

# EMBODYING FINNISH CULTURE IN EMOJIS

## A story of remediation and psychosemiotics

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**Abstract:** *To capture the sensations of the crisp, dry air as you walk along a country road at sunset (three o'clock in the afternoon). To feel the warm, moist steam waft back after dowsing the sauna stove in water (löyly). Head banging and feeling the beat through your entire body as you are squashed in the middle of a hypnotized crowd at a Nightwish concert. These examples and more are the multisensorial experiences that the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (This is Finland) attempting to capture and communicate in their advent-style icons - emojis - of Finnish culture, released December, 2015. From the perspectives of national and international media attention, the icons can be seen as a success. Stories of the emojis were published in news media worldwide, from The Guardian to Wired, The Verge, Time, the BBC, CNN, and more. Stories ranged from: “people sweating in saunas” and serving as an example for more countries to follow (Grossman 2015); to “nakedness in saunas, headbangers and cell phones” - hairy, chunky and unbreakable (Neild & Kwok 2015). The stories go on. Of interest in this working paper is how far media interpretations and representations (framing) of the emojis came from the original designer intentions of the figures, and how this differs between Finnish national interpretations and international interpretations. Additionally, we pay attention to the remediation of embodied, or multisensory, experiences reflected in these framings of the emojis - the elements, the details that prevail in the media stories.*

**Keywords:** *Emojis, Finnish, culture, embodied, psychosemiotics, remediation*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades in particular, many discussions and initiatives have taken place in the pursuit of nation branding. National branding itself can be seen in terms of strategies and actions to raise sets of values and imagery to the fore, to promote the identity and ethos of a country in a specific light to the international community (Molloy

& Lerner, 2013). National symbolism and elements of Indigenous cultures have especially been utilized to project as sense of authentic and unique identity (Bell, 2013). Countries such as Finland, with its relatively young industrial and independent history, have carefully utilized the cultural sector, particularly design and architecture to construct its internal and external sense of nation. For this reason, international events such as the *Design in Scandinavia* exhibition were so important (Hawkins, 1998). Through the forms of Alvar Aalto, Tapio Wirkkala and Timo Sarpaneva to name a few, mediations of Finnish culture seen through the designs were portrayed as simultaneously close to nature, while remaining smooth and sophisticated. These examples, combined with others which included *ryijy* (shaggy, woolen) rugs and textiles, interwove notions of nature, sophistication and industry, with the naïve, childish and exotic (Kalha, 1998). Moreover, in a climate of wartime (post World War II) debts owed to Russia, industrialism, production and functionalism have played key roles both in practice - increasing productivity and exports to raise income and goods to repay debts - and symbolism - aligning Finland with the Western economies and cultures (Hawkins, 1998).

As time has passed, more and more the engineering and information communication technology industries (especially Nokia) have played a greater role in the economy, in addition to the portrayal of Finland's internal and external national identity. Thus, for Finnish national branding to play upon the legacies of the most notable and recent industrial history, cultural industries (Heavy Metal music), and combine them with elements of Finnish nature and traditions, and materialize them in the digital realm of emojis, seems like a logical step when remediating the culture. Thus, to: capture the sensations of the crisp, dry air as you walk along a country road at sunset (three o'clock in the afternoon in winter time); feel the warm, moist steam waft back after dowsing the sauna stove in water (*löyly*); head banging and feeling the beat through your entire body as you are squashed in the middle of a hypnotized crowd at a *Nightwish* concert, within the space of digital emojis, symbolically and concretely connects Finnish culture to an embodied and industrial past, present and possible future. These examples and more are the multisensorial experiences that the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*This is Finland*) attempts to capture and communicate in their advent-style icons - emojis - of Finnish culture, released in December, 2015.

