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The importance of Product Styling, Aesthetics and their role in the Design
Process

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Abstract

In the production of well balanced and desirable products, it is important for a designer to consider each part of the design stage carefully and thoroughly in order to do the best job that they can.

Despite this, it is common for a particular part of the design phase to be skipped or rushed, due to time constraints, expense or simply because there is little need to carry it out. Particularly in certain product sectors, less time is spent developing the aesthetics of a product to concentrate on the engineering or usability aspects.

It is easy to argue that the aesthetics of a product do not matter if the product works fine. This paper will discuss and present arguments to suggest that, far from being expendable, the aesthetics and styling of a product are an integral part of the design process and can be a major factor in the success of a product.

The study discusses not only the importance of the process of styling itself, but also its benefits to the consumer and the psychological effect it can have on the user. It will also discuss the importance of styling as a branding and marketing tool and as a means of bringing financial gain to a company.

This paper does not serve as a definitive answer to the question of form vs function - it is not meant to suggest that either is more important than the other. It presents the benefits of the act of product styling and aesthetics without suggesting that other parts of the design phase should be compromised.

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1. Introduction

Today's market for consumer products is incredibly competitive. With technology becoming more and more widely available and cheaper for developers, it is becoming more and more difficult for companies to have a monopoly on a particular product sector. Because so many different companies produce the same kind of product, consumers can afford to pick and choose which developer's product they want, rather than being forced to buy what is available. With so much choice available for consumers, companies are constantly looking for new ways to make their products stand above the competition and be more appealing.

The way a product looks can often be the determining factor in whether or not a particular product is chosen over another. Like in all aspects of life, people are naturally attracted and fascinated by things that look good. When choosing between two identically functioning products, consumers will look at more materialist factors such as the brand name, social status it might give them, and in particular aesthetics. As a deal breaker, the styling and aesthetics of a product can be a powerful decider. It is puzzling, then, that some companies do not spend much time or resources styling their products. There are, of course, factors that affect the styling of a product, and in some product sectors, the styling will not always be the priority in the mind of the consumer. This paper will explore some of the factors that can affect the way a product is styled. In addition, it will highlight the benefits of successful product styling and aesthetics and attempt to justify their importance in the design phase.

2. Overview of the Styling Process

Defining Product Styling and Aesthetics

“Designers cannot help but give their products visual form. That visual form may be non-descript, inelegant or just plain ugly. Or it can be transformed, by styling, into a thing of beauty, admired for how it looks rather than what it does.”

Mike Baxter, 1995. *Product Design: A Practical Guide to Systematic Methods of New Product Development*. Published by CRC Press

There are various similar definitions of what exactly the process of product styling entails, but generally it is agreed upon that product styling is the specific design of a product’s visual mood or identity. Whilst aesthetics generally refers to what a product looks like physically, product styling generally suggests a more proactive approach to deciding upon a product’s form. The way a product is styled is often strongly influenced by a brand identity, material, manufacturing technique or the consumer demographic it is targeted towards. However, product styling is not limited to the process of designing a product’s form. Product styling also includes a significant amount of research, investigating brand identities, current fashions and trends and the study of existing products in that product sector, both those of the developers and their competitors. For the purposes of this paper, product styling is defined as the active process of developing the way a product looks – essentially, that the form of a product is as refined as the function.

The role of styling in the design process

Regardless of what the product is, it is highly likely that at some point in the design process there will have been some degree of product styling carried out, and typically, this point is at the beginning of the design process.

This is the obvious point at which to style the product, whilst it is still in concept form. The raw shape and visuals of the product are still being developed and the designer is able to influence the aesthetics of the project through successful styling.

It is important to remember that styling a product does not necessarily mean deciding on its shape and size. Many prominent brands, such as Dyson and Apple, have a distinctive style that is applied across their product range on a wide variety of items. In the case of Dyson, the products are styled to create a unified aesthetic for their range rather than to dictate the form of their products. On the other hand, the forms of many of Apple’s products, such as the iPod and the iMac, often do not differ from a standard form, which is strongly dictated by the distinct aesthetic they have chosen.

Ultimately, the amount of the design process dedicated to product styling will differ greatly from project to project, depending on various factors which are discussed in the chapters to follow.

