Sherbet House: Designing Iranian Culture for the United States

Atena Masoudi

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The relationship between Iran and the United States (both culturally and politically) is at a very low level because of decades of diplomatic (and at times military) conflicts. As a result, the American public is not familiar with Iranian culture. This paper describes a marketing campaign designed to develop cultural understanding between the two countries through the promotion of popular Iranian beverages. I chose Iranian beverages due to my observation that there is no market for them in the United States and my belief that a widespread and targeted campaign has the potential of becoming a successful product. The marketing campaign aims to raise awareness about Iran’s culture and history through identity, typography, packaging, virtual reality and app design.

INDEX WORDS: Culture, Iran, Beverage, Sherbet, Virtual reality, Packaging design, Travel experience, Bridge, Iranian, Persian, Calligraphy, Typography, Motion graphic, App design
SHERBET HOUSE

DESIGNING IRANIAN CULTURE FOR THE UNITED STATES

by

ATENA MASOUDI

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Art
in the College of the Arts
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2018
SHERBET HOUSE
DESIGNING IRANIAN CULTURE FOR THE UNITED STATES

by

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1 INTRODUCTION

While Iranian cuisines are fairly popular in the United States, Iranian beverages have gained far less, if any, popularity in the country. This low demand for Iranian beverages can be attributed to the country’s negative sentiments towards Iran and also lack of supply chains from Iran to the United States. On the other hand, main ingredients of Iranian cuisines are common in the United States while traditional Iranian beverages are made from foreign ingredients that do not have common usage in the country. Essentially, unlike Iranian cuisines, a market for Iranian beverages has never been shaped in the United States.

A recent Gallup research poll shows that 14% of Americans view Iran as the United States’ greatest enemy.¹ This strong unfavorable view towards Iran will inevitably create misconceptions about Iranian culture. Food as part of the cultural heritage of each society inevitably gets hurt from lack of cultural attraction in a host country. A successful campaign on introducing Iranian beverage culture can refine the view on Iran. The two main goals of this thesis are to introduce Iranian beverages as competitive drinks to the United States market and to build a bridge between two cultures. To achieve these goals, this project designs a marketing campaign for promoting Iranian beverages and presents it in gallery format. The idea is that a successful new foreign product can improve the knowledge about the country of origin, and as a result can mitigate the misconceptions about Iran while the product itself can potentially attract young adults’ interest.

Since one goal of this project is to promote Iranian culture and to change misconceptions about Iran, the target group of the products are young consumers (those age 20 to 34), with the premise being that this campaign would be more effective on them, primarily because they are

more accepting of new products and cultures. Besides, this demographic consists of more than 21 percent of the US population.²

The idea of using food products as a way to gain cultural attention has been around for decades Culinary Diplomacy (also known as Gastrodiplomacy)³ is based on a notion that “The easiest way to win hearts and minds is through the stomach”. The most famous practice of culinary diplomacy is perhaps the Thai global sponsored by Thailand government in early 2000s to increase the number of Thai restaurants by roughly 50 percent.⁴ This initiative was hoping to expand and deepen the relationship between Thailand and other countries as well as introducing Thai food to people. Conflict Kitchen⁵ – founded in 2010 in Pittsburgh, PA– attempt to introduce food “from countries with which the United States is in conflict.”⁶ As with Global Thai, the idea behind conflict kitchen is to use food as a medium for social exchange about countries, cultures, and people that an average American might know very little about them.

