid self-identities would be emerging. These were expected to incorporate, resist or construct values, norms and perceptions among Palestinian student. At times it emerged that the students I was researching encountered surveillance and pressures on-line from within Palestine/Israel and beyond. To understand how physical boundaries are overcome as people gain more opportunities and information abroad, mediated identities seems a useful concept. This expresses the idea that relationships and connections between young Palestinians studying abroad, families at home and others can stay strong despite physical separation through social media interactions. In spite of visa restrictions, and an Israeli occupation blockade, as confirmed in the work of McMillin, the notion of: "Mediated Identities addresses ethical dilemmas and transformative possibilities" for these young Palestinian women and men (McMillin 2009:216).

One of the students I interviewed had left Gaza five years ago and had never once been able to go back to the Gaza Strip. She posted on Facebook writing "Living in a world, where hugging your parents is a fantasy and too much

to ask for, is not easy".[8] These spaces and social media platforms such as facebook, referred to in this study, generate an endless set of debates around alternative interpretations of Palestinian diasporic identities and such questions as, not only: 'Who am I', but also 'Who are 'we'? The difficulties people face in communicating under existing circumstances, the role of technology in transcending communications boundaries and the theme of diasporic mediated online identities are all part of the core concern of this study. With no mail system between different parts of Palestine, as well as with the outside world, digital communication has become almost the only possible forms of communication.

Palestinian students currently living outside Palestine live in new and often very different environments where boundaries and borders can be more open. Both in their practical lives, and in their ideas, they may become free from the traditional and political constraints of home. This can give them the room to construct new ways of being, building up new self-identities. Generally, Palestinian students studying elsewhere will tend to have more freedom of access to knowledge and to scholarly search engines and other (expensive) academic resources through university libraries. They will enjoy greater freedom of movement than those who have remained 'locked in', within Palestine. This topic is especially worthy of exploration because the development of mediated identities by diasporic Palestinian students provides diasporic people from these cantons with an unusual opportunity for identity construction, after a long struggle of co-existence and resistance to purse higher educational opportunities.

Academics such as Miller (1995) and others have been busy exploring how identities are mediated and constructed in the Digital Age (see for example Rheingold 1995; Thompson 2002; Hine 2002; Aouragh 2011; Horsfield 2003; Pauwels 2005; Rettberg 2014, 2017). Sari Hanafi (2005) argues that the difficulties of realizing a reliable physical return of the Palestinians to the homeland of origin is increasingly addressed virtually by the diasporas and lead to the urgency of a cyberspace based communication. This current research examines how Palestinian students negotiate their mediated identities due to the increase in transnational ethnic networking in the modern cyber global spaces. Cultural, political and national intersections of power relations are embedded in this space, as they play visible and invisible roles in shaping the lives of these young students and their identities.

I want to investigate how students cope with studying across borders given the blockade and occupation walls that separates them from their families and their homeland. What is their ability to negotiate their identities, their dignity and their resilience? I am interested in mediated identities rather than norm identities such as religion, gender, age, and so on. Yet, how these norm identities are reinforced or undermined by mediatised diasporic interactions remains an interesting question.

## 1.6 Chapter Outline

The study considers the mediated identities of young Palestinian men and women, on selected social media forums (mainly facebook and personal blogs), and the meanings of these mediated identities, a concept explored in detail in Chapter 2. Then Chapter 3 and 4 present several key insights drawing on actual

[8] Shad, a Palestinian student doing a PhD in London

evidence from social media, on-line and Skype interviews, and observations of communication and narratives expressed through writing and posts, videos, and photos. These resources will be analysed to show how young women and men in the diaspora construct, represent and reconstruct their own identities as mediated identities.

# Chapter 2: Bringing the theoretical framework alive - Methodology

## 2.1 Introduction

My 'grounded' theoretical framework is inspired by the work of Bauman (2003) and of Appadurai (2006), who establish the need to 'de-parochialise' the production of knowledge. A more comprehensive description of the GT is provided by Corbin and Strauss (1990) as follows:

"a grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationship to one another" (Corbin & Strauss 1990: 23).

This research paper draws on the online voices of Palestinian students doing HE in the diaspora, whose rights continue to be violated from the moment of having the aspiration to study abroad and being locked in, to going through a long journey to make it out of the occupation walls and apartheid system. Then to living a reality in virtual life, to being locked out and being totally deprived from having physical contact with their own organic social network. In this chapter I will explain how the research was conducted, and how the medium of new communication technologies was researched. Social media offers problematic places where identity can be represented, even when it is in crisis. The chapter now starts the discussion of the grounded theory (GT) methodology adopted for this study.

## 2.2 Doing On-line Research: Dilemmas

The internet is problematically transforming the way that human beings relate, connect and communicate with each other. I would argue that it is not possible to use current theories to study phenomena occurring on the internet and its convergence with post-modern experiences within conflict settings. Jones simply agrees "that applying existing theories and methods to study of the internet related phenomena is not a satisfactory way to build our knowledge of the internet as a social medium" (Jones 1999:x). For this reason, this investigation will draw on Jones' argument that studying such phenomena, especially studying the process of personal life experiences and individual online social interaction, cannot produce new knowledge without methodologies designed to enable research about on-line realities.

Several scholars such as Luc Pauwels (2005) and Steve Jones (1999) argued that doing research on the internet is not an easy task. This is because generating questions about the post-modern interaction of human beings in the cyber world is made more difficult by the very "iniquitousness" of this medium. There are consequently many interesting enquiries that go on within the medium and make it worthwhile to investigate and do a research about the virtual human interactions that happen in the medium. Jones sees the medium itself as a tool currently used in our daily life which according to him "intersects with everyday

life in ways both strange and omnipresent, popular interest in the internet is enormous" (Jones 1999: xi).

This study investigates the media spaces through which Palestinian students in the diaspora form, negotiate and mediate their identities. In conducting this research paper, I used mainly qualitative research methods in the collection of data, conducting twenty semi-structured interviews and long-term observation on the students' posts and media content and activities on selected social media sites. The Palestinian community that I interviewed was a cohort of students scattered in 24 different time zones. I travelled virtually using the medium to several countries where these Palestinian students are scattered all around the world roughly distributed by longitude and latitudes. The tendency of using interviews as a method of collecting was backed by Easwaramoorth and Zarinpoush (2006) who consider interviews as "an appropriate method when there is a need to collect in-depth information on people's opinions, thoughts, experiences, and feelings" (Easwaramoorth & Zarinpoush 2006:6). Quotations from these interviews and online media-content are referred to throughout the study, in different chapters as appropriate.

The majority of network users, both active and passive, in the diaspora were forced to leave home to follow their aspirations of accessing HE. I drew upon using existing studies and scholarship on online, such as Miriyam Aouragh (2010); Christine Hine (2000); Hanafi (2005); Khoury-Machool (2007); Steve Jones (2002); Hugh Miller (1995); and Zizi Papacharissi (2002). Other studies on Palestinian identity were also helpful (for example see Rashid Khalidi 2010; Victoria Mason 2008; and Amani Ismail 2008). This body of work helped me to draw the lines around my research paper and in turn this study addresses a lack of scholarship particularly on the mediated identities formation and representation of the Palestinian students in the diaspora and how it becomes a definitive and significant identity.

In general, qualitative methods fit with the nature of my research paper and the questions triggered as this helps shed light on social constructions and on discourses around identities. Qualitative methods also work well to explore a particular problem presented by studying these Palestinian students. I felt it was important not to simply measure how often different words or phrases were used, but to use tools to enable me to detect and make sense of sub-texts in what they said, and to explore some hidden issues in more depth. According to Denzin and Lincoln, a good reason to choose qualitative research is that:

"Qualitative research [as]…a situated activity…locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:3).

In other words, I did not choose to conduct this research on-line freely, but because it would not be possible for me to go back home to do field work, or to have physical contact with people, given the restrictions of Israeli occupation. The West Bank, which is geographically separated from Gaza and also occupied, would make it almost impossible for a Palestinian coming from the Gaza Strip to travel there, or to the West Bank.

