

# **CHRISTMAS IN SEPTEMBER: CHRISTIAN CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS OF RETAILER EARLY PRESENTATIONS OF HOLIDAY SEASONALITY**

*Valerie A. Taylor, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga*  
*Stephanie T. Gillison, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research examines Christian consumers' responses to retailers' early presentations of Christmas merchandise displays. Using balance theory and the extant retailing literature as the theoretical foundation, this scenario-based experimental research shows that early presentation of Christmas displays results in a decrease in the perceived appropriateness of the seasonal display which, in turn, hurts retailer evaluations. Additionally, attitude towards early presentation of Christmas merchandise and both intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity moderate the relationship between the timing of the display and the perceived appropriateness of the display. These findings are discussed in relation to theory and implications for retailers are identified.

Key words: religiosity, retailing, store display, seasonality

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Retailers frequently engage in the early presentation of seasonal merchandise, such as Halloween merchandise available in September or Valentine's Day merchandise just after New Year's Day. However, retailers' early presentation of Christmas merchandise is by far the most significant early presentation of seasonality. Christmas merchandise can be found on display in early September at many retailers including At Home, Costco, Tuesday Morning, Cracker Barrel, Hobby Lobby, Big Lots, Dollar General, Dollar Tree, Belk's (United States), Selfridges and John Lewis (United Kingdom), David Jones and Myer (Australia). Yet, less than 20% of consumers report Christmas shopping in October or earlier (Cleveland et al., 2003), with most indicating that they do the bulk of their Christmas holiday shopping in November (Statista, 2022). With shoppers not thinking about Christmas shopping in early September, we consider how retailers' early presentation of Christmas merchandise and associated displays impacts Christian consumers' store evaluations, which to our knowledge has not been examined in the scholarly literature. We examine the impact of this potential mismatch given that the retailing literature concludes that even small changes in store environment can impact store evaluations (Babin et al., 2004; Elmashhara & Soares, 2022; Garaus, 2017).

Early presentation of Christmas merchandise is understandable from the retailer perspective given that the Christmas season is their make-or-break time of year (Cleveland et al., 2003; Laroche et al., 2000). According to the National Retail Federation, approximately 20 percent of annual sales and a significant proportion of annual profits correspond to annual Christmas retail sales (National Retail Federation, 2017). 2021 U.S. Christmas retail sales were \$886.7 billion, up 14.1% from the prior year (Shearman, 2022). Research exploring consumer reactions to retailers' early presentations of Christmas merchandise is relevant to the study of consumer behavior and markets, with religion identified as a key cultural force and social institution (Mathras et al., 2016). Christmas is integrally connected to the Christian religion; however, it is celebrated widely by practicing and non-practicing Christians alike. In fact, many consumers, regardless of strength of Christian identification, perceive Christmas to be more sacred than regularly day-to-day life (Belk et al., 1989).

While the US marketplace is becoming more diverse, two-thirds of Americans identify as Christian (Pew Research Center, 2022). Consequently, we examine the impact of retailers' early presentations of Christmas holiday merchandise on Christian consumers' retailer evaluations. We use a scenario-based experimental design comprised of three retailer settings as well as consumer religiosity. Consumer religiosity is investigated as a moderator of perceived appropriateness of retailers' early presentation of Christmas merchandise.

The current research contributes to the marketing literature by first identifying a new antecedent to perceived

retailing environmental appropriateness, namely, retailers' early presentations of holiday seasonality. This research also contributes to the growing research on religion and consumer marketing by addressing how consumer religiosity impacts Christian consumer perceptions of early presentations of Christmas merchandise. Next, we provide a brief review of the literature on retail store environments and advance hypotheses regarding the appropriateness of retailers' early presentations of Christmas holiday seasonality. We then investigate religion and marketing and the impact of consumer religiosity on Christian consumer judgments regarding retailers' early presentations of Christmas holiday seasonality.

## ***THEORETICAL BACKGROUND***

### **Retail environment effects on consumer retailer evaluations**

The retailing literature has explored the impact of store environments on retailer and shopping evaluations, concluding that retailers should consider the configuration of all instore elements as even small changes can impact store evaluations (Babin et al., 2004; Elmashhara & Soares, 2022; Garaus, 2017). Heider's (1946) balance theory is useful in understanding the effect of harmonious or consistent retail environments. According to balance theory, humans are motivated to maintain consistency or congruence. An imbalance may occur when early presentation of Christmas merchandise is inconsistent with consumer beliefs about when Christmas shopping should begin. This incongruence may, in turn, lower consumer evaluations of the retailer.

Prior research finds that harmonious (i.e., consistent) store environments created by lighting, music, colors, shelving, and visual merchandising increase shopping pleasure and satisfaction (Garaus, 2017) and that harmonious store environments make it easier for consumers to understand the store. Store environments perceived to "hang together" form a meaningful entity that is easy for consumers to understand and, as a result, are perceived as more pleasing (Garaus, 2017). Conversely, non-harmonious store environments resulting from high levels of instore elements characterized by variety, novelty, complexity, or conflict, may confuse shoppers and may be perceived as inappropriate by shoppers (Garaus et al., 2015). Consumer confusion resulting from non-harmonious or inappropriate store design underscores the importance of all elements of the instore environment.

Perceived retail environmental appropriateness has been shown to alter consumer emotions, perceived quality, satisfaction, value judgments, and positive word of mouth where even small changes in music, lighting, color scheme, odor, and other characteristics can impact consumers' interpretation of the store (Babin et al., 2004; Elmashhara & Soares, 2022). Further, Koo & Kim (2013) find that merchandising cues act as an important environmental factor significantly impacting retailer evaluations. Within the context of advertising, MacInnis & Park (1991) additionally find that consumer perceptions of appropriateness can be affected by small changes in visuals, music, and other cues. Consumers perceive the appropriateness of various store elements to hinge on the degree that the store element confirms or deviates from the consumer's expectation (Babin et al., 2004). When store elements are perceived to be consistent with expectations, they are likely to be judged as appropriate; when store elements are perceived to be inconsistent with expectations, they are likely to be judged as inappropriate.