3. Factors that affect the way a product is styled

Integrating style with functionality

The argument of form over function is one that has always occupied the mind of a designer. There are many arguments for both sides, and many different groups who argue for one or the other. Designing a product that looks great may seem like a fairly straightforward task. The problem with approaching a design purely from a styling point of view is that it may cause various issues later on in the design process if other factors are not considered. All too often, a concept fails because, whilst it may be very strong aesthetically, it is simply not feasible to manufacture in an efficient way. This means that the time spent producing and developing the concept has been wasted, along with money and resources. This is good for neither the designer nor the client. This ultimately poses the question – which is the most important; aesthetics or functionality? Which should the designer prioritise when creating their concepts?

The nature of the product and the environment in which it is to be used will affect the amount of time dedicated to product styling. Whilst some products use their aesthetics as a major tool in selling them, in some scenarios it may be more important that the product functions reliably and performs the task it was designed for. An example of this is in the design of tools, in particular hand tools. A hammer needs to be tough and durable to carry out its task, and the aesthetics of the tool will make little difference to the performance. The same applies to more complex power tools such as drills, sanders and larger garden and building equipment – time and money spent improving the quality of engineering and the durability and toughness of the products will be more beneficial to the consumer than fancy aesthetics. Although a manufacturer of these sorts of products will probably spend some time styling their products to fit their brand identity, the proportion the design process dedicated to styling will be much less than the proportion spent on the engineering and development aspects.

Manufacturing constraints could be considered to be another one of the most important factor that affects the way a product is styled. The long and the short of the matter is that no matter how good a product looks, if it is impossible to manufacture then it is of no use. Products that feature predominantly organic or complex shapes can cause issues when brought to manufacture. Whilst, of course, it still may be perfectly feasible to produce the product, manufacturing costs may be driven up by the complexity of the form. Sometimes this will not be an issue but other times it may be undesirable to have high manufacturing costs, depending of course on the nature of the product and its purpose.

From this, it might be considered that, ultimately, the aesthetics of a product must follow the function of a product; no matter how good the product in question looks, it is useless if it does not perform the task required of it. Ideally, however, form and function should not be seen as two opposing forces where ultimately one of them is going to lose out. Rather, one should be designed with the other in mind. The role of an industrial designer is to create and develop concepts that optimize the function, value and appearance of products for the mutual benefit of both user and manufacturer. (IDSA, 2009). A successful industrial designer will be able

to simultaneously consider both form and function of a concept, and be able to integrate styling and aesthetics into the design with the knowledge that the work they are doing will not create issues further down the line.

Ergonomics

Ergonomics and product styling are two factors in the design process whose principles may clash. This is because both ergonomics and styling can influence the overall form of the product and, in certain circumstances; a product that is visually striking and very well styled may actually have very poor ergonomics, and vice versa. The Alessi Juicy Salif (Figure 1) is an example of this. Visually, the juicer is very attractive and interesting to look at. It's unusual and eye catching aesthetic is a good example of product styling. However, the usability of this product is questionable: How can the user hold it to keep it steady and to stop it twisting round whilst in use? Whilst the focus of this particular product is obviously on the styling, it is a good example of how ergonomics and styling do not always go hand in hand with each other.



Fig 1 Alessi Juicy Salif, Alessi 1990

The effect of ergonomics on the styling of a product depends very much on the nature of the product itself and what it actually is. A product that requires a lot of interaction with a user will require greater attention to ergonomics than a product with little user interaction. In handheld products, for example, it is important to carefully consider ergonomics when deciding on a form or the product may be uncomfortable or even dangerous to use. A products styling may have to be applied to conform within ergonomic constraints if this is the case.

However, in other cases it is not really necessary to consider ergonomics when carrying out product styling. An example of this would be in the design of cars. When a designer is styling the bodywork of a car, they will generally be more affected by engineering factors such as the aerodynamics rather than the ergonomics, as most of the human interaction with this product takes place inside the car.



Fig. 2 Logitech MX Revolution, Logitech 2006

There are, of course, examples where good styling and good ergonomics have been implemented together without clashing, and in some cases even compliment each other. A good example of this is Logitech's range of ergonomically designed computer peripherals. The Logitech MX Revolution (Figure 2) is designed specifically with ergonomics in mind, shaped to provide the most comfortable use posture for the hand and wrist. At the same time, the sleek, sophisticated styling makes it instantly recognisable as a Logitech product.

