

## Millennial Consumer Responses to Christian Religious Symbols in Advertising: A Replication Study

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The appearance of Christian religious symbols in secular advertising is becoming more common, and marketers are aware of the potential persuasiveness of these religious cues in advertising. Prior research suggests that Christian symbols in advertising can trigger both positive and negative reactions from consumers. Thus, understanding the nature and influence of religious symbols is crucial for marketers who use them in their marketing communications. Prior theorizing and interpretive results support a backlash effect of a Christian symbol for certain consumers, yet evidence of this backlash effect is thin. Consequently, this research further investigates this backlash hypothesis using a consumer sample most likely to hold the lower levels of religiosity needed to produce the effect: Millennial consumers. A field experiment was conducted with a sample of Millennial adults. Results indicate that the Christian symbol significantly reduced perceptions of service provider quality for those with weaker religious beliefs. This backlash effect on perceived quality is interesting and important as it suggests that the use of religious symbols in advertising has the potential to turn off certain groups and is therefore not without risk. Further, results show that the Christian symbol significantly enhanced perceptions of service provider quality for those with stronger religiosity levels. This finding is consistent with prior research showing that the Christian symbol enhanced quality perceptions as religiosity levels increased. Finally, different patterns of mediation are found in the two religiosity groups. For those holding lower levels of religiosity, the Christian symbol resulted in perceptions of increased skepticism of the marketer, and these perceptions mediated the backlash effect on perceived quality. This result indicates that these Millennial consumers holding lower levels of religiosity viewed the service provider with greater skepticism as a result of the Christian symbol in the advertising, and this perception impacted their evaluation of perceived quality of the service provider. These results are discussed and suggestions for managers are provided.

**Keywords:** Christian symbols, millennial consumers, consumer religiosity, replication.

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## **Millennial Consumer Responses to Christian Religious Symbols in Advertising: A Replication Study**

The appearance of Christian religious symbols in secular advertising is becoming more common, especially in certain geographic locations within the United States. As marketers have become more aware of the potential persuasiveness of these symbols, religious symbols have been used in advertising for services as diverse as dog grooming, health care, home repair, moving and storage, pest extermination, and auto detailing. The symbols often include Bible verses such as Rom. 5:8, crosses, doves, and most frequently, the Christian fish symbol or ichthus. These symbols can be seen in display and outdoor advertising, on marketers' websites, in retail store signage, in print advertising, and on product packaging (Halstead, Haynes, and Taylor, 2009; Bhasin and Hicken, 2012). Local marketers and service providers appear more likely than large corporate entities to publically identify themselves as religious in advertising and to communicate their identity in secular advertising. However, even some large marketers (e.g., Target, Wal-Mart, Disney, and Hallmark) recognize a religious segment (Fielding, 2005), and the number of well-known large firms with strong Christian values continues to grow (e.g., Forever 21; Chick-fil-A; Interstate Batteries; Hobby Lobby; and Service Master) (Bhasin and Hicken, 2012). Yet, as Henley, Philhours, Ranganathan, and Bush (2009, p. 100) state, "...simply placing a Christian symbol in an ad to appeal to the Christian market is ill advised."

Indeed, the use of Christian religious symbols in advertising can trigger both positive and negative reactions from the consumer, and being aware of the extent and nature of these influences is crucial for marketers (Al-Hyari, Alnsour, Al-Weshah, and Haffar, 2012). Previous research has demonstrated the need to consider the following with respect to religious symbols in advertising: the consumer's involvement with the product/service advertised (Dotson and Hyatt, 2000; Lumpkins, 2010); the positive vs. controversial use of the Christian religious symbol in the ad (Gineikienė, Zimaitis, and Urbonavičius, 2015); the consumer's religiosity level (Henley et al., 2009; Taylor, Halstead and Haynes, 2010) and even various dimensions (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) of religiosity (Minton, 2015). Further, the need to diversify the religious symbols studied has been suggested by Dotson and Hyatt (2000). Taylor et al. (2010) studied the use of the Christian ichthus (or fish symbol) in advertising; Gineikiene et al. (2015) considered the use of the figure of Jesus in advertising; Henley et al. (2009) considered the use of the word "Christian" and the depiction of a Christian cross in advertising; and Minton (2015) used creationism and evolutionary advertising appeals in both print ads and bumper stickers. Various mediators have also been considered in different studies of religiosity's impact on consumer responses. For example, Taylor et al. (2010) examined source perceptions of the marketer (attitude similarity, trustworthiness and expertise, and skepticism toward the marketer), while Minton (2015) looked at general marketplace trust and specific relational trust as mediators of the relationship between religiosity and consumer responses.

