



Meanings of Fashion: Context Dependence

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ABSTRACT

Fashion gives distinctive meanings. These meanings however subject to constant change because of the context in which any message is transmitted influences its interpretation. There are three kinds of contexts which can be considered in relation to generating meanings in fashion the appearance context, the social context, cultural and historical context in which people lived and interacted. The Kotte era of Sri Lanka from the 15th Century to the 17th Century was a turning point in fashion history where the western fashion (Portuguese) directly influenced. It brought many social and cultural changes due to the changing of the state religion into Christianity. The newly introduced Christian social context led to many changes in royal dresses in the succeeding eras in history because the royalty formed a novel piece of dress fashion by mixed and matched with traditional Sinhala dress features with western dress fashion items. (Hybrid formation) The new fashion brought many new meanings to the Sri Lankan fashion arena. The objective of the research is to find out in what ways the 'context' affect the meanings of fashion. A qualitative method has been adopted for this research. Data were gathered from temple murals, cloth paintings, wood and stone carvings, sculptures and special ivory carvings at Munich Treasury in Germany. Literary data gathered from manuscripts, chronicles, books, original records of foreign travelers, published research and inscriptions. Validity was much concerned. The study reveals that the meaning of dress heavily rely on social contexts in order for a meaning to be comprehended.

KEYWORDS: *Fashion, meanings of dress, context, hybridization, Kotte period*

1. INTRODUCTION

In every society there are clothes that communicate something about the wearer, and this presupposes some shared concept of what particular clothes are to signify. These conceptions however subject to constant change because of the context in which any message is transmitted influences its interpretation. The significance of the paper is identified as in comparison to the world movement of dress fashions the Kotte period marked the culmination of an emerging novel fashion movement towards influential “context” which operated in succeeding eras in Sri Lanka accompanying with unique features rooted in Sri Lankan fashion context. The historical narration of Sri Lankan dress fashions of the royalties show that “context” of the particular society played a pivotal role in formed the meaning of dress, however consequently with the advent of the Portuguese in Ceylon 1505 AD show that the modernity in terms of instrumental in changing ideology of the royalty after the converted Christianity. The social significance of clothing is more complex depends on the dynamics of context. Social circumstances provide more complete framework of daily life in which clothing is worn, within the visual context of personal appearance. A context may consist of a setting or relationship which helps to understand others. Furthermore context includes the attributes of a wearer and perceiver of clothing. There are three kinds of contexts which can be considered in relation to generating meanings in fashion the appearance context, the social context, cultural and historical context in which people lived and interacted. The objective of the research is to find out in what ways the ‘context’ affect the meanings of fashion.

According to the social hierarchy in any society the royalty considered as fashion creators. The Kotte era of Sri Lanka from the 15th Century to the 17th Century was a turning point in Sri Lankan fashion history where the western fashion (Portuguese) directly influenced. It brought many social and cultural changes due to

the changing of the state religion into Christianity. The newly introduced Christian social context led to many changes in royal dresses in the succeeding eras in history because the royalty formed a novel piece of dress fashion by mixed and matched with traditional Sinhala dress features with western dress fashion items. The hybrid formation of new fashion ultimately brought many new meanings to the Sri Lankan fashion arena.

2. MATERIALS & METHODS

A qualitative method has been adopted for this research. The research start with a sequence of in-depth observational study carried out with temple murals, cloth painting at the museum of Colombo, wood and stone carvings and sculptures at Gampola Aludeniya temple, and special ivory carvings at Munich Treasury in Germany along with the continuous literature review. The process of the research is inductive; the researcher builds abstractions, concepts and theories from details. For literature review used documented manuscripts, chronicles, books, original records of foreign travelers, published research inscriptions pertaining to the era. Descriptive 'validity' is that concerned with the initial stage of research, usually involving data Validity of the data were confirmed with cross checking literary sources along with random interviews were conducted with most of the high priests of the temples, (Ven. Gangoda thero at Gadaladeniya, Ven Polwatte Sumanaseela thero at Ambulugala, Mawanella, Ven. Seelawimalthero at Malagammana, Kandy and many other priests of Kandy, Mawanella, Kegalle, Dambadeniya, Jaffna, Gampola, Gampaha, Ampara) head masters of the school in the villages, (Mr. Punchibanda of Handessa, Kandy , a retired school principal who has a relationship to Gampola royal clan) special persons engaged in special activities such as dancers (Mr. Peter Soorasena, a veteran Kandyan dancer and a teacher from Kandy) craftsmen (Mr. Wimalasurendra a veteran jewelry maker of Elugoda, Gampola whose ancestors provided

