Product as A Symbol: Reading its Cypher Script

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ABSTRACT

As products are created to cater to multiple needs of consumers simultaneously their appeal extend far beyond forms and corresponding functions and include creating experiences that are dynamic in nature and are relevant to consumers' ever evolving needs. To enable products to perform such wide and varied functions, they are developed as abstract symbols and are placed in the gap that exist between subject and object. As an intermediate entity, it draws traits from both subject and object and in the process loses its objectness to become a cypher and its opaqueness is laid bare, empirical reality is unveiled and its meaning disclosed.

This paper analyses product in its phenomenological form to ascertain its symbolic reality. It peels the philosophical layers that reside within the product concept and isolates a three-levelled construction of product as a theoretical construct. The three levels isolated are form-function relationships that produce meaning, techno-subjective abstraction that produces form and ontological structure of experience that produces experience. This model unravels structures within a product as seen from the perspective of the manufacturer and the consumer.

Keywords: Product conceptualization, Product Levels, Cypher, Phenomenology.

INTRODUCTION:

Product features are numerous and so are the benefits derived from them. Features provide benefits as perceived by the subject or consumer that in turn are conditioned by prevailing cultural norms and by psycho-socio construct of consumer. Accordingly perception of feature-benefit combination create a large number of possibilities for consumers. Product is bought for the perceived benefit and not on multiple possibilities or advertised strength. It is therefore critical that product conceptualization must incorporate multiplicity of feature-perceived benefit relationships and make provision for isolating the benefit that determines purchase decision. Most extant theoretical constructs stop at enumerating multiple possibilities of features and benefits. They neither recognize the role of subjective process that identify the meaningful benefit. They do not incorporate product as an abstraction within their fold nor product as an adaptable entity made possible by technology. They consider product experience as distinct from product.

This paper considers product as a phenomenon that is expressed and reified through subject-object polarity. It analyses the process of adding of layers of meaning to the product through hermeneutics and by unfolding its ontological reality. It asks questions related to constitutive elements of product and product as a constituent of the relevant universe so as to deliver a theoretical construct that can unleash product's potency arising out of its materiality and issuing forth from the concept that nourishes it. This paper seeks to reveal hidden truths in product by treating it as a phenomenological body, as a mutating entity, as an expression of intended and perceived benefits, as a part of ever evolving wholes that it may be a part of and as a psycho-socio entity simultaneously. It creates a theoretical construct that will afford a fuller view of product and provide managers multiple and richer handles to target greater customer loyalty.
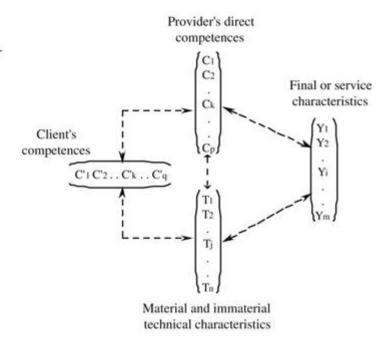
LITERATURE REVIEW:

Product is defined in many ways: as a physical object that is used as "an instrument in human action" to fulfill a set of values and needs of a person or an organization (Roozenburg & Eekels 1995); as artefacts that are conceived, produced, transacted, and used by people because of the properties and functions they may perform (Ulrich & Eppinger, 2003); as a number of functions that are realized as properties in the materialized product (Roozenburg & Eekels, 1995); as a combination of marketing, manufacturing and engineering & research efforts (Karger and Murdick 1966) with product development process as a combination of technical continuity and discontinuity. Product design which is a derivative idea of product development process was stated as combination of function structure, main working principle, and embodied design (Roozenburg & Eekels, 1995). Coates (2003) defined product design as encompassing functionality, aesthetics, ergonomics, and other facets of a physical product that form contact points with a consumer. Hekkert and Desmet (2007) state it to be a set of: structural and sensory properties, material composition, labels, functionality and possibilities of behavior whereas Kalyanaram and Krishnan (1997) called it as the process of arriving at the functional and technical specifications of a product and argued for a just-in-time definition. Product design, which is integral to product definition was conceptualized by Homburg et al (2015) along the dimensions of aesthetics, functionality and symbolism. Kotler's (1969) conceptualization of product along five product levels of core benefit, generic product, expected product, augmented product and potential product is one of the most popular conceptualizations. One of the earlier conceptualizations, 4Ps given by Jerome Mc Carthy (1960) that included price, distribution and promotion became popular as marketing mix (Borden, 1949) and became a key deliverable of marketing managers. Research on evolving nature of product definition led to Target Product Profile (TPP) in pharmaceutical industry defined as demonstrating how the intended product will be differentiated from competitor's products in some future market place (Kennedy 2008). Though this framework is derived for pharmaceutical industry it emphasizes that product needs to adapt to varying and numerous needs of consumer and achieve a conceptual ideal over time.