Web-based research gave me the opportunity to overcome some of these difficulties and closed-off borders and boundaries, by doing a study where my

sources and informants are online and spread internationally. Access to hundreds of online social networks, from friends and colleagues, allowed me as a researcher to connect with so many Palestinian students around the world who are very inspiring and intelligent. Using this medium, it was a simple step to request friends to help gather the more focused group of participants or informants. I decided to make a first post on FB, asking my friends to tag their friends in the comments or share the post to spread the word. To my surprise, the request was responded to almost immediately, with more than one hundred comments and tens of friends sharing my post with their contacts. Moreover, so many students expressed their willingness to participate in the research, that I had to be quite selective. I started contacting some of those who expressed an interest through their Facebook profiles and e-mails. The next stage, which was only moved on to with their consent, involved collecting and analyzing their social media content, as well as conducting interviews through online video calls. Interviews were conducted in this way with around 20 students.

By finding out how these individuals dealt with themes of laws, regulations and military occupation, and (re)connecting their stories to each other, the hope is to add value to the production of knowledge. Because many studies are conducted in just one place, we are often blind to trans-national and trans-local dimensions of social problems, as illustrated by the new cyber world and online sphere. Since the work of Appadurai (1996) and Anderson (1983), a vast production of knowledge has extensively focused on the new forms of digital communication, which includes different social media networks because of the flux of human migration and globalisation.

As stated by Leurs and Ponzanesi (2010), "Appadurai's intervention has resulted in increasing awareness of local, transnational, and global networking flows of people, ideas, and culturally hybrid artefacts". Here, there is a very particular justification of doing this study because people who are together in social relational terms are physically separated by these geographical boundaries. This is also a diaspora study research to some extent - although not fully - because some of the individuals are actually in Palestine, whereas in diaspora research, it all takes place away from 'home'.

## 2.3 Ethical dilemmas and considerations

There were many challenges and ethical dilemmas which arose throughout the process of conducting this research. This specific topic is very sensitive and it deals with personal experiences and feelings. It is also related to issues about privacy and trust as this is a very sensitive topic associated to private lives that are rooted in the settings of personal identities and reflections which are shown and represented on the web. I also was aware about the importance of gaining full consent from the participants. This enabled me to build up some guidelines to guarantee interviewees' privacy. Throughout the process of conducting the research, I needed to rethink and reflect on my biases and positionality.

Shah (2004) argues that 'a social insider is better positioned as a researcher because of his/her knowledge of the relevant patterns of social interaction required for gaining access and making meaning" (Shah 2004:556). Being an insider helped me appreciate the students' realities. However, my 'insider' knowledge about the kinds of experiences, also meant I had to reserve judgement and not assume I knew how my respondents would feel. Sensitivity was

required towards those interviewed. By using a grounded methodology, what became clear was the need to really listen carefully to those challenging the consequences of colonization. Palestinian students' lives, from the first moments they decide to build their future academic life, involve a prolonged experience of struggle, displacement and even statelessness. Given these sensitivities, I decided to step back a bit at times, and to let others express their own opinions without interruption or judgement. This 'listening' attitude was especially required when interviewees mentioned the unpleasant sides of their narratives - what can be termed "the pain behind the screens" (discussed further in Chapter 5).

Being locked out in the diaspora as a Palestinian student without having the realistic prospects of returning home to conduct fieldwork in the oPt means one must use the advantages of distance to see the issues on-line, with the benefit of a first-hand point of view. This gives me more understanding of the image of Palestinian students living abroad and the consequences of the Israeli occupation and blockade in the oPt. I gained full consent from the interviewees based mainly on trust, respect and mutual understanding. Using other alternative ways of getting information were considered, such as existing documentaries, secondary data and written blogs and media-content. But, as (Lee 2000) stated:

"The diffuse and democratic character of the internet, the very attributes that make it such a valuable source for information, also make the finding of available information difficult" (Lee 2000: 119).

One of the main challenges encountered on-line was that the targeted group were all students and were overwhelmed by the burdens of student life and their studies. This problem was avoided by using observation of existing media-content, observation that I informed them about. I started collecting data early on and slowly expanded the number of targeted students.

## 2.4 Conclusion

Using grounded theory in conducting research online is not an easy task as mentioned earlier, but it helped to present a promising development of this contribution situated in the research findings and its analysis. Also, the topic sensitivity is aided and combined by comprehensive existing theories and literature that helped to conceptualize this phenomenon in a more genuine approach. In relation to this, Strauss and Corbin (1990) state that, "a grounded theorist need not work alone. For many who use the grounded theory approach, an important part of research is testing concepts and their relationships with colleagues who have experience in the same substantive area" (Strauss and Corbin 1990:11). The process of conducting grounded research using data analysis; coding, naming, comparing, forming categories and putting central emphasis on specific points made it more clear to develop a structural framework that contributed to a clear structure for the research paper, which should allow the reader a coherent understanding of the paper.

# Chapter 3: Mediated Palestinian identities in the diaspora

"being Palestinian, virtual world gives a space to show your anger, passion, intimacy, loneliness, variety of feelings"9

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter will apply the version of grounded theory offered by Strauss and Corbin (1990) to the cases examined. This analysis will continue in Chapter 4. in chapter three, emphasises situated on analysing the social media content of the participants, rethinking of virtual reality and negotiated mediated identities in conflict setting and the highlighting the identities around belonging and longing. In chapter 4, presents more in depth profiles and personal narrative around the identity tension from within and beyond oPt. In both chapters, selective coding procedures and categories were developed throughout the process based on qualitative findings. These are both richly empirical chapters.

## 3.2 Virtual reality and negotiated mediated identities

The quote above is an excerpt of an interview with one of the Palestinian students, which helps draw lines for this section, that examines issues of the boundaries between the virtuality and the reality in the context of colonisation and ongoing conflict. The application of creating intellectual new identities do not always rebound into old forms, but undertake entirely new ones. "Virtuality" is a concept developed by Deleuze (1966), but which was first forged by Henri Bergson. In their work, D'Angelo & N Scapparone (2014) argue that "it is necessary to separate the virtual from the possible. The possible is opposed to the real, as it is nothing more than its retroactively fabricated image. It is identical to the real, except for the fact that it lacks existence". In my paper, the virtual is not the contradiction of reality. Rather, i i's another dimension of reality: a space where it creates a horizon of self-representation deprived of what is real and actual. (D'Angelo & Scapparone 2014:1-8)

By looking and reflecting about ourselves online, we look at ourselves beyond the medium, meaning that who we are in the online world is being, to some extent, negotiated based on the different surroundings in the offline world. Auoragh (2011) in her book, *Palestine Online*, reflects on the relationship between the offline and the online realities where she sees that there is as a fundamental link, as face-to-face contact becomes a fantasy for those whose only way to communicate with their organic social network is through the medium.

Auoragh also explains the downside of the virtual connection with the homeland and all the tension that is embedded into this struggle of mobility and immobility, space and place. This is not to say that a one-sided look at online representation will provide the understanding of who we are, or of our identities and representation in the cyber world. Rather it is to suggest that the way we

[9] Interview with Yaqout, studies in Istanbul

represent ourselves has different dimensions and aspects which contribute to the creation of the self in the virtual world – a world that has been mediated and negotiated to different levels and contexts. Researchers like Tetzlaff, (2000), Kendall (1999), Miller (1995), Kennedy (2006) and Baym (1995) argue that social media authors harmoniously craft offline identities consistent with their online selves. Similarly, Wright (2016) explores how "the connection between offline and online selves became even more pronounced with the rise of platforms like Facebook" (Wright, 2016:5).

Here I want to highlight a contested concept related to my study such as scholarship around "mediatization" which is not the main focus my research. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of scholarship focused on media and communication studies or what's so-called, "mediatization" which according to scholars such as Couldry & Hepp (2013) Hjarvard (2013) and Jensen (2013) is itself a contested term. Other scholars like Couldry (2012) Hjarvard (2008) and Lundby (2013b) describe it in relation to the mass media including newspapers, visual production, movies, radio and TV). Couldry & Hepp (2013) define mediatization rather generally, as: "the role of particular media in emergent processes of socio-cultural change" (Couldry & Hepp 2013:197).

