

Cultural Probe

Collin Pfender
Yash Mittal
Shakthidhar Gopavaram
Austin VanScoik

Table of Contents

Overview.....	3
Target User & Research Objectives.....	4
Probe Contents.....	5
Wine Bottle with Confetti.....	6
Ball Jar.....	7
Instagram Account.....	8
Alcohol & Food Pairings.....	9
Unusual Spices.....	10
Stationary, Food & Recipe Cards.....	11
Rationale & Design Process.....	12
Uncertainty Objects, Expanded.....	15
Celebratory Object, Expanded.....	16
Probe Aesthetic.....	17

Overview

As a team, we began with the issue of who would be the subjects of our Probe's deployment. In order to assemble the Probe in an effective way we would need to know which individuals would make up our context. After we had selected a group of subjects and confirmed their interest in participation, we proceeded to the Probe itself.

We brainstormed a series of food based items and tasks to go with them, ultimately choosing our current six items. Each of us took on the task of obtaining at least one of these items, some of the items were obtained by multiple members working together.

Afterwards, we assembled our Probe physically, and delegated which member of our team would detail which part of our final documentation and report.



Target User

Like the greater whole of America, Indiana suffers from a multitude of food-related health issues. Most prominently, obesity. However, instead of selecting natives or long-term residents, we selected an Indian international student studying locally. He will be referred to as Mr. Dasika.

We recruited him because we are interested in seeing how many of the influences contributing to Indiana's obesity epidemic were due to the state's food-environment and not just learned behaviors ingrained as bad habits. If even visitors find themselves prone to eating unhealthily while in-state then the environment itself is a significantly bad influence.

In addition, we refer to Mr. Dasika and his friends throughout the document either as participants or subjects, interchangeably.

Research Objectives

Our Probe is full of items that we intend to act as influences towards the exploration of the subject's food-spaces. We are curious to see how he may use the items, and if Mr. Daskia uses them in any ways that demonstrate other items' influences. If we provide spices, will our subject try them? If we provide recipe suggestions, will he make them or respond with their own? Will his behavior be affected in any way that is significant to them?

We have set up the contents of our Probe to work together and be conducive to our subject's self-documentation as well. Once the deployment has ended we will investigate these questions further.

Probe Contents

The cultural probe was designed to bring out the exploratory nature of humans which may be at the surface level for some and hidden for others. The contents were chosen carefully so as to not have any positive or negative connotations prior to any user engagement. All the items chosen are neutral in nature. However, they could potentially lead to positive or negative scenarios depending on user behavior and this is exactly what we aim to capture in our observations.



Figure 1



Figure 2

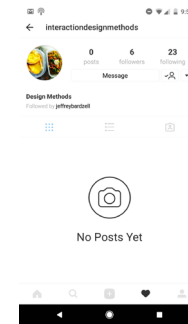


Figure 3

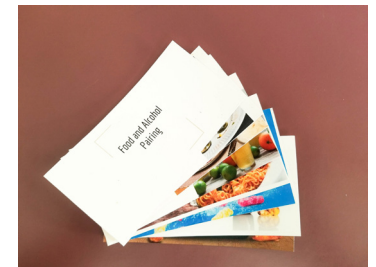


Figure 4



Figure 5

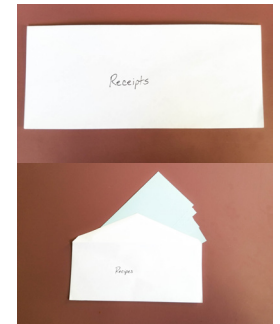


Figure 6

Wine Bottle filled with Confetti

Offered as a celebratory object to our users since in multiple cultures, it is viewed as a symbol warming up to people when visiting someone's home.

Since we do not intend to be biased in eliciting negative reaction from our target user, we have kept the bottle empty. The user would have to figure out a way to open the bottle, along with the added mystery of not knowing the contents.



Figure 1

Ball Jar

A common object found in homes that can be used for different purposes, as varied as drinking water or alcohol, storing food and even sugar and salt packages.



Figure 2

Instagram Account

We felt there should be a way for our user to record his experiences with our probe and felt Instagram to be a good choice since it is widely used for visually recording one's experiences.

We have set up an account for the user along with a few followers and followees where they can get ideas from.

@interactiondesignmethods is the channel on Instagram.

