

Modest it Hottest: Deconstructing Female Sexuality in Evangelical Communities

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“The females, in the terrifying, exhilarating experience of becoming rather than reflecting, would discover that they too have been effected by the dynamics of the Mirror World. Having learned only to mirror, they would find in themselves reflections of sickness in their masters. They would find themselves doing the same things, fighting the same way. Looking inside for something there, they would be confused by what would at first appear to be an endless Hall of Mirrors. What to copy? What model to imitate? Where to look? What is a mere mirror to do? But wait - How could a mere mirror even frame such a question? The question itself is the beginning of an answer that keeps unfolding itself. The question-answer is a verb, and when one begins to move in the current of the verb, of the Verb, she knows that she is not a mirror. Once she knows this, she knows it so deeply that she cannot completely forget. She knows it so deeply she has to say it to her sisters. What if more and more of her sisters should begin to hear and to see and to speak?”

Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1973)

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Abstract

This research thesis examines the surveillance of female bodies in religious landscapes and its impact on women's sexual experiences and well-being. The project focuses on the 1990s-early 2000s evangelical purity movement, which is rooted in white, heteronormative forms of sexuality and traditional gender roles, and its effects on women raised within this ideological environment. The movement's emphasis on premarital sexual abstinence and restrictive forms of sexual expression position women as gatekeepers to male sexuality and place moral imperatives on women's dress and behaviour. Through engagement with tenets of feminist theology and critical whiteness theory, I explore how gender and race are situated within evangelical purity ideology, and the ways in which the participants' narratives are reflective of these tenets. Research methods include conducting small-scale focus groups, which acted as a safe space for personal narrative sharing and fostered a consciousness-raising dynamic in which participants deconstructed their experiences of purity culture.

March 23, 2023

Modest it Hottest: Deconstructing Female Sexuality in Evangelical Communities

In 2009, American feminist writer, Jessica Valenti, released her book *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women*. The same year, I graduated from a private high school in a community that could be aptly described as embedded in small-town, Protestant evangelicalism. It was not until years later that my closest friend and I shared our (mis)beliefs about our sexual selves which was deeply reflective of Valenti's argument in *The Purity Myth*, in which she writes, "the lie of virginity – the idea that such a thing even exists – is ensuring that young women's perception of themselves is inextricable from their bodies, and that their ability to be moral actors is absolutely dependent on their sexuality" (p. 9). The cognizance that our upbringing, which embraced evangelical purity teachings, informed our sense of sexual and spiritual self was revelatory. This revelation reflects a generation of women who are living out their adulthood in the shadows of purity culture.

Sexual purity is a primary tenet of evangelical teachings, with pre-marital abstinence-based messages primarily directed at adolescents and young adults. While the emphasis on remaining chaste before marriage has been a long-standing virtue within the evangelical community, it became significantly heightened during the 1990s- early 2000s with the emergence of what is referred to as the 'evangelical purity movement'. This movement can be understood as a response by the evangelical community to the human rights progressions made following the 1960s women's and gay liberation movements, which were perceived as a threat to the normative [Christian] nuclear family unit and the over-sexualization of American youth (Joffe & di Mauro, 2007). The movement was accompanied by an increased involvement of evangelical leaders in conservative politics in an effort to influence legislation and policies, notably the funding of pre-marital sexual abstinence education in schools. This conservative

political mobilization accelerated support for the evangelical purity movement, further blurring the separation of church and State (Cibulka & Myers, 2008; Joffe & di Mauro, 2007).

To promote purity culture amongst youth, leaders spouted countercultural tropes, promising freedom and empowerment from secular society's over-sexualization (Moles, 2017). The movement relied on mass merchandising; leaders held massive youth conferences, sold merchandise emblazoned with trademark slogans such as 'True Love Waits' and 'Modest is Hottest', and infiltrated church youth groups with purity-inspired literature. There was a widespread adoption of purity rings and pledges of pre-marital sexual abstinence, popularized to persuade young Christians to abstain from morally objectionable sexual behaviour (Muldoon & Wilson, 2017). Adolescents were simultaneously subjected to sex-negative messages (sex as sin) (Dent & Maloney, 2017) and inundated with sexual purity teachings, or as Valenti (2009) articulates it, 'an obsession' with virginity.

Evangelical purity culture is rooted in re-enforcing traditional gender roles and monitoring female sexuality. The binary enforcement of gender roles is reflective of the belief of complementarianism, which stipulates that men and women have different [or separate] but complementary roles in their families, community, and church. The complementarian conceptualization of biblical womanhood asserts 'God-designed women primarily to be submissive wives, virtuous mothers, and joyful homemakers [while] men lead the home as husbands and fathers, as well as in church...' (Barr, 2021, p. 1). While this thesis focuses on the impact of purity teachings on women, I do not disregard that men are differentially confined to patriarchal normativity, which imposes a compulsory enactment of performative masculinity (Burke & Hudec, 2015).

Restrictive performances of acceptable femininity, i.e., gentleness, submissiveness, and modesty, applies to both a woman's gender and sexuality. Purity not only refers to abstaining from heterosexual penile-vaginal intercourse but rather the prohibition of any form of sexual expression. Furthermore, purity is not solely dependent on a bodily state but is conveyed through the outward commitment to a lifestyle free of 'impurity' (Schnable, 2017). This results in the active monitoring of the behaviour and dress of girls and women (Riscoll, 2013) and narrowly defining a woman's modesty based on her outward appearance. For women of color, their piety is not only evaluated by their clothing choices but by their skin color (Michael, 2019), a result of racialized stereotypes that hypersexualize women of color (Lomax, 2018).

Furthermore, women are positioned as gatekeepers to male sexuality and are held responsible for protecting men from sexual temptation (Muldoon & Wilson, 2017). This presumes women and girls lack any sexual agency (Manning, 2016), while men are characterized as unable to control their sexual impulses (Welcher, 2020). Violating these sexual expectations, often leads to women feeling shamed for their sexuality (Muldoon & Wilson, 2017; Leonhardt, Busby, Willoughby, & Park, 2020), as a woman's purity is equated with her spiritual morality (Valenti, 2009). Trite metaphors that equate female chastity to a discarded Styrofoam cup (Gish, 2018), or a crumbled rose, are used to convey the harm of [pre-marital] sexuality to future romantic relationships, and their relationship with God. However, similar to the fallacy of the 'prosperity gospel', the sexual prosperity gospel teaches young women that dedication to purity will result in a happy marriage and satisfying sexual union (Browning, 2010). The internalized script that posits sex is sinful is not easily altered upon marriage nuptials, instead, women may experience ongoing feelings that they are violating proper sexual conduct, resulting in negative emotional and physical outcomes (Estrada, 2021; Leonhardt, et. al, 2020). LGBTQ+ persons are excluded

from these heteronormative expectations as they are seen as violating prescribed gender roles (Bean & Martinez, 2014) and acceptable forms of [hetero]sexuality (Browning, 2010).

The objective of this research project is to explore the consequences of purity culture on women who grew up in evangelical Christian households in North America, and who attended church, youth groups, and/or private schools that promoted these sexual ideologies. By engaging with women with these personal experiences, I will explore the impacts of purity culture on their sexual experiences and long-term well-being. As argued in previous research, the sentiments propagated in purity ideologies produce feelings of shame and guilt about sexuality (Muldoon & Wilson, 2017) and label women who engage in premarital sex as damaged and impure (Gish, 2018). The goal of my research is to explore the following questions: how has evangelical purity culture affected women who have grown up within these socio-religious communities? What are the personal narratives of women who lived within this ideological culture? What are the long-term effects of purity culture on these women's sexuality and well-being? Lastly, how does this specific religious ideology intersect with issues of gender, sexuality, and race within a North American context?

I situate these research questions in engagement with two theoretical frameworks, including feminist theology and critical whiteness theory. Each of these frameworks examines how intersecting social power relations effects groups of people and individuals, particularly in relation to gender, sexuality, and race. Feminist Theology is committed to challenging the restrictive role of women in religious communities, reinterpreting male-dominated imagery and language, and advocating for marginalized persons in religious spaces ('Feminist Theology', 2021). This theory acts as a foundational instrument in confronting patriarchal religious traditions perpetuated in the evangelical church, and specifically employed to examine the

teachings of purity culture. Furthermore, I utilized critical whiteness theory to examine the intrinsic whiteness of western evangelical practices and traditions. Specifically, I wanted to investigate how whiteness is attributed to assumed morality and how race is utilized as a means of controlling the narrative of female sexuality.

