



The Cost of Comprehension

How products earn the right to be complex

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New information has a **cognitive cost.**

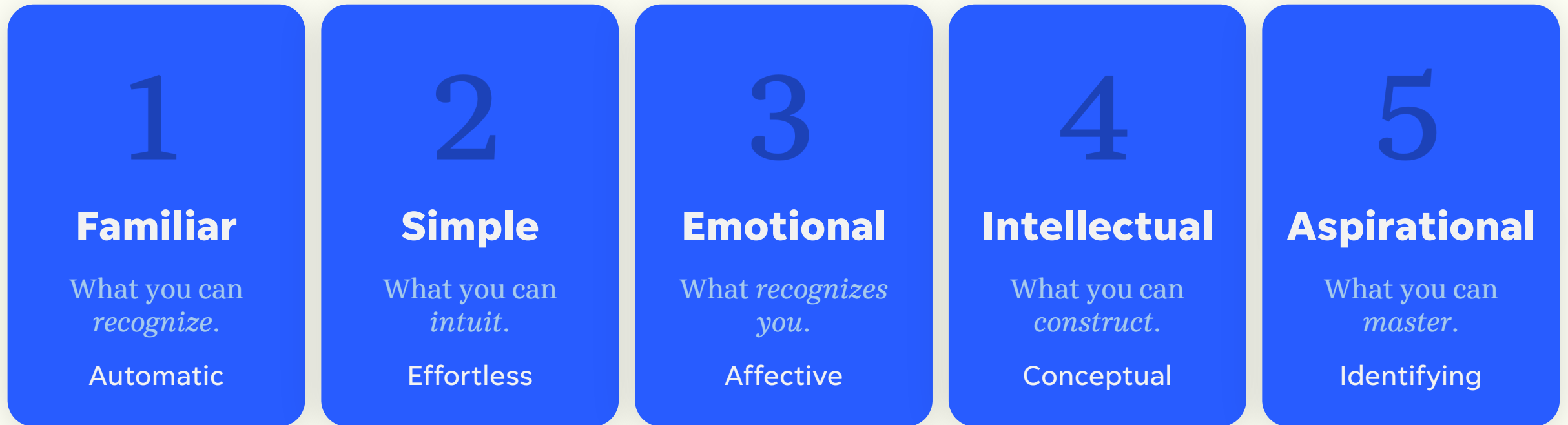
**Willingness determines
whether users will pay
that cost.**

Good design doesn't eliminate this cost. It **earns the right to charge it** by meeting users where they are, delivering value before asking for attention, and never spending more than the relationship has built.

*Willingness is **consent** to absorb complexity.*

The Spectrum of Complexity

New information comes with different cognitive costs, challenges, and shortcuts.