The present study adds to the research on the use of Christian religious symbols in advertising by replicating the original study conducted by Taylor et al. (2010) which focused on the Christian fish symbol. Replication research has been identified as having a critical role in advancing scientific knowledge (Campbell and Jackson, 1979; Rosenthal and Rosnow, 1991; Park, Venger, Park, and Reid, 2015). Replication reexamines previously produced findings and assesses whether results are reproducible and generalizable, thereby advancing scientific knowledge (Park et al., 2015). Unreplicated research results mean that empirical findings cannot

be generalized with confidence, thereby severely limiting the utility of many one-shot research studies. Nonetheless, the lack of replication research in the marketing literature in general, and in advertising specifically, has been identified as a substantial limitation by scholars (Easley, Madden, and Dunn, 2000; Evanschitzky, Baumgarth, Hubbard, and Armstrong, 2007; Park et al., 2015). Campbell and Stanley (1963) called for a replication research tradition in scientific research over 50 years ago, and three decades ago the dearth of replication research in advertising was noted (Reid, Soley, and Wimmer 1981). Numerous studies since then have pointed to the low frequency of replication research in the literature, even in the face of calls for additional replication research (Hubbard and Armstrong, 1994; Madden, Easley, and Dunn, 1995; Evanschitzky et al., 2007; Park et al., 2015).

While the present study replicates prior research investigating the Christian fish symbol in advertising, it focuses on Christian Millennial consumers, a distinctive generational cohort characterized by its lack of religious affiliation (especially as compared to older generations). Religiosity level is considered to be a key factor in determining the valence of consumer evaluations of Christian symbols or messages in advertising (Henley et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2010; Minton, 2015). In their original study, Taylor et al. (2010) hypothesized a Christian symbol by consumer religiosity interaction on consumer evaluations. Specifically, they predicted that a Christian religious symbol in advertising would result in favorable reactions for those holding stronger religious beliefs, but that the symbol would produce a negative or backlash effect for those holding weaker religious beliefs in that these consumers would have strong adverse reactions to a Christian message/symbol. Relative to the backlash hypotheses, their interpretive analysis found: *“negative reactions stemmed from proselytizing concerns or from what participants perceived as exploitive and an otherwise inappropriate use of a religious symbol. Some viewed the usage of Christian themes in advertising with complete skepticism. The strongest negative avoidance reactions came from those indicating low religiosity or from those describing themselves as Christians but who never or rarely attended church”* (p. 81).

While this backlash effect was hypothesized, results of two subsequent experimental studies, the first conducted with adult consumers and the second with emerging adult consumers, failed to find such an effect. For adult consumers, a Christian symbol in advertising led to enhanced perceived quality and purchase intentions, and the effect of the symbol on these variables grew as religiosity levels increased. In addition, source perceptions of the marketer in terms of attitude similarity, trustworthiness, expertise, and skepticism were shown to mediate these interaction effects. For emerging adults, the Christian symbol enhanced perceived quality and purchase intentions, but only for those holding moderate religiosity.

Thus, prior theorizing and interpretive results suggested a backlash effect of a Christian symbol for those holding weaker religiosity, but results were mixed. The objective of the present research, therefore, is to further investigate this backlash hypothesis by replicating the Taylor et al. (2010) research using a consumer sample most likely to hold the lower levels of religiosity needed to produce the effect: Millennial consumers. The religious beliefs and values of Millennial adults are reviewed next, and replication hypotheses follow.

## **Millennial Consumers**

The term Millennials refers to individuals born in the U.S. after 1980 (Pew Research Center, 2014a). The generational cohort known as Millennial adults, born between 1981 and 1995, is comprised of individuals from 21 to 35 years old. Millennial adults stand out from other generations in several distinct ways. First, and of primary interest to this study, is Millennial adults' weak political and religious affiliations. About 30 percent say they are not affiliated with any religion (Pew Research Center, 2014a), and half of them report being politically independent. The lack of attachment to formal political and religious institutions gives Millennial adults "the highest levels of political and religious disaffiliation recorded for any generation" in 25 years (Pew Research Center, 2014a, p. 4). Not only are members of this generational cohort less likely to be affiliated with religion, they are less likely than middle-aged and older adults to say they believe in God (Pew Research Center, 2014a), although more than half still believe. Millennial adults are less likely to perceive themselves as religious, however.

