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Thresholds of Heritage: Material Culture, Domestic Space, and the
Preservation of Iranian Identity among Iranian Students in Italy

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Extensive Summary in Italian

Questa tesi esamina il modo in cui gli studenti iraniani che vivono in Italia preservano la propria identità culturale attraverso oggetti quotidiani e pratiche domestiche. La casa viene interpretata come una soglia culturale tra l’“esterno italiano” – l’ambiente pubblico, sociale e universitario della vita quotidiana in Italia – e l’“interno iraniano”, cioè lo spazio domestico privato in cui memorie, emozioni e abitudini culturali legate all’Iran vengono mantenute e adattate.

La ricerca si concentra sulla cultura materiale, in particolare su oggetti come tappeti, zafferano, tè, fotografie, libri, opere d’arte e piccoli elementi decorativi. Questi oggetti non vengono considerati semplicemente come beni personali, ma come portatori di memoria, continuità emotiva e identità culturale. Attraverso di essi, gli studenti iraniani creano atmosfere familiari all’interno di stanze in affitto, appartamenti condivisi e spazi abitativi temporanei. La tesi utilizza l’idea di “archivio in valigia” per descrivere questi oggetti e ricordi portatili che accompagnano gli studenti all’estero e contribuiscono a trasformare spazi domestici ordinari in luoghi significativi. Accanto agli oggetti, la tesi considera pratiche quotidiane come l’ospitalità, i pasti condivisi, la preparazione del tè e il *taarof*. Queste pratiche sono intese come forme di patrimonio culturale immateriale che continuano nel contesto migratorio, pur venendo talvolta rimodellate dalle condizioni della vita studentesca in Italia, come spazi ridotti, cucine condivise e abitazioni temporanee.

Lo studio adotta una metodologia qualitativa basata su questionari anonimi, foto-elicitazione digitale, analisi visiva e riflessione auto-etnografica. I partecipanti sono invitati a descrivere oggetti significativi e pratiche domestiche e, quando possibile, a condividere immagini anonime dei propri spazi abitativi. Questi materiali vengono analizzati per comprendere come gli studenti iraniani rispondano alla nostalgia, allo sradicamento e al bisogno di appartenenza. Concentrandosi sugli spazi privati e sulla vita domestica ordinaria, questa tesi sostiene che il patrimonio culturale non viene preservato soltanto attraverso istituzioni pubbliche o tradizioni ufficiali. Esso può sopravvivere anche attraverso piccoli oggetti, memorie personali, rituali quotidiani e l’organizzazione emotiva dello spazio domestico.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how Iranian students living in Italy preserve a sense of cultural identity through everyday objects and domestic practices. Focusing on the home as a cultural threshold between the Italian outside and the Iranian inside, the research explores how objects such as carpets, saffron, tea, photographs, books, and artwork carry memories of Iran and help create a familiar emotional environment abroad. The thesis also considers how practices such as hospitality, shared meals, and *taarof* are adapted within Italian apartments.

Using a qualitative methodology based on anonymous surveys, digital photo-elicitation, visual analysis, and auto-ethnographic reflection, the study investigates how Iranian students curate their living spaces in response to nostalgia, displacement, and the need for belonging. By focusing on small domestic objects and everyday rituals, this thesis shows how heritage is preserved not only through public cultural institutions, but also through private spaces, personal memories, and ordinary acts of domestic life.

The thesis argues that Iranian identity in diaspora is not preserved as a fixed or unchanged tradition, but is continuously reconstructed through everyday adaptation. In the temporary and often limited conditions of student housing, objects and rituals become tools for creating emotional continuity between Iran and Italy. Through the analysis of participant responses and domestic photographs, the research shows that the home can function as a quiet but significant site of cultural preservation, where memory, belonging, and identity are negotiated through ordinary material and spatial practices.

Introduction

Migration is often understood as movement across national borders, but its effects are not limited to geography. When people leave one country and begin living in another, they also move between languages, memories, habits, objects, and emotional worlds. For students, this experience can be especially complex. Student migration is usually imagined as temporary, practical, and educational: a person leaves home in order to study, gain qualifications, and build a future. Yet even temporary migration requires the creation of a new everyday life. A student room, a shared apartment, or a small rented space abroad can become much more than accommodation. It can become a place where memory, identity, and belonging are preserved and reorganized.

This thesis examines how Iranian students living in Italy preserve a sense of cultural identity through everyday objects and domestic practices. It focuses on the home as a cultural threshold between two dimensions: the Italian outside and the Iranian inside. The “Italian outside” refers to the public, social, and university environment in which Iranian students live their daily lives in Italy. The “Iranian inside,” by contrast, refers to the private domestic space where memories, emotions, and cultural habits connected to Iran are maintained, adapted, and sometimes transformed. This distinction is not meant to suggest that Iranian students live between two completely separate worlds. Rather, it points to the constant negotiation between integration and cultural continuity, between the practical demands of life in Italy and the emotional need to remain connected to Iran. The Iranian presence in Italy has often been described as smaller and less institutionally visible than Iranian communities in countries such as Germany, France, Sweden, the United Kingdom, or the United States.

However, Italy has played an important role in Iranian student mobility. Adriano Valerio Rossi explains that Iranian migration to Europe developed in broad waves before and after the 1979 Revolution, and that the pre-revolutionary wave was strongly connected to student mobility. In the Italian context, he identifies the first major Iranian migration wave as mainly composed of university students who came to acquire technical and scientific skills (Rossi 2021). This history is important because it shows that Iranian students in Italy are not an accidental or marginal phenomenon; rather, they are part of a longer history of educational migration, cultural exchange, and mobility between Iran and Europe.

At the same time, Iranian student migration cannot be understood only through statistics or historical background. The experience of living abroad is also emotional and domestic. Even when students move for education, they still face nostalgia, displacement, and the need to create a familiar environment in unfamiliar surroundings. Their apartments may be temporary, rented, shared, or small, but these spaces can still become meaningful. Within them, Iranian students may arrange objects, prepare food, drink tea, host friends, speak Persian, or practice forms of politeness and hospitality associated with Iranian culture. These everyday actions may seem ordinary, but they are central to how identity is preserved abroad. The main argument of this thesis is that Iranian cultural identity is not maintained only through public institutions, official cultural events, or large community structures. It is also preserved through private spaces and small acts of domestic life.

A carpet placed on the floor, a packet of saffron kept in the kitchen, a tea glass on a desk, a photograph of family, a Persian book, or a piece of artwork can become a carrier of memory. These objects may not have great economic value, but they can hold emotional and symbolic significance. They connect the student to family, childhood, language, food, landscape, and the atmosphere of home. In this way, material objects become part of the everyday preservation of Iranian identity. This thesis uses the concept of the “suitcase archive” to describe the collection of objects, memories, and practices that the Iranian students carry with them or recreate in Italy. Unlike an institutional archive, the suitcase archive is private, mobile, and domestic.

It is not kept in museums or public collections, but in kitchens, bedrooms, bookshelves, suitcases, and personal corners of rented apartments. It may include objects physically brought from Iran, but also objects bought or recreated in Italy because they remind students of home. The suitcase archive is therefore not only about possession; it is about memory, repetition, and emotional continuity. It shows how identity can be preserved through small, portable, and everyday forms.

The focus on material culture is important because objects inside the home are not passive. Scholars of material culture have shown that domestic objects shape the way people experience identity, intimacy, and belonging (Miller 2001) . In migration contexts, objects can become even more meaningful because they connect different places and times. Sabine Marschall’s idea of “memory objects” is particularly useful here, as it helps explain how personal belongings can create emotional links to home, homeland, and pre-migration life (Marschall 2019).

For Iranian students in Italy, objects such as carpets, tea, saffron, photographs, books, and decorative items can function in this way. They make the domestic space feel less anonymous and less temporary. They also allow students to create a familiar atmosphere within an Italian environment.

Alongside material objects, this thesis also considers domestic practices. Iranian identity is preserved not only through material objects, but also through repeated practices: preparing tea, cooking Iranian food, offering food to guests, sharing meals, arranging the room for visitors, speaking Persian with friends, and practicing *taarof*, a highly valued form of ritual politeness.

These practices can be understood as forms of intangible cultural heritage because they involve knowledge, gestures, social expectations, and inherited habits. UNESCO defines intangible cultural heritage as practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities recognize as part of their cultural heritage, together with the objects and spaces associated with them (Convention for the Safeguarding, 2003). This definition is important for the present research because it shows that material and intangible heritage are closely connected. Tea culture, for example, is not only about tea as an object; it also includes preparation, offering, conversation, hospitality, and social meaning.

In the context of student life in Italy, these practices are often adapted rather than simply reproduced. Iranian students may not have access to large family homes, traditional kitchens, or the same social networks they had in Iran. They may live with non-Iranian roommates, have limited space, or depend on shared kitchens and temporary housing. Because of this, Iranian domestic practices are reshaped by the material conditions of life abroad. A full Iranian meal may become a smaller shared dinner among friends.

A formal form of hospitality may become a more informal gathering in a student apartment. *Taarof* may continue, but in a modified way, depending on who is present and what kind of space is available. These adaptations are not signs of cultural loss; rather, they show how culture survives by changing.

This research is also shaped by my own position as an Iranian student living in Italy. The topic did not emerge only from an abstract interest in migration or diaspora, but also from the everyday experience of living between two domestic worlds. Like many international students, I have

experienced the difference between the public space of Italian university life and the private space of the room or apartment, where familiar objects, food, language, and routines can become emotionally important. This personal position does not make the research less academic; rather, it helps explain why the domestic space is a meaningful site for studying migration, identity, and heritage. The home is often treated as something ordinary, private, or even secondary in discussions of migration. However, for students living abroad, domestic space can become one of the most important places where identity is negotiated. A rented room may be small, temporary, or shared, but it can still hold objects that connect the student to family, memory, and cultural belonging. This is why the thesis focuses on everyday domestic life rather than only on public forms of diaspora. Iranian identity in Italy is not expressed only through official cultural events, language, nationality, or community institutions. It can also appear in a cup of tea, a packet of saffron, a carpet, a photograph, a book, a shared meal, or the way a room is arranged.

This personal motivation is connected to an academic gap. Studies of diaspora and migration often focus on movement, integration, language, politics, labor, or public identity. These are important subjects, but they do not fully explain how migrants and international students live with memory in everyday life. The domestic space allows another view of migration: one that is quieter, more intimate, and more material. By looking at objects and domestic practices, this thesis asks how identity is preserved not only through what people say about themselves, but through what they keep, use, display, cook, and repeat.

The focus on Iranian students is especially important because student migration is often imagined as temporary. Students may come to Italy for education and may not initially think of themselves as permanent migrants.

Yet temporary migration is still lived through daily routines. Even if a student plans to return to Iran or move elsewhere later, they still need to create a livable environment in the present. This makes the student room or apartment a significant space. It is temporary, but not meaningless. It may not be a permanent home, but it can become a place where belonging is carefully and emotionally constructed.

For this reason, the thesis uses the domestic space as a way to understand the emotional and cultural dimensions of Iranian student life in Italy. The aim is not to present Iranian identity as fixed or identical for everyone. Rather, the thesis examines how different students preserve different

fragments of cultural memory through objects and routines. Some may feel connected to Iran through food, others through family photographs, books, music, carpets, artwork, or hospitality. These differences are important because they show that heritage is lived personally as well as collectively.

This motivation also explains the choice of qualitative methods. Since the research concerns memory, emotion, and private space, it requires methods that allow participants to describe meaning in their own words. Anonymous surveys, photo-elicitation, visual analysis, and auto-ethnographic reflection are appropriate because they respect privacy while still allowing domestic life to become visible. The research therefore begins from a simple but important idea: that ordinary objects and practices can reveal how Iranian students continue to feel connected to Iran while living in Italy.

The research is guided by four main questions. First, what objects do Iranian students bring to Italy or keep in their domestic spaces, and how do these objects carry memories of Iran? Second, how do Iranian students arrange and adapt their Italian apartments in order to create a familiar cultural and emotional environment? Third, how are practices such as hospitality, shared meals, tea culture, and *taarof* continued or transformed in Italian domestic spaces? Finally, how does the curation of domestic space help Iranian students respond to nostalgia, displacement, and the need for belonging?

To answer these questions, this thesis uses a qualitative methodology based on anonymous surveying, digital photo-elicitation, visual analysis, and auto-ethnographic reflection. The research focuses on Iranian students living in Italy and pays particular attention to the privacy of domestic spaces. Since the home is an intimate environment, the methodology is designed to be non-invasive. Participants are asked to describe meaningful objects, domestic routines, and feelings connected to home, memory, and belonging. When possible, they are also invited to share anonymous images of parts of their living spaces, such as tea setups, bookshelves, carpets, kitchens, desks, or decorative objects. These images are not treated as simple illustrations, but as visual materials that can help reveal how identity is represented and experienced inside domestic space.

Digital photo-elicitation is useful for this research because photographs can help participants speak about memories and emotions that might be difficult to express through direct questions alone

(Harper 2002). A photograph of a tea corner, a carpet, or a kitchen shelf can open a conversation about family, nostalgia, routine, and belonging. Visual analysis then allows the research to consider how objects are arranged, displayed, and given meaning within the home. Auto-ethnographic reflection is also included because the researcher's own experience as an Iranian student in Padua forms part of the context of the study. This does not replace the voices of participants, but it allows the research to acknowledge that the topic is personally situated and shaped by lived experience.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter One introduces the theoretical and contextual framework of the research. It discusses Iranian student mobility and diaspora in Italy, the relationship between material culture and intangible heritage, and the idea of domestic space as a cultural threshold. This chapter establishes the key distinction between the Italian outside and the Iranian inside, which guides the rest of the thesis.

Chapter Two focuses on the "suitcase archive," examining how objects such as carpets, tea, saffron, photographs, books, and artwork function as carriers of memory and identity. It also considers the emotional value of objects in relation to nostalgia and displacement.

Chapter Three presents the methodology and the analysis of domestic practices. It discusses digital photo-elicitation, anonymous surveying, visual analysis, and auto-ethnographic reflection, before examining how Iranian students adapt Italian apartments to Iranian rituals, hospitality, shared meals, and everyday practices of cultural continuity.

By focusing on private domestic spaces, this thesis aims to contribute to a broader understanding of diaspora, heritage, and identity. It argues that cultural preservation does not happen only in public or official spaces. It also happens in ordinary rooms, kitchens, desks, shelves, and shared apartments. For Iranian students in Italy, the home becomes a small but meaningful site where memory is kept alive, cultural habits are adapted, and identity is made livable abroad. In this sense, the domestic space is not simply a background to migration; it is one of the places where migration is most deeply felt and where belonging is quietly reconstructed.

