

## Research Dialogue

## Mindsets shape consumer behavior

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## Abstract

Mindsets—or implicit theories—are the beliefs people have about the nature of human characteristics. This article applies mindset theory and research to the field of consumer behavior. Specifically, we suggest how a fixed or growth mindset may shape consumer product preferences, acceptance of brand extensions, trust recovery following product failures, as well as the effectiveness of advertising and marketing campaigns. We argue that people with a fixed mindset are more likely to seek products and brands in line with their goals to burnish their self-image and demonstrate their positive qualities, while people with a growth mindset seek products that help them pursue their goals to improve and learn new things. Thus, products and brands may serve important self-enhancement functions—encouraging consumers to reinforce or expand core aspects of their identity. We also suggest that brands and companies can project a fixed or growth mindset. In turn, these organizational mindsets should shape consumers' expectations of, and relationships with, products, brands, and companies.

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## Introduction

Advertisers, managers, and industries think long and hard about how best to present their products to consumers. What can their product do for people? Can it help people improve and grow? Will it make them feel better about themselves? Boost their self-confidence? Social psychological research suggests that different product appeals may speak to different people based on their implicit theories.

Implicit theories—or mindsets—are the beliefs that people have about the nature of human characteristics (Dweck, 1999; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). These mindsets are important because they shape people's motivation (Dweck, 1999; Plaks, Grant, & Dweck, 2005). Some people subscribe to a *fixed mindset*, believing that human traits—such as intelligence, personality,

and morality—are relatively fixed. In this view, people are who they are and there is not much that can be done about it (Dweck, 1999). Some people are smart; others are not. Some people are good at sports; others are not athletic. Some people have social skills; others do not. Some people are winners; others are not. As we will see, fixed mindsets make people concerned about whether they have the good traits or not.

Other people subscribe to a *growth mindset*, believing that people can substantially change (Dweck, 1999; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Instead of believing that people have fixed, core essences, people with a growth mindset believe that learning and experience can foster development and significantly change who a person is and how they behave. While a fixed mindset suggests that people are either intelligent or not, a growth mindset suggests that those who strive to improve their intelligence can do so. Not athletic? Not to worry—one can practice and persist and become a sportier person over time. As we will see, a growth mindset may free people from concerns about their image in the moment and motivate them to seek opportunities to enhance their skills and abilities over time.

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We propose that these mindsets are important for understanding consumer behavior. For example, mindsets should influence the products consumers are drawn to and the messages they find most persuasive. Mindsets should also influence how groups, brands, and organizations are perceived and the degree to which people accept product changes, adaptations, and extensions. Finally, mindsets should play a central role in intergroup perception and experience. Companies considering ventures into new markets or launching efforts to attract diverse audiences would be well advised to consider how their mindsets may influence their ability to attract new consumers and shape people's perceptions of their products.

In this paper, we briefly review research on mindsets, describing their role in human motivation. We present hypotheses about how mindsets guide consumer behavior and how knowledge of mindsets can inform corporate behavior, and we highlight empirical evidence that speaks to those hypotheses.

## Two views of human nature: fixed and growth mindsets

Is human nature fixed or are people relatively malleable and capable of change? Believing that one's qualities are carved in stone (an entity theory or fixed mindset) activates the motivation to prove oneself over and over. If intelligence or competence is a fixed quality, it becomes important to prove—to oneself and others—that one has that quality in spades. Research shows that people with a fixed mindset will go to great lengths to feel or appear successful, even if it sometimes involves cheating (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007). If they are not successful, people with the fixed mindset may engage in a variety of defensive behaviors to hide this (Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999; Nussbaum & Dweck, 2008). Above all, they want to have “the right stuff” (Dweck, 1999, 2006).

In contrast, some people believe that where they start is just the beginning of their development. While some may start with an advantage or disadvantage, a growth mindset suggests that all people can change and develop by applying effort and gaining experience. Thus, people who subscribe to a growth mindset are more willing to make mistakes or appear foolish in the short run in the service of maximizing their development over time (Blackwell et al., 2007; cf. Mueller & Dweck, 1998). In this mindset, even failures can be seen as part of a learning process by providing important information for how to succeed the next time.

## Mindsets inspire different goals

Another way to say this is that mindsets are associated with divergent goals (Dweck, 1996; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Erdley, Cain, Loomis, Dumas-Hines, & Dweck, 1997). The fixed mindset orients people toward *performance goals* in which they strive to gain favorable judgments of their worth and competence (Blackwell et al., 2007; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Erdley et al., 1997). As we have noted, if abilities are inherent and fixed, those abilities need to be demonstrated—thus, performing and exhibiting those abilities is a primary goal of those who subscribe to a fixed mindset (Blackwell et al., 2007). In this mindset, failure

suggests that one is not smart or talented (Blackwell et al., 2007; Hong et al., 1999) and can threaten people's fundamental motivation to see themselves as good, competent people (Dweck, 1999).

Consumers, product/brand managers, and even companies can subscribe to a mindset about their own qualities or the qualities of others. For example, product managers with fixed mindsets are likely to adopt performance goals, feeling that their personal and professional reputation is dependent on the immediate success of their product launch, without requiring the many tests and iterations that are often necessary to cultivate a successful product. They would be likely to seek positive feedback about their performance as well as praise for their creativity and intelligence as their feelings of worth rest on demonstrating these traits.

Conversely, growth mindsets orient people toward *learning goals* in which they strive to increase their competence and mastery (Blackwell et al., 2007; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Erdley et al., 1997). Thus, growth mindset managers might approach a product launch differently than fixed mindset managers. The growth mindset might inspire them to pursue learning goals, seeking not only encouragement but also critical feedback from within and outside the company that they then incorporate into the product launch. If the launch fails, they would be more likely to take the time to reflect on the reasons for the failure and work to make certain those same issues do not impact future launches. That is, they would use the failure as an opportunity to learn how they can make the next launch more successful.

In the domain of consumer behavior, while fixed and growth mindset consumers may be equally interested in a cookbook, for example, different goals are likely to inspire their interest. The consumer with a growth mindset may be interested in learning and mastering a new cuisine—discovering how exotic spices and ingredients change the flavor of dishes. The consumer with a fixed mindset may purchase the cookbook in anticipation of an upcoming dinner party in which they hope to wow their guests with their cooking prowess and to bask in their guests' compliments and appreciation. Performance and learning goals have important implications for consumer behavior, some of which we outline below. Specifically mindsets, and the goals they inspire, should be useful in predicting the products and messages people find most compelling.

## Mindsets shape views of effort

Mindsets also shape the way people think about effort (Blackwell et al., 2007; Grant & Dweck, 2003; Hong et al., 1999; see also Middleton & Midgley, 1997). Those with a fixed mindset believe that if you have high ability, you should not need high effort. Moreover, if you need high effort, that means you do not have high ability. To these individuals, effortless success is the most rewarding (Murphy, Dweck, Chapman, & Kray, 2013). In contrast, people with a growth mindset view effort as the fuel that makes the engine run. Even more, effort is highly valued by people with growth mindsets because it indicates that they are stretching themselves and developing.

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