My methodological approach utilized the ‘outsider-within’ perspective as way to engage with my unique positionality within the research, and narrative focused small-scale focus groups. The ‘outsider-within’ perspective was first coined by Patricia Hill Collins’ (2002) and denotes the unique vantage point of a given individual or group who operate both within and outside a given domain, based on their intersectional social location. Within the parameters of this research project, I relate to this vantage point as someone who grew up within the evangelical community but no longer subscribe to the community’s conservative religious teachings. Moreover, this perspective provided me the opportunity to take on the dual role of facilitator and participant within the sessions; however, personal comments were often limited to topics already being explored by participants. This was done as a practice of providing space, both mentally and temporally, to participants, while also recognizing that the participants resided in the United States, and while a comprehensive comparison of Canadian evangelical culture with American culture would be interesting, it was outside the scope of this project.

For data collection, I utilized the qualitative research methodology of focus groups to support the prioritization of narrative-sharing and group consciousness-raising within the project (Munday, 2014). The qualitative research approach values the knowledge and subjectivity of the participants and allows the researcher to make first-hand observations (O’Shaughnessy & Krogman, 2012). As a feminist researcher, I actively addressed the issues of the inherent power imbalance present in research studies (Jowett & O’Toole, 2006), by allowing the participants to

direct the flow of conversation and taking on the dual role of participant, to reciprocate the process of sharing vulnerabilities with the group.

The thesis is divided into six chapters. To provide greater insight into the foundations of evangelical purity culture, I examine the origins of evangelicalism and the movement in chapter one. The second chapter is a review of previous peer-reviewed literature on the topic of purity culture and female sexuality in religious spaces. Chapter three explores the use of three feminist theoretical frameworks that anchor my research objectives and positionality as a researcher. In chapter four, I provide a detailed rationale for my chosen methodology, focus groups, and the structure of my field research. In chapters five and six, I synthesize the data results and analyses into two sections: the formative years of the participants and the present in relation to their experiences of purity culture. Lastly, the thesis conclusion summarizes poignant aspects of the research process, explores areas of transformation, and the limitations of the research.

Chapter 1: The Roots of the Evangelical Purity Movement

In 1996, almost two-thirds of United States residents identified as white and Christian, making evangelical purity culture deeply rooted in white normative religiosity (PRRI, 2021). The emphasis placed on maintaining the nuclear family, a evangelical value, is inherently tied to living the American dream, a narrative that upholds the discriminatory innate ‘goodness’ of white, middle-class Christians; disregarding the ongoing history of systemic poverty, lack of access to education, and other systemic injustices experienced by people of color (Mikkelsen & Kornfield, 2021). Looking back on the legacy of slavery, in the mid 1600s, slaveholding colonists conceptualized Christianity, and opposingly, heathenism, as hereditary with only the white race being capable of Christian righteousness (Mikkelsen & Kornfield, 2021). In relation to sexuality, virginity was interconnected to civility, which was to be Christian, white, and European (Blank, 2007). While this conceptualization of Christian religiosity may feel like a distant past, this pervasive colonial structure has persevered in western Christianity, with the traditions of white European settlers largely constructing mainstream evangelicalism in North America.

Evangelicalism is most commonly correlated with Protestant Christianity, with specific doctrinal tenets, practices, and history. Primary tenants of evangelical theological beliefs include: an affirmation of the authority of the Bible, Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross, the need for a personal commitment to Christ, and the need for all believers to participate actively in the religious mission, i.e., to evangelize, these tenets are often referred to as the Bebbington Quadrilateral (Joustra, 2019). Additionally, many evangelical denominations are considered both socially and theologically conservative. However, evangelical can also be understood as an

umbrella term (Joustra, 2019), as it encapsulates a wide range of church denominations with varying doctrinal belief and biblical interpretations.

In relation to the purity culture, evangelicals are widely recognized for their conservative views of sexuality and their adherence to traditional gender roles. Commentary on nineteenth-century evangelicalism noted that evangelicals subscribed to the ‘cult of domesticity’, a belief that women are designed to live and labour within the domestic sphere, i.e., within the home and child-rearing, and men in the public sphere, including religious responsibility, via church leadership (Kantor, Santelli, Teitler, & Balmer, 2008). These practices, reflective of complementarian gender roles, maintain an important function in the conceptualization of Christian gender and sex relations. While it could be argued that extreme forms of gender essentialism have gradually ebbed in evangelical communities throughout the past few decades, as women are increasingly active participants and leaders in the public sphere, the resurgence of sexual conservative politics in the United States in the 1980s and onwards demonstrates a fundamental attachment to these evangelical roots.

The concept of remaining sexually ‘pure’, i.e., abstinent, is not an uncommon command, or virtue, in many religious communities, especially within the Abrahamic faiths. However, within this paper, I will explore the unique nature in which American [referring to US residents] evangelicalism has prioritized the teachings of sexual purity, specifically from the 1990s onwards, known as the ‘evangelical purity movement’. To gain a greater understanding of the impact of the evangelical purity movement, it is a requisite to situate it within the history, practices, and beliefs of American evangelicalism.

The History of American Evangelicalism: 1700s-1980s

In reviewing the history of the evangelical purity movement in the United States, and its relationship with the state, I will primarily focus on the 1960s onwards; however, a brief overview of the previous centuries and decades will contribute to a further contextualization of evangelicalism leading up to the purity movement. Perhaps the most significant and identifiable movements within evangelicalism manifested in the three¹ ‘Great Awakenings’, described as waves of ‘religious revivals’, with increased religious enthusiasm in the United States during the 18th to 20th century. Influential evangelical Protestant leaders, such as George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and Gilbert Tennent, were instrumental in these revivals. The revivals were characterized by the increased importance placed on personal conviction and salvation, decentralizing religious ritual and ceremonial practices of traditional Protestant Christianity (Kidd, 2020). In his book, *The Color of Compromise* (2019), author and historian, Jemar Tisby, remarks that despite the colonial complicity of white Christians, the impact of Christian gospel during the Great Awakenings was a ‘source of strength and survival’ for many enslaved African Americans, and ‘planted the seeds of resistance and liberation’ (p. 15).

During the 1700s-1800s, white evangelicals were engaged in problematic theological debates about slavery, solely focusing on the ‘salvation’ of African Americans, but failing to engage in abolitionist efforts (Kidd, 2020). By the 1840s, there was less cohesion in the evangelical community, with deepening geographical and racial divisions, noting that many African American evangelicals did not subscribe to the title of ‘evangelical’, even if their theological beliefs were aligned (Du Mez, 2020; Kidd, 2020, Sweeney, 2005). This was due to ongoing issues of racism prevalent in many of the mainstream, white evangelical churches, who

¹ There is a contested fourth ‘Great Awakening’, which took place in the late 1960s- early 1970s, around the time of the ‘Jesus movement’.

were either impartial to racial oppression, or actively supported segregation (Du Mez, 2020; Kidd, 2020). These racial tensions continued in the civil rights era, in the 1950-60s, as many Black Christians were prominently involved in anti-racism, social justice activism as part of their religious beliefs, while their white counterparts were largely unresponsive to the movement (Du Mez, 2020; Kidd, 2020; Sweeney, 2005). Black evangelicals created churches independent of the mainstream evangelical denominations, the largest of which was the National Baptist Convention in 1895 (Sweeney, 2005), and the formation of the National Black Evangelical Association in 1963 (Kidd, 2020). Black Christians have developed their own ecclesiastical traditions, which historian and theologian, Douglas Sweeney (2005) describes as ‘...communal worship and praise... dynamic preaching... with a commitment to biblical justice’ (p. 127).

In the late 1770s, in connection with the political leadership of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, the question of the separation of church and state and religious freedom became a focal point between revivalist evangelicals and the establishment of the Church of England in the United States (Kidd, 2020). Evangelicals, referred to as fundamentalists², were dedicated to religious liberty and believed ‘government authority extended only to actions that affected civil peace and safety’ (Kidd, 2020, p. 31). However, it is important to note this stance on the separation of church and state changed in the 1940s onwards, during which time (new) evangelicals became politically engaged, as exemplified in the alignment of Republican politics with conservative evangelical movements. The transition from fundamentalism to (neo) evangelical signalled a significant shift from a commitment to ‘plain Bible reading’ to the once ardently disapproved ‘theological modernism’ and increased state engagement (Kidd, 2020).

² In the following chapters, I use the term ‘fundamentalist/fundamentalism’ as the characterization of religious people or groups who subscribe to strict dogmas, ideologies, and scriptural interpretation.

The conceptualization that the United States as ‘Christian nation’ is an important aspect of national identity for many Americans, particularly white evangelicals. There are prominent moments in American history over the past century in which evangelicals struggled with the state to uphold the Christianization of American society. Distinct examples of religious resistance to secular American society were depicted throughout the decades of the 1900s, in *The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes*, later known as the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial, debated the legality of teaching human evolution in state-funded schools. In the same decade, a constitutional amendment was made prohibiting the production, importation and sale of alcohol in the United States, spearheaded by the temperance movement, which many evangelicals supported. In 1963, mandated Bible reading and citing of the Lord’s prayer in public schools was banned, as it was seen as unconstitutional in violation of the First Amendment, a decision protested by conservative Christians.

