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## Religiousness and Risky Behaviors Mediated by Moral Attitudes

Benjamin Curth

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Honors Thesis

Religiousness and Risky Behaviors Mediated by Moral Attitudes

By

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Submitted to Brigham Young University for partial fulfillment of graduation  
requirements for University Honors

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Brigham Young University  
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### **Abstract**

There is a lot of existing research on religiousness in adolescents and risky behaviors such as sex alcohol. However, one understudied aspect of it is why the connection. Very few studies have explored this area, and a mediation model may aid in that research. For this study, a sample size of 364 adolescents ages 14-18 were surveyed ( $M = 15.64$ ). Some mediations models have been attempted which suggests that it should be successful. In this study, a mediation model is used to explore the relationship between religiousness and risky behaviors in adolescents mediated by conservative attitudes. After finding significant results, the present study presents evidence that suggests future research be done in this area to better understand the connection between religiousness and risky behavior in adolescents via conservative attitudes.



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## **Introduction**

Religion is a powerful factor for many of today's youth (Pearce et al., 2019). Many adolescents have differing levels of religious faith across multiple forms of religion. These religious convictions influence the attitudes and behaviors of adolescents in their communities (Smith, 2003). Religious influences impact decision making in adolescents including decisions on alcohol consumption and risky sexual behaviors (Jankowski et al., 2015). Specifically, it is noted that increased religiousness protects against risk behaviors in adolescents. However, the mediators between religion and reduced risk-taking behaviors have been understudied. One possible mediator between religion and risk aversion behavior in adolescents is their conservative attitudes towards risky behaviors. There is a connection between religious views and conservative attitudes (Van Tongeren et al., 2021). The connection between religious conviction and conservative attitudes could be an underlying link for the aforementioned risk avoidant behaviors of religious adolescents (Pearce et al., 2019). Adolescence is typically a time of increased risk taking (Arnett, 2017), and it is documented that many religious adolescents have a decreased inclination towards alcohol consumption and risky sexual behaviors (Pearce et al., 2019). The purpose of this study is to examine whether links between religiousness and risk behaviors is mediated by conservative attitudes towards risky behaviors.

### **Religion and Risk-Taking Behavior**

In the existing literature, much of it is focused on religiousness and risk-taking behavior (Hardy et al., 2019). In general, most of this research has pointed to the conclusion that increased religiousness tends to lead to less risky behaviors. Religions

teach conservative attitudes about risky behaviors, and if those attitudes are internalized, then this might discourage adolescents from engaging in risky behavior. For example, according to Vasilenko et al. (2013), adolescents who are more religious tend to avoid or abstain from sexual activities until marriage, have fewer sexual partners, and have less frequent sexual intercourse. Vasilenko's study surveyed university students over the course of three semesters. In the study, they found that religious students surveyed, on average, attended more church services and had a reduced amount of sexual activity compared to their non-religious peers. The study also was able to demonstrate that as religious attendance increased over time, sexual activity decreased. This further shows the negative correlation between religiousness and risky behaviors in adolescents.

The negative correlation between religiousness and risky behaviors is also observed in both substance use and sexual behaviors. In a longitudinal study, Mellor and Freeborn (2010) found a connection between adolescent church attendance and risky behaviors such as smoking, binge drinking, and marijuana use. They found that this connection was strongest in highly religious communities (Mellor & Freeborn, 2010). Religiousness is seen as a metric to measure if adolescents will avoid harmful substances such as alcohol and smoking (Kim-Spoon et al., 2014).

### **Religion and Conservative Attitudes about Risk Behaviors**

One potential mediator linking religiousness to risk behaviors may be conservative attitudes towards those risk behaviors. More religious adolescents tend to have more conservative attitudes towards risky behaviors than their less religious or non-religious peers (Gryczynski & Ward, 2011; Moon, 2021). In theory, this is due to religious institutions teaching doctrine that prohibits premarital sexual activity and

substance use. When it comes to sexual behaviors, religious institutions tend to teach members the importance of abstinence, and these teachings of abstinence are often practiced by believing members (Moon, 2021). Similarly, Gryczynski and Ward (2011) found that the more religious adolescents tended to have more conservative views of social norms for alcohol consumption. These more conservative views were then connected with less overall alcohol consumption (Gryczynski & Ward, 2011). The results of these studies suggest that there is a connection between adolescents' views of social norms on sex and alcohol consumption and their religiousness.

