'EMOJI MEME' IN POPULAR CULTURE AND ITS CONSUMER CONNECT

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ABSTRACT

Popular culture or pop culture is the entirety of ideas, perspectives, attitudes, images, and other phenomena that are within the mainstream of a given culture. Emoji culture is one phase of popular culture that evolved as a result of technologies and digital practices. This paper centers on the idea of emojis and coins the term 'emoji meme'. A meme is "an idea, behavior, or style that spreads from person to person within a culture". Emojis also could be called as memes since it is contagious and has occupied most of the personal and social activities of humans such as communication, relationships, arts, public relations, branding, advertising, and marketing. Thus, 'emoji memes' could be defined as an emotion, idea or concept that spreads rapidly from person to person through emojis (use and application). As an addendum to communication, emoji has broadened its coverage drastically based on various functions it performs. Consumerism is the freshly and predominantly affected area in which emojis perform persuasive function (the communicative goal of influencing the attitudes and/or behaviour of an addressee or audience). Consumerism is a social as well as economic order which encourages the buying of goods and services in ever-greater amounts. Adopting 'emojis' in communicating with consumers, people are persuaded to purchase goods and consume materials in excess of their basic needs. 'Emoji memes' influence the consumers and evoke interest towards products. This paper thus investigates the aspects like product designing/packaging, branding, marketing, advertising and customer relations in which 'emoji memes' are functioning effectively by influencing consumers. In addition, the paper determines the 'why factor' in each aspect by answering the question 'Why do we apply emojis in product designing/packaging, branding, marketing, advertising, and customer relations'.

Keywords: advertising, emoji, marketing, persuasive function, popular/pop culture

1. INTRODUCTION

In this thematic paper, the act of introducing, i.e. bringing concepts into use or operation for the first time is done based on the keywords mentioned above. **Popular culture or pop culture** is the entirety of ideas, perspectives, attitudes, images, and other phenomena that are within the mainstream of a given culture. It is the culture based on

the tastes of ordinary people rather than educated elite. Emojis that have been there since 1990's are taking over the world. These tiny images which are called by a Bangor University professor, Vyv Evan, as – the picture based language – are available globally on smart phones and mobile computing devices since 2011 by Apple adding emoji keyboard in iOS 5.

Emoji is a small digital image or icon used to express an idea or emotion in electronic communication. The term emoji is a loanword from Japanese (e - 'picture' + moji - 'letter, character'). These picture characters combined with the concept of pop culture and considering it as a phase of popular culture, we could mention the term emoji culture here.

Emoji culture is a term which is used to express the culture of using emojis which is increasingly ingrained in popular culture. The best option to visually understand the invasion of emoji in the pop culture is by visiting http://www.emojitracker.com/ - which tracks the real-time emoji use in Twitter. With emojis 845 in number arranged in rows and columns, this site tracks and shows the use with green blinks on each emojis on each use or click of it by a twitter user.

Professor Vyv Evans said that emoji is "the fastest growing form of language in history based on its incredible adoption rate and speed of evolution," reported Doble (2015). As per a published report, over 6 billion emojis are sent out on a daily basis and it has become a new language of communication for youth. Out of that 6 billion, 2 billion emojis are sent in India. And the interest around these has been increasing in last 24-30 months. According to Emoji Consumer Science Team, almost everyone is using emojis (Fig. 1). "Emoji culture has become so popular that individual characters have developed their own trends and stories," notes Grathwohl (Brown, 2015).
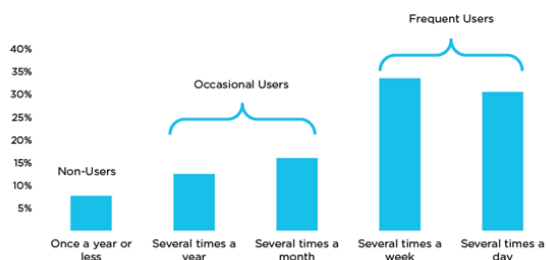

Fig. 1: Use of Emoji

(Source: http://neilpatel.com/2016/01/05/emoji-marketing-how-to-use-emoticons-to-increase-your-conversions/)

A **meme** is "an idea, behavior, or style that spreads from person to person within a culture" (Wikipedia, 2016). Adopting the meme concept, this paper coins the term 'emoji meme' representing the spread of it in global level.

