

THE FELT SENSE OF EVANGELICAL PURITY CULTURE

by

Michelle Dennyse Pate

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I certify that I read and approved the content and presentation of this dissertation:

Marilyn Schlitz, Ph.D., Committee Chairperson

Date

John Elfers, Ph.D., Committee Member

Date

Kelly Yi, Ph.D., Committee Member

Date

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Abstract

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Alongside concerns for teen pregnancy and the AIDS crisis, the purity culture movement arose in the early 1990s stemming from fears within the Evangelical community regarding the breakdown of the traditional family structure. Sexual abstinence campaigns began in 1993 under the *True Love Waits* banner. Sexual purity industry programs, both religious and secular, resulted across the United States that taught adolescents any sexual activity or thought outside of heterosexual marriage was damaging and sinful. Purity culture was significant as it is estimated one out of five American youth took a purity pledge to abstain from premarital sex. A main research question guided this study: What are the lived experiences of those who grew up inside of Evangelical purity culture who took a pledge of sexual abstinence and went to great lengths to keep that pledge in a culture that is predominantly not sexually abstinent? This study captured data from the interviews of eight purity culture survivors and conducted an interpretative phenomenological analysis of the experience of having lived through strict and shaming rules of purity culture. This study investigated the psychological and spiritual issues stemming from these individuals' participation in purity culture. The result is a careful examination of the detrimental effects experienced in these women's adult lives, including anxiety and depression stemming from sexual shame and guilt. Results of this study add to the psychological literature about the *felt sense* of purity culture and provide insight into how individuals have interpreted the teaching as well as how their mental health and well-being have been impacted.

Psychological damage from sexual shame and guilt can become lifelong disabilities of anxiety, depression, and chronic posttraumatic stress. The researcher's intentions are to provide education that contributes to healthy relationships and healing from the complex problem of religious trauma.

Dedication

This body of work is dedicated to the *Exvangelical* community with much appreciation for your deep commitment to love, justice, inner peace, and common sense. May you all experience profound fulfillment and deep self-love inside this wild and crazy thing we call life.

Acknowledgements

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?
—Mary Oliver, *The Summer Day*

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This study examined the relationship between the Evangelical sexual purity/abstinence movement and the subsequent claims of depression, anxiety, and chronic posttraumatic stress that participants suffered when later attempting to navigate adult intimate relationships (Allison, 2021; Anderson, 2015; Barber & Pack, 2015; Du Mez, 2021; Finch, 2019; Greczyn, 2021; Gushee, 2020; Ingersoll, 2019; Klein, 2018; Paul, 2014; Schermer-Sellers, 2017; Valenti, 2009; Van Der Wyngaard, 2018; Winell, 2009). Purity culture, which American popular media calls the nationwide Evangelical abstinence movement, started in the early 1990s and was popular through the first decade of the 2000s. For Evangelical Christian adolescents who grew up during this time, purity culture was pervasive in their lives. Purity balls, silver rings, and virginity pledge cards were a large part of the Evangelical youth community, resulting in nearly 3 million American youth pledging to remain virgins until marriage (Anderson, 2015; Bearman & Brückner, 2001; Bersamin et al., 2005; Carpenter, 2011; Freitas, 2008; Gardner, 2011; Moslener, 2015; Valenti, 2009).

This generation's parents came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, during a time of significant change in society, where the family structure saw a considerable breakdown in traditional family values. Parents wanting to help their children avoid painful experiences turned to the Evangelical church, which had been consistently firm regarding the participation of sexual activity only within the confines of marriage. Church-going parents believed that strongly persuading youth to wait until they were married to have sex would help them avoid many of the pitfalls these parents experienced. Some youth who went through purity culture had the experience of being told they needed to abstain from *any* forms or thoughts of sexuality until their wedding night (Allison, 2021; Finch, 2019; Gushee, 2020; Greczyn, 2021; Harris, 1997; Ingersoll, 2019; Klein,

2018; Schermer-Sellers, 2017; Winell, 2009). They were given little to no education on sexuality nor psychological instruction on how to shift from zero thoughts about sexuality to an intimate and erotic sexual response with their lifetime spouse (Finch, 2019; Winell, 2009). Thus, one generation who went to excess with their own sexuality tightly restricted the next generation's sexual expression, causing pain they undoubtedly never intended to make (Anderson, 2015; Moslener, 2015).

Anderson (2013) reflected on these changes in her commentary, *Purity Culture as Rape Culture: Why the Theological Is Political*:

The purity/abstinence movement began in response to the changing social and sexual mores stemming from the sexual revolution of the 1960s through the 1970s that characterized much of second-wave feminism and the 1973 ruling of *Roe v. Wade*; as well as the rising teen pregnancy rates and the AIDS Crisis of the late 1980s to early 1990s. The return to conservatism in the 1980s saw the beginnings of a resurgence of interest in womanly purity and “biblical” gender roles. With the set gender roles of the 1950s forever upended, many conservative evangelicals scrambled for a foothold—and they found it in the concept of purity pledges and purity balls. (para. 4)

Purity pledges did have a delayed effect on sexual debut because they invoked a sense of romantic love encouraging youth to wait for marriage, but where previous studies suggested that promise breakers are not worse off with respect to self-esteem from breaking their abstinence pledges (Bearman & Brückner, 2001), the current popular literature and thousands of recent media articles tell a different story. Though databases containing comprehensive studies regarding purity culture were still lacking, a Google search of *purity culture* revealed thousands of media articles, podcasts, and videos about damaged sexual response and the inability to enjoy adult intimacy and healthy relationships. Individuals reported feelings of anxiety, depression, and long-term chronic posttraumatic stress regarding the ways that purity culture damaged them (Allison, 2021; Finch, 2019; Klein, 2018). Because of the deep feelings of dissatisfaction and betrayal from being raised in a strict sexual purity culture, many felt their sexual response and

ability to be close and intimate with a partner was compromised. Many individuals on social media websites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, have spoken out against the Evangelical church, specifically purity culture, and the many problems it has caused them. Many more are calling for trauma-informed therapists to educate themselves about purity culture and religious trauma as there is a great need for healing for this population.

There is substantial lack of qualitative scientific support regarding the long-term negative effects of purity culture. Many individual stories about the harm of purity culture were discounted and people who spoke out were criticized and belittled instead of taken seriously by people within the Evangelical church. Not being able to find understanding or healing within their church or family, many looked elsewhere to heal the confusion and hurt they felt inside. Some found assistance by going to therapy or finding new networks of friends to talk with, but many who had not found resolution felt the need to compartmentalize their pain and move forward (Allison, 2021). This part of their essence has been described as a box that needs to be unpacked someday, just not now.

The researcher endeavored to contribute to the literature by analyzing and understanding the felt experiences of individuals who made an abstinence pledge and their psychological responses to intimacy and sexual experience as they later forged adult relationships.

This dissertation outlines long-term problems that purity culture has caused people, leaving them with sexual shame, guilt, and anxiety to contend with as adults, and provides a comprehensive phenomenological study to illustrate examples of the psychological and spiritual damage that has resulted with people who grew up inside of purity culture and their subsequent difficulties with mental health, sexuality, identity, and relationships as adults.

Evangelicals Require Youth to Wait Until Marriage for Sex

Though Evangelical Christians have traditionally held strict regulations for sexual behavior, abstaining from sex until marriage was at one time a social norm; there was little conflict between the values of Christian and secular citizens. However, after the sexual revolution of the 1960s when traditional social mores were dropped in favor of a more open sexual ethic, conservative Christians became troubled about how to keep the biblical tradition of sexual activity within the confines of marriage. Because of the rising premarital sex, extramarital sex, and divorce rates, these Christians were fearful for the breakdown of the family and religious life. They were worried that their children would be swept up in the casual-sex environment, not only because of increased teen pregnancy and rising sexually transmitted infections, but also because of the emotional pain of broken relationships and the stigma of sin attached to open sexual styles within the church.

Evangelical purity culture had its start during the 1970s as a reaction against the sexual revolution of the 1960s (Anderson, 2015). Christian youth programs including Sunday school class and youth camp encouraged young Christians to abstain from sex until marriage and educated youth on the reasons to wait, which included being pleasing to God and avoiding sin, as well as the avoidance of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Josh McDowell (S. McDowell, 2017), an Evangelical educator, launched the *Why Wait?* sexual purity movement in the 1980s. His Christian book *Why Wait?: What You Need To Know About The Teen Sexuality Crisis* (J. McDowell & Day, 1988) outlines the reasons why waiting to have sex in marriage was critical to one's spiritual and sexual wellbeing and teaches readers to decline premarital sex.

In the 1970s the popular fundamentalist seminar, *Basic Youth Conflicts* with Bill Gothard, regularly filled auditoriums throughout the United States and beyond with attendance

figures as large as 10,000 people for a 1-week seminar (Bockelman, 1976). Conservative Christians were eager to hear how his seven basic principles would shield their families from the cultural upheaval of the late 1960s and early 1970s. As of 2003, Gothard's *Basic Youth Conflicts* seminars have attracted more than 2.5 million participants since the mid-1960s (Poll, 2003). In the seminar book, *Institute In Basic Youth Conflicts*, Gothard (1981) taught that if everyone would simply obey the authority above them (children to parents, wife to husband, husband to God), everyone could fit into God's plan for their lives. He encouraged parents to demand unquestioning obedience with a bright and shining countenance from their children, to exercise authority (with corporal punishment, if necessary) over their youth's lives, and to disallow relationships they believe are not deemed *Godly*. Youth were encouraged to pursue courtship over dating and to allow their parents to guide them in proper mate selection (Gothard, 1981).

A popular facet of Evangelical purity culture is complementarianism, which involves the headship of the husband and the submission of the wife within the family. Complementarian gender ideology is integral to the formation of Evangelical identity. Men are responsible for the family before God, and women are directed to surrender to their husband's authority. Belief in male headship became a distinct mark of Evangelical identity starting in the late 1970s (Stasson, 2014). Inside of this authoritarian family system, adolescents are to submit to their parents' guidance for career and dating/courtship and are expected to remain virgins until they marry.

Centerpieces of purity culture are Dr. Richard Ross and Jimmy Hester's *True Love Waits* movement, Randy and Lisa Wilson's *Purity Balls*, Denny and Deb Patton's *The Silver Ring Thing*, and Joshua Harris' seminal purity culture book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (1997). All leaders mentioned here continue to be involved in their ministries, except for Joshua Harris who after attending seminary, unpublished his books and left the Evangelical Christian faith.

State of Societal Affairs: The Early 1990s

During the 1970s and 1980s, women entered the workforce in masses, giving way to young children spending time at daycare and older children and adolescents being left to their own devices. This generation of latchkey kids found youth spending their afternoons unsupervised by adults: watching television, hanging out with their friends, drinking their parent's liquor, and having sex. Many teenagers in the 1980s to early 1990s grew up with working and/or divorced parents, leaving youth with inadequate guidance into important lifestyle choices, thus teen pregnancy rates rose dramatically. In the documentary film, *Give Me Sex Jesus* (Barber & Pack, 2015), a special 1994 news report with the U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Joycelyn Elders indicated that teenagers were physically incapable of controlling themselves. She advocated that teenagers be comprehensively educated about their sexuality (Elders as quoted in Barber & Pack, 2015). Purity culture saw its launch into mass media because of the Surgeon General's report regarding the high teenage pregnancy rates as well as the very real tragedy of the AIDS crisis which was, at the time, a death sentence to anyone who was infected through sexual relations with an infected person. Following would launch almost two decades of mass media campaigns to turn back the clock to a more innocent time of traditional family values.

The Secular Reality of Society: Statistics

While traditional Evangelical Christian theology teaches that sexual activity is to be reserved for a lifelong marriage between a man and a woman who remain virgins until their marriage, most contemporary American culture does not follow this rule. Approximately 95% of Americans aged 18–44 have premarital sex, with 77% having sex by age 20 (Finer, 2007). Nearly 50% of people of childbearing age cohabit (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2017), 35% of Americans between ages 25 and 50 have never been married (Wang, 2020), and 46% of

married people divorce their first spouse (Payne, 2018). Furthermore, data retrieved in 2020 determined that the average age of first marriage is 28 for women and 30 for men (Wang, 2020), which is 1 year older than research conducted 6 years prior (Wang & Parker, 2014). The current age to marry is more than 15 years after most adolescent's puberty begins and sexual feelings commence. It is an extremely high standard to tell a young person they need to wait to have sex until they get married when most other people in society are living quite differently. Also, even within the Evangelical church, where more people get married than in secular society, 80% of young adults participated in premarital sex (Bearman & Brückner, 2001). For those who do get married as adolescents to avoid premarital sex, the divorce rate for being incompatible with their partner and struggling to find their adult identity can be high (Allison, 2021; Klein, 2018; Schermer-Sellers, 2017).

Risky sexual behavior in adolescents is common—about half of the persons aged 15 to 19 try vaginal sex, more than half try oral sex, and about 11% try anal sex (Mosher et al., 2005). Early sexual debut correlates with the number of lifetime sexual partners—about 40% of persons aged 15 to 19 have multiple sexual partners. This proportion increases with age—about 75% of persons aged 20 to 24 have multiple sexual partners. In those aged 20 to 24, about 90% have vaginal sex, more than 80% try oral sex, and about 30% try anal intercourse (Mosher et al., 2005).

Rationale for the Research

Many young American adults are speaking out and leaving the Evangelical church under the premise of sexual abuse and false teachings of guilt, shame, and fear that they say has damaged their lives. Since the 2017 #MeToo movement, numerous people found the courage to

publicly share their experiences of sexual assault and abuse; there are a growing number of people speaking out about the unjust and cruel ways they were treated in their church as children and adolescents.

These young adults say that when they entered adulthood, they started experiencing mental health disturbances such as depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder regarding their sexuality and intimate relationships. Recent books such as *Pure: Inside The Evangelical Movement That Shamed A Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* (Klein, 2018); *You Are Your Own: A Reckoning With The Religious Trauma of Evangelical Christianity* (Finch, 2019); *Sex, God, and The Conservative Church: Erasing Shame From Sexual Intimacy* (Schermer-Sellers, 2017); and the documentary film *Give Me Sex Jesus* (Barber & Pack, 2015), have discussed the movement for the resulting sexual shame and confusion it created in numerous participants' lives. On social media venues such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, many groups exist where individuals share their experiences from church abuse under the hashtags #exvangelical and #churchtoo. People who lead these groups recommend people stop attending church and make a statement about abuse under #emptythepews. The comments about abuse are staggering and disturbing. Much more research needs to be done to satisfactorily share these narratives in the psychological literature so psychologists can fully understand the dilemma of those who feel damaged by errant teachings about biblical purity.

With Christian author and pastor Joshua Harris's recent abdication from his religious views and his public apology regarding his promotion of purity culture via his *I Survived I Kissed Dating Goodbye* documentary (Van Der Wyngaard, 2018), the movement is again in the popular media. Researchers, therapists, and former pledgers write to highlight the problems

inherent in this ideology and how it has shamed an entire generation of pledgers. People are now attempting to heal and rebuild their lives from what they say is psychological and sexual abuse (Villarreal, 2019).

Although there are many new books, media articles, and internet blogs regarding the damaging effects of purity culture, more scholarly research needs to be conducted to find feasible solutions to support ongoing mental health. This problem affects mental health, as it can disrupt healthy development for an adolescent's identity as well as a young adult's comfort with intimacy and pursuing relationships. This study builds upon the already established conversation and furthers the definition of a healthy sexual ethic including publications for today's religious institutions. Additionally, this research may contribute to the current understanding of the human sexual response regarding religious restrictions for marriage as well as the pitfalls that may occur by making an idol of the marital contract.

Research Questions

The main research question guiding this study was: What are the lived experiences of those who grew up inside of Evangelical purity culture who took a pledge of sexual abstinence and went to great lengths to keep that pledge in a culture that is predominantly not sexually abstinent? This main question is followed by subsequent questions: (a) How do individuals who participated in Evangelical purity culture describe their adolescent and young adult journey, (b) what mental health challenges and psychological and spiritual impacts resulted from the experience of purity culture and taking a pledge of sexual abstinence, and (c) what coping strategies are used to address the challenges resulting from the experience of purity culture and taking a purity pledge?

Definitions

The following is a list of terms and definitions as they pertain to this study.

Purity Culture

The purity culture movement became popular in the early 1990s as a reaction to the AIDS crisis, the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, and fears within the Evangelical community that the traditional family structure was breaking down. Created by the Southern Baptist Convention, sexual abstinence campaigns started in 1993 under the *True Love Waits* banner, which teaches teenagers and young adults to abstain from sex until marriage (Lifeway Christian Resources, 2001–2020).

Purity Pledge

Also called virginity pledge or abstinence pledge, a purity pledge is a commitment made by teenagers and young adults to refrain from sexual intercourse until marriage. It is most common in the United States within Catholic and Evangelical Christian denominations.

Sexual Abstinence

The practice of restraining oneself or strict avoidance from indulging in sexual activity outside a marital relationship.

Prosperity Gospel

A theology that teaches God rewards faith or positive thinking with blessings. This concept plays a big part in persuading females to romanticize and anticipate their future marriage in lieu of pre-marital sexual activity.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Persistent mental and emotional stress occurring because of injury or psychological shock, typically involving sleep disturbance and constant vivid recall of the experience, with

dulled responses to others and the outside world. There are reports of individuals who experience symptoms of posttraumatic stress in their adult relationships stemming from their indoctrination with Evangelical purity culture (Klein, 2018; see also Appendix D).

Traumatic Religious Experiences

Function of chronic abuses of harmful religion and the impact of severing one's connection with one's faith and as well as their faith community. It resembles Complex PTSD and is also called Spiritual Abuse (Winell, 2009).

Deconstruction

A crisis of faith that typically occurs when a person has questions or doubts about their faith that go unanswered. It is the systematic dissection of looking deeper at the belief system that a person is raised within. The result may be the loss of religious belief, or a person may attempt to salvage their faith in a new form or community.

Sex Negative Response

Critical, shameful, guilt-inducing, antagonistic, or rigid response toward human sexuality.

Sex-Positive Response

A healthy attitude towards human sexuality that values and regards consensual sexual activities as fundamentally healthy and pleasurable. Encourages sexual pleasure and connection given one's individual needs.

Background of Choice of Topic

In late 2019, the researcher heard a news broadcast about Joshua Harris, the author of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (1997). On the news broadcast, it was said that Joshua Harris announced he was not a Christian any longer and he was unpublishing his books. The researcher was intrigued by this broadcast, as it reminded her of a defining moment she had regarding the

legitimacy of the Christian life. She remembered being in a Christian bookstore in 1997 and seeing a sepia-colored book with a man holding a fedora hat over his forehead. The title of the book was *I Kissed Dating Goodbye: A New Attitude Toward Romance And Relationships*. Intrigued, she picked up the book and thought, “Why would anyone want to kiss dating goodbye?” She was 30 years old and had divorced 4 years prior; a career woman and a single parent living in the contemporary world. She stood in the bookstore and read most of the book, horrified at what she was reading. This book about courtship said that God’s best was for young people to only seek a partner when they felt they were ready to be married. Otherwise, it was best to be single and completely abstain romantically from the opposite gender. It reminded her of the weird Bill Gothard (1981) teachings she was subjected to as a teenager, where a woman was required to be submissive and unconditionally obey her authority, whether it be a father, husband, or church, and let her parents choose her husband for her and oversee the courtship.

The researcher saw dating as an important rite of passage that teaches us who we are compatible with and who to avoid. She felt frustration toward Joshua Harris, as he was restricting the Christian life even more than what she had experienced. If she had known more as a young Christian about how to date men and how to do it with wisdom, instead of the focus of being indoctrinated about staying a virgin until being married and her life to be focused on finding the perfect husband, she would have been able to think more critically about finding a spouse. She did not know how to navigate dating other than abstaining from any kind of physical contact, which was difficult to achieve in a world of amorous suitors. This moment in the bookstore was important because it underscored in the researcher that there was something off with what she had been taught. Though it was a tradition she loved and grew up respecting, being abstinent until a marital license was procured did not save people from having family or

marital problems. After her own ugly divorce, she needed to determine her values in order to create her personal relationship with God while she shaped her own life trajectory. Because she had distanced herself from the Evangelical church by 1997, she had no idea how popular Joshua Harris' book would become and how many people's lives it would influence. *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Harris, 1997) had become one of the seminal manuals for how to find God's best for one's marriage.

When she heard about Joshua Harris' defection from Christianity in 2019, she started researching his life. She learned that as a pastor he had been part of a sexual abuse cover-up that should have been reported to police, and this was part of the reason that Joshua left full-time ministry and pursued an education at seminary (Boorstein, 2015). She learned that this quest to stay a virgin until marriage had a name: *purity culture*. To date she has spent almost 3 years researching purity culture and the harm it has been reported the movement has done to people's lives. She listened to countless podcasts, watched videos, read books, had discussions and heartfelt communications with so many people who were on similar journeys and educating themselves about purity culture. The psychological literature about purity culture has started to grow but is lacking. People continue to look for understanding and healing.

The Evangelical church still believes in sexual purity and continues to teach that young people should not participate in premarital sex or seek a divorce. Some churches forbid masturbation, and most believe the LGBTQ+ community is a sinful lifestyle. Most people adhering to this message will get married young before they know who they are as individual adults or have the opportunity to explore different communities. Some do not know they will forego career advancement in lieu of family life. Others will try to remain celibate until they

marry in their late 20s when they finish their education. Though there are many who write about the fallout of purity culture, there is still much debate about what a Christian sexual ethic looks like.

Researcher's Personal Statement

This researcher can speak of the Evangelical church competently because she lived much of her youth, from ages 5 to 25 as an insider. In subsequent years she attended church intermittently while studying religious thought, history, leadership, and observing others who attended services. In the interest of full disclosure, she attended Church of the Brethren as a child (with stepmother's parents), Charismatic Christian (Jesus Movement) and Conservative Baptist Church (with mother and stepfather) as a teenager, and Non-Denominational Bible Church as an adult. She went to church sporadically throughout elementary school, extensively in high school, attended a liberal arts Christian university in her first year of college, and attended church regularly until distancing herself at the age of 25 for her own protection, as she went through a contentious divorce to gain her freedom from abuse.

The researcher was a teenager in the early 1980s before purity culture was prevalent, but she was taught was to save her virginity, and specifically their first kiss, until her wedding day when she was permanently married to her life partner. She did not believe in saving kisses for her wedding day, but she did believe at age 21 that her virginity was to stay intact until marriage; any sexual activity beyond kissing she considered wrong. Marriage did not come for her as it did for most of the friends she grew up with, and she eventually had intercourse with someone she was dating when she was nearly 22 years old. Though she was careful to not have sex while she was ovulating (she did not use birth control as that was seen as a premeditated sin), she did not like the volatility of the relationship and tried to break things off numerous times. She discovered

she was pregnant around four months after she had first had sex from a non-consensual (not agreed upon) sexual experience. She married the man despite the objection of her pastor and parents. She was under duress because of his threats to take her baby away from her, plus she had been kept naïve under the guise of biblical beliefs, especially her role as a woman was to be meek and submissive. She was young and did not think she had the resources, support, or job skills to raise her child as a single mother. The marriage was difficult to live in because of her husband's strange, cruel, and heartless attitude toward her. It was a very difficult 4 years.

She lost trust and became disenchanted with her church at age 25 after consulting several pastors about the violence she was experiencing from her husband and his continual threats to kidnap and disappear with their daughter if she ever left him, so she filed for divorce to protect herself and her daughter. She did not receive help, wise counsel, or a safe respite, but disassociation from her church because of her decision to move ahead with divorce and pursue a loving, passionate, and protective partnership with another man instead of waiting for the church elders to choose her fate.

Though she still believed in God and held her Christian beliefs, she stopped attending church regularly and because of this experience, never felt safe enough to fully be an active part of a church body again. She experienced something akin to Marlene Winell's (n.d.) concept of *Religious Trauma Syndrome*, similar to posttraumatic stress disorder, where a person does not necessarily lose their faith after a traumatic church experience but loses the capacity to participate at church and experiences feelings of isolation. She lost her home, half of her family, her friends, her church community, and her identity. She left with her daughter, her car, and some clothes. Her worldview was Evangelical Christian-based, which holds itself separate from secular society and holds it as potentially evil, so she did not know how to function well out in

the secular world at the beginning. Her saving grace was her pursuit of higher education, a career, and her strong internal sense of spirituality and commitment to make intelligent life choices. She pursued knowledge to expand her understanding and gained wisdom to refine her beliefs into a more empowered manner of living.

She was already a divorced single mother when purity culture went mainstream in 1993. She chose this topic for research because it was something that she observed but did not participate with directly. She did not believe in the narrow, strict commands of a complementarian marriage and she was leery of commitment after experiencing abuse in her marriage. She found the Christian ideal of marriage difficult to accept after experiencing so much domestic violence and emotional abuse. She was also apprehensive of getting married again as her priorities were to provide for and protect her young child who had witnessed the violence. For the first time, she experienced men in the secular world who thought nothing of having sex outside of marriage or even having a commitment with a woman in order to have sex. This orientation was directly opposed to the beliefs she grew up with, but she was fearful of being abused again inside of a marriage. The researcher wrestled with this cognitive dissonance about her fears during the entire formation of her dissertation; she finally decided this conflict may never be resolved in this lifetime and decided to focus on acceptance.

