

Assessing Entrepreneurial Growth Mindset among Small Businesses in Onitsha, Anambra State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Onitsha, one of West Africa's largest commercial hubs and home to the expansive Onitsha Main Market, provides a distinctive setting for examining entrepreneurial mindset among small business operators, given its dense concentration of trading, wholesale, and small-scale manufacturing enterprises operating within a highly competitive and informally structured commercial environment. This paper assesses the prevalence and correlates of entrepreneurial growth mindset, the belief that entrepreneurial ability, business acumen, and venture outcomes can be developed through effort, learning, and adaptive strategy rather than being fixed traits, among small business owners in Onitsha. Drawing on Carol Dweck's mindset theory and the entrepreneurial cognition literature, and a qualitative synthesis of small business development research and studies of Nigerian informal commercial ecosystems, the paper examines how growth mindset orientation correlates with business practices including adaptive response to market disruption, willingness to adopt new technology and business practices, and openness to formal business training and mentorship. The paper finds that while Onitsha's small business community exhibits substantial entrepreneurial resilience and informally developed adaptive capacity, formally articulated growth mindset orientation, as distinct from fixed-mindset beliefs attributing business success primarily to inherent trading acumen or divine favour, appears to correlate with greater receptiveness to structured business training, technology adoption, and diversification strategies. The paper considers the sociocultural and religious dimensions shaping entrepreneurial belief systems in the Onitsha trading context and concludes with recommendations for growth-mindset-oriented small business development interventions tailored to this specific commercial environment.

Keywords: Growth mindset, entrepreneurship, small business, Onitsha, entrepreneurial cognition

1. Introduction

Onitsha occupies a distinctive position within Nigeria's commercial geography as home to one of West Africa's largest and most historically significant open-air markets, the Onitsha Main Market, alongside a dense surrounding ecosystem of small-scale trading, wholesale distribution, and light manufacturing enterprises. This commercial density and competitive intensity provides a particularly instructive setting for examining entrepreneurial mindset, given that survival and growth within Onitsha's commercial environment plausibly demand continuous adaptation to shifting market conditions, competitive pressures, and periodic economic disruption.

This paper assesses entrepreneurial growth mindset, following Carol Dweck's influential distinction between growth and fixed mindset orientations, among small business owners operating in Onitsha. The central questions guiding this inquiry are: to what extent do Onitsha's small business operators exhibit growth-mindset-consistent beliefs regarding the developability of entrepreneurial ability and business success, and how does this mindset orientation correlate with observable business practices including technology adoption, adaptive strategy, and receptiveness to formal training? The paper further considers the sociocultural and religious belief systems that may shape how entrepreneurial mindset is articulated and expressed within this specific commercial context.

The paper proceeds as follows: section two reviews relevant literature on growth mindset theory and entrepreneurial cognition; section three presents the theoretical framework; section four outlines the methodology; section five discusses findings regarding mindset prevalence and its correlation with business practices; and section six concludes with recommendations for mindset-oriented small business development interventions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Growth Mindset Theory

Carol Dweck's mindset theory distinguishes between a fixed mindset, the belief that ability and talent are largely innate and unchangeable, and a growth mindset, the belief that ability can be developed through effort, strategy, and learning from setbacks. Originally developed within

educational psychology, mindset theory has been extensively extended to organizational and entrepreneurial contexts, where growth mindset orientation has been associated with greater resilience in the face of business setbacks, more sustained effort in skill development, and greater openness to feedback and adaptive strategy revision.

2.2 Entrepreneurial Cognition and Mindset

The entrepreneurial cognition literature examines the mental models, belief systems, and decision-making heuristics that shape entrepreneurial behaviour, with a growing subset of this literature specifically examining growth mindset as a determinant of entrepreneurial persistence, opportunity recognition, and adaptive response to market change. Studies in this tradition generally find that entrepreneurs exhibiting stronger growth mindset orientation demonstrate greater willingness to pivot business strategy in response to market feedback and greater engagement with formal business training and mentorship opportunities, relative to entrepreneurs holding more fixed views of their own business capability.

2.3 Informal Commercial Ecosystems in Nigeria

Literature on Nigerian informal commercial ecosystems, including studies specifically addressing Onitsha and comparable major Nigerian trading hubs such as Aba and Kano's Sabon Gari market, documents a commercial culture characterized by dense apprenticeship-based knowledge transfer, notably the Igbo trade apprenticeship system commonly referred to as "Igba Boi", alongside strong informal social and religious belief systems that shape traders' understanding of business success and failure. This literature provides important context for understanding how growth mindset orientation, as conceptualized in mainstream psychological literature, may be expressed and articulated in culturally specific ways within Onitsha's commercial environment, including through frameworks that blend developmental effort-based beliefs with religious or spiritual explanations of business outcomes.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper draws primarily on Carol Dweck's mindset theory, which provides the core conceptual distinction between fixed and growth mindset orientations used to assess Onitsha

small business owners' beliefs regarding the developability of their own entrepreneurial capability. This framework is particularly useful for distinguishing business owners who attribute success primarily to inherent trading acumen, luck, or fixed personal characteristics from those who attribute success to cultivable skill, adaptive learning, and sustained effort.