### **Conservative Attitudes and Risk Behaviors**

Adolescents with conservative attitudes against risky behaviors tend to engage in those behaviors less than their peers who do not hold such conservative attitudes (Beier, 2017; Lederman et al., 2004). If an adolescent has a more conservative attitude towards risky behaviors, then it is likely they will not engage in the behavior because they view the behavior as wrong. In a study meant to examine if adolescents view sexual behaviors as wrong engaged in sexual behaviors, it was observed that the adolescents who viewed it as wrong did in fact engage in the behavior less than their peers (Lederman et al., 2004). Similarly, Beier (2017) observed that adolescents with stronger conservative attitudes resisted peer pressure to consume alcohol better than their peers who did not have as strong of conservative attitudes. The takeaway from these studies is that there is a connection between conservative attitudes and risky behaviors in adolescents.

### **A Mediation Model**

Religious adolescents tend to have more conservative attitudes towards risky behaviors than their non-religious peers (Gryczynski & Ward, 2011; Moon, 2021). Since

religiousness is connected conservative attitudes and conservative attitudes are connected to decreased risky behaviors, then conservative attitudes may be a good mediation mechanism between religiousness and risk behaviors in adolescents. In a study involving college students, Chawla and colleagues (2007) observed drinking habits of students and compared it to the students' religious views as well as the students' views on whether drinking alcohol was a good thing to do or not. The results of this study strongly suggest that there is an indirect connection between religious views and risky behaviors mediated by the students' views on drinking alcohol (Chawla et al., 2007). Consequently, this study suggests that conservative attitudes may be a good mediator between religiousness and risky behaviors when applied to adolescents.

As visualized in Figure 1, the present study will use conservative attitudes and convictions as a mediator between religiousness and risky behaviors. Past studies have attempted similar models with different mediators but only with moderate success (Holmes & Kim-Spoon, 2016). However, there have been several studies demonstrating the direct connection between adolescent conservative attitudes and avoiding risky behaviors (Beier, 2017; Lederman et al., 2004). The proposed model will build upon findings that have observed connections religiousness, conservative attitudes, and risky behaviors in adolescents (Desmond et al., 2008). While many studies have demonstrated the direct connections between religiousness and risky behaviors (Gryczynski & Ward, 2011; Moon, 2021) as well as conservative attitudes and risky behaviors (Beier, 2017; Lederman et al., 2004), very few studies have been done that bring all three measures together.

### **The Present Study**

The current study is meant to fill the understudied gap that is conservative attitudes and convictions in adolescents as a mediator for why religiousness is connected to risk aversion behaviors in adolescents. To fill this gap in the existing literature, the present study must first demonstrate that it is in line with the existing literature. This can be achieved by measuring religiousness in adolescents and checking if it is correlated with reduced risk-taking behaviors. After confirming the present study fits with the existing literature, the study will need to demonstrate that a significant amount of the change in risky-taking behaviors is explained through conservative attitudes.

Through the culmination of the aforementioned studies, this study will have three hypotheses that will be tested. Hypothesis 1 is that there will be a positive correlation between religious attendance and conservative attitudes towards risky behaviors. Hypothesis 2 is that there will be a negative correlation between adolescent conservative attitudes and risky behaviors. Hypothesis 3 will be that adolescent conservative attitudes against risky behaviors will mediate the correlation between religious attendance and risky behaviors.

## **Methods**

### **Sample**

The sample for the proposed project is 364 adolescents ages 14-18 ( $M = 15.64$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ; 53% male; 75% European American, 9% African American, 8% Hispanic, 8% other).

### **Procedures**

For this study, parents who had teenagers from ages 15-18 were recruited from across the country through various online survey panels. These samples were not

nationally representative but were diverse convenience samples from across the nation that included participants from most states.

## **Measures**

### ***Religious Attendance***

The items used to measure religious attendance were adapted from previous large, longitudinal studies measuring religious attendance. Specifically, this measure was adapted from Smith and Denton (2005). Religious attendance was measured on a seven-point scale from “Never” to “More than once a week”. Responses were recorded along this seven-point scale.

### ***Conservative Attitudes***

Conservative attitudes on sex were measured along a seven-point scale with items adapted from Wright (2011). For conservative attitudes about sex, the question was “How much do you agree with the following: Teens should not have sex.” Responses were numbered from 1 to 7 with 1 being “Strongly Disagree” to 7 being “Strongly Agree”. Conservative attitudes on alcohol were measured on 7-point scale with items similarly adapted (Wright, 2011). For conservative attitudes on alcohol, the question was “How much do you agree with the following: Teens should not drink alcohol.” Responses were numbered from 1 to 7 with 1 being “Strongly Disagree” to 7 being “Strongly Agree”.

