How Mindset Influences Consumer Judgments: Investigating the Role of Mental Imagery and Affective Responses

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This research examines the impact of mindset on consumer decisions. While previous research suggests that an abstract mindset may shift consumers’ focus to the desirable aspects whereas a concrete mindset may highlight feasibility concerns in their product decisions, this research focuses on consumer decisions where feasibility is not a concern. It is proposed that a concrete (vs. abstract) mindset may lead to greater intention to try products involving immediate, desirable experiences (e.g., nice fruit dessert) when detailed product information is provided (e.g., product picture). Findings from one experiment provide preliminary support to the hypotheses. Further experiments are planned to pin down the underlying mechanism involving the construction of consumption mental imagery and affective responses.

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A second study further examined negative labels using a different operationalization of elaboration, relevance of the appeal. When a message is self-relevant, an individual scrutinizes the message more thoroughly in order to judge the information more confidently (Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991). When there is little relevance of the appeal, those who view the other-benefit (vs. self-benefit) appeal should be more willing to give, as these individuals are more likely to depend upon the “altruistic giving” norm discussed above to guide their behavior.

This study was conducted using a 2 (self-relevance: high vs. low) X 2 (type of appeal: self vs. other) between-subjects design. The procedure was the same as that of study 1, with two exceptions: (a) all participants were negatively labeled, and (b) participants viewed the appeal from the perspective of either someone who has never known anyone with hearing loss (low self-relevance) or someone who had a family member recently diagnosed with hearing loss (high self-relevance).

A 2 X 2 ANOVA on self-relevance and type of appeal revealed a significant interaction (F(1, 66) = 3.110, p = .05), as well as a main effect of the type of appeal (M_{Other-BenefitAppeal} = 5.36 vs. M_{Self-BenefitAppeal} = 4.70; p = .08). Decomposing the two-way interaction revealed that in the low-relevance condition, the individuals who viewed the other- (vs. self-) benefit appeal reported significantly higher giving intentions (M = 5.63, M = 4.25; p < .01). Additionally, respondents who viewed the self-benefit appeal reported significantly higher giving intentions in the high (vs. low) relevance condition (M = 5.19, M = 4.25; p = .05).

This research contributes to the labeling literature by comparing the relative effectiveness of positive and negative labels, as well as demonstrating the impact of content of the appeal on the effectiveness of labeling. Future research will further examine positive labels and their relationship with content of the appeal to better understand the findings of our first study. We will also consider cultural variables in order to examine the effectiveness of labels when used worldwide.

REFERENCES

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Consumers may process incoming product information using different cognitive procedures. In some cases they may focus on abstract issues relating to values or end benefits (e.g., the effects brought by a product). In other cases they may focus on concrete aspects of the process (e.g., the process of consuming a product). The former can be referred to as an abstract mindset and the latter, a concrete mindset (Freitas, Gollwitzer, and Trope 2004). The activation of different mindsets may be influenced by individual difference such as age and culture (Hong and Lee 2010), psychological distance such as whether things happen in near or distant future (see Trope and Liberman 2010 for a review of construal level theory), and situational factors that induce a certain mindset temporarily (Escalas and Luce 2004; Torelli and Kaikati 2009).

Once a mindset is activated, it would have profound influence on people’s responses. Previous research shows that an abstract mindset may shift people’s focus to the desirable aspects whereas a concrete mindset may highlight feasibility concerns when people consider whether to carry out an activity (Eyal et al. 2004; Liberman and Trope 1998). While this finding bears important implications for many consumer decisions, there are also plenty of daily purchase or consumption decisions which involve few feasibility concerns. Under such situations, will mindsets still influence consumer decisions? Why or why not? This research is aimed to address these questions.