Emoji meme is defined as an emotion, idea or concept that spreads rapidly from person to person through emojis (use and application). Its use and application is mainly for the communication purpose - the imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing, or using some other medium. The communication activities like product designing, branding, marketing, advertising and customer relationship are taken into consideration in this paper.

   Product designing is the process of creating a new product to be sold by a business to its customers and **Packaging** refers to the process of designing, evaluating, and producing packages. Form design and Package design included under product designing/packaging are the aspects which are given chief importance here in this paper. **Form design** means the shape and appearance of the product and **Package design** means the design and appearance of the package. **Branding** is the marketing practice of creating a name, symbol or design that identifies and differentiates a product from other products. **Marketing** are activities of a company associated with buying and selling a product or service. It includes advertising, selling and delivering products to people. **Advertising** is a means of communication with the users of a product or service. Advertisements are messages paid for by those who send them and are intended to inform or influence people who receive them, as defined by the Advertising Association of the UK. **Customer relations** is the process and manner in which a business develops, establishes and maintains relationships with its customers.

   Consumerism is a social as well as economic order which encourages the buying of goods and services in ever-greater amounts. With the help of emojis that are meant for communication, the brands are applying it in the aspect of consumerism with its main intent of persuasion. **Persuasive function**, the communicative goal of influencing the attitudes and/or behaviour of an addressee or audience, is achieved by employing these picture characters in major marketing activities such as form designing as well as package designing, branding, marketing, advertising, and customer relations.

2. FORM DESIGN AND PACKAGE DESIGN

Emoji-themed products and emojis which take the form of emojis are for attracting the emoji addicts as well as the ordinary consumers. Emoticon Back Packs, Emoticon Mask, Emoticon Socks, Emoticon Stuffed Plush, Emoji Custom Elite Socks, Emoji Shopping Bags, Emoji Nail Art, Emoji Love Transparent Case, Emoji Legging Pajama Set, goes on the varieties which could even cross hundreds.

   Logos of products and services are also attracted by these tiny characters, especially 'the happy characters' (Fig. 2 and 3).

Fig. 2: Logo of the the brand Smiley
(Source: http://osmanassem.com/tag/change/)

Fig. 3: Logo of a hotel in Coimbatore
(Source: http://www.sulekha.com/)

Product packages with emojis are also the spaces where we find these emotion and idea communicators a great deal. PEPSICO design calling it THE LANGUAGE OF NOW for their global emoji can and bottle campaign – 'Say it with Pepsi' has created hundreds of PepsiMojis (among which 38 designs are for Indian consumers) and used these emotion-conveyers for consumer to pick a bottle with an emoji that reflects his mood. Unleashing emojis through packaging and beyond, with pop-culture at the heart of the Pepsi summer campaign, PepsiCo Design & Innovation Center included eight designs that reflect the unique nature of India and the Indian consumer – from the traditionally Turbaned man, the quintessential lunch dabba and popular snacks like dosas and samosas, to musical instrument Tabla and celebrities like Virat Kohli and Ranbir Kapoor (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4: PepsiMojis in Pepsi cans and bottles – SAY IT WITH PEPSI campaign
(Source: http://www.pepsicoindia.co.in/media/Press-Releases/release-14_03_2016-.aspx)

"With two billion global smart phone users sending six billion emojis daily, we're thrilled to have our iconic brand bring a unique take to this truly global phenomenon. 'Jaisa Mood, Waisi Pepsi' will come to life in the real world in the most unexpected ways, moving beyond the digital world into the physical world. Emojis have always been expressions of moods & emotions, now Pepsi can be used to express what you are feeling! This campaign is sure to excite our consumers this summer, and make them reach out to grab their Pepsi," says Vipul Prakash (2016), Vice President, Beverage Category, PepsiCo India.