From the perspectives of national and international media attention, the emojis representing Finnish culture can be seen as a success. Stories of the emojis were published in news media worldwide, from *The Guardian* to *Wired*, *The Verge*, *Time*, the *BBC*, *CNN*, and more. Stories ranged from: "people sweating in saunas" and "serving as an example for more countries to follow" (Grossman 2015); to "nakedness in saunas, headbangers and cell phones" – "hairy, chunky and unbreakable" (Neild & Kwok 2015). The stories go on. Of interest in this working paper is how far media interpretations and representations (framing) of the emojis, came from the original communicational intentions of the figures, and how these are conveyed to an international audience. We pay attention to what types of embodied experiences are reflected in these re-mediated

framings of the emojis - the elements, the details that prevail in the media stories. A psychosemiotic analysis (Rousi, 2013; Saariluoma & Rousi 2015) is conducted to examine the relationship between: Finnish culture (the object or that which is signified and remediated); the emojis (signifying elements or signs) and the interpretations or understandings (mental representations) of multisensory experiences remediated through the emoji designs. The history and cultural implications of emojis in the context of national branding are described in order to provide an understanding of the frame-vehicle through which Finnish culture is represented in this exercise by *This is Finland*.

## RE-MEDIATION AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

Lev Manovich (2001) describes how contemporary society exists in the midst of a “new media revolution” (p. 19) in which all aspects of culture are being transferred to information technology-mediated forms. Therefore, it should not be surprising that in addition to the cultural production, communication and distribution of e.g., art, mass media, film, music etc. being centralized to digital formats and the world wide web, cultures themselves - their representation, manifestation, communication and quite pertinently branding - are also being conveyed through digital networks. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000) characterize the modern condition of re-mediation, in terms of its double logic, which comprises simultaneous hypermediacy and immediacy. This is caused by the dual effect of both drastically multiplying the media not only present in people’s lives, but also in terms of the media through which cultural phenomena exists (for example, think of the *Angry Birds* phenomenon, or the current cultural progress of *Pokemon Go*), in addition to attempts to erase the traces of media - this media erasure can be seen in the principles of e.g., augmented and virtual realities themselves, where immersion is the optimal state of experiencing presence.

Media trace erasing can be discussed in terms of the effects of invisibility through abundance, or digital hegemony, in which through our screen-based dependence on smartphones, tablets, information screens and advertising, the boundaries between the digital and the physical are blurred. While embodiment of the digital in physical products or reference to physical experiences<sup>1</sup> through the digital are also serving to deter our attention away from the mechanisms, techniques and true nature of the media. Moreover, the very domains of usability (creating ‘user-friendly’ digital technology) and user

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Jones (2015) wrote an interesting article on the dynamics between the physical and the digital, in terms of our obsession for capturing every moment of life through smart phone (see: “The more time we spend on our iPhone cameras the less we see”). But, what also can be derived from this is the sense of digitalized embodiment, in which our embodied, multisensory experience is increasingly being captured in cyberspace, and relived through subsequent encounters with their digital archives.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2015/jun/15/time-eyes-glued-to-our-iphone-cameras-the-less-we-see>

experience, can be seen as agents in the quest of erasing the digital technology we are surrounded by, from our conscious experience (Bauman, 2000).

Remediation is not a product of the digital age (Bolter & Grusin, 2000), rather, throughout history it can be seen as the action of representing, or re-conveying reality through various human-made means such as paintings, writing (mark-making), oral histories etc. To a great extent we may consider that all remediation is cultural, thus, the portrayal, stylization and typifying of cultural traits or stereotypes through various media can be seen as one of its key functions. Culture, as most other concepts, is broad, diverse and lacks consensus regarding a precise definition (Brightman, 1995; Sommier, 2014). By many, culture has been considered as a discursive construction which not so much exists, but rather takes place through performance (Piller, 2011). Often culture is spoken of in terms of national culture or the identity of a country's people (Sewell, 2005) and is treated as a truism rather than a construction (Piller, 2011). Distinction should be made between the term 'culture' in singular form and 'cultures' in plural (Sommier, 2014). In its singular, culture refers to a theoretical approach while *cultures* refers to the various forms in which culture is realized (e.g., sub-culture, minority etc.). Cultures are semiotic systems of symbols and meanings (Piller, 2011), and as such are constructed through values, practices and representations through which people identify and connect (Shi-Xu, 2005).