When examining practicing Christian Millennials from non-Christian Millennials, some stark differences in religiosity appear. Practicing Christian Millennials (self-identified Christians who describe their religious faith as very important and attend church at least once a month) prioritize the Bible and view it as their moral compass (Barna, 2014). Non-Christian Millennials are ambivalent or even antagonistic about religion and are often skeptical of the Bible. In fact, many feel a sense of alienation and distance from the Bible and certain Christian practices (Barna, 2014). Overall, there continues to be a well-documented trend of Millennials leaving church or turning away from their faith (e.g., Barna, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2014a).

A second distinction of primary interest to this study is that many Millennial adults report low levels of social trust (Paxton, 2005), and some speculate that this is partially a result of this generation's high minority population and lower income levels (Smith, 2010). As a potentially disadvantaged group, they find considerable risk in trust as they are less able to deal with the negative consequences of misplaced trust (Wuthnow, 1998). Just 19 percent of Millennial adults say most people can be trusted, compared with 31 percent of Gen Xers, 37 percent of Seniors, and 40 percent of Boomers (Pew Research Center, 2014b). The skepticism and general distrust felt by this younger generation suggest marketers may need to "put more substance and less bluster into their products, services and messages..." (Lempert Report/Consumer Insight, 2014). Millennials will likely seek validation and confirmation of value in marketplace offerings—often through social media channels (Pew Research Center, 2014a). At the same time, Millennial adults tend to have favorable views of business and are more optimistic than other generations about America's future (Pew Research Center, 2014a), which suggests that context may matter with respect to trust issues.

A final important distinction of Millennial adults is that they represent the only generation to date that has not needed to adapt to the digital era. This group has come of age with the internet, mobile technology, and more recently, social media networks. As a result, they are increasingly connected to friends, co-workers, affinity groups, and other personalized networks (Pew Research Center 2014a, p. 5). Yet, about nine-in-ten Millennial adults think people share too much information when online (Pew Research Center, 2014a), which might be another sign of social trust concerns. With respect to posting Scripture passages online, over half of practicing Christians find it inspiring and encouraging, whereas non-Christians are much less likely to feel inspired (9 percent) or encouraged (7 percent) and are often irritated by the

practices (Barna, 2014). Clearly, differences exist in the perceptions of social media use for religious purposes.

It appears that Millennial adults are forming important social connections, particularly online and via social media networks. However, their connections to formal religious institutions or practices appear to be much weaker when compared to other generations. This tendency toward lower religiosity levels makes Millennial adults a crucial population to study with respect to the impact of Christian symbols and messages.

### **Backlash Interaction Replication Hypotheses**

Within the context of Millennial consumers, the following hypotheses adapt those originally proposed by Taylor et al. (2010). For Millennial adults, a Christian symbol by consumer religiosity interaction is expected. That is, those who hold weaker (stronger) Christian religious beliefs are likely to have unfavorable (favorable) evaluations of the Christian symbol used in advertising. The backlash effect on consumer evaluations (perceived quality and purchase intentions) is expected within the weaker religious belief group given the reduced level of religious affiliation among Millennial adults.

**H1a:** For Millennial consumers, there will be a significant Christian symbol by religiosity interaction on consumers' evaluations of the perceived quality of a marketer. For Millennials holding weaker religious beliefs, perceived quality evaluations will be significantly lower when a Christian symbol is present in an ad, compared to the symbol absent condition. For Millennials holding moderate or strong religious beliefs, perceived quality evaluations will be significantly higher when a Christian symbol is present in an ad, compared to the symbol absent condition.

**H1b:** For Millennial consumers, there will be a significant Christian symbol by religiosity interaction on consumers' purchase intentions toward a marketer. For Millennial consumers holding weaker religious beliefs, purchase intentions will be significantly lower when a Christian symbol is present in an ad, compared to the symbol absent condition. For Millennials with moderate or strong religious beliefs, purchase intentions will be significantly higher when a Christian symbol is present in an ad, compared to the symbol absent condition.

### **Mediation Replication Hypotheses**

In addition to the aforementioned interaction effects, several mediation hypotheses are proposed. Taylor et al.'s (2010) research indicated that a Christian symbol in advertising is likely to prompt consumer source perceptions, specifically those relating to attitude similarity, marketer trustworthiness, and skepticism of the marketer. The Taylor et al. (2010) results supported mediated moderation (Baron and Kenny, 1986; Muller, Judd and Yzerbyt, 2005; Dijk, van Kleef, Steinel, van Beest), meaning that the effects of the Christian symbol on consumer evaluations (perceived quality and purchase intentions) were mediated by consumers' perceptions of the marketer's trustworthiness, attitude similarity, and skepticism of the marketer, but primarily so for those with strong religiosity. Evidence from their preliminary study revealed different consumer reactions toward marketers' use of Christian symbols in advertising

depending on religiosity level. Reactions from less religious consumers included complete skepticism, while perceptions of marketer trustworthiness were observed among those who were more religious.