In the late 1970s- early 1980s, the engagement between evangelicals and the state manifested into a political organization called the ‘Moral Majority’, a mobilization of conservative religious groups (largely evangelical) in support of traditional moral values and conservative politics, often in alignment with the Republican party. Thomas Kidd (2019) adeptly articulates that the Moral Majority, in addition to the new Christian Right³, would dominate the ‘public image of white evangelicalism over the next four decades’ (p. 94). During this time, left-leaning evangelicals pushed against the traditional evangelical conceptualizations of individual sin, which failed to recognize the sins of structural systems that privileged whites, and ignored issues of institutional racism and economic inequalities (Kidd, p. 102).

³ A Christian political faction that is socially conservative and traditionalist

The History of the Purity Movement

Moving into the years spanning before and during the evangelical purity movement, 1960s-2000s, I want to take a closer examination of how evangelical leaders aligned with political parties in implementing their religious agenda within American society. While American Christian conservatives were once leery of joining political discussions and accepted the separation of church and state, the threat posed by liberalism to traditional family values motivated the development of interest groups and political affiliations (Cibulka & Myers, 2008). Political issues such as access to abortion, same-sex marriage laws, women's and gay rights, and sex education became increasingly contentious in conservative Christian groups. The Christian Right can be understood as a conservative, fundamentalist faction of Christians in the United States, primarily evangelicals, often aligned with the right-wing politics reflected in the Republican Party. Social commentators correlate the emergence of the 1990s evangelical purity movement as a response by the Christian Right to the perceived threat of the over-sexualization of the American people following the 1960s second wave of feminism and gay liberation movement (Joffe & di Mauro, 2007). Moral panic, the response to a perceived threat to societal values and interests, ensued, resulting in an increased fear of the spread of AIDS, unplanned pregnancies, and heightened levels of poverty (Joffe & di Mauro, 2007). The Christian Right's mobilization in response to the shifting sexual behavior of the American nation was demonstrated through their increased opposition to changing government policies and legal developments, such as increased abortion rights (Joffe & di Mauro, 2007). The purity movement's main function was to gain socio-political power, so as to influence government policies, as the perceived sexual degradation of the nation was viewed as a contributing factor to societal demise (Moles, 2017).

The political influence of the evangelical purity movement is reflected in the fluctuating progressive and regressive periods of American politics in its stance on sexuality (Joffe & di Mauro, 2007). Throughout the 1960s to the early 2000s, the landscape of American politics was fraught with presidential administrations sympathetic to fundamental evangelical ideologies, creating the opportunity for state involvement in enforcing conservative sexual political agendas (Schnable, 2017). This is most recognizable in the Ronald Reagan administration throughout the 1980s and then again during George W. Bush's leadership in the early 2000s. In his bid for the presidency, Ronald Reagan, showed support for the politics of the Christian Right, only partially following through on his promises upon election (Jeffries, 2017). A primary concern of the Christian Right was their ongoing efforts to ban abortion, to which Reagan responded by implementing stricter regulations on adolescent abortions, which he framed as a means of protecting childhood sexual innocence (Jeffries, 2017).

Regulating adolescent female sexuality became a catalyst for influencing socio-moral policymaking, demonstrated by the implementation of abstinence-only sex education in public schools (Jeffries, 2017). While the initial efforts to incorporate sex education into the education curriculum was resisted by conservative groups, by the 1980s the question shifted from whether to teach it, to how best to teach it (Kantor, et al., 2008). For evangelicals, this meant controlling the information and correlating it with their vision of appropriate sexual behavior, shaped by the belief in heteronormative, pro-family ideologies (Kantor & et al., 2008; Jeffries, 2017).

Relatedly, anti-abortion rhetoric became synonymous with pro-abstinence, creating a sex education curriculum reflective of the political-religious beliefs of the Christian Right (Jeffries, 2017). The abstinence-only sex education curricula imposed in the school system were fraught with scientific inaccuracies and fear-tactics used to dissuade adolescents from engaging in what

was characterized as ‘inappropriate sexual behaviour’ (Kantor & et al., 2008). Failure to implement comprehensive sex education curricula was not only problematic in terms of public health initiatives but was an ethical issue as the government is obligated to provide accurate health information to its citizens (Kantor & et al., 2008). This moralistic approach to sex education, rather than science-driven, created tensions with educators (and parents) who disagreed with the restrictions of the abstinence-only curricula (Jeffries, 2017).

In the early 2000s (2001-09), George W. Bush gained prominence amongst conservative Christians during his presidency, forming a religion-orientated political alliance. Carrying on the efforts to address non-marital pregnancies and STIs prevention, categorized as the first intervention during the Reagan administration, Bush co-opted the use of virginity pledges as a second intervention strategy (Paik, Sanchagrin & Heimer, 2016). Despite these tactics to enforce sexual abstinence education as part of social policy, the United States has some of the highest rates in the industrialized world of teen pregnancy, abortion rates, and STD infections (Rose, 2005). Studies conducted on the effect of abstinence-only sex education found it did not greatly delay sexual intercourse amongst adolescents and even in cases of delayed sexual intercourse, there was a heightened risk of STDs due to inaccurate sex education (Kantor, et al., 2008). Between 1996- 2005, nearly 1 billion dollars of state and federal funding was allocated to Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage education, despite evidence of its ineffectiveness (Rose, 2005; Estrada, 2021). A clear example of how politics can trump scientific findings, even in the face of public health crises.

To briefly recap, of the legislation relating to sexual health and education in the United States, in 1981, President Ronald Reagan introduced a program called Title XX of the Public Service Act, known as the ‘Adolescent Family Act’. This AFLA was a US federal law that

provided federal funding to public and non-profit organizations to promote pre-marital sexual abstinence. Through the AFLA, the US Department of Health and Human Services funded a variety of educational programs that addressed the social and economic ramifications of adolescent pregnancy and childbirth, citing abstinence as the only completely effective method of birth control (Nott, 2020, para 1). Title XX was an amendment to Title X Family Planning Program, which provided federal funding for family planning services, such as access to contraceptives to low-income and uninsured families (Nott, 2020, para 4). The policy came under fire by the American Civil Liberties Union, citing that the policy used explicitly religious language and concepts that violated the Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution, which is the principle of the separation of church and state (Blank, 2007). While amendments have been made to the AFLA and related legislation concerning sex education, there are consistent underlying ideologies of the harm of (premarital) sexual activity (Blank, 2007).

Issues with abstinence-only sex education were compounded by the re-enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality evident within the school curriculum. In the development of school policies, there was clear opposition by the Christian right to the inclusion of sexual orientation, citing that there was a 'homosexuality agenda' that was purposely promoting 'anti-Christian secular humanism' (Macgillivray, 2008, p. 29). This tactic of assuming minority group status and acting as targeted victims of mainstream society is not an uncommon ploy by the Christian Right to further their political agendas (Macgillivray, 2008). In the 1980s evangelical rhetoric not only framed homosexuality as a challenge to their religious beliefs but as a dangerous contamination to the nation's collective order, as it disrupts the ideal of the nuclear family unit (Bean & Martinez, 2014). These narratives are clearly demonstrated in the relatively recent legalization of

same-sex marriage in the United States, both in terms of the duration it took to overturn this human rights violation, and also in respect to the protests against the legalization.

As demonstrated above, during the Reagan administration, and then again during George W. Bush's administration in the early 2000s, the United States experienced a radical assault on the separation of the church and state (Giroux, 2004). It became alarmingly clear, particularly during the Bush administration, that the conservative movement was no longer on the outskirts of power, rather religious rhetoric and its impact on public policy became part of the normative political landscape (Giroux, 2004). Co-researchers James Cibulka and Nathan Myers (2008), explore the phenomena of the rise of the Christian Right (the 1970s and onwards) through the lens of institutionalization, a process in which a marginalized group gains political legitimacy and becomes mainstream (p. 158). This is done through an alliance with a political party (i.e., the Republican Party), development of government-related organizing, such as forming interest groups and advocacy coalitions, being appointed to cabinet or administration, attracting wealthy donors, and influencing the wider community with public radio and print publications (Cibulka & Meyers, 2008).

This form of political mobilization was an accelerant for the support needed to launch the evangelical purity movement in the 1990s and early 2000s. While the teachings are religiously orientated, the movement reached a mass audience via political, religious, educational, and social avenues, with the main objective of teaching adolescents to refrain from pre-marital sex. By committing to sexual purity before marriage and outward modesty, young people were dedicating their bodies to a vow of sexual morality. In her book, *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence*, Sara Moslener (2015) examines the countercultural tropes of

freedom and empowerment used within the purity movement during a time in which evangelical leaders condemned the over-sexualization of American youth (as cited in Moles, 2017).

