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The Effect of Adding Features on Product Attractiveness: the Role of Product Perceived Congruity

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This paper investigates the effect of adding more features on product evaluation. We argue that product evaluation as the number of features increases depends on the congruity of the features added with the product. We show that adding features leads to increased product attractiveness if these features are congruent with the product, but not if these features are moderately or extremely incongruent. However, the manipulation of two factors, task involvement and temporal construal, has been shown to make product evaluation increase as more moderately (but not extremely) incongruent features are added to the product.

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The Effect of Adding Features on Product Attractiveness: The Role of Product Perceived Congruity

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Manufacturers offer consumers an ever-increasing number of features to differentiate products. Even simple devices often add a relatively broad range of features. Research shows positive (e.g., Carpenter et al. 1994) and negative effects of adding features (e.g., Mick and Fournier 1998). However, all studies assume that buyers make calculations based on perceived benefits and costs associated with additional features. Using the cost-benefit framework, scholars (Thompson et al. 2005; Gill 2008) show that the outcome of the calculation depends on the context of evaluation.

We propose that calculation buyers make, weighing benefits and costs, depends on more than simply the benefits, the costs, and the context; it depends on the cognitive resources applied. We argue that the resources consumers apply to the evaluation of the added features depend on the number of features, the similarity between the features and the brand, and the time frame over which consumers anticipate making their choice. Contrary to many scholars, we specifically examine the case of one versus more additional features, and explore the role of time frame in buyers' evaluation, examining how varying the future time horizon affects buyers' valuation of added features.

When valuing novel features, consumers may rely on their existing knowledge about the brand. Consumers confronting a brand with a small or large number of new features may react depending on their ability to resolve the apparent incongruities between new features and brand. The value they attach to the features may depend both on the number and their perceived brand congruence. When exposed to congruent features, consumers need not expend great cognitive effort to resolve incongruity. As a result, as the number of congruent features increases consumers should perceive an overall benefit from such an increase, increasing valuation. When exposed to moderately incongruent features, consumers face a dilemma, because resolving such incongruities requires effort, but this resolution leads to enhanced evaluation (Mandler 1982). However, this effect should exist for any small to modest number of features. Finally, resolution of highly incongruent features would require making undesired structural changes to the schema: the resources required exceed those available, leading to consumers not positively valuing the newly added features. This should be true for one or more extremely incongruent features.

Next we focus on the case in which new features' number is high. Previous analysis suggests that consumers avoid spending the resources necessary to resolve the incongruity when the number of incongruent features is high. But evidence suggests that consumers apply more resources in some instances. Then, what is the impact of added resources on the valuation of a large number of added features? When the features and the brand are highly congruent, applying additional resources should produce no difference, because features do not need extensive elaboration. The same is predicted when features are highly incongruent, because of the undesired, structural changes to the schema required. When features are moderately incongruent, things change. Encouraging people to think carefully about new stimuli results in resolution of moderate incongruity and greater preference (Meyers-Levy et al. 1994; Maoz and Tybout 2002). The nature of that effect will, however, vary with the resources applied to the task. With greater resources, buyers will more easily be able to reduce the incongruity,

leading to more detailed information processing and more positive evaluation.

Further, are the cases where a larger number of moderately incongruent features is preferred to a smaller number? One possible answer is provided by temporal construal theory, according to which the outcomes of increasing the number of moderately incongruent features may differ depending on the temporal frame of consumers' evaluation. Liberman and Trope (1998) argue that distant future events are more abstract, whereas near future events are more concrete. Hence, when focused on near future, consumers will develop a concrete construal of the product: as the number of incongruent features increases, perceived difficulty to reconcile more features with the current configuration of the product increases, and product evaluation should not increase. However, when considering a number of moderately incongruent features in a distant time frame, consumers will develop a more abstract construal of the product, focusing on higher-level considerations, related to the desirability to have more features. Consequently, product evaluation increases as the number of features increases.

We tested these predictions in three experiments. The first one focused on the interaction between number and congruity of features. Pre-tests identified the brand (Apple), the product (Ipod Nano), and three features for each of three congruity conditions (high, moderate, low). A 2x3 was employed, in which the number of new features (one, three) and their product congruity were manipulated. Subjects were asked to rate the attractiveness of the Ipod Nano compared to \$200 cash. Results showed that product attractiveness increased as the number of congruent features increased, whereas it did not increase as the number of moderately or extremely incongruent features increased.

The second study was a 2x3 in which level of resources (high, low) and congruity were manipulated, whereas the number of features was set at three. We found a significant difference in evaluation between high and low resources only when features were moderately incongruent.

The third study was a 2 x 2 design, in which temporal construal (near, distant future) and number of new moderately incongruent features (one, three) were manipulated. An increase in product evaluation as the number of features increased was observed only in the distant future.

This contribution of this paper consists in suggesting that the perceived costs and benefits associated with adding multiple product features depend on the resources consumers are willing to devote to the evaluation and on the level of abstraction at which costs and benefits are considered. All else equal, greater number of features and greater perceived incongruence between features and brand increase the perceived cost of the features. But those same features are perceived to be less costly or more valuable when consumers devote more resources to considering them or when they do so at a higher level of abstraction.

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