So, what are mediated identities and why are they the focus of this research? The concept originated from the grounded findings "negotiated mediated identities (NMI)". This relates to many things in the literature and can be called "the medium", like the internet, new technologies or indeed any new media platform. "Mediated identities" are the identities that are constructed, shaped and represented through all these new media and in this contribution, Facebook and personal blogs in particular. Pauwels (2005), Turkle (1996), and Bhatia (2007) argue that the self-representation and identity construction taking a place in the postmodernist direction is hybrid, multiple, fluid, dynamic, and contingent.

The diasporic Palestinian Students who are originally from the oPt and who are currently living in Western countries, mainly the EU and UK, bring a fascinating sample of a prolonged process of negotiating new-hybrid cultures and identities and 'negotiated mediated identities'. The new high-tech platforms are utilized to negotiate the Palestinians students' identities among diaspora communities. While they are reflecting on our identities online, they cannot do so exactly as they please, as many of the Palestinian students find themselves nationalized, monitored, racialized, paralysed and somehow, their identities are reduced and negotiated, rather than enabled by this space and their historical and cultural background.

## 3.2 Rethinking of reality in the virtuality in conflict setting

The findings of this contribution on the mediated identities show that the Palestinian students use the medium as their vehicle for generating a virtual reality. Continued and unaccountable changes in the traditional literature of using such concepts and terms leads to an understanding that considers and labels the virtual world within the frame of unreality, which is not the case when it comes to the focus of this research within a conflict setting and an existing occupation where it is much more complex. As stated by Dijk (1997) "(s)paces and communities are called virtual as they appear to be no longer tied to a particular place and time" in line with this he also defines what is called "virtual" as "the

ongoing liberation of the restraints of space and time in human communication" (van Dijk, 1997:39).

For my analysis, two realms were considered: the online and offline contexts - as they are interlinked and interconnected where you fundamentally cannot separate the first from the latter. The offline conditions of the participants, who are all from a similar background of occupation and conflict in oPt, were studied for the current situation and where they are now regarding their media-sphere content[10]. Jones argues in line with this, that: "Off-line and on-line contexts also oversimplifies, because even those contextual considerations that seem to relate specifically to on-line situations have roots in off-line realties" (Jones 1999: 58). The traditional thinking of the virtual world sees users belong to numerous online chat rooms and different technology platforms that bring people together from different places within using one space in different forms of communication that come between synchronous and asynchronous.

The representation of the identities online cannot be divorced from the realm of the reality that Palestinian students go through in daily life. This means that the participants' off-line experiences are being negotiated and interpreted through their online interaction and representation. This leads us to a different dimension on looking at this context through what I call here a rethinking of the "virtuality in the reality" within conflict settings. According to Horsfield (2003), the term 'virtual' is largely used to refer to whatsoever is not physical and not face-to-face communication -, computer mediated communication (CMC) (Horsfield, P 2003:1). On the other hand, others consider the human interaction in the cyber world as an "imagined community" (Thompson, 2000, Anderson, 1983, Ananda Mitra, 2008). Rheingold (1994) describes a virtual community as: "(s)ocial aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold 1994: 5).

Here in this research, it is problematic to conceptualise such social phenomena as something "imagined" when it could be considered a reality that Palestinian students cannot change, as it is constructed and documented within the cyberspace. Going beyond the term "imagined community", which has been demonstrated by several studies of the online virtual communities as a social structure in terms of identities, (see e.g. Rheingold 1993,1994; Bromberg 1996; Turkle 1995,1996; Baym 1998; Donath, 1999; Wellman and Gulia 1999), there is the argument that getting access to the internet and being a user in the cyberspace doesn't mean that you can replace your own organic social network with an imagined community. These researchers have become increasingly more interested in how virtual spaces have the potential to develop communities that bring together different voices producing networks of unity and division, and new forms of individual and shared identification. This can allow for a strong consciousness of community. On the other hand, Turkle (1995,1997) and Appadurai (1993) are amongst the scholars who focus on the reinvention of technological culture, identities and the creation of a virtual community in cyberspace. Thus, according to Appadurai (1993), "(t)here is an increasing of the trope of the tribe as media, such as the Internet, are being mobilized by the diasporic

[10] Media-sphere: the constant human interaction that occur using the new social media and internet in general
Media-content: it's the media production of the PS, posts, blogs, photos, videos, live videos, writing, emojis, etc.

communities to rediscover their fundamental affiliations and allegiances" (Appadurai 1993:413).

In the context of the Palestinian students who are studying HE in the diaspora, they are forced to be separated and are fragmented from their families and friends as they are still facing the reality of displacement and exile. These students are already tied to a place and an organic social network not imagining that they have one virtually. In her significant book *Virtual Ethnography*, (Hine 2000) raises the prospects for researching internet life. She questions both cultural and traditional identity formation approaches and stresses that new media forces a rethink of customary classifications of society and culture. The result is that: "To side-step questions of what identities really are and whether reality is really there, by shifting to an empirical focus on how, where and when identities and realities are made available on the internet" (Hine 2000: 118). Having said that, Palestinian students use the medium as a space to express their negotiated hybrid-identities that occur rapidly throughout interaction with the homeland they use social media and different technology as a way of overcoming and going through the hardship of borders and occupation.

Brinkerhoff (2009) explains in her book "Digital Diasporas" how the new development of CMC and multimedia are ideally suited for connecting people in the diaspora who are geographically separated and removed from their organic homeland not to replace it and imagine it virtually. Goffman (1995) has made a remarkable contribution to this field, especially in relation to the presentation of the self in everyday life. Goffman explains it as an ongoing process of fluid and lucid information management, where individuals influence the impressions given on cyberspace. Indeed, one of the participants said that: "day to day, my days are speeding through this medium that helps me to make up for face-to-face interaction with my own real social network, access to internet is merely a symbol of how we have learned to overcome space and movement while no one else notices how my life is passing through the medium" [11]. In this setting, the reality of the Palestinian students is very dominant in the everyday life of the virtual dimension. According to this, virtuality is not an illusionary or artificial realm, rather it is a genuine human production.

## 3.4 Social Media-content

The use of online social networking sites and applications has increasingly risen in the last era of occupation and colonisation of historical Palestine. Research has shown that the mass use of the new social media gives us some indications that these platforms are functioning for several purposes. According to Lynch (2007) social media has been used to engage in activism, bridge-blogging, and public sphere engagement. Hanifa (2005) also explains how the internet generates spaces for the Palestinians in the diaspora to connect the fragmentations that are caused by the occupation. Social media is used as a bridge and a channel of communication between home and the place of exile. Applying these themes to the online setting, the focus of this study is not whether the media-content on social media can just bring political change or cross-border online mobilizations to the cause to transform the public opinion, but how these spaces represents identities of Palestinian students. Palestinian students have created an

[11] Interview with Rawan, a Palestinian student studies in London.

ever-expanding media-sphere - a network of online activism, posting and blogging, using Facebook, Twitter and many other social media platforms, sharing written pieces and posts, accompanied by photos and videos.

These pieces by individuals from the oPt and in the diaspora, carry the representation of the self and reflect about their Palestinian identity. By doing so, these young students actively reconstruct and explore their ethnical and cultural Palestinian identities throughout the representation of the self-online on these kinds of media. Tamam who has been away from Gaza for 5 years and recently started her MA in Belgium commented that: "studying and living abroad gave me a high sense of responsibility to post and blog in English language to bring people's attention and alert them to the plight of the occupied Palestine and advocating for my cause"[12].

Examining many of the features of the media content draws a connection between the content, place, identity, medium, and diaspora. There is an argument that the media-content of the Palestinian students represents a distinctive practice of the representation of the Palestinian identity in this space. Using discursive analysis methodology helps to understand that the Palestinian students who produce and write this media-content generate a special narrative of identity representation that is rooted in real place and presented through the medium. This argument is fundamentally backed up by some evidence from online social media platforms such as Facebook personal profiles and blogs in which Palestinian students represent their identities in the cyberspace.

This argument is based on the fact that Palestinian students are using the medium as a space to express their hybrid-identities, reflecting a sense of being. Such expression gradually strikes throughout media-content in relationship with the homeland within a conflict setting. Everyday media-content becomes the context for seeking a channel and make a presence in the social media-sphere. Practices of expression and self-representation are being exposed using different media platforms that go beyond the extension of the geographical and cultural boundaries, beyond the occupation walls and its restrictions.