The previous decades, the 1960s- onwards, helped build the foundation for the emergence of the evangelical purity movement in the 1990s- early 2000s. This movement's primary focus was to impose murky religious dogma that set parameters for girls' and women's sexuality, including the re-enforcement of traditional gender roles. Evangelical church communities endorsed the purity movement's teachings through the mass consumption of purity merchandise, such as purity rings, chastity pledges, dating books, and purity-focused conferences. In the United States, the movement organized nationwide campaigns, such as 'True Love Waits' (started by LifeWay Christian Resources in 1993) and 'Silver Ring Thing' (Denny Pattyn in 1995), with slogans like 'Modest is Hottest' as hallmark of the movement. Christian relationship books targeting youth and young adults, such as *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Harris, 1997), *Passion and Purity* (Elliot, 1984), *When God Writes Your Love Story* (Ludy & Ludy, 2004), and *Every Young Women's Battle: Guarding Your Mind, Heart, and Body in a Sex-Saturated World* (Ethridge & Arterburn, 2004) focused on how to abstain from sexual impurity in heterosexual romantic relationships.

This chapter examined the roots of the evangelical purity movement and the entwinement of evangelicalism and the political sphere. These teachings, specifically abstinence-only sex education, infiltrated both evangelical and secular settings, and were primarily directed and embodied by white, middle-class evangelicals, historically suppressing the experiences of people of color (Lomax, 2018) and the LGBTQ+ community (Fisher, 2009). It is debatable whether the movement fizzled out in the early 2000s or continues today with greater concealment of complementarianism rhetoric. With the recent presidency of Donald Trump, we once again see

the animation of evangelical politics embedded in white, Christian, American identities, supporting white supremacist policies and politicians, antithetical to Christian doctrines and values (Mikkelsen & Kornfield, 2021). Whichever political party is in power, evangelicals practice 'engaged orthodoxy', meaning they seek to change the secular world to reflect their religious beliefs (Kelly & Gochanour, 2018). With the right political allies, evangelicals are not only able to impact their religious communities but have made significant strides in shaping the policies and practices of secular institutions.

Chapter 2: The Problem with Purity Culture

As explored in the previous chapter, the evangelical purity movement emphasised the importance of premarital sexual abstinence amongst youth and young adults, as indicative of preserving one's religious morality. The movement, which was most prominent during the 1990s-early 2000s, particularly in the United States, advocated for a type of counter-subculture in which youth were to defy the secular world of sexual immorality by actively showcasing their decision to remain sexually pure (Moles, 2017). While refraining from heterosexual penile-vaginal intercourse is a significant aspect of remaining 'pure', sexual purity is an all-encompassing term used to discourage any form of sexual expression. Within these communities, purity is ritualized, repetitive, and performed; it does not exist independently from the social world as a bodily state but is conveyed in one's outward commitment to a lifestyle free of the myriad forms of sexual impurity (Schnable, 2017, p. 69-70). This outward display of a commitment to remain 'pure', is displayed through symbolic-infused apparel such as purity rings and clothing emblazoned with purity slogans, such as 'True Love Waits, or 'Modest is Hottest', and publicly professed chastity pledges (Schnable, 2017).

Aside from the call to live moral lives by abstaining from premarital sex, chastity is considered foundational to entering a sanctified marriage union. Remaining sexually abstinent, as a reflection of one's dedication to a Christian lifestyle, was coupled with the promise of a happy marriage and satisfying sexual union. This promise became referred to as the 'sexual prosperity gospel', a branch of the 'prosperity gospel', which is a belief that financial blessings and future well-being are the will of God if one remains committed to their faith. Akin to the prosperity gospel, the sexual prosperity gospel has been criticized for the theological inaccuracies that falsely promise that if one remains sexually abstinent and marries a fellow

Christian, they will have a fulfilling marriage and satisfying sex life (Burke, 2015). This delusive assurance is accompanied by a common discourse that emphasises the importance of being united in (heterosexual) marriage, predicated by restricted, monogamous dating designed strictly to fulfill God's divine plan of finding a mate (Willey, 2013). In his research on gender and sexuality within evangelical communities, Robin Willey (2013), observes that evangelical communities are kin to a sexual marketplace, in which single young adults are consistently concerned with seeking their God-given mate. This fixation on finding a partner may seem contradictory to the emphasis placed on remaining chaste, however within Willey's research, he observes the high-value participants placed on their future partner's virginity, attributing it as a sign of moral maturity, with this expectation disproportionately placed on women's purity (2013).

This evangelical version of a prosperous marriage is restricted to heterosexual unions and contingent on the enforcement of binary gender roles. This return to and maintenance of religious, traditional gender roles, utilizes the theory of gender essentialism. A general definition of gender essentialism is a belief that men and women are born with distinct biological differences, equating gender with sex (Oxford Reference, 2022). In this approach, the social construction of gender roles begins to appear inherent and natural, making the biological labels of bodies as male or female indicative of distinct physiological traits (Schnable, 2017). Gender essentialism is reflective of the evangelical church's principles of complementarianism, which argues that men and women have different but complementary roles within their community, church, and family. Within evangelical communities, gender essentialism is utilized to maintain traditional gender roles, rooted in a conceptualization of what a religious community believes to be normative behaviour and appearance in relation to one's sex.

Traditional western gender roles emphasize the value of performative masculinity and femininity (Estrada, 2021). In evangelical communities, men are positioned as the head of the household and church, in addition to western ideals of being the family breadwinner, while women are seen as submissive and domestic nurturers. The romanticized version of traditional gender roles, which appears to cherish women's dependence on men, is an ongoing form of benevolent sexism validated in evangelical communities (Muldoon & Wilson, 2017). Gender performances are embedded in 'doing religion', and the practice of hegemonic masculinity works to subordinate women (Burke & Hudec, 2015). While gender ideals are adaptive to the cultural landscape, therefore shifting from time and place, and in social interpretation (Michael, 2019), the benefits of male privilege remain in place, cementing gender inequality (Burke & Hudec, 2015). Moreover, men who are positioned in subordinate positions to white, cis-male heterosexuals, such as gay men or men of color, engage with masculinity as a means to assert a status of dominance, which highlights the part of their identity that conforms to hegemonic masculinity in evangelical spaces (Burke & Hudec, 2015). This superior placement of masculinity is maintained by positing men as ontologically reflective of Jesus' example of the 'divine man' (Burke & Hudec, 2015).

Within evangelical churches, male gender roles and sexuality are staunchly protected as a means to keep the 'natural order' within the home and community, i.e., male leadership and female submission. As explored in the previous chapter, the feminist movement has been heavily criticized by conservative church members as a threat to maintaining complementarian roles. In the 1980- 90s, there was a significant anti-feminist backlash that advocated for the restoration of male headship in the home and the return to full-time motherhood for women (Gallagher, 2004). The concept of headship also extends to controlling female sexuality from a young age. An

example of this can be seen in the creation and enactment of Purity Balls, most common in the United States, a ceremony during which adolescent girls pledge their sexual purity to their fathers until marriage. Purity Balls depict the deep gender divide in chastity culture, as the son's sexuality does not require parental control, or rather a father's control, as mothers do not play a role in the ceremony and are thereby stripped from their role as matriarchal mentors (Fahs, 2010). Sierra Schnable (2017), comments that female sexuality in evangelical communities is like a system of commerce, with a three-headed male figure, including God, their fathers, and their future husbands trading ownership. During the evangelical purity movement, and beyond, evangelical teachings, i.e., through sermons, relationship books, etc., often emphasised the importance of male-headship, with men internalizing messages of toxic masculinity (Klement & Sagarin, 2016). Arguments about shifting gender roles emasculating men continue to dominate conservative narratives on gender and sexuality.

Within the realm of sexuality, the complementarian view argues that men and women experience sexual desire differently (Klement & Sagarin, 2016). The evangelical view of sexuality often upholds gender stereotypes that assert women are interested in sex for love and men give love for sex (Browning, 2010; Klement & Sagarin, 2016; Joffe & di Mauro, 2007). Subsequently, this creates a culture that places women as gatekeepers to male heterosexuality, as men are depicted as unable to control their innate desires, while women lack any sexual motivation of their own (Klement & Sagarin, 2016). This construct of men being unable to control their sexual impulses is a narrative that has dangerous consequences for young men and women. Men are characterized as rash in their sexual behaviour and should not be expected to disavow their temptation, a message young men have utilized to actively blame women for their assaults (Welcher, 2020). Furthermore, this notion degrades men into assuming roles of helpless

predators, unable to make conscientious and respectful sexual decisions (Welcher, 2020). Consequently, young women who are sexually violated risk being blamed for ‘provoking’ their male counterparts (Klement & Sagarin, 2016; Muldoon & Wilson, 2017). The violation is responded to with the proverbial saying ‘boys will be boys,’ a narrative that normalizes sexual and gender-based harassment (Klement & Sagarin, 2016). When a man does resist his sexual urges, it is depicted as a valiant struggle against his nature, a courtesy not prescribed to women (Estrada, 2021).