Chapter 1: Iranian Diaspora, Heritage, and Domestic Space

1.1 Iranian Student Mobility and Diaspora in Italy

The Iranian presence in Italy has historically been marked by discontinuity, small numbers, and a limited degree of community formation. Unlike countries such as France, Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, or the United States, Italy has not usually been one of the main destinations for long-term Iranian exile or migration. Mario Casari's entry on "Iranians in Italy" in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* describes the Persian/Iranian presence in Italy as "fragmentary and discontinuous," noting that it did not develop into a large, cohesive, permanent community. This is important for the present thesis because it suggests that Iranian identity in Italy has often been preserved less through large public institutions or stable community structures, and more through smaller, private, personal, and domestic forms of cultural continuity.

Historically, the Iranian presence in Italy can be traced through diplomatic, artistic, educational, and commercial routes. Casari notes that early Persian presence in Italy included diplomatic staff and their families, especially after the establishment of official Persian diplomatic representation in Rome at the end of the nineteenth century. However, these diplomatic circles remained limited and often socially separate from Italian society. More relevant to this thesis is the role of students. According to Casari, students have "always constituted the main body" of Persians residing in Italy. This educational dimension began sporadically with artistic training and became more visible from the twentieth century onward, especially through art, military, technical, and university education.

From the 1950s onward, Iranian student mobility toward Italy became more significant. Casari connects this increase partly to the Cultural Agreement signed between Iran and Italy in 1958, which created study grants and encouraged educational exchange between the two countries. Between 1950 and 1970, thousands of Iranian students came to Italian cities such as Rome, Florence, Turin, Venice, and Perugia to study fields including architecture, fine arts, music, engineering, medicine, and agronomy. This history shows that Iranian mobility to Italy has long been connected to education, professional formation, and cultural aspiration rather than only to economic migration or political asylum. Rossi also emphasizes the importance of student

migration in the wider history of Iranian emigration to Europe. He explains that Iranian migration to Europe can generally be divided into two large waves: one before the 1979 Revolution and one after it. The pre-revolutionary wave was mainly composed of students, while the post-revolutionary wave included more exiles, political refugees, religious minorities, families, and intellectuals. This distinction matters because Iranian students abroad were initially understood as temporary migrants: they left Iran to study and were often expected to return. However, after the Revolution, many students who were already abroad decided to remain in Europe, including in Italy.

In the Italian case, this pattern is especially visible. Rossi writes that the first wave of Iranian migration to Italy consisted mainly of university students who came to acquire technical and scientific skills. Although this form of mobility was originally temporary, the political changes surrounding the 1979 Revolution led many Iranian students either to settle permanently in Italy or to use Italy as a point of departure for further migration to other European countries. The second wave was larger and more politically marked, including people fleeing for political reasons, members of religious minorities, supporters of the monarchy, and intellectuals from different backgrounds. Rossi also identifies a possible third wave beginning in the second half of the 1990s, composed of students, researchers, intellectuals, and lower-middle-class migrants seeking better opportunities abroad.

This student-centered history is directly relevant to the present thesis, which focuses on Iranian students living in Italy today. Contemporary Iranian student mobility is shaped by both educational opportunity and uncertainty. Rossi notes that Italian universities attract Iranian students partly because of open-access courses and scholarships for foreign students with low income. He estimates that around a thousand young Iranians arrive in Italy each year intending to enroll in Italian universities, although many abandon their studies and return to Iran during the first academic year. In the academic year 2012/2013, 2,667 Iranian students were enrolled in Italian public universities, with women slightly outnumbering men. These figures show that Iranian student mobility is not marginal, even if the Iranian population in Italy remains relatively small compared with other diasporic contexts.

At the same time, Iranian migration in Italy should not be imagined as a unified or homogeneous experience. Rossi stresses that the Iranian diaspora is highly diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion,

language, social class, gender, political affiliation, legal status, education, and reasons for departure.

This diversity is essential for avoiding a simplified view of “Iranian identity.” Iranian students in Italy may share certain cultural references, such as Persian language, food, family memory, literature, hospitality, or national symbols, but their experiences of migration and belonging are not identical. They may come from different ethnic, linguistic, religious, and social backgrounds, and they may relate to Iran in different ways.

Casari’s discussion of Iranians in Italy also highlights a central tension that is useful for this thesis: the relationship between integration and the persistent emotional link to the homeland. He notes that many Persian immigrants in Italy did not necessarily see themselves as “immigrants” in the conventional sense, partly because of the recurring hope or “utopia” of returning home. This attitude limited the formation of a strong public Persian social network in Italy. Instead, work, personal relationships, and a distant but rooted connection to the homeland became important features of Persian identity in Italy.

This point is particularly important for a thesis on domestic space. If Iranian identity in Italy has not always been organized through large public institutions or cohesive community networks, then the private home becomes a meaningful site for studying cultural continuity. For Iranian students, especially those living temporarily in rented rooms, shared apartments, or university housing, the domestic space can become a small but significant place where identity is preserved. Objects such as carpets, tea, saffron, photographs, books, and artwork may become ways of maintaining a connection with Iran. Likewise, everyday practices such as cooking, hosting friends, drinking tea, speaking Persian, and practicing *taarof* may help students recreate familiarity within an Italian environment.

Therefore, Iranian student mobility in Italy should be understood not only as an educational or demographic phenomenon, but also as an emotional and cultural experience. Students move between the public world of Italian university life and the private world of domestic memory. Their apartments are often temporary, small, and shaped by Italian architecture and rental conditions, yet they may also become spaces where Iranian identity is actively reconstructed. This thesis builds on that tension by approaching the home as a cultural threshold: a space between the Italian outside

and the Iranian inside, where material objects and domestic practices allow students to negotiate belonging, nostalgia, and displacement (Casari 2012).

Iranian student mobility to Italy should be understood within the broader history of Iranian migration to Europe. Rossi explains that Iranian emigration to Europe developed in two major waves before and after the 1979 Revolution. The first wave was mainly composed of students, while the second was more strongly connected to political exile, religious minority migration, family migration, and intellectual displacement. In the Italian context, this student dimension is especially important. Rossi argues that the first wave of Iranian migration to Italy, beginning in the 1960s, consisted mainly of university students who came to acquire technical and scientific skills. Although this form of migration was originally understood as temporary, the Revolution changed the trajectories of many students: some settled permanently in Italy, while others used Italy as a point of departure for further migration to other European countries (Rossi 2021, 148–152).

This background is relevant to the present thesis because it shows that Iranian students in Italy occupy a position between temporary mobility and longer-term diaspora. Even when students arrive for education and may not initially imagine themselves as permanent migrants, they still need to create livable and emotionally meaningful spaces abroad. Their apartments, rooms, and shared houses therefore become more than temporary accommodation. They are spaces where memory, identity, and belonging are negotiated in everyday life. The history of Iranian student mobility helps explain why the domestic space is an important site for studying Iranian identity in Italy: it is where temporary migration becomes lived experience.

Rossi also shows that contemporary Iranian student mobility to Italy is shaped by educational opportunity and structural pressures. He connects the decision to study abroad to Iran's young population and the difficulty of accessing university courses in Iran, while Italian universities attract Iranian students through open-access courses and scholarships for low-income foreign students. According to Rossi, around one thousand young Iranians arrive in Italy each year intending to enroll in university, although many return to Iran during the first academic year. In 2012/2013, 2,667 Iranian students were enrolled in Italian public universities, and in 2014 Iranians ranked fifth among foreign graduates in Italy. These figures show that Iranian student presence in Italy is not marginal, even if the Iranian community in Italy remains smaller than in countries such as Germany, Sweden, France, or the United Kingdom (Boccagni and Bonfanti 2023).

1.2 Material Culture and Intangible Heritage in Diasporic Contexts

Material culture refers to the objects, possessions, and physical surroundings through which people organize everyday life and give meaning to their social and emotional worlds. In the context of migration, material culture becomes especially important because movement across borders often involves separation from familiar places, people, and routines. Migrants cannot take an entire homeland with them, but they can carry selected objects, images, tastes, smells, and domestic habits. These objects may appear ordinary, but within diasporic life they often become emotionally charged. A carpet, a packet of saffron, a tea glass, a photograph, a book, or a decorative object can become more than a possession: it can become a link to family, memory, language, childhood, and the homeland (Miller 2001).

The study of material culture is useful for this thesis because it allows domestic objects to be understood not simply as decoration or practical belongings, but as active parts of identity-making. Daniel Miller's work on domestic possessions is important here because it emphasizes that the home and its material environment participate in the construction of people's lives. Objects inside the home are not passive; they help create atmosphere, intimacy, memory, and social identity (Hecht 2001). This is particularly relevant for Iranian students in Italy, whose apartments are often temporary, rented, or shared, but who may still use objects to make those spaces feel emotionally familiar. Even a small student room can become culturally meaningful through the arrangement of objects that refer to Iran.

In diasporic contexts, objects often carry memories because they travel with the migrant or are received from family and friends across distance. Sabine Marschall's concept of "memory objects" is especially useful for understanding this process (2019). Marschall defines memory objects as personal belongings that connect migrants emotionally to home, home culture, social relationships, and experiences from the pre-migration past. This idea is directly connected to the present thesis. For Iranian students in Italy, objects such as saffron, tea, carpets, photographs, books, and artwork may become memory objects because they preserve a sense of continuity between life in Iran and life abroad. Their value is not necessarily economic; rather, it is emotional, sensory, and symbolic.

This is why the thesis uses the idea of the “suitcase archive.” The term refers to the small collection of objects that Iranian students carry, keep, or recreate in Italy in order to maintain a connection to Iran. Unlike a formal archive, this archive is private, mobile, and domestic. It is not stored in an institution, but in suitcases, kitchens, bookshelves, desks, walls, and rented rooms. It is made of things that may seem ordinary from the outside but become meaningful through personal memory and cultural attachment. In this sense, the suitcase archive is not only about what students bring from Iran, but also about how these objects are used, displayed, touched, smelled, cooked with, or shared in everyday life.

The meaning of an object can also change after migration. Arjun Appadurai argues that objects have “social lives,” meaning that their value and meaning are shaped by the contexts in which they move and circulate (Appadurai 1986, 3–63). Similarly, Igor Kopytoff’s idea of the “cultural biography of things” suggests that objects can be studied through their life histories: where they came from, how they were used, how they changed hands, and how their meanings shifted over time (Kopytoff 1986, 64–91). This approach is helpful for understanding Iranian objects in Italian domestic spaces. A small carpet, for example, may have been an ordinary household object in Iran, but in Italy it may become a strong sign of cultural belonging. A tea glass may have been part of daily routine at home, but abroad it may become a ritual object through which the student recreates familiarity. Saffron may be an ingredient, but it may also carry memories of family cooking, celebration, and hospitality.

Material culture is closely connected to intangible heritage. According to UNESCO’s 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, intangible cultural heritage includes practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills, together with the instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces associated with them (Convention 2003). This definition is important because it shows that intangible heritage is not separated from material things. Cultural practices often need objects, spaces, gestures, and routines in order to continue. For example, tea culture is not only the physical tea itself; it includes the way tea is prepared, offered, served, and shared. Hospitality is not only the presence of guests; it includes food, seating arrangements, forms of politeness, and emotional expectations. In this sense, material culture and intangible heritage are deeply connected. For Iranian students in Italy, intangible heritage may be preserved through everyday domestic practices rather than through formal cultural institutions.

Practices such as preparing Persian tea, cooking Iranian food, using saffron, offering food to guests, arranging a room for shared meals, speaking Persian with friends, or practicing *taarof* can all be understood as forms of lived heritage. These practices are not necessarily public, official, or spectacular. They are often ordinary, repeated, and private. However, their ordinary nature is exactly what makes them important. Through repetition, they allow students to maintain a sense of cultural continuity in a foreign environment.

The diasporic home therefore becomes a space where material and intangible heritage meet. Objects help make cultural practices possible, while practices give objects meaning. A carpet may create a familiar visual atmosphere, but it may also shape how people sit, gather, or receive guests. Saffron may be stored as an object in the kitchen, but it becomes meaningful when used in cooking and shared meals. A photograph may be placed on a desk or wall, but it also activates memory and emotional connection. Books, poetry, calligraphy, or artwork may visually mark the room as Iranian, while also connecting the student to language, education, family, or national culture.

This connection between objects and practices is especially important in student migration because student homes are often unstable. Iranian students in Italy may live in small rooms, shared apartments, temporary accommodation, or spaces that do not fully belong to them. Because of this, they may not be able to recreate an Iranian home completely. Instead, they create partial and mobile forms of home through selected objects and repeated practices. The domestic space becomes a flexible site of adaptation: Italian architecture and rental conditions may shape what is possible, but Iranian objects and rituals allow students to create a sense of cultural familiarity within those limits.

In this thesis, material culture and intangible heritage are therefore used together to understand how Iranian identity is preserved in everyday domestic life. The focus is not on heritage as something fixed, monumental, or public, but on heritage as something lived through small acts of home-making. Iranian identity is approached as something maintained through objects, memories, tastes, smells, gestures, and social routines.

By studying these details, the thesis shows how diaspora is experienced not only in public spaces, universities, or national communities, but also inside kitchens, bedrooms, shared apartments, and private corners of the home.

1.3 Domestic Space as a Cultural Threshold

In this thesis, domestic space is understood not simply as the physical place where students sleep, study, cook, or store their belongings, but as a meaningful environment where identity and belonging are quietly negotiated. For Iranian students in Italy, the room, apartment, or shared house can become a space between different cultural worlds. Outside the home, students encounter the routines of Italian public life: university schedules, bureaucracy, language, streets, shops, and social expectations. Inside the home, however, they may recreate a more familiar atmosphere through objects, food, language, memories, and everyday habits connected to Iran. The domestic space therefore becomes a threshold: a place of passage between the Italian environment in which students live and the Iranian memories and practices they continue to carry with them. The idea of the home as a threshold is useful because it avoids treating home as a fixed or simple place. A house or apartment is not automatically a home. It becomes meaningful through the way people use it, arrange it, remember through it, and emotionally attach themselves to it.

Boccagni and Bonfanti argue that migration studies can benefit from looking more closely at domestic spaces, because dwellings reveal life stories, daily routines, social conditions, and the relationship between migrants' present lives and earlier experiences (Boccagni and Bonfanti 2023, 1–6). This is especially relevant for students, whose housing is often temporary and unstable. Many Iranian students in Italy live in rented rooms, shared apartments, or small student accommodations. These spaces may not fully belong to them, yet they can still become emotionally important through small acts of arrangement and care.

The threshold is not only architectural. It is also symbolic and emotional. A doorway separates inside from outside, but the real boundary is more complex than a wall or a door. Bonfanti and Bertolani explain that the concept of threshold can refer to the symbolic meaning of a boundary between outside and inside, and to the social processes through which people are admitted, excluded, or positioned in relation to a space (2023, 173–174). This understanding is useful for the present thesis because the Iranian student's domestic space is not only a private room; it is also a space where cultural belonging is marked. Who is invited in, what language is spoken, what food

is offered, how guests are received, and which objects are displayed all help define the social meaning of that space.