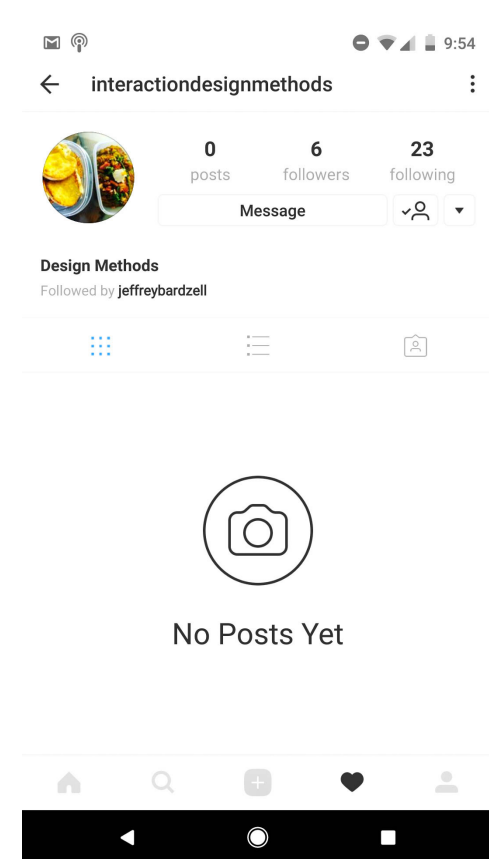


Figure 3

Alcohol & Food Pairings

Unique pairings of alcohol and food to intrigue our target group and see if they end up making use of alcoholic beverages in their food recipes.



Figure 4

Unusual Spices

We intend to offer unknown spices and condiments which they haven't used previously to our target user and observe what he will do with it.



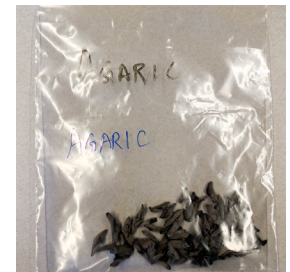
Chinese Dried Chili



Chinese Prickly Ash



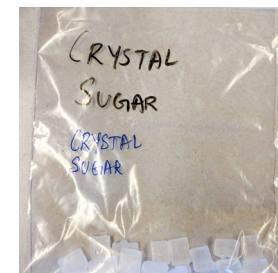
Star Anise



Agaric



Figure 5



Crystal Sugar

Stationary, Food & Recipe Cards

Stationery and food recipe cards for our user to try out variation in their cooking. It would be exciting to see whether and how our other object such as the spices and food pairings end up working in tandem with these cards.



Figure 6.1 (Receipts)



Figure 6.2 (Recipes)

Rationale & Design Process

At the onset, our team decided that our cultural probe may not necessitate an individual who would be ostensibly obese. This comes from the idea that the current climate of diet and body image is entangled with the idea of obesity. That is, obesity is the body condition/stigma which Indiana residents do not wish to embody. By virtue of this assumption, we opened up our participant search to anyone who has interacted with the neurotic, impeding cultural obsession occupying society's thoughts, namely, "I don't want to be seen as fat."

Two guiding points of inquiry for us were prompted, "What social, cultural, health, and justice concerns arise from various types of food production systems?" as well as, "How do individuals and communities self-organize to develop alternative models for the long-term health of the families and/or communities?"

Synthesis of our ideas for the former took us towards our participant. Simultaneously an Indian expat and a graduate student, he is primed to observe and perhaps develop opinions on the cultural, social, and health aspects of food production in Indiana. Questions and expectations which circulate for us are how does our participant assimilate into the cultural norms of Indiana? Does our participant reserve their behaviors from extending into the cultural expectations of native Indiana residents? What will our participant do with our objects? Will they be used for food storage? For cooking? For an air freshener? Will we find receipts for fast-food or groceries? And what will any of this bring to our minds?

Rationale & Design Process, Continued

The latter point of inquiry shaped our attention towards how our participant might conceive of our cultural probe as a health and lifestyle package. Popular services such as Blue Apron or Hello Fresh, are competing to provide consumers with local, in-season foods, delivered to their door. These packages provide instructions and the contents necessary to expand their repertoire as home chefs. How might our cultural probe align with some of the cultural nuances that have brought these home chef services to life?

With these ideas in mind, our team gradually filled our basket (probe package) with items which might encourage reflexive behavior for our participant to ruminate on the health and cultural aspects of their behavior, as well as tap into the enabling power of home chef package.

