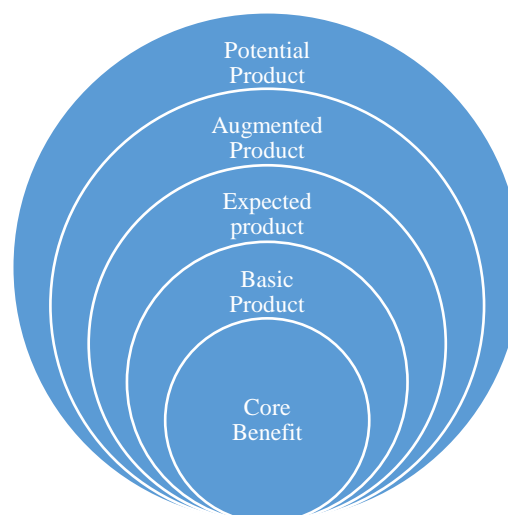


Product Design: A Philosophical-Marketing Approach

Product is more than a set of physical properties and is that which is offered for attention, acquisition or use. They must also satisfy a need or a want (Kotler 1969). As societies and markets mature, products become complex. They come with fringe benefits masquerading as core benefits. This movement away from essential function of a product towards in-essential functions create possibilities for the product to satisfy multiple wants simultaneously.

Any 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 colour or the shape of its body is a peripheral function. Consumers however often base their buying decision on peripheral functions and not on core function, as all grinders are expected to grind. The relationship between product and its functions delivers definition, depth, context and meaning to the product. Kotler (1994) provided a conceptual model that articulated a product's ability to fulfil multiple and simultaneous functions. The model contains five product levels as shown below:

Figure 1. Five Product Levels by Philip Kotler (1994)



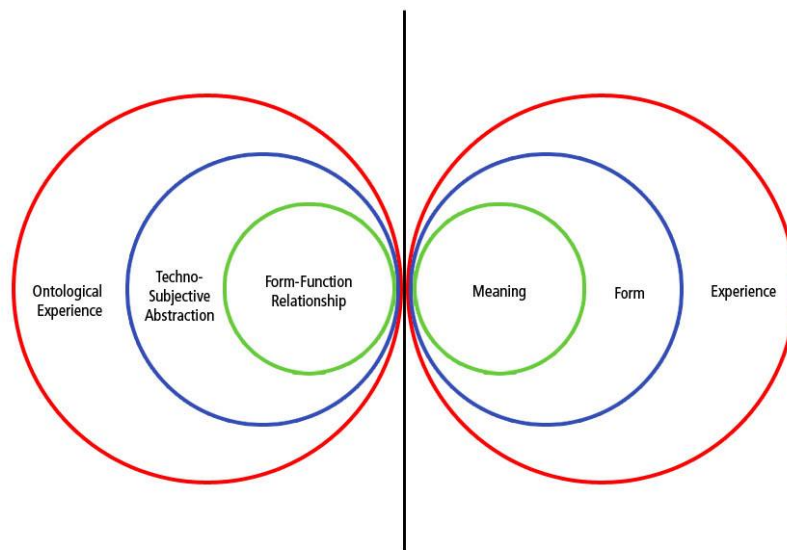
This model may be understood with the example of a knife. The core benefit of a knife is to cut. The basic product will be a knife that actually cuts; expected product would be a knife that cuts well; augmented product is a knife that has ergonomic handle made with a material that allows a good grip; and potential product is a knife that can probably perform multiple functions like cutting both vegetables and meat.

It is true however; that evolving tastes of consumers is making new demands from every product and with developments in technologies, and it is now possible to adapt the product by making alterations in it in real time. Further, the trends of servitization of products and productization of services are also used towards this purpose. The product managers have also begun and if not begun, need to begin, taking a deeper look at the very conception of product.

It is important that they ask questions that originate from the psycho-socio realm of the product-consumer duo and consider boundaries between empirical reality and transcendent ground on which products manifest themselves as artificial and illusory.

In a path-breaking study (Kumar, 2018) applies philosophical concepts to product, and proposed a new model for product design. It considers product as an ever-unfolding phenomenon effected by technological interventions and recognized through the depths of unexplored subjectivity to confer meaning to consumer's experiences. It peels the philosophical layers that reside within the product concept and proposes a three-levelled construction of product.. The three levels are form-function relationships that produce meaning, techno-subjective abstraction that produces form and ontological structure of experience that produces consumer experience. It unravels structures within a product as seen from the perspective of the manufacturer and the consumer and hence all three levels have a corresponding mirror view. It is shown in the figure below:

Fig 2. Product - A Phenomenological Conceptualization by Kumar, A. (2018)



In this model, product is recognized as having a dense malleable core of multiple forms and corresponding functions and all possible relationships between them. Automobile, a complex product is a good example. An automobile performs several functions simultaneously in fact different parts of it satisfy different needs. A feather-touch steering wheel, rubber that burns the asphalt, leg-space that gives comfort, music system that entertains, leather upholstery that gives a luxurious feel and so on. Going further, a car is expected to respond to its environment every moment as seen in driver-less cars or cars that communicate to one another through internet of Things (IoT). Cars also fulfil the need of esteem, of refuge from home and office, of the need to experience thrill of speed and driving pleasure etc. These benefits do not relate

closely to primary function of transportation and yet they play a significant role in influencing the purchase decision. In other words, a car exists simultaneously in several forms and each form corresponds to a different function. All of them combine to create meaning for the consumer as reflected in the mirror image

The second level of techno-subjective abstraction incorporates the role of technology and subjectivity of the consumer to product design. Product hides beneath itself a technological structure that binds its material form. Technology also enables the product to stretch its form so that it can adapt itself to different needs of the consumer. For example a television that can perform functions of a computer and gaming device as well or a banking relationship that enlarges or contracts itself at various interfaces, be it as a fixed deposit or a loan account or a document of identity. As the product is stretched by technology on one side and subjectivity of the consumer on another, it is raised to the level of an abstraction. This abstraction concretizes itself and manifests itself in different form at various touch points.

The third level of ontological experience asserts that a number of factors conditions product experience. Some of the factors are history of experience the consumer has of objects in general and of his own inner world, his ability with language and reason as unifying agents. They help the consumer in conferring meaning to his experience with the product. This ontological structure when unravelled offers insights to product designers and brand managers as they seek to construct product experience for the targeted consumers.

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