jewelry to the Kandyan court during King Narendrasinghe) and people who were aware of the sites or history about the findings were also interviewed. Descriptive 'validity' is that concerned with the initial stage of research, usually involving data gathering. The central issue is factual accuracy in the informational statements that describe what was observed and experienced. Selected dresses such as long coat *cabaya*, collared short coat *hettaya*, long cloth *thuppotti* and trouser *pantaloon* were observed and analyzed. Data analysis was conducted as an activity simultaneously with data collection, data interpretation and writing narrative sub topics. There are several simultaneous activities involved in the research process. The analysis is based on reduction (de - contextualizing) and interpretation (re - contextualizing). The systematic pictorial analysis reveals many new meanings created, which influenced transmission of its "context".

3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

3.1. The context influence interpretation of meaning "cabaya"

The long coat or *cabaya* was an outer garment that was worn by the Portuguese royalty in many royal occasions. Pierismentions (1992) stated that the *cabaya*, is a word originally Asiatic, received by the Portuguese from the Arabs and brought with them to India and it was applied to the long muslin tunic worn by the better classes of India. Furthermore Perera (1922) stated that Gray in his notes on Pyrard thinks that the word was introduced before the time of the Portuguese and remarks that *cabaya* in Ceylon means a coat or jacket. The word has been used by Castanheda (1551), Correa (1552) and Fitch (1585). Fitch described "*cabie*" made like a shirt tied with strings on one side. According to Linschoten (1598) it is a cotton linen gown called *cabaia*. Dalgado (1988) also stated that, *cabaia* (long tunic with wide sleeves used in the East) in Tamil it is known as *kabay*, a kind of tunic, in Marathi - *kabayorkabai*. In Sinhala it is called *kabaya*, a

coat. In the Indo - Portuguese dialects of Ceylon *cabaya*, *cabai*, *cuobai* are used in the sense of a coat. *Gaba* adopted in Hindustani vesture, introduced into India by the Portuguese. Castanheda said it was a fitting garment. The moors commonly use *cabaya* and it has long sleeves is provided with a cincture and is open in front with one flap over another in the manner of the dress of the venetians.

Besides Gaspar Correa said that, *cabaya* is a garment such as the *pelote* is analogues. (*Pelote* is a Portuguese name of a robe with broad flaps, used in former times). They brought to the Kings a costly *cabaya*, which he with his own hands put on the governor and this was the highest honor which he could bestow on him according to the usages. The *Kabala* is a kind of white design gown made of *cambrío* and furnished with lace. The complete outfit of a *malay* woman is called *sarong kabaia*. The existence of the *cabaia* in the Eastern parlance prior to the Portuguese arrival it's being previously unknown to the Portuguese. *Kabaya* is still a common word in Ceylon for a coat or jacket worn by European natives. Sometimes it was mentioned as long tunic. After the Portuguese encounter in Sri Lanka the dress item became more popular among the fashion line of the royal clan during the middle period of the sixteenth century after conversion of the Sinhala Kings to Christianity.

3.2. "Cabaya" in Sri Lankan context



Figure 1. Prince Dhramapala's coronation coat. Casket inv. No 1241, rear view bottom right (Schroeder 1990)

Prince Dharmapala (1551-1597AD) embraced Christianity and appeared in the social and cultural context which led to many changes in royal dress in the succeeding eras in history. Prince Dharmapala (1551-1597AD) succeeded his grandfather King Buwanekabahu (1521-1551 AD) and was given an education by the Franciscan superior, Joao de Vila Conde. The Prince was baptized as Don John Dharmapala. (1551-1597AD).

The young Prince gratefully refers to Friar Joao as 'my father and master' (Queyroz, 1930). He remained devoted to the Franciscans throughout his life. He also gifted to the Franciscans the lands and revenues of Buddhist temples, an impolitic step (Peter, 1983). Furthermore he built schools for Franciscans and encouraged the spread of Christianity. Besides the land he gifted for priests, it was also used for the upkeep of the orphans of the kingdom. It was the policy of the Portuguese authority to take over orphaned non-Christian children of the country and bring them up as Christians. The Franciscans' purpose was to train the students in a Christian way of life (Peter, 1983).