This researcher chose this study to enrich her understanding of the Christian view of sexuality as well as the pitfalls of shame, guilt, anxiety, and depression that pervade so many Christians' thought processes about sex. Her intention has been to utilize this knowledge in her therapeutic practice when working with people who have suffered religious trauma and crisis of faith. After 30 years of being divorced, she still hopes she can resolve her own hesitancy about

long-term commitment and build a long-term healthy and happy intimate relationship with a conscious, educated, and empathic partner. Personally, her own views toward relationship are as follows:

1. Having consciously explored her options, she identifies as heterosexual and monogamous.
2. She desires a close, productive, loving, and friendly relationship with a kind, evolved, and conscious partner (male).
3. She has a deep personal bias regarding marriage as a legal construct designed to take away her autonomy and make her subservient to a male. She is not amenable to her personal rights as a human to be taken or manipulated away from her, which she is concerned may happen if she marries.
4. Having an egalitarian, monogamous relationship with a male is the most acceptable option to her.
5. She has been unable to reconcile her reservations about marriage with her desires to marry even through years of conscious study. She remains undecided she will ever be legally married again during her lifetime.
6. She is not currently in a personal relationship and will only accept a positive-minded, thoughtful, and healthy partner.
7. She has no judgement toward anyone who wishes to be married and wishes them happiness and success in their chosen lifestyle.
8. She seeks to learn from other people what their values are and how they approach the aspects of marriage in today's society.

Transpersonal Applications for Sexuality and Faith

There is limited research on the transpersonal aspects (ontological; mind-body; spiritual-sexual; spiritual-traumatic; peak, valley, and plateau; alternative spiritual practices; and archetypal energy) of people's relationships with purity culture and their resulting self, relational, and faith responses. The researcher believes that the transpersonal aspects of spirituality and the soul are detrimentally affected because of purity culture, as are the religious interests and the sacred journey of sexual oneness with a lifetime partner.

This study adds to the transpersonal literature in its attempt to gather wisdom for a healthy and positive spiritual-sexual ethic for future comprehensive sexual education programs, while considering the seemingly irreconcilable differences of both sexual camps—which are polarized between comprehensive protection strategies for sexual activity and being 100% sexually abstinent until marriage.

An overview of the literature on people's interactions with the abstinence pledge and purity culture provided the researcher with a theory that people are detrimentally affected by the teachings of abstinence via purity culture. The act of pledging to wait for sexual activity until marriage without having individualized from the family of origin, understanding societal rites of passage and critical transitions, nor post-puberty natural biological responses, has caused many to experience extreme guilt and shame about their sexual feelings, resulting in long-term anxiety, depression, and chronic posttraumatic stress. The results of this study contribute to the current literature on traumatic religious experiences, religious and faith-based healing practices, purity culture, abstinence, and building a healthy and positive sexual ethic.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review's purpose is an outcomes-oriented review, which also deals with theories related to the purity culture phenomenon being investigated. The history of sexual activity after World War II and during the 1950s, the changing sexual mores because of the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s, and the problems with teenage pregnancy and the AIDS crisis of the 1990s are summarized. The resulting Evangelical purity culture and sexual education programs are outlined as well as problematic issues inherited with purity culture, specifically involving learned feelings of shame, guilt, fear and anxiety, child abuse, and religious trauma.

Traditional Sexual Mores

Historically, premarital sex was considered a moral issue that was taboo in American culture and religions including Christianity. Evangelical Christianity taught that premarital abstinence was the biblical way to honor God. Traditional marriage was the norm, as there was little way to prevent pregnancy before the birth control pill was developed in the 1960s and women were chastised if they had a baby out of wedlock. Societal rules in mainstream America were for women to be sexually chaste and wait for marriage to have sexual intercourse (Dobson, 1970/1992; Friedan, 1963; Moslener, 2015; Yalom, 2001).

World War II and the 1950s

During World War II, women managed much of the American workforce as men were overseas fighting for freedom. When soldiers came back from war, women were readily displaced from their jobs, got married, and settled into domestic life. While men went to work, the women kept the home and birthed children (Friedan, 1963). Families presented to society as functional and happy living in suburban bliss, though the general mood after World War II was fearful because of the Cold War (Moslener, 2015). Behind closed doors families experienced

dysfunction, as many men who were soldiers now had posttraumatic stress, experiencing war flashbacks and problems with alcoholism while being the main breadwinner in the family.

Effective birth control was not available and with men at home from war the birth rate rose; good jobs for women were lacking and alcoholism rose (Friedan, 1963). This conforming society was the environment that the Baby Boomers grew up, which paved the way for the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s (Allyn, 2001).

There is a common perception that most of those who came of age before the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s abstained from premarital sex and that it is necessary to revert to the behaviors of that earlier time to eliminate the problems of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. However, research has questioned whether such a chaste period ever existed. Statistics show that only 11% of all people who grew up in the 1950s abstained from sex before marriage (Coontz, 1992). It was merely customary to say one did. Nevertheless, because society supported marriage and the family during this time, the marriage rate remained high, and most people stayed married for life.

Sexual Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s

The Sexual Revolution challenged traditional codes of behavior related to interpersonal relationships and human sexuality became more open and unstructured. Feminists and gay liberationists confronted sexuality publicly and gained traction in society. Sexual liberation included the increased acceptance of sexual behavior outside of traditional, heterosexual, and monogamous marriage. Allyn (2001) stated that the 1960s also included the normalization of contraception and the birth control pill, nudity in public, pornography, premarital sex, homosexuality, masturbation, and the legalization of abortion.

The Baby Boomer generation rebelled against conformist society by growing their hair, burning their bras, cohabitating without marriage, and living in communes. The children of World War II war veterans countered what they saw—the hypocrisy and false conformity of their parents who created an image for public life and displayed contrary behaviors behind closed doors, with alcoholism and violence stemming from posttraumatic stress (Allyn, 2001).

Those who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s decided they were not going to keep their family's lies and secrets but were committed to living life more authentically and honestly by pledging to tell the truth about their home life (Allyn, 2001). Thus, the Sexual Revolution changed the dynamic of relationships considerably and allowed people to enter into dialogue regarding the meaning and worth of sex outside procreation.

The distribution of the birth control pill in the early 1960s and the passing of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, gave women reproductive freedom and the beginnings of personal and social autonomy. The birth rate plummeted and unencumbered by children, many women began flooding into the workforce and getting divorced in record numbers.

The Problems with Teenage Sex in the 1980s

The Sexual Revolution in the United States significantly changed attitudes and behavior toward sexuality. Where sexuality was socially repressed in the 1950s, it was greatly expressed in the 1960s. Because of the increased prevalence of prosperity, feminism, and contraception, young women's career prospects had broadened, and teenage pregnancy rates fell. The attitude of many parents in the 1960s and 1970s was to teach their teens to make good decisions, thus avoiding a pregnancy. Teenage pregnancy had been on a long-term decline since the late 1950s, but the rates steeply started to climb in the late 1980s through 1991 (Ventura et al., 2001). The economic conditions of the 1980s had a huge impact on many teenagers who saw their parents

lose jobs and have severe financial issues. Sex became commonplace among teenagers, yet fewer than 60% had taken sexuality education classes by the time they graduated high school. Access to abortions, health clinics, sex education, and birth control programs diminished because of budget cuts (Becklund, 1993). Teens also experienced high levels of sexually transmitted infections (STI). Approximately 19 million new STI cases were reported per year and about half of them were in young persons aged 15 to 24 (Malholtra, 2008).

From 1987 to 1991, rising teen pregnancy and STI rates paved the way for the debut of abstinence programs and Evangelical purity culture. Though it was commonly known that condoms and oral contraceptives reduced the risk for pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection, they didn't eliminate the risk for emotional and psychological harm. Malholtra (2008) stated that the only certain way to avoid the consequences of the Sexual Revolution was sexual abstinence outside a mutually monogamous lifelong relationship with an uninfected partner. Members of the Evangelical church who had experienced heartbreak and broken relationships concluded that the only certain way for their children to avoid disappointments they experienced was to teach them to be sexually abstinent until marriage (Allison, 2021; Anderson, 2015; Harris, 1997; Moslener, 2015; Klein, 2018; Schermer-Sellers, 2017).

True Love Waits

In response to the high teen pregnancy rates in the early 1990s, Dr. Richard Ross and Jimmy Hester, supported by the Southern Baptist Convention, birthed *True Love Waits* (TLW), a Christian-based socio-spiritual abstinence program that allowed youth to show the world that they *could* control themselves as they pledged to wait until marriage to have sexual relations. The very first meeting of TLW consisted of 53 teenagers standing before a group of youth

pastors stating their pledges to remain virgins until marriage (Colter, 2013). The attending youth pastors took the message back to their churches where the movement spread quickly. The TLW pledge stated:

Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, my future mate, and my future children to be sexually abstinent from this day until the day I enter a biblical marriage relationship. (Sargent, 2011, p. 33)

TLW soon became an international movement. The largest American display of pledges occurred in 1994 at a TLW rally, where 210,000 abstinence pledge cards were displayed on the National Mall between the Capitol Building and the Washington Monument and 25,000 youth attended (Barber & Pack, 2015). That same year the TLW movement was launched in Uganda, where the percentage of people living with HIV/AIDS, which was above 30% in some areas, was reduced to 6.7% of the country's 25 million people by 2006 (Gusman, 2013). Media interest of the movement continued to rise, as over 400 national and international media to date inquired about TLW including *Newsweek*, *Rolling Stone*, *Teen Magazine*, *Family Circle*, *Life Magazine*, *The Phil Donohue Show*, and many newspapers and radio stations. In 1995, 15 million people were watching *Nightline* when Richard Ross appeared to discuss sexual issues among teenagers in America (Lifeway Christian Resources, 2001–2020).

TLW has made a big impact on American youth. It is unknown how many adolescents have made virginity pledges, but one estimate is that the figure is well over 3 million youth and may be as high as one fifth of all American adolescents between 12 and 17 years of age (Martino et al., 2008). TLW produces and distributes the sexual purity message to this day.

Purity Rings and The Silver Ring Thing

The purity ring was a popular facet of Evangelical purity culture. Youth who made a purity pledge would often wear a ring to publicly signify their commitment to abstinence. Rings

had different designs on them, such as a rose or heart, and were often given to the youth by a parent (Allison, 2021; Bolz-Weber, 2019; Klein, 2018; Moslener, 2015; Schermer-Sellers, 2017).

The Silver Ring Thing is a worldwide Christian ministry geared toward adolescents that uses rock and hip-hop music events that promote sexual abstinence. At these events, adolescents hear a sermon about the importance of saving sex for marriage and obtain a silver purity ring to wear as an outward symbol of their commitment to sexual purity. *The Silver Ring Thing* was created in 1995 by Denny and Deb Pattyn, an Evangelical Christian youth minister and wife team, to combat the rising rates of sexually transmitted infection and teenage pregnancy. To start their ministry, Pattyn and his wife traveled to Mexico where they bought several silver rings and started teaching abstinence to their youth group. Their ongoing commitment is to help protect adolescents from what they see is the American obsession with harmful (i.e., unbiblical) sexual behavior stemming from their own experiences of promiscuity from the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Evangelical groups teach youth to avoid the shame and guilt of sexual misfortune by waiting for marriage and are ongoingly encouraged that the promise of amazing marital sex is worth the wait. In the 2000s, the rings were worn by several celebrities, young actors, and pop stars including Jessica Simpson, Justin Bieber, Miley Cyrus, Demi Lovato, Selena Gomez, and the Jonas Brothers. In January 2019, Silver Ring Thing changed their name to *Unaltered Ministries* and expanded their purity message to help students experience fullness of life and human flourishing through God (Unaltered Ministries, n.d.).

Purity Culture Handbook: Joshua Harris—I Kissed Dating Goodbye

In 1997, a 21-year-old man, Joshua Harris, published the informal guide to purity culture: *I Kissed Dating Goodbye: A New Attitude Toward Romance and Relationships* (Harris, 1997), which sold over a million copies and became the go-to manual on how to seek and conduct a

biblical Christian relationship. Harris advocated not only refraining from all forms of physical contact, but also from dating, which in his opinion only led to sin and broken heartedness.

Harris (1997) encouraged adolescents and young adults to not only abstain from physical and sexual contact, but to seek courtship toward marriage instead of dating or close friendship with members of the opposite sex. Harris advocated for “courting,” which should only begin when youths felt they were ready to become married. Harris also encouraged adolescent females to dress and act modestly to not cause males to have lustful thoughts about them. Adolescent boys were told their sexual thoughts and impulses were sinful and dangerous (Klein, 2018; Valenti, 2009). After receiving criticism about the harm people said they experienced with his message, Harris reconsidered the premise of his book in the documentary *I Survived I Kissed Dating Goodbye* documentary (Van Der Wyngaard, 2018) and publicly apologized to his audience by saying he was unpublishing his books. A year later, Harris pursued divorce and renounced his faith. Harris continued to publicly communicate with his former readers and apologize for any harm his views may have caused.

The Promotion of Abstinence Programs

A key institutional practice in the 1990s and 2000s, purportedly addressing nonmarital pregnancies and STIs, was the promotion of sexual abstinence until marriage (Paik et al., 2016). The abstinence movement in the United States, as a sector of the Christian Right, advocated abstinence before marriage and linked abstinence to Evangelical Christian morality, sexual purity, and heterosexual marriage (Williams, 2011). Advocates of abstinence are critical of what they see as an over-permissive, hypersexualized youth culture, and they defend sexual abstinence until marriage as a central component in a wider program of moral reform (Rosenstein, 2009). Religiosity (i.e., higher levels of spiritual connectedness, a strong relationship with God, and use

of spiritual coping) is associated with delayed sexual activity and reduction in alcohol use and illicit drug use among adolescents. Religious involvement, such as church attendance, is associated with delaying sexual intercourse and with fewer sexual partners (Boonstra, 2008; Murray et al., 2007).

Effects of Purity Culture on Sexual Abstinence

Purity culture teachings made an impact on adolescents, but the study results were mixed. Purity pledges resulted in a delay for sexual debut (Martino et al., 2008). Though the abstinence teachings of purity culture significantly delayed first intercourse for many teenagers; in many cases, purity pledges did not seem to have a long-term effect. At least 88% of adolescents who took pledges had sex before they were married (Bearman & Brückner, 2001). Approximately 12% of girls and young women in the United States pledged abstinence, yet most broke their pledges and engaged in first intercourse before marriage (Paik et al., 2016). In the absence of a pledge, it was estimated that 42.4% of virgins with characteristics indicating an inclination to pledge, initiated intercourse within 3 years; in the presence of the pledge, 33.6% of such youth-initiated intercourse. The choice to make a virginity pledge was an effective means of delaying sexual intercourse initiation among those inclined to pledge without influencing other sexual behaviors (Martino et al., 2008). Five years after making their pledge, 82% of pledgers denied ever making the purity pledge (Rosenbaum, 2009).

Other studies suggested that females who made purity pledges did not use sexual protection (Paik et al., 2016; Rosenbaum, 2009). Among those who had sex within 3 years of their pledge, pledging was unassociated with condom use (Martino et al., 2008). Because girls and young women were not taught ways to protect themselves as they would be taught in comprehensive sex education (i.e., condoms), they were at greater risk of nonmarital and

unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (Bearman & Brückner, 2001). There were few statistical differences between pledge breakers and non-pledgers in STIs and nonmarital pregnancies (Brückner & Bearman, 2005; Paik et al., 2016; Rosenbaum, 2009).

Adolescent Sex Education: 1980s to 2010s

Since 1981, the United States federal government has spent over \$2.2 billion on ineffective and shaming abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. These programs often prohibit teaching young people about the benefits of condoms and contraception and fail to address the needs of young people who are already sexually active, may one day be sexually active, are survivors of sexual abuse, and who are LGBTQ+ youth (Siecus, 2019).

Abstinence-Only Sex Education

The first government-backed abstinence programs had strict criteria that educators were only allowed to teach students to abstain from sexual relations until marriage, which meant zero instruction on contraception to avoid sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. These programs were meant to discourage adolescent sexual activity. *Abstinence education* programs that promoted abstinence-only-until marriage—now termed *sexual risk avoidance* by proponents—are now described as being scientifically and ethically problematic. They were said to systematically ignore or stigmatize many young people and did not meet their health needs (Gutmacher Institute, 2017).

However, advocates for abstinence-only education are gravely concerned about the deadly risks of sexually transmitted diseases even when condoms are used (Huber, 2012). Condoms are not 100% effective, which means there is a chance of pregnancy or STI. The Planned Parenthood website (2020) stated that using condoms perfectly with every sex act is 98% effective at preventing pregnancy. But with real-life lack of perfect use, condoms are about

85% effective, which means that 15 out of 100 people who use condoms as their only birth control method will get pregnant each year (Planned Parenthood, 2020). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC, 2016) website encouraged abstinence and monogamy, and stated that consistent and correct use of male latex condoms can reduce (though not eliminate) the risk of sexually transmitted disease transmission. To achieve the maximum protective effect, condoms must be used both consistently and correctly. The most reliable ways to avoid transmission of sexually transmitted diseases are to abstain from sexual activity or to be in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with an uninfected partner (CDC, 2016).

In American policy and programs, efforts promoting sexual abstinence until marriage increased during the early 2000s but ended when it became unclear whether establishing such behavior as normative was a realistic public health goal (Finer, 2007). Federal abstinence-only funding did not affect adolescent birthrates overall but displayed a perverse effect, increasing adolescent birthrates in conservative states. Adolescent pregnancy–prevention and sexuality education funding eclipsed this effect, reducing adolescent birthrates in those states (Fox et al., 2019).

Researchers have testified that abstinence-only-until-marriage programs are ineffective at getting young people to delay sexual initiation, nor are they effective at reducing teen pregnancies, HIV, and other STIs. Therefore, an end to federal funding for programs has been called for and the funds to instead be spent on already proven effective comprehensive sexuality education (Siecus, 2019). The millions of dollars spent on abstinence-only education did not affect adolescent birthrates, though conservative states that experienced the greatest burden of adolescent births were the most responsive to changes in sexuality education-funding streams (Fox et al., 2019).

According to the Guttmacher Institute (2017), abstinence-only programs are politically supported by conservative family values and will be funded whenever there is a majority of Republicans in office (Donovan, 2017). However, according to the president of the National Abstinence Education Foundation (as cited in Huber, 2012), the majority of Democrat parents support abstinence-only education as well. Recently in the California media, parents protested the current Healthy Acts sexual education curriculum stating it goes too far (Chiotakis, 2020).

Comprehensive Sex Education

Comprehensive sex education, which emphasizes the benefits of abstinence while also teaching about contraception and disease-prevention methods, has been proven to reduce rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease (STD) infection (Starkman & Rajani, 2002). Though comprehensive sex education has historically lacked funding by the federal government, it is more effective than abstinence-only education. Federal funding for adolescent sexual health programming has shifted away from abstinence-only-until-marriage programs and toward more comprehensive programming intended to prevent pregnancy, HIV, and other STIs among adolescents (Donovan, 2017).

Research shows that comprehensive sex education programs are more effective than abstinence-only programs. Not only is comprehensive sex education medically accurate, but it is also age-affirming (Donovan, 2017). In a review of both comprehensive and abstinence-only programs, about two-thirds of comprehensive programs showed strong evidence that they positively affect young people's sexual behavior, including both delaying initiation of sex and increasing condom and contraceptive use among important groups of youth (Kirby, 2008). Strong evidence suggests that approaches to sex education that include information about both contraception and abstinence help young people to delay sex, have healthy relationships, and

avoid STDs and unintended pregnancies when they do become sexually active. Many of these programs result in delaying sexual debut, reducing frequency of sex and number of sexual partners, increasing condom or contraceptive use, and reducing sexual risk-taking (Guttmacher Institute, 2017).

Carter (2012) analyzed the sex education laws and policies by state to determine the extent to which the state emphasized abstinence in its sex education program. States were assigned ordinal values from zero to three in four categories of emphasis: no provision (0), abstinence covered (1), abstinence promoted (2), and abstinence stressed (3). Data analysis showed that the more abstinence was stressed the higher the rates of teen pregnancy and births. Of the four approaches the most effective was Level 1, which included comprehensive sex or HIV education (or both) and covered contraception, condom use, and abstinence. Teaching about contraception was not associated with an increased risk of adolescent sexual activity or STD. Adolescents who received comprehensive sex education had a lower risk of pregnancy than adolescents who received abstinence-only or no sex education (Kohler et al., 2008).

Jemmott et al. (2010) developed an abstinence sex education program and evaluated their program over several months. This course was not designed to teach students to abstain from sexual relations until marriage, but to delay sexual behavior until adolescents were older and more prepared to cope with the psychological and emotional issues connected with sexual activity. It appeared that a successful approach to delaying sexual activity was to focus on developing positive attitudes about abstinence and to emphasize the gains from delaying sexual activity, rather than trying to scare students about the dangers of sex (Montemayor, 2018).

According to the Guttmacher Institute (2017), leading public health and medical professional organizations, including the American Medical Association; the American Academy

of Pediatrics; the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists; the American Public Health Association; the Health and Medicine Division of the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (formerly the Institute of Medicine); and the American School Health Association and the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine all support comprehensive sex education. A 2007 study in California reported that over 89% of all parents supported comprehensive sex education that includes abstinence messages as well as information on birth control and condoms (Constantine et al, 2007).

The Problems with Purity Culture

The biggest problems resulting from purity culture were the shaming messages embodied by some participants and the resulting anxiety, depression, and chronic posttraumatic stress former participants experienced as they pursued adult relationships (Finch, 2019; Klein, 2018; Schermer-Sellers, 2017). Many people who were taught to abide by purity culture felt ill-equipped to handle intimate or sexual relationships, as many were told to not even think about sex until marriage (Bolz-Weber, 2019; Greczyn, 2021; Gushee, 2020; Klein, 2018; Schermer-Sellers, 2017). The assumption that one should never have sexual thoughts when attempting to choose a lifetime spouse is deeply problematic and potentially emotionally traumatic. A person's nervous system registers an emotional trauma as a physical trauma (Van Der Kolk, 2015); thus, many purity pledgers' sexual responses became hindered in their adult relationships (Finch, 2019; Klein, 2018; Schermer-Sellers, 2017; Winell, 2009).

The worldview within some Evangelical environments is directly opposed to contemporary society, which is often taught to be evil and sinful. Young females are taught to be modest, self-conscious, and hypervigilant about not having a negative, lustful effect on males (Schermer-Sellers, 2017), as well as to constantly be on the outlook for sin and danger from the

non-Christian world (Klein, 2018). The following thought processes can be paralyzing to many young women and can make them unable to choose a lifetime partner effectively:

- Inherent in purity culture is the promise that if one obeys the high standards of purity culture teachings, one will be rewarded with an exceptional spouse who will give them a picture-perfect Christian marriage and make their dreams come true (Harris, 1997).
- As purity culture participants come of age and attempt to form adult relationships, many are deeply disappointed when that wonderful spouse does not materialize and give them that wonderful life they have long prayed for (Bolz-Weber, 2019; Schermer-Sellers, 2017).
- Religious beliefs are powerful, especially when programmed into a child or adolescent brain. Many people in younger developmental phases are unable to think abstractly about their life long-term. They are not yet at the maturity level to choose a partner effectively (Schermer-Sellers, 2017).

Negative Effects of Purity Culture

The following list denotes some (of the many) negative effects of purity culture as obtained from published scholarship:

- Modesty is enforced as wearing clothing in a way to conceal the shape of the female form. Adolescent girls are taught to wear conservative clothing to hide their newly developed curves in the effort to not incite male lust, which is seen as weak and bad (Allison, 2021; Klein, 2018).
- Adolescent girls are instructed to shut down any sexual thoughts because that is what leads to sinful sexual behavior (Harris, 1997; Schermer-Sellers, 2017). They are

taught that males have a difficult time controlling their sexuality and it is the female's responsibility to keep the male's thoughts pure by acting demurely to not provoke boys into a lustful state (Allison, 2021).

- The passage from the Bible that spoke to “Not letting your brother stumble” (New International Version, 1978/2011, Romans 14:13-23) is taken out of context and attributed to sexuality, when it was originally attributed to a person's relationship with food and being respectful of another's spiritual eating practices (Klein, 2018).
- Females are taught to fear male attention. The fear of a male's out-of-control sexual interest is perpetuated within Evangelical communities that prize purity and sexual abstinence. Females are blamed for any male's sexual attention. (Allison, 2021)
- Young people are told that if they do not have pre-marital sex, God will reward them with a perfect and awesome loving spouse with whom they will have great sex and a great life (Harris, 1997). This is a form of the prosperity gospel that is not biblical.
- Young women are not taught to own and develop their own identity, nor to be autonomous outside of a permanent relationship with a male. They are also uninformed about their bodies, sexual response, how to protect themselves against pregnancy and STDs, and the warning signs of unhealthy relationships (Klein, 2018; Paul, 2014).
- Young women are greatly disempowered. Purity culture indirectly encourages women to construct themselves as sexual property, becoming most literally the sexual property of their fathers and their husbands (Fahs, 2010). Purity culture promotes a patriarchal structure where women are treated as second-class citizens and only worthy because of their role as wife and mother.

