

Christmas is Coming: Exploring the Effectiveness of Christmas Commercials



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We investigate the effectiveness of Christmas commercials. First, we develop an overview of the types of Christmas spirits. We show how companies implemented these spirits in their advertising. We test the effectiveness of Christmas commercials in a sample of students. Our recommendations for practice are as follows: If a company uses product-related non-Christmas commercials outside of the Christmas season, it should refrain from creating and distributing additional product-related Christmas commercials; such commercials, while costly, do not improve brand attitudes. If a company uses product-unrelated non-Christmas commercials outside of the Christmas season, it should create and distribute a separate, product-unrelated Christmas commercial.

Eingereicht am 30.10.2020; akzeptiert am 23.08.2021

Keywords: > christmas spirit > product-relatedness of advertising > attitudes

1 Introduction

Christmas is a prominent annual event in many countries and cultures. It has a magical character – the darkness, the end of a year, holidays and more time for family, parent visits, nostalgic feelings, Christmas markets, fairy lights, home decoration, Christmas carols, shining children’s eyes, etc. Understandably, companies want to take advantage of Christmas. That is why Christmas print advertisements and TV/Internet spots are omnipresent in the weeks leading up to the annual Christmas festival. This practice raises some questions for companies.

First, what messages could Christmas commercials convey? In Section 2, we start with describing five concepts of the spirit of Christmas, i.e., what Christmas could mean for people: (1) Christmas as a religious event. (2) Christmas as the event where gifts are exchanged to strengthen social relationships. (3) Christmas as the event when “Santa Claus” delivers material goods. (4) Christ-

mas as an occasion for self-reflection. And (5) Christmas as an event which evokes mixed feelings. It is taboo for companies to refer to the religious background in Christmas advertising. However, companies derive specific advertising messages from the remaining four types of the Christmas spirit. Using examples of Christmas advertising, we will illustrate how the last four Christmas spirits can be implemented in Christmas advertising.

Second, should companies even use Christmas commercials? Of course, most companies use product-related advertising for the rest of the year. The question therefore arises as to whether regular non-Christmas commercials should be replaced by specific Christmas commercials in the days or weeks before Christmas. Unless non-Christmas commercials are as effective as Christmas commercials during this time, it does not make economic sense to produce Christmas commercials. Our investigation in Section 4 aims to provide some insight into this problem.

Third, if additional Christmas commercials are used, should the message be highly product-related or not? If advertisements implement the Christmas spirit (2) or (3), the Christmas commercials are product-related commercials. If they implement spirit (4) or (5), they are not product-related (i.e., do not promote products of the brand). There is no doubt that a single brand should not use different Christmas commercials to target the audience during a Christmas season, e.g., one product-related version addressing the gift-exchangers and people who strive for material possessions and another product-unrelated version targeting people with high propensity for self-reflection at Christmas and for those with mixed feelings. Providing multiple messages over the Christmas season would confuse consumers and might be very expensive. For instance, a Christmas commercial like John Lewis’ “Buster the Boxer” cost seven million pounds sterling, according to company information. This means that companies would focus on one Christmas commercial, either product-related or product-unrelated. In the investigations in Sec-

tion 4, we also want to provide some insights into the answer to this question.

2 Christmas Spirits

Although Christmas is both an important religious and economic event, to the best of our knowledge, few researchers have come up with ideas to answer the question of what Christmas means to people. Our attempts to describe different Christmas spirits are admittedly incomplete and sometimes overlap.

2.1 The Religious Background

The day with the longest night and shortest daylight was a magical event for people in prehistoric times and antiquity. In 274 A.D., Emperor Aurelian set December 25th as the annual day for Sol Invictus. That day became the Christian day of remembrance of the birth of Jesus in 336 A.D. Even today, this day has an important religious meaning for Christians: the incarnation of God. In product marketing and advertising, this type of Christmas spirit does not matter. The use of images that visualize the incarnation of the Christian God for this purpose seems taboo.

2.2 Gift Exchange to Strengthen Social Relationships

Christmas is a ritual event in which everybody must participate, because a significant portion of the people would like to practice a ritual: the strengthening of bonds within the family, relatives, and loved ones through the ritualized giving or exchanging of gifts. The purpose of the event is to achieve and maintain social acceptance. People have to find solutions to the following challenges: “I still need something for A. And what shall I give B?” One reason for this ritual is likely rooted in the human evolutionary history. The exchange of Christmas presents can be equated with the ritual of mutual fur grooming among monkeys. The reason why Christmas is the gift-exchange day is not clear; it can only be a coincidence that the gift-exchange day is not a different day like Thanksgiving. The gifts do not necessarily have to be expensive or purchased consumer

Abstract

Wir untersuchen die Wirksamkeit von Weihnachtswerbung. Zunächst entwickeln wir einen Überblick über die Arten der Weihnachtsstimmung. Wir veranschaulichen, wie Unternehmen derartige Stimmungen in Werbung umsetzen. Wir untersuchen die Wirksamkeit derartiger Weihnachtswerbungen in einer studentischen Stichprobe. Unsere Empfehlung für die Praxis lautet: Wenn ein Unternehmen außerhalb der Weihnachtszeit produktbezogene Werbung betreibt, sollte es diese Werbung auch während Weihnachten verwenden; spezielle produkt-bezogene Weihnachtswerbung leistet keinen Beitrag zur Verbesserung von Markeneinstellungen und verursacht lediglich Zusatzkosten. Unternehmen, die im Laufe des Jahres hingegen Werbung betreiben, die die Produkte nicht thematisieren, sollten eine separate nicht-produktbezogene Weihnachtswerbung verwenden.