### **Effects of early presentations of Christmas merchandise on consumer retailer evaluations**

Extending these ideas to perceptions of Christmas merchandise displays suggests that a greater amount of time between a holiday-oriented display and the actual holiday (e.g., displaying Christmas merchandise in September) will be viewed as less coherent and harmonious as compared with a shorter amount of time between a holiday-oriented display and the intended holiday (e.g., displaying Christmas merchandise in November). Store elements that violate consumer expectations are likely to be deemed inappropriate which, in turn, negatively impact perceptions of retailer quality, willingness to spend time in the store, willingness to return to the store, and willingness to purchase (Babin et al., 2004). Consequently, the following hypotheses are offered suggesting that the perceived appropriateness of Christmas merchandise displays will mediate the relationship between the timing of the display and perceptions of the retailer (H1) and intent to patronize the retailer (H2).

**H1:** For Christian consumers, as the time between the holiday-themed display and the holiday increases (i.e., early presentation of Christmas merchandise), perceived appropriateness of the merchandise display and positive attitude toward the retailer will decrease.

**H2:** For Christian consumers, as the time between the holiday-themed display and the holiday increases (i.e., early presentation of Christmas merchandise), perceived appropriateness of the merchandise display and intentions to patronize the retailer will decrease.

We further predict that consumer attitudes toward early presentation of Christmas merchandise will moderate the relationship between timing of the Christmas merchandise display and perceived appropriateness of the display

predicted in H1 and H2. Those who engage in early Christmas shopping and/or those who simply enjoy celebrating Christmas might be expected to hold a positive attitude towards the early presentation of Christmas merchandise. This positive attitude is predicted to attenuate the inverse relationship between the timing of a holiday-themed merchandise display and its perceived appropriateness. Conversely, those who are less positive about celebrating and shopping early for Christmas will demonstrate a stronger inverse relationship between merchandise display timing and its perceived appropriateness. Therefore:

**H3:** For Christian consumers, the inverse relationship between Christmas merchandise display timing and its perceived appropriateness will be moderated by the consumer's attitude toward celebrating Christmas and early Christmas shopping. The inverse relationship will be weaker for those who hold a positive attitude as compared with those who are less positive about celebrating and shopping early for Christmas.

We next provide a brief review of the research on religion and marketing, and then introduce the "religious orientation of individuals" framework which focuses on extrinsic and intrinsic religiosity (Allport & Ross, 1967). Finally, we examine the impact of consumer religiosity on these relationships.

### **Religiosity, marketing, and the religious orientation of individuals**

Religion has become an important variable of study in the field of consumer research (Casidy & Arli, 2018; Mathras et al. 2016; Minton & Kahle, 2016; Choi et al., 2013) and has been shown to influence a wide variety of consumer behaviors. While there are numerous definitions and conceptualizations of religion, broadly, religion can be considered as "a belief in a deity or deities to be worshiped, usually expressed in a ritual or any specific system, prayer, or worship, often involving a code of ethics," (Arli et al., 2022) or as "systems of meaning embodied in a pattern of life, community of faith, and a world view that articulates a view of the sacred and of what ultimately matters," (Schmidt et al., 1999, p. 10). These definitions highlight the importance of religious beliefs, rituals, values, and community (Mathras et al., 2016) and are consistent with definitions of religion that highlight a system of beliefs and faith as well as a belief in some unseen or higher power (Oman, 2013).

Consumer religiosity, differing from religion, refers to what psychologists describe as the strength/degree of one's religious convictions (Oman, 2013). Individuals who hold religious beliefs and values with more conviction are said to have stronger religiosity, while those holding religious beliefs and values with less conviction are said to have lower religiosity (Taylor & Minton, 2021). Consumer religiosity has been shown to impact consumer attitudes, values, and behavior and is considered a viable basis for market segmentation (Singh et al., 2021; Mottimer et al., 2020; Liu & Minton, 2018; Heiens et al., 2016). Additionally, religiosity has been shown to impact shopping behavior and status seeking (Essoo & Dibb, 2004), new product adoption (Mansorit et al., 2015), store evaluations (McDaniel & Burnett, 1990), information processing (Mathras et al., 2016; Minton, 2015; Choi et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2010), consumers' ethical judgments (Arli & Chowdhury, 2021), consumer materialism (Stillman, 2012), impulsive and compulsive purchasing (Singh et al., 2021), and consumer switching behaviors (Choi et al., 2013).

The religious orientation of individuals, comprised of extrinsic and intrinsic religiosity, is a mainstay in the psychology of religion research (Kirkpatrick & Hood Jr, 1990; Park, 2021). Religiosity focuses on religious motivation as opposed to outward religious behaviors. Allport and Ross's (1967) framework of religious orientation is frequently used today across a variety of domains, including consumer research (Vitell, 2015). It is by far the most widely accepted conceptualization of religiosity and its measurement (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989; Minton & Kahle, 2016; ) and remains perennially relevant (Park, 2021).

In Allport and Ross's (1967) framework, extrinsic religiosity stems from motivations related to desired ends, such as status, self-justification, security, and social support (Park, 2021). An extrinsically religious person uses their faith as a means to obtain other goals such as "meeting the right people, gaining social standing and acceptance in the community" (Hoge, 1972, p. 375). According to Allport and Ross (1967), "the extrinsically motivated person *uses* his religion" (p. 434). Those high in extrinsic religiosity have been described as seeking social approval and living their religious lives to connect with others rather than forming an inner religious identity (Pace, 2014).

