

PRODUCT AT THE CROSSROADS OF SPACE, LANGUAGE AND MEANING

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ABSTRACT

Purpose

Product is a site for the unfolding of extended space and language that defines the space. In the process, product receives an identity that locates it in consumer's mind and in the ever-evolving dynamics of society and culture. Product managers can decide and define the meanings that come to be associated to them. This article attempts to combine theories of space, language and meaning to evolve a richer theoretical conception of product.

Design/Methodology/Approach

To achieve the above said purpose, marketing mix is taken as the foundation and on it is superimposed the theories of physical, mental, and social spaces presented by Lefebvre. The article goes further and relates the newly constructed theoretical proposition to form, language and technology, and argues that this marriage gives birth to a discourse on products that is rooted in aesthetics and language. The propositions are formulated by tabulating factors that are relevant to the discussion and conducting a rigorous conceptual examination to interrogate the relations between them.

Findings

The findings enrich the discourse of the product theory by introducing a duplex structure of meaning-making and meaning-giving activity to visual experiences of the product. The enrichment opens the possibility of poetic treatment of products. The article elucidates the issue with fashion as an example where language has failed to play a significant part. It finally presents a hypothesis of the product that is rooted in human perception of physical space, conditioned by collective experience of social space, and meaningfully realized in the caves of human mind.

Research and Practical Implications

The hypotheses presented in this paper can be examined empirically through further research work. They can also lead to situating future research on product conceptualization in the field of sociology and philosophy. The practical implications will be realized by product and brand managers as they deepen their day-to-day concern of creating a sticky and differentiated position of their brand in the minds of their customers.

Originality/Value

The product literature in the past has engaged with sociology and philosophy in a limited way and this article will pioneer such an effort.

Keywords: *Fashion, Product, Space, Poetics of fashion, Meaning.*

1. PRODUCT AS A DESIGN SPACE

Product is a designed space. A physical space on which are conferred concrete and abstract qualities of design. Design may simply understood as a combination of form and function as laid out on space. The Bauhaus tradition comprised design as form, function and supplementary areas that contribute to use and meaning (Findelli, 2001). Product manager creates and arranges them to create utility and meaning for the user. Borden (1964) presented the idea of a marketing manager as a 'mixer of ingredients' in his Presidential address to the American Marketing Association Conference in 1953. He said:

I have always found it interesting to observe how an apt or colorful term can gain wide usage and help to further understanding of a concept that has already been expressed in less appealing and communicative terms. Such has been true of the phrase "marketing mix." (Borden 1964, p. 2)

Borden included 12 major decision areas in his marketing mix and did not forget to mention that a visual depiction of the elements could be of assistance to advance understanding of the concept. It is however not so obvious that he has to work with space as the raw material nor it is apparent that there are at least three types of spaces: physical, mental and social (Lefebvre, 1978). A discussion on this typology is beyond the scope of this paper however, it may serve well to remember that physical space is

extension or extended space, mental space is the space of mind and encapsulates epistemological reality while social space represents the spaces of culture and economics. These spaces find expression in marketing through the concept of marketing mix. McCarthy (1960) conceptualized and reduced 12 decision areas of marketing mix to four and articulated them as 4Ps of Product, price, place and promotion. Additional 3 Ps people, process, and physical evidence in the context of services in their own ways embed the three types of space. The relationship between the three spaces and their correspondence in marketing, when explored can lead to new insights. The purpose of this article is to elaborate upon this relationship. A simple juxtaposition of comprising elements of the two areas in Table A and Table B is below: A detailed conceptual analysis will lead to insights and interesting conclusions.