Schlagworte: › Weihnachtsstimmung › Produktbezug der Werbung
› Einstellungen

goods – they just must signal goodwill, affection, recognition, gratitude, or appreciation from the recipient’s point of view. Caplow (1982, 1984) extensively studied the Christmas behavior of the residents of Middletown, Indiana, in the United States. In his 1982 publication, he reported that the people obeyed to an “unwritten rule” consisting of the exchange of gifts: “People are expected to give a Christmas gift every year to their grandparents, parents, spouses, children, grandchildren, and to all siblings and siblings’ spouses with whom they have an ongoing face-to-face relationship.” Caplow (1982) provides further reasons why the importance of the exchange of gifts has increased in recent decades. First, he argues that among spouses, societal rules are “permitting easy, almost penalty-free divorce.” The exchange of gifts aims to prevent spouses from considering a divorce. Second, he argues that the relationship (affection, respect, willingness to communicate) of children under the age of 18 years with their parents “cannot be taken for granted” for the future. Children “are not expected or obliged at any point in their life to make any material contribution to their parents, and they are not answerable to law or public opinion if they show no permanent attachment to

them.” Thus, the “massive flow of (...) gifts from parents to their children” serves to establish the connection between the young children and their parents (i.e., to create their gratitude) to maintain a close and affectionate relationship when the children are grown up. Third, relatives may be willing to participate in the gift exchange ritual. As a result, people can expect help from relatives when they need it. In the study published in 1984, Caplow describes in detail rituals that take place at Christmas (e.g., “Christmas presents must be wrapped before they are presented”).

Christmas advertising took and is taking advantage of the ritual of changing gifts. For example, we can refer to videos promoting Hamilton, a manufacturer of wrist watches in the US in the 1950s. The videos are quite long (approximately five minutes). They contain many scenes depicting a husband’s (a wife’s) efforts to enable his/her spouse a comfortable life for the past year and finally suggest giving his/her spouse a Hamilton watch as a Christmas present to repay all these efforts. Advertisements for De Beers jewelry had texts such as “Think about it: A divorce costs more” or “Imagine the favors you can call in if she gives you a tie” be-

neath the picture of a diamond. Companies are also currently using this concept to create Christmas advertisements. In Weltbild's Christmas commercial (2015), consumers search the Weltbild catalog for gifts that family members might like. Also based on the gift-exchange concept, the Coca-Cola truck stops in a Christmas commercial for Coca-Cola (2015) at Kronstadt; it shows that people can choose whether they want a bottle of this drink for themselves or whether they want this drink to float down from the sky as a gift for others: In this commercial, Coca-Cola takes on the role of a family member giving gifts to loved ones. Nowadays, the gift-exchange character of Christmas is sometimes presented in a funny way. In an Ebay advertising video (2013, Warmth), for example, a hamster receives a Ferris wheel for Christmas from its friend, the dog. The dog obviously ordered the gift from Ebay.

2.3 Santa Claus as the Allegory of Materialism

In a different orientation, Christmas is the annual event at which the "celebration of consumption, materialism, and hedonism" (Belk 1987) takes place. Instead of participating in the cults of Christianity, people go on "pilgrimages to (other) shrines and temples, (i.e.) stores and shopping malls" (Bartunek & Do, 2011). This concept is based on materialistic values. People believe that good people deserve many material possessions. Hence, it is desirable for oneself to have as much material goods as possible. Receiving many material gifts makes people feel good. At Christmas, dreams of material possessions come true. Gurău and Tinson (2003) found in a sample of Scottish consumers, that there were only few people who "find little enjoyment in purchasing gifts." If there is no one who fulfills these wishes, people reward themselves with buying presents for themselves at Christmas. Santa Claus has been associated with the fulfillment of wishes since childhood, and therefore can be seen as the allegory (personified symbol) of this type of Christmas spirit. He is a modern version of a deity and the symbol of a new religion. Belk (1987) reports that Santa Claus' origin was neither the 4th century Lycian bishop of Myra, Saint

Nicholas, nor any "European mythical figure" (e.g., Sinterklaas, Pere Noel, Santa Lucia, Father Frost, Christkind¹, and Three Holy Kings). Clement Clarke Moore (1823) is considered to be the author of the poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" and thus the inventor of Santa Claus and some of his attributes (e.g., a flying sleigh pulled by eight reindeer)². Santa Claus is the opposite of baby Jesus. While the baby Jesus represents the ideas of helplessness and poverty (Fischer & Arnold, 1990), the attributes of Santa Claus are those of a supernatural adult hero (Belk 1987). Moore's poem is the alternative to the Christmas story of the Evangelist Luke ("In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world..."). Moore's poem, however, adopts motifs from Evangelist Luke. For example, Santa Claus wants people not to be afraid of him – this corresponds to the angel asking the shepherds not to be afraid. Many narrators added further attributes to Moore's Santa Claus. He lives at the North Pole, observes all people, can produce all desired material goods with the help of his elves, and delivers them through the chimney with his sledge at Christmas. Belk added that Santa Claus helps children "believe in boundless abundance and having goods." Children believe that Santa Claus can even bring products from special brands that they consider desirable, such as a Barbie instead of a doll (Otnes, Kim & Kim, 1994). In the commercial environment, Santa Claus is omnipresent at Christmas time. In the last few decades, this figure has also been exported to other countries (e.g., as the Weihnachtsmann to Germany) and other cultures (e.g., Japan).

In the early days of industrially manufactured and nationally marketed products (approximately since 1880), advertising in North America and Great Britain began with so-called Victorian trading cards (small, co-

lored cards that were sometimes included in the product packaging and could be collected) to foster the purchase of these products. There were also many Christmas versions of these trading cards depicting Santa Claus. They were distributed by companies selling products such as soap, medicines, string, cookies, groceries, and textiles. Obviously, they were valuable collectibles to increase brand loyalty. However, all showed Santa Claus as the person who fulfills the materialistic desires.

Then, in the first third of the 20th century, advertising in magazines became possible. At Christmas time, Santa Claus dominated such advertisements in North America. For example, Santa Claus read on a wish list that someone wanted "White Rock Ginger Ale" and he brought Colgate's toothpaste in his backpack on Christmas Eve. The aim of these print ads was obviously to emphasize that branded products per se are suitable Christmas gifts. In the special case of the Coca-Cola advertising in the 1930s, Santa Claus took on the role of a celebrity testimonial; Coca-Cola showed this figure in red clothes and with a long white beard (and shaped even today's impression about how Santa Claus looks like).