Product as service and service as product:

Product concept received a more intense treatment from researchers as servitization of product and productization of services became a reality. Productization of services was done to reduce complexity in services (Cross, B and Paquette, J, 2014) and servitization indicated towards a change in business-model and necessary organizational transformation. The re-conception of products as services allowed manufacturers to create value across the entire product life cycle and capture it not just from the firm's current position but along the entire value chain thus generating new revenue streams (Vandermerwe and Rada 1988). Servitization is today a strategic alternative to generate superior performance. Firms are increasingly exploring the value of integrating goods and services (Baines and Lightfoot 2013) motivated by anticipated improvements in profit margins and to lock competitors out of their customer base (Bustinza, Parry, and Vendrell-Herrero 2013). Servitization offers an opportunity to generate sustainable competitive advantage as it frees firms from competing on cost alone (Porter and Ketels 2003) thus allowing for greater differentiation and increased customer satisfaction.

It is undeniable that product and service cannot really be torn apart as one contains the other, when an apple is eaten it provides the service of taste and health. Service is produced and consumed simultaneously. Any conceptualization of services grapples with the challenge of fuzzy nature of experience due to its immateriality. Griliches (1992) highlighted output measurement and nature of user involvement as key challenge in conceptualization of services. These challenges have led researchers to create several conceptual frameworks that explain both product as service and service as product. One of the earliest attempt was by William J Baumol (1966) who gave the idea of abstract product conceived as abstract bundle of attributes that seeks to satisfy diverse needs of consumers by varying yet relevant attribute of the product. Several typologies were developed such as technologist approach, supplier-dominated approach, empirical approach and conceptual approach. Characteristics-based definition of product (and service) represented the integrative approach which was a promising theoretical advancement (Gallouj F and Savona M, 2009). Gallouj and Weinstein (1997) proposed product to be a set of vectors of characteristics and linked competences.

Fig. 1 The characteristics-based representation of the product. Source: Gallouj and Weinstein (1997)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

To achieve the stated research objectives, a philosophical treatment of product concept is carried out so as to formulate a construct for product that incorporates both material and abstract features, the role of consumer's subjectivity in co-creating the product, role of technology in adapting the product to ever evolving needs and wants, being of product in its full richness. The phenomenological roots of product is unearthed by an ontological analysis of product as a phenomenon. The methodology includes contextualizing social forces to the product development process to lay bare innards of product concept and go deep into the realm of structure, society and personality. Exploration and logical analysis of relevant concepts includes clarification, elaboration application and interpretation of concepts in the context of product to attempt a reconstruction of product concept by establishing hitherto unseen linkages.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS:

Product Experience:

The embedding of service in a product makes it mandatory for any conceptualization of product to explain and encompass varying possibilities of product experience. The extant literature on product experience defines it as a product of human-product interaction. Schifferstein and Hekkert (2008) defined it as subjective experiences that result from interacting with products or as the awareness of psychological affects elicited by interaction with product including the degree to which all our senses are stimulated and meanings and values that we attach to the product. Several definitions highlight narrower aspects of product experience. Carroll. J.M. (1997) terms product experience as human-computer interaction, Koskinen, Battarbee and Mattelmaki (Eds.2004) called for integration of psychological and social theory with engineering goal to design to deliver product experience, Cupchik and Hilscher (2004) stressed the designer's perspective on product experience and stressed the importance of social interaction in the formation of experiences. Pine, Joseph and Gilmore (2011) limited the meaning of term experience to special life events and referred experience to uniquely meaningful life events with both cognitive and affective qualities. They defined experience when services are used as stage and goods as props to engage with consumers to create memorable event. Hekkert and Desmet (2007) created a framework to define product experience as a change in core affect attributed to human-product interaction that has three components: aesthetic experience, attribution of meaning and emotional response. Aesthetic experience corresponds to the degree of gratification of senses; attribution of meaning to the meanings attached to a product and emotional response to emotions that are elicited from the human-product interaction.