In short, the degree by which styling is constrained by the ergonomics of a product really depends very much on the nature of the product itself. Ergonomics is a third factor in the form vs function argument. Whilst having an influence on both, it is more likely that it will affect the physical form a product takes, but the degree to which it affects the form is again defined by the nature of the product in question. Like the functionality of a product, ergonomics is something that a good designer will factor in from the beginning when styling a product.

4. Product styling and the user experience

The way a product is styled will generally not have a direct influence over the actual performance of the product in carrying out its function. However, good looking products can greatly enhance the experience of the consumer whilst using the product. Whilst having a plain, basic product that does the job it was designed to do and no more is fine for completing a task, humans generally do not just want the standard, but desire additional luxuries like style and comfort. The psychologist Abraham Maslow explored this principle in his famous *Hierarchy of Needs*, an adapted version of which is seen in Fig 3.

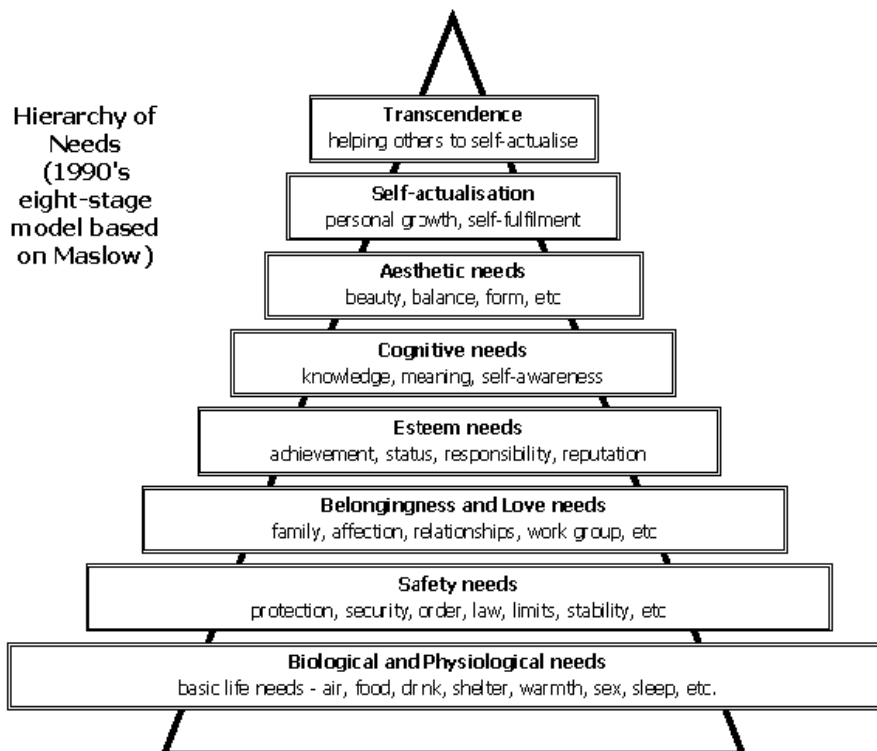


Fig.3 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Alan Chapman 2002

The theory behind Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is simple. There are basic physiological needs – air, food, drink, shelter etc that a human needs in order to be able to survive. Once a person has all of these needs satisfied, they can then seek further enrichment of their lives through other needs that are less urgent than the basic needs for survival. When put in a design context, this would seem to suggest that form follows function and that aesthetics is something that should only be considered once the function of the product has been fully defined. Not only that, it suggests that good aesthetics is something that can be ignored so long as the product performs its task well.

Whilst this works well as a theory, in reality it is more complex. In her book *The Substance of Style*, Virginia Postel examines the notion that aesthetics is “not a luxury, but a universal human desire.” The problem with portraying Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a simple pyramid is that it suggests that good aesthetics is

something that a consumer only desires once their basic needs have been fulfilled. In reality, it is something that is sought after once barely a modicum of stability and sustenance has been reached (Postel, 2004).