Consequently, different mediating processes are hypothesized here. For Millennial adults holding lower levels of religiosity, perceptions of skepticism are thought to mediate the effects on the consumer responses. The low social trust that is a hallmark of Millennials (Paxton, 2005; Lempert Report/Consumer Insight, 2014) is likely to result in skepticism among those Millennial adults holding lower levels of religiosity.

**H2a:** For Millennial consumers holding weaker religious beliefs, perceptions of skepticism toward the marketer will mediate the effects of the Christian symbol on perceived quality.

**H2b:** For Millennial consumers holding weaker religious beliefs, perceptions of skepticism toward the marketer will mediate the effects of the Christian symbol on purchase intentions.

As Taylor et al. (2010) observed, consumers holding stronger religiosity are undoubtedly most similar to marketers who utilize Christian symbols in advertising in terms of religious beliefs and attitudes. Consequently, for Millennials holding stronger levels of religious beliefs, perceptions of attitude similarity and trustworthiness are thought to mediate the effects on perceived quality and purchase intentions. These predictions are based on the robust literature on source effects which indicates that sources perceived as more attractive (i.e., likeable, familiar, or perceived to be similar in some way relative to the receiver) and more credible are perceived as more persuasive (Woodside and Davenport, 1974; Ohanian, 1990).

**H3a:** For Millennial consumers holding stronger religious beliefs, perceptions of attitude similarity toward the marketer and marketer trustworthiness will mediate the effects of the Christian symbol on perceived quality.

**H3b:** For Millennial consumers holding stronger religious beliefs, perceptions of attitude similarity toward the marketer and marketer trustworthiness will mediate the effects of the Christian symbol on purchase intentions.

## METHOD

### Research Design & Procedure

The study used materials previously developed by Taylor et al. (2010), and the procedure used by those authors was closely followed to minimize variability. The study was a two cell, between-subjects experiment using Millennial consumers who were exposed to display advertising. A Christian ichthus symbol (i.e., a simple graphic resembling a fish, consisting of two curves that bisect) served as the independent variable and was manipulated as either absent or present in a mock-up advertisement. The two dependent variables were measures of consumer evaluations of the marketer: perceived quality of the marketer and purchase intentions. The moderating variable was a measure of Christian religious belief, and the three mediator variables were measures of consumer perceptions of the marketer in terms of attitude similarity, trustworthiness, and skepticism.

The experiment was conducted in a lab setting, and surveys were accompanied by a cover letter explaining that the survey related to display advertising for service providers. It instructed participants on how to respond using the scale items. The letter also told participants they would be asked about heating and air service, but that participants in other locations would be asked about different service providers such as plumbers, dentists, roofers, and electricians. Participants were informed that their anonymous responses would be combined with those from different regions across the state.

### **Stimulus**

Before viewing the advertisements, participants read the following: “Please assume that you recently purchased your first home. During the first winter in which you live in that home, you decide to have a heating and air company perform annual maintenance on your furnace. You are in need of the services provided by a local heating and air company, but have never contacted one before. You start to seek out and notice ads for heating and air providers. You see many, but happen to focus on an ad for one, which is presented on the following page. Please look at that advertisement and form a judgment about the service provider.”

The next page included a professional looking mock-up of a display advertisement for a fictitious heating and air service provider. A heating and air service was selected as the target service because the credence properties of the service make it difficult for non-experts to evaluate. The rectangular-shaped ad indicated that the company performed service, sales, and installation on all makes and models of furnaces, heat pumps, and air conditioners. The ad included a phone number and address, as well as a small graphic of a workman installing a furnace in one corner and a MasterCard/Visa logo in another. The two versions of the ad were based on those used by Taylor et al. (2010), where one version included the ichthus symbol while the other did not.

### **Measures**

The measures used were previously developed or used by Taylor et al. (2010). The measurement items, along with associated scale reliabilities, are presented in the Appendix. Measures first assessed the dependent variables, perceived quality and purchase intentions. Next, measures assessed participants’ perceived trustworthiness of the marketer, skepticism of the marketer, and perceived attitude similarity between the participant and marketer. In the final section of the instrument, participants were asked to respond to a measure of Christian religiosity and a control measure assessing the influence of their religious beliefs on their buying and service provider choices. Finally, participants were asked to identify their gender, age range, ethnicity, education level, and religious affiliation. All multiple-item constructs were assessed by nine-point scales. Means of the multiple-item constructs were used as the operational measures.

