

Improving or Enhancing the Self? Beliefs About Body Shape Malleability Influence Consumer Product Evaluation and Preference

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Executive Summary

Dissatisfaction with body shape is a persistent concern for many consumers, prompting them to purchase products that address this issue. These products typically fall into two types: self-enhancement or self-improvement. Self-enhancement products signal an improved body shape without physical change (e.g., clothing that creates the illusion of muscle mass), whereas self-improvement products can alter body shape toward a desired state (e.g., protein-rich or low-fat foods).

Prior research shows that religious framing, video conferencing, and clothing size feedback affect interest in these product types. Yet another determinant lies in beliefs about body shape malleability. The literature identifies two lay theories about these beliefs: an entity theory, the belief that body shape is stable, and an incremental theory, the belief that body shape is malleable. Entity theorists aim to enhance body shape appeal without objective change, whereas incremental theorists strive for improvement. While marketing research has applied these theories to advertising, brand transgressions, information processing, and self-perception, little work examines their role in product evaluation and preference. Existing studies rely on correlational data and provide no empirical evidence of causality between lay theories about body shape malleability and consumer decisions.

The present paper addresses these gaps through two experiments that manipulate beliefs about body shape malleability, test causal effects on self-enhancement apparel product evaluation and self-improvement food preference, and examine gender as a moderator. An exploratory study shows no link between lay theories about body shape malleability and body shape satisfaction. Experimental findings indicate that women primed with an entity theory evaluate self-enhancement products more favorably than those primed with an incremental theory. Conversely, men and women primed with an incremental theory show a stronger preference for self-improvement products than those primed with an entity theory. Gender does not moderate these effects, suggesting generalizability across both sexes, despite possible differences in product relevance.

Manufacturers, retailers, and advertisers benefit from the paper in two ways. First, practitioners can apply the results by targeting self-enhancement products to entity theorists and self-improvement products to incremental theorists. Effective implementation requires assessing consumers' lay theories about body shape malleability, for instance, by embedding a simple survey instrument that measures consumers' agreement with items representing only an entity theory in newsletter or brand community sign-ups. Second, firms can prime the product-consistent lay theory among consumers who do not naturally hold it.