These remarkable facts show how much the young Prince Dharmapala (1551-1597AD) was immersed in Christianity. Figure 1 shows Prince Dharmapala (1551-1597AD) wearing a long coat over a long piece of cloth after he was crowned as being similar to that of the Portuguese king. He adopted a long coat and lived as a true Portuguese King. The coat in that sense not only signified royalty; it signified more, his changing of attitudes and loyalty to the Portuguese.

He is swearing an oath of loyalty to the Portuguese crowned he was clad in an over-coat to resemble and obey the Portuguese crowned. The edge of the coat is decorated with some beads. It was said that there was an exchange of *cabaya* and a type of a head-dress of Portuguese dignitaries with the Sinhalese delegation. Before the coronation took place, "the Sinhalese delegation had to compliment the king's gesture

exchanging their usual costumes for crimson *cabaya* and white *toucas*.

The word *touca* (Pieris, 1992) refer to the turban. Ferguson (1907) also mentions about the king's dress during the sixteenth century. He says that the "King was clad in a silken *bajo*. *Bajo* is a fashion of a closed jacket and girt with a cloth likewise of silken which reached to his knees".

3.3. Different types of Portuguese jackets "Camisa"

The long sleeved short jacket (*hettaya*) or long sleeved short jacket (*camisa*) was worn by the elites of the Portuguese. The Portuguese elites can be identified as viceroys, generals, and ambassadors who served the country after they occupied Ceylon in 1505AD.

They were present in, Ceylon from time to time due to their political agendas. The most influential elite characters who were directly linked with the internal politics of the country were Lorenzo De Almeida, Payo de Souza, Viceroy Alffonco de Noronha, General Lopes De Sousa (1594 AD) and General Viceroy Jeronimo de Azavedo (1594- 1612AD). General Lopes wore a long sleeved jacket called *camisa*. Dalgado describes (Dalgado, 1988) that *camisa*, Arabic origin called *gamis*, *gamis* is known as tunic.

Although the name of this garment may have come to us through the Arabs, the Arab word is derived from the Sanskrit *kschuma* (*kschaumi*) called fabric of linen, the garment has received the name from the material from which it is made.

There were two types of *camisa* worn by the Portuguese. They wore *camisa de dia* for the day and *camisa de noite* for the night (Dalgado, 1988). In this image the neckline was also covered with a collar having a zig -zag triangle shaped deign.



Figure 2. General Lopes' scamisa (Silva & Beumer 1988)

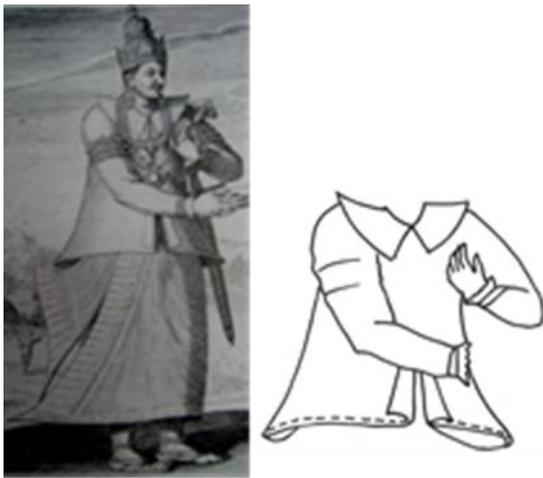


Figure 3. King Wimaladhramasooriya's upper body jacket

3.4. Changing context to create new meaning: "hettaya" and new collar "mantaya"

King Wimaladharmasooriya 1 (1592-1604 AD) in his long association with the Portuguese had made him converted to Christianity and was baptized as Dom Joao d' Austria. He was educated by the Franciscans in their college in Colombo after he had fled to the Portuguese (Peter, 1983). As he had become a Christian he fought with the Portuguese in the defense of Colombo against Rajasingha 1 (1581-1593 AD) of Sitawaka and later eliminated Dona Catherina his only possible rival to the throne, by taking her to wife (Weerasooriya, 1971). He became the King of Kandy and then turned against the