Alternatively, intrinsic religiosity measures religiosity as a primary life motive where the core values of religion are internalized (Park, 2021). Intrinsic religiosity is thought to be a measure of religious commitment, where religiosity is considered as an end to itself, distinct from church membership and theological orientation (Kirkpatrick & Hood Jr, 1990). Intrinsic religiousness concerns the ideals and mandates of religious culture and represents a form of identity (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). Intrinsically religious people view their religious beliefs and practice of religion as a personal commitment to religious principles around which they organize their lives (Weaver & Agle, 2002) and as an end in itself. As famously noted by Allport and Ross (1967), "the intrinsically motivated [person] *lives* his religion" (p. 434).

Consumer religiosity has been shown to have a positive impact on retailer evaluations (Taylor & Minton, 2021) as well as product evaluations (Minton, 2015). Moreover, research finds that more religious consumers respond more

positively toward marketing with religious cues, and even advertising in general. Higher levels of religiosity are associated with greater levels of trust and lower levels of skepticism toward advertisers, leading to more positive product evaluations (Minton, 2015; Taylor et al., 2010). In fact, Minton (2015) finds that religious consumers likely have greater trust in advertisers because they have greater trust in their god or divine being as well as greater trust devoted to their religious social network. In addition to being more trusting, some evidence suggests that religious people are perceived as more trustworthy, likable, and moral (Gervais et al., 2011; Hall et al., 2015; Isaac et al., 1995). These positive associations may occur for religiously oriented places or things as well.

**The moderating effect of extrinsic and intrinsic religiosity on consumer retailer evaluations**

Extending these ideas to the timing of Christmas merchandise displays, we predict that religiosity will moderate the negative relationship between the timing of Christmas merchandise displays and their perceived appropriateness. Specifically, we expect that Christian consumers with strong religiosity will be less likely to perceive early displays of Christmas merchandise as inappropriate as compared with Christian consumers with weak religiosity.

However, the proposed effect may differ by type of religiosity. The extrinsically motivated Christian consumer theoretically *uses* religion as a means to gaining social approval, social standing, and acceptance in the community (Allport & Ross, 1967). Early Christmas merchandise displays could be perceived as harmonious and appropriate when the Christmas season is viewed as an opportunity for leveraging gifts as social exchange and communication agents (Belk, 1979; Sherry, 1983) and for establishing and maintaining social roles (Otnes et al., 1993). We predict:

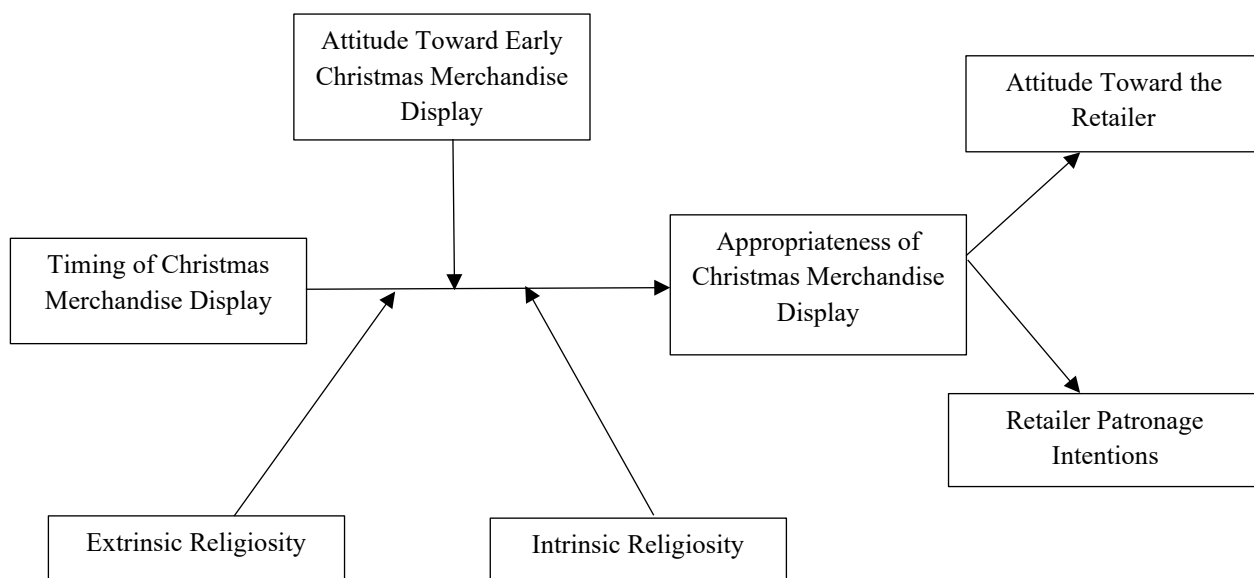
**H4:** For Christian consumers, the negative relationship between the timing of Christmas merchandise displays and their perceived appropriateness will be moderated by extrinsic religiosity such that as extrinsic religiosity increases, the negative relationship will be weaker.

Intrinsically motivated religiosity is also predicted to reduce perceived disharmony of early Christmas merchandise displays, but for different reasons. The intrinsically motivated Christian consumer *lives* their religion, placing it at the center of their lives as an integral part of their beliefs, convictions, and identity. Given that consumer identity has been shown to act as a strong driver of consumer choice (Büyükdag & Kitapci, 2021; Ostovan & Nasr, 2022), these Christian consumers are likely to perceive retailers’ early Christmas merchandise as highly appropriate, which in turn, should favorably affect consumer attitudes and intent to patronize the retailer. As such, we offer the following hypothesis:

**H5:** For Christian consumers, the negative relationship between the timing of Christmas merchandise displays and their perceived appropriateness will be moderated by intrinsic religiosity such that as intrinsic religiosity increases, the negative relationship will be weaker.

A model of the proposed relationships can be found in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Proposed Model of Timing of Christmas Merchandise Display**



## METHODOLOGY

A scenario-based experiment was used to test the hypotheses. Data were collected using Amazon mechanical turk (m-turk). Amazon m-turk produces quality feedback when compared to student samples and other online panels (Kees et al., 2017). Respondents were required to have completed 100 m-turk assignments, have a job approval rate of 95%, and live in the United States. Given the focus on Christmas, respondents in this study were individuals who identify as Christians as assessed by a question in the survey. Only respondents who identified as Christians were included in the study sample. A question was included to verify that respondents were paying attention, with those failing the attention check automatically removed from the study.