In the context of Iranian students in Italy, the threshold between outside and inside can be understood through the contrast between public adaptation and private continuity. Outside the home, students often need to adapt to Italian academic and social life. They may speak Italian or English, follow Italian university structures, move through Italian cities, and participate in everyday life as international students. Inside the home, however, they may return to practices that create emotional closeness to Iran: preparing Persian tea, cooking with saffron, placing a carpet or textile in the room, keeping Persian books nearby, displaying photographs, or listening to Iranian music. These actions do not cancel the Italian environment, but they create a private space where Iranian identity can remain present.

This does not mean that the domestic interior is purely Iranian or that the world outside is purely Italian. The boundary is never absolute. Sara Ahmed's work on migration and home is helpful here because she questions the simple opposition between "home" and "away." She argues that home is not just one stable place, and that migration changes the relationship between place, memory, and belonging (Ahmed 1999, 349). For Iranian students in Italy, home may be divided across several locations: Iran as the place of family, childhood, language, and memory; Italy as the place of present life, study, and daily routine; and the student apartment as the space where these different attachments meet. The domestic threshold is therefore not a border that separates two worlds completely, but a space where they overlap.

This overlap is visible in the material organization of the home. A rented room in Padua, Milan, Bologna, or Rome may be physically Italian in its architecture, furniture, and location, but it can be emotionally reshaped through Iranian objects and practices. A carpet on the floor, a small tea setup, a shelf of Persian books, or a packet of saffron in the kitchen may change the atmosphere of the room. These objects do not transform the apartment into Iran, but they create points of cultural recognition. They allow the student to feel that the space is not only temporary accommodation, but also a place where memory can settle.

Domestic space is also important because it allows forms of belonging that may not be visible in public. Nira Yuval-Davis describes belonging as connected to emotional attachment and to feeling "at home" (2011, 367–381). This is useful for understanding why the private space of the apartment

matters. Belonging is not always expressed through official membership, nationality, or public participation. It can also be felt through small, repeated experiences: drinking tea in a familiar way, cooking food that smells like home, inviting Iranian friends, or speaking Persian in the kitchen. These practices may seem minor, but they can help students feel emotionally grounded in a context where much of daily life is unfamiliar.

At the same time, the domestic threshold can also reveal tension. Student housing is rarely ideal. Shared kitchens, limited space, temporary rental contracts, roommates, and financial restrictions can make it difficult to recreate the atmosphere of an Iranian home. Some students may not have enough space to host guests in the way they would like.

Others may avoid cooking certain foods because of smell, time, or shared living arrangements. In these cases, Iranian domestic practices are not simply reproduced in Italy; they are adjusted to the conditions of student life. This process of adaptation is central to the thesis. Culture is not preserved by remaining unchanged. It survives because it can be reworked within new spaces and circumstances. The threshold between the Italian outside and the Iranian inside is therefore not a fixed line, but a lived and changing relationship.

The same apartment can feel Italian, Iranian, international, temporary, lonely, comforting, or all of these at once. Its meaning depends on objects, memories, people, routines, and emotions. A kitchen may be only a shared student kitchen during the day, but during a gathering with Iranian friends it can become a place of hospitality and cultural familiarity. A bedroom may be small and rented, but a photograph, a book, or a tea glass can make it feel more personal. In this sense, domestic space is not only where migration happens after the public day is over. It is one of the places where migration is most deeply felt.

For this thesis, approaching domestic space as a cultural threshold makes it possible to connect material culture, intangible heritage, and identity. It allows the research to ask how Iranian students use ordinary spaces to manage displacement and create belonging. It also allows attention to the small details of domestic life: what is placed on a desk, what is kept in a suitcase, what is cooked in a shared kitchen, what is offered to a guest, and what objects are photographed or described as meaningful. These details matter because they show how cultural identity is preserved in practice, not only in theory. The Iranian inside is not a closed or untouched space; it is a living space, shaped by memory, adaptation, and daily negotiation with the Italian outside.

1.4 The Italian Outside and the Iranian Inside

In this thesis, the distinction between the “Italian outside” and the “Iranian inside” is used as a conceptual framework for understanding how Iranian students experience domestic space in Italy. The phrase “Italian outside” refers to the public world in which students move every day: the university, the street, public transport, shops, administrative offices, Italian language, and the broader social environment of life in Italy. The “Iranian inside,” on the other hand, refers to the private domestic space where memories, objects, habits, and emotional attachments connected to Iran are preserved and adapted. This distinction does not mean that Italian and Iranian worlds are completely separate. Rather, it describes the way students move between different cultural atmospheres in everyday life.

For Iranian students, the outside world is often the space of adaptation. It is where they must manage the practical realities of migration and student life: attending classes, dealing with documents, communicating in Italian or English, finding accommodation, working part-time, navigating unfamiliar cities, and learning the social codes of a new country. In this sense, the Italian outside is not only a geographical environment, but also a social and institutional one. It requires adjustment, translation, and negotiation. Students may feel free and independent in this space, but they may also experience distance, uncertainty, loneliness, or the pressure to adapt.

The inside, however, offers a different kind of experience. The domestic space allows students to slow down and return to more familiar gestures. It is where they can drink tea in an Iranian way, cook with saffron, keep Persian books nearby, speak Persian with friends or family online, display photographs, listen to Iranian music, or place a small carpet or decorative object in their room. These practices and objects create a space that feels emotionally closer to Iran, even though it is physically located in Italy. The Iranian inside is therefore not a copy of Iran, but a recreated and adapted version of cultural familiarity.

This framework is closely connected to the idea that migrant homes are not neutral spaces. Boccagni and Bonfanti argue that domestic spaces are important for migration studies because they reveal how migrants experience belonging, memory, and everyday life. For this thesis, that

idea is especially useful because the homes of students are often temporary and modest. A student bedroom or shared apartment may not look important from the outside, but it can carry strong emotional meaning. It may be the only space where the student has some control over atmosphere, objects, routines, and privacy. Even when the apartment is rented and temporary, it can still become a meaningful site of identity.

The Italian outside and the Iranian inside should not be understood as fixed opposites. Sara Ahmed's work on migration and home is useful here because she complicates the idea of home as a stable and singular place (Ahmed 1999). For migrants, home is often divided across places, memories, and attachments. Iran may remain home because it is connected to family, childhood, language, food, and emotional memory. Italy may also become home because it is the place of present life, study, friendships, and future plans. The student's apartment becomes the place where these two versions of home meet. It is neither completely Iranian nor completely Italian; it is a space of overlap. This overlap is visible in ordinary domestic arrangements. A room may have Italian furniture, rented walls, and a shared kitchen, but the objects placed inside it can change its emotional meaning. A small carpet, a Persian tea glass, a photograph from Iran, a poetry book, or a packet of saffron can mark the space with memory. These objects do not remove the student from Italy, but they make the Italian space more livable. They create a sense of continuity between past and present, between the home left behind and the home being temporarily built abroad.

The distinction between outside and inside is also related to visibility. In public spaces, Iranian identity may not always be visible or easy to express. Students may not constantly perform their cultural identity at university or in the street. They may choose to blend in, speak another language, or adapt to the expectations of the environment. Inside the home, however, cultural identity can appear in quieter and more personal ways. It may appear in the smell of rice and saffron, the sound of Persian conversation, the offering of tea, the arrangement of a table, or the presence of meaningful objects. These forms of identity are less public, but they are not less important. This is why the domestic interior becomes central to the preservation of heritage. UNESCO's definition of intangible cultural heritage includes practices, knowledge, expressions, and skills, as well as the objects and cultural spaces associated with them (Convention 2003). This is important because it shows that heritage is not only preserved in museums, monuments, or official ceremonies. It can also survive through repeated domestic practices. For Iranian students, preparing tea, cooking

Iranian food, hosting friends, practicing *taarof*, or arranging a space for shared meals can all become forms of cultural continuity. These practices are ordinary, but they carry inherited meanings.

At the same time, the Iranian inside is not untouched by Italy. It is shaped by the conditions of life abroad. Many students live in small rooms or shared apartments where they cannot fully control the space. They may have limited time, limited money, or roommates from different cultural backgrounds. These conditions affect how Iranian practices are continued. Hospitality may become smaller and more informal. Cooking may depend on access to ingredients, shared kitchens, or the tolerance of roommates. Objects from Iran may be few because of luggage limits. As a result, the Iranian inside is often partial, improvised, and selective.

This selectiveness is important. Students do not carry all of Iran with them. They choose, consciously or unconsciously, the objects and practices that matter most. One person may preserve Iranian identity through food, another through books, another through music, another through photographs, and another through hospitality. The Iranian inside is therefore personal as well as cultural. It is shaped by national identity, but also by family history, class, gender, city of origin, memories, and individual emotion. This prevents the thesis from treating Iranian identity as one fixed thing. Instead, identity is understood as something lived and arranged differently by each student.

The inside can also become a response to loneliness and displacement. Yuval-Davis connects belonging to emotional attachment and the feeling of being at home (2011). For students abroad, this feeling cannot be taken for granted. It has to be created through daily routines and small acts of care. Making tea, cooking familiar food, placing a family photograph on a desk, or keeping an Iranian object close can help produce a sense of emotional stability. These acts may not solve the difficulties of migration, but they can make the experience of living abroad more bearable.

The “Italian outside” is therefore not simply negative, and the “Iranian inside” is not simply nostalgic. The outside can offer education, independence, friendships, and future possibilities. The inside can offer comfort, memory, and continuity. What matters is the movement between them. Iranian students do not live only in one space or the other. They cross the threshold every day, physically and emotionally. They leave the apartment to participate in Italian public life, and they return to the apartment to reconnect with private memory and cultural familiarity.

This movement also shows that cultural preservation is not the opposite of adaptation. Iranian students can adapt to life in Italy while still preserving meaningful elements of Iranian identity. In fact, adaptation may be what allows preservation to continue. A ritual does not need to remain identical to survive. A shared meal in a student kitchen, a quick tea before class, or a small carpet in a rented room may all be reduced or altered versions of familiar practices, but they still carry cultural meaning. The Italian setting changes the form of the practice, but not necessarily its emotional value. For this reason, the Italian outside and the Iranian inside should be understood as relational rather than separate. Each gives meaning to the other. The Italian outside makes the Iranian inside more visible and emotionally charged, because familiar objects and routines stand out more strongly in a foreign environment. At the same time, the Iranian inside helps students navigate the Italian outside by giving them a place of emotional return. The domestic space becomes a small anchor within mobility.

This section therefore prepares the main argument of the thesis: Iranian identity among students in Italy is not preserved only through public cultural institutions or large diaspora communities. It is also preserved inside private spaces, through ordinary objects and daily practices. The home becomes a cultural threshold where memory, adaptation, and belonging meet. It is where the outside world of Italy and the inside world of Iranian memory are not simply separated, but continuously negotiated.

Chapter 2: The “Suitcase Archive”: Objects, Memory, and Identity

2.1 Objects Carried from Iran to Italy

When Iranian students leave for Italy, what they pack is not only practical. Of course, a suitcase contains clothes, documents, laptops, and other necessary things, but it can also contain small pieces of home. A packet of saffron, a tea glass, a family photograph, a Persian book, a small carpet, a piece of jewelry, or a decorative object may seem ordinary, but after migration these objects can become emotionally important. They carry traces of family, language, memory, food, and everyday life in Iran.

This thesis uses the term “suitcase archive” to describe this personal collection of objects and memories that travels with Iranian students or is recreated after arrival in Italy. Unlike an official archive, this one is private and domestic. It is not kept in a museum or institution, but in bedrooms, kitchens, shelves, desks, and suitcases. Its value does not come from money or rarity, but from emotional attachment. These objects help students feel that some part of Iran is still close, even while they are physically living somewhere else. Sabine Marschall’s concept of “memory objects” is useful for understanding this process. She describes memory objects as belongings that connect migrants to the homeland, home culture, social relationships, and earlier experiences (Marschall 2019, 253–69). This is highly relevant to Iranian students in Italy because distance can change the meaning of ordinary things. A tea glass that once belonged to the background of daily life in Iran may become, in Italy, a reminder of family gatherings or familiar routines. Saffron may still be an ingredient, but it can also carry the smell of home. A photograph may be small, but it can hold the emotional presence of people who are absent. Objects also help migrants create a sense of home in places that may otherwise feel temporary. Pérez Murcia and Boccagni argue that domestic possessions can help produce and reproduce home among international migrants, because they carry memories, relationships, and emotional meanings (2022, 589–605). This matters especially for students, who often live in rented rooms, shared apartments, or university housing. These spaces may not fully belong to them. The furniture may already be there, the kitchen may be shared, and the stay may be temporary. Still, a few meaningful objects can change the feeling of a room. They can make it less anonymous and more personal.

Migration is therefore not only a movement of people. It is also a movement of things. Yi-Neumann, Lauser, Fuhse, and Bräunlein emphasize that material culture is a central part of migration because people move with objects, lose them, protect them, use them, and give them new meanings during displacement (2026, 1–20). In the case of Iranian students, the story of migration can be read through the objects that enter their Italian homes. These objects show what students choose to preserve, what they miss, and what they need in order to feel emotionally stable abroad.

Packing is also a selective act. Students cannot bring everything from Iran, so they must choose. Some objects are chosen because they are useful: spices, tea, cooking tools, medicines, or clothes. Others are chosen because they are emotionally necessary: photographs, books, family gifts, religious items, jewelry, or textiles. Some objects are both practical and emotional. Tea and saffron, for example, can be used in everyday life, but they also carry memories of Iranian kitchens, family meals, and hospitality. The meaning of these objects often changes after migration. Kopytoff's idea of the "cultural biography of things" suggests that objects have histories and that their meanings shift as they move through different contexts (1986, 64–91). A small carpet may have been an ordinary part of domestic life in Iran, but in an Italian student room it may become a visible sign of Iranian identity. A Persian book may have been one book among many at home, but abroad it can become a connection to language, literature, and cultural memory. The object itself has not changed, but its emotional role has.

Appadurai's idea of the "social life of things" also helps explain this transformation. He argues that objects should be understood through their movement, circulation, and changing forms of value (1986, 3–63). In this thesis, the value of objects is not mainly economic. A packet of tea, an old photograph, or a small decorative item may be cheap, but it can become precious because of the story attached to it. Its value comes from who gave it, where it came from, how it travelled, and what it allows the student to remember. This is why the suitcase archive should not be understood only as nostalgia. It is also a way of managing daily life abroad. Objects can help students create routine and emotional balance. They make a room feel less empty. They allow familiar gestures to continue: making tea, cooking Iranian food, reading Persian, decorating a space, or remembering family. In this sense, objects are not passive decorations. As Daniel Miller's

work on domestic possessions shows, the things people keep inside the home actively shape personal life, intimacy, and identity (2001).

At the same time, the suitcase archive is not the same for every Iranian student. One person may preserve Iran through food and cooking, another through books, another through music, photographs, religious objects, or family gifts. Some students may bring many things from Iran, while others may bring very little because of luggage limits, money, emotional difficulty, or the desire to start over. The archive can also grow after arrival. A student may buy Persian ingredients in Italy, receive packages from family, print photographs, or find new objects that begin to carry Iranian meaning in a new context.