## **RESULTS**

### **The Sample**

The sample consisted of 170 Millennials between 18 to 30 years of age who were junior or senior level students enrolled in non-marketing classes at a southern U.S. university. Eighty

five percent of the subjects were between the ages of 18 and 24. Forty four percent of the subjects were female, and the majority self-identified as either Caucasian (80.3 percent) or African American (14.5 percent). Christian religiosity scores ranged from one to nine, with a mean of 6.79 on the nine-point scale (Barna Group, 2005). Sixty five percent of subjects identified themselves as Protestant, eight percent as Catholic, three percent as Muslim, two percent as Jewish, 15 percent as other, and seven percent as none.

## Hypotheses Tests

**Backlash Interaction Replication Hypotheses: H1a and H1b.** First, there was a Christian symbol (CS) by religiosity (REL) interaction on both perceived quality and purchase intentions. Following Taylor et al. (2010), the religiosity measure served as the basis for splitting the sample into three religiosity groups ( $M_{\text{weak REL}} = 3.85$ ,  $n = 55$ ;  $M_{\text{moderate REL}} = 7.54$ ,  $n = 54$ ;  $M_{\text{strong REL}} = 8.82$ ,  $n = 56$ ). The data were next subjected to 2 (CS absent versus present) X 3 (weak, moderate, strong REL) ANOVAs on perceived quality and purchase intentions, testing for interaction effects where appropriate. Results indicated a significant CS x REL interaction on perceived quality,  $F(2, 151) = 5.04$ ,  $p \leq .01$ , and on purchase intentions  $F(2, 151) = 3.88$ ,  $p \leq .05$ .

Table 1 provides dependent variable means and standard deviations. Interpretation of the means is offered within the context of the interaction, as assessed by a series of directional t-tests. For participants holding weaker religiosity, the symbol significantly *reduced* perceived quality ( $M_{\text{symbol absent}} = 6.51$  vs.  $M_{\text{symbol present}} = 5.82$ ;  $t(49) = 2.01$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ), but had no significant impact on purchase intentions ( $M_{\text{symbol absent}} = 6.36$  vs.  $M_{\text{symbol present}} = 5.62$ ;  $t(53) = 1.57$ ,  $p = .12$ ). For participants holding moderate religiosity, the symbol significantly *enhanced* purchase intentions ( $M_{\text{symbol absent}} = 5.85$  vs.  $M_{\text{symbol present}} = 7.09$ ;  $t(52) = 2.76$ ,  $p \leq .01$ ), but had no significant impact on perceived quality ( $M_{\text{symbol absent}} = 5.96$  vs.  $M_{\text{symbol present}} = 6.60$ ;  $t(49) = 1.80$ ,  $p = .08$ ). For participants holding strong religious beliefs, the symbol significantly *enhanced* perceived quality ( $M_{\text{symbol absent}} = 6.24$  vs.  $M_{\text{symbol present}} = 6.93$ ;  $t(53) = 1.97$ ,  $p < .05$ ), but had no significant impact on purchase intentions ( $M_{\text{symbol absent}} = 6.22$  vs.  $M_{\text{symbol present}} = 6.72$ ;  $t(54) = .93$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Consequently, H1a was supported as there was a significant Christian symbol by religiosity interaction on consumers' evaluations of the perceived quality of a marketer. The interaction shows the negative effect of the symbol for those holding weak religiosity and a positive effect for those holder stronger religiosity. H1b was partially supported as purchase intentions were significantly enhanced when the Christian symbol was present, but only for those holding moderate religiosity.



**Table 1. Dependent Variable Means and Standard Deviations**

	<u>Perceived Quality</u>		<u>Purchase Intentions</u>	
	Christian Symbol <u>Absent</u>	Christian Symbol <u>Present</u>	Christian Symbol <u>Absent</u>	Christian Symbol <u>Present</u>
Weak religiosity	6.51 (1.35)	5.82 (1.05)	6.36 (1.87)	5.62 (1.60)
Moderate religiosity	5.96 (1.23)	6.60 (1.31)	5.85 (1.79)	7.09 (1.51)
Strong religiosity	6.24 (1.16)	6.93 (1.44)	6.22 (1.90)	6.72 (2.09)

**Mediation Replication Hypotheses: H2a and H2b, H3a and H3b.** Consumer perceptions of the marketer—attitude similarity, trustworthiness, and skepticism—were assessed as potential mediators of the significant effects of the Christian symbol on perceived quality and purchase intentions. Different mediating processes were hypothesized for those holding weaker versus stronger religious beliefs. Three conditions are required for mediation as assessed by a series of regressions models (Baron and Kenny, 1986). First, the independent variable (IV) must significantly affect the dependent variable (DV). Second, the IV must significantly affect the potential mediator. Third, when the IV and potential mediator are both included as predictor variables, the effect of the mediator on the DV should be significant, while the previously significant effect of the IV on the DV should be reduced.