The study procedures are as follows. First, respondents were told the following: “This research is about retailers and retailer merchandising choices. While there are no direct benefits for you, your participation in this research will help retailers serve you better. You will be asked about a certain type of store. Other people who complete this survey will be asked about other store types such as home improvement stores, electronics stores, and convenience stores, among others.” Next respondents were shown an image of Christmas merchandise and given a short scenario to read. In the scenario, the timing of Christmas merchandise was manipulated at three levels (September, October, and November) to represent time until the Christmas holiday (i.e., varying the time period before the Christmas holiday). Additionally, three different types of retail stores (department store, general merchandise retailer, and home décor/craft store) were used in the scenarios to increase the generalizability of the findings as well as reduce any retail store type effects. Store type was used as a control variable in the analysis. A picture of Christmas merchandise was included with the scenarios to increase realism as well as enhance respondent visualization of the scenario situation. The scenarios can be found in Appendix A. The presentation of the scenarios was randomized. Finally, respondents answered measures for the variables of interest as well as about their own Christmas shopping habits and demographic information.

The timing manipulation was assessed at the end of the survey by asking respondents when they were shopping in the scenario they read (choices: September, October, November). Those who did not provide the correct answer based on the manipulation shown to them were eliminated from the sample. Twenty-five respondents were removed from analysis for failing this manipulation check for a final sample size of 198 respondents. The ease of understanding the scenario was assessed using the item “This scenario was easy to understand” (7-point strongly disagree/strongly agree) with a mean of 6.19. The realism of the scenario was assessed using three items with a mean of 5.90: “This scenario is realistic,” “I can imagine the shopping experience happening to me in real life,” and “It is easy for me to imagine this situation happening to me” (cf. Jones et al., 2014). Finally, the respondents’ effort toward the experimental task (Pham et al., 2004) was assessed using three items with a mean of 6.48.

Fifty-three percent of the sample was female. The average age of the respondents is 37.9 years. The sample ethnicity is as follows: 75.8% white/Caucasian, 10.1% black/African American, 7.1% Latinx/Hispanic, and 8% other. The sample education is: 12.6% some high school or high school graduate, 30.8% some college, 43.4% undergraduate degree, 13.1% post-graduate degree. Finally, the sample income is: 48% \$0-\$50,000, 35.3% \$50,001-\$90,000, 16.1% \$90,001+. A prefer not to answer option was provided for all demographic questions.

In addition to the demographic information above, we also assessed respondents’ Christmas shopping habits. Respondents were asked the month in which they generally start their Christmas shopping with the following results (count/percentage): 1/0.5% January, 3/1.5% March, 1/0.5% May, 1/0.5% June, 6/3.0% September, 17/8.6% October, 112/56.6% November, 57/28.8% December. Additionally, respondents were asked to provide the earliest date that they think it is acceptable for stores to display Christmas merchandise with the following results (count/percentage): 2/1% June, 2/1% August, 11/5.6% September, 40/20.2% October, 127/64.1% November, 16/8.1% December (months not listed were not selected). The data suggests that most respondents feel November is the acceptable month for retailers to start displaying Christmas merchandise. These results then provide support for the use of the months September, October, and November in the scenario to represent timing of early Christmas merchandise.

Appropriateness of Christmas merchandise was assessed using three self-generated items. Attitude toward early Christmas merchandise is assessed using six self-generated items. Extrinsic and intrinsic religiosity were measured using Allport & Ross’ (1967) 11-item extrinsic religiosity subscale and 9-item intrinsic religiosity subscale. Both religiosity scales were assessed using Likert scale endpoints (i.e., strongly disagree to strongly agree). Attitude toward the retailer and retailer patronage intentions were assessed using three items each, adapted from Taylor & Minton (2021). All scale items can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1: Measures**

Scale and Items (All scales 7-point) (Cronbach's alpha, Average Variance Explained, Composite Reliability)	Standardized Estimate
<b>Appropriateness of Christmas merchandise display</b> (Alpha = .91; AVE = .77; CR = .91) The availability of Christmas items at StoreSome is: Inappropriate --- Appropriate Exploitive --- Not exploitive Distasteful --- Tasteful	.91 .78 .94
<b>Attitude toward the retailer</b> (Alpha = .96; AVE = .90; CR = .96) Based on what you know about StoreSome, your feelings toward the retailer are: Bad --- Good Unfavorable --- Favorable Negative --- Positive	.95 .94 .95
<b>Retailer patronage intentions</b> (Alpha = .95; AVE = .87; CR = .95) Based on what you know about StoreSome, please answer the following questions: I would consider shopping at StoreSome (Strongly disagree --- Strongly agree) When I go shopping, the likelihood that I would visit StoreSome is (Very low --- Very high) The probability that I would go to StoreSome is (Very low --- Very high)	.91 .95 .94
<b>Attitude toward early Christmas merchandise display*</b> (Alpha = .92; AVE = .66; CR = .92) I like it when retailers "push" the season by bringing in seasonal merchandise early. It is appropriate for retailers to "push" the season by bringing in seasonal merchandise early. It is wrong for retailers to "push" the season by bringing in seasonal merchandise early. (reverse) In general, I like it when retailers offer seasonal merchandise early. In general, I don't mind when retailers offer seasonal merchandise early. In general, I do not like it when retailers offer seasonal merchandise early. (reverse)	.88 .83 .69 .91 .85 .69
<b>Extrinsic Religiosity*</b> (Alpha = .84; AVE = .44; CR = .84) The primary purpose of prayer is to gain relief and protection. The church is most important as a place to formulate good social relationships. I pray chiefly because I have been taught to pray. Although I am a religious person, I refuse to let religious considerations influence my everyday affairs. A primary reason for my interest in religion is that my church is a congenial social activity. Occasionally I find it necessary to compromise my religious beliefs in order to protect my social and economic well-being. One reason for my being a church member is that such membership helps to establish a person in the community.	.51 .67 .66 .56 .87 .60 .71
<b>Intrinsic Religiosity*</b> (Alpha = .94; AVE = .63; CR = .94) It is important for me to spend periods of time in private religious thought and meditation. If not preventable by unavoidable circumstances, I attend church. I try hard to carry my religion over into all my other dealings in life. The prayers I say when I am alone carry as much meaning and personal emotion as those said by me during services. Quite often I have been keenly aware of the presence of God or the Devine Being. I read literature about my faith (or church). If I were to join a church group I would prefer to join a Bible study group rather than a social group. My religious beliefs are really what lie behind my whole approach to life. Religion is especially important because it answers many questions about the meaning of life.	.85 .65 .85 .69 .80 .80 .61 .92 .92

