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Scenario Planning for the Future of the Iranian Graphic Design Industry

Ahad Ravanjoo *
Assistant Professor, Department of Graphic Arts, Shushtar School of Art, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran, ravanjoo.ahmad@gmail.com
Mohsen Hazarian
Master's Degree in Graphic Design, Shahid Chamran University, Ahvaz, Iran. E-mail: mohsenhazarian@iran.ir

Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to conduct a futures study of the Iranian graphic design sector with a horizon up to 1414 (2035), outlining plausible scenarios in light of technological and social transformations.

Method :The research uses a mixed-methods approach (qualitative–quantitative). In the qualitative phase, a literature review and semi-structured interviews with experts identified key drivers and critical uncertainties, with data analyzed through thematic analysis and qualitative coding. In the quantitative phase, supplementary data were gathered via an online questionnaire from 20 active designers and specialists, and analyzed descriptively to validate and enhance the qualitative findings.

Findings: Two critical uncertainties were identified: the speed of technological transformation and the level of policy support. The intersection of these uncertainties produced four alternative scenarios: Digital Creative Leap, Conservative Support, Risky Free Market, and Traditional Stagnation. Comparing these scenarios highlighted that the future of graphic design in Iran is strongly influenced by supportive policies, technological infrastructure, and the alignment of the educational system with emerging needs.

Conclusion: The findings emphasize that the future of this sector is not deterministic or linear but shaped by multiple pathways, with decisions made today in policy, academia, and industry playing a key role. The study's importance lies in identifying drivers and developing diverse scenarios that allow for flexible planning and risk reduction for stakeholders. Thus, the results provide a basis for designing sustainable actions and long-term strategies for the development of graphic design in Iran.

Key Words: Futures Studies, Iranian Graphic Design, Van Der Heijden Model, Drivers, Scenario Planning, Schwartz Matrix.

Research Article

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Publisher: Imam Khomeini International University.
Corresponding Author: Ahad Ravanjoo (ravanjoo.ahmad@gmail.com)

Introduction

Graphic design, as a key tool in communication, advertising, and artistic fields, is constantly influenced by rapid developments in technology, media, and culture. In Iran, this industry faces new challenges with the growth of cyberspace and digital advertising. Changes in audience tastes, the emergence of technologies such as artificial intelligence, the metaverse, and augmented reality, have highlighted the necessity of foresight and scenario planning. Scenario planning, as a strategic tool, can outline a vision of opportunities and threats for Iran's graphic design industry and prepare designers for future decisions. This research, using a mixed-methods approach (qualitative and quantitative) and based on the analysis of articles, library resources, and online questionnaires, aims to provide a more comprehensive picture of the trends and future of the graphic design industry.

In recent years, numerous studies have addressed foresight in graphic design. A significant portion of these studies focuses on technological developments. For example, Palcaros-Theoclitou (2021) showed that after the COVID-19 pandemic, graphic design shifted from traditional print media towards digital technologies. Ozdal (2024) also emphasizes the role of artificial intelligence in increasing design speed and efficiency, although he considers human involvement essential for preserving aesthetic aspects. Tang et al. (2024) have highlighted the potential of artificial intelligence in enhancing human creativity but warn of limitations such as output quality and idea repetition. In this regard, Al-Dulaimi (2024) stresses that despite advancements in AI, the role of the human designer is vital, and updating educational programs is necessary.

Another group of studies has focused on social and cultural dimensions. Ghazivakili (1400) emphasized revisiting traditional elements and paying attention to possible, probable, and desirable horizons. Additionally, Bahajab Qudsi et al. (1401) introduced foresight as a tool for strengthening cultural and artistic policymaking. Zhou (2024) also examined the evolution of cultural symbols in graphic design and their importance in the digital age.

Materials and Methods

Methodology is one of the most important tools in futures studies, enabling researchers to navigate environmental complexities and paint a clearer picture of the future. As Khazaei et al. (2013, p. 159) point out, "methodology is the focal point and core of applied futures studies," and scenario analysis is considered one of the most tried and tested methods in this field. Scenario writing, as a key tool in futures studies, facilitates the depiction of possible and probable futures by identifying key factors and significant uncertainties (see Khashei, 2012, p. 124). Also, from the perspective of "Wendell Bell14," scenarios are an effective way to understand and explain different futures, helping decision-makers develop sustainable and long-term strategies in the face of uncertainties (see Hajiani, 2012, p. 260; Bell, 2012, p. 324).

Based on this, this research was conducted with an exploratory futures studies approach and based on the scenario writing method. In the first step, the 15STEEP framework was used to identify influential macro trends and drivers. This model, by categorizing the macro environment into five dimensions—social, technological,

economic, environmental, and political—provides a valid tool for analyzing future drivers and uncertainties (see Amer16, 2013, pp. 6-12).

In the next step, two complementary approaches were used to organize and narrate the scenarios: "Van der Heijden's model," which views scenario writing as "strategic conversation" and considers it a process that goes beyond mere prediction to change and improve decision-makers' mental models (Van der Heijden, 1996, p. 4). This framework forms the conceptual basis of the present research, as well as "Schwartz's" matrix logic, which is based on identifying two key uncertainties and combining them, depicting four distinct scenarios in a 2×2 matrix (see Schwartz, 1991, pp. 122-125).

Results and Discussion

The four scenarios of "Digital Creative Leap", "Conservative Support", "High-Risk Free Market", and "Traditional Stagnation" for the future of Iran's graphics industry are each shaped by a set of key factors and different environmental conditions. These scenarios have been developed using a hybrid methodology based on Schwartz's 2×2 matrix model and Van der Heijden's strategic dialogue approach. In the following, these three scenarios have been comparatively analyzed and evaluated.

Comparing the four scenarios presents us with different images of the future; Digital Creative Leap: the only path for simultaneous growth of the domestic market and global integration; smart regulatory government plus technological leap, with the risk of dependence on policy stability and skill gap. Conservative Support: stability and quality in traditional areas with domestic prosperity; but technological lock-in and irrelevance in the global digital services market. High-Risk Free Market: explosive opportunities for elites and startup waves; but a hollow ecosystem, erosion of the middle layer, and severe instability for the majority. Traditional Stagnation: gradual weakening to the death of the ecosystem; scattered individual successes, elite migration, and decline in quality. Overall, the main distinguishing feature among these four scenarios lies in how two key forces interact: supportive policymaking and technological transformation. The "Digital Creative Leap" scenario shows that the alignment of these two forces can lead to the formation of a unique competitive advantage for Iran in the global creative economy. In contrast, the "Traditional Stagnation" scenario warns that the absence of both factors will gradually lead the industry towards strategic irrelevance.

Conclusions

This research, utilizing a mixed-methods approach and foresight methodologies, aimed to outline the probable future landscapes of Iranian graphic design up to the horizon of 1414. Findings indicated that the evolution of new technologies, including artificial intelligence and interactive realities, alongside the level of policy and institutional support, are two key and decisive factors in the future of this field. Based on these uncertainties, four alternative scenarios were presented, covering a spectrum from "digital creative leap" to "traditional stagnation."

The results suggest that the future of Iranian graphic design is not certain and linear, but rather shaped by today's decisions in the fields of education, policymaking, and industry. The importance of this study lies in identifying drivers and probable scenarios, thereby providing a basis for dialogue, flexible planning, and the

adoption of sustainable strategies. Accordingly, the findings can help various stakeholders in this field to design more desirable paths for the development of Iranian graphic design by better understanding the uncertainties.

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