Notable objects to consider are the wine bottle, Instagram account, and spices. The wine bottle, in a critical design fashion, is empty of liquid content, but filled with confetti. Originally, we planned to fill it with ideas of food and alcohol pairings, as to provide a celebratory experience, which our participant could act upon. However, by occluding anything meaningful in our bottle, we wish for our participant to discover what the bottle may hide within – a metaphor, perhaps, for the the same experience many wish to discover if the bottle was full of mind-altering substance.

Thus, our celebratory object may lead to further contemplation, perhaps even regret. Our Instagram account is designed to inspire our participant with food creation options, with all of our account following back. This may create a sense of performance towards our expectations, whatever may be conceived of by our participant. However, we wonder whether or not the pictures posted on the account with map onto the food receipts we will ask our participant to keep. Either this positive or inverse relationship may be telling of their behaviors. Finally, our

Rationale & Design Process, Continued

inclusion of spices are geared towards the Indian palate, not to stereotype our participant, but to suggest interaction with reminders in the form of unground, aromatic spices. Will our participant find existential hesitations as he is reminded of his mother's cooking? Or will these spices be wholly unfamiliar to him? Maybe something completely unconsidered. For more interest about our objects included, please reference pages 5-11, where we discuss how they relate to one another.

Finally, we hope to present this package in a fruit basket, as this is a conventional American manner of receiving "healthy" foodstuffs. These are often given in goodwill, in addition to having the added cultural norm of distance; fruit baskets are not always something that intimate friends or family members would provide one another, in comparison to homemade baked goods or a sentimental object.

Wrapping our cultural probe, with its mixture between American and Indian, vague objects and others which suggest self-observation, we hope to incite play, confusion, joy, utility, and any number of other qualities for to inspire our own insights into our participant's lived lifeworld.



Uncertainty Objects, Expanded

One of the goals of our cultural probe is to understand some of the issues that people facing when making choices around food. In this section, we explain how the objects in our cultural probe help us understand these issues.

The envelope labeled “Receipts” is given to the participant so that he can store receipts of food purchases (both grocery and restaurant food). This object allows us to collect information about how often our participant eats out and what kinds groceries he buys. This information helps us gain insights into our participant’s eating habits, what kind of food he prefers to eat and the range of options people have to choose from.

These insights would be useful in helpful gaining a better understanding of the participant’s environment and the issues associated with it. For example, if the receipts show that our participant mostly ate out then we would infer that he does not have time or tools to cook at home.

We also have a stack of cards with a Alcohol and food pairings. These pairings go from simple (easy to make) to complex (harder to prepare). Since our target participant, and perhaps friends of our participant, are avid drinkers we thought that they might be interested in trying out the alcohol and food suggestions on these cards.

Based on if they try out just the simple pairings or if they tried out both the simple and complex pairings. We can make inferences about their habits which would enable us to understand more about the issues related to making food choices in association with human behaviour.



Figure 6.1 (Receipts)



Figure 4.1 (Pairings)

Celebratory Object, Expanded

The celebratory item should represent “positive and successful aspects of human behavior around food.” We agree that food is a positive experience, and we wanted to acknowledge it as such. However, too much food, and especially too much of the wrong food, is negative and harmful for the individual.

We believed that one of the most significant aspects of food’s allure is the anticipation of the experience of eating. Hunger in and of itself is essentially an innate desire and anticipation of food. We wanted our celebratory object to symbolize this.



Figure 1



Figure 1.1

The sealed bottle full of confetti suggests that there are things inside that are worth obtaining, however will the subject attempt to slowly extract the contents through the neck of the bottle? Or will he simply smash the entire thing and be done with it. These approaches parallel the strategies of Indiana’s residents within their food-space. Do they labor to measure their food intake on a daily basis, buy healthy ingredients, cook healthy dishes, and maintain these habits indefinitely? Or do people go for the quicker, less healthy option?

This is all up to the individual. Our goal would be to help them make these healthier decisions.

Probe Aesthetic

As we have described, we designed our probe to be pleasant and pleasing. Gift baskets are a commonality in our society and symbolize treats being share from one individual or group to another. We wanted our Probe to be perceived as something to enjoy. We hoped to positively influence our subjects with a gift with many diverse goodies, rather than burden them with an 'assignment' and 'tasks'.

By encouraging a lighter and more playful tone with our Probe, we believe our subjects will be less intimidated at the prospect of participation in our study, and more willing to engage with its contents and document the process of that engagement.



Figure 7