Less cost

More cost

Broader audience

Narrower audience

#1

Familiar

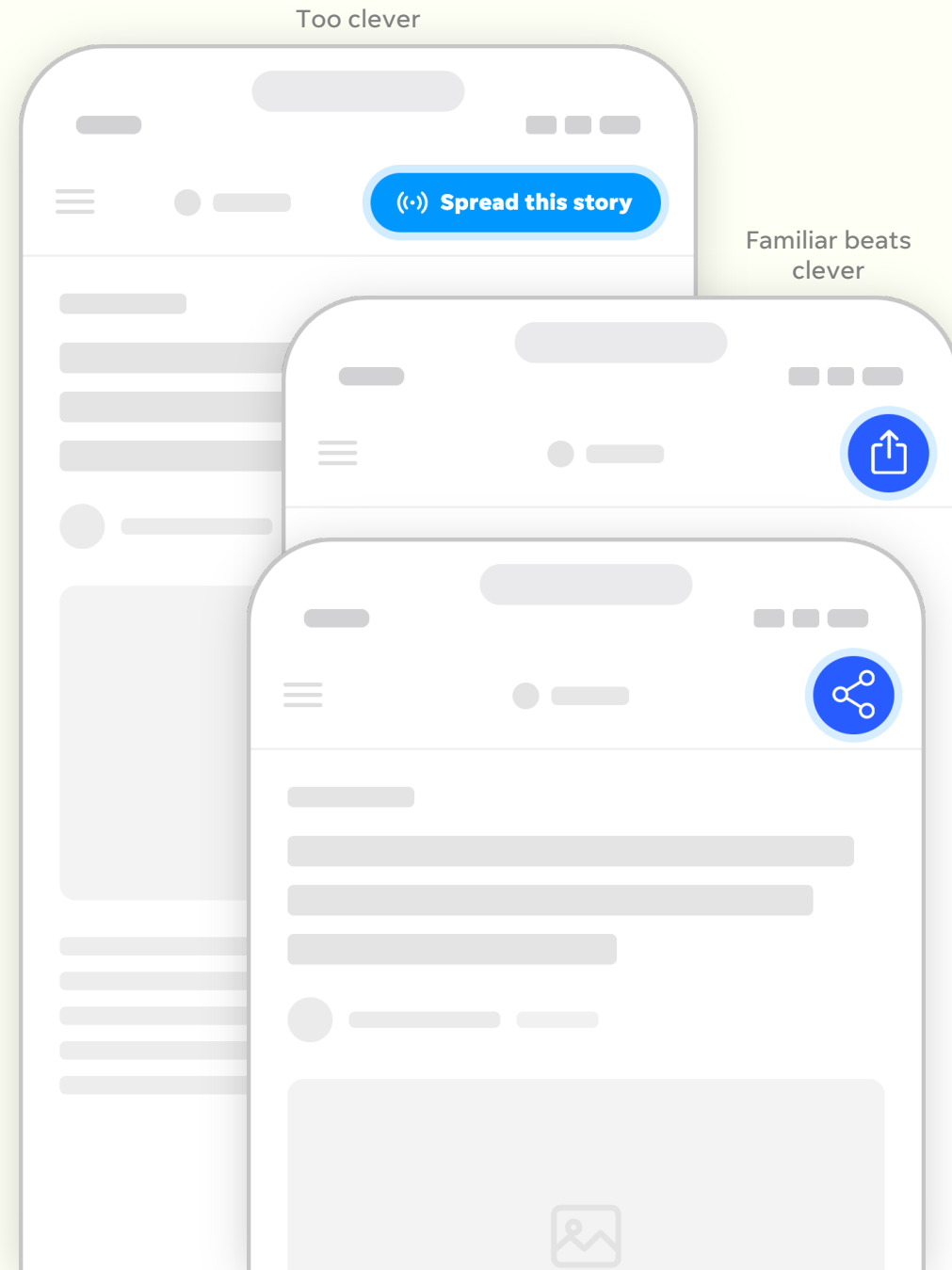
Cost: Almost none

Mechanism: Pattern recognition

Risk: Borrowed trust is not earned

Design move: Use it intentionally,
don't hide behind copying others

*Familiarity can be borrowed or **hard earned**
through repetition over time.*



#1 Familiar

*Distinctiveness at the cost of recognition
is not a win.*

It's a tax.