- Adolescent girls who participate in sexual activity are often left with guilty feelings for acting on their feelings where the boys are not. Teenage girls within the Evangelical movement are 92% more likely to feel guilty about sexual behavior than their male counterparts (Regnerus, 2007).
- Young women absorb many harmful feelings about their bodies (Allison, 2021; Barr, 2021; Finch, 2019; Johnston, 2021; Klein, 2018; Schermer-Sellers, 2017). They are made to feel as if their bodies are somehow corrupt and that their sexual drive is supposed to have only one form and appropriate outlet, which is being a wife and mother.
- Young women are taught throughout their childhood and adolescence that sex is a corrupting influence that will taint every aspect of their lives (Finch, 2019). Sex should be avoided at all costs, but on the night of their wedding, they must suddenly embrace their sexuality, which is now in the approved parameters (Klein, 2018). There is no structure in place to help young women (or men) deal with the sudden shift in sexual mentality. For all the talk of saving sex for marriage, they are seldom taught what to do when that event occurs. The emotional dissonance is staggering (Sargent, 2011).

Harmful Teachings: Induced Shame, Guilt, Fear, and Disgust about Sexuality

In many abstinence-education classes, adolescents are only taught the dangerous parts of sexuality, such as getting STIs or having an unwanted pregnancy, but they are not taught the positive, powerful, and intimate aspects of adult sexuality that are critical to a long-lasting and satisfying marital relationship (Schermer-Sellers, 2017).

Within Evangelical youth groups across the country, strong metaphors of sexual impurity: chewed-up gum, a spit-upon cookie, and a flower with lost petals are utilized to invoke disgust about pre-marital sexual activity and fear that one will no longer be desirable as a spouse if they participate in any form of premarital sexual contact (Freitas, 2008; Gardner, 2011; Klement & Sagarin, 2017; Moon & Reger, 2014; Schermer-Sellers, 2017). In many Evangelical communities, sexual purity encompasses not only abstaining from intercourse before marriage, but also abstaining from sexual touching, sexual and romantic thoughts, pornography, masturbation, and even actions known to lead to sexual arousal such as kissing and handholding (Harris, 1997; Schermer-Sellers, 2017). These restrictions cause some people to feel deeply shameful and guilty about their natural sexual responses and make them unable to enjoy physical intimacy in their relationships. In many Evangelical churches, purity culture remains strong to this day.

Toxic Childhood Abuse: Sexual, Physical, and Emotional

Numerous adults whose lives were shaped by purity culture have matured into adults who are exploring the damage that purity culture has caused them (Allison, 2021; Finch, 2019; Greczyn, 2021; Ingersoll, 2019; Johnston, 2021; Klein, 2018; Winell, 2009). Many are beginning to share their stories of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse as well as the harm their experience with purity culture has done (and continues to do) to their sexuality and adult relationships. Many blogs, websites, and groups on social media address the very real, debilitating sexual shame and guilt that participants experience in their personal lives as the result of purity culture. Valenti (2009), author of *The Purity Myth*, argued that forced virginity can cause mental disorders because it teaches young women that their morality is dependent on their sexuality. She asserted, “Evangelical Christianity's sexual purity movement is traumatizing

many girls and maturing women haunted by sexual and gender-based anxiety, fear, and physical experiences that sometimes mimic the symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)” (p. 9). Likewise, Ortiz (2019) summarized, “Purity culture contains messages that evoke shame and guilt, prescribe specific gender roles that have been found to result in negative consequences for those involved, and promote idealization of sexuality that may lead to unrealistic expectations” (p. 124). Additionally, in her book *Pure*, Klein (2018) stated that she and her childhood friends had “nightmares, panic attacks, and paranoia about their own bodies and sexual natures” (p. 8).

Critical to this study, and part of this researcher's hypothesis, is that childhood sexual, physical, and emotional abuse is a major reason that people experience sexual anxiety, depression, and chronic posttraumatic stress in their adult lives, and that religious influences make this problem exponentially larger because teens are caught in a double bind regarding being told to be sexually pure even after the experience of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. The prevalence of childhood sexual abuse is problematic to the concept of sexual purity because it is often hidden by adults and blamed on the child who carries the guilt and shame. With a harmful or dysfunctional caregiver, the child loses their own sense of value and cannot see the fault lies with their harmful or dysfunctional parent. The parent does not demonstrate boundaries, so the child does not grow up learning how to develop their own boundary systems (Mellody et al., 2011). This can make the child vulnerable to further abuse as they grow into maturity. The authoritarian methods of parenting often go unchecked in church-attending families and this can result in long-term physical, sexual, and emotional harm (Winell, 2009). Some researchers have asserted that people who grew up in purity culture experienced a form of sexual abuse (Allison, 2021; Schermer-Sellers, 2017).

Sexual abuse pervades American society in several forms. In a study conducted by Finkelhor et al. (2014), 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 20 boys were victims of child sexual abuse, and over the course of a lifetime, 28% of U.S. youth ages 14 to 17 are sexually victimized. Another analysis of studies' data suggested the child sexual abuse prevalence rate for girls is 10.7% to 17.4% and the rate for boys is 3.8% to 4.6% for abuse that includes physical contact (Townsend & Rheingold, 2013). Three out of four adolescents who are sexually assaulted are victimized by a person they know well (Kilpatrick et al., 2003). These figures do not reflect the countless numbers of physical and emotional abuses suffered in silence by children because of abusive people in their lives.

Though nearly every American health organization has condemned the use of corporal punishment on children and said it causes not just physical but psychological harm in children (B. Smith, 2012), over 60% of children between the ages of 2–14 worldwide have been subjected to physical punishment by their parents or other caregivers. In some countries, almost all students surveyed reported being physically punished by school staff (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). Christian authors have advocated the practice of corporal punishment on children. Christian-education books such as *To Train Up A Child* (Pearl & Pearl, 1994), *Institute for Basic Youth Conflicts Handbook* (Gothard, 1981), and *Dare to Discipline* (Dobson, 1970/1992) encouraged parents to assert their control and authority through physical discipline.

Inside of Christianity there is a core belief that people are basically bad or sinful. Therefore, human errors are interpreted as sins instead of as innocent mistakes and children are disciplined through shame (Winell, 2009). What Christian authors seemed unaware of was some parents lacked self-control when they were angry, especially those who grew up in abusive

households, and were likely to not follow appropriate guidelines of care as were illustrated in the books. Countless stories of church-attending parents beating their children harmfully with belts and paddles causing welts and bruises were published through popular literature and social media. Also, three deaths of children are attributed to the teachings of *To Train Up A Child* (Pearl & Pearl, 1994). The spanking literature showed that corporal punishment was harmful to children's development and other forms of discipline should be used, only utilizing light spanking as a last resort if it was ever necessary in response to extreme disobedience. Many studies showed that physical punishment can lead to aggression, antisocial behavior, physical injury, and mental health problems for children (B. Smith, 2012). These studies showed that toxic family and church behaviors traumatize children and can detrimentally affect the trajectory of a person's life.

Embodied Trauma from Toxic Christianity

People may experience religious trauma stemming from toxic forms of authoritarian religions. Stepping away from one's faith and church community can be traumatizing, as people are left feeling vulnerable, lonely, and confused without their regular social connections. Dr. Marlene Winell (2009), author of the book, *Leaving The Fold: A Guide For Former Fundamentalists and Others Leaving Their Religion*, defined the term "Religious Trauma Syndrome" (Winell, n.d., para. 1) on her website devoted to recovery from harmful religion:

Religious Trauma Syndrome is the condition experienced by people who are struggling with leaving an authoritarian, dogmatic religion and coping with the damage of indoctrination. They may be going through the shattering of a personally meaningful faith and/or breaking away from a controlling community and lifestyle. The symptoms of Religious Trauma Syndrome compare most easily with PTSD or Chronic PTSD, which results from experiencing or being confronted with death or serious injury and causing feelings of terror, helplessness, or horror. (para. 1)

Survivors experience negative emotional states, intrusive thoughts, impaired social functioning, and other difficulties. Deep loneliness may set in after severing one's connection with one's faith and church community. People may feel the effects of leaving their religion as physical sensations, emotional states, cognitive attitudes, and epistemic commitments that are the phenomenal experience of posttraumatic distress (Winell, 2009).

People leaving their faith as the result of traumatic events often experience a deep shame that can paralyze them (Winell, 2009), triggering them into a state of fight, flight, or freeze (Allison, 2021). These individuals feel a sense of brokenness and even a deep shattering inside their psyche that leaves them barely able to go through the motions of life. Many do not have the internal resources to understand what happened to them, and therefore blame themselves. This sense of posttraumatic stress (PTS) can live inside a person affecting their life for years to come. Brison (2002) explained, “Many survivors describe this experience as a fragmentation of the self—an inability to integrate past and present into a coherent narrative, to fully inhabit one's body, to cope with the world, or to imagine a future that includes oneself” (p. 68). Exposure to reminders of the religious trauma can elicit pain all over again, making life unbearable at times (Winell, 2009). Repeated exposure to triggers and the intrusive memories that they evoke can retraumatize the victim and make recovery even more difficult (Van Der Kolk, 2015). These triggers are especially problematic around sexuality because it is an area where many people raised in purity culture were shamed deeply. This shame affects a person's ability to connect intimately with another and sustain a relationship. With sexual activity and touch, the body re-experiences old feelings, memories, visions, etc. that are stored in the body but usually are unavailable to the individual through rational thought processes (Underland-Rosow, 1995).

Klein (2018), author of the book, *Pure*, equated the aftermath of purity culture to being a survivor of war. She stated,

Evangelical Christianity's sexual purity movement is traumatizing girls and maturing women haunted by sexual and gender-based anxiety, fear, and physical experiences that sometimes mimic the symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder. Based on our nightmares, panic attacks, and paranoia, one might think that my childhood friends and I had been to war. And in fact, we had. We went to war with ourselves, our own bodies, and our own sexual natures, all under the strict commandment of the church. (p. 8)

Like chronic PTSD, the impact of shame can last for years as embodied trauma, potentially debilitating the brain and complicating relationships (Van Der Kolk, 2015). Dr. Curt Thompson (2015) addressed the complicated outcome of the effect of shame on the brain in *The Soul Of Shame: Retelling The Stories We Believe About Ourselves*. He stated,

With repeated exposure to events [in which we feel shame], we pay attention to and, via our early neuroplastic flexibility, more permanently encode these shame networks. Thus, they become more easily able to fire later on, even when activated by the most minor or even unrelated stimuli. (p. 66)

When these neural networks become wired together, they can create repetitive emotional upsets when confronting similar scenarios. This may have a person continuing to seek out similar situations that can become devastating, even decades later. Developing coping skills and a connection between the mind and body can help a person manage triggers when they occur.

Conclusion

This literature review summarized several key aspects of Evangelical purity culture including the Sexual Revolution that liberated societal sexual mores but resulted in higher rates of pregnancy and STIs a generation later. One reaction was a nationwide uprising of conservative Evangelical programs designed to encourage youth to abstain from sexual relations until marriage. Also summarized was literature regarding the mental health issues arising from many who were subjected to harmful purity culture teachings.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The chapter begins with a discussion of the rationale for the chosen methodology, followed by an explanation of the study population and sampling procedures. Data collection procedures will also be reviewed as well as the description of how the data were analyzed, detailing the validity as well as the limitations of the methodology.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as Research Method

The researcher chose to conduct a phenomenological study to explore several individuals' subjective experiences with taking a sexual abstinence pledge during their participation with purity culture along with their subsequent experiences with intimate relationships. The qualitative study of IPA was chosen to allow the researcher to learn about the experience through the participants' own words (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The researcher conducted interviews with individuals to understand the meaning and felt sense that participants placed on their experiences with purity culture and its effect on their life, sexuality, and relationships. Felt sense is a concept proposed by Eugene Gendlin (1981) where the body is seen as the primary way in which people make meaning out of their experience. Gendlin's (1969) focusing-oriented therapy believed that the body acts as a container and hold deeper wisdom that can be obtained cognitively or emotionally. Because so much criticism has been directed toward purity culture and the sexual and mental health problems it caused, it became a goal of this researcher to define the felt sense of the experience with purity culture in order to help identify, label, and heal. Gendlin (1981) identified felt sense as in the living body deeper than the familiar feelings, in a physically sensed "murky zone" (p. ix). Engaging with the felt sense assists the individual in becoming aware of their own internal resources. Purity culture disconnected adolescents from their internal resources regarding their own bodies to be replaced with external

rules about abstinence and purity that left them feeling anxious, shameful, and guilty about their sexuality and intimate relationships (Allison, 2021; Finch, 2019; Klein, 2018; Schermer-Sellers, 2017).

The main research question guiding this study was: What are the lived experiences of those who grew up inside of Evangelical purity culture who took a pledge of sexual abstinence and went to great lengths to keep that pledge in a larger secular culture that is predominantly not sexually abstinent? This main question was followed by subsequent questions: (a) How do individuals who participated in Evangelical purity culture describe their adolescent and young adult journey; (b) what mental health challenges and psychological and spiritual impacts, if any, resulted from the experience of purity culture and taking a pledge of sexual abstinence; and (c) what coping strategies were used to address the challenges resulting from the experience of purity culture and taking a purity pledge?

This study investigated the experience of people who pledged to remain sexually abstinent until marriage but became unable or unwilling to measure up to the idealization of purity culture's version of sex and marriage, and consequentially, struggled to make sense of how the experience of purity culture impacted their lives. The methods and procedures outlined below describe the methodology for examining the lived experiences of individuals who engaged with teachings of purity culture and who deal with debilitating guilt, shame, and anxiety regarding intimacy and sexuality as they attempted to navigate their adult relationships.

The researcher applied the methodology of IPA (J. A. Smith et al., 2009) to gain insight into each participant's lived experience shaped by purity culture, as well as to build a co-creative understanding of the experience through open discourse, allowing for the sharing and

interpretation of various perspectives. The IPA approach allowed the researcher to observe emergent themes and then become an active participant in the discovery and development of these themes (Pringle et al., 2011).

IPA employed a double-hermeneutic approach, which is a process of discovering and interpreting an experiential meaning while remaining focused on the individual and experience itself (Pringle et al., 2011; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). IPA can be adapted to each participant; thus, it naturally encouraged a flow of questions, interpretations, and meanings as the process unfolded for both participant and researcher (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The approach involved not only examining what was said, but also looked beyond the actual words themselves to question what the words meant in the larger context of this phenomenon.

While traditional phenomenological approaches only focus on commonalities, IPA can move beyond by identifying and capitalizing on both the convergent and divergent themes, highlighting the value of the differences rather than simply focusing on what is common like other phenomenological approaches (Pringle et al., 2011). An IPA approach allowed the researcher to reflect on the subjective nature of the participant's reality and illuminated the participant's view of purity culture while maintaining the validity and uniqueness of the experience (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Interviewing purity culture pledge participants and witnessing their lived experience helped the researcher create a greater understanding of the lives of Evangelical teenagers and young adults (as well as the community of people who no longer consider themselves Evangelical Christians). The researcher consequently explored the experiential intersubjectivity of a person seeking an intimate relationship after having pledged to remain a virgin until marriage.

Research Questions

The main research question guiding this study was: What are the lived experiences of those who grew up inside of Evangelical purity culture who took a pledge of sexual abstinence and went to great lengths to keep that pledge in a larger secular culture that is predominantly not sexually abstinent? This main question was followed by subsequent questions: (a) How do individuals who participated in Evangelical purity culture describe their adolescent and young adult journey; (b) what mental health challenges and psychological and spiritual impacts, if any, resulted from the experience of purity culture and taking a pledge of sexual abstinence; and (c) what coping strategies were used to address the challenges resulting from the experience of purity culture and taking a purity pledge? These questions, as well as the literature review (Chapter 2), helped to shape and inform the semi-scripted interview questions that were the main form of data collection (Appendix A).

The interview protocol was influenced by the literature presented in Chapter 2 and was focused on eliciting information that helped to inform the research questions. The protocol included 20 open-ended questions and sometimes diverged into other lines of questioning, as the protocol was specifically designed to allow participants the freedom to explore their experiences and to create a space for a co-created discussion in which both participant and researcher were actively engaged in the conversation and the recollection of the lived experiences. This semi-structured interview approach was believed to be an effective research-based data collection method that engaged participants in meaningful dialogue, allowed the researcher to modify questions based on the response, and examined interesting and permitted the investigation of important areas that arose in the course of the interview (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Ethical Treatment Toward Participants

While understanding the firm ethics of Christian Evangelical sexual abstinence before marriage, the researcher took a sensitive, compassionate, and morally neutral response on purity culture and human sexuality. The researcher was informed of both Christian sexual ethics and secular sexual attitudes, and she understood the complexity of intimate relationships. Abstaining from intimate involvement outside a marital relationship and navigating real-world sexual boundaries in search of a long-term sexual partner are sensitive processes regardless of one's faith. What were the underlying negative effects that purity culture had on these participants' Evangelical faith? The researcher was interested in examining the challenges to one's faith that occurred when individuals were confronted with real-world cognitive dissonance opposing the more idealistic facets of their faith.

People who experienced trauma from purity culture need an empathic and sensitive response. Many have mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and PTS because of the embodiment of shame, guilt, fear, or anxiety into their sexual, relational, and faith responses. The utmost care was taken to track the participant's response and be prepared to discontinue the interview if the participant exhibited strong signs of distress. However, each participant was eager to share their story and most remarked they could talk about the subject for several more hours if they had the opportunity.

Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of their identity, how their information would be stored, and how the results would be published to the transpersonal psychology field. Since this clinical study was focused on the areas of toxic and abusive religious practices, the interviewer prepared herself that the questions might provoke a distressed response in some individuals. This possibility was clearly communicated with

individuals who choose to participate, and each was informed that appropriate therapeutic referrals to qualified practitioners would be provided to those who may need them. No participant requested a referral, and all participants seemed pleased and satisfied about sharing their narrative.

Selection Criteria

The selection of participants for this study was based on individuals who took an abstinence pledge in the early 1990s through 2010 and who later felt their pledge damaged intimacy in their relationships, molded an unhealthy sexual response, created mental health problems, and formed doubts about their Evangelical Christian beliefs.

The target population included female White/Caucasian American citizens approximately between the ages of 30 to 50, English-speaking, and identified as Evangelical Christian throughout their childhood and adolescence. Criteria for selection included if were they exposed to the purity movement and sexual abstinence programs as a teenager and took a pledge to abstain from sex until marriage. The population the researcher most wanted to inquire into was the population that was at the forefront of the purity movement and had direct exposure to sexual purity organizations such as *True Love Waits* and books such as *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Harris, 1997).

Purity culture has been predominantly a White/Caucasian Evangelical movement, some say it stemmed back to the social purity movement of the early 1900s. Several researchers of purity culture have asserted the movement was created to discourage the miscegenation of White women with men of other races (Anderson, 2015; Barber & Pack, 2015; Moslener, 2015; Valenti, 2009); therefore, it kept the White/Caucasian race *pure*. Though miscegenation was not overtly stated as the reason for the creation of purity culture events, the origin of the adamant

desire to keep the purity of the White race/lineage and not interbreed with other races was traced through history and was attributed as the covert reason for Evangelical purity culture. Therefore, much of purity culture has been perpetrated in White/Caucasian environments over environments of color. Though males were affected by purity culture by the conditioning that their sexual desires are uncontrollable and shameful, females overall were affected much more detrimentally in the areas of shame and posttraumatic stress with the messaging for modest dress, chaste behavior, shaming for any hint of sexuality, and avoidance of any behaviors that might make them appear a loose or immoral woman. These women were the target population for this study. Future studies may focus on males; Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC); or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus (LGBTQ+); but for purposes of this paper, White/Caucasian females were the population sought for interviews.

To be eligible for this study, participants must have experienced one adult relationship for at least 1 year (single, engaged, or married) since they took the pledge to have a grounded perspective of the challenges involved in an intimate adult relationship. An adult relationship consisted of a relationship that commenced after the participant left their parent's home. Participants were individuals who felt they were detrimentally affected by purity culture and that it negatively affected their adult relationships or religious beliefs.

For the purposes of this study, the participants were either individuals who did not keep their pledge and felt resulting guilt, shame, or censoring of their sexual response, or individuals who kept their pledge until marriage and felt their relationship lacked intimacy because of their difficulties in enjoying a healthy sexual response. Participants must have felt their sexuality was detrimentally affected by their abstinence pledge or exposure to damaging teachings of purity

culture. They were asked to discuss the resources (or lack of resources) they encountered in attempting to learn how to have a healthy intimate relationship with a committed partner.

Though there were likely individuals who experienced positive effects of purity culture teachings, this clinical study was limited to people who had a negative response to purity culture and felt their sexual response as well as faith suffered because of it. For the purposes of this study, though some still identify as *Christian*, all chosen participants were women who no longer considered themselves *Evangelical*.

Participant Recruitment

Original recruitment ideas were to be pursued through internet social media sites in Evangelical recovery support groups, through authors, bloggers, or podcast creators about recovery from purity culture indoctrination, or through media marketing such as advertisements. The researcher's initial aim to recruit participants was to contact community leaders, speakers, and authors in cultural groups such as #exvangelical or #churchtoo on social media sites such as Facebook (<https://facebook.com>), Twitter (<https://twitter.com>) or Instagram (<https://instagram.com>). The researcher considered contacting additional Evangelical recovery groups to inquire if they would refer appropriate participants for the study. The researcher contacted three prominent thought leaders she admired who worked with religious trauma and Evangelical purity culture survivors. One responded and stated she was excited for this study and wished she would have written her dissertation on purity culture.

Extensive outreach was not required, as there were many individuals in groups on the social media site, Facebook.com, who were eager to participate. With permission from the group administrators, requests for interviews were posted two times to both the *Exvangelical* and *Women Recovering From Purity Culture* groups on Facebook.com. A Google Form link was

provided for interested parties to answer qualifying questions about their experience with Evangelical purity culture. Questions included sexual orientation, gender identity, age, marital status, church denomination, and specific questions about each person's experience with purity culture, their journey away from purity culture, and challenges they have had in adult life specific to mental health, sexuality/relationships, and spirituality/religion. One hundred forty-eight people responded to the inquiry.

The researcher carefully reviewed each form for responses that best reflected the nature of the research question and subsequent questions. The ages between 35 and 45 correlated most with the height of the Evangelical purity culture popularity and 23 women were identified as appropriate candidates for the study. As a method, IPA suggests a small sample size of five to eight participants as a reasonable number to achieve rich phenomenological insight (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The researcher emailed the most qualified respondents, five at a time, and waited a few days before emailing more respondents. A total of 23 women were contacted. Once eight women had agreed to be interviewed, there were no further emails sent. Additional respondents inquired into the study and were told they could possibly interview in the future for another study.

Attached to each email were the 20 research questions (Appendix A) to give potential participants the opportunity to contemplate and expand their understanding before being interviewed. Information about the study in the form of an outreach letter (Appendix B) was also sent. The eight individuals who responded and agreed to be interviewed were sent the letter of consent (Appendix C) and Demographics survey (Appendix D) to be signed/completed before interviews commenced.

Data Collection

Participants were told to expect approximately 90 minutes to 2 hours in a semi-scripted interview following the 20 research questions to obtain their subjective experience of the effect that purity culture and abstinence pledges had on their adult relationships and religious beliefs. During the interview the researcher asked a few qualifying questions to deepen the context of the data but she primarily focused on the 20 questions. Each interview was recorded via video recording and confidentially transcribed to text through the Temi service (<https://www.temi.com>) and further edited by the researcher. Excerpts from the interview were included in the study with identifying details concealed by the researcher. Public health guidelines were followed in all contacts with participants. Interviews were conducted through Zoom videoconference, were kept confidential, and followed HIPAA compliancy (Please see <https://zoom.us/docs/doc/Zoom-hipaa.pdf> for clarification).

Data Analysis

Making use of the IPA analysis approach as detailed by J. A. Smith et al. (2009), the researcher conducted the data analysis utilizing a repetitive process that included multiple readings of interview transcripts as well as coding that was used to identify emergent themes and superordinate themes across cases. Each interview transcript was individually analyzed, and the researcher bracketed the findings and initial thoughts separate from the interviews with other participants. The process of bracketing was done to consider each case on an individual basis in an attempt to refrain from using the themes identified in earlier interviews to shade the analysis of a separate case (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008). Being cognizant of the bracketing process helped the researcher to consider each case individually during the early steps of the analysis and to prevent inappropriate ascribing of ideas or emergent themes to subsequent cases.

J. A. Smith et al. (2009) described the IPA sequence to analyze interview transcripts. Each transcript was to be read at least three times: (a) to become familiar with the data and ensure there were no errors, (b) to give first impressions and comments and make note of words and phrases that stood out, and (c) to code three different levels of the transcript. Coding was the way that the IPA method uses to analyze meaning from the text of the interview. Additionally, three levels of coding were utilized to analyze the transcripts:

1. Descriptive coding to help identify frequent words and phrases that stood out in the text because of frequency, connotation, or perceived importance to the researcher or the participant. These words and phrases were highlighted.
2. Linguistic coding to focus on the use of language and how the participant's word choices were presented and take a closer look at many levels of meaning of the language that existed in each word and phrase, both within and outside the context of the sentence.
3. Conceptual coding to elicit deeper levels of meaning within the context of the participant's experience. This level of coding involved a shift in focus from the important words and linguistic meanings to the overarching understanding of the participant's experience, thus causing the appearance of specific themes (J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

The researcher followed these coding sequences to determine the deeper meaning and felt sense from the interviews, and found they brought an unexpected complexity of religious trauma to her own process. The purity culture genre of the psychological literature was undeveloped, and the IPA methodology in this area was almost non-existent, so the researcher spent months looking for appropriate studies and literature to supplement her knowledge. The IPA structure of

analyzing the felt sense of this phenomenon was contemplated in great depth. Some points were obvious, such as stepping into the world of the participants, but others, such as analyzing their spoken words, were not.