Once these objects enter the apartment, they do not stay hidden in the suitcase. They spread into the room: on the desk, beside the bed, in the kitchen, on a shelf, or on the wall. They help mark the space as personal. A rented apartment may remain Italian in its architecture and location, but these objects allow students to create small points of familiarity. They do not recreate Iran completely, and they do not need to. Their importance lies in the fact that they make a temporary space emotionally livable. The objects carried from Iran to Italy therefore show how cultural identity can be preserved in quiet and ordinary ways. Iranian identity abroad is not maintained only through public events, national symbols, or formal institutions. It is also maintained through small things: the smell of saffron, the taste of tea, a photograph on a desk, a book in Persian, a carpet beside a bed. These objects create continuity between past and present, between Iran and Italy, and between the home that was left behind and the home that is being temporarily created abroad.

2.1.1 Selection, Absence, and the Limits of the Suitcase

The idea of the “suitcase archive” is useful not only because it shows what Iranian students bring with them, but also because it reveals what they cannot bring. A suitcase is always limited. It has physical restrictions of weight, size, airline rules, and practical necessity. This means that students must choose. They cannot carry an entire household, a family kitchen, a childhood bedroom, or the full atmosphere of Iranian domestic life. What travels is always partial. This selectiveness is important because it shows how migration forces people to decide which objects matter most.

The objects chosen for travel are therefore not random. They often represent a balance between usefulness and emotional value. Some objects are brought because they are practical: clothes, documents, medicine, electronic devices, spices, or books needed for study. Others are brought because they offer emotional continuity: a photograph, a gift from family, a small decorative object, a piece of jewelry, a textile, or an object connected to religion, memory, or childhood. Some objects belong to both categories at once. Tea and saffron, for example, are useful in daily life, but they also carry cultural memory through taste, smell, and domestic routine.

The limits of the suitcase also mean that absence becomes part of the archive. What is missing can be as meaningful as what is present. A student may bring saffron but not the family kitchen where saffron was used. They may bring a photograph but not the person in the photograph. They may bring a small carpet but not the larger home environment where carpets shaped daily life. These absences are not empty; they are part of the emotional structure of migration. The object becomes important precisely because it points toward something larger that cannot be carried.

This is why the suitcase archive is not a complete archive. It is fragmentary. It preserves selected pieces of home rather than home itself. However, this fragmentary quality does not make it weak. On the contrary, it reflects the real condition of student migration. Iranian students in Italy often build domestic familiarity from limited materials. A small number of objects may have to carry a large amount of emotional meaning. A tea glass may stand for daily family life. A book may stand for language and education. A packet of saffron may stand for cooking, celebration, and hospitality. A photograph may stand for family presence across distance.

The suitcase archive also changes after arrival. It does not remain fixed at the moment of migration. Students may receive packages from Iran, buy Iranian ingredients from international shops, print photographs, collect new objects in Italy, or reinterpret ordinary objects through Iranian use. In this way, the archive continues to grow and adapt. Some objects may lose importance over time, while others may become meaningful only after the student has lived in Italy for a while. A room that first felt empty may gradually become personal through accumulation, routine, and arrangement.

This process shows that cultural preservation is not only about carrying the past unchanged. It is also about creating new forms of continuity in the present. The Iranian student does not simply transport Iran into Italy. Instead, they create a smaller, adapted, and personal version of cultural

familiarity through the objects available to them. The suitcase archive is therefore both a memory of departure and a practice of settlement. It begins with what is packed, but it continues through what is kept, displayed, used, replaced, and remembered in the Italian domestic space.

The limits of the suitcase also prevent the thesis from romanticizing material culture. Objects can comfort, but they cannot fully solve displacement. They cannot replace family, language, familiar streets, or the atmosphere of life in Iran. What they can do is create points of connection. They make absence more manageable by giving memory a physical form. In this sense, the suitcase archive is not a complete solution to nostalgia, but a way of living with it.

This section deepens the meaning of objects carried from Iran to Italy. They are not only things that travel. They are selected fragments of home shaped by limitation, absence, and emotional need. Their importance lies in their ability to hold more meaning than their physical size suggests. A small object can become a large emotional presence because it carries what could not be brought: people, places, routines, and memories.

2.2 Carpets, Tea, Saffron, Art, and Everyday Domestic Objects

The objects carried, kept, or recreated by Iranian students in Italy are often small, ordinary, and easy to overlook. They are not always expensive, old, or officially “cultural.” In many cases, they are things used in daily life: tea, saffron, spices, photographs, books, small pieces of fabric, decorative objects, or items placed on a desk or kitchen shelf. Yet these objects become meaningful because of the situation in which they are used. Away from Iran, they begin to stand for familiarity, family, memory, and a sense of continuity. Their importance does not come only from what they are, but from what they make present inside the student’s domestic space.

Among these objects, carpets and textiles are especially important because they change the feeling of a room immediately. A carpet is not only a decorative object. It affects the way a space looks, feels, and is used. In an Iranian domestic context, carpets are connected to warmth, hospitality, sitting together, family gatherings, and the visual atmosphere of the home. In Italy, a small carpet or textile may not reproduce the Iranian home completely, but it can soften the foreignness of a

rented room. It may cover an impersonal floor, create a familiar corner, or make a temporary space feel less empty. In this sense, the carpet works as both a material object and an emotional surface. It allows memory to enter the room through color, texture, and placement (Marschall 2019, 253–269).

This is one of the reasons domestic objects are important in migration. Daniel Miller's work on home possessions shows that objects inside the home are not passive decorations; they participate in the organization of everyday life and identity (2001). For Iranian students, this is especially relevant because student housing is often limited. A student may not be able to control the architecture of the apartment, the furniture, or the rules of shared living, but they can still make small choices about what to place around them. A textile, a poster, a photograph, or a small object from Iran may become a way of claiming a space that is not fully theirs.

Tea is another central object and practice. It is material, sensory, and social at the same time. Tea exists as an object in the kitchen, but it also becomes meaningful through preparation, offering, drinking, and sharing. In Iranian daily life, tea is often connected to hospitality, conversation, rest, and family presence. In the context of migration, preparing tea can become a way of repeating a familiar rhythm. A student may drink tea while studying, during online calls with family, or when inviting Iranian friends. The act may be simple, but its repetition can create comfort. In this sense, tea is not only a drink; it is a small domestic ritual.

Saffron works in a similar way, but through smell, taste, and cooking. It is a tiny object materially, yet it carries strong cultural and emotional associations. For many Iranians, saffron is linked to rice, celebration, family meals, care, and hospitality. In Italy, keeping saffron in the kitchen can become a way of preserving taste and memory. It may also mark a difference between ordinary cooking and cooking that feels specifically Iranian. Foodways are especially important in diaspora because they allow identity to be practiced through the body: through smelling, tasting, preparing, feeding, and sharing. Sayadabdi and Howland's study of Iranian diasporic foodways shows how food can become a way of expressing Italianness and negotiating identity abroad (2021, 681–700). Food objects such as saffron, tea, rice, dried herbs, spices, or sweets are therefore not only ingredients. They are also tools for recreating atmosphere. A kitchen in an Italian apartment may be shared, small, or unfamiliar, but the smell of Iranian food can temporarily change its meaning. It can make the space feel closer to home. At the same time, these practices are often adapted.

Students may not have enough time, ingredients, money, or space to cook as they would in Iran. They may simplify recipes, cook only on special occasions, or prepare Iranian food mainly when friends visit. This adaptation does not make the practice less meaningful. On the contrary, it shows how cultural memory survives through adjustment.

Photographs are different from food objects because they preserve people and places visually. A photograph on a desk, wall, or phone screen can make absent family members present in everyday life. It can also create a private emotional link between the student's room in Italy and their life in Iran. In migration, photographs often become memory objects because they hold a moment, a person, or a place that cannot be physically accessed. Marschall's concept of memory objects is useful here because it explains how personal belongings can connect migrants to their home world and pre-migration past (2019). A photograph may be physically small, but emotionally it can occupy a large part of the room. Books also carry a particular kind of meaning. Persian books, poetry collections, notebooks, or even textbooks from Iran can connect the student to language and intellectual memory. For some students, books may be linked to family, education, literature, or a sense of cultural identity. A Persian book placed on a shelf in Italy does not only function as reading material. It can also be a visible sign of linguistic belonging. Even when it is not read every day, its presence matters. It reminds the student that their language and cultural references still have a place in the new environment. Artwork and decorative objects can work in a similar way. A poster, calligraphy, miniature image, handmade object, ceramic item, or small souvenir can visually mark the room as personal and culturally familiar. These objects may not be used in a practical sense, but they shape atmosphere. They make the room feel less neutral. They can also become conversation points when guests enter the space. For Iranian students who live in apartments furnished by landlords or shared with others, such decorative objects may be one of the few ways to visually express identity inside the home.

These objects are not separate from intangible heritage. UNESCO's definition of intangible cultural heritage includes practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills, but also the instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces associated with them (Convention 2003). This is important because Iranian domestic life cannot be divided neatly into "things" and "practices." Tea is an object, but also a ritual. Saffron is an ingredient, but also part of cooking knowledge. A carpet is a textile, but also part of hospitality and gathering. A photograph is an image, but also an act of

remembering. Objects and practices work together. Hospitality makes this connection especially clear. Iranian hospitality is not only an abstract value; it is practiced through material things: tea, food, sweets, seating, dishes, table arrangement, and the gesture of offering. *Taarof* also belongs to this wider world of social behavior. Beeman describes *taarof* as a complex Iranian system of linguistic and social behavior connected to politeness, status, and social intimacy (Beeman 2020). *Encyclopaedia Iranica* also emphasizes that *taarof* has both linguistic and social behavioral dimensions. In a student apartment in Italy, these practices may become smaller or less formal, but they do not disappear. Offering tea, insisting that a guest eat, arranging a shared meal, or using Persian politeness formulas can all bring Iranian social life into the domestic space.

At the same time, it is important not to romanticize these objects. They can comfort, but they can also intensify nostalgia. A photograph may make someone feel close to family, but it may also remind them of distance. Saffron may recreate the smell of home, but it may also make the absence of family meals more painful. A carpet may make a room warmer, but it may also show how far the room is from the home left behind. This emotional ambiguity is part of diasporic life. Objects do not simply solve displacement. They help students live with it.

The objects discussed in this section show that cultural identity is often preserved through ordinary details. Carpets, tea, saffron, photographs, books, artwork, and small domestic objects allow Iranian students to create a sense of familiarity inside spaces that are often temporary and shared. They connect the body to memory through smell, taste, touch, sight, and routine. They also show that Iranian identity abroad is not only something declared publicly, but something arranged privately, used daily, and felt emotionally. For this reason, everyday domestic objects are central to the idea of the suitcase archive. They are the material traces of movement between Iran and Italy. Some were physically brought from Iran, others were bought or recreated after arrival, and others became meaningful only because of life abroad. Together, they form a domestic language of memory. They allow Iranian students to make Italian apartments feel partly their own, not by rejecting Italy, but by creating small spaces where Iran remains present.

2.3 Emotional Value, Nostalgia, and Displacement

Objects carried across borders often become important because they hold emotions that are difficult to express directly. In the context of migration, the value of an object is rarely limited to its practical use. A photograph, a small carpet, a book, a piece of jewelry, or a packet of saffron may matter because it keeps a person, a place, or a memory close. For Iranian students in Italy, such objects can become quiet forms of emotional support. They do not remove the difficulty of distance, but they can make that distance easier to live with. The emotional value of an object usually increases when the student is separated from the environment where that object first made sense. In Iran, tea, saffron, family photographs, or Persian books may belong to ordinary domestic life. In Italy, the same objects can become more visible and meaningful because they are no longer surrounded by the larger cultural world from which they came. Their emotional force comes from this displacement. The object is physically present, but it points to another place. It brings Iran into the room, but it also reminds the student that Iran is far away.

This is why nostalgia is central to the meaning of domestic objects in diasporic life. Nostalgia is not simply a desire to go back to the past. It can also be a way of living with the fact that return is complicated, delayed, partial, or impossible. Sara Ahmed's work on migration and home is useful here because she argues that migration changes the relationship between home, identity, and estrangement. Home is not just a stable place that one either has or loses; it becomes reconfigured through movement, memory, and distance (Ahmed 1999).

For Iranian students in Italy, this means that "home" may exist in more than one place at once: in Iran as memory and family, in Italy as daily life and study, and in the student's room as a space where both are held together.

Marschall's concept of "memory objects" helps explain how this emotional connection is carried materially. She argues that memory objects can evoke deliberate or involuntary memories of homeland, home culture, social relations, and life before migration (Marschall 2019, 253–269) .

This is important because memory is not always activated through conscious reflection. It can be triggered by smell, taste, touch, or sight. The smell of saffron, the taste of tea, the texture of a carpet, or the sight of a photograph can suddenly bring back a person, a kitchen, a conversation,

or a family routine. In this sense, objects do not only represent memory; they help produce it. For Iranian students, nostalgia can therefore be sensory. It may appear through food, smell, sound, and domestic atmosphere rather than through formal statements about identity. A student may not always say, “I am preserving my heritage,” but they may still prepare tea in a familiar way, keep saffron in the kitchen, display a photograph, or listen to Iranian music while cooking. These gestures are small, but they matter because they create emotional continuity. They allow the student to feel that the past has not disappeared completely, even though daily life has moved elsewhere.

At the same time, nostalgia is not always comforting. It can be painful. A photograph may make family feel close, but it may also make their absence more intense. Iranian food may create warmth, but it may also remind the student of meals that are no longer shared with parents, siblings, or relatives. A familiar object can make a room feel more personal, but it can also underline the fact that the room is temporary. This emotional ambiguity is part of displacement. Objects can console and wound at the same time.

Ralph and Staeheli argue that home in migration should be understood through mobility, belonging, and the changing relationship between people and places (2011, 517–530). This helps avoid the idea that migrants simply leave one home and make another. For students, the situation is more uncertain. Many do not know whether they will stay in Italy, return to Iran, or move somewhere else later. Because of this uncertainty, domestic space may remain provisional. Yet even provisional spaces need emotional meaning. A rented room can be temporary and still become important. A shared apartment can feel unstable and still hold memory (Boccagni and Bonfanti 2023).

This is especially true for students because their migration is often framed as temporary. They may come to Italy for a degree, but their lives do not pause while they study. They still need comfort, routine, privacy, and a sense of belonging. Their objects help create these things in small ways. A desk arranged with familiar items, a shelf with Persian books, or a kitchen corner with Iranian ingredients can make the student feel less suspended between places. These objects do not necessarily create a permanent home, but they create enough familiarity to make daily life possible.

Povrzanović Frykman’s work on transnational dwelling is useful for this point because she argues that everyday objects carried, sent, or received across borders can create tangible connections between migrants, those who remained behind, and homes in different countries (2019, 28–45).