Content and themes of the Palestinian students posts and media interaction, based on my observation and data analysis, typically include responses to a rapid increase in the current socio-political situation in the homeland, including escalations of the ongoing conflict and Israeli blockade. It appears during times of heightened crises in the Gaza Strip, such as the electricity shortage and power cut for more than 18 hours a day, as well as during the attacks and the closure of al-Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem after the extraordinary closure heightened Israeli-Palestinian tensions.

The online observation and semi-structured interviews with a sample of the students in the diaspora has enabled this study a rich indication of how Palestinian students represent themselves and form identities which are embedded into every single word and post they make. Ayman from the Gaza Strip who lives with his wife and child in Australia, reflecting about his online daily experience in words, posting on his personal Facebook page lives in Perth posting:

[12] Interview with Tamam who has been away from Gaza for 5 years and now moved recently to start her MA in Belgium.

13

Ayman's 244-word post may give the reader a certain explanation of what makes the production of the social media of Palestinian students in the diaspora a special case. Moreover, in such similar examples, the students' social media interaction and production have a new form of identity indications and representation of the self-online. Mentioning the fact of their significant role as intellectual citizens coming from a conflict zone living in the diaspora which has different levels and dimensions of the other diasporic communities.

The social media "production" is shaped by the ongoing escalation and tension that happens in the oPt. According to Rheingold (1993), the internet is a space that " provides forums for the exchange of ideas, debate, and the mobilization of opinion, potentially culminating in strong social bonds and relationships" (Rheingold 1993:40). Many of the interviewees tended to be constantly active and concerned about the situation in the oPt. This somehow to some extent affected their social media 'production'. The term "production" or "media-content" refers to any kind of contents such as: words, messages, blogs, photos, videos that the Palestinian students share and posts on different social media platforms, in which they reflect about their identities and represent the self-online behind the screens.

The Palestinian Students' media-content is a constantly, shifting process of creation and recreation of identities. This sphere is full of different bewildering examples of well-informed and highly educated producers/users who devote their time and intellectuality on a definite issue within their realm of proficiency. Turkle (1996) explains in her publications how the mass communication influence the construction of our identities behind and on the screen.

Turkle in line with this states "the new technology shows how the use of social media and other platforms have profoundly shaped our traditional ways of thinking and feeling, how ideas carried by technology are reshaped by people for their own purposes, how computers are not just changing our lives but changing our selves" (Sherry Turkle 1996:4).

Being exposed to an immense exposure of online trauma and violence coming from the same conflict zone that you grew up in and have your own family living there shape the way we represent ourselves online, Ayman in another Facebook post reflects:

[13] Facebook posts by Ayman who is a Research Assistant at The University of Melbourne.

One multi-sited ethnographic study showed how the immense limitations imposed on mobility provokes Palestinians to (re)creating and reshaping their online Palestinian homeland (Aouragh 2011). Having said that, Palestinians also still struggle to change the situations in the off-line world. In a new era of technologies and worldwide networks, Aouragh's work shows how the virtual space brings a sense of political and affective networks but it doesn't substitute the real face-to-face interaction for Palestinians. This comes in line with my argument that the Palestinian students in the diaspora are forcibly alienated and separated as they are adhering segregating physical immobility.

On the other hand, (Tawil Souri, 2012) brings up a different dimension on the Israeli occupation which is described in her work as "digital occupation" in which Israel makes Palestinian high-tech firms into dependent agents. , Digital occupation as a space of control also enhances Israel's territorial containment of the oPt, for: "Internet users in the Gaza Strip can surf the Internet—assuming the electricity works—but are forced to do so at a high price and slow rate, effectively limiting their virtual connections and flows" (Souri 2012:35).

One of the students participating in this research said:

"there is no easy solution to physical return to the homeland of the Palestinian students in the diaspora. This brings so much tension in the digital space by the rise of virtual based communication. Overcoming the nature of Geo-Political implications and limitations" [14].

Another student added, that: "you are living your reality in pixels, virtual photos and texts. it is a struggle of existence and an arena of resistance where geography put us down but it's overcome within this space". [15] This space is

[14] Interview with Mariam, studies in Berlin.
[15] Interview with Laura, studies in London.

being used as a new arena of participation in the daily life of the Palestinian struggle, giving the boundaries embedded in the brutal geography. Palestinian students as users of these different mediums act as an audience exposed to different frustrations and depression, and ongoing news coming up from the occupied territories. Hala who studies in London is an intellectual young woman who has been away for three years. She faces losing her student residency if she tried to return to Gaza for a holiday or for research, as there is no guarantee that she would be able to get out or have a student life abroad again. She said:

"I left Gaza with the smell of the steel of the weapons, the smell of blood, and the smell of destruction and the rubble, I left it all behind, nevertheless, it's still living within me. I cannot tell if I am here in a better or bitter place. Following what is happening in my country, feeling powerless and it's the first time I feel that I should not be privileged to be here outside. I want to be there".

Users are also conveying their frustration and anger through writing, blogging and speaking up and breaking the silence where there is less fear from both sides due to the lack of physical presence from the Israeli occupation or the Palestinian forces of power in charge of the occupied territories. Going back and linking this to having an opportunity to study abroad and get access to HE which has become as a pathway of speaking up and stand against the oppression and muffling mouths. (Sari Hanafi 2005) called this "reshaping of geography". According to Hanafi, "Internet networking accomplishes this 'reshaping' by simultaneously connecting various dispersed communities not only to their centre but also to each other - periphery to periphery" (Hanafi S 2005:581).

New media is the foundation of practising virtual mobility to some extent where medium and space are key to linking territorial fragmentation, within the colonisation context of a monopoly of the means of power and violence. Another important aspect for those cases in which there is a rise in the production of social media-content and the explosion of the identities embedded into the online content is a reminder to ourselves that these students who left the homeland still living their reality and living their sense of belonging in the virtual world and still loyal and concerned about the situation in the oPt. The immense exposure of online violence and influxes of melancholy that surrounds the identity formation of the Palestinian students around the space today reflects the anxieties and tension on the relationships between place, space and identity.

## 3.5 Belonging and longing

An obvious aspect common between the participants in my interviews is that there is an element of longing and belonging in many of this hybrid media-content. Many of the diasporic students use the medium as a tool to compensate and practice their nostalgia in the public and private spheres. The evidence gathered during this investigation revolves around the realities and images of the place, belonging and longing.

The use of social media and new technology, in fact, represents strong interactions with the homeland and organic social network. The displacement of the Palestinian students and the deprivation of belonging to a state continue to affect the lives of these young bright students who were forced to leave the injustice and now being forced into different levels of injustice and oppression beyond borders. Palestinian identity is maintained, booming and alive in the so-

cial media and the cyberspace as it is the commonly shared aspect that all Palestinian students in the diaspora have along with a communal sense of injustice that is embedded into being deprived the right to live in, or return to, their homeland. A Facebook post by Sondos who studies in Canada illustrates this:

[16].

Based on my long-term observation, I have realised how the notions of longing and belonging are more rooted and generated in the diaspora. The country of origin is still the provocation of their online media-content that reflects to such complicated virtual reality. Schulz & Hammer (2003) and Victoria Mason (2008) argue that the creation and re-creation of the home in the exile reinforced by the maintenance of the cultural and social connections and linkages. In her work, she explains how Palestinian identity is shaped and constructed in the exile: "their understandings of identity, belonging and home have been shaped within the interplay of these attachments to Palestine and making sense of the realities of their life in exile in essence the intersection of the "roots" and "routes" of their lives" (Mason, V. 2007:272). Seeking HE overseas, crossing-borders and Israeli occupation barriers has contributed to the dispersion of Palestinians students, but has also contributed to a new way of constructing our identities through the medium we use to overcome this physical separation.

The new location of Palestinian students doesn't help them to have a privileged life in the diaspora. They are bombarded by several levels of belonging and longing, anger and vulnerability, displacement and survival. For instance, based around an original birthplace - to be relocated to new worlds where belonging and longing can be very challenging, this resonates with Najat who is trying to reunite with her children again. Posted on Facebook:

"Life keeps going on as though nothing remains the same, everything goes wrong and all what I do is hiding from my days, remain all alone, staying in the same place, staring to the ceiling of my room into darkness and touching my children behind the screen from distance with time difference" [17].