Christmas videos in the 1960s encouraged consumers to buy items such as a Hoover vacuum cleaner, Lucky Strikes cigarette, or a Gillette razor as Christmas gifts.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, Christmas commercials in the USA mainly showed Santa Claus, contained Christmas music such as Jingle Bells in the background, and advertised products as the implementation of materialistic wishes (e.g., toys, electronic household appliances, banking services, or gift certificates for McDonald's). Or they contained recommendations for special foods and drinks for Christmas dinner and Christmas bakery. Many commercials were based on cartoons (e.g., showed The Flintstones consuming the promoted products at Christmas Eve). The videos were rarely emotional, sentimental, or humorous. The videos only highlighted the benefits of products in a Christmas context (as gift or for dinner). Very few videos were story-like and had a greater entertainment value (e.g., in a

¹ The presumed origin of the Christkind concept is less clear. Its origins are likely to be found in medieval nativity plays in which not only Mary and Joseph, but also angelic figures played roles. These angels were guided by a white-clad girl with loose hair, denoted as Christkind (Weber-Kellermann 1978).

² It should be noted that Erich Kästner (1947) provided an excellent translation of this poem in German ("Als der Nikolaus kam").

video promoting the Polaroid camera, young children successfully built a photo trap to use that camera to take photos of Santa Claus; the m&m's noticed that Santa Claus really exists; polar bears enjoyed seeing northern lights in a Coca-Cola video).

In West Germany in the 1980s and 1990s, Christmas commercials were generally rather rare, and the scenes in Christmas videos were highly product-related advertising. Either the products' suitability as a gift was emphasized (i.e., by showing products that others would likely want as a gift for Christmas) or the consumption of the products was shown in a Christmas context. In typical commercials, the videos showed that the Weihnachtsmann was bringing 4711 Eau de Cologne and that people tasted gingerbread in the "Bahlsen Probierstube." McDonald's offered Christmas certificates. A woman enjoyed Jacobs Krönung coffee after decorating the Christmas tree. All family members drank this coffee under the Christmas tree. And a young boy loved his gift – a Milka Chocolate Santa.

Many Christmas advertisements have been based on this Christmas spirit even in recent years. In Zalando's (2012) Christmas commercial, Santa Claus and the postman compete to see who can deliver gifts faster. In Real's Christmas commercial (2015), viewers learn that Christmas shopping is perfect when it happens in Real's stores. An Amazon Christmas commercial (2017, Give a little bit) shows scenes in which thousands of packages are distributed before Christmas. Coca-Cola (2010) shows that Santa Claus must arrive together with the Coca-Cola Christmas truck before Christmas can really start. Hunkemöller (2014, Xmas collection with Sylvie Meis) shows that expensive lingerie products are perfect for pleasing women at Christmas. In Kaufland's Christmas commercial (2019, Das Gute in dir), Santa Claus tells the consumers that good people are rewarded with goods. In a video promoting Otto (2015, An Opa), a child's wish that did not achieve Santa Claus is fulfilled decades later, when the boy is already grown up. These Christmas commercials are in line with the materialistic Santa-Claus concept of Christmas. Wishes for ma-

terial goods are created and the promoted product's suitability as a gift is demonstrated. Or the product's suitability to contribute to the Christmas event (e.g., Christmas dinner) is highlighted.

In a few videos, the materialistic view of Christmas is parodied. For example, in a commercial for Mulberry (2015, Miracle), the shepherds and the Three Holy Kings come to worship a handbag. The company makes fun of the "new religion." Edeka parodied the Jingle Bells song. This song has been composed by James Lord Pierpont approximately in 1850 and could be considered the hymn of the materialistic orientation of Christmas. In the Edeka Christmas commercial (2014, Kassensymphonie), the cash registers in a supermarket play the tune of Jingle Bells. In a video promoting John Lewis (2017, Buster the Boxer), a dog mistakenly thinks it was given a trampoline for Christmas.

2.4 Christmas as a Time for Self-Reflection

There is another kind of Christmas spirit - Christmas as a time for self-reflection. Self-reflection is often triggered by thought-provoking narratives. To mention some of the well-known Christmas stories that have implemented this spirit, we can refer to "A Christmas Carol" by Charles Dickens (1843). It describes the metamorphosis of Scrooge from an evil to a good person. A grandpa also shows this change in the television film "Little Lord Fauntleroy." Other famous Christmas-related stories are: "Snow Queen" (a fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen 1844; film adaptation by Walt Disney); "Nutcracker" (ballet by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky 1892; based on the story "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King" by E. T. A. Hoffmann); Hansel and Gretel (opera by Engelbert Humperdinck 1893, based on the fairy tale told by Brothers Grimm and mostly performed at Christmas time); the story behind the song "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht" and numerous fairy tales about winter time. There are also many books that follow this concept and are aimed at young children.

During the Christmas season in the 1960s, companies in West Germany adopted the concept of self-reflection-oriented narratives. At that time, Tchibo was a mail-order company for coffee. To promote its products, the retailer distributed brochures annually with some songs and stories to make readers think and reflect. In recent years, the number of Christmas commercials that stimulate self-reflection has risen sharply. In Germany, the retailer Edeka launched a Christmas commercial in 2015 with the title "Heimkommen"; so far, more than 70 million YouTube views have been recorded. The Sparkassengruppe Österreich (Erste) advertised its brand at Christmas 2018 with the commercial "What would Christmas be without love?" and has received more than 70 million YouTube views to date. In [table 1](#), we provide a sample of narrative Christmas commercials aiming at self-reflection; these commercials do not advertise products, i.e., do not emphasize the suitability of products for Christmas gifts or as material possessions.

2.5 Christmas as an Event that Evokes Mixed Feelings

There are some studies that have shown that some people have mixed feelings about Christmas.