\* Anchored by Strongly disagree --- Strongly Agree

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted on the six outcome and moderator measures using AMOS 26 (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The 6-factor model exhibits acceptable fit ( $\chi^2 = 683.193$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $df = 391$ ; RMSEA = 0.062; CFI = 0.95; NFI = 0.88). Because the independent and dependent variables of interest were collected with the same instrument on the same sample, common method bias may be of concern. Common method bias was assessed using the Harman one factor test (common method variance is 30.8%) and was close to the average of 25% reported

by Williams et al. (1989), and below the commonly used 50% threshold suggesting that common method variance is not of significant concern. To test the discriminant validity of the measures in this study, Fornell & Larcker's (1981) procedure was used whereby the square roots of the average variance explained (AVE) for each factor was placed on the diagonal of the correlation matrix and compared to the corresponding correlations between the variables across both the row and column. The square root of the AVE is greater than each corresponding variable correlation, thus discriminant validity is demonstrated for all scales in this study. Scale means, standard deviations, and correlations appear in Table 2.

**Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Variables of Interest**

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Appropriateness of Christmas merchandise display	4.70	1.63	<b>0.87</b>					
2. Attitude toward the retailer	5.51	1.36	0.70***	<b>0.95</b>				
3. Retailer patronage intentions	5.44	1.46	0.60***	0.76***	<b>0.90</b>			
4. Attitude toward early Christmas merchandise display	4.06	1.52	0.61***	0.54***	0.53***	<b>0.81</b>		
5. Extrinsic Religiosity	3.60	1.23	0.25***	0.20**	0.12	0.18*	<b>0.66</b>	
6. Intrinsic Religiosity	4.36	1.55	0.07	0.21**	0.12	0.07	0.06	<b>0.79</b>

\* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001  
 Square root of the average variance explained in bold on the diagonal.

**RESULTS**

To test H1 and H2, PROCESS macro model 4 was used (Hayes, 2013). The significance of direct and indirect effects was evaluated with 5,000 bootstrap samples to create bias-corrected confidence intervals. To test H1, the direct and indirect effects of timing of Christmas merchandise displays on attitude toward the retailer through appropriateness of the Christmas merchandise display (H1) was assessed. The model results suggest that appropriateness fully mediates the relationship between timing and attitude toward the retailer such that as the time between the Christmas merchandise and the Christmas holiday increases, perceived appropriateness of the merchandise display decreases ( $\beta = -0.70, p < 0.001$ ) which, in turn, translates into less positive attitude toward the retailer ( $\beta = 0.61, p < 0.001$ ) and H1 is supported. Similarly, to test H2, the direct and indirect effects of timing of Christmas merchandise displays on retailer patronage intentions through appropriateness of the Christmas merchandise displays (H2) was assessed. The model results suggest that appropriateness fully mediates the relationship between timing and patronage such that as the time between the Christmas merchandise and the Christmas holiday increases, perceived appropriateness of the merchandise display decreases ( $\beta = -0.70, p < 0.001$ ) which, in turn, translates into decreased retailer patronage intentions ( $\beta = 0.54, p < 0.001$ ) and H2 is supported. Results can be found in Table 3.

**Table 3: H1-H2 Results**

Relationship	R <sup>2</sup> F	Total Effect	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	LLCI	ULCI
H1: timing → appropriateness → retailer attitude	.5068 66.4468***	-.3125**	.1126	-.4251	-.6092	-.2557
H2: timing → appropriateness → retailer patronage	.6061 37.5470***	-.3949**	-.0187	-.3762	-.5577	-.2167

LLCI = lower-limit confidence level

ULCI = upper-limit confidence level

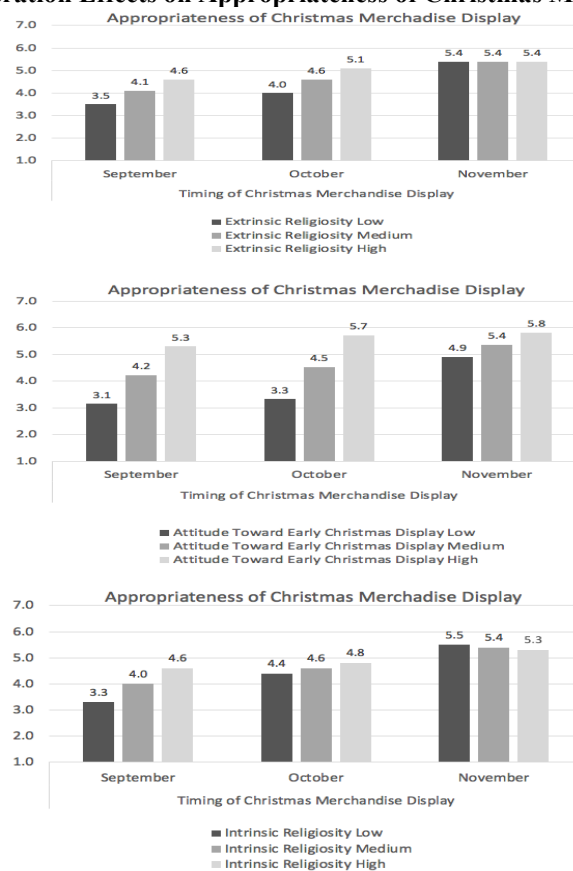
\*\*\*p<0.01, \*\*p<0.001

Note: Control variable store type included in analyses.