This problematic space presented in different media platforms make use of Palestinian social responsibility and nationality in a wider context where individuals practice their identity influenced by different dimensions of belonging and longing to connect with their home. Penkett's point is analagous, that "having been drawn away from the land, we no longer recognise it as our own. we are aliens to the soil, to the earth and to creation. Disconnected and displaced from the material world, we no longer value it as that by which we are sustained and nourished" (Penkett, L 2017:6).

[16] Sondos FB post 9 July 2017. Hamilton, Canada

[17] Facebook post by Najat doing a Ph.D. In United States, Michigan

Reflections on the production of the media-sphere that goes around solidarity and belonging become highly significant and acute throughout the intensity of the political and social climates. The medium stands as an emotional space where Palestinian students abroad congest it with visible presence in their physical absence. The notions of belonging and longing maintain and play such a sufficiently and important aspect to be worthy of attention. One of the participants reflecting about how much our lives, as Palestinians, are trapped said: "dignity is non-existent at home due to the lack off agency over our lives, whilst when we are in exile we are displaced and deprived of what we know of a meaningful life and our only choice is to begin again. We long for home, no matter how difficult the place is. The concern arises when we are unable to start a new life over and adjust to a new world[18]".

In their own words, along with my own long-term observation, the participants demonstrated the meaningful relationship between diasporic students who are already tied to an actual homeland and the creation and recreation of the online identities and its representation around the notions of longing and belonging.

[18] Shad, a Ph.D. student lives in London

# Chapter 4: Narratives of resilience

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the denial of movement, being locked inside and outside and rethinking of the place, space and Palestinian identity in the diaspora. In this way, the findings will be broken down into categories that are grounded in the personal life experiences and in-depth profiles of individuals who are members of the Palestinian students studying HE in the diaspora.

## 4.2 Entry denied

Palestinian students are denied freedom of movement due to requirements to gain permission to leave involving a long frustrating process of applying for a travel permit, made almost impossible due to the continuing closure of the borders especially in the Gaza Strip. The restriction to go back home and do further work is a further deprivation of personal and societal development as there is a fear of getting locked in and out. This reminds me of something I wrote several years agoo when I was locked in the Gaza Strip and I was fighting to get permission to come to London:

"We look at education as a way of finding an access to freedom and liberty. The aggression, depression, oppression, suffering, violence and injustice that Palestinian student experience filled us with a sense of helplessness – Hence we needed to do something to help overcome this feeling. We come to believe strongly that knowledge and education are the most powerful tools that we can use to change this reality and practise freedom". [19]

Education for Palestinians is far beyond anything supplementary that completes or enhances someone's life or an economic investment. It is seen as a way of seeking the survival of the man and its freedom, by doing so you are seeking new horizons of thinking and knowledge outside of the borders.

This caused current mediated identities embedded into the new cyber world, fundamentally and deeply linked to the reality of occupation. In their own voices saying "we all feel that we are trapped as prisoners" Mohamed, Wisam, Said, Tareq and Raghad who are scholarship-winning, visa holding and admitted to universities abroad. These young Palestinian students are trapped in the Gaza Strip due to Israeli-Egyptian blockade who witnessed their academic dreams vanishing with their bare eyes. Even though there is a possibility to apply to get a permit from the Israeli authorities to leave through the Israeli-operated Erez crossing, the exit permits are exceptionally challenging to get, because of arbitrary security complications imposed by Israel. These young guys are not alone; according, to the Israeli human rights organization, Gisha, amongst the 362 students who have successfully obtained visas (this year up to 28 September), only 73 managed to get permission from the Israeli authorities to leave through Erez crossing (Gisha 2017).

Post-modern technology and human interaction bring a challenge for educational opportunities due to the restrictions on human movement, due to

[19] My own personal diary, 2015.

the facts of the present geopolitical formations. The continuing imposed restrictions on the freedom of movement of the Palestinians from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank by the Israeli military army is enforced by "a system of fixed checkpoints, surprise flying checkpoints, physical obstructions, roads on which Palestinians are forbidden to travel, and gates along the Separation Barrier" (Btselem 2017).[20]

Israel continues to violate human rights law by its prolonged and systemised humiliating treatment of more than two million Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip. Each Palestinian needs to get approval from the Israeli (military) authorities to leave the Strip for any reason. This includes medical emergencies, but also studying abroad. Israel routinely refuses permission to Palestinians to travel abroad for studies, or leave the country. In her work, Abu Lugod (2000) explains the risks of physical separation for Palestinian people even if they try to travel in or out, since:

"Students who studied in other countries often were not permitted by Israel to return to their homeland, or, when they were permitted to return, were arrested and incarcerated in Israeli prisons" (Abu Lughod 2000:4).

Here the Palestinian students often find themselves stuck between their new realities and the realities of Palestine, mediating their identities as students through virtual worlds on social media. It becomes necessary to use the Internet and new media as the main means of bridging social worlds separated through a system of violent enclosure and locks. Palestinians in the diaspora interact and communicate through social media, as well as negotiate their identities as diasporic students through virtual worlds. This complex process has shaped new forms of identity construction through technologies that transcend, but also replicate, boundaries and borders through a form of "hyper culture" on-line, which is in line with Thompson's work in which he argues that "(n)ew technologies may be utilized to negotiate new, hybrid cultures among diaspora communities" (Thompson, 2002:410).

The current rapid use of technology in the oPt is both a window and a means of accessing the outside world physically, by moving through getting new opportunity to view HE. For many young Palestinian people aspiring to HE is a means to confront and challenge the injustices and restrictions on their freedom of movement that they experience.

## 4.3 Locked in – locked out

This section will discuss how Palestinian students negotiate being locked in and locked out by laying out these two concepts that have a long history of struggle. Palestinian students are "locked in" in the occupied cantons between the borders and occupation walls and they are "locked in" to the new social media. They are stuck in the imagined freedom that they see online behind the screens, seeking their freedom and dreaming of reaching their aspiration of participating in HE abroad.

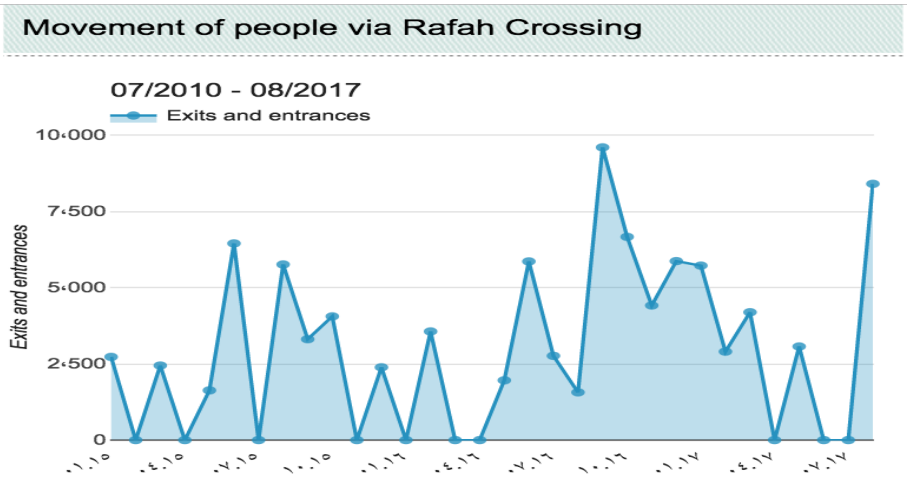
They are seeking freedom and liberation by creating opportunities and space for themselves online, with some using the Internet as a space to find universities and apply for scholarship. Wesam, 22 years old, completed many

[20] B'TSELEM - The Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories

applications to get a place on Georgetown University's 'Mepi' student leaders program but the Gaza blockade did not allow this. Wesam said:

"I was so excited about the idea of studying in the USA. For us, having the chance to get offer from a school abroad is a challenge but to make it through the Israeli walls and occupation cantons in a dream. I waited 3 months to get my permit to go to Jerusalem for the visa interview at the US embassy which is not located in Gaza but in Jerusalem. all what I got after a long time of waiting is a denial of my permission by Israel to travel through Erez crossing and devastating feeling of helplessness and powerlessness of being a prisoned object in the largest open-air prison in the world."