Product corresponds to multiple functions some core and some peripheral, some essential and some inessential. A grinder's ability to grind is its core function whereas the color or shape of its body is a peripheral function. Consumers often base their buying decision on peripheral functions like color or shape or brand and not on core function as all grinders do grind. The relationship between product and its functions delivers definition, depth,

context and meaning to the product. Review of literature indicate that extant conceptualizations do not deal with product as a dynamically evolving entity facilitated by technology nor do they deal with elevation of product as an abstraction that is borne out of interplay of subject-object-technology.

Consumer's movement away from the core benefit and towards peripheral or inessential functions as deciding factor for buying decision is encouraged by manufacturer as it is cheaper to imbue cultural dimensions for differentiation than doing it technologically. The attempt to wean customers away from core function is with the objective of making product experience important that provides greater opportunities to managers for product differentiation and consumer loyalty. Needless to say product experience is valued only if it is found to be meaningful. Managers leverage upon cultural dimensions that act as carrier of meaning and provide impetus for buying decisions and repeat buys. The subjective process which discovers meaning in products must find a place in product conceptualization for it to be real and valid.

Subject-object dichotomy is one of the central problems in philosophy since Descartes. While subject is individual humanity it also refers to streaming of consciousness (Husserl) in general. Object is that to which subject attends to and is one of the two poles of experience. Subject and object are integral to the structure of experience. They continuously and progressively define themselves better as they mediate the other. Results of the mediation are broadly across three possibilities: merger of the two, standing apart as discrete beings and a dialogue between the two. Most conceptual positions taken by philosophers are anyone or a variation of these three possibilities.

Subject-object mediation embodies perception:

When subject loses connect with object, it sees itself manifest everywhere and swallows the object in the process and sees itself as all-encompassing. World in reality or as experienced is not a singular manifestation of subject or object alone, it lies somewhere in between as one concedes space to the other in an ever continuing struggle for primacy.

Subject and object are born together in perception (Merleau-Ponty) [1] and from this union is also born knowledge. Interestingly the word for knowledge in French is co-naissance which literally means born together. Birth of perception therefore is original and primordial and in the dynamics of existence its production is akin to a dialogue between subject and object.

Perception necessitates one view or another and figure/ground (gestalt) phenomenon explains the process of its manifestation. In subject, we discover the transcendent ground upon which object reveals itself. Subjectivity of perception though ignores the fact that subject may or does share the same view with others and so belongs to inter-subjective region. Products are so created that they play upon this inter-subjective region to make them simultaneously appeal to numerous subjectivities in a way that is peculiar to each subject. To attain this objective, product in its objectness has to dematerialize and become an abstraction or a symbol.

World is experienced in lived unity of subject and object, also called lived body. Product or its perception as a symbol is discovered in the dialogue that subject has with the world that beckons him to understand it. Merleau-Ponty explains,

"The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible." (ibid, pp 16-17)

Product only in its avatar as a symbol can be inexhaustible in its consumption and so stimulate ever greater demand in the eternal quest for satiety.

Subject-object polarity creates an opening:

The separation between subject and object is both real and appearance at once. As subject constructs object in its own image it simultaneously loses historical and unique concreteness of object [2]. Object as the constituted entity also constitutes the subject as it invites the subject to reflect itself in its image. Object in such a way creates an opening through which subject shows itself.

At the primary level subject-object experience remains primordial and integrated. Dichotomy emerges only at the secondary level of experience. One becomes aware of the dichotomy only when the engagement with the world breaks down e.g. breaking of nib of a fountain pen as we write is when we experience ourselves as subject. The rivenness of subject and object is hence historical. Products aspire to secure the rivenness by drawing from and contributing to the identities of both subject and object.