This campaign builds an environment that represents elements of a traditional sherbet house in Iran in small art gallery. The installation also consists of a virtual reality experience and presents a brief history of the product along with a series of designs for the beverage packaging. One advantage of this type of campaign is that it provides a personal experience of Iran using virtual reality⁷ technology. The use of modern technology makes the campaign more intriguing, especially for the target group of the campaign (young adults). The campaign consists of

⁵ conflictkitchen.org “Conflict kitchen.” https://www.conflictkitchen.org/
⁶ The opening menu of the restaurant was Persian. Other menus includes Afghanistan, Cuba, North Korea, Venezuela, Palestine, and Haudenosaunee.
⁷ Virtual reality (VR) is a technology that creates images, senses, and sounds that resembles a physical experience in a virtual environment generally using VR headsets.
different components that are designed to introduce Iran and more specifically to provide information about the *sherbet houses* and the Iranian beverages.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Component 2 describes the background information about Iran and US relations, history of the Iranian beverages, and the technology used in the campaign; component 3 represent the implementation process of the campaign; component 4 reports the results; and, component 5 concludes the paper.

## 2 BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Aiming to Build a Bridge between the Two cultures (Iran and the United States)

Iran is a Middle Eastern country that is the home to one of the oldest world civilizations which dates back to 7000 BC \(^8\) (*Figure 1*). It has been one of the most influential countries in the world throughout history. However, that is not the case now. Its ancient history almost exclusively belongs to books, and its cultural influence in the US, if not vanished completely, is fading fast. While this might be considered natural since almost all ancient civilizations are now either extinct or to a large extent demised, the case of Iran is different because the general public view towards Iran around the world is widely unfavorable.

Around 40 years of tense relations between Iran and the United States has had devastating effect on the view of Americans toward Iran. A recent poll conducted by Gallup shows that American consider Iran the fourth greatest enemy of the United States, after North Korea, Russia, and China.\(^9\) Lack of political communication between the two countries


significantly raises the risk to Americans travelling to Iran and prevents formation of a proper understanding between cultures. The media and anti-Iran leaders in America also have significant influence in increasing misconceptions about Iranian culture in the United States. Besides, while many Iranians have come to US pursuing higher education or bright future, the reverse has rarely occurred for Americans, so that there are few unfiltered, first hand observations of Iran among Americans.\textsuperscript{10}

Figure 1. Wikimedia. 2011. Iran in the world. SVG format. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Iran_in_the_world_(W3).svg

2.2 The Medium of Communication

Food and beverages are an essential segment of Iranian culture. Each part of Iran has its own unique types of foods and beverages that are specific to their culture and environment that

\textsuperscript{10} It worth noting that the view toward Iran is growing more and more positive during the past decade (At least before the election of the new U.S. administration), but more work is required to take people closer together.
represent their identity. Food and beverage are about hospitality, sharing and communication in our culture. Surprisingly, however, Iran is known to many people around the world through Persian cuisine but not its beverages.

As mentioned above, Iranian foods are far more popular than its drinks in the United States. This campaign focuses specifically on Iranian drinks to display an unexplored aspect of the Iranian way of life. The goal of this project is that a successful campaign would increase the demand for Iranian beverages in the United States, and consequently provide a bridge to embracing the culture.

In Iran, alcohol is prohibited due to enforcement of the sharia law and as a result all the drinks and beverages are non-alcoholic. There exist about 30-40 types of cold drinks, called Sherbets, in Iran. The most common ingredients of Iranian Sherbets are flower essences and flower seeds. Each Sherbet has its own medical benefits that people are very well aware of in Iran. There used to be popular businesses in Iran which were called Sherbet houses (Figure 2,3), literally in English means beverage bar, where people would gather to socialize with each other and drink Sherbets. The Sherbet Houses are deemed as must visit tourist attractions.

Just like its modern counterparts (such as a coffeehouse like Starbucks) in the Sherbet Houses, people would usually engage in group conversations, but unlike the coffee shops, it was customary to read and listen to poetry and stories from Shahnameh (The Book of Kings) – A fourth century masterpiece of Persian poetry.11 The Sherbet houses served traditional beverages (Sherbets) such as Tokhme Sherbet, Saffron Sherbet, Khakeshir, and Rose water Sherbet. Each of them has its own exotic taste and health benefits. Besides their daily usage by people, many of

11 The Shahnameh is considered to have had a significant influence on conserving Iranian culture across generations.
them are also served in various events, celebrations, and festivals. Below is a brief description of each beverage that is used in the campaign:

Tokhme Sherbet

Tokhme Sherbet, chia seed in English, is a traditional beverage that people drink it more in high temperature and is known as thirst quencher. This is usually served in religious ceremonies in Iran. It is cultivated in different cities in Iran. The seed is an extraordinary source of calcium, potassium, and omega-3.

