

Research Dialogue

# Consumer mindsets and self-enhancement: Signaling versus learning

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## Abstract

The mindset framework and its downstream effects provide exciting new opportunities to explore one of the powerful drivers of consumer and organizational behavior. To advance discussions on the concept and applications of mindsets in consumer research and in the marketplace, we (1) provide conceptual and contextual clarity into the signaling mechanism and the process/outcome focus by identifying relevant and meaningful consumer contexts, (2) consider the unique theoretical contributions implicit theory may make to the field of consumer psychology, and (3) suggest potential solutions for important methodological challenges researchers and practitioners may face when implementing the mindsets framework. Finally, we (4) highlight the managerial and organizational relevance of mindsets.

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Murphy and Dweck (2016-in this issue) present a framework that addresses how different mindsets pertaining to the nature of human characteristics impact consumer and organizational behavior. Consumers who have a fixed mindset and believe that human characteristics are unchangeable will respond differently in consumer behavior contexts as compared to consumers who have a growth mindset and believe that human characteristics are changeable. Entity or fixed mindsets believe that human characteristics are unchangeable, and as a result, those with a fixed mindset tend to have performance goals that emphasize their superior performance with minimum effort on tasks and perhaps in life in general (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995). In contrast, those with a malleable mindset, also called incremental theorists, are on the other end of the continuum in believing that human characteristics are changeable. Incre-

mental theorists often have learning goals and believe in expending effort to achieve their goals. The view that consumers have two different mindsets is eminently relevant in both consumer behavior and organization contexts.

In the current article, we offer theoretical, methodological, and managerial extensions of the current understanding of consumer mindsets in marketing. We first clarify and enrich the conceptual differences in self-enhancement strategies (i.e., signaling vs. learning) employed by entity and incremental theorists by identifying diverse consumption and marketplace contexts where these different self-enhancement strategies become highly relevant and meaningful. We also suggest that the outcome versus process focus of entity and incremental theorists may impact their response to customer–marketer interactions, thus advancing the current understanding of how consumer researchers and marketers approach consumer complaints and redressal. From theoretical and methodological perspectives, we also identify the distinguishing features of implicit theory that establish its relevance as an important variable in consumer research and make several suggestions on improving the

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identification and elicitation of consumer mindsets. Finally, we discuss implications of consumer mindsets for organizations and countries.

### The role of signaling and learning in self-enhancement

Both fixed and growth mindset individuals aim to self-enhance, but as past literature has shown (e.g. Dweck & Leggett, 1988), they do so differently. While fixed mindset individuals tend to signal their qualities to the self and others, those with a growth mindset seek to self-enhance through self-improvement opportunities. We discuss below the implications of this difference in focus on signaling versus learning in consumer contexts related to goal progress, social media, brand personality, and pro-social behaviors.

#### *Self-enhancement through different goal progress markers*

While individuals can have overarching goals, such as being healthy and happy, most daily activities deal with everyday tasks that serve as immediate goals, such as reading a book or shopping for groceries. In these everyday tasks, consumers often encounter goods and services that provide cues to mark their progress along their consumption journey. For instance, while reading an e-book, a consumer can learn about their progress through progress bars at the bottom of the screen that inform the reader of the percentage of the book being completed or left. Much research has shown that goal progress markers tend to help goal achievement and motivate goal pursuit (Cheema & Bagchi, 2011). However, recent research by Mathur, Block, and Yucel-Aybat (2014) shows that because people with a different mindset have different goal pursuit strategies, they respond differently to goal progress cues. While people with a fixed mindset infer affirmation of their abilities and competence from progress cues that inform them of the extent to which they have completed the task, those with a growth mindset remain largely unaffected. Based on favorable inferences, people with a fixed mindset tend to be more satisfied with the task, but surprisingly, they end up performing poorly on the task. People with a growth mindset tend to favor cues that inform them of progress on their learning goals, such as progress feedback that relates to a skill developed during a task. These findings suggest that marketers should consider consumer mindsets during product design and service delivery planning. Products that are related to goals set in contexts that may induce a growth mindset, such as weight loss programs, may benefit from providing progress cues related to learning and skills garnered. Thus, a weight loss program may benefit consumers by providing feedback on the skills learned—for example, how to create a satisfying salad, in addition to the more common feedback provided on the number of pounds lost versus the number of pounds left. In contrast, marketers who are able to successfully measure consumer mindset may increase consumer satisfaction by tailoring progress cues to the consumer's implicit theory. Service providers may also gain from having a better understanding of consumer mindset. Waiting in line and waiting to be served are typical everyday

service encounters that can lower consumer satisfaction. Providing progress cues that inform customers of the reduction in wait time or their position in line may enhance satisfaction for those with a fixed mindset (Mathur et al., 2014), thus resulting in an overall increase in customer satisfaction.

#### *Self-enhancement through social media: differing roles as a message transmitter vs. a follower*

Social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter serve as an interesting platform in which different goals and behaviors fostered by a fixed or growth mindset can manifest. Given their orientation toward demonstrating performance and signaling their positive qualities and competence, social media is an attractive medium where people with a fixed mindset create and/or transmit messages. One of the many ways to transmit messages on social media involves word-of-mouth activities for liked or disliked brands or products. Engaging in word-of-mouth activities can indeed bolster a person's self-concept (Dichter, 1966) and signal expertise and maintain reputation (Wojnicki & Godes, 2011). When a positive self-view is threatened, a desire to boost self-esteem increases people's willingness to engage in word-of-mouth on social media but not their willingness to engage in traditional, offline word-of-mouth (Eisingerich, Chun, Liu, Jia, & Bell, 2015). The instant and broad reach of social media augments its attractiveness as a mechanism to self-enhance through signaling. Thus, those with a fixed mindset are likely to self-enhance by relying on (and further creating) the cues signaling their knowledge, competence, and the breadth of interpersonal connections (e.g., the number of messages they post, the number of friends/connections on Facebook or LinkedIn) and use social media as a tool to validate their self-worth (i.e., as a self-affirmation medium).

Likewise, people with a growth mindset would use social media to self-enhance but with different underlying motivations and behaviors. Their objective in engaging in social media should be to learn about recent trends, new development of knowledge, or certain skill sets for further improvement and growth. They are thus likely to be active *followers and observers* of the information exchanged on social space, and care less about being a transmitter of messages to affirm one's self-worth. Examining the systematic difference in the motivations and goals of different consumer mindsets can provide insights into consumer behavior in social media, and also add to the growing literature on how individuals with growth versus fixed mindsets use external cues to meet their learning and performance goals.

#### *Preference for brands with personalities consistent with mindsets*

Murphy and Dweck (2016-in this issue) note that those with a fixed mindset rely on external cues to signal favorable qualities about themselves. As Park and John (2010, 2012) find, entity theorists may prefer using the brands that possess desirable personalities in order to signal that they themselves possess these desirable qualities. We anticipate that the effect of brand personality may also influence consumer preference in other

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