First, H2a and H2b were tested. H2a and H2b predict that, for those holding weaker levels of religiosity, consumer skepticism of the marketer would mediate the significant effect of the Christian symbol on perceived quality and purchase intention. For perceived quality, the regression results indicated that the first condition was met as there was a significant effect of the Christian symbol ( $\beta = -.35, p < .05$ ). The second condition was met by the significant effect of the Christian symbol on the potential mediator variable skepticism (skepticism:  $\beta = .50, p < .05$ ). Attitude similarity, trustworthiness, and expertise were not supported as mediators. Finally, the regression results showed that with the inclusion of the potential mediator variable skepticism and the Christian symbol, the effect of the previously significant Christian symbol on perceived quality was non-significant (skepticism:  $\beta = -.296, p = .01$ ; CS:  $\beta = -.18, p > .10$ ), indicating full mediation. Further, a Sobel test supported skepticism as a significant mediator of perceived quality ( $p = .05$ ). This result indicates that, for those with weaker religiosity, perceptions of skepticism mediated the significant effect of the Christian symbol on perceived quality. Consequently, H2a was fully supported. H2b was not supported as there was no significant effect of the Christian symbol on purchase intentions for those holding weaker religious beliefs ( $\beta = -.43, p > .05$ ).

H3a and H3b were assessed next. H3a and H3b predict, for those holding stronger levels of religiosity, that consumer perceptions of attitude similarity and trustworthiness would mediate the effects of the Christian symbol on perceived quality and purchase intentions. For perceived quality, considering the stronger religious belief group, the regression results indicated that the first condition was met as there was a significant effect of the Christian symbol ( $\beta = .35, p < .05$ ). The second condition was met by the significant effect of the Christian symbol on the potential mediators (trustworthiness:  $\beta = .43, p < .05$ ; attitude similarity:  $\beta = .51, p < .05$ ). Skepticism was not supported as a mediator. Finally, the regression results showed that with the inclusion of the potential mediator variables and the Christian symbol, the effect of the previously significant Christian symbol on perceived quality was non-significant (trustworthiness:  $\beta = .72, p < .01$ ; CS:  $\beta = .11, p > .10$ ; attitude similarity:  $\beta = .33, p < .001$ ; CS:  $\beta = .24, p > .10$ ). Sobel tests also indicated both mediators were significant ( $ps < .05$ ). These results indicate, for those with stronger religiosity, that perceptions of trustworthiness and attitude similarity mediate the significant effect of the Christian symbol on perceived quality. Consequently, H3a was fully supported. H3b was not supported as there was no significant effect of the Christian symbol on purchase intentions for those with stronger religiosity ( $\beta = .23, p > .10$ ).

Mediation of the significant effect of the Christian symbol on purchase intentions was assessed within the moderate religious belief group. The regression results indicated that the first condition was met as there was a significant effect of the Christian symbol on purchase intentions ( $\beta = .54, p < .05$ ). The second condition was met by the significant effect of the Christian symbol on one of the potential mediator variables, attitude similarity, ( $\beta = .95, p < .001$ ). Finally, the regression results showed that with the inclusion of the potential mediator and the Christian symbol, the effects of the previously significant Christian symbol on purchase intentions was non-significant (attitude similarity:  $\beta = .54, p < .001$ ; CS:  $\beta = .07, p > .10$ ). A Sobel test supported attitude similarity as a significant mediator ( $p < .001$ ). This result indicates that, for those holding moderate religiosity, perceptions of attitude similarity mediated the significant effect of the Christian symbol on purchase intentions. This result partially supports H3b.

## DISCUSSION

This research was conducted with the objective of replicating recent research showing that the impact of a Christian symbol on consumer evaluations of marketers depends on consumers' Christian religiosity level (cf. Taylor et al., 2010). Marketing scholars agree that replication is important and needed to advance scholarly marketing-related knowledge (Park et al. 2015, p. 118). However, Park et al.'s (2015) recent analysis of the amount and type of replication research in advertising concludes "the health of advertising research has not improved very much over the last four decades" (p. 130). They find, depending on the type of replication conducted, that only 2.9 percent (interstudy) to 6.4 percent (interstudy and intrastudy combined) of research is replication, and that these low amounts are disturbing. They further state "advertising is a field of study that investigates emerging and moving communication phenomena, which behave in diverse and similar patterns influenced by culture, society and experiences, and in different temporal settings. Thus, ongoing replication under different circumstances, at different times, is needed to advance advertising knowledge," (Park et al., 2015, p. 133).