This is very relevant to Iranian students in Italy, especially when objects arrive through family packages, gifts, or visits. A thing sent from Iran is not only an object; it is also a sign of care. It carries the relationship between sender and receiver. It makes distance material. This emotional connection can also be renewed through use. A family gift may become more meaningful when it is placed in the room, touched every day, or shown to a friend. Saffron becomes meaningful not only because it came from Iran, but because it is used in cooking. Tea becomes meaningful because it is prepared repeatedly. A carpet becomes meaningful because it is stepped on, sat beside, or seen every morning. Objects preserve memory not by remaining untouched, but by entering daily life.

Displacement therefore changes the role of domestic objects. In the country of origin, many of these objects are part of a larger environment and may not require much attention. Abroad, they become selected signs of continuity. They help the student answer, in practical ways, the question of how to live between places. They also make identity less abstract. Iranian identity is not only something declared through nationality or language; it can be experienced through a familiar smell in the kitchen, a cup of tea after class, or a photograph placed near a bed.

Still, it is important not to assume that every object from Iran is automatically comforting or that every student relates to nostalgia in the same way. Some objects may be kept because they comfort the student. Others may be hidden because they are too painful. Some students may surround themselves with Iranian objects, while others may prefer fewer reminders of home. Nostalgia can be chosen, avoided, controlled, or triggered unexpectedly. This is why the emotional meaning of objects must be studied through individual narratives, not only through general cultural symbolism.

In this thesis, emotional value is understood as something created through the relationship between object, memory, and situation. A carpet, tea glass, photograph, or book is not meaningful only because it is “Iranian.” It becomes meaningful because of how it is connected to a person’s life: who gave it, when it was packed, where it is placed, how it is used, and what it makes the student remember. The same object can mean different things to different students. One person’s saffron may be connected to a mother’s cooking; another’s may be connected to celebration, guests, or simply the comfort of familiar taste. The emotional value of objects also shows that displacement is not only a loss of place. It is a change in the relationship between person, memory, and everyday environment. Iranian students in Italy may be physically settled in an apartment, but emotionally

they may remain connected to several places at once. Domestic objects make these connections visible and usable. They allow memory to take material form inside the room.

For this reason, nostalgia should not be seen only as weakness or refusal to adapt. In the context of this thesis, nostalgia can also be understood as a resource. It helps students identify what matters, what they want to preserve, and how they can make life abroad emotionally bearable. The suitcase archive is built from this process. It is not only a collection of objects from the past, but a way of organizing the present.

Objects, then, become part of how Iranian students respond to displacement. They create continuity without denying change. They allow students to live in Italy while keeping emotional links to Iran. They turn temporary rooms into spaces of memory, and they make the experience of migration more intimate and concrete. Through these objects, the home abroad becomes neither a full replacement for Iran nor a simple copy of it. It becomes a lived space where memory, absence, adaptation, and belonging exist together.

2.4 Material Objects as Tools for Preserving Iranian Identity

Material objects become tools for preserving Iranian identity because they make culture present in daily life. They do not preserve identity in an abstract or official way, but through use, repetition, and emotional attachment. A student may not consciously think of a tea glass, a packet of saffron, a carpet, or a photograph as “heritage” every time they see it, but these objects still help create a familiar environment. They allow Iranian identity to appear inside the ordinary routines of living, studying, cooking, resting, and receiving guests. In this sense, objects are not only reminders of Iran; they are practical instruments through which Iranian identity is continued abroad. This is especially important in the case of student migration, where domestic spaces are often temporary. Iranian students in Italy may live in shared apartments, rented rooms, or university housing. They may not be able to choose the furniture, change the structure of the apartment, or create a fully Iranian domestic environment. However, they can still shape the atmosphere of the space through selected objects.

Pérez Murcia and Boccagni argue that ordinary domestic possessions can help migrants reproduce home by carrying memories, emotions, relationships, and connections to former homes (2022). For Iranian students, this means that even a few objects can make a temporary room feel more personal and culturally recognizable.

The importance of these objects lies partly in their ability to make identity visible. A Persian book on a shelf, a piece of Iranian artwork on the wall, or saffron in the kitchen marks the space in a particular way. These objects do not necessarily announce identity publicly, but they quietly produce it inside the home. They allow the student to look around and recognize something of themselves in the space. This recognition matters, especially when the outside environment requires constant adaptation. In the university, on the street, or in public offices, the student may need to move through Italian or international codes of behavior. At home, familiar objects can create a space where Iranian identity does not need to be explained.

Objects are also important because they connect personal identity to collective culture. A photograph may be deeply personal, but the practice of placing family photographs in a room is also connected to wider ideas of kinship and memory. Saffron may remind one student of their mother's cooking, but it is also part of a broader Iranian food culture. A carpet may be connected to one family home, but it also evokes wider associations with Iranian domestic life, warmth, and hospitality. In this way, objects move between the personal and the cultural. They preserve individual memories while also carrying shared cultural references.

Pechurina's work on material cultures and migration is useful here because it shows how migrants use domestic objects, food, clothing, and decoration to negotiate belonging and cultural identity in the home (Pechurina 2015, 15–28). This is directly relevant to Iranian students in Italy. Their domestic objects are not simply things they happen to own; they help them position themselves between Iran and Italy. A student can be adapting to life in Italy while still keeping Iranian objects nearby. The presence of these objects shows that integration and cultural preservation are not opposites. They can happen together, in the same room.

Material objects also preserve identity through memory. Some memories are difficult to hold in words, but objects make them tangible. A gift from a family member, a book carried from Iran, or a piece of jewelry may contain stories that are not visible to others. Tolia-Kelly's work on artefacts in diasporic homes is useful because it connects material culture to memory, identification, and the

ways diasporic subjects locate themselves through objects (2004, 314–329). This helps explain why objects in Iranian student homes should not be treated as simple decoration. They are part of how students remember who they are and where they come from.

The emotional power of objects often comes from the fact that they are used repeatedly. A photograph may be looked at every day. Tea may be prepared every evening. Saffron may be used when cooking for oneself or for friends. A carpet may be stepped on, sat beside, or seen every morning. Through repetition, objects become part of the rhythm of life abroad. They help make identity habitual rather than only symbolic. Iranian identity is not only remembered during special occasions; it is also repeated through small gestures that happen in the home.

This is where material culture and domestic space become inseparable. Daniel Miller's work on home possessions emphasizes that domestic objects participate in the shaping of personal life and social relationships (2001). For Iranian students in Italy, objects help transform a physical dwelling into a meaningful domestic space. A kitchen becomes more than a place to cook when it contains Iranian ingredients and familiar smells. A bedroom becomes more than a rented room when it contains photographs, books, textiles, or objects from Iran. A desk becomes more than a place of study when it also carries traces of family and memory.

Food-related objects are particularly strong tools of cultural preservation because they involve the body. Saffron, tea, rice, spices, and sweets are not only seen; they are smelled, tasted, prepared, and shared. Sayadabdi and Howland's study of Iranian diasporic foodways shows that food can become a way of performing and negotiating Italianness abroad (2021). This is important because food connects memory to practice. A student may preserve Iranian identity not by speaking about it, but by cooking, offering, tasting, and sharing. Food allows identity to be experienced physically and socially.

Tea functions in a similar way. It is an object, a drink, and a social practice at the same time. When Iranian students prepare tea in Italy, they may be repeating a domestic habit learned in Iran. When they offer tea to a guest, the practice becomes connected to hospitality. When they drink tea alone, it may become a private form of comfort. In each case, the object is doing cultural work. It helps maintain a familiar rhythm within an unfamiliar setting. Even when the practice is simplified, it still preserves something meaningful.

Material objects also support intangible heritage. UNESCO defines intangible cultural heritage as practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills, together with the objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces associated with them (Convention 2003, article 2). This definition is useful for this thesis because it shows that heritage is not separated from material life. Iranian hospitality, tea culture, food preparation, and domestic rituals all require objects and spaces. A meal requires ingredients, dishes, and a table or floor arrangement. Tea requires cups, a kettle, and the gesture of offering. *Taarof* may be linguistic and social, but it often happens around material acts such as offering food, sweets, tea, or a place to sit.

In this sense, material objects do not simply represent Iranian identity; they help perform it. A carpet may allow people to sit together in a familiar way. Saffron may allow a student to cook a dish that feels connected to family. Photographs may keep kinship present. Books may maintain a relationship with Persian language and literature. Artwork may create a visual atmosphere that feels culturally recognizable. These objects make identity active. They allow it to be practiced rather than only remembered.

At the same time, the preservation of identity through objects is always selective. Students do not preserve everything. They choose some objects and leave others behind. This choice may be shaped by luggage limits, money, emotional attachment, family expectations, or the practical conditions of student housing. Some students may surround themselves with Iranian objects, while others may keep only one or two meaningful things. Some may recreate Iranian identity mostly through food, while others may do so through books, music, photographs, or decoration. The objects chosen reveal what each student considers necessary for feeling connected to Iran.

This selectiveness is important because it prevents Iranian identity from being treated as fixed or uniform. There is no single Iranian domestic space in Italy. Each student creates a different version of Iranian presence depending on their memories, family background, city of origin, gender, class, religious position, political feelings, and personal experience of migration. A carpet may be central for one student and irrelevant to another. Saffron may be emotionally powerful for one person and simply practical for another. What matters is not that all students use the same objects, but that objects become a way of negotiating identity within the conditions of life abroad.

Objects can also help students manage the instability of migration. A rented apartment may change from year to year, but some objects move with the student. A photograph, book, or tea glass can

be carried from one room to another, creating continuity across different addresses. This mobility gives objects a special role. They help produce a sense of stability when the environment changes. They become small anchors in a life shaped by movement.

Marschall's discussion of memory objects is helpful again here, because it shows that objects can connect migrants to places, people, and experiences that are no longer physically present (2019). For Iranian students, this connection can be especially important during moments of loneliness or uncertainty. A familiar object does not remove displacement, but it can make displacement more bearable. It offers a point of return inside the room.

Material objects may also create social belonging. When Iranian students invite friends and share tea, food, or familiar objects, the domestic space becomes a site of connection. Objects help create atmosphere, but they also help create relationships. A packet of saffron can become part of a shared meal. Tea can become part of conversation. A Persian book or artwork can become a point of recognition between Iranian friends. In this way, objects do not only preserve identity privately; they can also support small forms of community.

This is particularly important because Iranian student life in Italy may not always be organized through large public Iranian institutions. As discussed earlier, Iranian presence in Italy has often been smaller and less cohesive than in some other countries. In that context, private domestic practices become more significant. The preservation of Iranian identity may happen less through large community centers and more through small gatherings, kitchens, living rooms, and personal objects. The home becomes a place where culture is maintained quietly, sometimes almost invisibly.

Material objects therefore help bridge the gap between memory and daily life. They allow Iranian students to keep the past close without being trapped in it. They support adaptation because they make the present more livable. A student can build a life in Italy while still using objects that connect them to Iran. The object does not prevent change; it helps the student carry continuity through change.

For this reason, material objects should be understood as active tools in the preservation of Iranian identity. They make memory tangible, support domestic routines, create emotional familiarity, and allow intangible heritage to continue in private spaces. They also show that identity is not

preserved only through language, nationality, or public tradition. It is preserved through what people keep, use, display, cook with, touch, and share. This chapter has argued that the “suitcase archive” is not simply a collection of things brought from Iran. It is a living arrangement of objects, memories, and practices that helps Iranian students create cultural continuity in Italy. In the next chapter, this theoretical discussion is brought into dialogue with methodology and participant data. Through anonymous surveys, digital photo-elicitation, visual analysis, and auto-ethnographic reflection, the thesis examines how these objects and practices appear in the lived domestic spaces of Iranian students in Italy.

Chapter 3: Iranian Domestic Practices and the Preservation of Identity in Italy

3.1 Methodology: Digital Photo-Elicitation, Anonymous Surveying, and Auto-Ethnography

This thesis uses a qualitative methodology because its aim is not to measure Iranian identity statistically, but to understand how it is experienced, preserved, and expressed in everyday domestic life. The research focuses on meanings: why certain objects matter, how students describe their rooms, what memories are attached to tea, saffron, photographs, carpets, books, or artwork, and how domestic practices such as hospitality and shared meals are adapted in Italy. For this reason, the methodology is based on anonymous surveying, digital photo-elicitation, visual analysis, and auto-ethnographic reflection.

The choice of a qualitative approach is important because the subject of this thesis is intimate and personal. Domestic space is not a neutral research site. It is connected to privacy, emotion, memory, family, and sometimes loneliness or displacement. Asking participants about their rooms, objects, and rituals means entering a personal world, even if the research is conducted digitally.

For this reason, the methods were designed to be non-invasive. Instead of visiting participants' homes directly, the study uses written responses and voluntarily shared images. This allows participants to decide what they want to reveal, what they prefer to keep private, and how they want to describe the meaning of their domestic space.

The first method used in this research is an anonymous qualitative survey. Unlike surveys designed for statistical measurement, this survey is used to collect descriptive and reflective answers. Qualitative surveys are useful when the researcher wants to explore patterns of meaning across a group while still allowing participants to answer in their own words (Jansen 2010). In this thesis, the survey asks Iranian students living in Italy about meaningful objects, domestic routines, memories of Iran, feelings of belonging, and the ways they adapt their living spaces. The questions are intentionally open-ended, so that participants can explain not only what they keep in their homes, but why these objects and practices matter to them.

The participant group consists of Iranian students living in Italy. The number of participants is small, and the findings are not intended to represent all Iranian students in Italy. Instead, the

purpose is to provide a focused qualitative insight into how a small group of Iranian students experience domestic space, memory, and identity. This is important to state clearly. The thesis does not claim that every Iranian student in Italy uses domestic objects in the same way. Rather, it examines recurring themes within the responses and considers how these themes illuminate broader questions of diaspora, cultural continuity, and belonging. The second method is digital photo-elicitation. Photo-elicitation is a qualitative method in which photographs are used to generate reflection, memory, and explanation. Douglas Harper argues that photographs can evoke forms of knowledge and emotion that may not emerge through words alone (2002). This is particularly relevant for a thesis on domestic space because many aspects of home are visual, sensory, and difficult to describe directly. A participant may struggle to explain why a tea setup or a bookshelf matters, but a photograph can make the meaning easier to discuss. The image becomes a starting point for memory.

In this study, participants are invited to share anonymous photographs of meaningful objects or areas of their domestic space. These may include desks, kitchens, tea corners, carpets, bookshelves, decorative objects, photographs, food items, or other domestic details connected to Iran. The aim is not to judge the appearance of the room, but to understand how students create familiarity and emotional belonging in Italian apartments. The photographs are therefore treated as research material, not as decoration. They help show how Iranian identity becomes visible through arrangement, placement, use, and atmosphere.