### ***Risk Behaviors***

Frequency of engagement in sex and alcohol behaviors was assessed using a single item for each behavior, adapted from prior research (Smith & Denton, 2005). Youth rated the frequency with which they had sexual intercourse and used alcohol using the following eight-point scale: 1 (not in the past year), 2 (once in the past year), 3 (a few

times in the past year), 4 (about once a month), 5 (a few times a month), 6 (about once a week), 7 (a few times a week), and 8 (once or more a day).

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

Analyses were computed using Stata/SE 17.0 64-bit. Tables 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the study. Table 2 shows the correlations between religious attendance, conservative attitudes, and risk behaviors. As shown on Table 2, there is a positive correlation between religious attendance and conservative attitudes towards sex ( $r = .39$ ) and alcohol ( $r = .22$ ). Table 2 also shows that conservative attitudes are negatively correlated with risky behaviors such as sex ( $r = -.49$ ) and alcohol ( $r = -.49$ ). Similarly, religious attendance is also negatively correlated with both sex ( $p = -.21$ ) and alcohol ( $p = -.16$ ).

In Stata, I ran a mediation model to examine the effects of religious attendance on risky behaviors mediated by conservative attitudes. In line with Hypothesis 1, religious attendance positively predicted conservative attitudes about sex ( $\beta = .34$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and alcohol ( $\beta = .17$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Specifically, more religious adolescents are more likely to think it is wrong to have sex and drink alcohol. Then in line with Hypothesis 2, conservative attitudes negatively predicting involvement in risky behaviors for both sex ( $\beta = -.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and alcohol ( $\beta = -.32$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In other words, adolescents who viewed having sex and drinking alcohol as wrong were less likely to engage in those behaviors. Lastly, Hypothesis 3 tested the mediation by computing the indirect effects of the previous two hypotheses. In line with our hypothesis, there were significant negative indirect effects for sex ( $\beta = -.12$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and alcohol ( $\beta = -.06$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Specifically,

religious adolescents' decreased engagement in risk behaviors is partially explained by their conservative attitudes towards risk behaviors.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the connection between religious attendance and aversion to risky behavior in adolescents mediated through conservative attitudes. As shown in the existing literature, there is a connection between religiousness and risky behaviors (Smith, 2003) as well as conservative attitudes and risky behaviors (Beier, 2017; Hardy et al., 2019). Thus, the present study had the purpose of testing if conservative attitudes are a good mediator between religiousness and risky behaviors in adolescents (Smith, 2003). I found support for all three hypotheses.

First, religiousness (operationalized as church attendance) was positively predictive of conservative attitudes towards sex and alcohol. In other words, the more adolescents attended church, the more likely they were to view ideas of teens having sex and using alcohol were wrong. This is in line with prior research connecting religiousness to conservative attitudes about risky behaviors (Gryczynski & Ward, 2011; Moon, 2021). An interesting find was that religiousness was a better predictor of conservative attitudes on sex than for conservative attitudes on alcohol.

Second, conservative attitudes were negatively predictive of engagement in risky behaviors. In other words, the more adolescents viewed sex and alcohol consumption as wrong, the less they reported engaging said behaviors. This is in line with previous research that connected conservative attitudes and risk behaviors (Beier, 2017; Lederman et al., 2004). Unlike the first leg of the model, conservative attitudes predicted risk behavior of sex and alcohol very similarly.

Lastly, religiousness was negatively predictive of risk behaviors when mediated by conservative attitudes. In other words, the total indirect effect of religiousness and conservative attitudes predicted the decrease in risk behaviors. Prior research suggested that this would be the result (Chawla et al., 2007); however, this result was found for both and sex and alcohol consumption in adolescents. It is interesting to note the difference between sex and alcohol, and that result is likely due to the difference observed in the first leg.

### **Limitations**

The present study does have some noteworthy limitations. One such limitation is that this study's data is cross-sectional and correlational. As a result of this limitation, it is not reasonable to draw conclusions about causal relationships in the data. Future studies should seek to use experimental or longitudinal methods. Further examination on this subject using longitudinal or experimental methods will aid in filling the gaps to find a potential causal relationship. Another limitation is the sample size of the study. While the sample size was large enough to test for significance, the demographics were not necessarily representative of the United States adolescents as a result. This limitation restricts the ability to generalize the results of the study. However, the study still serves as an example of a mediation model yielding significant results. Future studies should test a similar model on a broader, more representative sample in order to produce results that will generalize better.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the present study sought to fill a hole in the existing research of religiousness, conservative attitudes, and risky behavior in adolescents. Prior to the

present study, this particular field of research has been understudied (Hardy et al., 2019). As a result, there is a hole that needs to be filled. The present study demonstrates that there is a need to research further into the question of religiousness, conservative attitudes, and risky behaviors. Future studies should seek to improve upon the design of the present study in order to reduce the limitations of the present study in order to increase the generalizability. As future studies delve deeper into this understudied area of research, hopefully a better understanding of the complex issue comes to pass.