Alike one of the most often quoted axioms is: "Show, don't tell.", the emojis shows without telling. The smiley faces are doing even the job of 'welcome girl' in shops by becoming a part of the shop boards. Welcoming the customers with a smile, the smiley faces attracts the customers to the shops expressing warm and happy welcome.

3. BRANDING… BRAND MARKETING...

Prof. Vyv Evans. Linguistics professor and emoji expert, Bangor University in his talk "Adding Value to Brands with Emoji" in the second session of the Dots 2016 conference, speaks about how emojis can give brands an edge in the digital age. "A brand doesn't need to have a specific emoji to take advantage of emojis as a marketing tool," said Vyv. But according to Grennan (2016), "The popularity of emojis represents a major opportunity for brands, but only if they're thoughtful about the ways they incorporate emojis into their customer outreach."

Branded emojis (WhatsApp, FB Messenger, etc.), branded stickers (Finland-branded stickers that can be downloaded from iTunes and PlayStore – Fig. 5) and Taco Bell lobbying Unicode to add a taco emoji (Fig. 6) by circulating a Change.org petition are all various terminologies of 'emoji meme'.

Fig. 5: Sauna, the Nokia 3310 model, and a headbanger: quintessentally Finnish according to its foreign ministry
(Source: https://euobserver.com/digital/130962)

Fig. 6: Taco emoji
(Source: http://neilpatel.com/blog/emoji-marketing-how-to-use-emoticons-to-increase-your-conversions/)

4. MARKETING…ADVERTISING…

Here comes the term 'stickers' – bespoke emojis that users or companies create, using which the marketers leverage the emoji trend. Pepsi, Domino's, Candy Crush, McDonald's, Ikea, PETA, WWF, Budweiser, Taco Bell, GE, AT&T, Burger King, Goldman Sach and Washington Post; a few of the top brands brings into play the 'emoji

meme'. They have used emojis advertently in their campaigns like 'Share a Coke', 'Order with a Tweet', 'Cruelty Beyond Words', 'Back to School Hub', and 'Taco Emojis T-Shirts' in order to convey an emotion, idea or concept that spreads rapidly from person to person through emojis.

Incorporating emoji into their marketing strategy, foremost brands played with emojis by promoting the idea of emojis' efficiency (Appendix A):

- McDonalds by bringing emojis to life in its new video,
- IHOP updating its logo after 20 years,
- Bud Light by tweeting patriotic emoji tweet in its signature style,
- Foot Locker by releasing a "Shoemojis" app featuring the most popular shoes from Nike, Under Armour and more,
- Burger King by creating an emoji set to promote Chicken Fries,
- Chevorlet with their emoji press release, and
- Domino's Pizza with Domino's Emoji Ordering System and Emoji Literacy Flashcards.

Domino's concept of delivering pizza through emojis (on Twitter) even won a Titanium Grand Prix at the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity.

Movie watchers are also customers. Connecting 'emoji meme' directly to the popular culture, we could take its influence in the Film industry and the conveyance of its concept through emojis. Deadpool's emoji marketing campaign (Fig. 7) is the biggest success in recent history which reveals by the intrusion of digital life into the physical world (Chong, 2016).

Fig. 7: Deadpool Marketing Campaign: Totally respecting the power of surprise
(Source: http://seopressor.com/blog/emoji-marketing-8-best-emoji-campaigns-what-you-can-learn-from-them/)

In their '2015 Emoji Report' by Emogi Consumer Science Team, while analyzing the data on 'Stated Reasons for Selecting a Positive Emoji', 54% of the respondents said 'I believe the ad's message' and 35% said 'It is different than other ads' based on the scale - very/extremely important.

Adding on to this surprise was The *Emoji Movie*, a 2017 American 3D computer-animated film directed by Tony Leondis, and written by Leondis, Eric Siegel and Mike White, based on emoji. But came many negative reviews like: "While it's tempting to sum up in thumbs down emoji, when they go low, we go high. So let's just say, abandon all hope, ye who enter here," reviewed the film journalist, Helen O'Hara.