To test H3-H5, PROCESS macro model 1 was used (Hayes, 2013). H3 proposes that the negative relationship between timing and appropriateness will be moderated by respondents' attitude toward early Christmas merchandise displays. As shown in Table 4, the interaction term between timing and attitude toward early Christmas merchandise displays is significant ( $\beta = 0.18$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and H3 is supported. A graph of this interaction can be found in Figure 2.

When attitude toward early Christmas merchandise displays is less favorable, the negative relationship between timing and appropriateness is stronger ( $\beta = -0.83$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ); however, when attitude toward early Christmas merchandise displays is more favorable, the negative relationship between timing and appropriateness is weakened and not significant ( $\beta = -0.28$ ;  $p = 0.07$ ). Thus, Christian consumers who have a positive attitude toward early Christmas merchandise displays appear to consider these displays appropriate regardless of the time until Christmas. However, those who have an unfavorable attitude toward early Christmas merchandise displays find it inappropriate in September and October. H4 proposes that the negative relationship between timing and appropriateness will be moderated by respondents' extrinsic religiosity. As shown in Table 4, the interaction term between timing and extrinsic religiosity is significant ( $\beta = 0.22$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and H4 is supported. A graph of this interaction can be found in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Moderation Effects on Appropriateness of Christmas Merchandise Display**



When extrinsic religiosity is weaker, the negative relationship between timing and appropriateness is stronger ( $\beta = -0.94$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ); however, when extrinsic religiosity is stronger, the negative relationship between timing and appropriateness is reduced ( $\beta = -0.40$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). That is, when time until Christmas is longer (i.e., September and October), Christian consumers with stronger extrinsic religiosity perceive Christmas merchandise displays to be more appropriate as compared with those weaker in extrinsic religiosity. However, as the time until Christmas decreases (i.e., November), the appropriateness of the merchandise display is high and similar regardless of extrinsic religiosity.



**Table 4: H3-H5 Results**

	$\beta$	t	Hypothesis Supported?
<b>H3: Moderation by attitude toward early Christmas merchandise display</b>			
R <sup>2</sup> = .4683			
Independent Variables:			
Control Variable: Store type	.1716	1.6347	
Timing of early Christmas display	-.5543	-5.2399***	
Attitude toward early Christmas display	.5912	10.2902***	
<b><i>Timing of display X Attitude toward early display</i></b>	<b>.1833</b>	<b>2.6037**</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>H4: Moderation by extrinsic religiosity</b>			
R <sup>2</sup> = .2009			
Independent Variables:			
Control Variable: Store type	.1479	1.1476	
Timing of early Christmas display	-.6728	-5.2209***	
Extrinsic religiosity	.2945	3.4231***	
<b><i>Timing of display X Extrinsic religiosity</i></b>	<b>.2191</b>	<b>2.1107*</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>H5: Moderation by intrinsic religiosity</b>			
R <sup>2</sup> = .1642			
Independent Variables:			
Control Variable: Store type	.1541	1.1717	
Timing of early Christmas display	-.7183	-5.4125***	
Intrinsic religiosity	.1436	2.0410*	
<b><i>Timing of display X Intrinsic religiosity</i></b>	<b>.2138</b>	<b>2.4415*</b>	<b>Yes</b>

Dependent Variable: Appropriateness of Christmas merchandise display

\* p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

Finally, H5 proposes that the negative relationship between timing and appropriateness will be moderated by respondents' intrinsic religiosity. As shown in Table 4, the interaction term between timing and intrinsic religiosity is significant ( $\beta = 0.21$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and H5 is supported. A graph of this interaction can be found in Figure 2. For Christian consumers, when intrinsic religiosity is weaker, the negative relationship between timing and appropriateness is stronger ( $\beta = -1.05$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ); however, for these consumers, when intrinsic religiosity is stronger, the negative effect of timing on appropriateness is reduced ( $\beta = -0.39$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). When time until Christmas is longer (i.e., September and October), Christian consumers with higher intrinsic religiosity perceive the Christmas merchandise displays to be more appropriate as compared with those lower in intrinsic religiosity. However, as the time until Christmas decreases (i.e., November), the appropriateness of Christmas merchandise displays is high and similar regardless of intrinsic religiosity.

## **DISCUSSION**

This research identifies a new antecedent to perceived retailing environmental appropriateness – retailers' early presentations of holiday seasonality – and considers Christian consumers' responses to retailers' early presentations of Christmas merchandise. While prior research has investigated the impact of store environments on retailer evaluations (Babin et al., 2004; Garaus, 2017), the current research is the only research that we are aware of to examine retailers' early presentation of holiday seasonality and consumers' evaluation of these early presentations. The retailing literature finds that even small changes in store environment can impact store evaluations (Babin et al., 2004; Garaus, 2017; Koo & Kim, 2013), and our results suggest that retailers should consider early presentations of holiday seasonality as an additional factor impacting store environment. Consistent with balance theory, early presentation of Christmas merchandise was predicted to result in a perceived imbalance for consumers who do not expect Christmas merchandise to be available at retailers until later in the season. Our findings are consistent with this account as results show that the early presentation of Christmas merchandise leads to a decrease in the perceived appropriateness of the seasonal merchandise, which in turn decreases attitude toward the retailer as well as intent to patronize the retailer. Further, results show that this relationship is moderated by attitude towards the early presentation of Christmas

merchandise. A less favorable attitude toward early presentations of Christmas merchandise results in a stronger negative relationship between early merchandise timing and perceived appropriateness of early Christmas merchandise displays. Finally, this research finds that the relationship between the timing of Christmas merchandise display and the perceived appropriateness of Christmas merchandise display is moderated both by extrinsic and intrinsic religiosity. For Christian consumers, as religiosity decreases, the negative relationship between the timing of Christmas merchandise displays and their perceived appropriateness is stronger.