## **NATIONAL BRANDING THROUGH FINNISH EMOJIS**

In contemporary consumerist society, the symbolic currency of cultures is in full swing in the trend towards national branding. The objective of national branding is to develop and manage national reputations of countries for the purpose of increasing symbolic values of products (Anholt, 1996; True, 2006). Thus, the communication and positive transference of specific national impressions and traits can be considered equally if not more important than the products themselves. The intentions behind national branding differ often in accordance with the socio-economic conditions of the countries, in terms of attracting foreign investment, tourism or promoting products (True, 2006). Melissa Aronczyk (2008) discusses national branding in terms of national governmental communication strategies and initiatives, in order to compete against an increasing number of nations for a decreasing set of resources. Pertinent to what was said above regarding re-mediation and its medial duality nation branding can be viewed as a bi-product of the "attention economy" in which an abundance of information has created "a poverty of attention" (Herbert Simon cited in Davenport & Beck, 2001, 11). Therefore, national branding is seen as a political action towards establishing a meaningful (lucrative) role for the nation in question, on the global market, otherwise known as global nationalism (Castells & Hall, 1994; Hall, 1997; Sklair, 2001).

For George Yúdice (2003) culture and its remediation fulfill productive roles and exist as performances, and through its invocation, invent traditions, qualities and values,

which are subsequently communicated and engendered on and with the phenomena to which it is being associated. The Finnish cultural emojis for this matter, are interesting to observe as they remediate a range of phenomena which differ from natural, social, habitual to commercial (technological) and even cultural practices themselves. These emojis have emerged within Finland's strong global tradition of nation branding. In fact, in 2015 Finland was identified as one of the world's most competitive nation brands by the 2015 Nation Brands Report and was valued a 289 billion US dollars, placing the nation at number 33 globally (Good News from Finland, 2015).

Forgetting about the international image building and branding which has politically taken place through the likes of the Finnish design industry since the turn of the twentieth century for instance, and rather concentrating on the recent discussions of nation branding, we may reflect on a quite humorous blog called "Brand Finland" by a group of students at the London Metropolitan University (Public and Cultural Diplomacy, 2011). The blog charts the recent progress of Finnish nation branding through documenting Simon Anholt's advice to the Finnish Brand Committee to consider what it should do in order to establish an international need for Finland and the committee's 2010 report response stating "Finland is already the best country in the world" (Ängeslevä, 2010). Following this, the report also emphasizes the quality of Finland's functionality (a system that works combined with hardworking people), its education, water ("Drink Finland") and strengths in problem-solving. Furthermore, the qualities of action and results over talk were also articulated by Anholt (Public and Cultural Diplomacy, 2011).

Moreover, the chain of interactions surrounding the branding discussion were exacerbated by the then topical situation of the importance of Nokia for the Finnish national economy, while Nokia as a company was more often than not attributed to being a Japanese company than Finnish (Rantanen, 2008). On this note, one of the more pronounced icons of the emoji series is the Nokia 3310 (Figure 1). Paradoxically, while remaining one of the most successful and iconic models ever to be produced by Nokia<sup>2</sup> selling 126 million units globally, being a sleek, affordable device with built-in antenna and full SMS capabilities, rather than capitalizing on the opportunity to connect Nokia to the reputation of Finland's strong design traditions, the phone and company were promoted in a more global light through the slogan of "Connecting People" (Microsoft Device Development Team, 2013).

