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“Merry Christmas!” & “Happy Holidays!” Consumer Reactions to Holiday Advertising Messaging

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ABSTRACT

Marketers regularly utilize religious holiday messages, but holiday messages vary with some retailers communicating religious messages such as “Merry Christmas” while others communicate secular messages such as “Season's Greetings”. What strategy should retailers use during the critical holiday season? This research develops propositions using belief congruence theory to suggest how a religious message should result in more favorable evaluations.

Religion and consumer religiosity influence consumer behavior. Consumer religiosity refers to the degree to which religious beliefs and values are held and practiced (Essoo & Dibb, 2004; Vitell, 2009). Individuals who hold religious beliefs and values with more (less) conviction are said to have stronger (weaker) religiosity. Religiosity influences the valence of consumer evaluations in reaction to religious messages in advertising marketing (Alhouti et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2010). Some conclude that there is little benefit for retailers in communicating religious information. Yet, does this conclusion hold during the holiday season when consumers perhaps bring a different frame of mind to the retailer transaction? We explore this question regarding holiday advertising and retail patronage through the framework of belief congruency theory.

Retailer image is known to have a significant influence on retail patronage (Pan & Zinkhan, 2006; Sirgy & Samli, 1985), with several models emphasizing the necessity of congruency between the consumer and the retailer (Crissy et al, 1974; Samli & Lincoln, 1989; Sirgy & Samli, 1985). Perceived congruency between a retailer’s image and a consumer’s self-image results in more favorable store attitudes and increased purchase intentions (Sirgy et al., 2000). While belief congruence theory relates to a variety of consumer beliefs, we focus on religion as core a belief that drives consumption decisions (Mathras et al., 2016; Minton & Kahle, 2014). Considered within the context of holiday messaging, belief congruency theory suggests that consumers assess the congruence of the retailer’s image with their own religious beliefs. For higher religiosity consumers, consideration of a retailer presenting strong religious cues in holiday advertising should facilitate congruence between the retailer and the consumer, resulting in more favorable attitude and purchase intentions. We further propose that this effect will occur via different

processes hinging on the nature of the consumer's religiosity, specifically whether a consumer is intrinsically or extrinsically religious (cf. Allport & Ross, 1967).

Intrinsic religiousness concerns the ideals of religious culture and represents a form of identity (Ysseldyk et al., 2010) and religion as an end (Kirkpatrick & Hood Jr, 1990). We propose that for consumers high in intrinsic religiosity, self-image enhancement will mediate the relationship between congruency and retailer evaluations. Conversely, extrinsic religiousness stems from utilitarian motivations (Kirkpatrick & Hood Jr, 1990). Those high in extrinsic religiosity tend to use religion to meet their needs rather than spiritual purposes and are more likely to engage in religious activities for the purpose of social gain (Vitell, 2009). Here, we propose that for consumers high in extrinsic religiosity, perceptions of social approval will mediate the relationship between congruency and retailer evaluations.

An experimental method is suggested for exploring these ideas. This research should advance understanding of *why* certain groups react positively to religious holiday advertising and extend prior research suggesting religiosity as a basis for market segmentation.

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