There is current political instability and a complex relationship between the new Egyptian regime and Palestine as well as Egyptian-Israeli cooperation that has contributed to 11 years of blockade, which has deprived thousands of students from the Gaza Strip their rights to travel and achieve their goals. (According to OCHA,, Rafah opened on a partial basis for 44 days in 2016 compared to 32 days in 2015. (OCHA, 2017))




(Gisha 2017)[21]

Others create a voice for themselves and blog and share their ideas and thoughts in different languages even though they are locked in. Wesam [22]also added:

"For me as a guy who has never been outside Gaza the only way for me to communicate with the outside world is by using the social media, I consider writing as a tool to release the anger deep inside my soul. Sharing them with people on social media makes me feel comfortable especially when my friends from different countries comment on my stories and show solidarity and support. I feel that I'm not alone in this world and that there is someone out there who really cares about what's happening here".

Afaf another Gazan who got an offer to study at Sheffield, believed her life was about to take a different direction, sharing a post on Facebook writing: "When I got the acceptance email, I recollect, I was trembling hands. I open it,

[21] Gisha is an Israeli not-for-profit organization, its goal is to protect the freedom of movement of Palestinians, especially Gaza residents. Gisha promotes rights guaranteed by international and Israeli law. Available @ http://gisha.org/about/about-gisha

[22] Wesam Alnaouq, 22 years old from the Gaza who is one of hundreds of students who lost his chance to study abroad due to the sever blockade imposed on the Gaza Strip.

I took a deep breath, and I felt sunken of joy, I am going to the UK!". Afaf was one of the students who is still stuck and locked in the Gaza Strip desperately and eagerly looking for a way to make it out of the prisoned and besieged Gaza. Afaf on a Facebook post said: "I seriously need to figure out a way to leave Gaza as soon as possible or all of what I worked for over a year, would be a mere dust".

'Locked out' is where the Palestinian students are locked out physically and separated totally from their own physical social network and they cannot simply go back home in holidays or when they finish their studies. Hala [23]comments saying during the skype interview:

"when my friends ask me, when the last time you went to see your family" holding a big sigh and continues "I tell them, it's not like booking a flight to Paris or you can easily plan your holidays, if you go back you have to think twice and you have to wait on the borders couple of months to get into an open-air prison".

Palestinians are literally locked out and have no freedom of movement and deprived from practising their right to move and to citizenship. 'Locked out-in'. On the other hand, Palestinian students in the diaspora are locked out-in by using social media and new technological platforms to communicate with their family and send updates about their life which includes negotiating pain as well as happiness and melancholy. In his reflections on exile, Said draws a beautiful illustration of being a prisoner out of your homeland where he stated:

"The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience" (Said 1990:365).

In line with this Silverstone argues "knowing where we are, is as important as knowing who we are, and of course the two are intimately connected" (Silverstone 1999: 86). "Locked out-in" in our computers and phones. Reflecting about the meaning of being Palestinian and answering the questions of where I am from and where I am now? What is Palestine for me? All these questions that don't leave 'us' as Palestinian students in peace every time we open the screen of the laptop and surf the social media-content of our friends, especially Facebook, we often find ourselves trapped in this virtual reality.

## 4.4 Rethinking Place, Space and Identity for Palestinian HE students

In this investigation, these three concepts are intertwined and interconnected as they determine the limits and boundaries of this study, forming a unique phenomenon within a specific context. Beginning with making a distinction between the place and space. To understand "Place" as a term, we have to answer the questions. Where am I now? and where I do originally belong to? For this study that is the place that is the geographical location and current position of the Palestinian students that influence their well-being and opportunities and where they are located now in the diaspora. The other being, the place where they originally come from, the West Bank, Jerusalem or the Gaza Strip, the place where

[23] Hala is PA doing a MA of Architecture in Sheffield Hallam University.

they spent the first two decades of their lives building and constructing their organic social network and identities, the place where they have a high sense of belonging and longing.

Homeland and Diaspora are contested terms where the latter one is also used to refer the dispersal of Jews beyond Israel, who live outside of their claimed inherited homeland. This comes in line with Bhatia (2006) and¨lö¨Yan (1996) who indicated in their work that this term now represents a wide-ranging group of people who have experienced dislocation. Yasser Suleiman (2016) in his masterpiece of a beautiful collection of narratives of Palestinians living in the diaspora, reflects on Palestinian identity in the diaspora, that"home is carried home in one's bones" (Suleiman, 2016: 2). Randa Farha, a Palestinian Professor at the University of Ontario quoted in his work said:

"I am tired of being a present absentee, constantly having to defend my right to be, to have been and my future right to be a Palestinian. Today, I am sliced in two: an internal world of memories and Palestinians ways of being, and an external life which I mechanically navigate, often unsuccessfully, in a western society. It is still better cold and I walk faster, I am eager to reach my home so I can listen to the news and live virtually in the Arab world. Who knows? I might be a day closer to return." (Suleiman 2016: 154).

In this personal narrative, it intellectually explains how being Palestinian acts like a burden of 'continuing struggle', being and becoming, living and dreaming and in different forms of reality and virtuality. Randa, in another quote in Suleiman's work said in line with this:

"I am neither the 'wandering Jew', a phrase often used in diaspora studies, who is living by or awaiting biblical prophecies to be released nor am I a migrant who journeys north from a post-colonial world seeking a better life. Exile or refugee are more appropriate terms to describe the ruptures, temporariness, violence I and other Palestinians suffered, and to summon our right of return" (Suleiman 2016: 151).

Georgiou (2010) argues in her work that "Diaspora refers to people who cross boundaries and who settle in locations different to those of their origins" (Georgiou 2010: 6). In Arabic language, we call it "Watan" which refer according to Lewis (1991) to the meaning of home or homeland and sentimentally associated to the commitment, devotion and love which people feel for their birthplace or place of origins (Lewis 1991: 524).

On the term "space" or "cyberspace" Bryant comments, "this word has stormed into our language and invaded our collective consciousness like no other" (Bryant 2001:138). Due to the rapid increase of technology and its usage in our daily life, we became completely dependent on this space that has invaded different aspects of our lives that link to daily practices that articulate our experiences. To Batty (1993) the space is becoming more important than physical space itself. On the other hand, (Benedikt 1991:15) sees it as a "parallel universe". This space as an aspect to shape our belonging to a place is consequently a complicated feature of the diasporic Palestinian identity. The prolonged history of elimination, wiping off and expulsion of the Palestinian heritage and population bring several thoughts of reflection and rethinking about the self and who we are, where we from and where we belong to. "Place" and "space" in Palestinian identity is a challenge at offering an analytical realm where their currently separated lines of intellectual inquires can meet and merge into one analytical discourse: that of post-modern online identities in conflict settings.

Taking the internet as an actual space of human interaction in which it uncovers the processes of dealing with the unjust past and uncertain future and with the rapid ongoing development of technology, inventions and mediums which is the one side of development we can sense and keep track with. There is another side of development that comes as a consequence of the first, that is the one we do not see and we cannot dare to question: the construction of the new mediated identities of the Palestinian students. This space is being used as a new arena of participation in the daily life of the Palestinian struggle, within the boundaries embedded in geography, Palestinian students as users of these different mediums act as echo chambers, reflecting and reinforcing about their struggle and exile.

In his article, "Identity, Space and the Media: Thinking through Diaspora" Georgiou (2010) triggers the correlation between the three concepts, the space, place and identity which cannot be fully understood if not through the other. As stated by him "the mediated connections within and across space that provide human subjects information and communication for being and becoming" (Georgiou 2010:02).

These three concepts bring together the meaning of identity and the reality in the virtuality as well as forming different layers of belonging and longing. What makes this case critical is the displacement of the Palestinian students as they are isolated in a new form of online being - a place of being and doing. The link between the space and diaspora is the social human interaction of internet-based communication between the diasporic communities and the homeland. These are going on within and take a place in the medium, as the Palestinian students have different multiple levels of diaspora and do not enjoy their rights of mobility and freedom of movement back and forth to where they originated from.