Clarke (2007) reported that Christmas can induce both positive and negative affective states in people. He asked a sample of persons to answer the question "How do you feel about Christmas overall?", presented a list of adjectives, applied factor analysis, and did not find a single-factor solution. There was a positive-affective-state factor (represented by agreement to adjectives such as cheerful, happy, and joyful) and a negative-affective-state factor (represented by agreement to adjectives such as annoyed, disappointed, and sad). The factor correlation between these factors was only moderately negative. This weak negative correlation suggests that most consumers agree with positive and disagree with negative adjectives (or vice versa), but that there are also some consumers who would agree with both the positive and negative adjectives used to de-

Tab. 1: Examples of narrative Christmas commercials with no reference to products

Variable	Examples
Help among friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sainsbury (2015, Mog's Christmas Calamity): A cat's activity prevents a house from burning down. Neighbors make a wonderful Christmas dinner possible.
Christmas is the time to believe in fairy tales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Penny Markt (2015, Die Reise des Nussknackers): A boy loses a nutcracker, and after a long journey, the nutcracker returns when this person has a boy of his own.
Christmas is the time for liking others and doing things with each other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bahlsen (2016, Das ist Weihnachten): A young boy shows affection for a girl, probably an immigrant, and explains what Christmas means. Rewe (2015, Schneemann/Weihnachten von Herzen): A family celebrates Christmas in front of the house; hence, the snowman can participate. John Lewis (2019, Edgar the Dragon): The little dragon causes many misfortunes. He likes all others and makes the others to like him. Otto (2016, Schenke das Wertvollste, das Du hast: Zeit): The message of the video: Having time for the family is the most important thing at Christmas. Penny Markt (2017, Der Weg): The true mother's love overcomes all obstacles to reconciling with her daughter. Sainsbury (2014, 1914): British and German soldiers celebrate Christmas together on the war front in WW 1. Edeka (2017, 2117): Humans were almost completely displaced by robots. However, an artificial intelligence robot is a welcome member of people at Christmas dinner. Alphabeth Photography (2010, Christmas Food Court Flash Mob): Customers of a food court unexpectedly become physically part of the performance of Hallelujah from Handel's Messiah. As it should be, many guests get up.
Christmas is the time to spend time with others – nobody shall be alone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Penny Markt (2016, Familie Heilmann): Unexpectedly for grandpa and grandma, the children and the grandchildren come to visit. Edeka (2016, Zeit schenken): Stressful experiences at Christmas lead to the insight that the most important thing is to have time for one's child at Christmas (incomprehensibly combined with inappropriate symbols). Edeka (2015, Heimkommen): Grandpa makes his children believe that he has died to achieve that they come home for Christmas. Credit Bank of Moscow (2016, Dear Santa: All I want is my mommy. Alice): Santa Claus uses horrific measures to teach a mother to pay more attention to her child. John Lewis (2015, Man on the Moon): A little girl interacts with the lonely man on the moon.

Source: Own depiction.

scribe Christmas. Christmas feelings can be bittersweet. What is the reason for such ambivalent feelings? Hirschman and LaBarbera (1989) suggested that consumers associate Christmas with four categories of thoughts and experiences: thoughts about and experiences of (1) interpersonal relationships, (2) materialism, (3) sensory/hedonic aspects, and (4) religious issues. They argue that the thoughts for each category can be accompanied by either positive or negative emotions. Based on qualitative interviews, they provided examples of thoughts from each type that are related to positive or negative affect. When consumers associate Christmas with the burden of empty obligations, false emotions, loneliness, etc., Christmas evokes negative emotions; on the con-

trary, when Christmas induces thoughts about sharing joy, giving love, family, friends, etc., Christmas creates a positive affect (>table 2). Mixed feelings could be inferred if, for example, a consumer has negative thoughts about interpersonal relationships (e.g., "I feel the burden of empty obligations") as well as positive thoughts about the materialistic aspects (e.g., "I am happy about many gifts"). Mixed negative feelings can also arise when a person has problems correctly recognizing the gift wishes and fears negative reactions from the recipients: "This gift was very cheap – Is my value really that low?"

Kasser and Sheldon (2002) took a similar approach. They suspected that Christmas-re-

lated experiences stem from seven sources: (1) closeness to family and friends, (2) holiday traditions, (3) spending money on others, (4) getting nice gifts, (5) helping others in need, (6) eat and/or drink well, and (7) practice one's religion. They correlated the intensity of these experiences with measurements of positive and negative emotions in consumers. They reported that experience of being close to family and friends reduced negative affect associated with Christmas. On the contrary, high spending on the gifts were associated with a higher level of negative affect. Surprisingly, experiences that one has received "really nice gifts" produced a lower level of positive affect and a higher level of negative affect. The authors concluded that consumers are happy when "fa-

Tab. 2: Thoughts about Christmas which elicit positive and negative affect

	Examples of thoughts and experiences that lead to	
	negative affect	positive affect
Interpersonal relationships	Burden of empty obligations, false emotions, loneliness, depression, family rituals, guilt, competition, hostility, rudeness	Sharing joy, giving love, family and friends, togetherness, reaffirming bonds of love, home comings, sharing piece and goodwill among all people
Materialism	Commercialization, Santa Claus promoted over Christ, materialism promoted over love and brotherhood, aggressive advertising	Enjoyment of receiving many gifts
Sensory/hedonic aspects	Physical and emotional exhaustion, over-indulgence while feasting	Delicious food, brightly colored lights, caroling, scent of tree, drinking eggnog, decorating the house, drinking champagne

Source: Hirschman and LaBarbera (1989).

mily and religious experiences are salient” and that they experience negative emotions when spending money for gifts and receiving gifts are predominant.

McKechnie and Tynan (2006) added the finding that, “for adults at least, Christmas is less of a reality-suspending event and more of an occasion demanding a lot of hard work instead.”

Cartwright, McCormick, and Warnaby (2016) analyzed mixed feelings, using as data the consumer reactions to four Christmas commercials shown by retailers in the UK in 2011 (Matala: Snow Globes; TK maxx: Christmas Advert; Marks & Spencer: X-Factor; and John Lewis: The long wait). A total of 23 female consumers were exposed to these commercials. They had to answer the question “How did you feel when you were watching the TV advert for (...)?” The authors found that each commercial was associated with both adjectives indicating positive affect (e.g., happy, warm, nostalgic/reminiscent, excited/upbeat, and touched/sentimental) and adjectives signaling negative affect (e.g., confused/unsure, annoyed, and disappointed).

In advertising practice, some companies react to mixed sentiments in consumers and propose solutions in Christmas commercials. In the commercial for Aldi (2016, Frohe Einfachten), scenes are shown in which adults experience Christmas “stress,” “terror,” and “duties.” Then, a young girl recommends forgoing all rituals – then Christmas

will be “easy.” A commercial for Penny (2018, Weihnachten braucht nicht viel. Nur Liebe) shows the problems of a mother and her son – she cannot afford expensive gifts. Then, the boy’s happiness is described; it is because he has received the most precious gift – her love. Such commercials initially arouse mixed feelings in the audience and then present solutions.