Because the research involves images of private spaces, ethical care is necessary. Participants should not be asked to show their whole home if they do not want to. They should also be reminded not to include faces, addresses, house numbers, private documents, computer screens, passports, university papers, or anything that could identify them or others. If a photograph contains identifiable details, these should be cropped, blurred, or excluded. This is especially important because domestic images can unintentionally reveal more than participants intend. Visual ethnographic research requires attention not only to what images show, but also to the privacy and vulnerability attached to visual material (Pink 2013).

The third method is visual analysis. The participant photographs are analyzed together with the written explanations provided by participants. The analysis asks what is visible in the image, how objects are arranged, what kind of atmosphere is created, and what meaning the participant gives

to the object or space. For example, a photograph of a tea setup may be analyzed not only as an image of cups and tea, but as evidence of routine, hospitality, sensory memory, and connection to Iranian domestic life. A photograph of a carpet may be read through texture, placement, color, and the participant's description of warmth, familiarity, or memory.

The visual analysis does not treat images as objective evidence by themselves. A photograph can show an object, but it cannot fully explain what that object means. Meaning comes from the relationship between the image and the participant's narrative.

For this reason, the thesis uses photographs and written responses together. If a participant shares a photograph of saffron in the kitchen, the analysis focuses not only on the image, but on what the participant says about saffron: whether it reminds them of family meals, hospitality, celebration, or the smell of home. In this way, the image and the text support each other.

The fourth method is auto-ethnographic reflection. Auto-ethnography allows the researcher's own lived experience to become part of the research, while still being analyzed critically. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner describe auto-ethnography as an approach that connects personal experience to wider cultural and social meanings (2011, 273–290). This is relevant because the researcher is also an Iranian student living in Italy. Her experience of arranging a room, preserving objects, drinking tea, cooking familiar food, or negotiating feelings of belonging is not separate from the topic. However, this experience is not used as a replacement for participant data. Instead, it is used as a situated reflection that helps clarify why the research questions matter.

In this thesis, auto-ethnography is used carefully and briefly. The researcher's experience is included as one layer of reflection, not as the main evidence. It helps situate the research, especially because the topic concerns memory, displacement, and domestic life. For example, reflecting on how certain objects made the researcher's room in Padua feel less temporary can help connect the theoretical discussion of material culture to lived experience. At the same time, the analysis remains grounded in the anonymous responses and images shared by participants.

After collecting the survey responses and photographs, the data is organized through thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke's approach to thematic analysis is useful because it provides a flexible way to identify patterns across qualitative data (2026). In this thesis, the analysis focuses on repeated themes such as objects and memory, food and tea, hospitality, the Iranian inside and

Italian outside, nostalgia, displacement, and adaptation to Italian student housing. These themes are not imposed mechanically. They emerge through careful reading of the responses, comparison between participants, and attention to the meanings attached to objects and spaces.

The analysis process follows several steps. First, all survey responses are read carefully in order to become familiar with the data. Second, important words, phrases, and descriptions are highlighted. These may include references to specific objects, feelings, routines, or memories. Third, the highlighted material is grouped into themes.

For example, responses about saffron, rice, tea, and cooking may be grouped under food and sensory memory. Responses about photographs, family gifts, and personal objects may be grouped under objects and emotional continuity. Responses about rented rooms, shared kitchens, and limited space may be grouped under adaptation to student housing. Finally, these themes are connected back to the theoretical framework developed in Chapters One and Two.

The domestic focus of the methodology is also important. Boccagni and Bonfanti argue that domestic spaces are valuable sites for migration research because they reveal how people experience belonging, memory, and everyday life (2023, 1–19).

This thesis follows that idea by treating the home not as a background setting, but as a central site of cultural negotiation. The rented room, shared kitchen, desk, shelf, carpet, or tea corner are not minor details. They are the places where Iranian identity is preserved, adapted, and made livable in Italy.

This methodology is suitable for the aims of the thesis because it allows attention to both material and emotional dimensions of migration. Anonymous surveying provides participants' own words. Photo-elicitation brings visual and sensory details into the research. Visual analysis makes it possible to study the arrangement of objects and domestic space. Auto-ethnographic reflection situates the researcher's own position within the topic. Together, these methods allow the thesis to examine how Iranian students preserve identity not only through what they say, but also through what they keep, display, use, cook, remember, and photograph.

The limitations of the methodology must also be acknowledged. The sample is small, and the participants are not representative of all Iranian students in Italy. The research also depends on what participants choose to share, which means that some parts of domestic life remain invisible.

Photographs are selective and partial; they show only a chosen angle of a space. Written responses may also be shaped by what participants feel comfortable expressing. However, these limitations are also part of the research context. Since the thesis deals with private spaces, memory, and identity, allowing participants to control what they reveal is ethically necessary.

Overall, the methodology reflects the main argument of the thesis: that Iranian identity in Italy is preserved through small, private, and everyday forms of domestic life. The methods are designed to capture these ordinary details without forcing participants to expose more than they wish. By combining anonymous responses, images, and personal reflection, the study creates a way to examine the emotional and cultural meanings of domestic objects and practices among Iranian students in Italy.

3.1.1 Research Context, Ethics, and Limitations

Because this thesis studies domestic space, ethical care is central to the research design. The home is not a public research site. It is connected to privacy, intimacy, family memory, personal belongings, and sometimes vulnerability. Asking participants to describe or photograph parts of their living space means asking them to share something personal. For this reason, the research was designed to give participants control over what they wanted to reveal.

The use of anonymous surveys allowed participants to answer without attaching their names to their responses. This was important because the questions concerned personal feelings, nostalgia, belonging, and private domestic objects. Participants could describe meaningful objects or practices without exposing their full identity. This also made the research less invasive than face-to-face observation or home visits. Since many students live in shared apartments or temporary housing, entering their homes physically would have raised practical and ethical difficulties. A digital and anonymous format was therefore more appropriate for the scale and sensitivity of the study.

The same ethical logic applies to the use of photographs. Participants were invited to share images only if they felt comfortable doing so. They were not asked to show their entire room or apartment. Instead, they could choose a specific object, corner, table, wall, shelf, carpet, kitchen space, or domestic arrangement that felt meaningful to them. This made the method participant-controlled. The image therefore does not represent the whole home, but the part of the home that the participant chose to present as meaningful.

Before using the images in the thesis, attention was given to anonymity. Images containing faces, names, addresses, documents, screens, or other identifying information should be cropped, blurred, or excluded. This is especially important because domestic photographs can reveal private details unintentionally. A wall, a window view, a desk, or a kitchen surface may contain information about a person's location, identity, or daily life. For this reason, the photographs are treated carefully and only as research material connected to the participant's explanation.

The study also has methodological limitations. The number of participants is small, and the findings cannot be used to represent all Iranian students in Italy. This thesis does not claim that

every Iranian student preserves identity through the same objects or practices. Instead, it offers a qualitative reading of a small group of participant responses and images. The value of the research lies not in statistical representation, but in depth, detail, and interpretation.

Another limitation is that the data depends on self-reporting. Participants chose what to say, what to omit, and what to photograph. This means that the research shows selected aspects of domestic life rather than full domestic reality. However, this selectiveness is not only a limitation; it is also meaningful. The objects and spaces participants chose to show are precisely the ones they considered important. Their choices reveal what they wanted to make visible about memory, identity, and belonging.

The photographs are also partial. A photo freezes one angle of a space at one moment. It cannot show smells, sounds, movements, conversations, or the full emotional atmosphere of the room. For example, a photograph of saffron cannot fully communicate its smell; a photograph of tea cannot fully show the act of offering it; a photograph of a *sofreh* cannot fully capture the conversation around it. This is why the visual analysis is combined with participant narratives. The meaning of the image comes from the relationship between what is visible and what the participant says about it.

The researcher's own position is another important part of the research context. Since I am also an Iranian student living in Italy, I am not completely outside the topic. My own experiences of domestic space, memory, and adaptation shaped the questions I asked and the way I understood the responses. Rather than hiding this position, the thesis acknowledges it through auto-ethnographic reflection. This does not mean that my experience is treated as universal. It is used carefully as one situated perspective among others.

This position brings both strengths and challenges. On one hand, it allowed me to understand certain cultural references, such as *taarof*, tea culture, *sofreh*, family objects, and the emotional meaning of food, without treating them as exotic or strange. On the other hand, it required caution, because familiarity can also create assumptions. I had to avoid assuming that all Iranian students experience domestic space in the same way I do. For this reason, participant responses and images were treated as individual experiences rather than examples of one fixed Iranian identity.

The ethical and methodological choices of the thesis therefore reflect the subject itself. Since the research is about private domestic life, the method had to respect privacy. Since the research is about memory and emotion, the method had to allow participants to speak in their own words. Since the research is about objects and space, the method had to include visual material. And since the research is connected to my own experience, the method had to include reflexivity. Together, these choices make it possible to study Iranian domestic identity in Italy without turning private life into an object of exposure.

3.2 Adapting Italian Apartments to Iranian Rituals

For Iranian students in Italy, domestic space is often shaped by limitation. Many students live in rented rooms, shared apartments, or temporary housing where they cannot fully decide the structure, furniture, or atmosphere of the place. The apartment may already be furnished by the landlord; the kitchen may be shared with other students; the bedroom may function at the same time as a place for sleeping, studying, eating, and resting. Because of this, adapting the apartment does not usually mean transforming it completely. More often, it happens through small changes: placing a carpet near the bed, arranging a shelf with familiar objects, keeping Iranian ingredients in the kitchen, creating a tea corner, or displaying photographs and books.

This is why the Iranian domestic space in Italy should be understood as partial and improvised rather than complete. Students are not recreating the full structure of an Iranian home. Instead, they are selecting certain elements that allow the space to feel more familiar. Boccagni and Bonfanti argue that domestic spaces are important in migration research because they show how people negotiate belonging, memory, and everyday life through the places where they live (2023). This is especially visible in student housing, where the home is often temporary but still emotionally important. Even when the apartment is not permanent, students still need to create a sense of comfort and recognition within it.

In the responses collected for this thesis, domestic adaptation appears through the arrangement of objects rather than through large changes to the apartment itself. Participants often describe small objects or corners as meaningful because they interrupt the anonymity of the rented space. A room may feel “Italian” in its structure, furniture, or location, but a carpet, tea glass, photograph, or Persian book can create a more personal atmosphere. These details help students feel that the space is not only a place they are staying in, but a place where part of their identity is present.

In Iranian domestic practice, a *sofreh* refers to a cloth or spread on which food is arranged and shared, either on the floor or on a table. In the context of this thesis, the *sofreh* is understood not only as a practical eating surface, but also as a domestic arrangement connected to hospitality, intimacy, and shared meals.



Figure 1 Adaptation of an Italian student living space through a sofreh arranged on a carpet. Source: participant-submitted photograph, anonymized.

Figure 1 shows a student living space temporarily transformed through the arrangement of a *sofreh* on a carpet. The room itself has a simple and modern structure, but the placement of the carpet, cloth, food, and tea-related objects changes the way the space is used. Instead of eating at a table, the meal is arranged close to the floor, recalling a familiar Iranian domestic practice. This does not reproduce an Iranian home completely, but it creates a temporary cultural atmosphere within an Italian apartment. The image shows how domestic adaptation can happen through small spatial changes: the floor becomes a place of gathering, the carpet becomes a surface of familiarity, and the meal becomes a ritual of comfort and belonging.

The adaptation of space is also connected to the way students use domestic objects repeatedly. A carpet, for example, is not only something to look at. It changes how a room is felt and sometimes how it is used. It can create warmth, mark a personal area, or produce a sense of domestic intimacy. A shelf with books or photographs can also become a small visual archive of identity. Miller's work on domestic possessions is useful here because it shows that objects inside the home are not passive; they participate in the organization of everyday life, memory, and social identity (2001). In student apartments, where the larger space may not belong to the student, these smaller arrangements become even more significant.

The kitchen is another important site of adaptation. For many Iranian students, the kitchen is where cultural memory becomes practical. Keeping saffron, tea, rice, spices, dried herbs, or Iranian sweets in an Italian apartment allows students to continue familiar routines even in limited conditions. The kitchen may be shared, small, or inconvenient, but it can still become a place where Iranian identity is practiced through cooking, smell, taste, and offering food. These practices do not require a perfect reproduction of an Iranian household. A simple meal, a cup of tea, or the smell of saffron can be enough to create a temporary feeling of familiarity.



Figure 2 Tea, saffron, cardamom, and other food items kept in a student domestic space. Source: participant-submitted photograph, anonymized.

Figure 2 shows tea, saffron, cardamom, and other food items arranged together in a student domestic space. The participant described these objects as part of their “cultural heritage,” which is significant because it shows that such items are not understood only as ingredients or personal belongings. Instead, they carry cultural meaning through smell, taste, memory, and repeated

domestic use. Tea and saffron become practical tools for recreating familiarity in Italy, while also connecting the student to Iranian kitchens, family meals, and hospitality. This participant's use of the phrase "cultural heritage" also reflects the broader meaning of intangible heritage as something preserved through practices, knowledge, objects, and domestic spaces.

Food-related objects are particularly important because they connect domestic space to the body. Taste and smell can make memory immediate, as well as food can become a way of negotiating Italianness and belonging outside Iran (Sayadabdi and Howland 2021). In the context of this thesis, this means that cooking or keeping Iranian ingredients in the apartment is not only a practical matter. It can become a way of making the student feel less detached from Iran. A shared kitchen in Italy may not resemble a kitchen in Iran, but through repeated use it can still become a place where Iranian memory is activated.

The adaptation of Italian apartments also happens through routines. Participants may not always have enough space or resources to host guests in a traditional way, but they can still preserve parts of Iranian domestic practice. They may offer tea, cook for friends, arrange a table, share snacks, or create a welcoming atmosphere in a small room. These gestures are important because they show that cultural preservation is not only about objects themselves, but about what students do with them. A tea glass matters because tea is prepared and offered. Saffron matters because it is used in food. A carpet matters because it changes the way the room is inhabited.

At the same time, this adaptation is shaped by the realities of student life. Iranian students in Italy may live with roommates from different backgrounds. They may have limited money, limited time, and limited storage space. They may not be able to cook Iranian food often, invite many guests, or decorate freely. Some may keep objects from Iran in private areas rather than shared spaces. Others may choose small objects because they are easy to move from one apartment to another. These limitations are not separate from the research; they are part of what makes student domestic space meaningful. Culture is preserved here not through abundance, but through selection.

This selectiveness appears in the way students choose which objects or routines to prioritize. One student may focus on food and tea, another on photographs and family gifts, another on books or artwork, and another on carpets or textiles. These choices show that Iranian identity is not expressed in one single domestic style. Instead, each student creates a personal version of Iranian

presence inside the Italian apartment. The “Iranian inside” is therefore not a fixed design, but a lived arrangement made from memory, habit, and available space.