The argument here that the Palestinian students are increasingly developing their sense of becoming and belonging in relation to the medium "the mediated connections within and across space that provide human subjects information and communication for being and becoming" (Georgiou 2010: 17). Georgiou argues that the developing mediation that happens through this medium is increasingly growing within the diasporic communities as transactional communications that capture human connection across boundaries (Georgiou 2010).

In the cyber world, we construct our identities and are presented by virtual profiles. It doesn't matter if it is Facebook or Twitter or Instagram as they are all functioning to the same purpose. The user constructs a virtual profile by sharing a reality embedded into posts, photos, videos, music, and making a connection between other individuals and communities. one's identity emerges from what you represent, what you are associated and connected with. Circulation where the Palestinian students circulates any type of media content that resonates with their experiences and resonate with their ideas and thoughts, especially that concerning the continued struggle, circulation comes in forms of reposting links, photos, posts blogs and any type of information that may tackle the phenomenon of identity crises.

## 4.5 Bringing the case of Mohamed Awad

The story of Mohamed is a fascinating example of how social media, identity and having the aspiration of achieving HE abroad combines to form an example of a struggle under the wire and till the end. Mohamed went through so much to make it to Goldsmiths, University of London. According to him, living in Gaza shaped him into a peaceful warrior, faithfully and actively fighting for a better life for himself and for others.

Having the opportunity of pursuing HE abroad is not something Mohamed took for granted as he almost lost his chance to leave the Gaza Strip. Mohammed Awad won a full scholarship after applying for ten different scholarships, holding onto the hope of leaving the Strip: "I spent a long time and efforts filling applications to get such an amazing opportunity." Mohamed refused to be oppressed and a victim of the occupation and instead raised his voice using his Facebook account and let his message be heard. , whilst hundreds of Palestinian Students are still trapped within the occupation walls and the besieged Gaza Strip.

Mohamed was one of the students who luckily managed to make it. Posting on Facebook Mohammed stated on the 12th of September 2017:

Mohamed was losing time but holding onto hope to get the permission to leave the Gaza Strip. In another Facebook post with a photocopy of his Visa on September 21, he mentions that his course starts on October 1 and his UK visa expires on Oct 13:

Until the beginning of the course, Mohamed had no clue what would happen with his future as he got a notification from the Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs in Gaza: "They told me you must wait till Nov 14th just to get a reply from Israel's Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT)".

An online petition run by students from Goldsmiths supported Mohamed and put more pressure on the UK Government to help this young Palestinian student who had been denied exit permission from Gaza to be able to take up his place at Goldsmiths. The petition was signed by 2,638 supporters and Mohamed's Facebook posts got an enormous amount of attention from pro-Palestinian activists, students' unions and foreign media as well British MP, Vicky Foxcrof, who personally got involved in his case. Mohamed's story got covered by more than ten media agencies including: Middle East Monitor, The Independent, The Canary and RT UK.

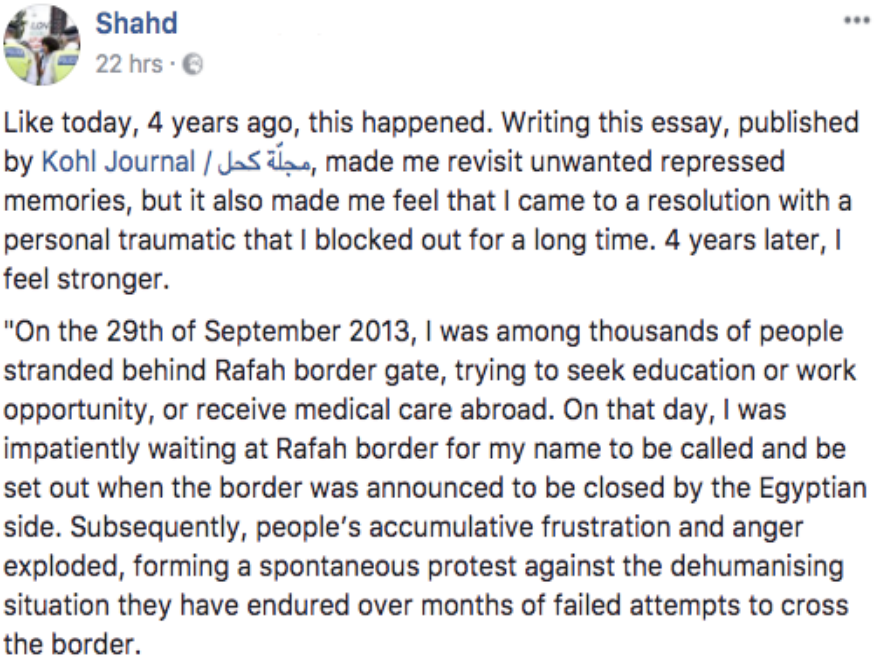
Gisha spokesperson Shai Grunberg has said: "Since Rafah has remained closed for extensive periods of time, Israel has come under pressure to allow students from Gaza to travel abroad via Erez Crossing and Allenby Bridge, and from Jordan to their destinations abroad. However, the policy on this issue is not fixed, and changes unpredictably and arbitrarily" (Independent 2017). After all of this media coverage, Israel's COGAT made a Facebook post on its official page informing Mohamed that he would be allowed to exit the following Tuesday.

Mohammed Awad is delighted that he's now safe and sound here in the UK and he has already started his university course after an epic journey. On October 4, Mohammed arrived at Heathrow Airport from Jordan and shortly after started his Master's Degree in Multilingualism, Linguistics, & Education. A friend of Mohamed from London shared his thoughts on Facebook: "We campaigned. We raised awareness. We applied pressure. We spoke to a rare sympathetic individual at COGAT. We got UK politicians involved. We got Goldsmiths Students' Union and the NUS on-board. We made a big noise and shined a light on the reality of daily life in Gaza and the restrictions, brutalisation and barriers Palestinians face."

## 4.6 The story of Shahd

Shahd is a bright young Palestinian student, originally from the Gaza Strip, who was born and raised in Jabalia Refugee Camp. Shahd has a Master's degree in Media and the Middle East from SOAS-University of London. Shahd now lives in the UK and is working towards her PhD at Sheffield Hallam University.

She introduces herself on her Facebook profile as "a Palestinian whose eagerness for justice drives her campaigning, creative and journalistic work". Shahd is one of the participants who has inspired this research with her fighting spirit for the Palestinian people by using different social media platforms. This is connected to her reality of activism and involvements with youth and students' unions in the UK as well as working and endorsing the BDS movement.




The above Facebook post by Shahd reflects on having left the Gaza Strip. Like other Palestinians, she grew up with scenes of horror and injustice which shaped her consciousness of the reality of oppression and aggression. Through her worldwide audience of followers and activists, she brings an insightful example of the self-representation of Palestinian students studying abroad. Through her blog, Shahd says she is able to raise the voice of the voiceless, to highlight marginalized issues, such as the plight of Palestinian political prisoners and bring up cases that are not covered and reported by the international mainstream media. Shahd has 16,248 followers on her blog, is followed by 4,545 people on Facebook and 11,900 followers on Twitter.

In her personal blog "Palestine from My Eyes," she writes "The lack of Palestinian voices from Gaza who could connect to the outside world motivated me to start my English language blog, 'Palestine from My Eyes.' Shahd sees her widely-read blog as a tool of self-representation, mobilization, documentation, educating others about the struggle of the Palestinian people.

Shahd went through a long journey to make it across the Gaza Strip borders, to follow her dreams and passion of studying abroad. In an essay, she described herself as she was "stranded at the Border Crossing", a place that according to her has become a metaphor for "the world's biggest open-air prison." Shahd added in another Facebook post supporting the BDS movement: "I'm a survivor of multiple deadly Israeli attacks launched on Gaza ever since my birth, and being punished for my identity was the story of my life. This is not just my personal struggle, but a collective one, shared by Palestinians everywhere. Our only offence is our identity, our history, our culture. Being Palestinian is our offence."