2.6 Types of Christmas Commercials

In preceding sections, we separated different spirits of Christmas. We have given examples of their implementation in Christmas advertising or commercials. At a more abstract level, these implementations can be divided into two types:

Type I: This type of Christmas advertising exists if it is aimed at gift-exchangers or people who expect material goods at Christmas (Christmas spirits (2) and (3)). The advertisements are highly related to promoting products. They show the suitability of the products for Christmas purposes (gifts, valuable possessions, dinner, bakery).

Type II: This type of Christmas advertising exists if advertising is aimed at people who associate Christmas with an occasion for self-reflection or at people with mixed feelings (Christmas spirits (4) and (5)). There is little or no product-reference in this Christmas advertisement.

3 Hypotheses

First, we consider the condition in which a company uses product-related commercials to promote its products before and after the Christmas season. During the Christmas season, this company could (1.) also use these non-Christmas commercials. Alternatively, it could create and distribute either (2.) product-related or (3.) product-unrelated Christmas commercials. We suspect that consumers are accustomed to such companies’ measures to highlight the suitability of products and would therefore be confused by option 3. From our research on advertising practice, we have found that companies that use product-related Christmas commercials also normally use product-related non-Christmas commercials outside of the Christmas season. We are therefore comparing the options 1 and 2. Christmas commercials with high product-relatedness are neither surprising nor perceived as something special. We test:

H1: During the Christmas season, product-related Christmas commercials are as effective as product-related non-Christmas commercials.

Second, we consider the condition in which a company uses product-unrelated commercials outside of the Christmas season. Its options are (1.) to use these commercials in the Christmas season as well, (2.) to create and distribute product-unrelated Christmas commercials, or (3.) to use product-related Christmas commercials. From our investi-

gations of advertising practice, we found the tendency that companies that use product-unrelated Christmas commercials chose product-unrelated non-Christmas commercials outside of the Christmas period. This is the reason why we compare the options 1 and 2. Christmas time is the time when self-reflection and mixed feelings are likely to be more intense than at other times of the year. Hence, messages that match that Christmas spirit can might be more effective. We test:

H2: During the Christmas season, product-unrelated Christmas commercials are more effective than product-unrelated non-Christmas commercials.

We therefore assume that it makes little sense to create and distribute Type I Christmas commercials, as companies could also regularly use product-related non-Christmas ads even during the Christmas season. On the contrary, we suspect that it makes sense to use type II Christmas commercials for companies that also use product-unrelated commercials outside of the Christmas seasons because they appeal to special Christmas spirits.

4 Study

4.1 Test stimuli

Our goal was to select video pairs. Every pair should contain a non-Christmas video and a Christmas video that promote the same brand and differ as little as possible except for the Christmas theme.

Preselection of Christmas videos: We used keywords to identify Christmas commercials stored on YouTube. The commercials should not be too old (we chose the period between 2011 and 2018). We only selected Christmas videos that either contained no text or used the English or German language. From this procedure, we selected Christmas videos promoting the following brands (in parentheses the number of different Christmas videos): Aldi (2), Amazon (1), Apple (1), Audi (1), Bahlsen (1), Coca-Cola (6), Coop (1), Credit Bank of Moscow (1), Deutsche Telekom (1), Ebay (1), Edeka (5), Erste (2), Ferrero Rocher (1), Galeria Kaufhof (1), Har-

rods (1), Hunkemöller (1), Ikea (3), International Committee of the Red Cross (1), John Lewis (7), Kaufland (1), Kinder Schokolade (1), Lidl (2), Littlewoods (1), Marks and Spencer (1), Matalan (1), Mercedes (1), merci (1), Migros (1), m&m's (1), Morrisons (1), Mulberry (1), Nivea (2), Otto (1), Penny (7), Real (1), Rewe (1), Sainsbury (3), Tesco (1), TK maxx (1), Tommy Hilfiger (1), Toys 'R' Us (1), Victoria's Secret (1), Waitrose (1), Weltbild (1), Whiskas (3), and Zalando (1). Thus, we collected 86 Christmas videos from 46 brands. Most brands' products are available in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and the UK.

Selection of non-Christmas commercials:

Twelve students assisted us to find corresponding non-Christmas commercials. They watched commercials for these 46 brands which were shown recently (2011-2018). The length and style of the non-Christmas spots should match (i.e., be as similar as possible) the length and style of the Christmas spots. For instance, we noticed that there are two Ferrero Rocher videos containing a strongly product-related message that are 30 seconds long. One of them (Celebration has arrived) shows scenes of a woman enjoying the chocolates at a party. The other (Share your golden Christmas) shows very similar scenes of a woman eating these chocolates at a Christmas party.

Selected pairs of videos: From this approach, we have selected three video pairs in which stories are told. Aldi, Littlewoods, and Nivea are advertised in these three video pairs. Only at the end of the videos the brands' logo appeared. In addition, we selected eight video pairs that highlighted the products of the advertised brand. In these pairs, Ferrero Rocher, Ikea (two pairs), Kinderschokolade, Lidl, Nivea, Tommy Hilfiger, and Victoria's Secret were promoted (>table 3).

Note, that the only criterion for the selection of video pairs was the availability of a Christmas and a non-Christmas video for the same brand, which differ only slightly in style and length. We selected pairs with a low or high product-relatedness (as a moderating variable). Further criteria such as the product category, brand history, brand positioning, the

depiction of animals, or children etc. (as moderating variables) were not considered.

4.2 Sample of participants

A total of 370 consumers took part in the survey. Each person was in contact with two of the 22 commercials (eleven brands × 2 videos). This procedure resulted in 740 observations. 56.1 percent of the participants were female. The age of the consumers was between 18 to 58 years (mean age = 22.8 years). 89.5 percent said they were a student. Our sample therefore consisted of rather young consumers. Brand knowledge and the general attitude toward advertising served as control variables. Across the experimental conditions (people who watched a Christmas commercial, people who watched the corresponding non-Christmas commercial), these variables were not significantly different for each pair of commercials.

