

# Darwinian Processes and Memes in Furniture Design in Turkey

## A Memetic Theory of IKEA Design

Zeynep YALMAN

Department of Industrial Design  
Faculty of Architecture, Gazi University  
Ankara, Turkey  
Email: [zeynep.yalman@gmail.com](mailto:zeynep.yalman@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*This paper aims to find answers to two questions whether we can apply Darwin's natural selection process in other fields outside of biology such as; design or not. And whether we can explain the success of IKEA design in Turkey depending on seven premises of Darwinian change. To begin, memes, memetics and how they evolve from the perspective of Darwinian processes will be mentioned. Then premises of Darwinian changes, Darwin's natural selection processes about biological world will be adapted to non biological world such as; design, especially furniture design. By applying theory of memes and memetics to the field of design, designed furniture rather than species in biology will be examined. This paper tries to explain success of IKEA case in Turkey and in the world based on memetic theory. In explaining this a point of view of Universal Darwinism is needed. In the final part, several factors that aid meme transmission of IKEA in society will be focused*

**Keywords:** meme, memetics, furniture design, Universal Darwinism, IKEA

### 1. Meme and Memetics

In this chapter the question of what is meme and memetics will be discussed. As we all know from our previous biology knowledge, gene is a molecular unit of information about heredity that passes genetic traits to offspring. Hence, in order to show the similarities between organic world and inorganic world we need to set an analogy between them.

The term „meme“ was first coined by British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* in 1976. He described memes as units of cultural transmission. Dawkins states that we need a name for the new replicator, it is a unit which conveys the ideas by imitation. *Mimeme* comes from a suitable Greek root, but it should sounds a bit like gene. It should be related to memory, or to the French word *même* (Dawkins, 1989).

Memes are entities that primarily inhabit human minds but they can be found in other places as well. A meme is an idea (Silby, 2000). Some examples of memes are; musical tunes, jokes, catch-phrases, trends, clothes fashions, car designs and ways of making pots or of building arches. Another well-known example is the 'happy birthday song'.

Brent Silby (2000) expresses that "Any thought or idea that has the capacity to replicate is a meme. These ideas that inhabit our minds and have been very successful at replicating. Not only have these memes found their way into literally millions of minds, they have also managed to leave copies of themselves on paper, in books, on audiotape, on compact disks, and in computer hard-drives."

Susan Blackmore (2002) says that memes are very behaviors and artifacts that fill our lives. They are whatever is copied. They are only bits of information, either coded on DNA or copied by imitation.

John Langrish (2004) defines memes as "Memes are not units; they are patterns or Russian dolls. The idea of a meme is not a unit; it is complex concept meaning different things to different people." and memetics as "Design evolution is the evolution of ideas, and the Darwinian evolution of ideas is called, memetics" from the concept of self-replicating ideas called memes by Richard Dawkins".

Darwin was the first who speculated about the application of natural selection in areas outside of biology. Today, this is what we called as Universal Darwinism.

A neo-Darwinian view of design change is natural selection plus memes, their competition, their modes of transfer, and their transformation; i.e., memetics (Langrish, 2004).

An idea that reproduces, propagates, inherits generally by imitation and sometimes mutates is meme. Memes are in competition against each other in order to survive. If a meme is not successful enough to replicate itself and reproduce, it dies. The point is that memes have similar features with genes, behave and spread in similar ways like genes. They compete, replicate and vary.

Like genes, memes are in competition with each other. While genes compete for representation in the genepool, memes compete for representation in the memepool (Silby, 2000).

The winning ones or the ones who have ability propagate, increases in other human brains. And human brains are meme pools where millions of memes compete against each other and try to survive. Nevertheless we can see memes in everywhere. So if ideas are memes, then for instance, modernism (modern architecture) is materialized version of memes. And in order to live a meme has to be materialized.

From pen and paper to the printing press, from telephones to the fax machine, and from computers to the Internet, copying machinery has been improving, and more memes are spreading further and faster (Blackmore, 2002).