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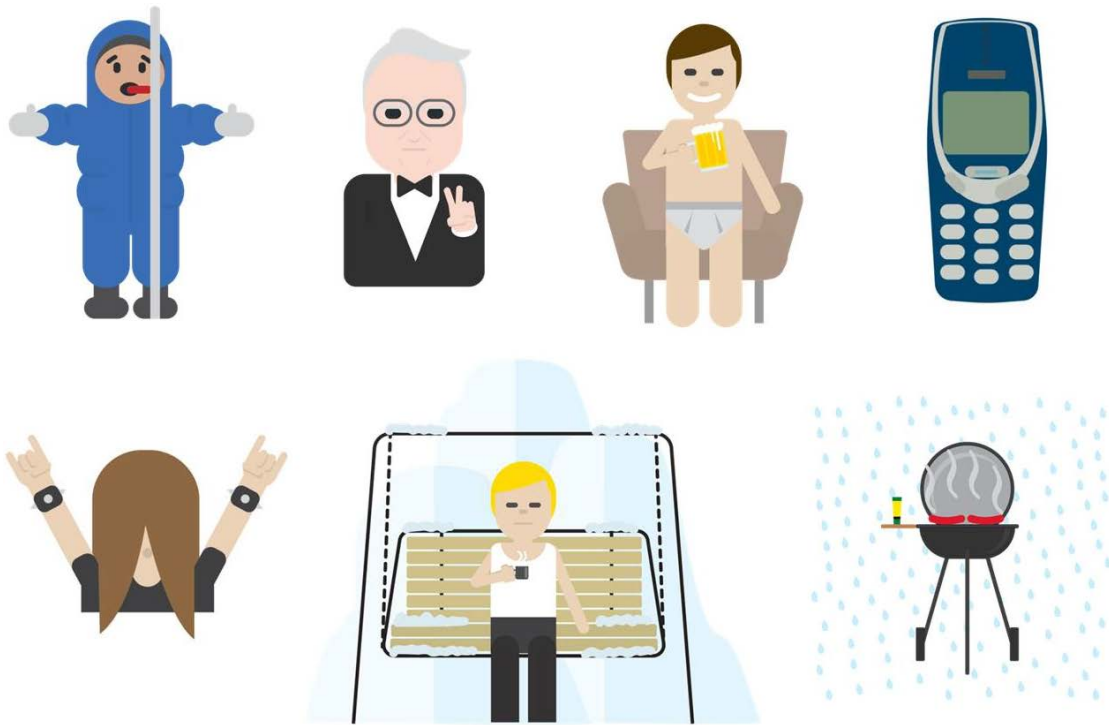
<sup>2</sup> Arguably worshipped the world over, which is reflected in blogs such as Ben Stinson's (2015) "Nokia's 3310: the greatest phone of all time".



Figure 1. Finnish cultural emoji: Nokia 3310

### **PSYCHOSEMIOTIC ANALYSIS: THE EMBODIMENT OF FINNISH EMOJIS**

Of particular interest to the approach of this paper is the idea of communicating or representing and remediating the embodied experience of a culture (Hall, 1997). The embodied or physical experience, of consumption and more significantly national consumption and branding is one thing, and then, how to convey the lived experience of symbols of a culture is another. Psychosemiotic analysis is coined by Pertti Saariluoma and Rebekah Rousi (2015), as a means of undertaking semiotic analysis (analysis of representations - linguistic, non-linguistic, formalistic or otherwise), to understand the psychological foundations and mental content (types of mentally bound information that can be attached to specific phenomena and expressions) of experience. This approach draws from previous theories on design communication from scholars such as Daniel Dennett (2009) with his design intention and intentional systems theory, and Nathan Crilly's design stance, whereby major components of the design of objects'/forms' syntactics is to communicate both the intention and stance behind its concept. For this analysis we have chosen to focus on seven emojis, from both the summer and winter experiences: 1) stuck, 2) peace, 3) kalsarikännit (underwear drunkenness), 4) unbreakable (Nokia 3310), 5) headbanger, 6) out of office, and 7) sausages on a grill (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Chosen emojis (from upper left then clockwise) - 1) stuck, 2) peace, 3) kalsarikännit, 4) unbreakable, 5) headbanger, 6) out of office, and 7) sausages on a grill**

In order to gauge the design intentions we interviewed one of the major decision-makers behind the emojis, from This is Finland. The individual in question listed the above seven emojis as her favourites and explained them in the following:

#### *Winter emojis*

- *Stuck*: the feeling of being stuck on a metal pole from your tongue as a Finnish child is a painful but somewhat dear memory from everybody's childhood.
- *Peace*: Martti Ahtisaari - it's such a versatile emoji in today's heated discussions.
- *Kalsarikännit*: the lady version is incredibly cute and a very useful one.
- *Unbreakable*: the Nokia 3310 phone representing unbreakable is also a very useful one ("Are we still friends?" answer: "3310 emoji").
- *Headbanger*: such an appreciated emoji by the metal community, representing what even President Obama mentioned - the high number of metal bands per capita in Finland.