In another post in her blog that was read by 185,749 people, Shahd describes the pain and agony embedded into the new technology of distance and exile:

> Skype is now my crouch that I lean on to ease the pain, but Skype doesn't allow me to touch their skin, or contemplate the new wrinkles that appear on their faces. It stands in the way of feeling the full extent of their unconditional love such that I live on its memory to recharge myself. It doesn't allow me to show how much I love them, in return.

(Shahd 2017[24])

Exploring the participants' experiences within the space of being a student abroad, combining the virtual reality of the human interaction within the medium allowed for understanding of how participants such as Shahd created phenomenal examples of the identity and self-representation of using social media platforms. During observations of the participant's media-content, I tried to pay more attention to both textual and physical interactions and find the link between these two realms to see if the first influences the latter.

On the 20th of July 20, Shahd's young brother got married in the Gaza Strip. Shahd couldn't go back to attend her brother's wedding and be there with her mother and father so she watched the wedding online live, virtually instead of being there physically. Posting on Facebook, Shad wrote: "I'm feeling emotional, watching the videos from my brother's wedding…..Gaza is an open-air prison; Israel and Egypt are collaborating to ensure its gates are shut in the face of thousands of people stranded at its both ends. But yes, it still has space for celebrations and happiness."

During my online video interview, Shahd opened my eyes about many things which I had never considered about "being Palestinian" whilst studying abroad. Shahd brought up the term "Survivor guilt", which developed during the 1960s in a relation to Holocaust survivors (see, e.g Garwood 1996). After the interview, I read several pieces of literature on Holocaust survivors. Garwood argues in his work that, "the essential psychic process underlying survivor guilt is self-blame which is a defensive omnipotent phantasy" (Garwood 1996:243). This overwhelming feeling of powerlessness, helplessness and vulnerability is something that not just Shahd feels, but other students including me do as well. These feelings perhaps generate an urgent need to use social media, to overcome this feeling created by the Israeli occupation.

[24] A post shared on Shad's personal blog, available @palestinefrommyeyes

> "We are still subject to violence even though we are out of the conflict zone. We are almost exiled and unable to return, which plants fear of losing contact with our families. It's not as visible and life threating as back home. We are aware. We lived this life. We are still living it in a way. We know that we don't live it as extremely as they do. And that is where the survival guilt comes from."

Shahd defines "Survivor guilt", as a sense of deep guilt, which lives within you in every aspect of your life. To overcome this survival guilt, we constantly try to use our 'freedom' from the open-air prisons of Palestine. Shahd uses social media: posting; writing; and sharing news about what happens on the ground in Palestine in English. In this way, she added, "now we are overcoming the distance by being present on social media". When she was in Gaza, Shahd was more active in protests and used social media in what she described as a "meaningful and grounded way". Living here, she feels a gap between the place where she used to live and where the events happen and the space she now uses to share her reflections. She said:

> "Now our lives go in parallel with what happens in Palestine. I remember when I was in Gaza, I was more active using social media compared to nowadays. I was on the ground, reporting and posting from the same place that events took place, so place and space somehow were connected."

Shahd realises that her ambitions and professional academic aspiration are driven by her lived experiences that she had back home:

> "We are now living in a comfort zone. I feel privileged having access to all these mediums constantly and using them in different ways, even though I have had to pay a huge price to get such a privilege - being away from home, segregated from my own organic social circle and unable to go back."

Shahd's contribution shows how the use of social media presents elements of the reality of everyday life of the students as well as being part of wider of mass national diasporic intellectuals. This gives rise to a different dimension of identity construction, facilitated by technological developments in communicative and representational social platforms.

## 4.6 Bringing my own personal Narrative to this research

Sitting behind the screen of my laptop, the medium, facing so much difficulty, trying to put my thoughts into actual words, I am exposed to an immense scale of pain and struggle coming out from the place I was born and spent the first two decades of my life. The place where I built my personality, passion, dreams and hunger for freedom was also where I constructed my own aspirations to pursue HE. This was where I built my norm identities which have been established over time by Palestinian nationalisms and politicisms, which were and are constructed by social or political institutions and by interactions with other people.

The agony of distance and absence is doubled when you watch your blood brother dying in front of you, suffering from chronic hepatitis B with continuing dialysis and pneumonia. My brother fled from Gaza to Germany seeking survival and life for his ill body, through a long journey all the way from

Egypt to Turkey and Italy, before finally ending up in Germany. The real distance is vituperative when your mother calls you helpless to change this reality of the place and space. My helpless self cannot do any useful thing to take my mother to give my brother the last kiss on his forehead. Making a call on Facebook, my brother is unconscious but my mother insists that she wants to whisper in his ears and tell him to forgive her using this medium. It is painful to see our parents going through this trauma of longing and grieving.

We are not permitted a family visit to my brother who has been in a coma and in intensive care for more than a month at the time of writing these words. There is a cruelty that cannot be accurately described in a research paper, watching your brother, who has chronic Hepatitis B, dying, whilst seeking treatment in Germany, and not being able to take your mother to visit him. Our family is not permitted access to travel to see him, because of our nationality. The negotiation of the pain and suffering of Palestinian students using the medium as a way of communication and representation cannot be covered in this research paper. Listing examples of reliance and resistance in words is just an elusive desire. There is a revolution embedded into this technology. There is so much pain and agony. I am devastated, sad and heartbroken.

## 4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to put more emphasis on presenting my findings around personal narratives and in-depth profiles of the Palestinian students studying abroad. The chapter discussed scenarios about the restrictions of movement, negotiating being locked inside and outside and rethinking of the place, space and Palestinian identity in the diaspora. This was presented alongside with several key insights drawing on evidence from social media posts.

# Chapter 5: Conclusion

This modest contribution presents the self-representation of Palestinian students studying HE abroad (in the diaspora) through an online investigation. Using a grounded theory methodology, I conducted interviews with 20 Palestinian students where they related issues of self-representation to narratives of students from inside and outside Palestine in order to understand the correlation between having a HE opportunity and new identities represented online.

The development of this thesis has been aided by my own experience as a Palestinian student travelling and living abroad for the last two years far away from the Gaza Strip, my home. The theoretical framework and the methods applied in this study were grounded on the principles of the daily life experiences of the Palestinian students studying HE in the diaspora. Even those outside Palestine are constantly enduring global injustice and displacement. Through conducting this research and using a grounded theoretical framework, drawing from the data collected and related literature we can begin to understand this phenomenon of negotiated mediated identities.

The research focussed on Palestinian students who are now based in different regions, yet with similar backgrounds and origins. Notwithstanding that my initial research focussed on online identities of both women and men, I was struck at the complications and difficulties that women not just face on the way to fulfilling their dreams and pursuing HE abroad, but as well their online and self-representation and the identity tension they have between where they live and where they come from. During my online interviews with a diverse group of women, they often shared how the medium and the social media, in particular, functions as critical to their feminist identities and activism.

On the social media realm, their feminism is considered to be problematic, not only for their family but for the whole society where they come from – where they are seen as potential mothers not future builders and dreamers, coming from a traditional, patriarchal culture. These young women are struggling to have the right to make their own life choices and have life changing experiences through participating in HE opportunities. These experiences have opened many opportunities and the potential to build new identities to many of the women I interviewed.

The cyber world simply cannot be confiscated by any occupying power. Based on my findings, students from Palestine have reached inspiring prestigious universities and now stand as role models to other young people. Nadira Shalhoub (2010) described the belligerence of Israeli polices in putting more restriction on the movement of the Palestinian students and using it as a tool of "collective punishment" due to the severe blockade in the Gaza Strip and deadly checkpoints in the West Bank. She also mentions that it is a tool that Israel uses to deprive Palestinians from having a safe and secure education which continues to be violated, which leads to an ultimate subordination of the right to education for "security considerations". Shalhoub shows how "education becomes supremely politicized within the larger field of power mediating colonizer–colonized relations" (Shalhoub, 2010:336-370). The intention had not been to focus on the education itself, but rather on education as a way of creating new pathways of (mediated) identity construction for Palestinian HE students, especially

those locked out, but also those locked in. This study has shown how accessing higher education can play a very vital role in building new ways of thinking and rethinking about the self. Of course, self-representations of Palestinian students on-line cannot be contained in one modest research paper, and I hope that my research leads to further research on this topic.

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