Although the researcher was affected by similar religious sentiments about purity as an adolescent, she had rejected them, and thus had a difficult time initially determining what a felt sense of sexual shame and guilt would be like. Some of her process entailed going back into her own history to try to feel into experiences and she realized she had little feelings or emotion around them, but rather a blunt frozen feeling. Sitting with the felt senses of sexual shame and guilt felt uncomfortable, disjointed, and confusing; they were difficult emotions to sustain for very long. For a few months, her writing process was affected trying to feel into experiences and determine the meaning, but she started to recover some disowned but powerful feelings from the past, and that helped her writing flow again.

As she attempted to feel into the sensations of sexual shame and guilt, she recognized from her adolescence and young adulthood that her Evangelical Christian belief system required she put her own feelings aside to adhere to what she taught was from the Bible. She was required to dismiss her feelings and thoughts about sexuality as something sinful and potentially evil if she was not married to a man. From conducting research about purity culture, she discovered it is still a very common practice in Evangelicalism to diminish anyone's feelings or independent thoughts about their life. She came to acknowledge this teaching kept a person from not listening to her own internal wisdom; what was inside her own body, mind, and heart. Even as a young Christian, the teachings around her taught that in her own self, somehow, she was depraved and craved a sinful life, leading her to doubt she could trust herself and her own bodily sensations.

These teachings are also classic cult control tactics (Finch, 2019; Winell, 2009) and not principles of love and grace. These teachings basically make a person vacate their own life and surrender themselves to God, but it also means they need to be subject to other people at church and submit to discipleship and accountability with other people instead of making their own choices about life. This structure allows a person to be easily manipulated and controlled by their environment. Changing one's beliefs about this lifestyle and leaving this structure causes stress and suffering known as Religious Trauma Syndrome (Winell, 2009). Seeing the effects of religious trauma come up in the interviews caused a process of sadness and grief for the researcher for a while. Though many years ago she knew instinctively that the teachings she received were meant to control her and not support her, she did not know how to explain this phenomenon until she encountered articles on the internet about purity culture and started this study. Each interview she analyzed reflected the confusion of cognitive dissonance she had herself felt in some way.

Her deeper question as she researched purity culture and grappled with her own cognitive dissonance became "How can I keep the commitment to my inner 5-year-old to love Jesus and still believe that Jesus is love without all this external contention?" She continued to refine her thoughts and kept reading, writing, and learning from others who were more articulate about their convictions. She learned from each woman in this study who asserted her own personal development and autonomy was hijacked by purity culture, her church, and sometimes, her family. Each was shamed and made afraid of sexuality as something scary, dark, and evil unless it was strictly carried out in marriage. Holding sexuality as something so negative and forbidden for much of one's life, caused problems with mental health, emotional development, and sexual

shame. As each matured into adulthood, the researcher's internal conversation became: "How can I heal this injury to my mind and body to create a healthy sexuality for myself and others?"

Within IPA a transcript would be coded, categorized, and then the researcher would look for themes within each transcript as well as between the transcripts. Connecting these themes with the original research question was then explored and evaluated. Narrative descriptions of each participant's experience were created, and the researcher combined the narratives of all participants resulting in an underlying structure of the combined felt experience of the purity culture experience. Optimistically, the results will provide a clear understanding and a felt sense of what it was like to live through purity culture and deal with difficulties such as self-concept, intimacy in relationships, and the Evangelical faith as a whole.

Limitations and Delimitations

Though there are thousands of popular articles denouncing the harmful effects of Evangelical purity culture, the psychological research literature is limited and in its infancy. A qualitative study was needed to deepen the understanding of the harmful effects individuals have suffered. One limitation that may have influenced the results of this study was the small quantity of individuals interviewed. Another limitation was that those interviewed may not truly be a random sample of those affected by Evangelical purity culture, as they were found in religious recovery groups. Also, the researcher may not have been able to secure the exact type or geographic scope of participants best suited for the advancement of psychological literature for this subject.

A delimitation of this study was that only Caucasian, heterosexual women in committed relationships were interviewed. There are many individuals who are male, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ who have been deeply affected by Evangelical purity culture and who have important personal

narratives to share. The reason that Caucasian, White women were interviewed was merely to simplify the results of this study. Further study of other populations is needed to cover the wider scope of Evangelical purity culture, both positive and negative. Also, the qualitative study of IPA may obscure conclusions that other qualitative studies may procure. Lastly, this study was chosen to improve the standards of the field by revealing certain findings as defined by IPA and may not be replicable.

Conclusion

This chapter covered the parameters of the research method chosen for this study. The qualitative study of IPA allowed the researcher to learn about the experience of Evangelical purity culture through the participants' own words (J. A. Smith et al., 2009) and to understand the felt sense and meaning participants placed on their experience and its effect on their life, sexuality, and relationships. The research questions involved examining the lived experiences of those who grew up inside Evangelical purity culture and who strove to keep their abstinence pledge in a dominant culture that was not sexually abstinent. The interviews helped the researcher have a greater understanding of the lived experienced of Evangelical teenagers and young adults who grew up in purity culture. This chapter also reviewed the parameters around ethical treatment toward participants, selection criteria, recruitment, data collection and analysis, and limitations and delimitations of this study.

Chapter 4: Results

Participant Overview

The purpose of this study was to reveal information regarding the lived experience of Caucasian, straight, cisgendered women aged 35–45 who as a child or adolescent took a purity pledge based on the teachings of Evangelical purity culture and who later experienced symptoms of PTSD and other mental health challenges in adult life. The focus of this analysis was on the phenomenology of the eight participants who shared their experiences in semi-structured interviews. One interview per participant was conducted and interviews ranged from 79 minutes to 176 minutes with an average of 111 minutes. Although the participants were each asked the same questions, their responses varied and reflected each of their unique perspectives. These findings illuminated the deep impact of growing up in an environment where sexual abstinence until marriage was mandated by parents, church, or both. All participants chose a pseudonym to maintain their confidentiality.

Annie was a 43-year-old cisgender, straight, Caucasian female who earned a master's degree. She was married to her second husband and the stepmother of four children. Annie's parents were still married, and she had one brother. She grew up in an Independent Fundamental Baptist (IFB) church in Michigan. IFB churches are by nature very conservative, autonomous, and separatist. The IFB tradition started in the late 19th century in reaction to the modernism and liberalism of the Baptist denomination.

Kasey was a 37-year-old cisgender, straight, Caucasian female who earned a master's degree. She had never been married but was in a committed relationship of 5 years, and she had no children. Kasey grew up in a family of nine children and her parents divorced when she was 12 years old when her father left her mother for another woman. She grew up in a Church of God

(Pentecostal) in West Virginia and a Non-denominational Evangelical church in Virginia.

Pentecostal churches are a charismatic movement that started in the 20th century. They believe in the baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, and spiritual gifts. Non-denominational bible churches became popular in the latter half of the 20th century and are largely self-governing. They hold no connection with recognized denominations and mainline churches and each church makes decisions on various parts of church life for itself.

Katherine was a 44-year-old cisgender, straight, Caucasian female who earned a master's degree. She had an 8-year-old child and has been married to the father for a year. She chose to wait to get married until she was ready to make a formal commitment. Katherine's parents were divorced when she was a child, and she has one brother. Her mother has remarried twice, and her father has remarried once. She grew up in a Southern Baptist church in Texas. Southern Baptists are conservative and bible-believing; the largest Protestant denomination in the world and the second largest Christian denomination in the world, behind the Roman Catholic church. The Southern Baptist Convention was formed in the mid-1800's when Southern Baptists who supported slavery split with Northern Baptists. Southern Baptists are Evangelical in origin, and the main characteristics are an individual conversion experience and adult baptism. Southern Baptist churches are largely autonomous. Though structural inequalities still exist, in 1995, the Southern Baptist church publicly renounced racism and apologized for its history of supporting slavery and advancing segregation.

Lily Sebastian was a 42-year-old cisgender, straight, Caucasian female who earned a master's degree. She was unmarried but in a committed relationship for 7 years, and she had no children. Lily's parents were still married, and she had two brothers. She grew up in a United Methodist church in Pennsylvania. The United Methodist denomination is the second largest

Protestant denomination after the Southern Baptist Convention. Methodist churches began in the mid-18th century within the Church of England. They are known for being exceptionally detailed in their study of the Bible. The United Methodist church has a governing board and had garnered controversy in the last few years for their support of LGBTQ+ rights.

Marie was a 39-year-old cisgender, straight, Caucasian female who earned a professional degree. She was divorced from her husband and had been in a committed relationship for a year and a half. Marie's parents were still married, and she grew up with three sisters. She grew up in an Assembly of God church in Wisconsin. The Assembly of God denomination was founded in the early 1900s and is energetic and dynamic, believing in the baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, and an experiential feeling or direct experience of the presence of God by the believer.

Paige was a 42-year-old cisgender, straight, Caucasian female who earned a master's degree. Her marital status was married with three children. Paige's parents were still married. She had one brother and one sister. She grew up in a non-denominational church in Illinois. Her church adhered to a modern and cool presentation, while still teaching the tenets of traditional Christianity. Non-denominational bible churches became popular in the latter half of the 20th century and are largely self-governing. They hold no connection with recognized denominations and mainline churches. Each non-denominational church makes decisions on various parts of church life for itself.

Rachel was a 38-year-old cisgender, straight, Caucasian female who earned a master's degree. Her marital status was married with two children. Rachel's parents were still married, and she had one brother. Rachel grew up in an Independent Fundamental Baptist (IFB) church in Texas. IFB churches are by nature very conservative, autonomous, and separatist. The IFB

tradition started in the late 19th century in reaction to the modernism and liberalism of the Baptist denomination. Rachel stated that her church was similar to the Amish church. Her family was also part of Bill Gothard's organization, now called *Institute in Basic Life Principles*.

Rose was a 39-year-old cisgender, straight, Caucasian female who earned a bachelor's degree. Her marital status was married with six children. Rose's parents were still married and she had one brother. She grew up in an Assembly of God church in North Carolina. The Assembly of God denomination was founded in the early 1900s and is energetic and dynamic, believing in the baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, and an experiential feeling or direct experience of the presence of God by the believer.

Descriptive Analysis

IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of human lived experience (J. A. Smith et al, 2009). IPA assisted in the exploration of how participants experienced a phenomenon and the meaning they made of it, which was accomplished through intensive and detailed analysis of participant interviews. The following processes, recommended by J. A. Smith et al. (2009), were used to guide the analysis of the data: read and re-read each transcript; edited transcripts coincidental with reviewing video and audio recordings; made initial notes on each transcript of impressions and reactions; identified abstract concepts regarding the patterns of meaning and felt sense within the participant's narrative; developed the meaning units, categories, and themes within researcher notes; charted how these main ideas fit together with the research questions; and observed similarities and differences between participants' narratives.

The researcher read through the interview transcripts and videos multiple times over several months. She reflected on each woman's story and noted similarities and differences from her own Christian upbringing. In the beginning, purity culture was a fascinating subject, but she

found it difficult to embrace the felt sense of purity culture for herself. This difficulty later drove the researcher's own emotional process. She journaled and processed her own psychological restrictions affecting her ability to identify the felt sense of the participant's process and her writing of the analysis. She looked for thought, feeling, and sensation states. She meditated, rested, and provided self-care for her own process. She continued to make notes and journal entries when she encountered difficulty with experiencing the felt sense of each participant. She found it necessary to tend to her own traumatic experience of church life and its purity culture teachings in therapy and journaling alongside continuing to understand and write about her participants' felt sense of purity culture.

To clarify main points and find meaning units, the researcher found it necessary to eliminate spoken filler words such as *oh, um, uh, you know, really, like, just, actually, and basically*. Filler words are natural in spoken communication and quite common when people share complicated thoughts and memories such as each participant shared in the interviews, but the researcher noticed these filler words diluted the focus away from finding the meaning units and organizing the data. She also eliminated false starts and repetitions while working diligently to keep the integrity of the narrative. She focused on choosing text to reflect what coincided with the research questions. Categories emerged that were further analyzed to discover the themes within that described the felt sense for each participant. The result was a 55-page text with 14 categories that she further sifted through to determine appropriate themes for the analysis.

The researcher followed the IPA process of *felt sense* and *deeper meaning* in analyzing the interviews. The process became complicated and emotionally draining when attempting to assign meaning units to complete the analysis. The researcher found it necessary to feel her own emotional concerns and pain and then find her own empowerment and meaning as she sifted

through the text. Over time and through repeated contemplation of the text, she found the wisdom communicated to her by the participants gave her language to move through her own painful emotional blocks that resulted from her own indoctrination and experiences as an Evangelical Christian female even before purity culture emerged inside the church.

Each woman interviewed was led to believe an ideal Christian woman's life would follow a specific script laid out for them by purity culture teachings. Later, when life did not unfold as each woman was told it would by her parents and/or church for obeying purity culture teachings, each experienced deep difficulty synthesizing the convergence between her faith, spirituality, and sexuality. This difficulty caused a myriad of problems with sexual shame, delayed emotional and social development, and mental health.

Purity Culture Indoctrination Script

This indoctrination script is based on the research, interviews, and analysis done. This is the script that is told to many young girls about the virtues of purity culture. Its accuracy was verified by 48 women inside the *Women Helping Women Recover From Purity Culture* group on Facebook (www.facebook.com).

The Ideal Girl

A girl grew up going to church with her family and was immersed into a world where God, Jesus, and the Bible reigned supreme. Sexuality was not spoken about much, if at all, in her home. Around sixth or seventh grade, she was introduced to the concept of *purity*. She was told that God wanted her to abstain from all forms of sexual contact before she was married. She was told that she was to save her virginity until her wedding night, and if she did not, she would be unacceptable and undeserving as a bride. Because each girl loved Jesus, she wanted to do the

right thing. She also didn't want to feel dirty or any of the other disgusting things her youth group said she would be if she participated with sex before being married.

She was presented with a *purity pledge* where she was invited to sign a document, often in front of several witnesses at a church event, youth group, or a concert, promising to wait for God's best for her life if she abstained from sex outside of marriage. To decline this invitation was disadvantageous to the girl. It was insinuated that declining would bring shame to her family and mark her as a rebellious and sensuous woman. She wanted to be virtuous and make her parents proud of her. She may have also been presented with invitations to a purity ball where she wore a fancy dress, dined with her father, and pledged her virginity to him until she got married, while he pledged to protect her. She may also have been presented with a purity ring or necklace to show her allegiance to the purity message.

She spent her entire adolescence *guarding her heart* from any men who might use “love” as the way to get sex from her. She also dressed modestly, covering her torso, legs, and wore loose clothing to hide her curves; partially to represent her commitment to Christ, but mostly so men would not see her as a sex object. She was told men have a difficult time with controlling their lust, and that she would never want to make her brother stumble and take him away from or hurt his walk with God. She was told that dressing modestly would keep men from thinking sexual thoughts about her and in this way, they would be able to see Christ inside her. She was also told that her demeanor was important in conveying she was a chaste and upstanding Christian woman who would make a Godly wife. She was not to flirt or be seductive toward a man but be gentle and quiet to convey her devotion to Christ.

She was told that a Godly man wanted God's best for her, and he would marry her without thinking lustful, sexual thoughts about her. He would marry her in order to have sex with

her. Hopefully, he would have saved himself for her, but since it was so much more difficult for males to not be sexual, she must forgive him if he strayed. She was also taught that it will be her responsibility to take care of her husband's sexual needs, even when she did not feel like it or was tired.

She was told that by staying pure in her mind, heart, and body, God would reward her with a Godly man who would love and protect her, that he would be the spiritual leader of the home, and she would be blessed with children. And best of all, she would have a happy marriage with GREAT sex. She would be safe and loved, and her relationship would last a lifetime.

Summary

Purity culture promised young people a great life if they remained abstinent before marriage in both thoughts and actions. Unfortunately, many people never experienced the life that purity culture promised them. Rather, they experienced anxiety and depression from shame and guilt because they found it impossible to conform. This paper chronicled the stories of eight women who grew up attending church and who were exposed to and later had detrimental experiences because of purity culture teachings.

Growing Up in Evangelical Christianity and Purity Culture

Following are the narratives of eight women and their experiences growing up inside of Evangelical purity culture. Each woman grew up learning traditional Evangelical Christian beliefs about God, Jesus, the Bible, and sexuality. This chapter describes the felt sense of the childhood sexual education received, the purity pledge took, impressions from purity culture, the modest dress she was expected to conform to, and the felt sense of her first sexual experiences. The most common themes were mentioned throughout the interviews. Each participant described her impressions of purity culture and their impact on her sexual and emotional maturity.

Childhood Sexual Education in Evangelical Christianity

Sexual Shame and Guilt was the most common theme each participant felt growing up in the Evangelical purity culture environment. As a child each felt subtle senses of shame, fear, confusion, and inhibition regarding sexual knowledge. Also revealed was a theme of *Restricted Sexual Communication*—not feeling comfortable talking about sexuality openly or asking questions of parents, which prevented each participant from developing a sexual vocabulary and knowledge of sex as a natural process. A theme of *Sexual Suppression* was indicated as each woman was told she needed to be abstinent from premarital sex but received little discussion about what that entailed or how to cope in a society (including inside the Evangelical church) that is not sexually abstinent. Any sexual thoughts or activity needed to be dismissed from one’s conscious thought and put aside as sinful. Each theme and the felt sense, consequences, and/or negative conditioning is listed in Table 1 (below).

Table 1

Felt Sense of Childhood Sexual Education

Themes	Felt sense (consequences/negative conditioning)
Sexual shame and guilt	Anxiety about sex Confusion about sex Fear about sex Guilt about sex Shame about sex
Restricted sexual communication	Could not ask questions about sex Discomfort with talking about sex No sexual vocabulary
Sexual Suppression	Believing sexual activity was evil, bad, or wrong Dissociation from sexual curiosity Fear about sexual activity Inhibition with sexual thoughts, feelings, and sensations

Participants' Responses

Annie, Age 43. Annie's parents did not talk to her about sex, except by saying that she should be abstinent from it until marriage. Sex was taboo and seen as a great evil in her church community. She said, "I felt a great deal of shame and guilt in my body at any feelings I may have had toward something sexual." Premarital sex, masturbation, and homosexuality were considered sins, but Annie did not learn anything about how to have a healthy marriage and sex life with a husband.

Kasey, Age 37. Kasey grew up in a family that did not talk about sexuality except that she was to save sex for marriage. As a pre-teen and teenager, she explored with self-pleasure. She said, "I felt shame associated with it, but I didn't talk to anyone about it, nor did I think about it too much." She read romance novels and educational books which is where she learned about sex.

Katherine, Age 42. Katherine learned about the mechanics of sex from her mother around age 8. Sex seemed taboo to her. Her mother caught her exploring her body and told her not to do it, and she felt awkward talking to her mother about it. With a friend, she looked through *Playboy* magazines and innocently mimicked the pictures with each other. A few years later when she was in purity culture she thought, "I felt guilty and ashamed of those activities."

Lily, Age 42. Lily's parents were open about sexuality and taught her there was nothing to be ashamed of. She said, "Conversations about sexuality with my parents were very positive." However, the sexual information from her church was different. She shared, "When I was 12, I thought I needed to be pure, or I would go to hell. Sexuality became a shameful thing."

Marie, Age 39. Marie learned about sex when her mother showed her a movie that taught children about sex, but they did not talk about it and she didn't feel she could ask questions. She

felt awkward and embarrassed about sex and attributed her discomfort to what she learned in church. Her overall orientation around sex was shame. She said, “I felt dancing, music, and pop culture was shameful. I didn’t know what masturbation was, but I was ashamed of it. I felt clueless but ashamed at the same time.”

Paige, Age 43. Paige did not ever talk with her parents about sexuality, except they had one solid rule. She said, “My parents taught me that I would be abstinent and that was the only way to do it.” The only guidance other than abstinence she received was to keep going to church.

Rachel, Age 38. Rachel grew up with sexuality as an off-limits topic, as yucky, dirty, dark, and secretive. She was unable to talk about sex with her parents or ask vulnerable questions. Her mother told her it was ok to have feelings for boys, but she was never to act on them. She said, “I was taught by my father that everything I needed to know I would be taught by my husband one day.”

Rose, Age 37. Rose’s parents preached abstinence but did not talk to her about sex. “We knew what not to do, so we didn’t have to talk about anything.” She learned almost nothing about sex until she was a teenager. What she learned was it was gross and to stay away from it. She said, “I felt very ashamed and guilty if I thought about it.”

Summary

Overall, the messages women received as children left each of them feeling confused, ashamed, and anxious about sexuality and unable to positively accept sexual curiosity in adolescence. They were left with little to no vocabulary to express themselves or understand their sexuality in a positive way. Many of them felt deep shame and guilt regarding asking questions about sexuality to their parents.

Adolescent Development Inside Evangelical Purity Culture

Purity culture was a substantial part of the church youth group curriculum. Purity pledges were rituals experienced by each participant and because it was an ordinary part of their upbringing, no one questioned them. Being sexually inexperienced as teenagers, each female trusted her parents and church leaders with the information given. As an adolescent, cognitive dissonance about sexuality entered each woman's awareness on occasion, but it was pushed to the side as the overall environment promoted sexual abstinence as God-ordained and biblically based. A critical part of each woman's upbringing was to stay sexually abstinent until marriage.

The main theme regarding purity culture was *Sexual Suppression*, which impacted each participant before any understood what sexual feelings and sensations actually were. The overall theme that adolescents learned in purity culture was that *Sex is Dangerous and Potentially Evil*. These fearful cognitions left many youths continually evaluating their sexual impulse or attraction as aberrant and pushing their sexual thoughts and sensations away.

The themes of *Indoctrination* and *Compulsory Religious Education* came about through purity pledges and the purity culture education prevalent in youth groups at church. Another theme inherent in adolescent purity culture was *Sexual Shame and Guilt*. Adolescents were taught to believe they were acceptable to God only if they did not participate with sex or even think about it. Sex before getting married was a sin, and adolescents were told that remaining abstinent was the biblical thing to do. A theme in purity culture teaching was *Potential Loss of Inherent Value* if they had sex outside of marriage. Youth were told their virginity and sexual purity was the primary gift they could give to their marriage. A sub-theme inherent with purity pledges at adolescence was that it created the formation of a *Sexual Purity as Identity* that meant NOT being sexual was the good and right way to be. If females had sex before marriage, they

were not sure if they were still acceptable to God. Other females waited to have intercourse until marriage, and still encountered difficulty adjusting to life as a sexual being. The felt sense of each theme is listed in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Felt Sense of Adolescence in Evangelical Purity Culture

Themes	Felt sense (consequences/negative conditioning)
Sexual suppression	Elimination of sexual thoughts, feelings, and sensations To not sin or be evil
Sex is dangerous	Disgust
Potentially evil	Fear
Gross	Hypervigilance
Indoctrination	God owns sexuality
Compulsory religious education	No choice Pressure to conform Trapped
Sexual shame and guilt	Sexual dissociation
Potential loss of inherent value	Fear Pressure to conform
Sexual purity as identity	Follow the rules Lack of sexual and emotional development Sexual dissociation
Cognitive dissonance	Anger Confusion Disappointment Evaluation Noticing inconsistencies but not being able to speak up Questioning

Themes	Felt sense (consequences/negative conditioning)
Compliance with faith	Follow the rules to be acceptable and pure
Avoidance of relationship	Fear No learned relationship skills Only way to insure purity
Trust in authority	Belief formation Curiosity Learning Trust
Authoritarian parental control	Trapped Restricted choices No freedom for self-expression Not confident with autonomous choices

Following are narratives of each participant's experience with purity culture including their purity pledge and internal process throughout adolescence. Not just the themes, but the narratives are shown as they illustrate each participant's felt sense of adolescence in purity culture as an Evangelical Christian. Because adolescence was a formative time for purity culture indoctrination, each participant's narratives were comprehensively detailed. Each participant felt most of the themes stated above. The themes stated in each participant's narrative are the themes most pertinent to their experience.

Participants' Responses

Annie, Age 43. The theme of *Sexual Suppression* affected Annie in her adolescence so much that she shut off her sexual feelings. The theme of *Sexual Purity as Identity* was inherent in

her adolescence to the extent that she hadn't kissed anyone by the time she went to college. As a college adult, she started to question purity culture and what she had been taught encountering the theme of *Cognitive Dissonance*.

After being taught as a child to save her sexuality for marriage, Annie made a purity pledge at her church youth group at 15. She said, "Everybody would put their name on the card and check, 'I'm not going to have premarital sex.'" Adolescents were given scare tactics that they would lose their inherent value if they had sex before marriage. "The leaders would chew a piece of gum and hand it to someone else insinuating that was the same as having sex. 'You are not going to want the gum after so many people chewed on the gum.'" Annie responded to purity culture's conversations about sex with a freeze response. She said, "I was embarrassed and shut down because I did not want to talk about sex, especially at church." Annie felt ashamed and guilty when she heard at church that masturbation was evil and realized she had been doing it since she was around seven years old. She said, "I thought I was the worst person because I had been sinning against the Lord."

Annie had a lot of freedom as a teenager and her parents were not concerned with who she spent time with, nor did they realize she was drinking alcohol and going to parties. She said, "If they had known they would've absolutely lost their minds, but they weren't really paying attention." Annie believes that her parents felt they had completed their job raising her by the time she was a teenager. She shared,

I was so good all the way up until then they felt like they didn't need to pay attention. My brother and I would leave the house after they went to bed at night. We would go out and do literally anything we wanted. Then at the same time, we were in the church youth group and in the choir. It was a double life a lot of the time.