#### *Summer emojis*

- *Out of office*: captures the feeling all Finns have in July perfectly and worked very well as a profile picture during summer
- *Sausages on a grill even if it rains*: need I say more?

Beginning with the ‘stuck’ emoji we see the blending of painful physical experience with the positive emotions induced by nostalgia. Here, the imagery of someone’s tongue being stuck to frozen metal shows both an excruciating experience, yet also a shared one for those who come from such extremely cold climates. While not necessarily uniquely Finnish, combined with the rest of the icons in addition to the blues and whites of the clothing, draws on symbology established in connection to Finnishness. The Martti Ahtisaari emoji is particular in the sense that Ahtisaari is a known international figure of peace. He is one of Finland’s most successful international negotiators and arguably one of the most appreciated former Finnish presidents. Interestingly, the emoji figure itself is dressed in a tuxedo and bow tie, connecting it to formality, high society and class. Meanwhile, the interviewee’s description of the emoji referred to the “heated discussions” of today’s climate, drawing on felt sensations of temperature against a rather polished figure in the image. ‘Kalsarikännit’ may be similar to an Australian ‘Bruce’ or ‘Norm’ with a beer can in an armchair. The particularity here being the absence of clothing, often associated with Nordic countries, and not as stylishly as the nudity encountered in sauna settings. The ‘unbreakable’ icon of the above discussed Nokia 3310 is significant in terms of its iconic value, drawing on durability, usefulness (a trait attributed to Finnish culture, e.g., see Simon Anholt’s statement in *Public and Cultural Diplomacy*, 2011), and moreover human unconditional relationships. The ‘headbanger’ in turn draws on the national experiences of Finns (and those in Finland) participating in heavy metal concerts, while at the same time the international reputation of Finland being the Metal Capital of the World. While the two summer icons ‘Out of office’ and ‘Sausages on a grill even if it rains’, both refer to the unpredictability and often times reluctant disappointment of the Finnish summer weather. The summer images are in this sense a continuation to the first emoji mentioned - ‘stuck’ - in that the physical climate plays a major role in both the embodied experience and branding of Finnishness.

## CONCLUSION

In this working paper we observed the notion of remediation through two vantage points: 1) that of the remediation of culture and its embodied experience; and 2) remediation as discussed in the realm of digital studies, in which mediation and remediation simultaneously refer to digital media’s own inherent nature as a remediation vehicle, as well as through its abundance, repetition and through its immersive nature, somehow establishing an invisibility. This is a particularly interesting quality in the discussed examples of the Finnish cultural emojis. Not only are these designs cute representations of often described and referred to Finnish cultural phenomena, but they themselves are designed in and for digital spaces. They are on the one hand crude, two-dimensional symbols of cultural, industrial, technological, festival and natural phenomena, while on the other hand, digital products linking to discourses past and present involving the



political, economic and social circumstances used to build not simply a national brand, but the concept of (post World War II) nation as it stands, here in Finland.

Undoubtedly, on this note one may observe parallels with many nations post World War II globally. Equally, the signification of Finnish culture, and how people identify these emojis as Finnish, also relies not just on the observers familiarity with Finnish culture, but their own (multi)cultural backgrounds and lived experiences. Snow and ice can be found in numerous countries, rendering the tongue stuck on metal experience not so unique for Finland, but also for other nations sharing a similar climate. Cartoons such as *King of the Hill* and *The Simpsons*, represent scenes such as *Kalsarikännit*, and surely Christmas parties are prominent in many Christian-based countries. But the combination of these, and utilization of a symbol on Finland's technological and industrial success - Nokia, and specifically its 3310 model - establish a narrative through form (sign or symbol), their references (objects), and the combined understanding (mental representation) of these elements and their remediated nature in digital media, to an embodied political, economic and social impression of a culture.

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