Portuguese and championed Buddhism. He reverted to Buddhism and came to be known as Konappu Bandara (Paranavithana, 1997). His next attempt which was the restoration of Buddhism was a master stroke; the Saivities installed by Rajasingha 1 (1581-1593 AD) were removed from Buddhist temples. He restored Sripada (Adam's Peak) to the Buddhist monks and the Tooth Relic was brought back to Kandy and he built a magnificent Palace as its receptacle (Weerasooriya, 1971). He not only restored Buddhist places he also dispatched Buddhist missions to Lower Burma. The ceremony of Higher Ordination was held in Ceylon at Kandy in 1597 AD after the lapse of many years. Though the King restored Buddhism his inner feelings and attitudes were seemingly not purely Buddhist. It is said that lodging places in the King's palace were 'arranged not in the Sinhalese but in the Portuguese fashion (Paranavithana, 1997). Also the same journal mentions that the table and on which all in the guests' great hall also was arranged in the Christian manner (Paranavithana, 1997). These evidences show how subtly senses of western feelings were immersed in his inner soul. Furthermore it is proved that King Wimaladharmasooriya (1592-1604 AD) was strongly influenced by the social context in which he lived. All these facts show that King Wimaladharmasooriya's long sleeved jacket signified his western attitudes, his changed mind as well as his political aspirations.

The king Wimala Dharmasooriya I (1592-1604 AD) is shown in full royal dress. The royal dress seemed to be changing from its conventional dress meanings into more novel meanings. His complete dress is described by Coomarasvamy (1956) as follows, Sinhalese King wears a jeweled crown surmounted by a *trisula*, and having a Buddha figure in the front; a jacket and 'mante' and a patterned *tuppotiya*, probably of muslin with gold or silver thread. He carries a sword hanging by a bandolier over the right shoulder. A lotus flower is in the left hand. The jewelry worn includes earrings, two necklaces with jeweled pendants, armlets and anklets. Even

though Prince Dharmapala (1551-1597AD) first adopted the Portuguese style *cabaya* or long coat and introduced them to the Kings if also it could be suggested that King Wimaladharmasooriya (1592-1604 AD) I introduced the short jacket as upper body dress for royalty. The jacket is known as *Juan hettaya* or *kameesa hettaya*. Codrington identified (1910) *mante* or collar as *tippet* was made of light weight material such as lace or stiffed material like calico was made of light weight material such as lace or stiffed material like calico. In western fashion context it could have been worn to protect the heat in neck area because of the cold climatic condition. However in Sri Lankan fashion context the item has been gradually developed and utilized in many different ways. The purpose of attaching such a piece of item gave numerous meanings to it. Coomaraswamy explained that both men and women wore *mante* to protect their jackets. During the ancient time anointing oil has been practiced as etiquette for dressing by the royalty to the commoners of the society.

3.5. Exchange of cultural meanings of dress: Portuguese to Sinhala

Furthermore it is also revealed that the production and exchange of meanings of dress of the Sinhalese Kings are quite clearly similar to the meanings of the original Portuguese long sleeved jacket and given numerous interpretations by different Kings as cultural producers. It is understood by the examples below that the original Portuguese jacket ends up with a set of meanings different from those it began with. Prince Dharmapala (1551-1597 AD) wears a long sleeved long *cabaya* with a front opening, King Wimaladhramasooriya 1 (1591-1604AD) wears a *kameesahettaya* or known as *juanhettaya* with a *tippet* (1949) (a kind of collar) and with a front opening, King Rajasinghe 11 (1635-1687AD) wears a long sleeved jacket with a sash crossed over the shoulder with buttoned front opening, Keerthi Sri Rajasingha (1747-1782 AD) wears a long sleeved jacket known as *mohahettaya* with a broad *tippet*, and King Sri Wrickrama Rajasingha (1798-1815

AD) wears a long sleeved jacket known as *yatahettaya* or *relikamise* with three layered frill *mante* layered trimmings attached to a broad *tippet*. It is understood that the production and exchange of cultural meanings of dress ends up with a set of meanings different from those it began with since it has given numerous interpretations by different hierarchical personages in the top of the social strata as cultural producers.