The participant photographs are especially useful for understanding this process because they show how small adaptations actually appear in domestic space. Pink argues that visual methods can help researchers pay attention to sensory, spatial, and material aspects of everyday life that may not be fully captured through words alone (2013). In this thesis, photographs allow the analysis to move beyond general statements about identity and look closely at how identity becomes visible: where objects are placed, what is displayed, what is hidden, and how domestic corners are organized.

However, the meaning of these images does not come only from what is visible. A photograph of a desk, carpet, or kitchen shelf needs the participant’s explanation. Without the narrative, the image may look ordinary. With the explanation, it becomes possible to understand why that object matters. For example, a small tea setup may look simple, but the participant may describe it as connected to family, comfort, or daily routine. A carpet may look decorative, but the participant may describe it as the object that makes the room feel less foreign. The analysis therefore depends on the relationship between image and story. Overall, the adaptation of Italian apartments to Iranian rituals is not a dramatic transformation. It is a quiet process of arranging, using, remembering, and repeating. Iranian students may not be able to recreate the full atmosphere of home, but they can create smaller zones of familiarity. A desk, a shelf, a carpet, a kitchen corner, or a tea setup can become a domestic threshold where Iranian memory enters Italian space. These adaptations show that cultural identity survives not only through public traditions, but through the ordinary ways students make temporary housing feel emotionally livable.

3.3 Taarof, Hospitality, and Shared Meals

Hospitality is one of the clearest ways in which Iranian domestic identity continues in Italy. While objects such as carpets, photographs, books, tea, and saffron create a familiar atmosphere, hospitality gives those objects social meaning. A tea glass matters not only because it reminds a student of Iran, but also because it can be offered to someone. Saffron matters not only because it carries smell and taste, but also because it can become part of a shared meal. A carpet or *sofreh* matters not only as decoration, but because it creates a space where people can sit, eat, and gather. In this sense, Iranian domestic identity is preserved not only through what students keep in their homes, but through what they do with these objects.

In the participant responses, hospitality appears as a repeated domestic practice rather than a formal cultural performance. Students do not necessarily describe it as something exceptional. Instead, it appears through small actions: preparing tea, offering food, inviting friends, arranging a meal, insisting that someone eat more, or making a guest feel comfortable in a small room. These gestures may seem ordinary, but they carry cultural meaning. They show how Iranian identity is continued through daily forms of care and attention.

Taarof is central to this discussion because it connects hospitality to language, politeness, and social behavior. William Beeman defines *taarof* as a broad and complex Iranian system of behavior that marks social status, politeness, intimacy, and respect. In his *Encyclopaedia Iranica* entry, Beeman explains that *taarof* has both linguistic and social dimensions: it appears in speech, but also in gestures of courtesy, hospitality, offering, refusing, and insisting (2017). This is important for the present thesis because *taarof* is not only something said; it is also something performed in domestic space.

In Iranian homes, *taarof* often appears through acts of offering. A host may offer tea, fruit, sweets, food, or the most comfortable seat. The guest may refuse at first, not necessarily because they do not want the offer, but because refusal is part of the social exchange. The host may then insist. This back-and-forth can be difficult to translate into another cultural context, but for many Iranians it is a familiar form of care. Beeman notes that hospitality and generosity are deeply connected to *taarof*, and that offers and refusals can become part of the social rhythm of Iranian interaction (2017).

In the context of Iranian student life in Italy, however, *taarof* is often adapted. Students may not have the space, time, or resources to practice hospitality in the same way they experienced it in Iran. They may live in shared apartments with non-Iranian roommates, have limited kitchen access, or only be able to host one or two friends at a time. Still, the basic gesture remains. Offering tea, preparing a simple meal, placing food in the middle of the room, or insisting that a guest take something can become small ways of recreating Iranian social intimacy.

One participant connected hospitality directly to feeling Iranian at home:

“When my friends come to my apartment, I always try to offer tea or food. It makes the space feel warmer and more like home, even though the apartment is small.”

This response shows that hospitality is not dependent on having a large or ideal domestic space. Even in a small apartment, the act of offering creates a familiar social atmosphere. The participant does not describe identity as an abstract idea, but as something practiced through receiving others.

Shared meals are another important form of cultural preservation. Food allows Iranian identity to be experienced through the body: through smell, taste, touch, and repetition. Sayadabdi and Howland’s work on Iranian diasporic foodways shows that food can become a way of performing and negotiating Italianness outside Iran (2021, 681–700). This is directly relevant to Iranian students in Italy because cooking or sharing Iranian food allows them to recreate a sense of familiarity in a foreign environment. Even a simple meal can carry memories of family, celebration, home kitchens, and social belonging.



Figure 3 Iranian meal prepared and shared in a student domestic space. Source: participant-submitted photograph, anonymized.

Figure 3 shows an Iranian meal prepared and shared in a student domestic space. The plate of rice with saffron coloring and barberries, together with chicken, salad, olives, and side dishes, creates a familiar food setting within an Italian apartment. The image is important because it shows that cultural identity is not only preserved through objects kept in the room, but also through food prepared, served, and shared. In this case, the table becomes a temporary site of Iranian domestic life. The meal connects taste, smell, memory, and hospitality, showing how students can recreate

familiar forms of belonging even in a temporary or shared living space. The participant described this kind of food practice as part of their “cultural heritage,” which suggests that the meal is not understood only as everyday eating, but as a way of maintaining cultural memory and continuity abroad.

The *sofreh* discussed in the previous section is a clear example of this process. When food is arranged on a cloth or spread and shared close to the floor, the space is temporarily reorganized around a familiar Iranian domestic practice. The apartment itself remains Italian in its architecture and location, but the social use of the room changes. The floor becomes a place of gathering. The carpet becomes a domestic surface. The meal becomes a moment of cultural continuity. In this sense, the *sofreh* is not only a physical arrangement; it is a way of making the room socially Iranian for the duration of the meal.

Commensality, or eating together, is important because it creates belonging through shared bodily experience. It is not only the food that matters, but the act of gathering around it. Research on migrant food practices shows that shared meals can help migrants maintain social bonds and create a sense of home in diasporic contexts. For Iranian students, this can happen in very modest conditions. A shared meal may take place in a small kitchen, on the floor of a bedroom, or around a temporary table. What matters is not the size of the space, but the social atmosphere created through food.

3.4 Visual Analysis of Domestic Spaces

The participant photographs collected for this thesis are not used as simple illustrations. They are treated as visual research material that helps reveal how Iranian identity becomes visible inside domestic space. While written survey answers explain what participants think and feel, photographs show how objects, food, textiles, images, and domestic arrangements are actually placed within rooms, kitchens, shelves, and corners of student apartments. In this sense, the photographs make the argument of the thesis more concrete: they show that Iranian identity is not only remembered internally, but also arranged materially in everyday space.

Visual analysis is especially useful for this research because domestic life is often difficult to describe only through words. A participant may say that an object makes a room feel “like home,” but a photograph can show how that object is positioned, what surrounds it, and how it changes the atmosphere of the space. Sarah Pink argues that visual ethnography allows the researcher to pay attention to the sensory, material, and everyday dimensions of social life (2013). These matters for the present thesis because the domestic spaces of Iranian students are made meaningful not only through ideas, but through color, texture, smell, food, light, placement, and repeated use.

At the same time, images do not speak for themselves. A photograph of a tea cup, a carpet, a framed picture, or a plate of food may look simple unless it is connected to the participant’s explanation. Gillian Rose emphasizes that visual materials should be approached critically, with attention to how they are produced, what they show, and how they are interpreted (2023). For this reason, the analysis below does not treat the images as objective proof of identity. Instead, each image is read together with the participant’s narrative, the theoretical framework of material culture, and the broader question of how domestic space becomes a cultural threshold.

The selected photographs were chosen because they represent different forms of Iranian domestic presence: food and hospitality, decorative memory, sensory objects, and personal attachment. They do not represent all Iranian students in Italy, nor do they show a single model of Iranian domestic space. Rather, they offer examples of how Iranian students create familiarity through small visual and material arrangements. The analysis focuses on what is visible, how the objects are arranged, and what cultural or emotional meanings they may carry.

If section 3.2 showed how an Italian student apartment can be adapted through a *sofreh* and carpet, and section 3.3 showed how food and hospitality become social practices, this section looks more closely at the visual details of domestic life. It asks what these images reveal about memory, belonging, and the preservation of identity. The aim is not to judge whether a space looks “Iranian enough,” but to understand how ordinary objects become meaningful inside temporary student housing.



Figure 4 Framed image of an Iranian courtyard with a howz-e āb displayed in a student domestic space. Source: participant-submitted photograph, anonymized.

Figure 4 shows a framed image of an Iranian courtyard with a *howz-e āb*, plants, and brick walls. Unlike the food or *sofreh* images, this photograph does not show a ritual being performed. Instead, it shows how visual memory is placed on the wall. The framed image brings an Iranian architectural and domestic atmosphere into the Italian apartment. The *howz-e āb* evokes a familiar visual language of Iranian courtyards, water, plants, and enclosed domestic calm. Even if the

student's actual apartment in Italy does not resemble this space, the image creates a visual connection to Iranian domestic imagination.

This is important because not all forms of cultural preservation are practical. Some are atmospheric. A framed image, artwork, poster, or decorative object may not be used in the same way as tea or saffron, but it changes the way a space feels. It gives the room a visual point of return. In this case, the participant does not recreate an Iranian courtyard physically; instead, the image allows the memory or idea of such a space to remain present. The wall becomes a surface of memory.

This photograph also shows how domestic space can contain more than one place at once. Physically, the student is in Italy. Visually, the image refers to Iran. Emotionally, the room becomes a meeting point between the two. Marcus Banks argues that visual materials in social research are not neutral objects; they are embedded in social relationships and meanings (Banks 2001). The framed picture therefore matters not simply because of what it depicts, but because of where it is placed and what relationship it creates between the participant and the idea of home.



Figure 5 Tea prepared for sharing as a domestic practice of hospitality. Source: participant-submitted photograph, anonymized.

Figure 5 shows tea prepared for sharing, with several glasses arranged around a teapot and dates placed beside them. Unlike a single tea cup, this image emphasizes the social dimension of tea. The arrangement suggests hospitality, conversation, and the act of welcoming others into a domestic space. In Iranian everyday life, tea is not only a drink; it is often one of the first things offered to a guest and one of the simplest ways of creating warmth between people. In the context of student life in Italy, this practice can be adapted to small apartments, shared rooms, or temporary housing. The image therefore shows how Iranian domestic rituals can continue without requiring a traditional family home.

Tea is important in this thesis because it moves between object, ritual, and memory. It can be offered to guests, shared with friends, or consumed alone as comfort, but in this photograph its collective meaning is especially visible. The glasses, teapot, and dates create a small scene of hospitality, where the domestic space becomes socially and culturally familiar. The visual analysis of this image helps show how an everyday object can carry cultural meaning without needing to appear dramatic. Douglas Harper's work on photo-elicitation is relevant here because photographs can evoke memories and meanings that may not emerge through direct questioning alone (2002, 13–26). In this case, the photograph opens a discussion about tea as routine, hospitality, family memory, and emotional comfort.



Figure 6 Drawing made by the participant's seven-year-old sister. Source: participant-submitted photograph, anonymized.

Figure 6 shows a child's drawing displayed on a wall. Although it is not an obviously national or traditional object, it is important because it connects domestic space to family memory and emotional attachment. According to the participant, the drawing was made by her seven-year-old sister and has been kept on the wall since 2025. This detail gives the object a strong emotional value: it is not only a drawing, but a visible reminder of a family relationship maintained across distance. The image therefore expands the meaning of Iranian identity beyond visible cultural

symbols. Iranian identity in diaspora is not preserved only through carpets, food, saffron, or Persian books; it is also preserved through family relationships and intimate reminders of people left behind. A child's drawing can become part of the emotional architecture of the room.

This kind of object is especially powerful because it carries the presence of someone absent. It may not look culturally specific to an outsider, but for the participant it holds a personal history and a continuing connection with her family in Iran. Marschall's concept of "memory objects" is useful here because it explains how ordinary objects can connect migrants to homeland, family, and pre-migration life (2019). The drawing becomes a small but emotionally charged object. It helps the student feel connected not only to Iran as a country, but to the people and relationships that make Iran meaningful. The visual analysis of these photographs shows that Iranian domestic identity is built from different kinds of objects. Some objects, such as the framed courtyard image, work visually by bringing the memory of Iranian architecture or atmosphere into the room. Others, such as tea cups, work through routine and hospitality. Others, such as drawings or family gifts, work through emotional attachment. Still others, such as saffron and cardamom, work through smell, taste, and cooking. Together, they show that the domestic space is not made meaningful through one single object, but through a network of material details.

This also confirms that the "Iranian inside" is not a fixed or uniform interior. Each participant creates a different domestic arrangement depending on what they value, what they were able to bring, what space they have, and what kind of memories they want to keep close. For one student, Iranian identity may be most visible through food. For another, it may appear through an image on the wall. For another, it may be preserved through a family object that has no obvious cultural meaning to anyone else. Visual analysis allows these differences to appear.

At the same time, these images reveal a shared pattern: Iranian identity is often preserved through small, ordinary objects rather than large public symbols. The participant photographs show rooms and objects that are modest, temporary, and personal. This modesty is exactly what makes them important. They show how culture survives in everyday life: on walls, tables, kitchen shelves, carpets, desks, and inside the repeated gestures of cooking, drinking, remembering, and arranging.

The photographs also show that domestic space is not simply a background for migration. It is an active site where migration is felt and managed. Boccagni and Bonfanti's work on migration and domestic space supports this point, because it treats the home as a key site for understanding

belonging and everyday life in migration (2023). In the participant images, the home appears as a place where Iran is not reproduced completely, but partially and meaningfully. The Italian apartment remains Italian in structure, but it becomes emotionally mixed through objects and practices.

Overall, the visual analysis demonstrates how Iranian students in Italy use domestic objects to create familiarity, preserve memory, and negotiate belonging. The images do not simply decorate the thesis; they show the material reality of its argument. They make visible the small ways in which Iranian identity is carried into Italian apartments and kept alive through ordinary domestic life.

3.4.1 Reading Images Together with Participant Narratives

The photographs used in this chapter are most meaningful when read together with participant explanations. A domestic image can show an object, but it cannot fully explain why the object matters. For example, a photograph of tea may show cups and a teapot, but the participant's words explain whether tea is connected to hospitality, family memory, comfort, or daily routine. Similarly, a drawing on a wall may not look culturally specific, but the participant's explanation can reveal its connection to family and emotional distance.

This is why the analysis avoids treating images as self-explanatory. The photographs are interpreted through three layers: what is visible in the image, what the participant says about it, and how it connects to the wider themes of the thesis. These layers allow the research to move from description to interpretation. First, the image is described in concrete terms. Second, the participant's explanation is introduced. Third, the image is connected to themes such as memory, hospitality, nostalgia, or belonging.

This approach is especially important because many of the objects in the photographs are ordinary. A tea glass, a food container, a framed image, or a child's drawing may not appear significant without context. However, in the participant narratives, these objects become emotionally and culturally meaningful. The ordinary nature of the objects is part of their importance. They show

that identity is preserved not only through formal symbols, but through small things that belong to everyday life.