There are various examples of this human desire for decoration and adornment throughout history. One story of particular interest is told in the diary of Lieutenant Colonel Mervin Willett Gonin DSO, who was among the first British soldiers to liberate Bergen-Belsen in 1945. This famous story gives an account of how, instead of sending urgent medical and food supplies to the newly liberated camp, someone saw fit to send a case full of lipstick. To the surprise of the Allied soldiers, this was welcomed by the internees despite the appalling sanitary conditions and the desperate lack of vital supplies.

“At last someone had done something to make them individuals again; they were someone, no longer merely the number tattooed on the arm. At last they could take an interest in their appearance. That lipstick started to give them back their humanity.”

Lieutenant Colonel Mervin Gonin, 1945.

Their desire for an aesthetic had overridden their desire for the basic physiological needs as stated in the bottom rung of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. This extraordinary account demonstrates the human desire for individuality, to make a statement about themselves through their appearance and to have a status in society.

Whilst this example might not appear to be relevant in the context product design, the principles behind it are, and it does raise an interesting point about human nature and the complexity of the Hierarchy of Needs. Having a product that successfully performs the task it was designed for is simply not enough if the product itself is aesthetically undesirable to the consumer. Similarly, the way a person feels about an object or a thing influences how successful they will be in using it. A user forced to use something they don’t like because of how it looks or feels will be unhappy to some degree, no matter how well they do on usability tests, (Burken, 2000). It is for this reason why someone might choose to buy an expensive, intricately styled and branded watch like a Rolex over a cheap, tacky watch off the market. Both watches carry out the same function well, but it is the aesthetic satisfaction and the status that comes with the Rolex that people crave. Car design is another good example. Whilst performance, features and cost are all important factors to consider when choosing to buy a car, the majority of consumers are more likely to base their decision on which car to buy on how they good look and feel when they drive it. In terms of performance, there is nothing about Apple’s iMac range that is particularly unique- a buyer could get an equally powerful PC for the same amount, if not less. But the desirable styling and aesthetic of the iMac gives the product an edge over its competitors that make it more attractive to a consumer. Essentially, the principle behind the hierarchy of needs is that neither aesthetics nor functionality alone can be effective in a product – the two need to be applied together in order to bring enrichment and happiness to the consumer.

5. The Benefits of Successful Product Styling

Product Styling as a Marketing tool

There is no doubt that product styling is a core part of branding and bringing a product to market. It is a vital tool for not just attracting a consumer towards a particular product, but also for communicating a brand image to a consumer. Many companies have a distinct aesthetic to their product range which distinguishes it from the competition and will protect their brand identity fiercely.

In some cases, the fervent protection of a brand identity goes right down to small, seemingly insignificant details such as subtleties in the shape and form of a product. A good example of this is the iconic, instantly recognisable Coca-Cola bottle (Figure 4). In 1914, the Coca-Cola company designed the form of the packaging for their soft drink with the sole purpose that it be instantly recognisable as a Coca-Cola product. A key thing to remember is that this was before the days of putting labels on bottles – the entire brand identity had to be communicated through the shape of the bottle. The styling of the packaging, therefore, had to be particularly distinctive if it hoped to make the product stand out from its competitors. In 1916 The Root Glass Company produced a prototype Coca Cola bottle that was unlike anything that had been seen before - such was the uniqueness of the curves, grooves and flutes of the bottle, (The Irish Times, 2000). The shape was quickly patented to protect the Coca Cola identity from imitation.



Fig 4, Coca Cola Bottle, Coca-Cola Company 2009

It is not surprising that companies want to protect their brand identity, particularly if it attracts a large demographic of people. Modern consumers often show intense brand loyalty, with rival companies such as Apple and Microsoft having large fanbases who, for various reasons, prefer their chosen brands products over those of a competitor, even if the product itself is actually inferior to a rival. This is captured clearly in the aforementioned rivalry between Apple and Microsoft, with the former trying to present their brand as hip, friendly, and ultimately “cool”, in comparison to the latter’s corporate, business like image. This trendy, elite brand identity Apple has created for themselves is evident in the styling of their products, and exists across their entire product range. The styling of the new iMac (Figure 5) is crisp, clean and almost oozes a sense of sophistication. However, although the form is very different to the original iMac, (Figure 6) it still carries the same stylistic cues – the minimalist exterior, the clean surfaces and the hard edges – that appeal to Mac fans as much then as it does today. It would not be unrealistic to say that Apple owes a lot of its fanbase to the aesthetic appeal a Mac has over a PC.