Figure 4. King Mayadunne & King Raigam Bandara's short jackets. Casket inv. no 1241, left gable



Figure 5. Rajasingha 11
Shirt & waistcoat long breaches
(Knox, 1966)



Figure 6. Kirthi Sri Rajsinha
Mojahette & pantaloons
(Dambulla temple)



Figure 7. Sri Wickrama Rajasinha
Yatahette & loose white pantaloons
(Davy, 1821)

3.6. The long lower cloth “*tuppetti*”

The long cloth was the lower body dress worn by the royalty. The dress was composed with one piece of cloth draped around the body by making many folds and draperies. It was a one piece of unsown dress without having any single stitch or

a pin to tuck it. Normally the long cloth was worn with bare upper body with much jewelry. During the Kotte period the cloth for the lower body known as *tuppetti* (Pieris, 1949). There had also been a costume tax known as *tuppetti* at that time. By using a word *tuppetti* it would be quite widely used among the people of the society. By naming a special tax or duty for consumable items suggests that *tuppetti* had been used as fabrics or cloth during that period. According to *Vijayanthanthraya* (Jayasuriya, 2001) (technical manual) the ceremonial robe is said to be of three kinds in different lengths in cubits as 13, 9, or 7. The entire cloth should be draped around the King from left to right. He also used a silk shawl while he is presents at the *dharmashala* or the religious place. Poetical work *Parakumba Siritha* (Paranavithana, 1997) (verse 60) indicates that the King Parakramabahu VI (1411-1466 AD) was dressed in silk cloth. Sometimes, it mentioned the quality of the silk cloth that the King wore. He got a gift of fine silk from foreign King (Paranavithana, 1997) (Verse 151). Barbosa refers to silk cloths of *pegu* called *patola* (Pieris, 1992) Sometimes the King used gold and silver as an added value to enhance the timeless quality of dresses and give a cozy look to dresses. The description of Queyroz noted that the King long girt with cloth of silver, the King’s Lion Throne of six stages was covered with cloth and gold. The King wore a white *cabaya* (Pieris, 1992). The King wore long trousers as a lower body dress. These trousers were called *calcao* or *breeches* (Silva, 1990).

3.7. Development of meaning of dress

Kings of the Kotte period communicated vital meanings through their dresses. A variety of new dress forms, dress details, vastly differentiated evolved shapes of dresses and amalgamated parts wore communicated by a mixture of South Indian regional and far beyond western avant - garde sense of expression. The very subtle manipulations of some western dress features that were aesthetically blended with Sri Lankan sartorial sense are highly remarkable. Direct representations of different dresses and details

are not much, instead the King adapted to the Portuguese long coat or *cabaya*. King Wimaladharmasooriya (1591-1604 AD) and Prince Dharmapala (1551-1597 AD) adapted the Portuguese style jacket called *cabaya* with the so-called Sinhala long piece of cloth. Wearing a long *cabaya* or the jacket in the context of Portuguese adherence is a sign of both their societies, but also visible to their participation in a cultural tradition.

Prince Dharmapala (1551-1597 AD) wore a long *cabaya* or Wimaladharmasooriya's (1591-1604 AD) jacket and his four coned flat crown were carefully manipulated dress signs which would reveal their loyalty to the Portuguese rulers as well as showing their changing attitude. However when people feel it is necessary or wish to show loyalty to a particular group, or when it is necessary for political bonds and divisions to be clearly visible, the meanings of dress played a vital role. During the sixteenth century, the jacket worn by the elites became the sign of commitment to their loyalty to Portuguese rule. They used jacket and other Portuguese styles fashions as a visual symbol of their loyalty. However, King Buwanekabahu VII (1521-1555) never changed his religion; or his attitudes, he wished to see his grandson, Prince Dharmapala (1551-1597 AD) become the king of Kotte while following a Portuguese lifestyle communicated vitality in his thoughts by keeping and maintaining Sinhala dress etiquettes. The King always exhibited the right behavior according to the traditional royal dress. At the same time these kings would prefer to experience novel feelings by changing some dress parts in line with Portuguese manipulation.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study reveals how the meanings of dresses developed in one social context and possibly moved across contextual boundaries and created new context for a new mode of perception. When Prince Dharmapala (1551-1597 AD) adopted the western long coat as his upper body dress with a