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## Appendix

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics Table*

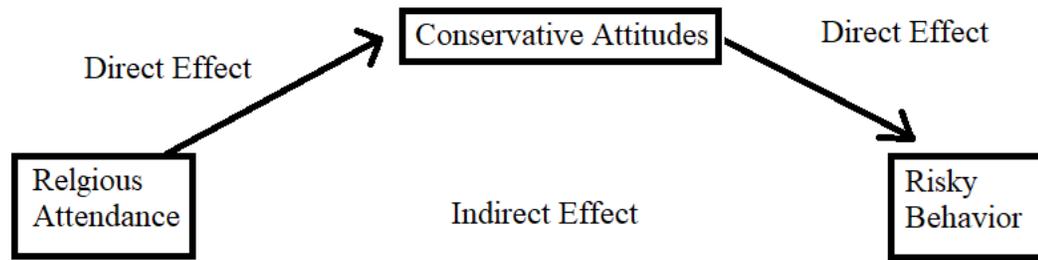
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Religious Attendance	363	3.66	2.22
Conservative Attitudes: Sex	364	5.19	1.97
Conservative Attitudes: Alcohol	363	5.64	1.76
Risky Behavior: Sex	363	1.57	1.41
Risky Behavior: Alcohol	362	1.58	1.15

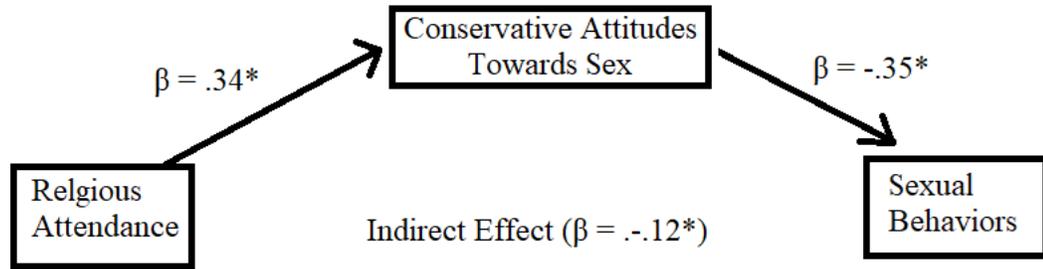
Note: *N* = 364

**Table 2***Correlations Table*

	1	2	3	4	5
1 Religious Attendance	-				
2 Conservative Attitude: Sex	.39*	-			
3 Conservative Attitude: Alcohol	.22*	.67*	-		
4 Risky Behavior: Sex	-.21*	-.49*	-.38*	-	
5 Risky Behavior: Alcohol	-.16*	-.45*	-.49*	-.56*	-

Note: \* indicates  $p < .01$ ; numbers are correlation coefficients ( $r$ ).

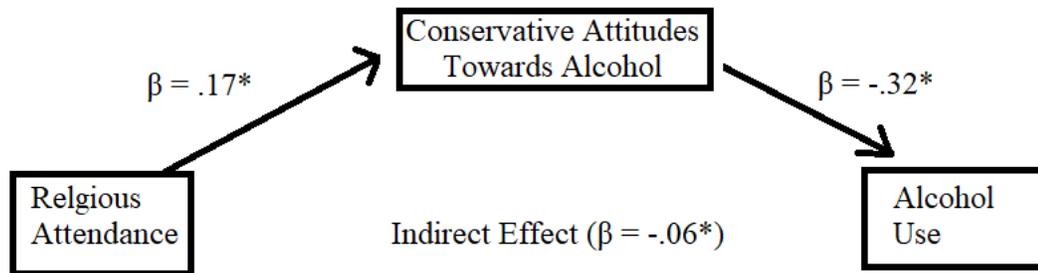
**Figure 1***Mediation Model*

**Figure 2***Mediation Model: Sex*

Note: \* indicates  $p < .01$

**Figure 3**

*Mediation Model: Alcohol Use*



Note: \* indicates  $p < .01$