Regardless of the fallacy of this narrow conceptualization of male sexuality, as it fails to recognize a spectrum of sexual interests, a lack of desire is rationalized through various explanations, such as a medical reason, past trauma, or a means of cultivating self-control, thereby maintaining hegemony (Burke & Hudec, 2015). In sexual discourses that fall outside normative, hegemonic heterosexuality, such as sexual indifference, the gendered power within the relationship is not fundamentally altered (Burke & Hudec, 2015). For example, in a research study that explored the rejection of marital sex, which poses a threat to the authoritarian gender roles within evangelical communities, Kelsy Burke and Amy Moff Hudec (2015) concluded that men reframed the rejection as successfully passing a spiritual test. This narrative is problematic, as the male participants do not (re)frame this rejection as their wives’ right to self-determination and the requisite of consent, but instead, invoke a false sense of self-congratulatory superior religiosity.

The other compounded issue with the concept of women as motivated solely by emotional attachment (Klement & Sagarin, 2016) and relegated to sexual gatekeepers, is that it dismisses female sexual desire. The ‘virgin-whore’ dichotomy of female sexuality presents women as either innocent, naïve and feminine, in need of male protection (Muldoon & Wilson,

2017), or the ‘whore’ if they express an ‘unnatural’ interest in their sexuality. In an evangelical sexuality and relationship book, *Dateable: Are you? Are they?* (2003), co-authors Justin Lookado and Hayley Dimarco, narrow the parameters of modesty by instructing women to ‘play hard to get’ and maintain an air of mystery, as sexually available women are less attractive (as discussed in Klement & Sagarin, 2016). Furthermore, these authors argue that women who are sexual (and claim to enjoy it) are lying to themselves and are not confident in their femininity (Klement, & Sagarin, 2016). This baseless conjecture is just one example of how evangelical relationship messages infer young women engaging with their sexuality are damaged, if not delusional. Sierra Schnable (2019) argues the value of ‘purity as performative’ amongst evangelical communities can be just as important as actually being sexually abstinent, as the appearance of purity is a significant aspect of desired femininity and virginal facade. Alarmingly, engaging in premarital sex is equated with the value of a discarded Styrofoam cup (Gish, 2018), and various other trite metaphors to convey the perceived harm of sexuality to future romantic relationships (Gish, 2018).

Furthermore, female sexuality is recognized solely as a ‘stumbling block’ to the purity of their male counterparts, and it is a woman’s responsibility to protect her ‘brothers’ from temptation (Muldoon & Wilson, 2017). This portrayal of female sexuality as a stumbling block is reminiscent of the ‘eve’ narrative (Browning, 2015), the first biblical woman, and paints women’s bodies as innately sinful, causing women to disproportionately fear their own bodies and sexual desires (Estrada, 2021). Therefore, to avert the male gaze and remain sexually pure, moral imperatives are placed on women’s dress and behaviour (Riscol, 2013). Noting the double standard in dress code, as boys and young men are rarely asked to dress modestly, a correlation to the myth that women are not visually stimulated.

The conceptualization of ‘modesty’ has been of significant debate within evangelical communities, from policing shifting fashion trends to defining modesty outside external appearances, making it a contentious term (Michael, 2019). The purity movement evoked a Foucauldian-type practice, which prompted young women and girls to engage in self-surveillance, in addition to the external surveillance of women’s appearance by members of the religious community (Michael, 2019). This sort of surveillance positions clothing as a medium to which to judge a woman’s purity as visible to others (Michael, 2019), failing to accurately account for the moral complexity of ‘modesty’ (Kieser, 2014). Even in instances of evangelical leaders opposed to the relentless policing inherent in modesty culture, their commentary often centralizes the experiences of white, heteronormative women, disregarding the fact that these teachings are not applied to all women equally (Michael, 2019). While white women’s piety is based on their clothing choices, black and brown women’s skin is used as the medium for reading their morality (Michael, 2019); as Simone Brown argues, epidermalization as a form of surveillance (as cited in Michael, 2019).

Displacing the centrality of whiteness within the discussion of purity culture requires exploring the intersection of gender and race within evangelical communities. Religious Studies professor, Monique Moultrie (2018), provides an insightful narrative of the connection between the sexual exploitation of Black women during slavery and the resulting embodiment of ‘politics of respectability’, i.e., getting married as a reflection of morality, adopted from white-centric churches. This dictation of morality is centered on white colonial ideals of religious piety, which Black evangelical churches have adopted. Conversely, while white women are framed as sexually naïve and pure, Black women’s sexuality is depicted as insatiable, often compared to the biblical character of Jezebel (Hutchinson, 2014). In her book *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the*

Black Female Body in Religion and Culture, Tamura Lomax (2018) describes the church's role in the formation of Black women's sexuality, saying church culture subconsciously and consciously reads Black women's bodies in terms of sexual deviance, accessibility, and excess, beginning at a young age. Lomax comments that the entangling of religious beliefs with metanarratives of black female sexuality, robs women and girls of complex subjectivity and misaligns these entanglements as biblical and holy (Lomax, 2018). Utilizing the images of women in religious text, such as the narratives of Jezebel and Rahab⁴, becomes a means of (mis)interpreting and engaging with dangerous iterations which correlate a women's ['impure'] sexuality as a cautionary tale of God's divine judgement (Lomax, 2018).

Black male sexuality has also endured racist stereotypes, which pathologize Black men as having an untameable animalistic sexual appetite, with violent and brutish tendencies (Barnes & Battle, 2010; Lomax, 2018). Black male sexuality is positioned as a threat to the innocence and sexual purity of white women, in need of protection from the mythical dangerous black male rapist (Lomax, 2018; Stanley, 2020). This image of the black male rapist and his uncontrollable lust for white women merges paternalistic ideals of preserving white female purity while deploying racialized tropes that excuse vigilante anti-black violence (Stanley, 2020). This imagined threat of black male hypersexuality is used to problematize the sexual encounters between black men with white women, the emblem of 'purity' (Lomax, 2018). The threat of corruption of white women's sexuality, in comparison to Black women's prescribed innate promiscuity, reflects the deeply racialized stereotypes western Christianity has placed on women's bodies.

⁴ The story of Jezebel is found in the Biblical book of 1 Kings, associated with female promiscuity and the character of Rahab is found in the book of Joshua, and is a prostitute.

In response to the racialized stereotypes of Black hypersexuality, Historian Victoria Walcott characterizes Black evangelical purity culture as means to situate female purity as indicative of Christian morality (Moultrie, 2017). Echoing the theme of purity as a reflection of morality, Monique Moultrie (2017) in her book *Passionate and Pious: Religious Media and Black Women's Sexuality*, discusses how Black women trained to live a sanctified life are given prescriptions in behaviour and appearance, as pure dress and action indicate a woman's ability to follow God's will (p. 25). These prescriptions in behaviour and appearance are not only exhorted by white and/or male authorities, but also embedded in the beliefs and practices of white evangelical women. In a research study of the entwinement of whiteness and femininity in American evangelical religiosity, Sage Mikkelsen and Sarah Kornfield (2021), examine the discourse of the online media platform 'Girl Defined Ministries', an evangelical-based blog hosted by two white women located in the United States. In the article, the co-authors analyze how the bloggers depend on cultural associations of whiteness, such as the reimagined visualization of white, middle-class, Christian femininity presented in the stylistics of the room, from soft lighting and light paint colors, to the bloggers' choice of clothing, and naturalistic makeup to highlight their fair features (Mikkelsen & Kornfield, 2021). This demonstrates the subtle undercurrent of white normativity in desired femininity embedded in purity culture.

Transgressing these sexual expectations can result in feelings of guilt and shame amongst women within this ideological culture (Muldoon & Wilson, 2017; Leonhardt, Busby, Willoughby, & Park, 2020). Internalized sexual scripts about purity have resulted in women feeling insecure about their bodies, responsible for others' behaviours, and often, remaining illiterate about sex (Estrada, 2021). Policing women's sexuality can often include direct or passive comments to young women about their appearance, such as being told to cover up or

change their clothing to avoid attention. In many cases, young women internalize these modesty messages, at times in fear of reprimand, or shame of their bodies. Brene Brown (2006, as cited in Estrada, 2021) describes shame as an entrapment connected to unrealistic expectations based on internal and external influences, a feeling of powerlessness bound up in secrecy, resulting in isolation and disconnection. This sentiment reflects the way evangelical teachings view female bodies, as something shameful that must be hidden.