Annie's purity culture education affected her in the sense that she did not have a boyfriend in high school, nor did she kiss anyone until college. Annie went to an Evangelical Christian college where she encountered another layer of purity culture. She said, "Joshua Harris's courtship book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* was a very hot topic." When she first heard about courting, it seemed almost like arranged marriage, so she rejected the teaching. She said, "I don't need somebody to tell me how to date a person. What's wrong with just going out to coffee?"

Kasey, Age 37. Kasey's predominant theme as an adolescent was *Sexual Purity as Identity* that would impact her greatly as she encountered sexuality in early adulthood. A subtheme was *Compliance with Faith* as she had prided herself in being a Christian and saving her sexuality for marriage. She carried a theme of *Embracing Erotic Self* as she educated herself surreptitiously about sexuality through literature. Another theme that affected Kasey was *Cognitive Dissonance* as she observed inconsistencies in the purity movement. She also felt the effect of the theme of *Sexual Suppression* as she moved into a sexually active adulthood and felt she held herself back in intimate encounters.

Kasey's purity pledge was an important part of her adolescent identity, though she noticed pressure to conform and doubted others were keeping their pledges. Though Kasey remained sexually abstinent, she secretly read books that involved sexuality. She said,

I accepted that I felt sexual desire and secretly read trashy romance novels and books that involved people having sex in them, but I personally was not going to have sex until I was married. I felt it was a point of pride to be able to resist the temptation.

Kasey wore a purity ring and considered it a part of her identity. She shared,

I was very attached to the ring and what it represented. I remember agonizing over the decision to stop wearing it. I didn't stop wearing the ring until long after I had lost my virginity. It still felt like part of my identity.

Kasey felt the purity pledge stunted her growth and held her back during a time when her peers were exploring their sexuality.

Kasey was only allowed to date Christian boys as a teenager. She said, "you don't want to be unequally yoked with unbelievers." She was not allowed to spend much time alone with boys. "My boyfriend in high school wasn't allowed to be in my bedroom nor in any room with a door closed." She could not talk with her mother about her sexual life:

I feel envious of my friends who have close relationships with their mothers and could talk to their mother when they lost their virginity. It would have been nice if I hadn't had to stumble around on my own figuring things out.

Kasey noticed cracks in purity culture when her older sister got married rather quickly because she didn't want to be "tempted to sin." Her sister later divorced and told Kasey that if it wasn't for not wanting to commit a sin in their relationship, she would have realized she and her husband weren't compatible a lot sooner. Kasey said,

Rushing into getting married because you didn't want to sin by having sex outside of marriage is a recipe for disaster. My sister had expressed to me that married sex didn't just work great, which led me to change my feelings about not waiting. There is definitely this idea that if you wait until marriage, it will be some great, wonderful magical thing.

Katherine, Age 42. Katherine's predominant theme regarding purity culture was *Compliance with Faith*, where she found security in life by following the rules of purity culture. Her way of coping in her attempt to stay abstinent created a theme of *Avoidance*

of Relationship by burying herself in her education and career, and later the theme of *Cognitive Dissonance* as she started to evaluate purity and faith through reading and research.

As a child Katherine trusted her parents and church, even though Christian values about sexuality and being told she was a sinner and worthless invoked shameful feelings inside her body. When she was 12 years old, she attended a *True Love Waits* ceremony with her father where she pledged to be abstinent from sex until she married. She felt positive about this decision because she believed it was the right thing to do. Her opinion of purity culture was that it was normal. Abstinence was what she was taught, and she didn't know any different. In her culture, a person stayed a virgin until they were married and only got married once. Katherine believed that if a woman lost her virginity before she was married, she was no longer pure and had lost her inherent worth. She reflected, "You are considered or seen as tainted or secondhand goods." She knew abstinence was an absolute, and it meant a lot to her to stay pure until she married. She did not want to be seen as dumb or rebellious by her elders, so she made the pledge to not have sex before marriage.

Katherine's parents had differing attitudes toward dating as an adolescent. Her mother was nervous and would call her incessantly if she was late home from a date. She confronted Katherine in front of her father one time. Her father was more laid back and didn't see her doing anything he should be worried about. She wanted to have a relationship but was conflicted how to make that work with her purity culture upbringing. She attended a Baptist college because it aligned with her faith values, but found once she was away from home, she journeyed away from what she saw were some damaging aspects of Evangelicalism and purity culture. As a young

adult, Katherine was very career driven and did not date much until her 30s. She wanted a relationship but did not know how to make it work while navigating sexual abstinence.

Lily, Age 42. Lily's predominant theme as an adolescent was *Sexual Purity as Identity*. Another theme was *Trust in Authority*, and a third was *Sexual Suppression*. The roots of the theme *Cognitive Dissonance* started in late adolescence.

When she was 12, Lily signed a purity pledge and wore a *True Love Waits* necklace. She said, "I wanted to be a good Christian female who does what she is supposed to do. I obeyed the people around me because they clearly knew what was best for me." Making the purity pledge affected how she felt inside of her body about sexuality, and she felt like she needed to be cleansed and cleaned. Later, she came to see purity culture as hurtful because it portrayed sexuality as dirty and something to avoid completely. She mused, "How teenagers learn about sexuality and their bodies is by reading books and having thoughts. I feel like purity culture existed to save me from myself and to save me from going down some dark path." Lily believed purity culture kept her naïve about her own needs. She stated, "I didn't know how to respect my body. I didn't know how to advocate for my likes and dislikes."

The *True Love Waits* movement was the gold standard for the youth culture at Lily's church. She attended several Christian music festivals with her youth and college groups where she heard messages of purity. She said,

At youth group, they would talk about what a girl's responsibility was as a woman, to keep yourself pure and holy for your future relationship. Purity was about what you brought to the table to your future partner. They told us to not have sex before marriage.

As an adolescent, Lily attended a 4-day music festival called *Creation Fest*. Christian female artists and authors told attendees that a girl's duty with her body was to be

responsible for how people viewed her and to stay pure until she married. Lily said, “You are responsible for keeping yourself pure until you marry. We were told to not engage in anything that was considered inappropriate and that you are dirty if you are sexually active or dress in a certain way.”

As a teenager, Lily had positive feelings toward purity culture teaching. She felt her church elders were looking out for her best interests by teaching her the right way to be, act and behave. She believed they wanted to protect her, but inside, she was conflicted. She said, “The effect of purity culture teaching was that it made me feel that my thoughts and feelings about what was going on inside my body were not that important.” Lily’s parents were free-spirited and gentle people who raised her in a sexually positive and affirming environment. They had rules but trusted their kids to do the right thing. She said, “I had a boyfriend in high school and my parents never had problems with me dating. One of my best friends in high school was male and they had no issue with him at all.” In her late teens and early 20s, Lily believed in purity culture, but as she explained, she also explored what sexuality meant by reading sexual literature:

I had some very conflicted years of wanting to know the natural curiosity of being female or a feminine sexual person. But then balancing that with being pure and good and holy. It was a very confusing and conflicting time in my life.

Marie, Age 39. Marie’s theme of her adolescence was *Compliance with Faith*. Because she trusted her church doctrine, other themes were *Trust in Authority* and *Sexual Purity as Identity*.

Marie learned about the purity pledge at church. She said, “My youth group pushed purity culture. I believed the Bible taught it and you need to be pure to have a happy marriage. No kissing until the altar. Wear a purity ring.” Making the purity pledge made her feel that she

was doing something right when she didn't know much yet about life. She remained abstinent until marriage. She shared, "I feel like the purity pledge completely stunted my growth in so many ways, and it really destroyed the first part of my life." She wasn't told what to look for in a relationship nor how she should be treated by her husband. She said, "When I went into my marriage, my thinking was sex is the most important thing in a marriage, because that's all that everything's focused on." Marie did not question purity culture as she did not know any different. She said, "I grew up in the Christian subculture with this whole us versus them mentality, which is probably pretty common." She knows now that is a harmful mindset to have, but back then it was all she knew. She shared, "I'm going to be a virgin until I'm married because sex is only okay when I'm married. It was very black and white thinking. All my friends from youth group, that's just what we did."

In college, Marie attended a discipleship program called *Master's Commission*. She said,

Your first year, you're not allowed to date or even talk to a boy for more than five minutes. You're not allowed to be alone with a boy because you're supposed to be setting this year apart to focus on God alone.

At that point in her life, Marie had always put God first and didn't look at boys or think about their appearance. She mused,

I was coming in pure as pure can be. I was so put in my place that I wasn't going to let my brain go there. I am a different person now, and it is hard to explain how I got so brainwashed, but that's where I ended up.

Because of the extremely strict and controlling environment, Marie later considered *Master's Commission* a cult.

Paige, Age 43. Paige's theme in adolescence was *Sexual Suppression*, which affected her emotional health and triggered panic attacks. She also felt a substantial amount of *Cognitive Dissonance* as an adolescent and young adult which gave her much anxiety as well.

Paige made a purity pledge when she was 10 years old at her church. She said, “I was told to write down the things I would do to keep myself sexually pure, to sign the pledge, and to keep it in my Bible.” The purity message was continuously reinforced. Paige also felt her feelings for boys needed to be off limits, too. She said, “The verse I remember being very connected to was ‘guard your heart’; that was the love connection they used and abused to force us into creating this note card of how you’re going to remain pure.”

Having adopted a theme of *Sexual Purity as Identity*, she followed the purity culture rules but suffered in silence. She said, “I privately had panic attacks that I couldn’t share with anyone. The cost of purity culture was a lot of my wellbeing.” Paige followed the rules well until she got to high school. She said,

As I started to break a few of the rules, I felt a lot of shame and guilt. I caused myself a lot of harm to my body and to my spirit and to my soul by some of my actions in college that were a result of my upbringing.

Paige found that because of purity culture, she put a lot of effort into finding her value and worth in becoming a perfect Evangelical trophy wife and woman.

Paige’s parents did not participate with her dating life, nor did she ever talk with them about her experiences with the opposite sex. She shared, “It was pretty absent. I don’t know if it was connection to their origin story, or is it was a carryover culturally or generationally that you don’t talk about those things.” Paige said she could only guess that her parents were absent because they both grew up in Evangelical households that were very performance-based.

She went to a prominent Evangelical Christian college where bible study groups used the book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* by Joshua Harris (1997) to teach sexual abstinence. It was here

where Paige started to feel dissonance with what she had been taught. Paige questioned the fact that she was a legal adult and was being controlled over how often she could talk to boys. She explained,

I started feeling that dissonance of, whoa, whoa, now I am starting to come into my body, now I am starting to feel attraction. And now you're telling me I can't even talk to men? I can't keep guarding my heart this way.

The purity culture rules no longer made sense to Paige.

Rachel, Age 38. The theme of Rachel's adolescence was *Authoritarian Parental Control*. Her parents controlled so much of her life and sexuality that she did not learn much of anything about sex before she got married. The theme of *Sexual Suppression* was entrenched in Rachel's life, as she was grossly uninformed about sex when she got married at almost 23 years of age. A theme at adolescence was *Compliance with Faith*, which came from Rachel's desire to love God and please her parents.

Rachel's purity pledge was a literal purity contract with her father when she was 12 years old. She said, "I would keep myself pure and not marry anyone without my father's approval and blessing." Rachel had no idea of the ramifications of what she was signing, but she knew the pledge was important to her father, so she complied. "I wanted to be pure. I loved Jesus. I loved God. I wanted to be a good little girl. I had no clue what I was doing." Rachel's mother was not involved with the contract, but her grandfather was a witness and signed the contract as well.

Rachel's parents believed in traditional courtship so when she was in high school, they only allowed her to spend time with boys if she was in a group and there was another girl or an adult present. However, the rules were inconsistent. She said, "There were certain guys that it was okay for me to be alone with, the people they thought either

they could trust or that they would be ok with me marrying.” Boys were required to ask Rachel’s father’s permission to court her, but no boys did. After high school, Rachel met someone when she was on a trip outside the country and her parents sabotaged the relationship. She said, “I remember coming home from a trip and my parents sitting me down and saying, ‘Are you pregnant?’ I’m like, ‘What do you mean?’” Her parents proceeded to tell her they assumed she had sex with the man. She said,

The way they’d raised me, the things they crammed down my throat and indoctrinated into me, I’m the most naïve, innocent, unsuspecting, vulnerable little girl that could have ever existed in this sex realm. They were not happy that I had met some guy. My parents responded very poorly. That relationship ended because of how they handled things.

Rose, Age 37. The main theme in Rose’s adolescence was *Compliance with Faith*. She was very good at following the rules and making sure she did the right things, thus forming her theme of *Sexual Purity as Identity*. She wanted her parents and God to be pleased with her. A theme in Rose’s adolescence was *Sexual Suppression*, as she felt she had to hide any physical contact with boys from her parents as well as create strong boundaries with boys about staying abstinent. She also felt tremendous *Sexual Shame and Guilt*.

When Rose was 13 she made a purity pledge, wore a purity ring, and showed the ring off throughout her adolescence. She said, “I was great about keeping rules and very prideful about that.” As a young adult she observed that her ability to be emotionally intimate was restricted, as she was required to keep strong boundaries to keep her purity intact throughout her adolescence. She said, “With dating, there was always some kind of wall up and we’ve got to be this goody two shoes. Not just sexual intimacy, but other types of intimacy, too. You couldn’t be completely honest and vulnerable.”

Rose's main thoughts about purity culture were a continual stress about doing the wrong thing to make her brothers in Christ stumble. She felt shameful if she had any feelings of arousal inside her body and was continuously anxious she was doing something wrong, such as unintentionally flirting with someone or giving them the wrong impression about her intentions. She said, "I had lots of shame, anxiety, guilt. Jesus wants you to be completely pure, so you had to be completely pure and holy and set apart. Any time I veered from that, was piles of shame, guilt, and anxiety." She didn't know there was any other way of being in her life as she was at church or with her homeschool group much of the time.

Summary

The innocent trust each woman has toward her caregivers and church leaders caused her to believe that in order to be acceptable to God, she must suppress sexual feelings and actions. Each was taught negative messages about sex which caused sexual shame and guilt. Part of each woman's church youth group curriculum were warnings of the loss of inherent value as a woman if she participated in premarital sex. To be acceptable to God, one must abstain from sexual thoughts and actions, causing each to form an adolescent identity around sexual purity and abstinence.

Modesty Culture Inside Evangelical Purity Culture

A focus on modesty culture emerged under the researcher's reasoning that modesty teaching in purity culture detrimentally affected the somatic aspects of each participant's psyche and therefore, affected her healthy adult sexual response. Modesty culture left each woman feeling insecure in her own body, and avoidant and/or anxious about approaching sexual relationships as an adult. The main theme in modesty culture was the teaching that women were

Responsible for Men's Sexual Thoughts and Behavior. This led not only to a protective and shaming attitude toward adolescent girls, but to young wives who were told they needed to keep themselves physically attractive and take care of their husband's sexual needs while remaining dutiful, chaste, and modest.

Because they were forced to hide their bodies under loose clothing during adolescence, girls thought there must something inherently wrong with their bodies. A theme of *Body Shame* added confusion, fear, and rejection toward the developing body. During their development, adolescent girls in purity culture learned they had power to make men act out sexually, but they needed to avoid using that power at all costs because it was sinful and evil to make a male have sexual thoughts toward her. The theme of *Self-Consciousness* arose causing worry and anxiety about presenting themselves modestly enough (not just in dress, but in attitude), which led to lack of self-esteem and confidence in making sexual choices as a young adult. Girls learned that if they dressed in a way that revealed any part of their body and it caused a sexual or lusty reaction with a male, they would be to blame. Absent in modesty culture were discussions of sexual consent, sexual communication, or sexual empowerment for women. Table 3 illustrates the felt sense of modesty culture, along with consequences and negative conditioning acquired by the participants.

Table 3*Felt Sense of Evangelical Modesty Culture*

Themes	Felt sense (consequences/negative conditioning)
Responsible for men's sexual thoughts and behavior	Anxiety Avoidance Insecurity
Body shame	Confusion Fear Rejection of developing feminine body
Self-consciousness	Lack of self-esteem and confidence
Feminine sexual agency is wrong	Dissociation Fear Rejection of arousal Rejection of personal power

Participants' Responses

Annie, Age 43. Annie was required to cover her body and dress modestly, which left her feeling there was something wrong with her female form. She said,

We weren't allowed to wear shorts or skirts that were too short. We had to wear one piece bathing suits if we were camping. Our bodies are such a danger to society that we still had to wear a one-piece bathing suit behind a wooden privacy fence. It was a sin to swim in the same pool as the opposite gender.

Kasey, Age 37. Kasey wore high-cut necklines, long skirts, and loose pants as an adolescent. She said, "I was told the reason to cover up was 'so that you don't cause your brother to stumble.'" She felt it was her responsibility as a woman to not be causing men to have feelings toward her, but they were likely to have them anyway because that was how they were made. The dichotomy left her feeling self-conscious and led to confusion and fear about how to relate to men.

Katherine, Age 42. Katherine was told she needed to dress modestly because provocative clothing would cause men to have lustful thoughts toward her. She felt responsible for their thoughts and embarrassed she was a woman. She said, “I felt very ashamed of my femininity, feminine sexuality, and my inherent ability to cause the men in my life or the boys to stumble.” She felt conflicted because she was curious about her body but taught to be ashamed of it.

Lily, Age 42. Lily was told her developing body could be a lust problem with boys and their relationship with God. She said,

As a teenager, you had to be careful how you dressed your body to make sure you weren't causing others to stumble. I was taught that I was responsible for the elder men in the church and their behavior and thoughts.

She internalized these messages as shame toward her own body.

Marie, Age 39. Marie mentioned she was not allowed to wear short skirts or tops that showed her midriff, but what caused her body shame was connected to developing breasts in fifth grade. She said, “I was very embarrassed because I didn't want anything to do with being sexual. I wanted to be a good girl and please God. It was just a constant struggle for me.” Marie developed an eating disorder because she was trying to keep her breasts small. She shared, “It really kind of shaped the root of who I thought I was when I was younger.”

Paige, Age 43. Paige did not experience modesty dress, but she still internalized the effect of modesty culture. How purity culture affected Paige is that she disconnected from her feelings, which ultimately left her feeling disconnected from her body sensations and she went through high school without experiencing feelings of attraction. As she put it:

The path of least resistance was to follow those rules for me, but I never connected to my body then. I shut off my body because I bought into the tenets of purity culture. I didn't realize that I had been detached from my body until I was around 30.

Rachel, Age 38. Rachel was required to dress modestly and refrain from touch. She said, "There was an unhealthy focus on the body, covering the body with loose and long covering." Modesty culture in Rachel's environment included the teaching that men were always looking at and lusting after women's bodies. She said, "It had to do with being naked, and that men like to look at your body, but I didn't understand anything past that." Thinking that men were lustful toward her gave her a enormous sense of shame in her body. As an adolescent, Rachel's mother required her to wear a girdle whenever she left the house, "so that no part of my booty would jiggle and attract attention. I had digestive issues because it was so tight. I didn't know why it mattered if my booty jiggled."

Rose, Age 37. Rose believed she was responsible for boys and men's lustful thoughts so she had to dress in a way that would not provoke them. She said, "We heard a lot about how you dress and how you held yourself." Rose was required to wear a T-shirt over her bathing suit, spaghetti straps on her dresses were forbidden, shoulders and midriff did not show. Her shorts and skirts had to be longer, so they did not show the thighs, and she was required to wear shorts under her skirts.

Summary

As the result of modesty teachings, each woman was left feeling insecure in her own body. She was taught that she was responsible for men's sexual thoughts and behavior, so she must dress in a way where men would not experience lustful thoughts if they looked at her. This led women to believe there was something wrong with her body, leaving her self-conscious and ashamed of her feminine body and appearance.

Emerging Sexuality Inside Evangelical Purity Culture

As young adults who were beginning to participate with sexual relationships, most participants experienced the themes of *Sexual Shame and Guilt* whether they were married or not. Others felt a change after sexual debut, the theme of *Lost Purity Identity*, which prompted them to start evaluating their faith. At different points and for different reasons, each woman started evaluating her own life and relationship to sexuality, leading to themes of *Confronting Purity Culture* and *Rejecting Sexual Shame*. The theme of *Cognitive Dissonance* continued to grow regarding the efficacy of purity culture as each woman encountered difficulty in relationship as none were educated nor prepared how to have a healthy sexual relationship as an adult. These themes are illustrated in Table 4 below with participants' narrative responses to follow.

Table 4

Felt Sense of Emerging Sexuality After Purity Culture

Themes	Felt sense (consequences/negative conditioning)
Sexual shame and guilt	Accepting poor treatment from partners Anxiety with sexual activity Feeling dirty about sexual activity regardless of marital status Inability to know and ask for what one wants Inability to give birth Inability to speak up for self Inability to sexually explore Not knowing what healthy sexual activity is Somatic pain with sexual activity Susceptibility to being manipulated

Themes	Felt sense (consequences/negative conditioning)
Confronting purity culture	Asserting thoughts and opinions Deciding purity culture is abusive Growing in intimacy with partner Reevaluating beliefs and faith
Rejecting sexual shame	Being sexually open with partner, married or not Refusing negative feelings about sex
Cognitive dissonance	Seeing irreconcilable differences between purity culture teachings and life/reality
Sexual suppression	Avoidance of sexual contact Fear of becoming promiscuous Fear of judgment by peers or church leaders Fear of upsetting god Ignorance about sex and pleasure Inability to enjoy sex, even after marriage Needing to take a substance to lower inhibitions Suspended sexual development Susceptibility to sexual assault

Participants' Responses

Annie, Age 43. Annie's first sexual experience reflected the theme of *Lost Purity Identity*. The relationship that ensued was not ideal and not one she wanted to continue. She shared, "My first sexual experience was with a woman at my Christian college. I had been manipulated into the relationship and felt shame about the sexual activity." Growing up in a Christian church that forbid homosexual relationships, this was an exceptionally uncomfortable situation for her, and she embodied the theme of *Sexual Shame and Guilt*.

She shared,

Had purity culture not been what it was, I would have told someone. I told the woman I wasn't going to continue the relationship, but she told me she would tell the resident director. I couldn't tell anyone. It was a terrible vicious cycle of manipulation.

Annie felt she had lost her purity identity. She said, "That was where I felt I had crossed the line between purity and impurity. I was a good girl and never had any kind of sexual experience. Had never kissed anybody." The experience changed how she felt about herself and she started reevaluating what she thought was true with her belief system causing her the thematic experience of *Confronting Purity Culture*. She explained,

I started to question the beliefs around sex and sexuality with my first boyfriend in college who was also an Evangelical. My boyfriend felt extremely guilty about having sex, but I did not. I had already sort of turned away from the church but still held a lot of the beliefs.

Annie made a conscious decision she was not going to be made to feel guilty about sex anymore causing her to embrace the theme of *Rejecting Sexual Shame*.

Kasey, Age 37. Kasey had sex with her boyfriend for the first time when she was intoxicated. She said, "I somewhat non-consensually lost my virginity; he was my boyfriend, and I was not sober," reflecting the theme of *Sexual Suppression*. "That whole experience messed up my self-worth for a while, but I was drifting away before then which made it easier than it would have been otherwise." Kasey had lot of self-realization from her experience. She reflected on the theme of *Lost Purity Identity* when she stated,

I felt I had broken some essential part of who I was as a person. I had this idea about myself that I was a person who was going to wait until they got married to have sex. I've ruined my virginity, so I had sex with other people, but still felt very guilty about it.

Her words (above) reflect the thematic embodiment of *Sexual Shame and Guilt*. Kasey had a crisis of faith and identity that caused her to evaluate her faith and what she

believed, and she embraced the theme of *Confronting Purity Culture*. Kasey now can't imagine committing to a lifetime with someone she had never been sexual with. She stated,

It seems insane. I had internalized a feeling that other people felt. Sure, that is how I was raised, but I was also raised that evolution was not real, but I am actively working in a field where I am doing evolutionary science.

Through self-reflection and reading, Kasey was able to sort through her feelings and dismiss the shame and guilt she had internalized that she didn't even believe in reflecting the theme of *Rejecting Sexual Shame*.

Katherine, Age 42. Katherine left home to attend a Baptist college because it aligned with her faith values but ended up journeying away from what she saw were damaging aspects of Evangelicalism and purity culture. Her earliest sexual experiences were full of shame and anxiety causing her a thematic embodiment of *Sexual Shame and Guilt*. She had sex for the first time when she was studying abroad. She shared, "I remember my heart was pounding and I had an almost panicky reaction." Though she felt uncomfortable and anxious, she also felt the experience was ideal for her because her partner was sensitive and listened to her body. She couldn't sleep that night wondering what was going to happen to her and believed she just changed an important part of her identity pointing to the theme of *Lost Purity Identity*. She thought, "I guess the cat's out of the bag, I'm standing on the precipice of launching into promiscuity and being that loose girl, being called a slut or a whore." She felt she was a fallen woman, tainted, and worried she was going to become promiscuous and ruin her reputation. She shared,

I thought back at other times fooling around or kissing and feeling very shameful and embarrassed that I had let myself be handled in that way and that I kind of liked it. I felt guilty for liking sex or enjoying sex because I wasn't enjoying within the bounds of marriage.

Katherine's final words reflect the theme of *Sexual Suppression*. Purity culture affected Katherine so much that she was in her 30s before she felt comfortable dating and having sex.