Twelve students helped us to collect data mainly from students at a university in Germany. These twelve students were of different nationalities (Brazilian, seven German, Greek, Lebanese, Russian, Ukrainian). The data was collected by means of an online survey on social platforms which aimed at the friends of these students. We therefore presume that a large proportion of the participants were international students living in Germany.

4.3 Procedure

The data was collected in Germany in December 2018 before Christmas. The participants received online-links to the videos. As mentioned earlier, each person watched two randomly selected videos from a total of 22 videos. When following the link, the persons were directed to one of the videos and no previous advertising (which usually must be watched a few seconds before viewing videos on YouTube) had been viewed. At random, the test participants first watched a Christmas spot (or a non-Christmas spot) of brand A and then a non-Christmas spot (or a Christmas spot) of brand B. Thus, each person viewed a Christmas and a non-Christmas spot of different brands. After watching

Tab. 3: Overview of the selected pairs of videos

Brand	Non-Christmas commercial with low product-relatedness	Christmas commercial with low product-relatedness
Aldi	“Die Erwachsenen wollen immer die Bestimmer sein” (2016): A young boy thinks about adult stress. He says: “The simple is more.” The Aldi logos are inserted at the end of the video.	“Frohe Einfachten” (2016): A little girl comments the stress of adults before Christmas. The Aldi logos are inserted at the end of the video.
Littlewoods	“Abracadabra” (2015, Ireland): The video shows a children’s birthday party with music by the Steve Miller Band in the background. At the end, the logo of Littlewoods is shown.	“You never forget how it feels to be a child at Christmas” (2016, Ireland): Children decorate the Christmas tree and wait for their presents; music from Queen (Those are the days of our lives). At the end, the brand logo is displayed.
Nivea	“Danke Mama” (2015): A young boy ponders his mom’s problems. The Nivea logo is presented at the end of the video.	“Christmas” (2015): A young boy ponders his parents’ problems before he became their child. The Nivea logo is inserted at the end of the video.
	Non-Christmas commercial with high product-relatedness	Christmas commercial with high product-relatedness
Ferrero Rocher	“Celebration has arrived” (2016): The video shows the ingredients of the sweet. A female person is shown who enjoys eating the product.	“Share your Golden Christmas” (2011): A couple attends an ambassador reception. The female person receives Rocher as a Christmas present.
Ikea #1	“Meine Zeit” (2017): The husband lying in bed compliments his wife, but she does not react as desired. Then, an Ikea bed is advertised.	“Grandpa” (2017): Grandpa gets tired after dancing at the Christmas party and children are worried about him. Ikea shows pricing information and states that people are well-equipped for partying with Ikea.
Ikea #2	“Auf dich und deine Freunde – alles eingerichtet” (2017): Many guests came. Ikea states that this company offers furniture for a living-room. Then, this room is perfectly prepared for the guests.	“Feiern/Jesus – so viele Ideen für dein Wohnzimmer” (2017): Many guests come. A guest admires furniture; prices are displayed. Finally, this guest meets the adult Jesus.
Kinderschokolade	“Wenn ich erwachsen bin” (2015): The video shows scenes of a young boy with his parents. Then the boy says that as an adult he will do many things differently, with one exception: eat Kinderschokolade.	“Was wäre Weihnachten ohne Kinder” (2014): Children play the flute under the Christmas tree before they eat a Chocolate Santa from the Kinder brand.
Lidl	“Chose to live a little Swap Time” (2015, Ireland): Two young boys evaluate products in the role of jurors. Lidl then asks parents to think about buying products that children really like.	“A Lidl Bit of Magic” (2013, Northern Ireland): The parents did the Christmas shopping at Lidl. Their little daughter puts cookies on a plate. Santa Claus arrives and finds them tasty.
Nivea	“Hautpflege auf der ganzen Welt” (2012): People from different cultures use Nivea skin cream.	“Weihnachtszeit ist Familienzeit” (2017): A little girl applies Nivea skin cream to her parents.
Tommy Hilfiger	“Voyage SeaFarius” (2013): Dancing “Hilfigers” on a yacht are wearing clothes of this brand.	“House Par-Tay” (2011): Dancing “Hilfigers” at a Christmas party are wearing clothes of this brand.
Victoria’s Secret	“A night at the opera” (2016): Models go for a walk in the Palais Garnier in Paris and present fashion.	“Santa Baby” (2016): Models walk under Christmas trees and present fashion.

Source: Own depiction.

a video, the participants had to take part in a thought-listing task. They were asked to verbally phrase “all thoughts and feelings that come to mind while watching the video.” Next, they had to indicate their attitude toward the advertised brand. Subsequently, the affective state induced by the video, perceptions of the company’s persuasi-

ve intent, attitudes toward the ad (i.e., the video being presented), and the fit of the video to the brand’s image were assessed. Then, brand knowledge and interest in the product category were recorded as control variables. After these ratings, the participants had to indicate the extent to which the video highlighted the brand’s products (ma-

nipulation-check variable). The second video was watched next, followed by the same measurements. Finally, the general attitudes toward advertising (as a further control variable), the age of the consumer, the gender, and the job position had to be stated.

4.4 Measures

We used four dependent variables, one manipulation-check variable, and several control variables. Due to space limits, we only report the measurement and the findings for the perceived brand-video fit as a control variable.

As dependent variables, we used brand attitude, the positivity of evoked affect, the attitude toward the ad, and perceptions of the marketer's persuasive intent. To assess brand attitude, we asked the participants to agree or disagree with four statements: "The brand (brand name) is very attractive," "... is very appealing," "... is very interesting," and "... is very good" (Cronbach's alpha = .885). The positivity of the evoked affective state was also measured by agreeing with four statements: "Watching the video made me feel very cheerful," "... feel very happy," "... feel very joyful," and "... feel very delighted" (alpha = .921). The attitude toward the ad was assessed as follows: "This video is very attractive", "... is very appealing," "... is very interesting," and "... is very good" (alpha = .911). Perceptions of persuasive intent of the marketer were measured by agreement with: "The brand wants to convince me," "... wants to manipulate my buying behavior," "... wants to create a positive mood," and "... wants to take advantage of a good mood" (alpha = .829).

We consider the product relatedness of the commercials as a moderating variable. To check the success of our manipulation, we have added a manipulation-check variable. The product-relatedness of the commercial was measured with the statement "In this video, the brand or its products are in the foreground."