Fig 5 Apple iMac, Apple Inc 2008

Ultimately, the aesthetics and styling of a product will often determine the choice a consumer makes between two products of otherwise equal capabilities. Companies and designers both know this – it is only natural that the more impressive and striking looking out of two choices will succeed. This philosophy is evident in every part of modern life, and illustrates just how important product styling can be to the success of a brand.



Fig 6. Apple iMac, Apple Inc 1998

The Contribution of Styling and Aesthetics to the commercial success of a product

It is the opinion of many successful designers that product appearance can often be the most significant factor in a product's saleability (DCA, 2009). In today's climate of consumerism and impulse buying, it is natural that the most eye catching, boldly styled and branded products will attract the attention of the consumer and stand out from their counterparts. The ability to capture a consumer's fascination is very important, particularly when there is so much competition. In the past, companies who first developed new consumer products, such as mobile phones, tended to have a monopoly on the market due to the fact that they were the ones pioneering the new technology and as such had few competitors. As the technology for these products advanced and became available to more and more developers, companies needed new ways to get ahead of their competitors. Nowadays, competition has pushed quality so high and prices so low that few manufacturers can survive on performance and price alone. To produce value, they must give customers something to please their sensory side. Aesthetics is the killer app. (V Postrel, 2003).

It is important for a company that their products are perceived to be fashionable in order to be desirable, and product styling is often carried out in a way that makes the aesthetic of the product match the current trends in product fashion. Design trends change over the years and it is important that companies style their products to meet the expectation of what is fashionable. This is particularly relevant to the design of household products and furniture, gadgets and accessories and generally luxury consumer items that are perceived to be "cool".

This desire to keep up with the latest trends can be seen clearly in the release of the iPod and the subsequent series of iPod impersonations that followed. When Apple released the original iPod in 2001, not only was it innovative, implementing new technology in a very user friendly way, but the styling and aesthetic of the iPod was unlike anything that had been seen before. One of the most distinguishing things about the iPod was the colour – white. Up until its release, barely any electronic products were released with white fascias – black and silver were the most commonly used colour combinations. The iPod went on to be a very successful product, and the iPod range became known not only for its innovation in technology but also its innovation in form and aesthetics. Because of the success of the iPod, companies began to release products that were similar in appearance to the iPod, recognising that that was an aesthetic that was proving to be popular amongst consumers. For example the Creative Zen Touch (Figure 7) was released in 2004 alongside the 4th

Generation iPod (also Figure 7). The similarity in appearance is obvious – particularly because Creative have incorporated a touch sensitive interface on this product, very similar to the one on the iPod. Whilst this may be perceived as copying Apple’s style, in reality it is simply styling their products to meet an aesthetic that is currently very popular, something that is absolutely necessary if a product is to be commercially successful.



Fig 7. L-R: Creative Zen Touch and Apple iPod 4th Generation. Creative 2004 & Apple 2004 respectively.

Aside from being the most eye catching and trendy looking out of its competitors, good product styling can be used to make products more desirable to consumers in various ways. As previously mentioned, product styling does not generally influence the way a product performs its task. However, successful product styling can be used to communicate to a consumer that a product has certain qualities about it that would make it desirable for performing a certain task. For example, if a product is to be used in a particularly rough or harsh environment, it would make the product more desirable if it were styled to look like it would survive in a harsh environment.

An example of this would be the LaCie “Rugged” External Hard Drive (Figure 8). Computer components and peripherals are typically quite delicate and not designed to be roughly handled, and this is something that is generally well known. The unique selling point of this product, however, is that fact that it was designed to be especially resistant to harsh elements (LaCie 2009). The styling of the product also suggests that this is the case. The strong grooves and ridges on the outside combined with the mixture of rubber and aluminium surrounding the case give this product an almost armoured aesthetic about it that is uncommon among computing peripherals. This choice of styling gives the product the appearance of being much more durable and tough than its competitors, which will make it a more appealing choice for consumers looking specifically for a hard drive for use in harsh environments.