Sexual Morality or Sexism?

Since sexual morality is a cornerstone of evangelical teachings, followers need to untangle authentic scriptural teachings from the problematic messages fueling patriarchal violence within this ideological landscape. An example of this is astutely articulated by Abigail Muldoon and Midge Wilson (2017), who describe the gender-based harassment accepted in Christian communities as ‘divine discrimination’ (also referred to as ‘sanctified sexism’) (Eliason, Hall, & Anderson, 2011), a range of prejudicial behaviours justified through religious doctrine (p. 261). For example, if a male counterpart gently admonishes a female peer on her immodest appearance, this could be framed as a gesture of accountability and righteous entitlement (Muldoon & Wilson, 2017). This version of sexism, as it is not perceived as overt and hostile, is accepted as part of the normal social landscape, rather than the unjust outcome of gender essentialism (Muldoon & Wilson, 2017).

Whereas this form of sexism is often referred to as benevolent sexism, meaning that while the perpetrator’s action is harmful their motives may appear well-intended, there is a danger in the rhetoric of gender essentialism within sexual purity culture. In a research project that studied the impact of sexism in Christian academia, co-researchers Kristen Eliason, Elizabeth Hall, and Tamara Anderson (2012) found that in many cases, a mix of benevolent and

hostile sexism, referred to as ambivalent sexism, functions to enforce and justify gender roles and patriarchal attitudes. Additionally, several other studies (see Moon & Reger, 2014; Klement & Sagarin, 2016) examined the language used in evangelical relationship books and have reported (un)intended rape-supportive messages targeting young women. These books cite narratives in which young women are taken advantage of sexually, and instead of condemning the issue of sexual assault, they are used as cautionary tales of how flirting and ‘provocative’ dressing places girls in compromising situations (Klement & Sagarin, 2016). Reiterating the normalcy of sexual-driven men, sexual pressure is portrayed as natural, ignoring the coercive nature of these encounters (Klement & Sagarin, 2016).

Regrettably, there is a sexual violence crisis in churches. As Hilary Jerome Scarsella and Stephanie Krehbiel (2019) astutely observe, sexual violence is not an outside intruder and can not be neatly separated from Christian theology. Relating to gender essentialism, women are directed to be submissive to male authority, especially to their husbands. This submission includes the marriage bed, in which fulfilling a husband’s sexual desires are expected, and a woman’s sexuality and body become her husband’s (Estrada, 2021). This expectation of sexual subservience normalizes marital rape, often left unreported and at times unbeknownst to the victim. In cases of women reporting spousal abuse to church authorities, they may be counseled to stay with their abuser and prioritize Christian ideals of forgiveness and reconciliation (Scarsella & Krehbiel, 2019). Although these messages are often subtle, the consequence is the re-victimization of sexual assault survivors. These studies provide further evidence that there needs to be attention and action taken to examine how various forms of sexism and violence are enacted within evangelical purity culture.

While sex in a (heteronormative) marital union is celebrated, the transition from the internalization of ‘sex is dirty’ to acceptable can be complex. The fallout of the ‘sexual prosperity gospel’, which promises great sex after marriage (assuming one will get married) if one remains sexually abstinent, can lead to disillusionment (Browning, 2010). To understand the effect of religious teachings on one’s sexuality, researchers Nathan Leonhardt, Dean Busby, Brian Willoughby, and Crystal Park (2020), conducted a study that found young women experienced continued feelings of guilt of sexual sin even after marriage. The ongoing feeling of violating internalized messages of proper sexual conduct can have negative effects, including emotional and physical outcomes, such as inhibited sexual satisfaction and dysfunction (Estrada, 2021; Leonhardt, et al, 2020). While not as common, there are cases in which women experience extreme physical discomfort during sexual intercourse, a condition called Vaginismus in which there are involuntary contractions of the vaginal muscles upon penial penetration (Crain, 2020). Speculation of why this condition occurs can be frequently correlated to a negative reaction to sexual stimulation, feelings of shame and anxiety about sex, and/or past sexual traumas (Cleveland Clinic, 2021). These issues, both physical and emotional, demonstrate the potential long-term impact on young women of messages of sex as shameful.

Violating the Nuclear Family: LGBTQ+ Exclusion

Positioning sexuality as inherently sinful, results in internalized sexual scripts of guilt and shame, which are experienced differentially by members of the LGBTQ+ community. LGBTQ+ youth are often silenced and absent from the discourse on religiously motivated chastity teachings and discussions. Akin to sexual purity being associated to whiteness, evangelical purity culture is limited to heteronormative sexuality, actively silencing members of the LGTBQ+ community. This exclusion plays out in several ways, including the sole recognition of

heterosexuality by rendering homosexuality as invisible, and re-enforcing binary gender roles. A primary example of this can be observed in the movement's foundational teaching of sexual abstinence that excludes LGBTQ+ relationships, as advocates define sex strictly as penial-vagina intercourse in a marital relationship (Gish, 2018). Therefore, even if a same-sex couple remains sexually abstinent until marriage (which was legalized nationally in the US only in the last decade), they would still be violating the ordained nuclear family unit which upholds gender roles, with males as the head of the family and females as submissive helpers (Bean & Martinez, 2014). Additionally, gender non-binary and transgender youth are excluded from purity teachings, as they disrupt the prescribed performative gender roles and the intersection of these binaries with acceptable forms of sexuality (Browning, 2010).

As stated earlier, the foundation of purity culture is the enforcement of heterosexuality and the simultaneous endorsement of gender roles. In an effort to understand the strategies employed by lesbian, gay, and straight-but-affirming church members to accommodate heteronormative conceptions of the 'good Christian' within conservative church communities, researcher Krista McQueeney (2009) found that 1) lesbians minimized their sexuality as secondary to their Christian identity, 2) lesbian and gay members, black and white, normalized their sexuality by enacting Christian morals of monogamy, manhood and motherhood, and 3) moralized their sexuality as grounds for challenging homophobia in the church. This type of strategic positioning of one's various identities, or means of existing, is connected with the reproduction of the politics of respectability (McQueeney, 2009), which was discussed earlier, as it relates to the prescribed performance of purity amongst Black women in evangelical churches (Lomax, 2018; Moultrie, 2018).

Since the purity movement is primarily directed at youth and young adults, messages that actively silence the experiences of these adolescents, who are entering a stage of ‘emerging adulthood’ defined by self-exploration, can be detrimental (Muldoon & Wilson, 2017). In schools, primarily in the United States, sexual abstinence-only teachings fail to provide adequate information and support for students, especially LGBTQ+ students who are often silenced and experience overt and covert forms of homophobia and heterosexism (Fisher, 2009). For some youth it may feel safe to engage in ‘playing straight’ and gain a sense of belonging, thereby subverting feelings of isolation and alienation from their heterosexual, cisgender peers (Fisher, 2009). In conservative religious settings, expectations of heteronormativity often go unchallenged, however, as Dawne Moon, Theresea Tobin, and J.E. Sumerau (2019) saliently illustrate, white middle-class narratives of sex and gender are not timeless or universal.

In review, on a practical level, abstinence-only teachings are ineffective, as 70-80% of pledge-makers have oral or vaginal sex before marriage, do not significantly delay intercourse, and are less likely to use protection (Landry, Lindberg, Gemmill, Boonstra, & Finer, 2011; Paik, Sanchagrín, & Heimer, 2016; Schnable, 2017). Furthermore, sex abstinence teachings, silence the experiences of the LGBTQ+ community, this is especially detrimental in the identity-forming adolescent years (Fisher, 2009; Muldoon & Wilson, 2017). In addition to the ineffectiveness, the western notion of ‘purity’ within evangelical discourses dismisses the complexity of sexuality and gender and has been reduced to a bodily state, in which women are controlled through punitive narratives of purity (Kieser, 2014). Professor and Counsellor, Doris Kieser (2014) suggests there needs to be a more nuanced approach to discussions on Christian feminist sexual ethics. As she laments,

I thus introduce the retrieval of the virtue of prudence as a moral skill that facilitates navigation of an embodied sexual ethic (beyond the state of purity), based on sexual self-determination, towards an integrated sense of sexual well-being and health, that is sexual flourishing. Thus, the praxis of sexual well-being, the choices we make around sexual behaviour, includes a variety of options, that incorporate self-determination in a meaningful, embodied sense (Kieser, 2014, p. 121).