Reading the photographs alongside participant narratives also prevents overinterpretation. Without the participant's explanation, the researcher might impose meaning onto the image. For example, a carpet might be interpreted as a national or cultural symbol, but the participant may value it mainly because it was a gift from family. A food object might be interpreted as heritage, but the participant may describe it as comfort or routine. The participant's own words therefore guide the analysis and keep it connected to lived experience.

This method also respects the partial nature of domestic photography. The images show only selected parts of a home. They do not reveal the entire apartment, the full life of the participant, or the complete meaning of the space. They are fragments, but they are meaningful fragments. Like the suitcase archive itself, the photographs preserve selected pieces of domestic life. Their value lies in what they allow the participant to show, remember, and explain.

3.5 Domestic Space as a Response to Nostalgia and Displacement

The participant responses and photographs show that domestic space becomes one of the main ways Iranian students respond to nostalgia and displacement in Italy. The home, even when temporary, rented, or shared, offers a space where students can gather familiar objects, repeat cultural routines, and create a sense of emotional stability. This does not mean that an Italian apartment becomes a complete replacement for the home left behind in Iran. Rather, it becomes a partial and adapted space where memory can be held, where cultural habits can continue, and where the feeling of distance can be made more bearable.

In migration, home is rarely a simple or stable idea. Sara Ahmed argues that migration changes the relationship between home, belonging, and estrangement, because the migrant's sense of home becomes shaped by movement, memory, and separation (Ahmed 1999). This idea is important for the present thesis because Iranian students in Italy are not only living between two countries geographically; they are also living between different emotional attachments. Iran may remain connected to family, childhood, language, food, and memory, while Italy becomes the place of

study, daily routine, independence, uncertainty, and future possibility. The student apartment becomes the space where these attachments meet. The participant material confirms this tension. In the photographs analyzed in this chapter, Iranian identity appears not as a complete reconstruction of Iran, but through small domestic traces: a *sofreh* arranged on a carpet, food prepared for sharing, tea set out for guests, saffron and cardamom kept in the kitchen, a framed image of an Iranian courtyard, and a child's drawing displayed on a wall. These objects and arrangements do not erase the fact that the students are living in Italy. Instead, they make the Italian domestic space emotionally mixed. The apartment remains part of Italy, but it also contains fragments of Iran.

This emotional mixing is central to the experience of displacement. Displacement does not only mean being physically away from one country and present in another. It can also mean feeling that familiar routines, social gestures, smells, tastes, and relationships have been interrupted. For Iranian students, this interruption may appear in small ways: eating alone instead of with family, cooking in a shared kitchen instead of a family kitchen, drinking tea in a rented room instead of a familiar living room, or seeing family members only through phone calls and photographs. Domestic objects help respond to this interruption by creating points of continuity.

Marschall's concept of "memory objects" is especially useful here because it shows how ordinary belongings can connect migrants to home, family, and pre-migration life. In the participant photographs, memory is not preserved through extraordinary or expensive objects. It is preserved through things that are often modest: tea, food, spices, drawings, images, textiles, and small arrangements. Their value comes from the memories and relationships attached to them. A drawing made by a younger sister, for example, may not look culturally specific to an outsider, but for the participant it becomes a powerful emotional object because it carries the presence of someone absent.

This shows that nostalgia is not only about national identity in a broad sense. It is also personal and relational. Students do not miss "Iran" only as an abstract homeland; they miss family kitchens, specific meals, familiar rooms, particular people, childhood memories, forms of hospitality, and everyday language. The domestic objects they keep around them help make these memories visible and usable in daily life. A photograph can make family present. Tea can repeat a familiar rhythm. Saffron can bring back the smell of home cooking. A carpet can make a room feel warmer and less

anonymous. At the same time, nostalgia is not always simple comfort. It can also intensify the feeling of absence. The same object that makes the student feel close to home can also remind them that home is far away. A family drawing on the wall may bring emotional warmth, but it may also underline the distance from the sister who made it. Iranian food may create a familiar atmosphere, but it may also recall the absence of family meals. A framed image of an Iranian courtyard may make the room more beautiful and familiar, but it may also show how different the actual apartment is from the remembered or imagined home. In this sense, domestic objects carry both comfort and longing.

This double feeling is important because it prevents nostalgia from being understood as only sentimental. In this thesis, nostalgia is not treated as a refusal to adapt to Italy. Rather, it appears as one of the ways students adapt. By keeping meaningful objects, cooking familiar food, preparing tea, arranging a *sofreh*, or displaying images and family objects, students create emotional resources for living abroad. Nostalgia becomes practical. It helps students decide what to keep, what to repeat, and how to make a temporary space feel livable.

Ralph and Staeheli argue that home in migration should be understood through mobility, belonging, and changing attachments to place (2011, 517–530). This is especially relevant for international students, whose lives are often uncertain and transitional. Many students do not know whether they will remain in Italy, return to Iran, or move somewhere else after graduation. Their domestic spaces may change from one year to another, and their rooms may never feel fully permanent. Yet even temporary spaces can become meaningful. A rented room may not be a final home, but it can still become a place where memory is arranged and belonging is practiced.

The participant images show this clearly. The *sofreh* arranged on a carpet temporarily changes the use of the room. The meal prepared for sharing turns the table into a site of hospitality. Tea prepared for guests creates a small social ritual. The framed courtyard image brings visual memory into the room. The child's drawing creates a continuing family presence across distance. These examples show that students respond to displacement not by recreating Iran completely, but by creating smaller, manageable forms of continuity.

Domestic space therefore becomes a kind of emotional shelter. This does not mean that it is always peaceful or free from difficulty. Shared apartments can be uncomfortable. Kitchens can be limited. Rooms can be small. Students may feel lonely even when surrounded by familiar objects.

However, the ability to arrange even a small part of the space gives students some control over their environment. Boccagni and Bonfanti's work on migration and domestic space is useful here because it treats the home as an important site where migrants negotiate everyday life, memory, and belonging (2023). For Iranian students, this negotiation often happens through very small domestic choices.

One of the most important findings of this thesis is that belonging can be created through ordinary repetition. It does not always appear as a strong or permanent feeling. Sometimes it is created through making tea every day, cooking Iranian food on the weekend, keeping saffron in the kitchen, looking at a family object before sleeping, or inviting friends to share a meal. These repeated acts create rhythm. They make the apartment feel less temporary, even if the student knows they may leave it later. Through repetition, the room becomes familiar.

Yuval-Davis describes belonging as connected to emotional attachment and the feeling of being "at home" (2011). This feeling is not automatic for migrant students. It has to be produced and maintained. In the context of this research, students produce belonging through the objects and practices that make their domestic space emotionally recognizable. They may not fully belong to Italy yet, and they may be physically distant from Iran, but inside the apartment they can create a space where both realities are held together.

This is why the idea of the "Iranian inside" remains important. The Iranian inside is not a sealed or pure cultural space. It is not separate from Italy, and it is not identical to Iran. It is a lived and changing space made from memory, available objects, student housing conditions, and daily routines. It can appear in a kitchen corner, on a wall, on the floor around a *sofreh*, or in the act of offering tea. The Iranian inside is therefore less a physical place than a set of emotional and cultural arrangements. The participant data also shows that domestic space responds to displacement differently for each student. For some, food is the strongest connection to Iran. For others, family objects are more important. Some students create belonging visually through artwork, photographs, or decoration. Others create it socially through guests, tea, and meals. These differences matter because they show that Iranian identity is not preserved in one single way. Each student creates a personal form of continuity, depending on what they miss, what they value, and what they are able to keep with them.

At the same time, the responses reveal a shared pattern: domestic objects and practices help students manage emotional distance. Whether through food, family memory, visual decoration, or hospitality, the home becomes a place where the effects of migration are softened. The apartment cannot remove displacement, but it can make displacement more livable. It gives students a place where they can return to familiar gestures after moving through Italian public life.

This section therefore brings together the main argument of the thesis. Iranian identity among students in Italy is not preserved only through public culture, language, or formal community life. It is also preserved through private domestic arrangements that respond to nostalgia and displacement. Objects and practices become tools for emotional survival.

They help students create continuity without denying change. They allow Iran to remain present inside Italy, not as a complete reconstruction, but as a set of memories, tastes, images, gestures, and relationships.

In this sense, domestic space becomes more than a background to migration. It is one of the places where migration is most deeply felt. It is where absence becomes visible, where memory becomes material, and where belonging is quietly reconstructed. The Iranian student apartment in Italy is therefore not only a place of residence. It is a threshold where nostalgia, displacement, adaptation, and identity meet in ordinary domestic life.

Conclusion

This thesis examined how Iranian students living in Italy preserve a sense of cultural identity through everyday objects, domestic practices, and the emotional arrangement of private space. Rather than approaching heritage only through public institutions, official cultural events, or large community structures, the research focused on the intimate and ordinary spaces of student life: rented rooms, shared apartments, kitchens, desks, carpets, shelves, and personal corners of the home. The central argument of the thesis has been that domestic space functions as a cultural threshold between the Italian outside and the Iranian inside, allowing students to negotiate memory, belonging, nostalgia, and adaptation in everyday life.

The idea of the “Italian outside” and the “Iranian inside” has helped frame the domestic space as a place of transition rather than separation. Iranian students in Italy move through Italian public, social, and university environments, but within their private spaces they often recreate familiar cultural atmospheres through objects and routines. This does not mean that the home becomes a perfect copy of Iran. Instead, it becomes a partial, selective, and adapted space where Iranian identity can remain present. The student apartment is shaped by Italian architecture, rental conditions, shared housing, and limited resources, but it can still be transformed through small acts of arrangement, cooking, remembering, and hosting.

Chapter One situated Iranian student mobility within the wider context of Iranian migration and diaspora in Italy. It showed that Iranian presence in Italy has often been marked by student mobility, temporary movement, and relatively small community formations. This context is important because it explains why private domestic spaces can become especially meaningful. When cultural continuity is not always organized through large public institutions or strong visible communities, the home becomes a quieter but important site where identity is preserved. The chapter also introduced the home as a cultural threshold, a space where different attachments, memories, and forms of belonging meet.

Chapter Two developed the concept of the “suitcase archive.” This concept was used to describe the collection of objects, memories, and practices that Iranian students carry with them or recreate

in Italy. Objects such as carpets, saffron, tea, photographs, books, artwork, family gifts, and decorative items were discussed not simply as possessions, but as carriers of emotional and cultural meaning. These objects allow students to keep parts of Iran close, even when they are physically far from home. Their value is not only material; it is sensory, emotional, relational, and symbolic. A tea glass, a packet of saffron, or a family photograph may seem ordinary, but in the context of migration these objects can become powerful reminders of family, language, food, memory, and home.

Chapter Three brought the theoretical discussion into dialogue with participant responses and photographs. Through anonymous surveying, digital photo-elicitation, visual analysis, and auto-ethnographic reflection, the research explored how Iranian students actually arrange and experience their domestic spaces in Italy. The participant photographs showed how cultural identity becomes visible in small domestic details: a *sofreh* arranged on a carpet, tea prepared for sharing, saffron and cardamom kept as sensory objects, a framed image of an Iranian courtyard, and a child's drawing kept on the wall as a reminder of family. These images confirmed that Iranian identity in diaspora is not preserved only through obvious national symbols. It can also be preserved through family relationships, food practices, visual memory, domestic rituals, and emotional attachments.

One of the main findings of this thesis is that material culture and intangible heritage are deeply connected. Objects matter because they make practices possible, and practices give objects meaning. Tea is not only an object in the kitchen; it becomes meaningful when it is prepared, offered, and shared. Saffron is not only an ingredient; it carries smell, taste, family memory, and culinary knowledge.

A carpet is not only decoration; it can change how a room is used and how people gather. A *sofreh* is not only a cloth; it creates a shared domestic arrangement connected to intimacy, hospitality, and eating together. In this way, heritage is preserved through the interaction between objects, gestures, spaces, and emotions.

Another important finding is that nostalgia is not only a feeling of sadness or longing. In the context of this research, nostalgia can also become practical. Iranian students respond to distance and displacement by creating small forms of continuity inside their living spaces. A familiar object, a food practice, a photograph, or a domestic routine can make a temporary apartment feel less empty

and more emotionally livable. These objects and practices do not erase displacement, but they help students live with it. They create small anchors in a life shaped by movement, uncertainty, and separation from family.

The research also showed that Iranian identity among students in Italy is not fixed or uniform. Participants did not all preserve identity in the same way. For some, food and tea were central. For others, photographs, books, decorative objects, or family gifts carried the strongest meaning. Some objects were visibly Iranian, while others were meaningful mainly because of the personal relationships attached to them. This diversity is important because it prevents a simplified understanding of Iranian identity. The thesis does not argue that there is one single way to create an Iranian domestic space abroad. Rather, it shows that each student creates a personal version of cultural continuity through the objects and practices that matter most to them.

The methodology also shaped the findings. By using anonymous surveys and digital photo-elicitation, the research allowed participants to decide what parts of their domestic space they wanted to share. This was important because the home is private and emotionally sensitive. The photographs did not simply illustrate the thesis; they became part of the analysis.

They showed how identity is arranged visually and materially, while participant explanations helped clarify the emotional meanings behind the images. Auto-ethnographic reflection also helped situate the research, since the topic is connected to the researcher's own experience as an Iranian student in Padua. However, this reflection was used as a supporting layer rather than as a replacement for participant data.

The study has some limitations. The number of participants was small, and the findings cannot represent all Iranian students in Italy. The data was also based on what participants chose to share, which means that many parts of domestic life remained private or invisible. The photographs show selected objects and corners rather than entire homes. However, these limitations are also connected to the ethical nature of the research. Because the thesis deals with private space, anonymity and participant control were necessary. The aim was not to produce a general statistical picture, but to offer a focused qualitative understanding of how identity, memory, and belonging are preserved in everyday domestic life. Future research could expand this study by including a larger group of Iranian students in different Italian cities, or by comparing Iranian students with other migrant student communities. It could also examine differences based on gender, class, city

of origin, religion, length of stay, or type of accommodation. Another possible direction would be to study how Iranian domestic practices change over time: for example, whether students keep the same objects throughout their stay, replace them, send them back, or attach new meanings to them as Italy becomes more familiar.

Overall, this thesis has argued that the preservation of Iranian identity in Italy does not happen only in public, formal, or visible ways. It also happens quietly, through ordinary domestic life. The home becomes a threshold where the Italian present and the Iranian past meet, where objects carry memory, and where everyday practices make culture livable. Iranian students may not be able to bring an entire homeland with them, but through tea, saffron, carpets, photographs, books, food, hospitality, family objects, and small domestic rituals, they create spaces where Iran remains emotionally present. In this sense, the domestic space is not just where migration is experienced after the public day ends; it is one of the places where belonging is most carefully, and most tenderly, reconstructed.

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