5. CUSTOMER RELATIONS… RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT…

"More recent research has also found that a smiley face online is equivalent to looking at a smiling face in real life," quotes Patel (n. d.). A statistical data on the 'Leading reasons for using Emojis according to the U. S. Internet users as of August 2015' which shows that 50% of the respondents shares the statement that 'They help create a more personal connection with the other person.' These quotes prove why brands (products or services) are so much behind emojis. With the human-like real face that can help in building more personal connection, the emojis are used by brands to maintain good relationship with their customers. Receiving their feedback using Reaction tool or Emoji rating system (Fig. 8) in websites and even in the most popular search engine Google, the reaction or the feedback of the readers or users is understood.
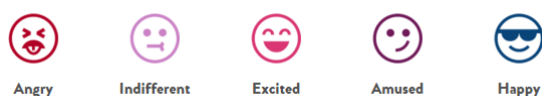

Fig. 8: Reaction Tool/Emoji rating system for websites
(Source: http://www.reactiontools.com/toolbox-en/emoji-rating-for-my-website/)

Dominos - an American pizza restaurant chain, Naturals – Beauty Salon, Hyundai – motor company and Home centre - home ware and furniture store are some of the shops in which we spotted the use of face emojis for different purposes especially for establishing a smooth relationship with customers. Henceforth the agreement to a study quoted by Neil Patel (n. d.), a marketing expert, "As per a 2008 research paper on typographic facial expression – Emoticons are effective in improving enjoyment, personal interaction and the perceived information richness of our messages."

6. THEORETICAL INTERPRETATION

Whether it is product designing/packaging, branding, marketing, advertising, customer relations, the 'emoji meme' is a concept which has engulfed the brands or service providers. Emojis are conveying varying emotions, ideas and concepts among customers. Emoji meme is blowing up.

Social Presence Theory (SPT) discusses the level in which a person is perceived as 'real' in mediated communications. Though SPT is found to be incompatible with nonverbal communication via digital technologies, a study by Durante (2016) has proved that nonverbal coding can be present within digital communication. Applying this theory to the above discussed aspects, this paper proves that the emojis; face emojis or branded emojis or branded stickers, the consumers are targeted by the marketers with its 'reality'. These emojis are perceived as 'real' by the consumers that:

- the form or the package of the product are designed by making it attractive and 'real' with the help of emojis especially face emojis: the Pepsi customers seeing the 'Ranbir Kapoor-emoji' and experiencing the 'real' feel of seeing him
- the brands are creating a personal connection to them making it appear as 'real' as experiencing the product in person: the smiley brand with its brand spreading a smile so as to spread happiness among consumers and them feeling the same
- the products are 'sensed' by the consumers during various campaigns, for instance, Dominos ordering system the consumers placing the order as s/he does it in 'real' physical space
- the consumers themselves express their emotion or feedback through emojis so that they feel that the brands are maintaining a 'real' emotional relationship with them.

7. CONCLUSION

The consummation of this paper is that emojis are in this culture. Professor Evans states: "Given the utility and added value provided by emoji, their usage is expected to increase exponentially across all age and cultural groups. While the uptake will differ by specific type of communication and function, it is not inconceivable that the majority of digital communication will feature emoji in future." "It's a brand-new way of speaking and it takes some time to get comfortable with the idea," says Nell (2015). Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing through emojis, irrespective of the demographic factors and geographical factors 'emoji meme' is spreading physically and digitally. Marmer (2018) adds that "from a marketing standpoint…emojis can…encourage interaction from your audience, higher click-through rates, and better messaging from your brand." "The emoji trend is here and it is here to stay. Emoji transcend language barriers, while increasing the richness of online communication," Chong (2016)… the richness of the 'real' online as well as offline communication.

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Appendix A

McD

IHOP

BUDLIGHT

FOOTLOCK

BURGERKING

DOMINOS

CHEVORLET