Saffron Sherbet

“Red crimson” is a main spice of Persian cuisine. It is another traditional beverage with delicate taste, aroma and healing abilities. The origin of Saffron is in Khorasan province that is located in northeast Iran.

Khakeshir

It is called teff or herb-Sophia in English. Khakeshir is another popular and refreshing Persian drink to quench the thirst, especially during summer. It is a relieving beverage with abundant health benefits.

Rose water Sherbet

Rose water Sherbet is the product of distilling rose petals. It is discovered by the Persian physician Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 980-1037). It has an exotic flavor, which combines all tart, sweet and floral tastes simultaneously.
Figure 2. Bahare Askari. 2017. Firooz Sherbet House. Isfahan, Iran. 56inch x 42 inch.

Figure 3. Bahare Askari. 2017. Firooz Sherbet House. Isfahan, Iran. 56inch x 42 inch.
2.3 Target Audience Analysis for Iranian Beverages Products

The two main goals of the project are introducing the Iranian culture and promoting traditional Iranian beverages in the United States. Tables 1-3 summarize the characteristics of the targeted consumers of the products.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-34 years old</td>
<td>F &amp; M</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Median</td>
<td>Higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(children)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Psychographic Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychographic</th>
<th>Interests</th>
<th>Attitudes</th>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Drinks</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Hope</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinks</td>
<td>Luxury</td>
<td>Interested</td>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>Clear-mindedness, Competition, Eagerness,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxury</td>
<td>Healthy</td>
<td></td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Education, Encouragement, Ethics, Health,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy</td>
<td>New</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Peace, Sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tables 1-2 show demographic, psychographic, and behavioristic identification of the target audience of this project in the United States. Young adults are targeted in the project because young people are more eager to experience new things, and they are more accepting toward new ideas; thus, they are more likely to be attracted to the product. Since the products count as a luxury product with high health benefit, we also focus on individuals with above median income.\(^\text{12}\)\(^\text{13}\) Table 2 specifies the psychographics of the ideal audience of the products.


The focus is on the individuals who are interested in technology and new things, are independent, and love drinks.

2.4 Design media

The main medium of design in the campaign is typography, which is used to design the interior of the gallery. Typography uses language as a mean of communication. Therefore, it is the most straightforward way of connection with the audience. However, in the campaign, I used a combination of Persian and English words. Since Persian vocabulary is not understandable with most American audience, I created patterns – based on word repetition – using Iranian symbols.

The center piece of the campaign is the design of the products packages that also benefit from typography. I used letters of the word IRAN in both Persian and English to design four different packages. In each design, I used one of the letters of Iran. I created circular patterns by repetition of one of the Persian and English letters (Figure 4). There are four main bright colors used in the designs that are inspired from traditional Iranian crafts. Two of the colors (pink and orange) resemble the color of the products (rose water Sherbet and saffron Sherbet, respectively). For the Tokhm Sherbet and Khakeshir packages, I chose yellow and light green, respectively, since these colors have better contrast with the products as can be seen in the pictures (Figure 5).