In addition, the Christmas and the non-Christmas version should not differ in any other way except the Christmas issue. To control this aspect, we included the perceived brand-commercial fit as a control variable in the questionnaire. This fit was rated according to the following statements: "The subject of the spot fits the brand image very well," "The spot is very well suited to underline the brand image," "I understand very well why this brand shows this content," and

"I find it very easy to relate the ad content to the brand" (alpha = .916).

All scales were seven-point scales with 1 = "totally disagree" and 7 = "totally agree." All multi-item scales were arithmetically averaged.

4.5 Results

In >table 4, we present the results of variables depending on the type of commercial (Christmas, non-Christmas) and whether the brands are advertised with product-related or product-unrelated commercials.

Manipulation Check: We had selected three pairs of commercials with low product-relatedness that advertise the following brands: Aldi, Littlewoods, and Nivea. For the non-Christmas commercials within these three pairs, the perceptions of product-relatedness were low (M = 2.09); these perceptions were also low for the Christmas commercials contained in these three pairs (M = 2.37). Thus, we have a sample of three pairs of commercials with low product-relatedness. We had also selected eight pairs of commercials with high product-relatedness that advertise the following brands: Ferrero Rocher, Ikea (two pairs), Kinderschokolade, Lidl, Nivea, Tommy Hilfiger, and Victoria's Secret. For the non-Christmas commercials within these eight pairs, the perceived product-relatedness was relatively high (M = 4.37); the product-relatedness was also relatively high for the Christmas commercials contained in these eight pairs (M = 4.71). Across the commercials, the perceived product-relatedness of commercials that we have assigned to the condition of high product-relatedness is higher than that of commercials that were assigned to the condition of low product-relatedness (high: M = 4.54, low: M = 2.25, $t(738) = 18.087$, $p < .001$). The manipulation check thus confirms our manipulation.

Control Variable: The perceived brand-commercial fit did not depend on the use of a Christmas or non-Christmas video version.

These findings indicate that we have selected pairs of commercials that differ in terms of their product-relatedness but not noteworthy in terms of other aspects. At the brand level, these findings are stable. Test participants agree, for example, that the Christmas version that advertises Ferrero Rocher fits that brand as well as the non-Christmas version that advertises that brand.

Dependent variables: If a brand has the option to show a Christmas commercial with high product relatedness or a non-Christmas commercial with high product relatedness during the Christmas season, these options' effectiveness does not differ. The decision for one of the variants has no effect on brand attitudes, the affective state, and ad attitudes. This finding conforms to hypothesis 1. On the contrary, if a brand considers the use of a Christmas commercial with low product relatedness or a non-Christmas commercial with low product relatedness during the Christmas season, it should choose the Christmas version (if costs do not play any role). The Christmas version results in more favorable brand attitudes, more positive affect, and higher ad attitudes (all $ps < .01$). This result is in line with hypothesis 2. There was no effect of the video version (Christmas, non-Christmas) on perceptions of manipulative intent in both conditions of the product-relatedness of the commercials.

5 Answers to the Research Questions

Nobody owns Christmas. From a marketing point of view, nobody would contradict the quote from the British journalist, writer, and columnist Katharine Whitehorn (1962): "From a commercial point of view, if Christmas did not exist it would be necessary to invent it." Because sales rise in the days and weeks before Christmas, retailers spend more money on advertising during these times. Despite the importance of Christmas to businesses, little is known about how to create effective Christmas advertising. Our analysis was also inspired by the observation that over the past decade many brands have been promoted with stories that encourage self-reflection. At the beginning of our

Tab. 4: Study results

		Commercials with low product-relatedness	Commercials with high product-relatedness
Manipulation-check variable			
Product-relatedness of the commercials	Non-Christmas commercial	2.09	4.37
	Christmas commercial	2.37	4.71
	Overall	2.25	4.54
Control variable			
Perceived brand-commercial fit	Non-Christmas commercial	4.72	4.16
	Christmas commercial	4.84	4.12
		t(201) = .523	t(535) = -.133
Dependent variables			
Attitude toward the brand	Non-Christmas commercial	3.94	4.79
	Christmas commercial	4.53	4.81
		t(201) = 12.241***	t(535) = .167
Positivity of the affective state	Non-Christmas commercial	3.82	4.26
	Christmas commercial	4.41	4.15
		t(201) = 2.803**	t(535) = -.828
Attitude toward the ad	Non-Christmas commercial	3.96	4.26
	Christmas commercial	4.68	4.25
		t(201) = 3.464***	t(535) = -.042
Perceptions of persuasive intent	Non-Christmas commercial	4.87	4.83
	Christmas commercial	4.71	4.92
		t(201) = -.707	t(535) = .810

*** p < .001, ** p < .01.

Source: Own description.

research, we asked three questions. Our preliminary answers are as follows:

What messages could Christmas commercials convey? It becomes confusing for consumers and expensive for a single brand to target each consumer segment that is different in its Christmas spirit (gift exchangers, people seeking for material possessions, people with a high level of self-reflection, and people with mixed feelings) with a separate Christmas commercial. We suggest only considering two options: either product-related or product-unrelated Christmas advertising.

In the first condition, the ads should show that the products are suitable as gifts for others or that they are goods that one should want for oneself. In the second condition, the ads should either be thought-provoking narratives. In >table 2, we have listed examples of commercials that can be considered representative of this type of advertisement (Christmas as an event that inspires to help friends; Christmas as a time to believe in fairy tales; Christmas as a time to like other people and as a time for common activities; and Christmas as time to spend time together

and avoid loneliness). Or the ads demonstrate how to escape Christmas rituals.

Should companies even use Christmas advertising? According to our findings, we must advise against using additional variants of Christmas commercials if the videos are highly product-related advertising. We suspect that special product-related Christmas commercials cannot convey a message that is significantly different from product-related advertising outside of the Christmas season; such companies should therefore simply display regular non-Christmas adver-

tising during the Christmas season. However, if brands are typically promoted through product-unrelated commercials, we recommend using separate product-unrelated Christmas commercials during the Christmas season. A higher sensitivity to self-reflection could benefit from Christmas narratives.