Lily, Age 42. How purity culture and her purity pledge affected Lily was that she did not start dating or have sex for the first time until she was 30 years old, reflecting the theme of *Sexual Suppression*. She said,

It got to a point where I just needed to get it over with because I had prescribed so much to virginity, what that meant and saving myself. I did not know who I was as a sexual being until I was in my 30s, which is a very negative effect.

Lily struggled with asserting her needs and preferences in her first relationships. She said, "I didn't know what I liked or how to speak up for myself. I stayed in a relationship for too long because I didn't know how to say, 'this is not what I want,'" which echoed the theme of *Sexual Shame and Guilt*. She discovered dating wasn't just about sexuality but that she deserved to be treated better. She stated, "I didn't know these things because I put them in a little box with my sexuality and didn't know how to unpack it." Lily was led to believe that having sex would launch her into promiscuity, but she found that to not be the case. She mused,

I never wanted to go crazy when I was finally done with purity culture. I never had my 'ho' phase. I never had a one-night stand because there's a lot of meaning attached to sexuality for me because of how I was raised within the church and how my sexuality was shaped.

This disparity between what she learned and what she experienced reflected the theme of *Confronting Purity Culture*. Lily met her current partner when she was 35. His orientation about relationships allowed her to grow as a person. She said,

We laugh because he gets to benefit from my repressed sexuality from my 20s. When we started dating, I still didn't know how to speak up for myself for the things I wanted. I was never taught that it was ok to do so. He made it a safe space for me to ask for anything.

This freedom with her partner allowed her to embrace the theme of *Rejecting Sexual Shame*.

Marie, Age 39. As a young adult, Marie didn't know what she wanted from a relationship or how to even have one. She shared, "I had many walls up because I was so afraid to displease God or to be judged by my peers or my youth leaders that I wasn't going to do anything," indicating the theme of *Sexual Suppression*. In college Marie met the man she would marry at *Master's Commission*. She said, "I wasn't at all attracted to him. I married him because it was convenient. We were both in purity culture our whole lives." She felt his standards matched her regarding her own rules for herself in the world. Her future husband told her he wanted to get married to someone who wanted to be a good wife and have children. They decided not to kiss until they got married. She shared,

We maybe had a good sex life for the first year. We had three children together and he didn't want anything to do with sex. After ten years of marriage, I asked him if he's gay and he is, so now he's engaged to a man and that was the end of that marriage.

Marie holds purity culture responsible for her difficult experience. When her marriage ended, she sought out a heterosexual lover and realized she didn't feel shameful or guilty about sex at all, indicating the theme of *Rejecting Sexual Shame*.

Paige, Age 43. Paige got married at 21 and her partner was 22. She shared, "I was a good Bible college girl. I was a child bride." Paige and her husband were able to process the unhealthy ways they had been brought up. She shared:

Then how dirty and shameful we felt through our college experiences of having partnerships with other people, and how wrong and guilty and shameful we felt which indicated an embodied theme of *Sexual Shame and Guilt*. My partner and I worked hard to not have intercourse when we were dating.

Her retelling pointed to a theme of *Sexual Suppression*. Paige continued by explaining that she and her partner liked each other and felt they were right for each other, “But all this stuff we’ve been taught our whole lives has done nothing but make us feel guilty and dirty. So now we’re together and we respect each other. Where do we even begin?” The negative conditioning left them with a lot to work out together about how to grow in intimacy together as a couple reflecting the theme of *Confronting Purity Culture*.

Rachel, Age 38. Rachel was almost 23 years old when she got married. She said, “My husband was respecting my parent’s position and us not talking about sex, not having sex before we were married, to honor us, to respect us. He did not understand that I was that clueless.” Rachel’s statements indicate the theme of *Sexual Suppression*, and she had strong sentiments about this later. She said, “If you allow your child to get married with never giving them any form of sexual education, that is a form of sexual child abuse,” reflecting a theme of *Confronting Purity Culture*. Upon reflection, Rachel said, “I was so innocent. I was so naïve. So sheltered, so protected. They were handing me off to a man where anything could have happened to me.” Rachel stated she was so naïve that she would not have recognized rape or assault. She said, “Thankfully I married a kind man who was not trying to ever take advantage of me.” She experienced a lot of pain with intercourse early in her marriage. Several years later, she learned she had vaginismus, where her vagina tightened up involuntarily with penetration. She said, “My honeymoon was excruciatingly, horribly painful. Very difficult for my husband who kept saying, ‘but you’re hurting and I’m hurting you and I don’t want to hurt you.’” It took Rachel several years to work through the pain and become excited about sex. She said, “I was very prudish and

strait-laced. Intimacy has been a struggle in my marriage.” Because of her upbringing, Rachel embodied the theme of *Sexual Shame and Guilt*, which played out in her marriage.

Rose, Age 37. Rose kept her purity pledge and stayed sexually abstinent until she was married. After she got married she had a difficult time moving past the abstinence restrictions, as reflected in the theme of *Sexual Suppression*. She said, “You’re taught, don’t do this at all, but then all of a sudden, be that tiger in the bedroom! I had no idea about anything and what to do.” She couldn’t overcome the sexual anxiety, guilt, and shame she felt, and often wondered if she was doing things right in her marriage, demonstrating the embodied theme of *Sexual Shame and Guilt*.

She had difficulty adjusting to being sexual and it took her a long time to feel like she wasn’t doing something wrong which pointed to the theme of *Lost Purity Identity*.

She said,

I felt shame inside my body and guilt of not being able to be for my husband what I was supposed to be. It took years of marriage to not feel like I was sinning to have sex with my husband. Ten plus years after getting married and I was still feeling guilty and shameful about doing stuff like that.

Summary

Each participant was detrimentally affected by what she learned through purity culture. From childhood through adolescence into adulthood, each participant learned that sexuality (including thoughts and appearance) was potentially dangerous and was always sinful outside of marriage. Each participant felt it difficult or impossible to find anyone to talk to honestly about the feelings she was having about her changing body or how to make the best choices for herself regarding her sexuality and relationships. The training caused each participant to embody sexual shame and guilt, while some even found themselves in situations where they were taken advantage of by deceitful people. The

restrictions were prescribed to be ordained by God, Jesus, the Bible, and the assumption was that they would follow this Christian behavior and not question it, or risk being ostracized by leaders and peers at church. The consequences of growing up in this culture and not learning concepts such as sexual communication, consent, or sex positive attitudes caused a myriad of problems to each participant's mental health.

Mental Health Consequences from Evangelical Purity Culture

As adults, each participant faced mental health consequences based on what she learned from her upbringing in purity culture and the Evangelical Christian church. Each woman described mental health and somatic health issues that took her many years to contend with about her sexuality. Themes of *Suppressed Feelings About Sexuality*, *Shame and Guilt*, and *Fear and Anxiety* were the prevalent felt senses participants encountered as adults navigating not only sexual but emotionally intimate relationships. Themes of *Freeze Response/Dissociation* from sexual feelings were also common.

Participants were taught to suppress their emotional feelings as adolescents with instruction about shielding not just their bodies from sexual temptation but guarding their hearts from feeling vulnerable toward another person. Thus, themes of *Difficulty Expressing Needs and Wants* and *Stunted Maturity* prevailed as adults. Themes of *Codependency* in the form of deferring to the partner's wants and needs and not feeling one's own needs were important, allowed, or known were common. In this chapter for simplicity's sake, themes relating to each participant's mental and emotional health were listed in order of appearance inside her narrative. Each participant recognized and was able to articulate how purity culture harmed her mental health, sexuality, and outlook toward life. As the researcher perused the narratives, emerging themes in each woman's

life became apparent and were noted as markers in her healing process. The next table outlines themes and reported health consequences participants experienced from purity culture, followed by their individual responses.

Table 5

Reported Health Consequences from Evangelical Purity Culture

Themes	Reported health consequences
Suppressed feelings about sexuality	Difficulty trusting oneself
	Lack of sexual desire
	Lack of freedom with being sexual
	No knowledge of consent
	Susceptibility to being abused
Sexual shame and guilt	Anxiety
	Confusion
	Delayed health treatment
	Depression
	Discomfort with being naked
	Feeling dirty and bad
	Feeling of being broken
	Flashbacks of past sexual activity
	Inability to give birth
	Lack of self-worth
	Negative body image
Somatic pain and discomfort	

Themes	Reported health consequences
Freeze response/dissociation	Feeling constrained Inability to feel sexual sensations or excitement Isolation Limited ability to engage with emotional intimacy and sexuality Late development of sexuality Self-consciousness Somatic shut down Susceptibility to being manipulated Weak sexual identity
Difficulty expressing sexual needs and wants	Anger Can't talk "dirty" Discomfort Feeling misunderstood and misjudged Inability to assert oneself Inability to open up emotionally Inauthenticity Low self-esteem Putting oneself last Secret panic attacks
Stunted maturity	Difficulty handling stressful life situations Emotional and mental guardedness Emotional awkwardness Feeling dirty about sex until around age 30 Inability to fit in with peers and society Late development of identity Looking for validation outside of oneself, self-doubt Making lifetime commitments based on limited knowledge Not knowledgeable about sexual pleasure

Themes	Reported health consequences
Spiritual uncertainty	Ambivalence Depression Disappointment Distrust because of false doctrine and misused scripture Disruption of spiritual identity Grief Loss No clarity who God is anymore No idea how to feel pure as a sexually active adult Sadness

Participants' Responses

Annie, Age 43. Annie's experience with detrimental mental health issues from growing up in purity culture reflect the following themes: *Depression, Anxiety, Panic Disorder, Late Treatment for ADHD, Self-Esteem, Cognitive Distortions, Somatic Shame, Sexual Guilt, Emotional Guardedness, and Codependent Tendencies*. An emerging theme in Annie's healing is *Authenticity*.

As a young child, Annie developed insomnia because she was terrified of hell and eternal damnation. Purity culture affected Annie and later she was diagnosed with chronic dysthymic depression. She feels one reason for her depression was that her sexual naivete made her susceptible to becoming a victim and her feelings of shame kept her locked in an abusive situation. She chronically felt anxious in her first marriage as her husband used religion as a weapon to psychologically abuse her. Annie felt she needed to always be a sweet and helpful person to others. She has had panic attacks when worried about disappointing someone. She said, "There was a lot of guilt and shame wrapped up in there and it makes you anxious." Cognitively,

she said she knows she was brainwashed inside a cult, but she still feels fear at times that she was wrong for leaving. She attended therapy off and on since she was 19 years old and has been on medication for depression and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). She has felt frustration that her church did not recognize mental health issues.

Annie recognized that because of how she was conditioned through purity culture, she has had limits on her ability to be intimate and sexual. She said, “You put up these walls and barriers so that people think that you are this thing that no one can really be.” She dealt with sexual shame around being naked, after intimacy, and about her past relationships. Purity culture affected her self-esteem. She married her first husband because she felt “he accepted me despite me being dirty and sinful and impure.” Years after rejecting purity culture, she felt the concepts were still deeply engrained and sometimes she still felt dirty. She said, “I haven’t been able to feel completely free sexually because there is always some kind of undercurrent in there somewhere.” Annie felt “a stifling effect over everything” within her marriage. She shared, “I am 43 and it's really only been the past four or five years that I feel like I've come as much out of it as I will ever.”

Spiritually, Annie noticed substantial inauthenticity within purity culture but felt like she was an outsider because she didn’t agree with it. She mused,

There was always this film of fakery over everything. You could never be who you were, because if you were who you were, you were admitting to not being a perfect person and not always being joyful and cheerful and happy.

She saw people at her church as very guarded and wanted to share a more authentic spirituality, which was one of the main reasons she left.

Kasey, Age 37. Kasey's experience with detrimental mental health issues from growing up in purity culture reflect the following themes: *Stunted Emotional Development, Somatic Shame, Sexual Guilt, Difficulty with Intimacy, Self-Esteem, Difficulty Determining Needs and Wants, Spiritual Uncertainty, Emotional Guardedness, Codependent Tendencies.* Emerging themes for Kasey are *Autonomy* and *Emotional Openness.*

Kasey still felt attached to her religion as it was a big part of her identity growing up. She asked herself, "Am I in church because I actually still believe any of this or am I just not willing to give up that last little bit of this identity that I have had for so long?" She decided that if she became an atheist, she would never tell her mother as she did not want to disappoint her.

Regarding mental health, Kasey felt her emotional development was stunted by purity culture. She said, "We were taught to guard your heart and guard your mind, mostly in the context of not opening yourself up emotionally to a relationship that's not your husband, which has made it harder to open up in relationships." Kasey felt difficulty with being intimate and letting herself relax in a sexual relationship. She said, "There is still some part that feels I am doing something wrong, a side effect of the whole idea that you can be a stumbling block." She also felt over-responsible in her relationships. She shared,

I have done a lot of faking it in sex because somewhere in there, it's my job to make sure his experience is good. If I am not giving him what he wants sexually, I feel it's my fault not a joint issue.

Because of her upbringing, she felt her needs came second in a relationship. She said,

There is the idea in the church that the man is the head of the household, and the woman is supposed to support him in the things he wants. I have a really hard time asking for what I want in that regard.

Kasey felt that purity culture made it harder for her to trust herself.

Kasey felt her spirituality was affected when she lost her virginity, and she had a major crisis and shift in her faith. She started thinking, “What does this mean about my relationship with God? Purity culture places such an emphasis on virginity.” Kasey had been taught that having sex before marriage was almost like an unforgivable sin.

Virginity was seen as irretrievable once lost, so Kasey felt God didn’t want her anymore. She said, “I still sometimes don’t know whether or not I consider myself a Christian.”

Katherine, Age 42. Katherine’s experience with detrimental mental health issues from growing up in purity culture reflect the following themes: *Depression, Anxiety, Irritability, Anger, Sexual Guilt, Somatic Shame, Panic Disorder, Self-Esteem, Isolation, Emotional Awkwardness*. An emerging theme for Katherine is *Freedom*.

Katherine felt purity culture was one of the more damaging aspects of the Evangelical faith practice she grew up in. She said, “Purity culture contributed to my overall dislike and ultimately my decision to not consider myself an Evangelical Christian anymore. I find it really distasteful.”

She attended therapy off and on for almost 18 years to deal with depression, anxiety, irritability, and anger. She said, “My depression had a lot to do with not feeling like I had much autonomy in terms of sexuality and religious morality.” She felt stress as an adult in terms of feeling naïve and having very narrow perspectives and opinions about sexuality. She said, “I experienced shame even with engaging in non-intercourse sexual behaviors like making out and

heavy petting. I felt I was dirty and bad.” She encountered the cognitive dissonance of “this is how I was raised” when encountering many other ways of thinking.

Katherine badly wanted to have a romantic relationship but was afraid to be in one. She said, “I was afraid because I felt obsessed with making sure I didn’t do anything to invite any sexual advances. I was deeply worried about how I would handle it if things went too far.” She was taught that having sexual thoughts was as sinful as engaging in the actual sexual behavior, and that left her feeling too afraid to date until she was in her 30s. She said,

I felt I was emotionally and psychological immature in a lot of ways. In my early twenties, I’d finished my master’s degree, had a career, my own income and had bought a home. But I was still looking for validation outside myself.

Purity culture made marriage the main purpose of being a woman and for a long time, Katherine felt her identity was supposed to be in relationship with somebody else and not with herself as an individual. She wasn’t taught how to have healthy boundaries or consent within the bounds of marriage. She said,

Part of why I waited so long to get married was because how are you going to know if you’re compatible with a person to live with them for the rest of your lives if you don’t spend time together? I feel that part of that is learning about each other sexually and likes and dislikes.

Spiritually, purity culture made Katherine feel very confined and suffocated within her faith. She said, “I felt incredibly anxious and depressed about not feeling I had much choice to think any differently about the negativity than the way I had been taught.” For a period of time, Katherine could not sit in a church without feeling like she was going to have a panic attack. She said,

I had heart palpitations. I didn’t feel comfortable being in that place anymore. Then I experienced religious trauma syndrome, as moving away from my upbringing felt very tumultuous and gave me a sense of upheaval.

Lily, Age 42. Lily’s experience with detrimental mental health issues from growing up in purity culture reflect the following themes: *Sexual Guilt, Sexual Suppression, Difficulty*

Determining Needs and Wants, Somatic Shame, Disappointment, Codependent Tendencies.

Emerging themes for Lily are *Freedom* and *Egalitarian Relationship*.

When Lily went to Christian college, she felt conflicted between learning and exploring the dating world, but also wanting to keep herself pure for her future husband. Lily felt a deep desire to be married and have children. At 25, she wondered why it hadn't happened and started questioning church values because they no longer made sense to her. Lily evaluated social issues, especially homosexuality, racism, and sexism and found them all too inflamed within the church. She desired to hold on to being a Christian and have a positive sexual experience, but the cognitive dissonance was too much. It took Lily 5 years of thoughtful exploration until she felt she was ready to leave the Evangelical church. She said, "I realized my salvation wasn't dependent on my virginity or any inherent pureness. I left religion when I realized that I was wholly responsible for my happiness, and religion was a social construct put in place to control populations." Lily stopped going to church right after her 30th birthday. Her parents took the news hard, but they were very supportive and respectful of her decision. She mused, "That was really helpful and what kept me balanced."

Lily shared, "At 16 I engaged in sexual acts and felt horribly guilty for it, so I shut myself down." Because she was afraid to explore her sexuality, she did not date until she was 30 nor did she have her first serious relationship until she was 35. When she met her current partner, she felt she was able to explore sexuality in a healthy way. She shared, "In church, they teach you to do whatever your husband wants to do. I didn't learn how to say no or to advocate for myself." Lily's boyfriend gave her the space to say no to sex. She said, "It took time for me to process that in a healthy way and realize that if I'm not feeling it, I can absolutely say no." Ten years out of purity culture, Lily felt she was finally comfortable with what sexuality looked like and she

overcame what she felt were her shortcomings. She mused, “But in the beginning, coping was just going along with it because that’s what you thought you were supposed to do.”

What Lily learned from her immersion at church and Christian college was that if she didn’t do things a certain way, there was something wrong with her. She said,

I went through a never-ending cycle of feeling guilty and not worthy. I felt I needed to pray and confess my sins, which included impure thoughts. I never felt like I was good enough. I was confused and felt there must be something wrong with me, like I’m broken and beyond repair. And that’s a lie.

Lily felt she overcame purity culture; it just took her time to get there.

Marie, Age 39. Marie’s experience with detrimental mental health issues from growing up in purity culture reflect the following themes: *Emotional Suppression, Betrayal, Deceit, Sexual Shame, Sexual Guilt, Difficulty Communicating About Sex, Fear, Codependent Tendencies*. Emerging themes for Marie are *Freedom* and *Self-empowerment*

Marie didn’t think about purity culture until she was going through her divorce and started evaluating her life. She was 36 years old and had spent ten years being a godly wife. She said, “I thought that if I waited to have sex until I got married that I was going to have a great marriage and a wonderful sex life. And it was just all a lie.” During their marriage Marie’s husband drank heavily to cover up the fact that he was attracted to men. Because being gay in the Christian church is considered sinful, he never told anyone. She said,

I asked him to leave because of the alcoholism. And then while he was gone, I realized I was in an emotionally abusive situation, and I didn't want him back. I felt free for the first time in my life.

When Marie asked her husband if he was gay, he said he was. She then felt that perhaps the breakdown of her marriage was her fault. She said,

I went through a whole crisis on my own where I felt like, is he not attracted to me? Did I turn him gay? I went on a mission to have sex with a straight man, because I wanted to know what it was like. I had sex with somebody I'm not married to. And I actually loved

it. I didn't feel ashamed, and I thought my whole life that sex outside of marriage is the most shameful thing you could ever do ever in life.

Marie joined a support group for wives and what constantly came up was a theme behind religious men pretending to be straight for an entire marriage. She said, "There were so many pastors' wives in this group and my eyes were open. I remembered the *I kissed dating goodbye* book and realized that the author had apologized for what he had said in it." Marie went to a Christian male therapist for a while and had difficulty talking to him about sex. She mused,

I have to be so Christian, and I don't even know if I believe this stuff. I just felt so much shame. I examined how I got here and what made me think this was the only way to think.

Purity culture affected Marie's life because she believed that having sex before marriage would destroy her destiny and connection with God. She shared,

I had such a fear that being intimate before marriage in any way, even like talking too much about intimate things or talking about sex before marriage. I wasn't able to do it because I was afraid it was sinful.

Marie didn't feel sexual shame once she was married but felt there was something missing. She said,

We couldn't have the level of intimacy because we couldn't have that emotional connection. He was hiding his sexuality and he had his own fears of intimacy. I didn't know better. There was no intimacy for me. Now I'm in a healthy, really amazing relationship and it's just blowing my mind. On one side I'm so happy. And then on the other side, I'm mourning the loss of the years I didn't know any better.

Marie had posttraumatic stress responses about sexuality from time to time. She said,

When I first started having sex with the man that I'm with and he made a comment, 'Oh, you really like sex.' I immediately felt massively shameful for that. He meant it as a compliment. I worked through it and it's obviously a good thing and we're going to enjoy it. I'm not going to be ashamed about it.

Marie felt purity culture stunted her growth and destroyed the first part of her life. She shared,

I didn't know what I was looking for in a partner or a spouse. I didn't have sex until my wedding night and ended up in an emotionally abusive marriage, being used as a cover up for his sexuality, providing children and a wife for him so he wouldn't look gay.

Marie felt her ex-husband took consent from her because if she knew the truth, she never would have made a life commitment with him.

Spiritually, Marie felt like her standing with God was based on her purity. She shared, "I also felt like I deserved to have a great life because I did what God was asking me to do, but that's not what the Bible teaches." Marie felt that she could hear God and she knew God, but a lot of what she believed was based on false doctrine. She mused,

I don't understand why Christians, why there's such a big emphasis on sex. Purity culture was the sum total of my relationship with God so when it all fell apart and I realized I had taken a wrong path in my beliefs, I also began to question if I even knew who God was at all.

Paige, Age 43. Paige's experience with detrimental mental health issues from growing up in purity culture reflect the following themes: *Early Trauma, Fear, Anxiety, Negative Body Image, Self-Esteem, Panic Disorder, Somatic Shame, Sexual Suppression, Depression, Anger.* Emerging themes for Paige are *Autonomy* and *Freedom.*

As a small child, Paige experienced severe burns from her back down to her legs. Soon after, the term *lake of fire* became a point of interest to her. She shared,

When you tell a child who has been burned to the degree that I was that the lake of fire is where you are headed if you don't accept Jesus Christ and get to heaven, that was the baseline of anxiety for me, panicked anxiety.

Paige was seriously traumatized, both physically and emotionally. "In bed late at night, I'd hyperventilate and cry and try really hard to stop the repetitive thoughts of going to hell, to make sure that I knew Jesus because I can't handle the lake of fire again."

As a teenager, Paige did not experience sexual feelings in her body and was concerned there was something wrong with her. She said, “I had a negative relationship with my body, whether it was its size or its worthiness for men. The answer was always to get men and boys to be interested in me and then behave right.” Looking back, Paige can see had feelings in her body because she was having panic attacks alone in bed at night, but her conscious mind at the time was concerned with doing the right thing. Paige was diagnosed with major depressive disorder and took medication. “I don’t know how much of that is tied to Evangelicalism because since birth, it was part of my journey. I have a family history of depression, but I also have a family history of Evangelicalism.” Since Paige left church and purity culture and no longer prescribed to versions of heaven or hell, she stopped having panic attacks and racing thoughts.

As an adolescent Paige tried to balance between participating enough physically so boys would not think she was a prude, but not going far enough to break her promise to stay a virgin until she got married. She said, “I pushed my body down and I pushed my desires down until much later. Purity culture impacted my relationship with my own body and my ability to have healthy physical interactions with a romantic partner.” After Paige got married, she saw the gender roles being played out between herself and her husband, and it didn’t feel comfortable to her:

I started to say what I liked, what I didn’t like. I started to give myself a voice. Part of my growth has been from a partner who has given me room. I still need permission from him to exist in some ways. It’s nothing he says or does, that’s the insidious purity culture still being there. It plays mind games with you.

Paige felt angry that as a 10-year-old she was required to make a pledge about sexual choices. She shared, “I am sad and mad on behalf of the child version of myself. I was a child, it was wrong. I was broken before I even had a chance to define my sexuality for myself.” She believed

that she had to do what boys wanted sexually to be of value to them. She did things physically that she didn't want to purely because she needed their approval. As she put it:

I didn't know what I wanted or how I should be treated because the only answer was to save myself for marriage. My introduction to physicality and intimacy that way was bad. I did not have guidance. I did not have worth connected to myself outside of what these men wanted from me.

Paige felt so much shame when she felt attraction to her partner and wanted to have sex with him before they got married. "It was hard to talk to him about our sex life because it was taboo. It took a while and having a great partner for me to decide I can enjoy sex and intimacy."

On a spiritual level, becoming a mother changed Paige's views. She decided she would not raise her children to be reduced to their sexual choices, "amongst the myriad of messed up doctrine." She said,

It's impacted every part of me, but I'm done letting it wreak havoc for me. I can't pinpoint how done I am with sorting out my healing, but I have had to start over with what I believe. I'm done with patriarchy, Evangelicalism, and God through Jesus Christ. That portrayal of God is not one I want anything to do with.