Besides copying machineries, memes show themselves in the form of books, t-shirts of rock bands, jerseys of sports teams and buildings that represent some architectural theories in many other different mediums. These examples are materialized versions of memes. They are all tools to help memes to spread.

For Susan Blackmore (2002) "A group of memes that works together is called a 'co-adapted meme-complex' or 'memplex'. Memplex, created by and for the memes themselves for their own protection and replication". And the memes are dependent on their counterparts in the memplex for survival (Silby, 2000).

It does not mean that ideas and memes are copied because they are good or correct. They have just better survival skills. They are good at copying themselves. There some memes that are very successful at replicating, in spite of being false or bad.

We have to not forget that evolution is not in a progress. It is changing and adapting to existing conditions. Not the successful ones but the fitting ones can survive in a certain situation.

## **2. A Brief History of IKEA**

IKEA, an international home furniture and accessories retailer company, was founded in Sweden in 1943 by Ingvar Kamprad when he was 17. It is owned by the Kamprad family. The name of the firm, IKEA, comes from the founder's initials (I.K.), plus the first letters of Elmtaryd (E) and Agunnaryd (A), the farm and village where he grew up. IKEA has started with selling pens, wallets, picture frames, table runners, watches, jewellery and nylon stockings. Founder's interest was to meet the customers' needs with the lowest possible price products. After the firm has gained enough experience on this special focus, then IKEA increased its interest towards furniture. Since 1948 home furniture product category started to take place in IKEA stores. After that time IKEA has rapidly become one of the major retailers in this category. The first store opened in 1958 is located in Älmhult, Sweden. The first IKEA catalogue was published and was distributed in 1951.

After 1943, IKEA stores are run by franchising system all around the world. The first IKEA store in Turkey was opened in 2005 (5 May), in Ümraniye, İstanbul. One year after the success of its first store in Turkey, they opened the second store in Bornova, İzmir (6 April 2006). The third was opened in Bayrampaşa, İstanbul (8 November 2007). The fourth was opened in Osmangazi, Bursa, in 2008 (13 November). And finally they opened the fifth store in 2011 (23 June), in Ankara. As of October 2011, IKEA has reached 332 stores in 38 countries, which makes IKEA is the world's largest furniture manufacturer. In fiscal year 2010, it sold \$23.1 billion worth of goods, a 7.7 percent increase over 2009.

### **2.1. IKEA Vision and Business Idea**

IKEA is known for its 'ready to assemble' concept. The furniture company claims that ready-to-assemble idea of IKEA furniture helps reduce costs. Usage of flat-pack transportation minimizes packaging wastes and lowers cost of storage and shipping. They offer a wide range of furniture at low cost making them affordable for as many people as possible. Mass producing, modern, simplified, functional, inexpensive and eco-friendly designs are the basics of IKEA's design approaches.

The IKEA vision, business idea and market positioning statements provide a framework for all IKEA marketing communication worldwide. The IKEA vision is "to create a better everyday life for the many people". Their business idea supports this vision by offering a wide range of well-designed, functional home furnishing products at prices so low that as many people as possible will be able to afford them. According to them low prices are the cornerstones of the IKEA vision and business idea.

The IKEA has a wide product range from beds to mirrors, lighting to storages and cooking to eating. Its product range is wide in both function and style. Customers will find everything they need to furnish their home, from plants and living room furnishings to toys and whole kitchens. There are several ways to work for same function. There is something for each customer according to their styles. They claim they are developing methods that are both cost-efficient and innovative to make good products at low prices. Board-on-frame construction (a layering of sheets of wood over a honeycomb core) gives a strong, lightweight structure with a minimal wood content. This type of construction is cost-effective and environmentally friendly and is used today in IKEA products such as the LACK table from 1980.