Fig 8. LaCie Rugged External Hard Drive, LaCie 2006

Successful styling of a product can also make it more desirable towards a certain age demographic. The most obvious example of this is in the design of children’s products. Figure 9 shows two toothbrushes, both manufactured by Oral B. Although they both perform in exactly the same way, the two products are styled to



Fig 9. L-R: Oral B Stage 4 and Oral B Advantage Plus, Braun 2008

appeal to different demographics. The toothbrush on the right is a standard toothbrush, with fairly conservative styling that is aimed more at adults than at children. The toothbrush on the left, however, is clearly aimed at a younger demographic. Research has shown that children are naturally attracted to products that give the impression of being “more fun”, and companies often capitalise on this by adorning their products with bright colours, attractive forms, and in some cases graphics that children can relate to, such as cartoons or characters from recently released films. Because children are even more impulsive than adults, it is vital that products aimed at children are styled in a way that children will find exciting and instantly desirable, and are not perceived to be “boring” rather than “fun”. If this styling is done successfully, it can make even a mundane yet important task such as brushing your teeth seem more appealing.

6. The role of product styling within different types of organisations

The role of product styling and the importance of aesthetics to a company slightly depends on the type of organisation the company is. A large company, for example, is likely to have their own product range that they market and sell as well as design. It is important for them to create a brand identity across their product range to distinguish the product as one of theirs rather than a competitor's. As mentioned before, consumers often show intense brand loyalty, not just to the name itself but also to the style adopted by a particular brand. Large companies need to ensure that they have a constant aesthetic to their products to provide loyalists with products that they are going to conform to the aesthetic that they find desirable, and that they will want to buy and own as opposed to a similar product from a competitor. In addition to making a product more attractive than a competitor's, product styling is necessary for a large company to make sure that their new products fit in naturally with their current product family.

The role of product styling within a design consultancy is slightly different to its role within an in house design team. Whilst a large company might have a dedicated design team who style all their products in a similar way, design consultancies carry out commissioned work, typically from several different brands. As a result, design consultancies generally do not have an aesthetic of their own which they apply to their products as the styling of their products depends on a number of different factors that are controlled by the client and the nature of the product.

If a client requires the consultancy to carry out and implement detailed brand analysis and styling into the project they are working on, then that has certain implications for the amount of work that a consultancy will have to carry out. A dedicated in-house design team will already have a wealth of experience styling their products to fit in with their brand image, but it is likely that a consultancy will not have the same experience unless it is a client that they regularly work for. Because of this, a consultancy will have to spend time and resources researching the brand identity of the client in order to effectively style their products to meet the client's demands. This may well include the researching and compilation of mood boards, brand aesthetics, close evaluation of other products in the clients range as well as researching the clients ethics and work morals.

Alternatively, it may simply be the case that a client does not want the consultancy to spend much time on the product styling aspect of the design phase. This may simply be that the nature of the product does not require product styling to be a major part of the design. If a product is particularly industrial or is focused mainly around engineering, the aesthetics of the product may not really matter as much as the functionality and the usability. As a design consultancy is paid by the amount of work that they do, the client may ask them not to spend any time styling the product in order to save on time and costs.

Regardless of whether or not a client has specified that they want styling work carried out, a good consultancy will make sure to dedicate some time to developing the aesthetics of the product, as this is a key part of the design process and should come naturally whilst the product is still in its concept form.

7. Conclusion

There is little doubt that considering aesthetics and carrying out product styling is an important part of designing a product. Whether a consultancy or a large company, it is imperative that they carry out some form of product styling at an early stage in the design process. Product styling is an important part of the design phase and successful product styling can greatly improve the desirability of a product, which is good for business. In addition, the experience whilst using the product can be greatly enhanced by successful product styling, making the consumer happier and more satisfied. It is vitally important that styling and aesthetics are not considered as an afterthought, but rather are something that should be specifically developed before the more technical details of a product are materialised. Despite this, the aesthetics and styling of a product should not come at the expense of the usability, and it is the job of an industrial designer to constantly strive to produce great looking products that also function well and perform their task to a high standard. Ultimately, the timeless argument of form against function remains unsolved and this will likely forever be the case. One of the biggest challenges for a modern designer is managing to decide upon and reach a compromise that will satisfy both of these factors.

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