Consequently, several findings from this replication research are notable. First, results indicated that the Christian symbol significantly *reduced* perceptions of service provider quality for those with weaker religious beliefs. Taylor et al. (2010) predicted such a backlash effect, but did not find support for it across two experimental studies. The backlash effect on perceived quality found here is interesting and important as it suggests that the use of religious symbols in advertising has the potential to turn off certain groups and is therefore not without risk. Second, results indicated that the Christian symbol significantly *enhanced* perceptions of service provider quality for those with stronger religiosity levels. This finding is consistent with prior research showing that the Christian symbol enhanced quality perceptions as religiosity levels increased. Third, the Christian symbol only affected purchase intentions for those who held moderate levels of religiosity. That is, there was no significant increase or decrease in purchase intentions for either lower or higher religiosity subjects. The symbol impacting the purchase intentions of only moderate religiosity subjects mirrors those of Taylor et al.'s (2010) Study 2 findings. Finally, the results support perceptions of skepticism, trustworthiness, and attitude similarity towards the service provider as mediators of the effect of the Christian symbol on perceived quality. For those holding lower levels of religiosity, the Christian symbol resulted in perceptions of increased skepticism of the marketer, and these perceptions mediated the backlash effect on perceived quality. This result indicates that those holding lower levels of religiosity viewed the service provider with greater skepticism as a result of the Christian symbol in the advertising, and this perception impacted their evaluation of perceived quality of the service provider. These lower religiosity Millennials had strong adverse reactions to the use of a Christian symbol in marketing communications, which prompted increased skepticism towards the marketer.

This backlash finding mediated by skepticism is consistent with Taylor et al.'s (2010) interpretive results which found that some consumers viewed the use of Christian themes in advertising with complete skepticism, while others had negative reactions. These negative responses were due to proselytizing concerns or perceptions that the Christian symbol in advertising was exploitive and an inappropriate use of a religious symbol for commercial effect. Yet, and also consistent with prior research, as the religiosity level of Millennials increased, the Christian symbol resulted in perceptions of increased trustworthiness and similarity, and these perceptions mediated the findings on perceived quality. For those holding moderate religiosity, results also indicated that perceptions of attitude similarity towards the service provider mediated the effect of the Christian symbol on purchase intentions. These findings suggest, for Millennials holding moderate to high levels of religiosity, that the effect of the Christian symbol on consumer evaluations was based on the subject's perceived attractiveness of and similarity to the service provider.

### **Managerial Implications**

This research suggests that marketing managers consider several issues with respect to their strategies, especially their marketing communication strategies. First, U.S. firms considering or using a Christian message or symbol in its marketing communications should monitor long-term trends in Americans' religious beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors as religiosity has been shown in this and several other studies (e.g., Taylor et al., 2010; Minton, 2015) to impact several different consumer responses to religious cues. Thus, marketers must carefully research and identify their target audience's religious belief levels and practices. They cannot

assume that advertising which contains Christian messages or symbols will always be favorably received.

Consumers with the highest degree of religiosity had the most favorable reactions to Christian symbols. This supports both Taylor et al.'s (2010) earlier research and Minton's (2015) research which found that higher religious groups had higher levels of both marketplace and relational trust, leading to more positive responses to religious belief cues. Some consumers, however, such as the Millennial adults surveyed in this research, will have negative reactions to Christian messages. Any firm targeting the Millennial cohort must consider the fact that this group has lower levels of religious affiliation than any other generation to date. This group also has low levels of social trust, which may in part explain the skepticism finding in the mediation hypotheses (e.g., those with lower religiosity levels had lower quality perceptions of the marketer, and this was mediated through skepticism). Regarding market segmentation, there are geographic "pockets" in the U.S. that exhibit stronger religious beliefs and practices than other areas (e.g., the Bible Belt region in the southeastern U.S.). Use of Christian religious symbols and messages in this area might seem advisable given the stronger religiosity of these populations. Yet, the previously provided cautions remain. Managers should not assume, no matter the location, that religious symbols in advertising will be perceived universally with favor. However, on a local level, a service provider's proximity to churches and megachurches may facilitate more positive acceptance of religious messages in advertising, as posited by Taylor and Halstead (2014).