IKEA believes that taking responsibility for people and the environment is a prerequisite for doing good business at every stage of the new product's development. IKEA tries to ensure that their home furnishing products and materials have not any negative impact on the environment, and they are safe for customers from a health perspective. They insist on using renewable and recyclable materials in their products.

### 3. Darwinian Theory of Change

To understand better how memetics fit the Darwinian Change, we should consider Charles Darwin's premises on Theory of Natural Selection. First seven premises, taken from Can Özcan (2002), are as follows:

- 1) In ideal circumstances (limitless resources), populations will grow exponentially.
- 2) Resources are limited. And because resources are limited populations tend to remain stable.
- 3) Individuals within a population are not identical, they are variable and they have unique characteristics. (variation)
- 4) Some of these variations are inherited. An individual's characteristics are passed on to its offspring. (inheritance)
- 5) Change can occur, and this sometimes results in offspring having slightly different characteristics to their parents.
- 6) Given the fact that individuals have varied characteristics, it is reasonable to suppose that the some individuals will have characteristics that give them a better success at acquiring resources and reproducing.
- 7) Characteristics that enhance an individual's survival and reproductive success will be passed on to subsequent generations. This is 'survival of the fittest' or Natural Selection.

### 4. Darwinian Process of Memes

Now according to premises we can make analogies between biological world and the designed world. We can easily draw the result that world of designed objects, in this example world of furniture, change according to premises listed above. The outcome of this process is natural selection of memes.

- I. In ideal circumstances, populations will grow exponentially. In design world limitless resource is a two sided issue. Firstly we have to have enough (limitless) materials, technology and methods in order to produce objects which means there is no limitation for production. Then secondly the market need customers, users to buy these artifacts. If this two conditions are provided, the number of products and the variety of products in the furniture market will increase.
- II. Resources are limited. And because resources are limited populations tend to remain stable. For sure there is a limit for both production and consumption, although it do not seem like that.
- III. Individuals within a population are not identical, they are variable and they have unique characteristics. This also can be understood in two ways. Here, in this paper furniture market in Turkey is our population. So we can call local and nonlocal brands in the market as individuals.

Moreover, we can consider each product group (let's say 'model') as an individual in the same brand. And they all differ from one another.

- IV. Some of these variations are inherited. An individual's characteristics are passed on to its offspring. This is what we call as 'brand identity'. An example for 4th premise is very obvious

for IKEA's furniture, since their main design criteria is ready-to-assemble concept. Although their products' characteristics are different in general, they have a same design language in common.

- V. Change can occur, and this sometimes results in offspring having slightly different characteristics to their parents. Sometimes a model is naturally not selected maybe because of its characteristic. So the designer or the company change or modify this model slightly. Created difference might cause a new model or a revision in an existing model. The regulation can be related either with its function or its form.
- VI. Given the fact that individuals have varied characteristics, it is reasonable to suppose that the some individuals will have characteristics that give them a better success at acquiring resources and reproducing. I will not be able to explain better than Can Özcan. He said that "What makes a design a success or a failure are the characteristics to be selected users, consumers, buyers under specific circumstances." (Özcan, 2002). The important point is selection takes place at a certain time and circumstances. If time and conditions change, reasons for selection will change automatically. As John Langrish (2005) claimed today's sensible decision can be tomorrow's disaster but designers have to make a living by making decisions.
- VII. Characteristics that enhance an individual's survival and reproductive success will be passed on to subsequent generations. This is 'survival of the fittest' or Natural Selection. Consciously or unconsciously, reasonable or unreasonable, somehow selection occurs. For example classical furniture exist and survive since art & craft period. They were being produced by art and craft techniques before, they are being produced by mass production now. It is not because of the reason they are functional or they are beautiful. It is because they fit with their users fancy and satisfy them with their performances and become selected.