If additional Christmas advertising is used, should the message be highly product-related or not? If companies use product-related advertising during the year (product-related non-Christmas advertising), they should not display special Christmas advertising that is also product-related. If regular commercials are product-unrelated, Christmas advertising should also be product-unrelated.

6 Limitations

There are various Christmas spirits from which messages for Christmas advertising can be derived. In the scientific literature, we mainly found studies on the gift-exchange spirit and the Santa-Claus spirit. We have added some thoughts on other spirits. However, we do not believe that our overview is complete or that the spirits do not overlap.

In our empirical study, we simplified the concept of the large number of Christmas spirits implemented in advertising and focused on two conditions: (1) brands that use non-Christmas commercials and Christmas commercial with high product-relatedness, (2) brands that use non-Christmas commercials and Christmas commercial with low product-relatedness. We did not consider the intermediate forms: (3) product-related non-Christmas advertising and product-unrelated Christmas advertising and (4) product-unrelated non-Christmas advertising and product-related Christmas advertising.

Our sample was made up of students or other young people – therefore, responses of older consumers were not examined. We do not know whether the Christmas spirits of young consumers and their reactions to product-related and product-unrelated commercials differ systematically from those of older consumers. In the course of life, the interest in connecting the materialistic spirit

with the idea of sustainability probably changes.

Our sample of pairs of commercials was rather small. In addition, we simply considered Christmas commercials with a low or high product-relatedness. We were not able to create a sample of pairs of Christmas commercials that differed in terms of the Christmas spirits described in Section 2.

7 Suggestions for Future Research

First, for future research, we recommend avoiding the simple product-related/product-unrelated dichotomy and examining the effectiveness of types of Christmas commercials which differ in terms of the Christmas spirits implemented. There are brands that have been promoted through dozens of Christmas commercials within a few years because they created commercials for different countries. For instance, there are numerous Coca-Cola Christmas commercials. Hence, future research could focus on one of these brands and examine consumer reactions to different types of commercials. In addition, cross-cultural studies could investigate the prevalence of different types of the Christmas spirits. This could result in suggestions for different ways of addressing consumers in different countries or cultures during the Christmas season. To put in a nutshell: One could envision a map showing prevalent Christmas spirits in different countries. International market research institutes may also be interested in this task to attract customers.

Second, many more aspects of Christmas advertising could be explored. Based on the results from the thought-listing task included in our questionnaire, we found numerous written negative comments on the Christmas commercials included in our study.

Ambience: Many persons disliked an ambience in Christmas advertising that had little in common with the self-reflective spirit of Christmas: the presentation of the rich and beautiful (Hilfiger, Ferrero Rocher), luxurious ambience (Ferrero Rocher), or sexual references (Victoria's Secret).

Weak Christmas cues: In addition, many test participants indicated that they disliked weak Christmas cues (e.g., snowfall).

Dance parties: Christmas dance parties obviously do not match any Christmas spirit of our test participants, as they commented negatively on the Ikea and Hilfiger commercials. Dance parties were associated with comments such as “exhausting,” “loud,” and “intrusive.”

False humor: Many people complained about the use of false humor. For Ikea's Christmas commercial (“Feiern/Jesus”), they explained that the depiction of the adult Jesus was against Christmas and was “not funny at all.”

Pop songs vs. Christmas carols: Obviously, the use of soft pop ballads instead of Christmas carols (when music is playing in the background) has annoyed a lot of our test participants (e.g., Queen's music in the Littlewoods commercial). They stated that the song from Queen in the background (“Those are the days of our lives”) does not suit any Christmas spirit.

Clarity of the message: Some participants misinterpreted the message of Aldi's Christmas commercial. Although most comments were about “the truth of the child's advice,” many said that the message sounded “naive, and why would Christmas be easier at Aldi?” Presumably, consumers have mistakenly interpreted this Christmas video as advice that Aldi makes Christmas easier.

Cliché: When Santa Claus was portrayed, many participants said that these commercials are cheesy and clichéd. The examined Lidl Christmas commercial (“A Lidl Bit of Magic,” used in Northern Ireland: A little girl longs for Santa Claus and Rudolph and actually meets Santa Claus) aroused positive thoughts; however, there were many comments such as kitschy. The reason of these thoughts might be the special culture of our participants.

Our findings from the thought-listing are preliminary and should be checked in further experiments. Some of the factors mentioned could be manipulated experimentally (e.g.,

either pop ballad or Christmas carol in soundtrack of the commercial).

Third, some companies promote brands through narrative commercials that have a very negative tonality. Sainsbury, a super-market chain in Great Britain, presented a Christmas spot in 2014 that even attracted the interest of German newspapers and magazines (e.g., FAZ, Stern, Welt) and caused mixed comments. It is entitled “Christmas Eve 1914,” lasts five minutes, and shows scenes from the First World War – British and German soldiers celebrate Christmas; together, they sing the Christmas classic “Silent night, holy night” or “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht.” Instead of fighting each other with weapons, the soldiers play soccer and give each other presents. After a few minutes, the soldiers must return in their trenches and the bombing continues. Currently, this video has approximately 24 Mio YouTube views. It aims to evoke mixed feelings – negative affect due to the war scenes and positive affect due to the humanity of the soldiers at Christmas. In Edeka’s video (2015, Heimkommen), only an invented obituary led children to visit their old father at Christmas. In a video promoting Credit Bank of Moscow (2014, Dear Santa), Santa Claus took very terrible measures to grant a girl’s wish. The International Committee of the

Red Cross has launched a Christmas commercial (2019, The one gift Santa can’t deliver | The Laws Of War) that shows realistic war scenes and the grief of an abandoned young girl – Santa Claus could not help. It would be interesting to gain some insight into the mental processes induced in consumers if the tonality of Christmas commercials is either positive or negative.

Fourth, our study was based on a sample of students. It would be interesting to examine the response of older consumers to different types of Christmas advertising that suit different Christmas spirits.

Management-Takeaway

Although marketers frequently consider Christmas as a celebration of consumption and the purchase of material goods (based the spirit of Santa Claus or the idea of exchanging gifts), other Christmas spirits have emerged (time for self-reflection, mixed feelings). Commercials featuring the latter spirits are an effective way of enhancing brand attitudes if the company also uses product-unrelated advertising outside of the Christmas season.

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