ABSTRACT. Despite the importance of Christmas within many cultures, research has not examined the types of experiences and activities that are associated with holiday well-being. Thus, we asked 117 individuals, ranging in age from 18 to 80, to answer questions about their satisfaction, stress, and emotional state during the Christmas season, as well as questions about their experiences, use of money, and consumption behaviors. More happiness was reported when family and religious experiences were especially salient, and lower well-being occurred when spending money and receiving gifts predominated. Engaging in environmentally conscious consumption practices also predicted a happier holiday, as did being older and male. In sum, the materialistic aspects of modern Christmas celebrations may undermine well-being, while family and spiritual activities may help people to feel more satisfied.

KEY WORDS: Happiness, consumption, Christmas festal days

“I get up early and with cash and credit cards in hand go about the difficult and dirty task of spreading Christmas cheer.”

Anonymous participant, Hirschman and LaBarbera (1989), p. 140

The Christmas holiday has evolved from an event banned in some American colonies to one that dominates the month of December. According to a Gallup poll conducted in 2000, 96% of Americans celebrate the holiday (Gallup Organization, 2000). Indeed, few other holidays change the face of a nation and the behavior of its citizens as does Christmas. Offices close down, people travel back home, billions of dollars are spent on gifts, endless strings of lights are hung in homes and city squares, and church pews fill.

Many themes intermingle during the holiday (Hirschman and LaBarbera, 1989). Originally it began as a celebration of the birth of the religious figure Jesus Christ, who preached a doctrine of love and anti-materialism. Christmas also involves renewing ties with extended family and engaging in traditions such as feasting, caroling, and decorating an evergreen. Increasingly, however, the materialistic elements of the Christmas holiday have become predominant, with the primary figure of reverence being Santa Claus, a “secular version of Christ” whose “realm is that of material abundance” (Belk, 1993, p. 83). Indeed,
the Christmas season is a key element of the US economy, with an estimated 1/6 of all retail sales occurring due to Christmas (Carrier, 1993). Americans report spending about $800 on Christmas gifts, and many consumers are still in debt 6 months later as a result of this spending (Center for a New American Dream, n.d.).

Despite the prominent and recurring place that Christmas holds in many people’s lives, there is surprisingly little empirical research about the season. Consumer research has provided interesting analyses of its myths, movies, and media messages (Belk, 1989; 1993), sociology has examined gift-giving rituals (Caplow, 1982; 1984), and anthropology has investigated meanings of the holiday in various cultures (Miller, 1993). Within the field of psychology, what literature exists on Christmas mostly concerns whether psychiatric admissions (Velamoor et al., 1999) and suicide rates (Jessen and Jensen, 1999) increase during the season. Surprisingly, we were unable to find any quantitative empirical studies that have endeavored to understand the experiences and qualities which are associated with happiness during Christmas.

The Current Study
We therefore set out to examine what makes for a merry Christmas by examining how different types of experiences and activities predict people’s satisfaction, stress, and emotional state during Christmas. Is happiness during the holiday primarily a function of the religious and family experiences that are historically central to the celebration? Or are materialistic means the true path to Christmas joy, as implied by the inundation of advertisements and the reign of Santa Claus?

Our primary interest in this study concerned the types of experiences that individuals have during the holiday, and how these relate to their well-being. Past literature (Hirschman and LaBarbera, 1989) and pilot interviews suggested that seven main types of activities (and hence experiences) occur during the holidays: (1) Spending time with family; (2) Participating in religious activities; (3) Maintaining traditions (e.g., decorating a Christmas tree); (4) Spending money on others via the purchase of gifts; (5) Receiving gifts from others; (6) Helping others (e.g., Salvation Army bell-ringers); and (7) Enjoying the sensual aspects of the holiday (e.g., good food).

Our theoretical perspective suggests that the relative frequency of these experiences will bear differential relations to well-being. Past research shows that people whose lives are focused on goals such as