The Spectrum of Complexity

#2

Simple

Cost: Low, sequenced, but not absent

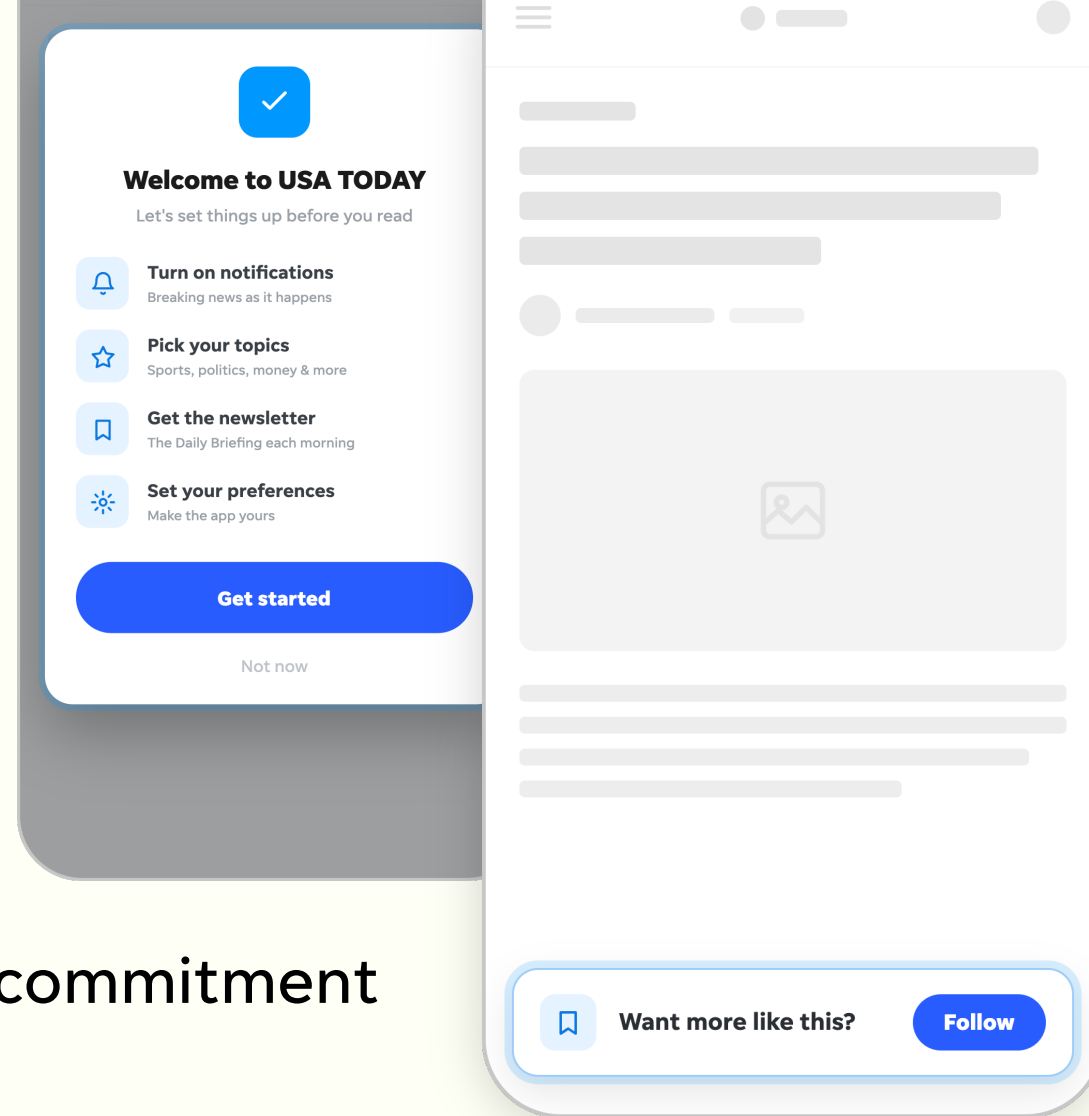
Mechanism: Restraint and contextual awareness

Risk: Oversimplification

Design move: Defer complexity until commitment

*Simplicity is not a lack of complexity. **It's strategic restraint.***

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Immediate and contextually relevant

#2 Simple

Earn the next ask.

Don't **front-load** the relationship.