By integrating Kieser's suggestion towards a feminist sexual ethics, women produce their own sense of sexual self, thereby dismantling the control over female bodies in religious communities and disavowing the 'problem with purity culture'.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Frameworks

In reflecting upon the complexity of gender, sexuality, and race within evangelical religiosity, my theoretical framework is designed to support the exploration of my thesis question ‘how has evangelical purity culture affected women who have grown up within these socio-religious communities?’ This framework includes engaging with feminist theology and critical whiteness theory, which are both rooted in feminist discourses recognizing personal and systemic forms of privilege and oppression, particularly in relation to gender and race. Feminist theology critically examines religious tenets pertinent to evangelicalism, the social-political and religious landscape in which the research is centered, and considers the positioning of women within the church. Moreover, while my topic is rooted in examining gender and sexuality within evangelicalism, critical whiteness theory recognizes the intersection of pervasiveness of whiteness in purity teachings. In this chapter, I will explore each theory and how they support the research project, from framing the research question to data analysis.

Feminist Theology

My interest in engaging with feminist theology is two-fold, it supports my positionality within the research and provides an insightful framework in which to analyze the data. In situating my own identities as a feminist and Christian within the research, feminist theology integrates the work of feminist theology, with my experiences of Protestant Christianity. There is an ongoing tension between these religious communities and feminism, positioning these practices as antithetical to one another. Within feminist theology, which integrates the two disciplines of feminism and theology, I find a space for intellectual thought and practice that encompasses my overlapping identities as a religious feminist researcher. Furthermore, the

multiple engagements of women's rights and religious teachings, foundational to this project, are aptly reflected in the tenets of feminist theology.

Feminist theology reconsiders the practices, traditions, and theologies of religion from a feminist perspective. Feminist theology often includes challenging the role of women in religious communities, religious authority, reinterpreting male-dominated imagery and language, and validation for marginalized persons in religious spaces ('Feminist Theology', 2021). Other movements related to feminist theology, include feminist liberation theology, intersectional feminist theology, and womanism, which is specifically concerned with the experiences of Black women and spirituality ('Feminist theology', 2021). Feminist theology gained prominence in North America in the late 1960s and has been correlated with the progress of the women's liberation movement in the United States. Prominent feminist theologians include Valerie Saiving Goldstein (1960), Mary Daly (1985), Rosemary Radford Ruether (1998), Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1992), and Katie Cannon and the Mud Flower Collective (1985), whose work I reflect upon in this research.

Feminist theologians actively confront the patriarchal norms ingrained in the interpretation and application of scriptural teachings and religious doctrine, most often in re-examining the limitations of predominately male-produced theological work. As Rosemary Radford Ruether (2002) explained,

Feminist theology takes feminist critique and reconstruction of gender paradigms into the theological realm. They question patterns of theology that justify male dominance and female subordination... seek to reconstruct the basic theological symbols of God, humanity, male and female, creation, sin and redemption, and the church, in order to define these symbols in a gender-inclusive and egalitarian way" (p. 3-4).

Furthermore, as Ruether (2002) explains, those in positions of power use social constructs of gender, race, and class as a means to validate their own power, these social relations are not God's 'order of creation' (p. 4). The evangelical purity movement is a relatively recent example of how religious dogma can be used to control female sexuality in culturally specific ways via harassment and shaming, resulting in the disempowerment of women. This use of power is also saliently observed in race relations in evangelicalism, with whiteness positioned as normative within church practices and beliefs. However, as a point of clarification, my goal within this research is not to re-examine Biblical scriptures, as many feminist theologians do, but to examine how evangelical institutions utilize gender essentialism to maintain harmful patriarchal practices.

Prominent Catholic Feminist Theologian and Philosopher, Mary Daly (1973), made salient scholarly critiques on the conflicting narratives claiming gender egalitarianism within the church, arguing that while the church proclaims the equal worth of every person, it simultaneously treats women as inferior (as cited in Coblenz & Jacobs, 2018). As Daly (1973) astutely observes, a woman's worth is tied to her role as a mother, wife, and her service to the church and homeland (Coblenz & Jacobs, 2018). To expand this observation, it would be fitting to add that a woman's worth is also tied to their sexual purity, as virginity is equated with morality (Valenti, 2009). Since the early days of Daly's work, the discourse of feminist theology has proliferated across the globe (Coblenz & Jacobs, 2018). Recognizing the importance of an intersectional approach, feminist theological scholarship

... not only centers on women's experiences but also interrogates the multiple oppressions that render many groups unnecessarily vulnerable, of which women-

identified people are only one group among and containing many others” (Coblentz & Jacobs, 2018, p. 544).

In awareness with the multiple oppressions that women experience within evangelical communities, the next section focuses on a prominent aspect of evangelicalism, the centering of whiteness.

Critical Whiteness Theory

As explored in chapter 2, when purity culture was at its peak in the 1990s, a survey revealed two-thirds of United States residents identified as white and Christian (PRRI, 2021), reflective of the prevalence of white religiosity. While this conveys the racial homogeneity of evangelicalism during the height of the purity movement, it is also important to recognize the pervasive feature of whiteness intrinsic to evangelical practices, teachings, and beliefs. Through engagement with critical whiteness theory, a closer examination of the ‘invisible structures that produce and reproduce white supremacy and privilege’ (Applebaum, 2016) within the evangelical church are explored. More specifically, critical whiteness theory supports the exploration of purity culture teachings, which rely upon race as a means of differentiating white women’s sexuality, from that of women of color.

Critical whiteness theory is recognized as a branch of critical race theory, a social and intellectual movement, with roots in legal scholarship, that recognizes race as a ‘socially constructed category used to exploit and oppress people of color’, and functions to maintain social, economic, and political inequalities (Britannica, 2022). The development of critical whiteness theory aims to ‘disrupt(ing) racism by problematizing whiteness as a corrective to the traditional exclusive focus on the racialized “other”’ (Applebaum, 2016). Moreover, critical whiteness theory prompts individuals to ‘think critically about how race functions systemically,

and often subconsciously, to privilege people with certain perceived skin tones' (Beech, 2020, p. 3). While many critical whiteness scholars argue that whiteness is normalized and rendered invisible as a racial categorization, David Owen (2007) contends 'whiteness is largely invisible to whites and yet highly visible to non-whites' (p. 206). I contend that these paradoxical statements co-exist in exemplifying the complex realities of whiteness in evangelical spaces. For while a non-white congregant may articulate aspects of whiteness in their churches, there are also elements of whiteness deeply embedded in the churches institutional structure that remain incognizant to its members. To further conceptualize the positionality of whiteness, Marcus Bells' (2021) argues, 'in lieu of asking the general question, what does it mean to be white, scholars should be asking a more specific question, *'what does it mean to be white within particular local environments?'* (p. 1).

To articulate the function of whiteness in evangelical spaces, looking back at the development of race relations within the church provides insight into the preservation of white normativity. In response to the growing racial diversity in nineteenth century American Evangelicalism, churches adopted the 'colorblindness' approach, an ideology that posits that treating every one as equal, without regard to race, culture, or ethnicity, is the best way to end racial discrimination (Williams, 2011), mitigating the responsibility to establish racially inclusive religious communities and maintaining white leadership as normative in evangelical churches (Butler, 2021). Moreover, the implementation of 'color-blind conservatism' manifestation in white evangelicalism, enforces non-white believers to adopt the practices and viewpoints of white leadership (Butler, 2021). In his dissertation 'Seated on the Great White Throne: Examining the Legacies of Whiteness in Progressive Evangelical Christian Perspectives', DJ Torres (2021), argues an uninterrogated race consciousness views racism as 'coincidental and

not intentional’, thereby negating ‘ownership and accountability’ (p. 38-9). The long-standing practices and beliefs of white Christians are coded as natural and stable, rendering whiteness invisible in evangelical churches (Torres, 2021, p. 39).

Theologian and critical race scholar, James H. Cone (1989), in his exploration of American church-race relations remarks,

Although Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights activists did much to rescue the gospel from the heresy of white churches by demonstrating its life-giving power in the black freedom movement, they did not liberate Christianity from its cultural bondage to white, Euro-American values. Unfortunately, even African American churches had deviated from their own liberating heritage through an uncritical imitation of white denominations from which they separated. This it was hard to distinguish between the theologies of white and black churches and the images of God and Jesus they used to express them (p. xxv).

This sentiment is demonstrated through the mass consumption of purity culture content produced by white evangelical leaders, thereby centered on colonial ideals of religious piety, by Black churches (Gish, 2018). As discussed in chapter 3, the stereotyped promiscuity of black female bodies is regulated inside the church community. This monitoring of black women’s sexuality points to an underlying ideology of racial discrimination that labels women of color as ‘impure’, in contrast white women are positioned as symbolic of purity. This version of purity is not only concerned with virginity but relies on whiteness as a social marker demonstrative of inherent superior virtue within evangelical communities (Torres, 2021) As aptly articulated by Brittany Cooper (2018), ‘White Christianity controls White women’s sexuality while weaponizing it against racial and ethnic minorities whose sexuality becomes hypervisible against the erasure of

White women's sexuality' (as cited in Mikkelsen & Kornfield, 2021). Therefore, while whiteness is positioned as pure, a positioned privilege, it is used as a social control mechanism in which to survey white female sexuality.