I used three fonts in my designs. For the beverages’ name, I used Lighthouse font since its shape and curvature is closer to Persian calligraphy (in particular Nastaliq font). I used Avenir to describe the product in the packages. I also used Nastaliq Urdu (the letter is same Persian Nastaliq letter) font in the packages for its challenging and genuine visual form to encourage curious people to learn more about the product by visiting the app (Figure 6).
The front side of the package includes the brand name, the product name, some highlighted information about the product. The bottom of front view include the word “Sherbet” in Persian (شربت) which maintains the same style and position but is displayed in a different color (Figure 7). I named the product Pol, which means bridge, as a symbol for friendship and closeness of the two cultures. There are four products introduced in the campaign, namely, Tokhm Sherbet, Khakeshir, Rose water Sherbet, and Saffron Sherbet. The back design contains the general information about the ingredients and nutrition facts (Figure 8). In the side of the package, I designed a simple word game that encourages the consumers to learn simple trivia about Iran and encourages the audience to follow a link in their electronic devices for more information (Figure 9). This is to inform the consumers about a fact on Iran and aims to have a positive impact on their perspective of Iran by presenting facts about Iran that the consumers may not be aware of. For those curious consumers who visit the app, there would be more information about the products, Iran, and its culture and traditions. Lastly, the top side of the package contains the circular patterns described above (Figure 10, 11).

Another aspect of the campaign is the use of virtual reality technology. Virtual reality is a well-known technology in gaming and film making industries. In recent years, virtual reality has opened a new dimension in the tourism industry. Virtual reality travel experiences (henceforth, VRTE) not only save time and money, but also allow people to travel around the world from their couches. Some of the best virtual reality travel applications are Google Earth VR, The Grand Canyon Experience, and Everest VR.14 Hence, VRTE can provide the audience with the chance to visit sherbet houses in Iran and have a personal experience of Iran. Traveling to Iran comes with great expense, therefore VRTE provides a less expensive travel option. The final

component, I designed an app consisting of three sections. The first and most important section contains information about the Sherbets. In this section, I introduce the Sherbets, provide background information about each of them and list all their health and nutritional benefits. It also contains information about the Sherbets production processes for which I designed several illustrations to show all steps of production.

Section two and three focuses on Iran. Section two contains a map of Iran that the audience can click on to see Iran’s different provinces. Then they will be pushed to a separate page in which there is information about traditional and conventional sherbet houses in the selected province. The third section is about Persian language, which further contains two subsections. First, it introduces the Persian alphabet. In this part, the viewer can choose any Persian letter and hear its pronunciations and phonetics. In the second part, the audience can write their name (or any other word they want) and see how that word would be written in Persian (Figure 12).

Figure 5. Atena Masoudi. 2017. Main color palette for each bottle. Adobe Illustrator.

Figure 6. Three different Fonts. Adobe illustrator.
Figure 7. Atena Masoudi. 2017. Front view. Adobe illustrator, Adobe Photoshop, Photography.


Figure 10. Atena Masoudi. 2017. Top view. Photography
Figure 11. Atena Masoudi. 2017. All beverages from 4 views. Adobe illustrator, Adobe Photoshop, Photography
3 IMPLEMENTATION

The gallery consists of 7 sections: map, language, package, animated typography, shelf display, app design, and virtual reality. Typography is the primary design element of all sections. I designed a combination of Persian and English words in all of the sections. The following describes inside of the gallery.

The map is the first section the audience observes when they enter the gallery. This includes the map of Iran and its provinces and major cities. There is a brief summary of Iranian geography, its climate, and its neighboring countries. A photo album alongside the map allows the audience to find the location of the sherbet houses in Iran. It should also be noted that both the map and the photo album are inside a traditional Iranian door, welcoming their entrance to
the gallery. On the top of the door, the word map is connected with a circular motif created by the repetition of the word map in Persian.

The next section is language, where audience learn about the Persian alphabet, and the English letters that correspond to the them. There are also pieces of paper where they can write their names in Persian (with the help of an assistant).

In the next section, the audience observes the designed packages for the four products in the campaign. These packages are designed using MAYA (3D modelling package) and provide a view of the front, back, side, and top of the packages.

To the right of the package illustration, I designed animated typography, projected onto a wide and large wall. It projects words of Iran in both English and Persian rotate and create motives closely similar to Persian motives.