#3

Emotional

Cost: Moderate

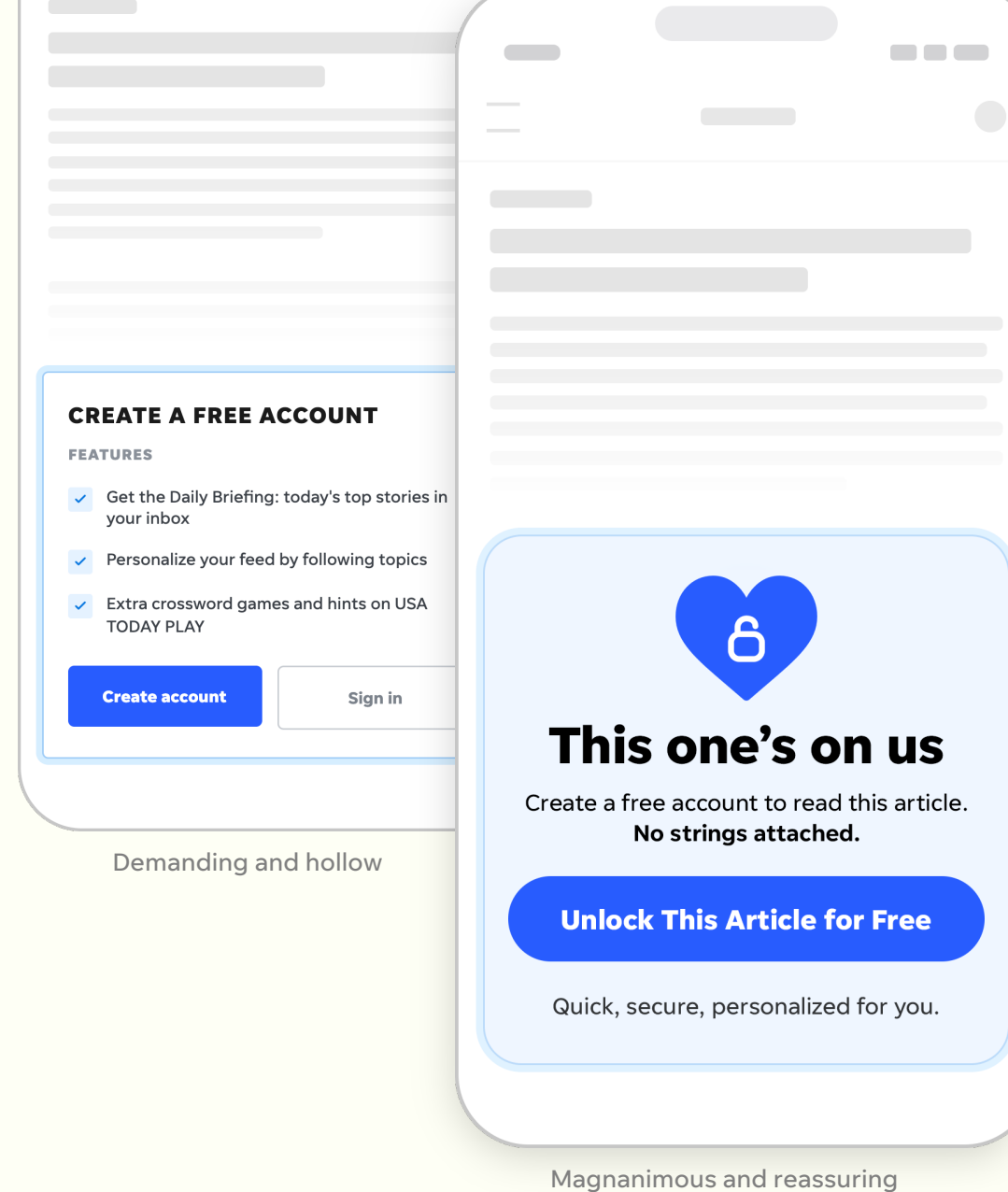
Mechanism: Feeling substitutes for certainty

Risk: Manipulation or overreach

Design move: Use tone, visuals, and social proof to accelerate belief. Then reward belief with value.

*Emotion is a **cognitive bridge to understanding**.*

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#3 Emotional

Users know when they're being sold to.

Meet them **where they are**, not where you want them to be.