### **Research Implications**

Several suggestions for future research are prompted by this study. First, additional research is needed with respect to consumer purchase intentions. The differential findings in this study regarding perceived quality versus purchase intentions suggest different underlying dimensions. Perceptions of a marketer's quality may be more cognitive in nature, reflecting a consumer's beliefs. Purchase intention, on the other hand, leans more toward a behavioral dimension as it represents a decision already made by a consumer, a decision to act in the near future.

Also recommended for future research is the examination of consumer responses to written religious messages in marketing communications, such as a Bible verse, versus a visual religious symbol such as an ichthus; considering more versus less relevant religious messages, per Minton's (2015) suggestion; and considering the relative size of religious symbols used in marketing communication (larger versus smaller in a given ad). The choice of the religious symbol used may also require careful thought as each symbol is likely to be loaded with unique meaning. For instance, the Christian cross might be perceived as a more relevant fit when communicating about health care while an ichthus symbol might be perceived as more relevant fit when communicating about more mundane consumer services, such as car repair. The Christian cross or dove symbols may be perceived as more holy, while the ichthus symbol may be used to simply communicate affiliation and be less endowed with deep religious meaning.

In addition, other religious beliefs should be examined (this study focused on Christian religiosity), and all three dimensions of religiosity (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) should be examined when possible as Minton (2015) found different effects of religious cues for

different dimensions of religiosity. There is also the need to examine the possible consumer effects stemming from a firm's religious underpinnings that might be communicated on the firm's website that are not displayed directly in marketing communications. Prior research suggests that the influence of a small business owner's personal religious beliefs on the identity of their business can be strong (Halstead et al., 2009). Corporate entities often communicate religious values as well. For instance, Hobby Lobby indicates in the "about us" section of its website, "*We believe that it is by God's grace and provision that Hobby Lobby has endured. God has been faithful in the past, and we trust Him for our future.*" This statement and others referring to The Lord on the Hobby Lobby website, while not directly tied to marketing communications, may have a significant impact on those with the strongest religious beliefs. The impact of such corporate policy statements on consumer responses should be considered.

In conclusion, this research strongly supports the idea that a Christian religious symbol in advertising will affect consumer evaluations of the marketer or service provider. This research showed both a backlash and an enhancement effect of the Christian symbol on perceived quality, depending on the subject's level of religiosity. The implication of this finding is that managers must recognize that the inclusion of religious symbol in advertising has the potential to backfire and hamper the perceptions of less religious consumers. The reverse also seems true – that the symbol had a positive impact on the perceptions of those who stronger religiosity.

## APPENDIX

### Multi-Item Measurement Items <sup>a</sup>

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Perceived quality of marketer,  $\alpha = .96$ , (adapted from Broniarczyk and Alba 1994; Keller and Aaker 1992).

1. low quality / high quality
2. bad / good
3. inferior / superior
4. worse than most / better than most

Purchase intention items,  $\alpha = .95$  (Likert scale adapted from Buchanan et al. 1999; Dodds et al. 1991).

1. If I need heating and air services, I would consider using Alexander Heating & Air.
2. When I need heating and air services, the likelihood that I will call Alexander Heating & Air is: (anchored very low / very high)
3. The likelihood that I will contact Alexander Heating & Air to fix my furnace is: (anchored very low / very high)

Perceived trustworthiness,  $\alpha = .96$ , (adapted from Ohanian 1990).

1. undependable / dependable
2. dishonest / honest
3. unreliable / reliable
4. insincere/ sincere
5. unreliable / reliable
6. not believable / believable

Skepticism of marketer,  $\alpha = .91$ , (Holbrook and Batra 1987).

1. not skeptical / very skeptical
2. not suspicious / very suspicious
3. not distrustful / very distrustful

Attitude similarity,  $\alpha = .87$  (Likert scale adapted from Pilkington and Lydon 1997; Byrne 1971).

1. The owner of Alexander Heating & Air is a lot like me.
2. The owner of Alexander Heating & Air holds beliefs that are similar to my own.
3. The owner of Alexander Heating & Air has attitudes that are similar to my own.

Christian religiosity,  $\alpha = .95$  (Likert scale adapted from Barna Group 2005).

1. I have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in my life today.
2. When I die, I will go to Heaven because I have accepted Jesus Christ as my savior.
3. The Bible is the inspired word of God.
4. I have a personal responsibility to share my religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians.
5. Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth.
6. I believe that Satan exists.
7. I believe that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works.
8. I believe in the second coming of Christ.
9. Christ performed miracles such as changing water into wine.

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<sup>a</sup> Measures previously used by Taylor et al. (2010).

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