This research proposes that people in a concrete (vs. abstract) mindset are more interested in hedonic products when detailed product description is provided. This is because when consumers encounter such products, their focus on concrete processes and contextual information would facilitate the construction of vivid mental simulation of consuming the product, especially if there is sufficient product information that provides enough materials for mental simulation. When the consumption imagery becomes more accessible in memory, consumers have more favorable responses to the product (Petrova and Cialdini 2005). Moreover, such mental imagery may elicit positive affective responses (MacInnis and Price 1987), which also enhance consumer judgments. Therefore, we expect that a concrete (vs. abstract) mindset may lead
to greater intention to try products involving immediate, desirable experiences (e.g., nice fruit dessert) when detailed product information is provided (e.g., product picture). However, when product information is very limited, consumers may lack sufficient information for generating consumption imagery, regardless of their mindset. This would become a boundary condition where a concrete mindset may not enhance consumer judgments. Experiment 1 tested these hypotheses.

Experiment 1. This experiment adopted a 2 (mindset: concrete vs. abstract) x 2 (product information: picture vs. no-picture) between-subjects design. 110 participants were induced to be in a certain mindset by completing a task under the pretense of psychology research on actions and goals. In the abstract mindset condition, they were instructed to write about why they carry out several actions such as improving leadership skills, which shifted their focus to end benefits. Participants in the concrete mindset condition were instructed to write about how they carry out those actions, which shifted their focus to concrete processes (adapted from Freitas, Gollwitzer, and Trope 2004). Thereafter, they proceeded to an ostensibly unrelated product survey in which they assessed several products. The target product was a fruit dessert. In the picture condition, participants saw a picture of a fruit dessert and indicated their interest in having it, whereas in the no-picture condition, participants were simply asked to indicate how interested they were in having a fruit dessert. The main dependent variable was measured on a seven-point scale ranging from “not interested at all (1)” to “very interested (7)”. An ANOVA analysis reveals a main effect of product information (picture vs. no-picture; \( F(1,106) = 18.92, p < .001 \)) and an interaction between product information and mindset \((F(1,106) = 6.27, p = .01)\). Consistent with our prediction, when participants saw the product picture, they were more interested in trying the product if they were in a concrete mindset (\( M = 5.97 \)) than if they were in an abstract mindset (\( M = 5.08; F(1,106) = 4.31, p < .05 \)). However, when they did not see the product picture, the difference between concrete mindset condition (\( M = 3.89 \)) and abstract mindset condition (\( M = 4.52; F(1,106) = 2.14, \) NS) diminished. Another set of planned comparisons show that when participants were in a concrete mindset, they were more interested in trying the product if they saw the product picture (\( M = 5.97 \)) than if they did not (\( M = 3.89; F(1,106) = 24.37, p < .001 \)); the difference diminished when participants were in an abstract mindset (\( 5.08 \text{ vs. } 4.52, F(1,106) = 1.64, \) NS). The findings provide preliminary support to our hypotheses.

Experiments are planned to further investigate the mechanism underlying the mindset effect. The next experiment would examine different types of hedonic products to improve generalizability, collect measures of imagery generation and affective responses to validate the mechanism, and study the possible moderating role of individual difference in imagery ability. A third experiment would examine the potential moderating role of the affective nature of consumption, which would help further pin down the mechanism. Note the fruit dessert studied in experiment 1 is desirable in terms of both consumption experience and end benefits. However, some products may bring desirable end benefits but entail negative consumption experience (e.g., using insect killer). If the proposed mindset effect is simply due to the accessibility of consumption imagery, a concrete (vs. abstract) mindset should be more likely to trigger mental imagery and lead to more favorable responses regardless of the affective nature of usage experience. However, if the affective responses elicited by the consumption imagery matter, a concrete (vs. abstract) mindset may result in greater interest/less interest in products involving pleasant/unpleasant usage experience.

To summarize, this research will complement previous research to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the mindset effect. The research will also investigate new mechanisms through which mindset may influence consumer judgments, namely, the generation of consumption mental imagery and the affective responses toward the mental imagery.

REFERENCES