Various philosophers have considered the issue differently. Subjective idealism (Immanuel Kant) which considers subject to be the spirit from which all spring forth, states that subject constructs objective world from

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[1] "We must rediscover, as anterior to the ideas of subject and object, the fact of my subjectivity and the nascent object, that primordial layer at which both things and ideas come into being." (1945/1962), p.219.
[2] Schelling's positive philosophy

undifferentiated material. Fichte says subject engenders the world from itself. Objectivist approach says that there exists a reality independent of person-world relationship and is akin to a view from nowhere (Nagel, 1989). Objective idealism (Schelling) emphasized existential and empirical character of object and argued that there is only one perceiver who is one with what is perceived. It considered the impossibility of overcoming historical and unique concreteness of object and made it a moment in the dialectic of reason. In between the polarities of subjective and objective idealism, in the twinning of subject and object there is left an opening, a gap. A no man's land is created that belongs to neither and also to both. It carries impress of both and when dominated by either gives birth to one or the other form of idealism.

Character of any empirical experience is determined by the swing towards one or the other in the dichotomous structure of subject and object. If the experience is considered finite and self-sufficient in its finitude, it generates despair, inadequacy, loss of meaning and value capable of distortions. On the other hand if in the experience we encounter transcendent ground of modes of being, we become aware of the possibility of surpassing limits of empirical existence. And then objects of empirical experience become bearers of meaning that transcend their empirical dimensions. Self too attains a grounding in that which transcends its finitude. In such an encounter, objectness of object disappears and assumes the state of Cypher (Jaspers K, 1947). The object as cypher appears in the unique encounter of historical self with sensuously concrete.

Objects in their everydayness are consumed, traded or possessed and in the process encounter subject. These are commercial transactions conducted with profit as the ultimate aim. In its path to successfully transition itself from an object first to a product to a symbol and then to Cypher requires continuous and numerous interventions by managers. These interventions are technical, psychological, social and hermeneutic in nature and are made appropriately. The transition do not happen but is made to happen. Managers usurp the opening created during the encounter between subject and object and fill it with a product that is conferred a cypher-like state.

Opening as an opportunity to place object as product:

Object interacts with subject at various levels. Object is created as a product to satisfy specific needs of subject in the role of consumer. While seemingly product is created to satisfy a set of needs, in order to differentiate it from competitor's products, it is made to satisfy numerous needs of which some are essential and some inessential, some core and some incidental needs, some technical and some symbolic. As addition of technical features or making technical advancements is difficult and expensive, managers find it easier to add symbolic benefits to the product. As such benefits draw upon identities of both subject and object to create meaning, they are more likely to ensure repeat purchase.

Managers therefore develop product as a symbol also called brand that resonates with consumer at varying levels of his identity. A product so constructed responds to his varying needs like aesthetics, esteem value, and other psycho-socio functions that are beyond its functional utility. In the process product assumes a dynamic, tentative and edgy character as it engages continuously with the subject. Its cypher-like status invests the product with a strength that allows product to create newer functions and meanings and establish itself as evolving, adapting and transforming entity. Product as a cypher forges multiple relationships with the subject to which correspond different perceived value respectively. From these multiplicities of relationships, consumer chooses a primary relationship that is meaningful to him in accordance to his perception. A meaning that determines his decision towards the product. Managers attempt to understand consumers' preferences and choose a particular relationship to emphasize in his communications and hopes that consumers too have chosen the same relationship.

Object's extension is held together by its technical structure. Technology that has created the product determines its stability and responsiveness. It ensures consistency of performance and renders stability to its perception. Technology enables product to adapt to consumers' needs by changing its form and function. For example automobile is a combination of engine, steering wheel, brakes, transmission system, climatic control, electronics, structural frames etc. and functions smoothly as a car when all parts are related and respond to one another seamlessly.

A change in technology from manual to automatic transmission metamorphoses the automobile completely and obviates the need for concrete physical action and replaces it with smooth and almost invisible process. Television when facilitated by technologies like Wi-Fi and Bluetooth allows it to change its form from television to a computer screen to a gaming device and so on. Its appearance also has greater appeal with slimmer and curvy form that often elicits aesthetically pleasing response from the consumer.

Technology stretches the form of the product so that it may appeal to consumers' various needs simultaneously. Consumer too discover newer demands and alternate newer values from differing forms in which product appears to him and so stretches the range of benefits that he derives from the product. Such multiplicities that

operate simultaneously can only be conceptually contained and expressed as abstraction or an idea. The second level therefore of the product is proposed as techno-subjective abstraction.