### **Theoretical and practical contributions**

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on religion's influence on consumption, finding that early presentations of Christmas seasonality are evaluated less favorably by Christian consumers holding weaker relative to stronger religiosity. We find that both extrinsic and intrinsic religiosity moderate the relationship between the early presentation of Christmas merchandise and the perceived appropriateness of Christmas merchandise displays such that as each base of religiosity decreases, the negative relationship between timing of the Christmas merchandise displays and appropriateness become stronger. Regarding intrinsic religiosity, this finding is particularly noteworthy. Recall that intrinsic religiousness concerns commitment to the ideals and mandates of religious culture (Ysseldyk et al., 2010) and that intrinsically religious persons view their religious beliefs and practices as core values that are deeply internalized (Park, 2021). To the degree that Christian consumers high in intrinsic religiosity believe that early Christmas merchandise displays encourage behaviors that are at odds with their religious beliefs, such as participation in the overly materialistic commercialization of the sacred Christmas religious holiday, these consumers may perceive the early presentation of Christmas holiday seasonality as less appropriate. However, our results are not consistent with this account. Rather, for those who identify as Christian, our results suggest that as intrinsic (and extrinsic) religiosity increases, the negative relationship between early presentations of Christmas merchandise and perceived appropriateness of Christmas merchandise displays is attenuated and that early presentations of Christmas merchandise are perceived as more, not less, appropriate.

While the Christmas season is regarded as the make-or-break time of year for retailers (Cleveland et al., 2003; Laroche et al., 2000), the early presentation of holiday Christmas merchandise is becoming more commonplace with approximately 15% of retailers beginning Christmas promotions in early October (Statista, 2017). The growing emphasis on Christmas sales highlights why our research examining consumer response to retailer's early presentation of Christmas merchandise is important. Based on a sample of consumers who identify as Christian, our findings suggest a negative relationship between early presentation of Christmas merchandise and perceived appropriateness of Christmas merchandise displays, which in turn, impacts retailer evaluations such that the negative relationship between early timing of Christmas merchandise and perceived appropriateness is stronger as extrinsic and intrinsic religiosity decrease. That is, the early presentation of Christmas merchandise is perceived as less appropriate by Christian consumers who hold weaker religiosity and more appropriate by Christian consumers those who hold stronger religiosity. These findings support Koo & Kim's (2013) conclusion that merchandising cues should also be viewed as an important environmental factor and have a significant impact on retailer evaluations.

The primary managerial implication from this research is that retailers need to be aware of the religious convictions of their customer base because religiosity level differentially influences response to early presentations of Christmas seasonality. Specifically, retailers should seek to identify the extent of religious identity of their customers and reconsider early presentations of Christmas seasonality if Christian religiosity is weakly held. While others have suggested religion as a segmentation variable (e.g., Taylor & Minton, 2021; Heiens et al., 2016; Choi et al., 2013), we again make this recommendation. Retailers might target more religious consumers with early appeals to Christmas seasonality and hold these appeals for less religious consumers until a more traditional time of year.

Additionally, in markets known to be Christian and highly religious, retailers might increase early presentations of Christmas merchandise, while also decrease such presentation in markets known to be less religious. Such a strategy suggests that retailers make merchandising decisions relative to the early presentation of Christmas displays at the local level. Both brick and mortar and online retailers might also consider the geodemographic segmentation of their customer base to identify geographic areas where Christian religiosity is stronger as early presentations of Christmas merchandise is likely more welcome in these areas (e.g., Stebbins, 2018). Retailers engaging in early presentation of Christmas seasonality might also offer religious cues in the retail environment to make religiosity more salient, such that the early Christmas merchandise displays are not as unexpected or perceived as incongruous.

### **Limitations and directions for future research**

This research has several limitations. First, this research is limited to using one sample source (mTurk) and data collected in one country (the US) and is limited to a sample identifying as Christian. Future research should address

these limitations, particularly by examining consumers interacting with Christmas displays in a field study as well as investigating early Christmas merchandise displays in other countries. Future research might also extend this exploration of early presentations of seasonality to other consumer shopping events, such as Halloween, Valentine's Day, New Year's Eve, Easter, and Mother's Day, for example. Prior research has shown that consumer behavior differs between sacred and secular events, with sacred holidays garnering more attention and meaning, as well as encompassing more rituals with deep meaning (Belk et al., 1989). As such, early presentations of seasonality related to secular holidays, such as Halloween, may not enjoy the support of those with stronger religiosity; however, research is needed to examine this question. Finally, brand positioning might be examined as a boundary condition for these findings. That is, brands perceived to have a religious meaning or positioning, such as the retailer Hobby Lobby, for example, might be perceived as being a more appropriate setting for an early presentation of Christmas holiday seasonality. In other words, the focal timing and religiosity interactions might be more prominent for nonreligious brands than religious brands.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we first show that retailers' early presentation of Christmas merchandise leads to a decrease in the perceived appropriateness of Christmas merchandise displays, which in turn decreases attitude toward the retailer as well as intent to patronize the retailer. Further, we show that this relationship is moderated by attitude towards the early presentation of Christmas merchandise such that a less favorable attitude toward early presentations of Christmas merchandise results in a stronger negative relationship between early display timing and the perceived appropriateness of early displays of seasonality. This research also finds that the relationship between the timing of Christmas merchandise and the perceived appropriateness of Christmas merchandise is moderated both by extrinsic and intrinsic religiosity such that as religiosity decreases, the negative relationship between the timing of the Christmas merchandise and appropriateness becomes stronger. While marketing scholars have established the importance of religion in understanding consumer behavior relative to branding, culture, and media (Casidy & Arli 2018; Choi et al., 2013), we contribute to this research by showing that religion also impacts retailer evaluations. Finally, our results suggest that retailers should consider early presentations of holiday seasonality as an additional factor impacting store environment.

