

The Social Utility of Feature Creep

THE PROBLEM

It seems as obvious as it is intuitive: a phone with a camera, music player, app store, touch screen, GPS, and internet capability is better than a phone with only a camera and music player. More is better than less. Counter intuitively, Debora Thompson demonstrated that when evaluating products this adage is not always true. Thompson and her colleagues found that consumers prefer products with a greater number of features at the time of purchase or initial evaluation, due to the perceived greater capability. However, after use, they preferred simpler products with fewer features.

For example, when consumers rated digital video players Thompson and colleagues found that before use consumers preferred feature-rich models. In contrast, after use Thompson found a significant drop in the portion of consumers interested in feature-rich players. The complexity of feature rich products leads to decreased satisfaction, a phenomenon Thompson and her colleagues refer to as “feature fatigue.”

In follow-up research, Thompson and colleagues show that there are additional factors that contribute to consumers’ initial interest in high feature products. Consistent with the idea of conspicuous consumption, consumers prefer feature-rich products because they perceive a significant social utility to the product. Complexity of the product may in fact confer benefits when factoring in the social context of consumption. Using feature-rich products helps consumers cultivate positive impressions by others. Just as owning a luxury car can confer wealth, using a complex product can confer competence and expertise.

FINDINGS

In a series of studies the authors examined conditions under which consumers are willing to trade off the cost of decreased product usability for the expected social utility imparted by feature-rich options. The researchers first tested if consumers perceive those who purchase feature-rich vs. feature-poor products differently. They found that consumers who choose feature-rich products were seen by others as more technologically savvy and more open to new experiences.

They also found that consumers primed to think about the impressions others would have of them were more likely to choose feature-rich products than consumers primed to think objectively. Additionally, the preference for feature-rich products emerged when consumers were told that others would evaluate their decision. Finally, consumers’ beliefs about the social benefits of feature-rich products were predictive of their own choices of such products.



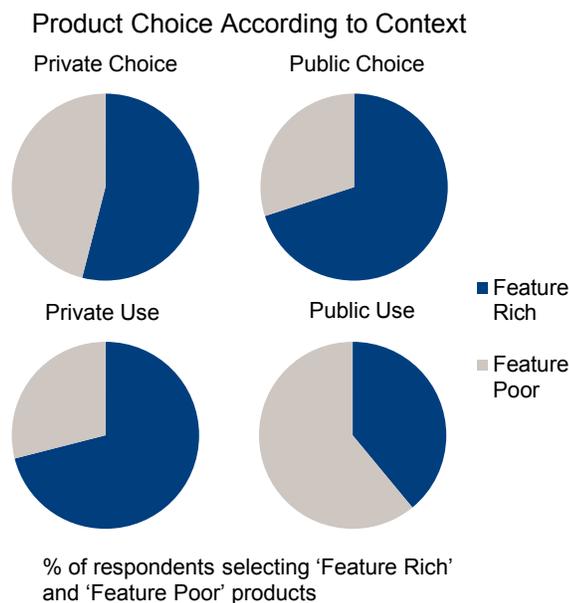
Debora Thompson

Associate Professor of Marketing and Contributing Researcher at the Georgetown Institute for Consumer Research

Thompson's research interests are in the area of judgment and decision making, information processing, and attitude change.

in partnership with
Michael Norton

One circumstance reversed the initial preference for feature-rich products. When consumers anticipated having to actually use a complicated product in front of others, they favored feature-poor products rather than feature-rich ones. In such public use situations, consumers place greater value on product usability, which enhances the attractiveness of feature-poor products. This shift underscores an important distinction between conspicuous consumption of feature-rich products and traditional conceptions of conspicuous consumption. Because consumers perceive a usability cost is associated with additional features, they prefer feature-rich products for public display but may choose feature-poor products for public performance.



IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

The findings suggest that highlighting public consumption can increase or decrease the attractiveness of feature-rich options. Public display situations in which consumers' preferences are made visible to others are expected to increase the preference for feature-rich products. In this context, marketers might emphasize the presence of additional features in the product through distinctive design, packaging, and advertising. In contrast, directing consumers' attention to how their performance interacting with the product may be judged by others (e.g. navigating the TV menu options in the presence of others) can significantly increase the attractiveness of feature-poor options by focusing on the importance of product usability. Moreover, marketers of feature-poor products should facilitate in-store trials and virtual simulations of product use. Direct product experiences enhance the importance of product usability (vs. capability), increasing the attractiveness of simpler products.

Source: Thompson, D. V. and Norton, M.I. (2011). The Social Utility of Feature Creep, *Journal of Marketing Research*, 48, 555-565.

This Brief, based on the work of Debora Thompson et al., was composed by Chris Hydock in collaboration with Debora Thompson.

Key Points

- Counter-intuitively, when it comes to features you can have too much of a good thing; after use, consumers prefer feature poor products relative to feature rich.
- However, before use consumers often still prefer feature rich products due to their perceived social utility.
- When products must be used publically, consumers abandon pursuit of social utility for usability.

The Georgetown Institute for Consumer Research, Sponsored by KPMG, develops innovative, ground-breaking research to illuminate the challenges and opportunities of understanding and marketing to consumers.

For more information, visit <http://consumerresearch.georgetown.edu>