A large number of crisscrossing of relationships is possible between the elements in the above two tables. While product is seemingly a physical space and the physical evidence of service operates in the physical space, the power they exercise over the minds of the user or the buyer is a mental space. The power residing in the product springs from the social space. Automobile is a good example of a combination of not only the 7Ps but also the three spaces. While an automobile definitely has a physical existence whose dimensions seem to have enormous

significance, the mental and social space that it occupies is probably much more than the physical space it can ever consume. The physical space of an automobile ranges from steel to leather, sound of music to the sight of its color, volume of the boot to spaciousness of its cabin and so on. Mental space related to an automobile would be the confidence that handling such a big structure brings to the driver or the spaciousness that the passenger experiences while travelling or the driving pleasure that accompanies the thrill of speed. Social space in this case is associated to the pride, the owner experiences or the rise in his social hierarchy once a person owns an automobile. While these factors are obvious, when seen through the lens of space, it provides a canvas to the designer on which he can unfold his concepts. Each one of these spaces has its own peculiarity and therefore a unique power to exert upon human mind. You may look at space as geometric, empty, and innocent that is waiting to be given a shape or filled with objects and ideas. This is however not a complete picture. The three spaces are produced at the same time. They also collectively represent the contemporary economic and social order that is concentrated in the form and function of the product. Through them, the product becomes richer with ideas. Every product is also a product of a psychosocial context and if the product manager remains sensitive towards them, he can make the product resonate with a wider audience for a longer period.

The product that we propose to discuss here is one that is far closer to our existence both physically and mentally and they are clothes. Clothing exists at three levels simultaneously: image clothing, written clothing, and real clothing. Image clothing is the representation of clothing through pictures and images. As clothes are looked upon, their form strikes us as significant. This form of a dress may be equated to the element's product and promotion in the marketing mix and to physical and mental spaces as it corresponds to tactility that a touch elicits and the image that it creates in the mind of the observer. In written clothing, dress is described through words and sentences. Language is used here as the medium to understand and engage with the product. In marketing this relates to processes, pricing, and promotional material. And the real dress, where one comes face to face with technology. The cloth is cut, sewn, stitched, wrapped, polished and so on to get expressed in the form of an attractive dress. Technology brings the dress into existence. We therefore encounter another triumvirate that help us understand products. The table now takes the following form:

Language freezes the meanings of clothes as words indicate towards concrete and accepted meanings. A written description emphasizes and highlights for example, a decorative button or asymmetric hem of a skirt. Language performs the function of emphasis and gives a finality to its description for example a

halter-top buttoned down at the back or elbow length sleeves. When an object encounters language, knowledge is created, in this case knowledge of fashion. While image is a whole and resists analysis. It allows freedom and possibilities and cannot be exhausted by seeing. It supplies raw material for layers of perception, and suggests both breadth and depth in the dress. A dress also reproduces the space of the body and makes it available for adornment. Suddenly the simple ideas of left and right, upper and lower, above and below attain meaning. The hermeneutic reality of a dress often unleashes political and sociological forces upon the dress and makes it a site even for the exercise of power.

2. POETICS OF CLOTHING AND THE WORLD OF FASHION

Clothing becomes an object of poetry too as it demonstrates a peculiar and unique combination of qualities of matter like form, substance, movement, luminosity, tactility, and rigidity. Such qualities of matter lend character to the body by both concealing and revealing it simultaneously. As it touches the body perpetually and hence serves as its substitute, it is an object of significant investment. A large part of world poetry and literature are devoted to the worship of body that it is a matter of surprise that the language of clothing has not received similar poetic attention and has remained impoverished as fashion literature. Some examples are hot boots, belt as thin as a line or creamy and dreamy petticoats, bandage

skirt etc. Leather denotes power and lace sensuality, silk richness and cotton, a Spartan value system. The language of clothes and fashion has remained restricted to popular literature and has rarely transcended to occupy a place that a substitute for body should ideally attain to.

Any study of clothing however does lend itself to cognitive and affective treatment. A classification of sources of inspiration like nature, geography, history, and art makes possibilities multiple and ground fertile, a flower dress or a hat in bloom, Russian blouse, or a California shirt, bohemian or contemporary, and Picasso colours or celebrity-inspired lines. It is symbolic of a high-school girl's learning template, a young girl who is "on the go and in the know", who would take courses in prestigious institutions, visit museums and exhibitions when she travels and would have read a few well-known novels. In other words, a signifier of worldly advancement. A movement in social hierarchy that is available at a price. This movement is visible as products move from Table C to Table A with Table B as the mediating variable.