#4

The Spectrum of Complexity

Intellectual

Cost: High

Mechanism: Value must be proven through reasoning

Risk: Drop-off

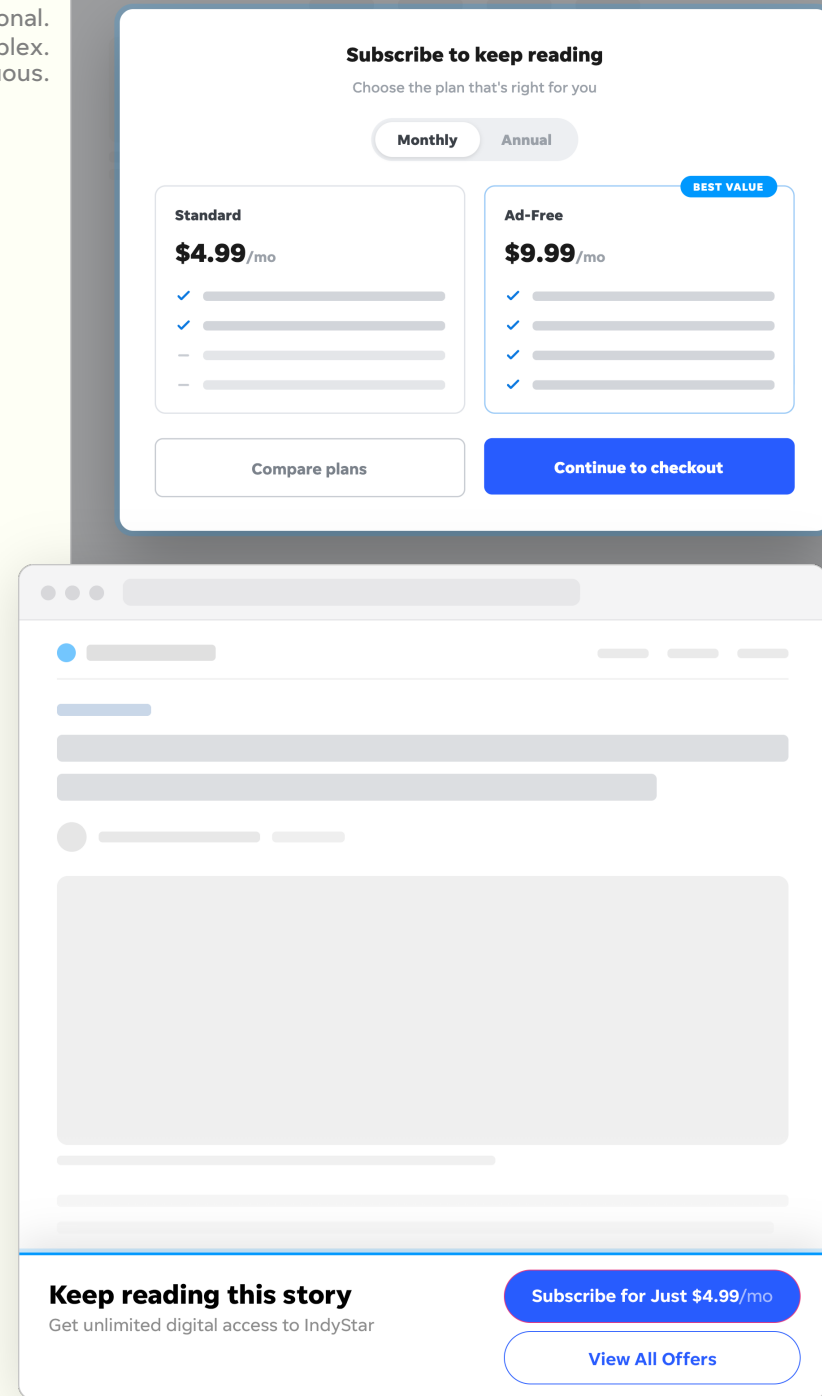
Design move: Make the payoff undeniable. Don't just expose complexity — justify it.

*If the reward is unclear, **willingness collapses**.*

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Confrontational.
Complex.
Presumptuous.

Acknowledges
complexity
while offering to
bypass it.



#4 Intellectual

When complexity is necessary, the job isn't to eliminate it.