long piece of cloth, new meanings were attached by the social context. He adopted the same styled long coat which was worn by the Portuguese King. In the social context of the long coat emerging signified royalty with a combination of long trousers. But in Sri Lankan social context the signification of 'royal' first emerged with a long piece of cloth and then it moved from that social context to another (Kandy period) and flourished as a new style for the Kings. The new dress style of the King's attire existed until the end of the last kingdom of Sri Lanka; the Kandy period (last king of Kandy also wore a long sleeved jacket and a trouser). It is also identified that the elite or the high rankers of the administrative society during the early twentieth century in the south of Sri Lanka wore long coats with a long cloth up to the ankle and wore long trousers beneath the cloth. What is noticeable here is that instead of Prince Dharmapala's (1551-1597 AD) long coat and long lower piece of cloth a new dress form a trouser worn beneath the cloth emerged. This new fashion brought interesting dress composition and elaborated the perception of the perceivers of that society. The mode of the new dress composition signified 'smart gentleman'. It seems that with the passage of time the elite male has ignored the lower cloth and practiced wearing a long coat and trousers. In this way it seems that people in the society could continuously convey dress signifiers according to their wish. However it is apparent that the culture of the society had ignored some dress forms and re-formed and adopted another dress for elite males in the middle phase of the twentieth century in Sri Lanka.

When the writer studied and analyzed the society and culture during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it is proven that some meanings of the dress are derived from cultural experience and some are negotiated during social transactions and also some are conjured independently in the minds of the participants of their culture. This also can be seen when analyzing the series of images of the Kings and the dancers (stereotypes). The King's trousers signified

royalty during the Kotte period, however when considering the same trousers today it won't signify royalty; it signifies formality or smartness, because the trousers are a sign deriving today in a different culture.

Through the study it has been identified that the meanings of dresses are the result of a constantly shifting negotiation among the members of the society. When Prince Dharmapala adopted western dress, it was continued by the succeeding Kings Wimaladhramasooriya 1 (1591-1604 AD), Rajasingha 11, Keerthi Sri Rajasingha and Sri Wrickrama Rajasingha. If their dress was not accepted by the people of the society, these dresses would not have existed in the society. Their upper body long sleeved jacket, roppillios (a vest worn by the Sinhalese) trousers (pantaloons), wambays (doublet) from the Portuguese fashion are followed by the elite of the court of Wimaladhramasooriya 1 (1591-1604 AD) (Paranavithana 1997).

In addition it is also revealed that meanings of dresses are semantically unstable, because the meaning is directly related to the context, when clothes are considered as texts, it was typical in hierarchical societies for clothes to function as 'closed' texts with a relatively stable and fixed meaning. This is also proved by the dress of Prince Dharmapala (1551-1597 AD) (*Cabaya* with long cloth), King Wimaladhramasooriya 1 (1591-1604 AD) (*juanhettaya* with long cloth) and King Rajasingha 11 (long sleeved jacket with pantaloons). These dresses were embedded in the Portuguese influenced social, cultural and historical context of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

These three royal personages were brought up in the Portuguese social context from their childhood. The Kings Keerthi Sri Rajasingha and Sri Wrickrama Rajasingha's dresses were also embedded in Dutch and British influenced social contexts. Within that western influenced social context all the dresses of the above said Kings prevailed at a certain time period, remaining as fixed dresses of the royalty. The King's dress

signified many meanings, royalty, and sovereignty, and enormous power, ruler of a particular area or country. These examples also show that dress signs rely heavily on social contexts in order for a meaning to be comprehended.

5. RECOMMENDATION

The study has demonstrated that dress rarely conveys single meanings; more often their messages may be described as consisting of layers of meaning, with some layers being more applicable than others in a specific context. It also signified some fashion or style, comfort and luxuriousness. Because clothes are social objects, they have the potential to convey meaning and from a variety of social and cultural contexts.

These concepts are derived from the scientific basis would be recommended for application of different avenues of the field of fashion. Therefore the applicability of fashion meanings of Kotte period to the present as well as to the future is possible. The knowledge gained from the study can be applied to the fields of fashion, identified as fashion advertising, fashion photography and fashion journalism. Contemporary society is valued on a pecuniary culture. In this culture dress and fashion becomes highest demanding consumer consumption product.

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