This is complemented by entrepreneurial cognition theory, which examines the specific cognitive scripts and heuristics entrepreneurs employ in recognizing opportunities, assessing risk, and making resource allocation decisions. Reading mindset theory alongside entrepreneurial cognition theory allows this paper to move beyond a general assessment of growth versus fixed mindset orientation to examine the specific behavioural correlates, including technology adoption, training receptiveness, and adaptive strategy, through which mindset orientation is theorized to influence concrete small business outcomes.

4. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design based on a desk review and thematic synthesis of growth mindset and entrepreneurial cognition literature, alongside documented studies of small business development, informal apprenticeship systems, and commercial culture specific to Onitsha and comparable major Nigerian trading hubs. Thematic analysis is applied to organize the review around three areas: the prevalence and articulation of growth-mindset-consistent beliefs among Onitsha small business owners, the correlation between mindset orientation and specific business practices, and the sociocultural and religious factors shaping how entrepreneurial mindset is expressed within this commercial context. This approach is appropriate given the exploratory nature of the inquiry and the current scarcity of large-scale primary survey data specifically measuring growth mindset orientation among Onitsha's small business population using standardized psychometric instruments.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Prevalence and Articulation of Growth Mindset

The evidence reviewed suggests that Onitsha's small business community exhibits substantial informally developed adaptive capacity and entrepreneurial resilience, consistent with growth-

mindset orientation, particularly among business owners who have progressed through the Igba Boi apprenticeship system, which is itself structured around the premise that trading competence is a learnable skill developed through sustained mentored practice rather than an innate or fixed characteristic. At the same time, the literature also documents fixed-mindset-consistent beliefs among segments of the trading community, particularly explanations of business success or failure attributing outcomes primarily to spiritual favour, luck, or immutable personal destiny, a pattern that appears to coexist with, rather than uniformly replace, growth-oriented beliefs about skill development.

5.2 Correlation with Technology Adoption

Findings indicate that small business owners exhibiting stronger growth-mindset-consistent beliefs, specifically those attributing business capability to developable skill rather than fixed trait, demonstrate greater willingness to adopt new technologies, including digital payment systems, social media-based marketing, and inventory management tools, consistent with the broader entrepreneurial cognition literature's finding that growth mindset correlates with openness to novel practices perceived as initially unfamiliar or effortful to master.

5.3 Correlation with Training and Mentorship Receptiveness

A related finding concerns receptiveness to formal business training and mentorship opportunities beyond the traditional apprenticeship structure, with business owners exhibiting stronger growth mindset orientation appearing more willing to engage with externally provided business development programming, including those offered by government small business support agencies and non-governmental development organizations, consistent with the theoretical expectation that growth-mindset individuals view skill acquisition opportunities more favourably than those holding fixed views of their own capability.

5.4 Sociocultural and Religious Dimensions

Finally, the findings underscore the importance of understanding growth mindset expression within Onitsha's specific sociocultural and religious context, where developmental, effort-based beliefs about business skill frequently coexist with religious frameworks attributing ultimate business outcomes to divine favour or spiritual intervention. Rather than treating these belief

systems as mutually exclusive with growth mindset orientation, the evidence suggests many Onitsha traders integrate both frameworks, viewing sustained effort and skill development as necessary complements to, rather than substitutes for, spiritual favour, a nuance that mindset-oriented business development interventions should account for rather than dismiss.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has assessed entrepreneurial growth mindset among small business owners in Onitsha, finding that growth-mindset-consistent beliefs, substantially reinforced by the traditional Igba Boi apprenticeship system, correlate with greater technology adoption and receptiveness to formal business training, while coexisting in culturally specific ways with religious and spiritual explanatory frameworks for business outcomes. These findings suggest that growth mindset in this context is not a simple, culturally uniform construct but one that is locally inflected and integrated with existing belief systems.

The paper recommends: first, small business development interventions targeting Onitsha traders should explicitly build on the developmental, skill-based logic already embedded within the Igba Boi apprenticeship tradition, rather than introducing growth mindset concepts as entirely foreign frameworks; second, technology adoption programmes should be designed with attention to the demonstrated correlation between mindset orientation and adoption willingness, potentially incorporating mindset-strengthening components alongside purely technical training; third, business training and mentorship programming should be designed in a manner that respects and integrates, rather than conflicts with, the religious and spiritual belief frameworks documented among segments of the trading community; and fourth, further empirical research, including direct survey-based administration of validated mindset assessment instruments among a representative sample of Onitsha small business owners, is recommended to quantitatively substantiate the patterns identified in this qualitative synthesis.

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