Rachel, Age 38. Rachel's experience with detrimental mental health issues from growing up in purity culture reflect the following themes: *Unquestioning Spiritual Obedience, Betrayal, Cognitive Dissonance, Disruption of Spiritual Identity, Somatic Sexual Shame, Emotional Suppression, Panic Disorder, Indoctrination, Presentation of False Self, Self-Esteem, Anxiety, Lack of Personal Boundaries, Codependent Tendencies, Difficulty Communicating Needs and Wants.* An emerging theme for Rachel is *Empowerment.*

The birth of Rachel's daughter opened her eyes to something not right with her spiritual foundation. She said, "My spiritual identity, my whole identity, not just my religious belief was disrupted the day my daughter was born." Having done all the spiritual preparations for her

daughter's home birth, she was unprepared to have a C-section after several days of labor. Not only did she feel the incision into her belly, but her daughter's face was cut by the knife.

She said,

I followed all the rules. I was the poster child for our little fundamental Evangelical church and world and purity culture. I was the purest of the pure. I was the most innocent, the sweetest, the most obedient, the most compliant. I did everything I was taught. I honestly wanted to serve God and please God. I'd claimed all the names of God, the God who heals, the God who provides all things.

Yet she felt deeply traumatized when her birthing plans went awry, and she wondered why God was not there for her. Rachel's experience and lived reality, collided with the spiritual principles she had been taught. "That's the moment where my spiritual identity was disrupted, where the learned faith, the promises I've been given, it didn't happen. Something is off, God lied to me. People lied to me, God disappeared, or something is wrong." Rachel started to understand that purity culture was so deeply rooted in her entire Evangelical culture. "I realized I was part of teachings about sexuality and purity that were not right."

Rachel believed that women were supposed to be self-conscious and not trust their bodies. She said,

That self-consciousness carries over. The men were the ones always commenting on the modesty of my body. If we're supposed to be keeping men from stumbling and staring at us and looking at us, the men are the ones who are looking at our modest bodies, staring at our modesty.

Part of her indoctrination was to take the attention off her body and up to her face with an unconditional smile. "They're teaching you to keep your emotions under check, to only have the response that they're wanting." Rachel learned that every internal sensation she had was to be met with questioning what someone else would want, and her response was to be gracious and smiling. She explained,

I don't want to do this, but I'm being obedient, so I will have this obedience smile. It's so unhealthy and so toxic. It's teaching you to be manipulative, but also to never hear what your emotions are telling you.

Rachel believed purity culture was a process of grooming that allowed women to be abused by people. When red flags and emotions came up, they were circumvented by obeying the person who appeared to be in authority. She said,

I will smile through the abuse. I will smile through the narcissism, through the manipulation, through the coercion. Even though I am panicking inside, even though I'm freaking out, I keep pushing forward with that smile and those bright eyes without listening to myself.

Rachel felt she was being forced to disassociate from her emotions.

Rachel found it impossible to go from being an innocent girl who didn't know what sex was to performing for her husband. She said, "For some reason you're supposed to go from being Amish to being a pole dancer for your husband overnight." In Rachel's faith tradition, intimacy and sex was honorable and gave glory to God. She explained,

We read the books when we were first married, the ones that are all now being refuted, imagine Jesus standing at your bed, watching you have sex. He's so honored and glorified by this. But the books were primarily focused on the husband.

Rachel felt so inhibited she couldn't tell her husband what felt good or what hurt:

I would be in agony and never tell him. I had panic attacks, but I couldn't tell him. It has caused a huge strain in our relationship because he would say, if you'd only told me, I would never do that to you.

In the process of overcoming Evangelical fundamentalism, Rachel almost lost her marriage. She explained that "I was taught to be a greatly restrained woman, whether it is sexually or with speaking my mind. It has harmed greatly my relationship with my husband."

Rachel felt ashamed of being seen naked or being touched, especially during the birth of her daughter. She speculated with a counselor that her labor was so long because so many midwives were touching her and looking at her when she was naked. She shared, "I couldn't be

free in my body.” The counselor helped her walk through the trauma and the anxiety of having to look good, be modest, be covered, and not show nakedness. As she explained,

It literally was making me hold my baby in and causing distress to my child as well as to myself causing a labor that was so intense and so long. My body could not give birth, because of the modesty.

Rachel faced the ultimate psychological dissonance of trying to be modest while giving birth.

She recalled,

I’ve seen the doctors, there should be no reason why you can't give birth. It must be emotional and psychological. I look how I was raised and the teachings I'd been given. It was all held so tightly within my body that I could not even do the most natural thing in the world for a woman's body to do, which is giving birth to their child.

Rachel contended with her body image issues that carried over from Evangelical teachings and how her mother treated her body by making her wear a girdle. She said, “I believe it for sure damaged any sexual identity I may have had, because I didn't know I could have one.”

Rachel saw her relationship with church as complicated. She said, “I’m a Christian misfit. I've never fit in.” In the fundamental Evangelical purity culture environment, she felt she was too independent, smart, and capable. Outside of that environment, she felt she was too naïve and too conservative. As she moved away from purity culture and her upbringing, she thought she may have become too progressive and liberal for the church.

Rose, Age 37. Rose’s experience with detrimental mental health issues from growing up in purity culture reflect the following themes: *Shame, Anxiety, Late Development of Personal Identity, Posttraumatic stress, Depression, Sexual Guilt, Somatic Shame, Sexual Disownment, Lost Purity Identity, Late Identity Development.* An emerging theme for Rose is *Empowerment.*

After extensive evaluation, Rose left her faith and church community. She decided that the church was not the same as the God of the Bible. She saw some situations at church she felt were unfair, where some people’s mistakes were covered with grace, but others weren’t. She also

wanted to spare her children the feelings of shame and anxiety that she grew up with. So far most of the people she had met outside of church were online. She said, “I have been open and listening and learning.”

The impact of purity culture affected Rose’s mental health, including depression and generalized anxiety. She said, “It is a lot better now with therapy and with being free from church, but my body's constantly on hypervigilance, hyperaware, and hypersensitive.” Rose felt like she was a constant temptation to men which left her feeling very anxious. She said, “It made me feel sinful, like I was a terrible person. I felt like my worth was only in being pure.” Developmentally speaking, she did not find her own identity until she was 30 because she didn’t know she could have anything different than a church life. Rose was affected by religious trauma stepping away from church and losing her friends, community, and way of life, and had posttraumatic stress triggers. Being on staff at church where they had very strict rules where she felt controlled by her pastor or his wife. She said, “I have nightmares still of the pastor's wife saying things or giving me looks or misunderstanding me. There was a lot of being misunderstood.”

Purity culture affected Rose’s romantic and sexual life. Though she waited until marriage to have sex she was impacted. She mused,

It took years to not feel like I was dirty or gross or sinning when we’d have sex. I didn’t know or feel like it was okay to have fun. I was never taught about orgasms, so I didn’t know how to even have one until months after we were married.

She was told by her pastor’s wife that she needed to take care of her husband’s sexual needs whether she had the energy to do so or not. She explained,

I have three babies at home and just completely wiped at the end of the day. And the pastor’s wife said, “you're the only one that can take care of his need. So, recognize that it's a privilege and do it.” So, I had to be that for him.

How purity culture affected Rose's spirituality was that she thought she was in a relationship with God only if she remained sexually pure. She said,

Sex was seen as one of the ultimate sins. As I began to see the light in how what I was taught in church did not line up with who God really is, I began to break free from the purity culture mindset.

She was proficient at keeping the rules and obeyed authority even when she did not get an adequate response to her questions. As she put it,

You'll understand when you get to heaven, or your parents are your authority, and so you have to listen to them, even if you don't understand. If I started having suspicions, it was quickly shut down. That's how Jesus wants you to be, is completely pure, so this is what you have to do to be completely pure and holy and set apart. Anytime I veered from that was once again, piles of shame, piles of guilt and anxiety.

Rose prided herself on keeping the rules, except when feelings and arousal came into play, she found it was not too easy to follow the black and white rules set out for her. She said,

It was a lot of confusion and anxiety. Feeling guilty and anxious about literally everything in my life. A big part of us is our sexuality, so you would just have to completely pretend it doesn't exist or that you're wrong if it does. I'm a bad person if it does.

Summary

As the result of growing up in Evangelical purity culture, each participant was unprepared to navigate her adult sexuality with knowledge and understanding. Each experienced harmful mental and somatic health consequences as the result of being unprepared to choose a lifetime partner wisely and to enjoy her sexuality comfortably. With positive arousal around sexuality having been suppressed through being taught to deny all things sexual, the general reactions experienced were shame, guilt, fear and anxiety. Participants also reported feelings of being frozen and disassociated from their sexual identity and positive emotions as an adult.

Healing After Leaving Purity Culture and Evangelical Christianity

As displayed in Table 6 below, the prominent theme for the healing that can happen after leaving purity culture and Evangelicalism is *Ease, Flow, and Peace*. Each participant adopted thoughts, feelings, and practices in life that gave her life a positive flow and purpose. For the theme of *Spiritual Life*, the concept of *Embracing Internal Wisdom* became imperative for each participant to trust her inner guidance after leaving purity culture and Evangelical Christianity. The personal growth themes of *Welcoming Authenticity, Open-Mindedness and Goodness* are included. The theme of *Healing Journey Endeavors* includes personal growth themes of *Talk Therapy, Bibliotherapy, and Authentic Conversations with Loved Ones*. The theme of *Parenting the Next Generation* included the personal growth themes of *Body Autonomy, Knowledge of Consent Practices, Presence, and Availability*. This chapter is arranged by topic.

Table 6

Felt Sense of Personal Growth Post-Purity Culture

Themes	Felt sense of personal growth
Prominent: Ease, flow, and peace	Adopting thoughts, feelings, and practices that led to positive flow and purpose in life
Spiritual life	Embracing internal wisdom Open-mindedness and goodness Welcoming authenticity
Healing journey endeavors	Authentic conversations with loved ones Bibliotherapy Talk therapy
Parenting the next generation	Availability Body autonomy Knowledge of consent practices Presence

Spiritual Life: Beliefs and Practices

The themes regarding spiritual beliefs and practices are *Embracing Internal Wisdom*, which includes themes of *Embracing the Authentic Spiritual Self*, *Open-Mindedness*, and *Goodness*. Each woman found peace in believing she did not need to have the answers to life, came to be open to embracing what she did not know, became interested in and accepting of the world around her, and expressed that she simply wanted to have a good life and spread goodness to others around her. Participants' individual responses are shared below.

Annie, Age 43. Annie goes to a progressive Christian church and loosely considers herself agnostic. She is open-minded about spiritual practices and traditions. She said, "I was more interested in finding people who were genuine and sincere and finding a genuine experience where I could just be who I was." Her church community is open and accepting, and she enjoys, "having conversations about different spiritual beliefs like Buddhism and Taoism" with her priest and others.

Kasey, Age 37. Kasey believes in a God that is "less judgmental and more loving and kinder than the one she was raised with." She still sometimes attends church and listens to Christian music. She is not sure if she still believes in Christianity, but since it was the basis of her identity for so much of her life, she still participates in Christian practices at times.

Katherine, Age 42. Katherine is a progressive Christian. She appreciates a larger perspective about faith and spirituality where "all faiths can be beautiful." Her focus is on "seeing a person's humanity and respecting human dignity." She believes in "acting in loving, respectful and compassionate ways, while maintaining healthy boundaries."

Lily, Age 42. Lily believes "nothing in particular about spirituality and faith," but doesn't call herself an atheist because she believes there could be something out there. She practices her

spirituality this way, “if you put positivity out into the world, you get that positivity back.” She remains open-minded about faith but is not really interested in it. Her spirituality is to be a good person.

Marie, Age 39. Marie used to feel threatened by other’s differences but now is open “to learning about what others believe in and what they think.” She “enjoys learning about other people’s faiths even when they are very different from hers.” She is fascinated by what other people believe and learns so much from them by attentively listening to them.

Paige, Age 43. Paige believes in “openness” and that is where she finds peace. She sees there is “something big in this universe and life, that could be God” and she is open to learning more. She believes “in energy and that we are sharing energy with each other.” She is okay with not knowing the answers. She has “much peace” with where she is now and what she believes, even with the current passing of her Christian mother.

Rachel, Age 38. Rachel believes in God and sees Christianity to be a “broad and inclusive belief system where people accept each other, learn from one another, and support one another.” She is concerned with “why people believe what they do, rather than what they believe.” She enjoys learning about philosophies and ideas people have. She enjoys having intellectual conversations about spirituality where people can ask questions of each other in a civil and inquisitive manner.

Rose, Age 37. Rose believes in God because of “the amazing and intricate scientific details of the world.” She believes God reveals things through our intuition, innate morality, random thoughts, and other spiritual means. The spirituality that feels best for her is “erroring on the side of love, being kind and not hurting others, and helping people get justice.” She practices “mindfulness, thankfulness, especially in spending time with her family.”

Healing Journey

Each woman in this survey acknowledged the negative impact of purity culture and has done a significant amount of recovery work to move past the harm each has felt in life. The themes regarding the effort made on the healing journey are *Psychotherapy*, *Bibliotherapy*, and *Conversations with Loved Ones*.

Annie, Age 43. Annie learned through therapy to accept the truth that her church experiences were traumatic and harmful. She learned she had a choice in what she wanted to believe. She let herself be okay with the unknown and with the mystery of life. She started to have open-minded conversations with others which enriched her life and is part of a purity culture recovery group.

Kasey, Age 37. Kasey evaluated what she believed about purity culture and decided she didn't believe in it. She has read books such as *Tiny Beautiful Things* by Cheryl Strayed, several books by Brene Brown, and she bought the purity culture recovery books, *Come as You Are* by Emily Nagoski and *PURE* by Linda Kay Klein. Kasey would like to go to therapy to work through her religious trauma, but only if a therapist is purity culture-informed and not an Evangelical. She has talked with her friends who went through purity culture and practices open-minded conversations with others and is part of a purity culture recovery group.

Katherine, Age 42. Katherine worked with a therapist who specialized in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, which helped her to connect her thoughts and feelings. She also learned to trust her own sexual and emotional feelings. She exposed herself to secular thinking about sex, which gave her an open mind. A book, *The Erotic Mind* by Jack Morin, helped her understand herself better and embrace her sexuality. She is also part of a purity culture recovery group.

Lily, Age 42. Lily closely evaluated the beliefs she grew up with and realized they made no sense to her. Though it was difficult for her to walk away, she knew she was doing the right thing for herself. She would like to see a therapist someday, but she wants a non-religious therapist who works with religious trauma. She knows she is holding her religious trauma in a box until she finds a therapist she is comfortable talking to. She read books like *#ChurchToo* by Emily Joy Allison (2021), has talked with her friends and boyfriend about her past in church, and is part of a purity culture recovery group.

Marie, Age 39. Marie read several books and joined a straight wives' group when she was going through her divorce. Being in a healthy relationship has been very healing to her. She consciously decided to be sexually open and intimate in a healthy egalitarian relationship. She chose to not be afraid of the outside influences she had and places value in sexual integrity over sexual purity. Marie has close friends she has shared her church experiences with and is part of a purity culture recovery group.

Paige, Age 43. Paige went to therapy and reported that she loved it. She was able to process her upbringing and it has given her peace. She has listened to academic podcasts such as *Exvangelical* with Blake Chastain and *Straight White American Jesus* with Daniel Miller and Bradley Onishi and talked with her partner of 20 years. The relationship has continued to be a source of growth and inspiration for her. She is also part of a purity culture recovery group.

Rachel, Age 38. Rachel attended therapy for several years, but nothing connected to sexuality, as she hasn't yet found a therapist who understands purity culture. She helps others as a purity culture recovery life coach and finds healing in supporting others recover from their own religious trauma. She has read many books to aid her on her spiritual journey and is part of a purity culture recovery group.

Rose, Age 37. Rose has benefitted tremendously from attending therapy and reported that Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) was helpful and valuable to her wellbeing. She has talked with friends she grew up with about their purity culture experiences as well as communicating with her husband. She read books about purity culture and is part of a purity culture recovery group.

The Next Generation

Each participant experienced being taught they did not really own their own body, and this seemed to be a core issue of what went amiss with purity culture, so each wanted this generation of children to understand *Body Autonomy*. Because purity culture taught complete abstinence until marriage, information about sexual consent and communication was denied to each participant. When discussing how each woman intends to raise her children differently, *Knowledge of Consent Practices* was the most common theme. Each woman believed consent is one of the most important parts of sexual health education, especially with asserting boundaries with others. A third theme was *Presence* that values paying attention to children's lives and teaching them the information they need to know to grow up being sexually whole and prepared to negotiate sexual activity in a responsible way. A fourth theme is *Availability*. Participants felt the loneliness and emotional disconnect of not being able to talk to their parent about their own sexual growth. They wanted their children to know they were there to support them no matter what they were going through or what choices they made.

Annie, Age 43. Annie believes in the affirmation of her stepchildren's sexuality. When she talks with her stepchildren, she focuses on her ability and desire to listen to the personal parts of their lives and support them. She wants to provide them the support she did not get from her own mother.

Kasey, Age 37. Kasey is not planning to have children but believes in youth knowing they have personal ownership of their own body, not their parents, spouse, or church. She also wants youth to know they are not responsible for other's reactions to their body.

Katherine, Age 42. Katherine is teaching her daughter about her body and the changes that will happen as she matures. Consent is a value at the forefront of her parenting that includes sexuality as well as food choices, personal touch, and other aspects of life. She wants her daughter to know how to be responsible and informed about her own sexual health, right to privacy, and to be empowered to explore her sexuality when she is ready.

Lily, Age 42. Lily has not had children yet and does not know if she will. But she would want her children and other youth to know that sex is not shameful and should be celebrated. She believes a child's body is their own, "Your body belongs to you." She also wants children to understand that others need to get consent for any kind of touch, even hugs. She believes in "not forcing affection."

Marie, Age 39. Marie is teaching her boys to be respectful and have strong boundaries and convictions. She wants them to understand consent, respect for their own and other's bodies, and healthy connections with people. She sees sexual integrity is important, as is not having shame about sexual thoughts and activity. She would like her sons to date a lot before they get married, so they have experience with their own sexuality and personal wants.

Paige, Age 43. Paige provides her children an environment where they have a voice. She said, "They are allowed to question life." Language around consent is important in her household. She talks about sex often with her children, as she wants them to have the connection with her that she did not have with her own parents. She desires for them to have the inner wisdom to know when they are ready for sexual activity.

Rachel, Age 38. Rachel is very honest with her daughter, teaching her about sex to make sure she is knowledgeable. She teaches her about consent and provides an environment where there is no shame about sexual feelings. She and her husband are affectionate with each other in front of their daughter. They talk a lot together and ask questions; nothing is off limits. Above everything, she wants her daughter to know she is there to love and support her.

Rose, Age 37. Rose has open and ongoing conversations with her children about sexuality and wants to provide a sex positive atmosphere for them to grow up in. She wants them to be responsible with sex and does not want them to feel shame. No questions are off limits, and they are figuring out the answers together.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The researcher examined the lived experiences of those who grew up inside of Evangelical purity culture and who made a purity pledge to remain sexually abstinent until marriage. The researcher extensively reviewed purity culture and popular media literature, as well as Evangelical Christian history and literature. She also spent much time reading and analyzing the narratives of the eight women she interviewed who pledged to remain sexually abstinent until marriage but had challenges measuring up to the idealized script of purity culture's vision for sex and marriage. Consequentially, each woman struggled through her early adult life to overcome her limitations, own her sexuality, and take care of her mental, emotional, and spiritual health. Each also spent a considerable amount of time trying to make sense of how the experience of purity culture had impacted her own life.

The main research question guiding this study is: What are the lived experiences of those who grew up inside of Evangelical purity culture who took a pledge of sexual abstinence and went to great lengths to keep that pledge in a larger secular culture that is predominantly not sexually abstinent? This main question was followed by subsequent questions: (a) How do individuals who participated in Evangelical purity culture describe their adolescent and young adult journey; (b) what mental health challenges and psychological and spiritual impacts, if any, resulted from the experience of purity culture and taking a pledge of sexual abstinence; and (c) what coping strategies were used to address the challenges resulting from the experience of purity culture and taking a purity pledge?

Participants shared their life journey through childhood, purity culture, adolescence, early adulthood, and marriage/relationships. The narratives in this report were comprehensive and focused on the felt sense of the participants. The felt sense was a concept proposed by Eugene

Gendlin (1981) where the body is seen at the primary way in which people make meaning out of their experience. Gendlin's (1969) focusing-oriented therapy believed that the body acts as a container and holds deeper wisdom that can be obtained cognitively or emotionally.

Engaging with the felt sense means to become aware of one's own internal resources. This is especially important for people recovering from purity culture, as it had the tendency of dissociating a person from their internal resources to solve problems and guide themselves throughout life. To block out any form of physical arousal as a teenager tended to make it more difficult to find that arousal later as an adult. The literature shows this in several of the participants' accounts that were stated in Chapter 4 and each participant shared they had this dissociative experience as well.

Reflections on Purity Culture Interviews

Each participant had much to share about Evangelical purity culture and the negative impact it had on their lives. Each participant mentioned she could talk about this subject for many hours. Not one participant interviewed for this study believed that purity culture was something that benefitted her life. They found very little redeeming features about purity culture they wanted to share other than perhaps being exposed to a refined sexual ethic and being selective regarding emotional openness with potential romantic partners. Otherwise, each participant stated there was nothing good about growing up with purity culture as a sexual ethic and the entire purity movement went too far in its message because it cultivated states of shame, guilt, anxiety, and fear that were very difficult if not impossible to move past in adulthood.

As youth, no participant knew they were in a subculture that taught adherence to premarital sexual abstinence, as they were not greatly exposed to the larger secular culture that was much more comfortable and open about sexuality. Because of their upbringing, they simply

believed being completely abstinent before marriage was how life was supposed to be. As youth, any difference in lifestyle was explained by their elders that as Christians they were required to live in the world, but not be part of the world's system. They were told that as Christians, they were to abstain from worldly behaviors that included any sexual or intimate activity outside of marriage. As the interviews commenced, it became clear to the researcher that each participant had been greatly insulated from the majority culture, so as a youth, no one knew there were acceptable lifestyle options available outside her community. Also, the Evangelical Christian subculture taught (and still teaches) a restrictive sexual ethic that prohibited practices such as masturbation, LGBTQ+, and divorce, so many were conditioned that their only options were to permanently marry young or remain celibate as an adult.

Each participant's lived experience of purity culture was riddled with feelings of shame, fear, confusion, and inhibition about sexual activity. Themes of *Restricted Sexual Communication* and *Sexual Suppression* did not give participants a solid knowledge base or vocabulary to navigate their sexuality from the purity pledge taken in adolescence to being abstinent until marriage. While the Evangelical Christian church taught that sexual activity was for pleasure as well as for procreation, the restriction was that it only be practiced by married couples consisting of one man and one woman.

Reflections on Childhood Sexual Education

The subsequent questions first involved obtaining information on the background of each participant growing up in the Evangelical church and the childhood sexual education she received. During the 1980s and 1990s, even though sex education was taught in schools, information about sexuality was largely absent in the participant's lives. The superordinate theme encountered with childhood sexual education in Evangelical Christianity was *Sexual*

Shame and Guilt. The childhood sexual education obtained at home and/or through church felt forbidden, dirty, and something disgusting to be avoided, with references to premarital sex and masturbation being out of the question for everyone. As children and adolescents in church environments, participants were kept from knowing much about human sexuality, and the instruction from elders was to abstain from sex, not talk about it nor think about it until she was married. It was in this framework that the young brain lacked information about sexuality and participants were almost completely illiterate of anything positive and affirming about sexuality.

Reflections on Purity Pledge

Inside of this constraining environment of much sexual shame and very little sexual communication, the purity pledge as part of the Evangelical church youth group curriculum was presented as the biblically correct and Godly choice for adolescent sexual conduct. Pledges were usually made in groups where young people with extremely little sexual knowledge or experience were making promises to save their virginity for their future spouse. Themes encountered with the purity pledge were *Indoctrination*, *Compulsory Religious Education*, and more *Sexual Suppression*. Adolescents were taught that they would lose inherent value if they had sex before marriage. These teachings created the formation of a *Sexual Purity Identity* in each participant that believed abstinence before marriage was the only way to keep her value in God's eyes. Because this identity revolved around sexual abstinence as the only way to be pure before God, once a person was no longer a virgin, whether she was married or not, she realized how little knowledge and information she had about sex and had difficulty with the development of a valid new identity to embrace as a sexually active person.

Reflections on Modesty Culture

Contact with modesty culture created themes of a *Damaged Sense of Self* and *The Felt Sense of Shame Within the Body*. Each woman grew up thinking her body was something that could ruin a man's relationship with God. Several women mentioned feeling self-conscious and anxious around men about how they presented themselves and acted. No one ever wanted to be ungodly by arousing lust in a man. This led to themes of *Fear and Discomfort About One's Appearance* as well as anxiety regarding sexual attention and what enticement her developing body could be causing inside of men's minds and bodies. Expressions of "not making a brother stumble" (New International Version, 1978/2011, Romans 14:13-23) were common and as adolescents, each participant believed her body had the potential to cause men to sexually sin with lustful feelings, and she would be responsible for their actions. Women were taught that men were out of control sexually, and they needed to protect men from lusting after their bodies. This phenomenon has been discussed in the popular literature (Allison, 2021; Barr, 2021; Johnston, 2021; Klein, 2018; Schermer-Sellers, 2017) and each participant's narrative reflects the harmful themes of shame and guilt.