It's earning **more consent.**

#5

Aspirational

Cost: Very high

Mechanism: Effort reframes growth as identity

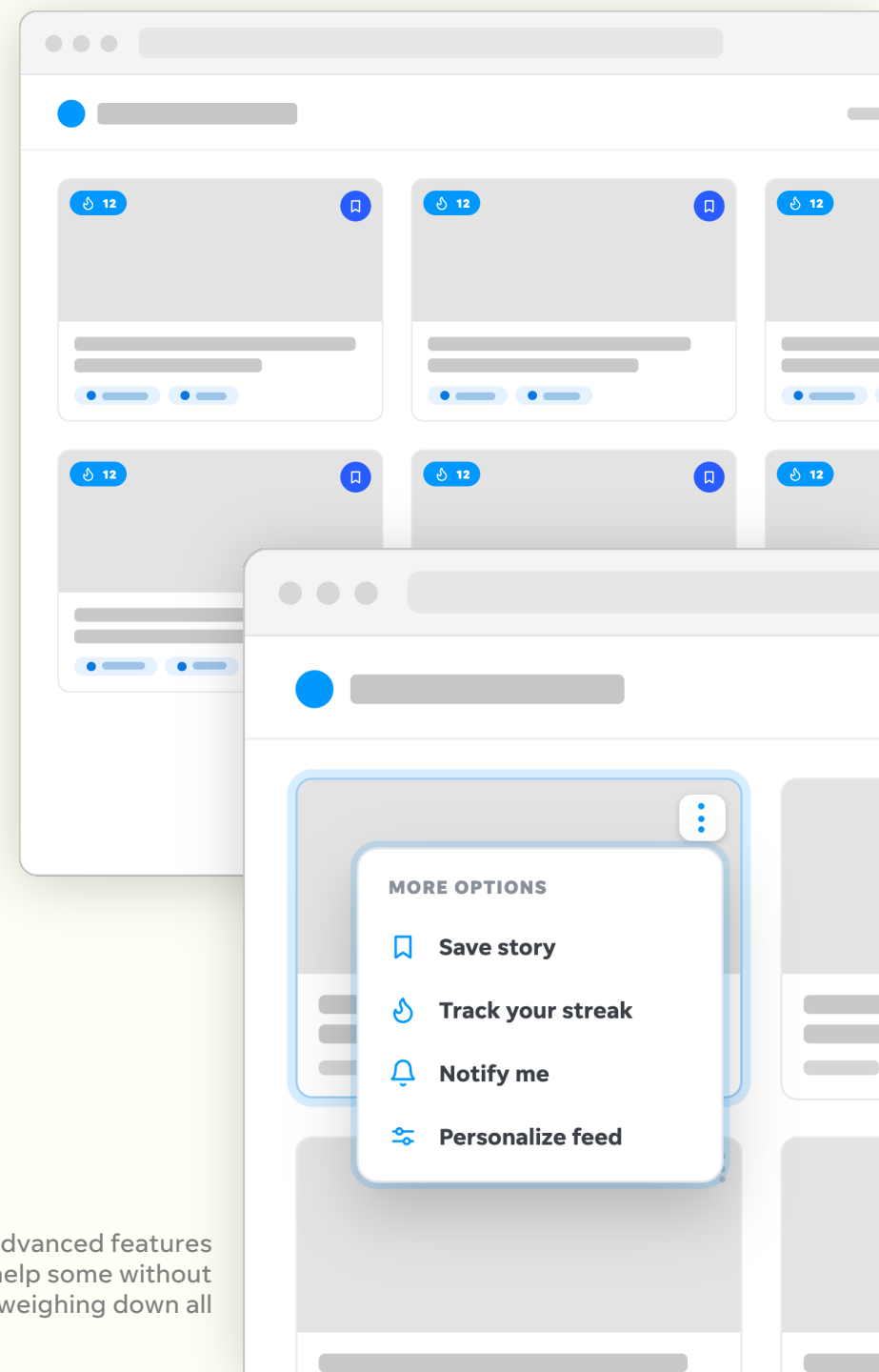
Risk: Overwhelm

Design move: Signal depth, but don't force it. Allow users to embrace complexity as their willingness matures.

*Mastery creates **ownership and advocacy**.*

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Advanced features can help some without weighing down all



#5 Aspirational

Some features earn their audience.

Let the *right* users find them — **and feel found.**

Where meaning is **constructed**

1. Familiar: meaning is *preloaded*
2. Simple: meaning is *deferred*
3. Emotional: meaning is *inferred*
4. Intellectual: meaning is *constructed*
5. Aspirational: meaning is *earned*

Contextual Volatility

Same user. Different day.

Different cognitive budget.

Users don't climb this hierarchy linearly.
They drop down under stress.

- Fatigue collapses users toward the familiar
- Urgency bypasses intellectuality entirely
- Confidence allows temporary ascent

Clear hierarchy: If we can't decide what matters most, users can't either.

This explains why:

- Power users still want defaults
- Experts make “dumb” mistakes under pressure
- Elegant systems fail in real-world chaos

Signal Density

The amount of meaning per unit of cognitive effort.

Good UX should escalate perceived value faster than cognitive cost.

Users instantly decide if they're willing to pay the cost for new information or **disengage entirely**.

Ruthless prioritization: By earning some trust today, we win a chance to ask for more tomorrow. Forcing too much complexity squanders that chance.

Willingness isn't free. It's earned, moment by moment.

People don't owe us their attention.
We have to prove we deserve it.

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Thank You.