3. DUPLEX STRUCTURES IN MEANING

Roland Barthes (1915-1980) asserted that semiotics, the study of symbols, is a part of linguistics and not the other way round. He opened a new world of signifying unities that

brought sign, image, text and the object together in a heady blend. Be it an automobile or a fashionable dress, be it a two-roomed flat in a cosmopolitan city or a decorative lamp; they all even though bought at a price from the nearby store, always represent something other than themselves. In semiotics, a product expressed through forms that use physical space become a symbol. The meaning of these symbols is derived from other six Ps in the table A, from mental and social space in the table B and from language and technology in the Table C. Price of the product establishes its accessibility and therefore determines its exclusivity. It conditions the other Ps of place, promotion and people that is where it will be available or not available, the way it will communicate to its intended audience and people who are seen to be associated with it.

Here products include services as well as both products and services are developed in such a way that they have traits of each other. The extending of the concept, marketing mix from 4P to 7P was to include the features of services. Language on the other hand gives voice to the experience of the product and technology exerts a totalizing influence on the product and presents to the user a complete entity thus enabling meaningful engagement. Lexicon of semiotics is constructed by a small and highly qualified technocracy from the field like fashion, automobile, furniture etc. The speaking mass are only its users and followers. A deciding group arbitrarily determines the rules and techniques. It is often a small clique that is

present at the origins of the system or at the time when it was changing. The nature of communication therefore is institutionally fixed, and its ethos are imposed on the users. A rigid code is then derived which majority of the user are expected to observe. Any deviation in its observance is marked as being asocial and unfashionable. It makes obvious indications towards the process of 7Ps. The lexicon leads to a way to approach the product, which further leads to processes that are expected to be followed. It implies almost blind rule-following when it comes to the use of the product and a consequent loss of meaning Symbolic value of a product emerges from it being situated in the mental and social space, from being represented in these spaces through form, language, and technology. Symbolism of the product therefore presents the product as a prism through which the contemporary society may be seen.

Language, which duplicates the meaning-giving and meaning-making effort of any visual experience, creates duplex structures of meaning and connotation. Product description and usage guide belong to both meaning-giving and meaning-making activities whereas visual experience is pegged on the form of the product. When the power of language and of forms are combined, duplex structure of meaning and connotation is erected. If applied to the object of fashion, a dress, the associated language refers to the exciting possibilities. Language and speech, when

viewed distinctly elucidate hidden rules of meaning and connotation. A simple tautological relationship exists between the two: if clothing is language, speech is a dress. Further as clothes are described we may observe that the description does not correspond to individuals' response to codes of fashion but are presented as an expression of systematized set of rules and signs. As clothes are photographed even though worn by an individual woman, we find it in a semi-formal state of fashion system. The woman wearing the dress in the photograph represents a normative individual chosen for her canonic generality. As clothes are worn, the opposition of pieces within the garment and the rules that govern their coming together either on the length of the body or in depth, the individual way of dressing up, the personal quirks of association of pieces is expressed. In the dialectics of the garment system therefore, costume precedes clothing and is analogous to language and speech. Just as in food system, rules of association at the level of a dish or at the level of menu, the distinction between language and speech is discerned. In this way, a duplex structure of meaning comes into being. A product structure that is rooted in human perception of physical space and in the collective experience of mental and social space.

4. CONCLUSION

This article sees a coming together of symbolic unities of space, meaning and technology in a

product. The example of clothes through which it elucidates the connections is revealing and heady at the same time. A dress seen through the lens of 7Ps, three types of spaces and finally form-language-technology triangle reveals exciting possibilities for both the manager and the researcher.

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Table A: 7Ps Marketing Mix

Product
Price
Place
Promotion
People
Process
Physical Evidence

Table B: Types of Space

Physical Space
Mental Space
Social Space

Table C: Meaning creating factors

Form
Language
Technology