Reflections on Emerging Sexuality

As each participant became sexually active, she experienced difficulty adjusting to her life as a woman engaged in sexual relationships. Whether a participant had intercourse before she married or not, each had difficulty adjusting to life as a sexual being and themes of *Shame*, *Guilt*, and *Anxiety* continued. Annie felt dirty because she had sex before marriage and settled for a man who was abusive. Kasey had a crisis of faith and guilty feelings when she became sexually active and wondered if God still wanted her. Katherine did not feel ready for dating, sex, or marriage until her 30s because she did not know how to make it all work. Lily kept her virginity

until she was 30 and finally gave up on a faith that did not live up to its promises or did it make much sense to her anymore. Marie was a virgin when she married but spent 10 years with an alcoholic husband who was secretly gay. Paige struggled to find her own identity after her role models taught her she needed to defer to the male as the relationship head. Rachel grew up with controlling parents who denied her sexual education and after she married, she struggled with a crippling disorder that prevented her from enjoying her sexuality. Rose dealt with sexual shame and guilt well into her second decade of marriage. These narratives build on and reflect other narratives about purity culture shared in the popular media and in the literature (Allison, 2021; Barr, 2021; Finch, 2019; Gushee, 2020; Klein, 2018; Schermer-Sellers, 2017). The excerpts shared in the literature review above regarding the harm of purity culture found in the interviews.

Review of Mental Health Challenges

Each participant encountered a variety of mental health challenges as an adult coping with the fallout of purity culture. The most themes of mental health challenges connected to purity culture were *Anxiety and Depression Stemming from Sexual Shame and Guilt*.

Regarding purity culture and mental health challenges it has caused, Emily Allison (2021) in her book *#ChurchToo* wrote that purity culture was abusive:

People who uphold purity culture need to come face-to-face with what they are actually advocating for; a culture of mental health issues stemming directly from their theology and the abuses their theology sustains. Even those who haven't directly experienced abuse in the church but grew up in purity culture are more prone to struggle with their mental health. The whole system is sexualized violence. (p. 192)

For each participant, sexual purity involved a script that Evangelical Christian adolescents were mandated to follow. They were told by church pastors and leaders that being sexually abstinent and waiting for marriage to have sex was how they showed their love and obedience to God and their future husband. Each person was expected to obey the tenets of purity culture but also

experienced deep feelings of shame, guilt, and fear about their sexual feelings, which impeded their maturation and preparation toward being a sexually active adult. As recipients of purity culture teachings they were continuously warned against trusting their own sexual thoughts, feelings, and sensations or creating any kind of intimate bond with the opposite gender. They were told to wait for *God's best* by abstaining from all sexual, mental, and emotional actions and thoughts. Doing so left each ill-equipped to deal with sexuality and relationship as a young adult.

The natural process of maturation and sexual identity development throughout adolescence conflicted with the script of complete sexual abstinence and purity for God, which provoked themes of *Unspoken Confusion, Sexual Shame and Suppression, and Cognitive Dissonance*. This unique combination along with a lack of sexual education made it difficult to make meaning of one's own experience. Each participant was approximately 30 years old before she was able to sort out what happened and begin to take ownership of her body sensations and sexuality. Each needed to carefully evaluate her own experience and how it conflicted with the abstinence and purity views learned. The focus of purity culture was primarily on abstinence until marriage, so purity culture did not teach these women how have healthy adult relationships within marriage. To create a healthy life and take care of their own wellbeing, participants all found it necessary to detach from much if not all of the belief system they grew up with. Each grappled with learning to let her authentic self show up in her life.

Reflections on the Post-Evangelical Chosen Life

Each participant examined the beliefs she had inherited from growing up in purity culture and chose something different that aligned with a healthier way of living. The process of doing this was to survey her spiritual and mental constructs and choose internal structures that gave her relief. Each participant shared the felt sense of her current lived experience. The main theme in

this area was *Ease, Flow, and Peace*. Ironically enough, exposure to contemporary culture and other religious perspectives gave each woman the confidence that she could believe something other than what she was taught during her upbringing. She learned that choosing other beliefs did not mean she was a bad person nor that she was headed to eternal damnation. Each woman chose what worked for her and what gave her peace. Exposure to the wider culture helped each participant orient herself to more healthy ways of thinking and feeling. The culture she was taught to fear and be separate from was actually what helped her heal and be at peace with her own life trajectory.

When reviewing how she would raise her child(ren) differently, each woman described themes of *Teaching Mindful and Positive Ways of Looking at Sexuality; Celebration of Bodies; Communication and Consent; and Giving Children Education, Knowledge, and Affirmation*. Each participant believed in a broader and more open perspective of sexual affirmation and practice, of self-responsibility and self-ownership.

When sharing her healing journey, each participant felt themes of *Inner Peace and Acceptance* regarding the direction she was going with her spiritual life. She felt much more calm and secure with how she was living her life than she did inside of Evangelicalism. Each participant chose a broader perspective than what she grew up with. No one could say that she did not believe there was a God at all, but each asserted huge doubts about the legitimacy of purity culture as well as the denomination she grew up. Each questioned the value of Evangelicalism because of the sexual, emotional, mental, and spiritual damage she felt in her life. Purity culture hindered and did not help prepare her for an adult life of being sexually active.

The researcher learned so much from each participant and obtained a greater vocabulary to describe not only the participant's felt sense of purity culture's failings but her own difficulty owning and experiencing much security and joy in her own sexuality. The researcher found herself feeling deep sadness that the legalism and narrow views of purity culture diluted the spiritual message of the gospel of love, kindness, and grace she herself embraced as a youth. Each narrative told to the researcher resonated on some level with her own experience and helped her personal growth toward sexual and spiritual wholeness.

Reflections on Purity Culture and Abuse

Though the Evangelical church has historically required sexual abstinence outside of marriage, there have been many documented accounts of sexual impropriety, abuse, and assault reported from within church leadership and inside Christian families (Allison, 2021; Anderson, 2015; Du Mez, 2021; Finch, 2019; Freitas, 2008; Greczyn, 2021; Gushee, 2020; Winell, 2009) that created a traumatic environment and complicated the commitment the church said it had toward the sanctity of marriage. As individuals came out of the Evangelical culture and discovered these abuses, each felt even more a sense of betrayal and confusion. If they could not count on their faith community to practice what they preach, what was there to count on that was true and could be relied upon for a faith practice? Participants who came out of purity culture noticed these discrepancies, along with race, gender, sexual orientation (e.g., LGBTQ+), and political issues, and decided the Evangelical life was not for them. Seeing the church system for what it was as shaming, fearful, confusing, and controlling encouraged people to disengage from what they had internalized from purity culture and decide for themselves what kind of life they were going to live. It was inside inquiries such as this and about one's upbringing, that led most participants to change their belief structure.

Though the literature review (Chapter 2) included a section on the church's endorsement of corporal punishment, no participant reported being spanked or beaten as a child, so it was assumed this activity did not happen or that it did not affect the participant's purity culture journey. Also, though the literature review included a section on childhood sexual abuse, no participant reported experiencing overt sexual abuse as a child, so it was assumed this activity did not happen nor did it affect the participant's purity culture journey. However, it has been asserted in the literature that purity culture teaching *is* sexual abuse (Allison, 2021), especially since it leaves a young woman naïve and susceptible to sexual predators as well as naïve about rape (Greczyn, 2021). Winell (2009) stated, "Sexual abuse occurs in a surprising number of strict religious families" (p. 141). Whether or not a woman has experience overt sexual abuse, the healing path for a woman who has been indoctrinated by purity culture and has had difficulty embracing a fulfilling sexual life as an adult may consist of treating her difficulty as sexual abuse. Schermer-Sellers (2017) stated, "For many, the healing process can look very similar to someone who has experienced childhood sexual abuse" (p. 21). More research needs to be conducted with individuals who have had these experiences to determine what trauma actually transpired and how it affected them.

Implications: Why These Results Matter

There are many details inside of summarizing the literature and the results of the study. The parents were Evangelical, but they did not grow up inside the purity abstinence program. Obviously, parents and churches did not anticipate the problems their youth would have in their adult lives because of purity culture teachings. The negative effects, shaming teachings, and toxic childhood abuse caused embodied trauma that was not part of this group's belief system at

the time. As trauma becomes a more deeply researched topic in the psychological literature, the aspects of religious life will be more scrutinized and researched.

These results matter because these women shared narratives that relate strongly to the already established literature. These narratives were recorded and the felt sense of each participant and her journey was explored in detail. Instead of the unrelated articles, anecdotes, and case studies that are found in search engines, these results gave a compilation of literature and analyzed data of people who experienced this phenomenon directly.

Limitations and Delimitations of Study

Though this study reviewed, reflected, and analyzed the experiences and felt sense of individuals who were affected by purity culture, this study had some limitations and delimitations. One limitation was that eight women were interviewed for the study. Although the experiences reflected those already reported in the literature, their experiences may not have reflected others who grew up inside Evangelical purity culture and who have not yet spoken up. A delimitation was that for the purposes of this seminal study, the researcher specifically interviewed participants who were White, heterosexual, cisgender, had exited from Evangelical life at least one year ago, and who were in committed relationships or married. There are many other populations who may have a different felt sense of purity culture, such as men, BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and individuals who continue to hold Evangelical Christian beliefs. There are also many other individuals who were detrimentally affected by abstinence teachings before 1990s and after 2010 who resonate with feelings of trauma and dysfunction in their relationships.

A personal limitation was that though the researcher grew up inside the Evangelical church and is well versed and educated about the Bible and history of Evangelical Christianity, she came of age before the purity culture trends such as *True Love Waits* (Encyclopedia, 2020)

and *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Harris, 1997) went mainstream, so she did not personally experience the purity culture boom inside church youth groups. Though she experienced facets of purity culture teaching as an adolescent, such as being told it was God's will for her to stay abstinent until marriage and experienced the felt sense of sexual suppression and sexual shame and guilt, she never made a formal purity pledge or participated in the purity culture rituals and trends mentioned above. She was not subjected to the methodological teaching that her participants went through. Another limitation was that because of time constraints regarding the completion of this paper, the researcher was unable to fully immerse herself in the newest literature about purity culture, the problems other researchers are asserting, and the politics behind why purity culture even came about. There is much more research to be done.

Since 2019 when the researcher started her research into Evangelical purity culture, it became a popular topic in the psychological literature. In 2019, there were approximately 200 bodies of literature regarding purity culture; thus, finding appropriate information for this study was difficult. In July of 2022, the researcher searched for purity culture studies on Google scholar and discovered an additional 400+ studies that had commenced since 2019. There is little doubt in the researcher's mind that Joshua Harris's abdication from Christianity as well as the recent political climate had much to do with the surge in studies on purity culture. There is still very little literature on the *felt sense* of Evangelical purity culture though, so more work needs to be done.

Practical Applications and Studies That Could Follow

When the main themes gleaned from the interviews were shared with people in an *Evangelical* group, over 300 people affirmed these themes resonated with them. The literature needs more studies regarding the felt sense of purity culture so the themes can be researched

more in both qualitative and quantitative ways. Many more individuals would like to share their story about growing up in purity culture and the problems this teaching caused their life.

Individuals want to recover from purity culture but have a difficult time finding a therapist or coach who specializes in purity culture recovery. More therapists and researchers are training themselves on purity culture religious trauma, but future studies can help legitimize religious trauma recovery therapy adjuncts to master and doctoral programs that train trauma-informed therapists.

Argument in Support of Overall Conclusion

An estimated 3 million youth (Anderson, 2015; Bearman & Brückner, 2001; Bersamin et al., 2005; Carpenter, 2011; Freitas, 2008; Gardner, 2011; Moslener, 2015; Valenti, 2009) took an abstinence pledge into a system the researcher asserts was never empirically based. There were no studies done on how these modalities would affect adolescents. Abstinence was asserted as the biblical, God-ordained way to behave before marriage (Fahs, 2010; Finch, 2019; Gardner, 2011; Gothard, 1981; Greczyn, 2021; Harris, 1997; Klein, 2018; J. McDowell & Day, 1988; Moslener, 2015), but many others believe it is an idealistic and legalistic way to live one's life. The researcher's conclusion about purity culture asserts that it was an unhealthy way to look at human sexuality and the reasons for getting married. There are many other reasons to marry someone besides sexual activity, such as compatibility, common interests, and shared goals. The negative emotions and mental harm created by purity culture from these eight participants outweighed the benefits of waiting for someone special to come into one's life and suppressing all sexual identity until that happens.

A child can be raised to make good decisions about sexual activity without being shamed and guilty for being impure or dirty if they do not measure up to an ideal of complete abstinence

before marriage. The way purity culture unfolded was that youth were told something wonderful would happen if they abstained, and their lives did not work out that way. Every woman interviewed had a difficult time adjusting to being sexual as an adult after a childhood of shaming restriction and being denied sex positive education. There are countless others struggling to make sense to what happened to them, so they can experience love, comfort, and happiness in their most intimate connections.

Many parents who grew up in Evangelical purity culture have studied sexuality in depth to make sure they are giving their children appropriate information. Having been suppressed sexually as children, parents are concerned with being too open with their verbal sexual expression and education. The theme of *Consent* encompasses parents most important aspect of sexual education, including any kind of touch or expression a child or teenager might feel uncomfortable with. It is assumed most parents coming out of purity culture would engage in sexual education in order to ensure their children would have strong ethics regarding their own sexuality.

There is a big commitment with the current generation of parents who were raised Evangelical to ensure their children receive competent instruction in navigating the waters of early adulthood relationships. Choosing a life partner is a very important decision which can literally make or break a person's trajectory and success in life. Be wise.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. What were your attitudes about sexuality growing up? How did the thought of sexuality make you feel inside your body?
2. What messages did you receive from parents and church about your sexuality? How did those messages affect how you felt inside your body? How did these experiences affect how you felt about the sub-culture of Evangelical Christianity?
3. Tell me about your experience with purity culture. What were the circumstances? How did you initially respond? How did you respond as time went on? Did you believe purity culture was a good thing or were you suspicious of it? What did you like/dislike about purity culture? Was your transformation out of purity culture based on a trigger that pushed you to reflect the legitimacy of it? Or were there a sequence of tremors that all of a sudden one day you decided, "I need to make a change?" How did you decide you needed to re-evaluate your values regarding your sexuality?
4. How do you feel your abstinence/purity pledge affected your sexuality? How did making the purity pledge affect how you felt inside your body about sexuality?
5. Is there anything good or positive you collected from the purity culture teaching?
6. How did purity culture and the abstinence teaching about your sexuality affect your ability to be in an intimate relationship? What are the prevalent thoughts, feelings, and sensations you have had regarding purity and sexuality in regard to being in a relationship?
7. How did purity culture and abstinence teaching affect your Christian Evangelical faith as you became an adult?
8. How did purity culture and abstinence teaching affect your family relationships as you became independent in your teenage and young adult life?
9. What were your parents' attitudes about dating and your relationships with the opposite sex?
10. What difficulties (if any) did you experience with your family as you developed your own identity? How has this impacted your life? Was your family accepting or rejecting of your independent identity and how did that affect your mental health? How did you cope?
11. How have you attempted to reconcile any difficult thoughts, feelings, and/or sensations (books, therapy, pastoral counseling, talking to friends/family, etc.) from purity culture and your adult sexuality? What have you learned? What did you discover that you did not know before?
12. Define posttraumatic stress, religious trauma syndrome, developmental disorder, depression, and anxiety to participant: Do you feel you resonate with any of these descriptions regarding your learning about sexuality via purity culture? In what ways?

13. If you left your faith and church community, how did the effects of purity culture impact your life and relationships out in the secular world?
14. How do you feel your abstinence pledge and purity teaching may have damaged your sexuality? How have you coped?
15. In what ways, if any, did your experience with the abstinence pledge and purity culture lead to a change in your faith or a decision to leave your faith? Did your political views change? And if so, how did that affect your relationships with those who still hold close to Evangelical values?
16. What do you believe now about spirituality and faith?
17. What kind of spiritual practices do you enjoy now (if any)?
18. In what ways have you been able to create positive, intimate relational and/or sexual experiences for yourself in your life?
19. What were the positive and nurturing thought processes, learning, and influences that led you there?
20. What messages would you/do you plan to give your daughter or son about sexuality as they grow up?

Appendix B: Outreach Letter

Sofia University – Institute of Transpersonal Psychology

(Date)

Michelle Pate
Sofia University
Palo Alto, CA

Dear Participant,

I am a doctoral student at Sofia University in Palo Alto, California who is conducting research to learn about the life experiences of individuals who grew up in Evangelical purity culture and experience problems with self-image, relationships and faith and adverse effects such as anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress in their attempts to form adult intimate relationships.

You have been referred to me by _____ as having experienced such a phenomenon and therefore are invited to consider participating in this research study. If you decide to participate, you will be asked a series of questions in an interview about your experiences connected to purity culture, the sexual atmosphere you grew up in, what teachings affected your life, your relationships and your faith, and anything else you feel might be significant regarding this subject. The information you provide will be combined with those gathered from other participants to draw conclusions about lived and felt experiences of those who grew up in purity culture and the detrimental effects experienced. Your contribution to this study will be invaluable and will increase understanding for the benefit of clinicians and scholars in the fields of transpersonal psychology.

I would like to talk with you by telephone to discuss your participation in this research study. If you agree to participate, I will send a consent form for you to review and a brief demographic questionnaire for you to fill out. We can discuss a date and time that is convenient for you and a neutral location for our meeting. The interview will last approximately 90-120 minutes and will be video or audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of data collection. All recordings will be password protected. For the protection of your privacy, all information received from you will be kept confidential, and your identity will be protected as well as the identity of those you mentioned during the interview. Participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or prejudice. You may disclose personal information at your choosing with no pressure to divulge material that may be sensitive or cause discomfort.

Thank you in advance for considering participation with this unique study

Sincerely,
Michelle Pate

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

To: Research Study Participant

You are invited to participate in a dissertation research study that is being conducted to help us learn about individuals who experienced Evangelical purity culture and who made a “purity pledge” to abstain from sexual activity until marriage. You will be asked questions about your process of keeping (or attempting to keep) your purity pledge and your experiences in life stemming from your acculturation in Evangelical purity culture, any mental health challenges you have experienced, and the development of your worldview as you matured into adulthood. Your participation is appreciated and will be a valuable contribution to an understanding of the topic.

As a part of this study, you will be asked to participate in a 90-120 minute interview to be conducted at a mutually agreeable time. In order to abide by current public health guidelines, interviews will be conducted over Zoom videoconferencing. Public health guidelines are followed in all contacts with participants. Interviews are conducted through Zoom videoconference, are kept confidential, and follow HIPAA compliancy. Please see <https://zoom.us/docs/doc/Zoom-hipaa.pdf> for clarification. The interview will be recorded for the accuracy of data collection, and the recording will be password protected. During the interview, you will be asked a series of questions about your experiences regarding Evangelical purity culture and you may contribute anything you feel may be significant about your process. The information you provide will be combined with other interviews to draw conclusions about the experiences of individuals who made critical life choices as the result of Evangelical purity culture teachings.

For the protection of your privacy, all information received from you will be kept confidential, and your identity will be protected. Any transcripts or quotes from the interview will be assigned a pseudonym and neither your name nor any identifying information will accompany it. The names of any other individuals mentioned during this interview will also be held in confidence, and a pseudonym substituted in the data and discussion. Digital and paper copies of the interview transcript will be stored in a locked cabinet. Please ask any questions that you have before the onset of the interview.

Personal benefits from the study may include new information and insights about the lived experiences in your life. Your contribution to this study will increase understanding for the benefit of clinicians and scholars in the fields of transpersonal psychology. I anticipate no risks to you due to participating in this study. However, as with any form of self-reflection, this interview may surface insights or memories that you may wish to address with a mental health professional. I will be happy to discuss your concerns or make any appropriate referrals necessary to resolve those concerns.

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or prejudice. If you have any questions or concerns following the interview session, do not hesitate to call or email:

Michelle D. Pate, Psy.D. Research Student
 c/o Sofia University
 1069 East Meadow Circle Palo Alto, CA 94303
 michellepatepsyd@gmail.com

Marilyn Schlitz, Ph.D., Dissertation Committee Chairperson
 Sofia University (888) 820-1484
 marilyn.schlitz@sofia.edu

Dissertation Office, Research Ethics Committee
 Sofia University (888) 820-1484
 dissertation@sofia.edu

___ (initials) I attest that I have read and understand this consent form. Any questions I have about this research study and my participation have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that no pressure has been applied to encourage my participation. I have received a copy of this consent form and understand that my confidentiality will be protected. My signature indicates my willingness to participate in this research study and to have the results published.

Participant Signature

Date

Researcher Signature

Date

Participant Pseudonym

___ (initials) I would like to receive a summary of the findings. Included here is the destination where I would like them sent. All efforts to ensure confidentiality will be taken by the researcher, including registered mail and email encryption. I understand, however, the confidentiality of documents sent by postal mail or email may be compromised by the transmission.

Address and/or email:

Appendix D: Demographic Questionnaire

Number ID: _____

Date of Birth: _____ Age: _____

Gender: _____

Religion As Youth: _____

Current Religion: _____

Ethnicity: _____

Occupation: _____

Children: None _____ If yes, # of children _____ Age(s) _____

Marital Status: Single _____ Married _____ Divorced _____ Widowed _____ Remarried _____

Highest Education Level:

- _____ Elementary (up to 6th grade)
- _____ Junior High School (7th to 9th grade)
- _____ High School (10th to 12th grade)
- _____ GED
- _____ Associate degree (2 year)
- _____ Bachelor's Degree (4 year)
- _____ Master's Degree
- _____ Professional Degree (such as M.D., J.D., D.D.S., D.V.M. etc.)
- _____ Doctoral (such as Ph.D., Ed.D., Psy.D. etc.)

Socio-economic status (annual family income):

- _____ \$0 - \$30,000
- _____ \$30,001 - \$60,000
- _____ \$60,001 - \$90,000
- _____ \$90,001 - \$120,000
- _____ \$120,001 - 150,000
- _____ \$150,001+

Appendix E: DSM-5 Diagnostic Criteria for PTSD

Note: The following criteria apply to adults, adolescents, and children older than 6 years of age.

A. Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more)

of the following ways:

1. Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s).
2. Witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others.
3. Learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend. In cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental.
4. Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (e.g., first responders collecting human remains; police officers repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse).

Note: Criterion A4 does not apply to exposure through electronic media, television, movies, or pictures, unless this exposure is work related.

B. Presence of one (or more) of the following intrusion symptoms associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred:

1. Recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic event(s).

Note: In children older than 6 years, repetitive play may occur in which themes or aspects of the traumatic event(s) are expressed.

2. Recurrent distressing dreams in which the content and/or effect of the dream are related to the traumatic event(s).

Note: In children, there may be frightening dreams without recognizable content.

3. Dissociative reactions (e.g., flashbacks) in which the individual feels or acts as if the traumatic event(s) were recurring. (Such reactions may occur on a continuum, with the most extreme expression being a complete loss of awareness of present surroundings.)

Note: In children, trauma-specific reenactment may occur in play.

4. Intense or prolonged psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s).
5. Marked physiological reactions to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s).

C. Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by one or both of the following:

1. Avoidance of or efforts to avoid distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic event(s).
2. Avoidance of or efforts to avoid external reminders (people, places, conversations, activities, objects, situations) that arouse distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic event(s).

D. Negative alterations in cognitions and mood associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by two (or more) of the following:

1. Inability to remember an important aspect of the traumatic event(s) (typically due to dissociative amnesia, and not to other factors such as head injury, alcohol, or drugs).

2. Persistent and exaggerated negative beliefs or expectations about oneself, others, or the world (e.g., “I am bad,” “No one can be trusted,” “The world is completely dangerous,” “My whole nervous system is permanently ruined”).
 3. Persistent, distorted cognitions about the cause or consequences of the traumatic event(s) that lead the individual to blame himself/herself or others.
 4. Persistent negative emotional state (e.g., fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame).
 5. Markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities.
 6. Feelings of detachment or estrangement from others.
 7. Persistent inability to experience positive emotions (e.g., inability to experience happiness, satisfaction, or loving feelings).
- E. Marked alterations in arousal and reactivity associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning, or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by two (or more) of the following:
1. Irritable behavior and angry outbursts (with little or no provocation), typically expressed as verbal or physical aggression toward people or objects.
 2. Reckless or self-destructive behavior.
 3. Hypervigilance.
 4. Exaggerated startle response.
 5. Problems with concentration.
 6. Sleep disturbance (e.g., difficulty falling or staying asleep or restless sleep).
- F. Duration of the disturbance (Criteria B, C, D, and E) is more than 1 month.

- G. The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
- H. The disturbance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., medication, alcohol) or another medical condition.

Specify whether:

With dissociative symptoms: The individual's symptoms meet the criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder, and in addition, in response to the stressor, the individual experiences persistent or recurrent symptoms of either of the following:

1. **Depersonalization:** Persistent or recurrent experiences of feeling detached from, and as if one were an outside observer of, one's mental processes or body (e.g., feeling as though one were in a dream; feeling a sense of unreality of self or body or of time moving slowly).
2. **Derealization:** Persistent or recurrent experiences of unreality of surroundings (e.g., the world around the individual is experienced as unreal, dreamlike, distant, or distorted). **Note:** To use this subtype, the dissociative symptoms must not be attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., blackouts, behavior during alcohol intoxication) or another medical condition (e.g., complex partial seizures).

Specify whether:

With delayed expression: If the full diagnostic criteria are not met until at least 6 months after the event (although the onset and expression of some symptoms may be immediate). (American Psychological Association, 2013, pp. 271–272).