Product is often described as an experience. Heidegger (1927) equated experience to looking at something, understanding and conceiving it, choosing it, accessing it and making these acts constitutive of modes of being for the subject-object integral. He said that agency of subject, materiality of the object and integration of the two constituted experience. These dynamic structures establish product experience as a phenomenon that fills the opening created by subject-object split. Reason integrates subject's prior experience of similar products and experience with his inner self to lend meaning to his experience.

Product as a part of nourishing wholes:

Product derives its meaning additionally from various wholes that it is a part of and from various parts within it that make it a whole. A part can be independent of the product e.g. tyres or steering wheel of a car or parts that cannot be independent such as its colour or shape or driving pleasure that it provides. A product can be looked at as a sum of parts that includes product as a part of itself. Various relationships between parts and wholes and between parts and parts within a whole create meaning for consumers. The proceeding whole nourishes the preceding whole by conferring a unique identity and place of eminence in the overall scheme of objects. These relationships between wholes and parts are nourished by original template of abstract and transcendental forms (Plato, 330 BC) and are manifested by the sensory reality. Plato's metaphor of nourishment explains it further,

"The sun (Socrates explains to Glaucon) not only makes the things we see visible but causes the process of generation, growth and nourishment, without itself being such a process. The (form of the) good therefore may be said to be the source not only of the intelligibility of the objects of knowledge, but also of their being and reality".

Just as seed contains the tree in form and spirit, the organic unity between the object and its concept is the original template that gives birth to varied manifestations of the object.

Product - A Phenomenological Conceptualization:

The arguments above establish form-function relationship as core of the product. Appropriate relationships relevant to the context that serve as primary reason for product to be bought and consumed may be selected and emphasized by the product manager. As market realities alter, as cultural and social norms change, as technologies evolve, these relationships change. In response product innovates itself and forges new a set of form-function relationships to remain relevant.

The techno-subjective abstraction to which a product is raised addresses both form and function individually and collectively. Developments in technology establish new constraints and create newer possibilities within the form while the changes in markets, society and culture engineer newer psycho-socio realities and create newer set of meanings the subject assigns to product experience. The techno-subjective abstraction therefore not only contains form-function relationship but elevates it to a level that contains seeds of possible changes in both form and function to contain all possible relationships between form and function and is proposed as techno-subjective abstraction as the concentric circle containing the core.

Product experience as ontological experience situates product in a series of ever-expanding wholes and establishes its being as a fused entity of subject and object. Ontological experience contains product as a techno-subjective abstraction developed from a jelly-like core of form-function relationship. Expressed pictorially the newly constructed product concept takes the following form:
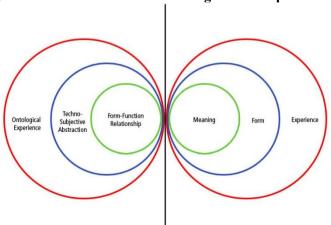
Figure 2: Product – A Phenomenological Conceptualization

CONCLUSION:

This model offers a complete, elegant and futuristic alternative to the way marketing is done. In the three envisaged product levels, it scopes and institutionalizes a large number of basic marketing processes. The core of form-function relationship presents a large number of opportunities to play with product features that are interpreted in the subjective context of consumers. It transforms both 4P and STP into a simple relationship that can explain mass customization and Veblen goods simultaneously. Managers are presented with options to choose an appropriate form and consequent function to emphasize given the stage of product life cycle. They can also run campaigns around different set of form-function relationships for so as to appeal to varying sentiments of the targeted segment. As these relationships vary with time and geography managers can select an appropriate relationship and contextualize it across space, time and culture. Techno-subjective abstraction the second product level incorporates the role of technology in making the product adapt to the needs of its consumers. This level leverages existence of product as a concept and uses technology to make product adapt and conform to the concept. This level does not envisage role of technology in a vacuum or as an end in itself but ties its application to the subjective relevance in context of consumer. This product level provide managers a tool to evaluate possible technological interventions for product development. It accommodates concept of product in a way that is integral to product conceptualization and yet gives room for further developments.

Product experience resolves the subject-object polarity and is constructed in such a way that it always remains incomplete. It leaves the customer pining for more by leveraging the transcendent ground on which the edifice of product is constructed. The fertile ground nourished by materiality and subjectivity gives birth to product that expresses but never enough, promises delightful but not completeness of experience. The transcendence allows fulfilment in the quest for continuous consumption and not in acquisition alone.

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