## 5. The State of Turkish Market

Until 1990s handcrafted, ornamented classical furniture was dominating the market in Turkey. After 1990s firms have realized the advantage of working with designers and architectures. After opening its first store in İstanbul, IKEA has grown faster than expected and they started to gain market share. consistently has rapidly entered Turkish furniture market with its first store in İstanbul. Hasan Karçı, the chair of the board of MASKO, states that local brands such as İstikbal, Bellona, Yataş and Tepe can be counted as competitors of IKEA in furniture market in Turkey.

The entrance of Swedish furniture company in to Turkish market bring a revival to the sector. It effects not only the furniture market but also others sectors from home textile products to home decoration accessories and souvenirs.

Although there is a production related with furniture in almost every city in Turkey, many primary companies are located in İstanbul (MASKO and MODOKO), Ankara (Sitelер), İzmir (Karabağlar), Bursa (İnegöl) and Kayseri. As a result of a successful marketing strategy, IKEA opened five stores in these four cities in Turkey.

One of the most crucial two problems of furniture market in Turkey is branding. Most of the firms do not understand the significance of brand and branding. However, branding provides many privileges for them such as; recognition, popularity and confidence. The second problem is lacking of design centered production. It is not enough but the importance of product design, designed furniture is increasing recently. In order to compete against global brands in the market, companies know that they have to work with qualified designers. More product and furniture designers, who understand user's needs and find creative, original solutions to them, should be raised in Turkey. Design should be the most critical tool and reason for natural selection in the system of furniture.

## 5. Conclusion

'IKEA memes' can be described as the viable ideas, the reasons, IKEA creates consciously or unconsciously in our minds and that attracts customers and leads them to select IKEA products somehow. The memes related with IKEA are also interlinked with each other. They are like the rings of a chain, memplexes. Here are several factors for why IKEA design meme is so popular in Turkey. These factors help to increase the spread of IKEA memes. Thus they can explain the success of IKEA design in Turkey.

- a) Cost Efficient: The secret behind IKEA's low prices is elimination of the assembly and the transportation cost. Assembly and shipping of products are done by buyers. This directly appears in prices. If users want assembly and transportation service, they have to pay extra for them.
- b) Swedish Heritage: They are known for their Swedish culture. And they are proud of being Swedish origin. Even they reflect the colors of Sweden flag on their logo. As well as their home furnishing products, many stores include grocery shop selling Swedish-made, Swedish style groceries such as; Swedish meatballs, packages of gravy and various Scandinavian cookies and crackers.
- c) Concept: IKEA has introduced ready to assemble concept with customers from Turkey. It has its own style. functional, modern and do it yourself products at affordable prices.
- d) Store Layout: The availability of all furnishing products under one roof. Since the design of stores is convenient for this purpose, customers can find all their furniture needs at one shop. It looks like a museum more than a furniture store. For example many stores include restaurants serving traditional Swedish food like; meatballs and potatoes with cream sauce. So when you get tired of shopping, you can have a seat and eat or drink something. Furthermore IKEA gains nearly 5 percent of their annual turnover from their restaurants. The stores also include child care centers where 3 to 10 years old children can play. Parents can leave their children at a playground area and pick them when they arrive. This service is offered completely free of charge.
- e) Product Range: IKEA provides wide range of home furnishing products in its stores. In the stores of many Turkish companies you can only find living room suites, dining room suites, bed room suites, beds and sofas.

- f) Online Shopping: IKEA offers an online shopping opportunity via its official web site. By this way they are not only facilitate shopping for consumers but also raising their sales. 2% of total sales of IKEA come from online shopping in Turkey.
- g) IKEA Catalogue: One of the reasons behind IKEA's success is its catalogues; copied in millions, printed in many languages and distributed to households all over the world in every year.
- h) Global Brand: IKEA is a global brand in the market with 34 milliard dollar annual return. Taking the advantage of being a global brand, IKEA gain their Turkish customer's respect and preference. And it is still planning to open new stores all around the world.
- i) Initiatives: Another positive attributes of IKEA are social responsibilities and environmental acts that they take part in. This approach gains the appreciation and admiration of customers.

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