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## Appendix A: Scenarios

### **September/Department Store**

It's September, just after Labor Day. You are enjoying the warm weather and the end of the summer season. You start noticing Christmas items and materials at various retailers in your area. You recall seeing the display shown in-part below at one particular retailer, StoreSome Department Store. StoreSome Department Store is a department store retailer offering a wide breadth and depth assortment of fashion apparel, shoes and accessories for the entire family. StoreSome Department Store competes in the same category as department stores like Kohl's and Stein Mart. Some of the displays you remember from StoreSome Department Store are reproduced below. Please look at the display, take as long as you need, and form a judgment about the retailer.

### **October/Department Store**

It's October, almost Halloween. You are enjoying the fall season and the cooler weather. You start noticing Christmas items and materials at various retailers in your area. You recall seeing the display shown in-part below at one particular retailer, StoreSome Department Store. StoreSome Department Store is a department store retailer offering a wide breadth and depth assortment of fashion apparel, shoes and accessories for the entire family. StoreSome Department Store competes in the same category as department stores like Kohl's and Stein Mart. Some of the displays you remember from StoreSome Department Store are reproduced below. Please look at the display, take as long as you need, and form a judgment about the retailer.

### **November/Department Store**

It's November, just after Thanksgiving. You are enjoying the fall season and the brisk November weather. You start noticing Christmas items and materials at various retailers in your area. You recall seeing the display shown in-part below at one particular retailer, StoreSome Department Store. StoreSome Department Store is a department store retailer offering a wide breadth and depth assortment of fashion apparel, shoes and accessories for the entire family. StoreSome Department Store competes in the same category as department stores like Kohl's and Stein Mart. Some of the displays you remember from StoreSome Department Store are reproduced below. Please look at the display, take as long as you need, and form a judgment about the retailer.

### **September/General Merchandise Retailer**

It's September, just after Labor Day. You are enjoying the warm weather and the end of the summer season. You start noticing Christmas items and materials at various retailers in your area. You recall seeing the display shown in-part below at one particular retailer, StoreSome General Store. StoreSome General is a general merchandise retailer offering a wide breadth and depth of products for the home including kitchen, closet and bath products, cleaning supplies, pet products, entertainment products, sporting goods and more. StoreSome General Store competes in the same category as general merchandisers like as Target and Walmart. Some of the displays you remember from StoreSome General Store are reproduced below. Please look at the display, take as long as you need, and form a judgment about the retailer.

### **October/General Merchandise Retailer**

It's October, almost Halloween. You are enjoying the fall season and the cooler weather. You start noticing Christmas items and materials at various retailers in your area. You recall seeing the display shown in-part below at one particular retailer, StoreSome General Store. StoreSome General is a general merchandise retailer offering a wide breadth and depth of products for the home including kitchen, closet and bath products, cleaning supplies, pet products, entertainment products, sporting goods and more. StoreSome General Store competes in the same category as general merchandisers like as Target and Walmart. Some of the displays you remember from StoreSome General Store are reproduced below. Please look at the display, take as long as you need, and form a judgment about the retailer.

### **November/General Merchandise Retailer**

It's November, just after Thanksgiving. You are enjoying the fall season and the brisk November weather. You start noticing Christmas items and materials at various retailers in your area. You recall seeing the display shown in-part below at one particular retailer, StoreSome General Store. StoreSome General is a general merchandise retailer offering a wide breadth and depth of products for the home including kitchen, closet and bath products, cleaning supplies, pet products, entertainment products, sporting goods and more. StoreSome General Store competes in the same category as general merchandisers like as Target and Walmart. Some of the displays you remember from StoreSome General Store are reproduced below. Please look at the display, take as long as you need, and form a judgment about the retailer.

### **September/Home Décor & Craft Store**

It's September, just after Labor Day. You are enjoying the warm weather and the end of the summer season.

You start noticing Christmas items and materials at various retailers in your area. You recall seeing the display shown in-part below at one particular retailer, StoreSome Home Decor & Crafts. StoreSome Home Décor & Crafts is a home décor and arts-and-crafts retailer offering a wide breadth and depth of merchandise for picture framing, jewelry making, fabrics, floral supplies, and home accent décor. StoreSome Home Decor & Crafts competes in the same category as craft and home stores like Michael's and Hobby Lobby. Some of the displays you remember from StoreSome Home Décor & Crafts are reproduced below. Please look at the display, take as long as you need, and form a judgment about the retailer.

**October/Home Décor & Craft Store**

It's October, almost Halloween. You are enjoying the fall season and the cooler weather. You start noticing Christmas items and materials at various retailers in your area.

You recall seeing the display shown in-part below at one particular retailer, StoreSome Home Decor & Crafts. StoreSome Home Décor & Crafts is a home décor and arts-and-crafts retailer offering a wide breadth and depth of merchandise for picture framing, jewelry making, fabrics, floral supplies, and home accent décor. StoreSome Home Decor & Crafts competes in the same category as craft and home stores like Michael's and Hobby Lobby. Some of the displays you remember from StoreSome Home Décor & Crafts are reproduced below. Please look at the display, take as long as you need, and form a judgment about the retailer.

**November/Home Décor & Craft Store**

It's November, just after Thanksgiving. You are enjoying the fall season and the brisk November weather.

You start noticing Christmas items and materials at various retailers in your area. You recall seeing the display shown in-part below at one particular retailer, StoreSome Home Decor & Crafts. StoreSome Home Décor & Crafts is a home décor and arts-and-crafts retailer offering a wide breadth and depth of merchandise for picture framing, jewelry making, fabrics, floral supplies, and home accent décor. StoreSome Home Decor & Crafts competes in the same category as craft and home stores like Michael's and Hobby Lobby. Some of the displays you remember from StoreSome Home Décor & Crafts are reproduced below. Please look at the display, take as long as you need, and form a judgment about the retailer.