In the center of the gallery, the beverage package is displayed to give a better view of how the design looks in fully dimensional form. The next section is package display, where prototypes of the packages appear in a regular supermarket shelf around other drinks to display how its design compares to other products in a real-world situation.

App design is the context of the next stage where I present the app in large screen and navigate through different pages of the application.

The virtual reality experience is the last section of the campaign. There are three 360-degree photos of historic, traditional, and modern sherbet houses in Iran. My goal is to present the evolution of the sherbet houses over centuries and how they compare to one other.

It should also be noted that as the main theme of the campaign, there will be a testing experience of the four main products for the audience. The feedbacks taken from the audience
eventually leads to a better marketing of the products that are liked by the consumers and therefore have a better chance of earning a market share in the future (Figure 13-22).

Figure 13. Atena Masoudi. 2017. Thesis Exhibition at Ernest Welch Gallery, left side of the gallery. Photography.

Figure 16. Atena Masoudi. 2017. Thesis Exhibition at Ernest Welch Gallery, right side of the gallery. Photography.

Figure 17. Atena Masoudi. 2017. Thesis Exhibition at Ernest Welch Gallery, Map section. Photography.

Figure 19. Atena Masoudi. 2017. Thesis Exhibition at Ernest Welch Gallery, Beverage section. Photography.

4 RESULTS

The thesis exhibition was held from March 5\textsuperscript{th} to March 8\textsuperscript{th}, 2018 in the Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design Gallery at Georgia State University. Overall, the audience seemed excited about the experience (by oral and written comments). As was expected, people were not very familiar with Iran. However, people were eager to know more about Iran and the two sections that caught a lot of attention were the language and virtual reality. The High-tech presentation of an unexplored location and a drastically different alphabet can intrigued the curious viewers. This gave me hope there is an interest in the culture and, with the right medium, one can positively affect the view of public. Of the four beverages in the gallery, rose water Sherbet was the most popular one, although other beverages also had their own fans. I saw some
students following the motifs on the wall with their hands, probably out of curiosity over uniquely different arrangement of Persian words and motifs.

Overall, the feedback I received from visitors was very encouraging and demonstrated there may be a real chance for promoting the beverages in the United States. However, I realize that sample of audience were particularly small and to have a better view of how people react to these new foreign products, we need to have a larger and more diverse participants. (Figure 23-25).


5 CONCLUSIONS

The campaign described in the paper explores a broad concept of using food and drinks as a medium of deepening social relations with other countries. Governments of many countries such as Thailand, South Korea\textsuperscript{15}, and Peru\textsuperscript{16} have initiated programs to expand their public relations around the world through food. Inspired by this line of works, I attempted to create the same experience for Iran. However, unlike previous programs (to the best of my knowledge), the focus is on Iranian beverages rather than Iranian cuisines. Iranian beverages are undiscovered products in the United States that have the potential to gain a lot of popularity with the support of a successfully targeted marketing campaign. In this project, I focused on a number of these beverages and designed comprehensive packages for them. I designed beverages’ packages, an app for introducing the products, and created 360-degree images, displayed by VR technology. The pilot launch of the campaign in my thesis exhibition can be counted as a successful experience in which I received constructive feedback. The audience showed genuine affection and interest to the products and the underlying cause of the campaign. This campaign was also a manifestation of the friendship between the nations and the fact that the conflicts among governments cannot sustain friction among people for a long time and sooner or later people will rejoin one another.

\textsuperscript{15} Pham, Mary Jo. "Food as communication: A case study of South Korea’s gastrodiplomacy." \textit{Journal of International Service} 22, no. 1 (2013): 1-22.

\textsuperscript{16} Matta, Raúl. "Food incursions into global heritage: Peruvian cuisine's slippery road to UNESCO." \textit{Social Anthropology} 24, no. 3 (2016): 338-352.
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