Furthermore, while critical whiteness theory often interrogates the invisibility of whiteness, the increasing movement and commentary on white nationalist ideology has become alarmingly visible in the United States in the last number of years. This ideology is habitually entwined with fundamental Christian doctrine, creating the confluence of religion, nationality, and whiteness. This has become particularly potent in relation to the election of former president, Donald Trump who was heavily supported by the white evangelical community (Reiss, 2021). Throughout my research, there is substantial [peer-reviewed and pop culture] literature that examines the link between whiteness and evangelicalism, in so far that 'white evangelicalism' has become a common term with alluded to not-so-positive connotations. In her attempt to conceptualize what a white evangelical signifies, Religion Columnist and author, Jana Reiss (2021) comments that from an oversimplified political perspective, "white evangelicals are a reliable voting bloc that opposes abortion and same-sex marriage while enthusiastically supporting a special role for Christianity in public life" (para. 4). However, Sharon Kuruvilla takes a step away from trying to define 'white evangelicalism' and instead asks the salient question, 'Has American evangelicalism been "stamped from the beginning" with racism?' (para. 2). In critical discourse on white evangelicalism, University of Pennsylvania Religious Studies Professor, Anthea Butler, in her book *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (2021), examines the debates around critical race theory happening in the church today, arguing whiteness is foundational to evangelicalism in American society, and is

actively engaged in maintaining ‘status quo, patriarchy, and American nationalism’ (as cited in Kuruvilla, 2021, para 3).

As explored above, the theories of feminist theology and critical whiteness theory offer an intersecting exploration of how gender and race function within purity ideology. Feminist theology focuses on the patriarchal practices in [Christian] religious spaces and provides a foundation in which to explore the narratives of female sexuality within the evangelical community. Additionally, by engaging with critical whiteness theory in the data analysis, I can examine how whiteness operates within evangelical culture, and the ways in which the research participants’ social locations and narratives reflect the racialization of these spaces. It is within these theoretical frameworks I position the research questions: how has evangelical purity culture affected women who have grown up within these socio-religious communities? What are the personal narratives of women who lived within this ideological culture? What are the long-term effects of purity culture on these women’s sexuality and well-being? And how does this specific religious ideology intersect with issues of gender, sexuality, and race within a North American context?

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Reflecting upon the most constructive methodology to implement in conducting this research, I prioritized the use of a feminist qualitative approach. Qualitative research practices are defined by the researcher's first-hand observations, descriptive rather than numerical data, with a focus on narratives. Since the late 1980s onwards, standpoint epistemologies have been the foundation for producing feminist research as the method questions how 'knowledge is generated, by and for whom' (O'Shaughnessy & Krogman, 2012, p. 494). In debates about the benefits of qualitative methods, many feminist researchers argue this methodology displaces the androcentric and reductionist nature of positivist research practices by prioritizing participant knowledge, values, and subjectivity (O'Shaughnessy & Krogman, 2012). Furthermore, as astutely identified by scholar, Jacqueline Watts (2006) there are specific principles feminist researchers consider, which may include...

the power relations between researcher and participants; the foregrounding of participants' or subjects' viewpoints; a commitment to the group being researched; an aim of using the research to improve women's lives; and an awareness of the different relation to the production of knowledge between researcher and subjects (p. 385-6).

In recognition of subjectivity and non-linear aspects of qualitative research practice, I echo the sentiment of Maggie Maclure, who urges qualitative researchers to "spend more time considering data "hot spots"—those affective relations to data that both "disconcert" and create a sense of "wonder"—where data "glows" for the researcher in various moments of fieldwork, analysis, and beyond" (as cited in Ringrose & Renold, 2014, p. 773). With this perspective in mind, I can simultaneously acknowledge the thematic outputs of the data, while embodying the inquisitiveness that comes from finding unexplored narratives and sources of knowledge. In the

next section, I introduce my positionality within the research, utilizing the concept of the ‘outsider within’, followed by my use of focus groups, a space in which the sense of ‘wonder’ and navigating data ‘hot spots’ was plentiful.

Situating Self: Outsider Within

In the process of articulating my thesis topic, I was conscious that I wanted to engage on an issue that resonated with my lived experience, a topic that reflected my standpoint. I decided exploring, examining, and identifying the issues prevalent in the evangelical church, in which I was raised and still dwell in today, reproduce issues related to gender, sexuality, and race pertinent to feminist discourse. In tangent with my use of the theoretical and pedagogical stance of feminist theology, I am able to explore the positioning of women within conservative religious traditions and practices, by reflecting on the intersection of my religious and feminist identity. I was raised in a conservative, evangelical community where I attended church, youth group, and a private school. As an adult I continue to practice the Christian faith, however, have a more progressive doctrinal understanding of scripture and religious practices. This unique positioning, in which I am intimately familiar with the tenets and practices of conservative evangelicalism as experienced in my formative years to my present positionality as a feminist researcher, allows me the vantage to explore this issues in a nuanced and insightful manner. Upon reflection of this compounding identities, the conceptualization of ‘outsider-within’ positionality supported my understanding of self in relation to this research and created an opportunity to utilize this positionality to implement the research design.

To better understand the outsider-within as a methodological perspective, I am drawing upon the work of Patricia Hill Collins (2002) in her book, *Black Feminist Thought*. The term ‘outsider-within’ was used by Collins to contextualize the experiences of black women as

domestic workers Pre-World War II, and their experiences of intersectional oppression related to race, gender, and class, which provided them a unique perspective on social and political realities (Collins, 2002).

By engaging with this standpoint, I need to acknowledge the limitations of my utilization of this term in relation to its original use. As noted, Collins coined this term to examine the experiences of black women, this recognition and centralization of racial identity presents an obvious distinction, as a white women, I have not experienced the intersection of the women Collins' was describing. As mentioned in my theoretical framework, whiteness often operates as invisible, an unidentified norm; this is particularly true within 'Bible-belt'⁵, or in my case, small northern Canadian evangelical-dominated communities. In Collins' operation of the outsider within, black women are in predominately white spaces, i.e., the homes of white families, an embodied 'outsider' within this white terrain. Contrastingly, my 'outsider' status within evangelical communities is not reflected by my physical embodiment, rather my outsider positionality is porous, as I can actively choose when to share and/or hide parts of my identity. This is a significant annotation to my utilization of this approach; as a feminist researcher its pertinent to acknowledge the inherent privilege I hold and the theoretical limitations this presents in my self-characterization as an 'outsider-within'.

Moving forward, I rely on the subsumption of this term to mean the exploration of the unique vantage point of individuals and/or groups who operate both within and outside a given domain, based on their intersectional social location. Expanding on my engagement with the 'outsider within' perspective, I resonate with Rachelle Gold's (2016) prescriptive 'hallmarks' of this positionality,

⁵ The term 'Bible-belt' refers to a geographical region in the Southern and parts of the Midwest United States defined by its socially conservative Protestant demographic.

...a special perspective of both nearness and remoteness from power hierarchies...a peculiar ability to see oneself through the lens of the dominant group, a desire to bring greater equality to the viewpoint of the outsiders so they are more visible to the gaze of insiders, and, often, a political or social justice imperative to raise the consciousness of insiders to appreciate the undervalued experiences of outsiders (Abstract).

An expansive example of the 'outsider within' perspective can be observed in the experiences of feminist theologians within religious spaces. A primary concern of feminist theologians is to confront the oppressive practices inside religious communities, which are often embedded in the organizational structure and benefit those in positions of power. This confrontation often relegates feminist theologians as outsiders despite any personal engagement they may have with the religious community. Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan (1993), illustrate the vantage perspective of woman on the margins of the church by calling them 'prophets', as they protest the abusive power emanating from the pinnacle, the clergy. They assume the outsider within position as they are on the outside of the power arena and have the ability to see the inequalities of the oppressed, as well as analyse the power of pinnacle (p. 17).

While feminist theology has gained more ground within the scholarly sphere, the practical application within churches and Christian communities is still underway. As Nicola Slee (2020) remarks,

...I see... feminist theologies not so much as discrete species of theology as theology in a particular mode or perspective. They highlight the vocation of *all* theology to be concerned with the lives and practices of ordinary believers and with the imperative of gender justice (p. 16).

Regrettably, gender justice has not yet been fully recognized within the church, in particular the evangelical church. Therefore, those who champion tenets of feminist theology, i.e., challenging the role of women and other minorities in the church, are often be designated to the ‘outsider-within’ positionality. Moreover, the role of religion can be speculative within feminist circles, as a strong history of patriarchal ideologies prevalent in mainstream Christian doctrine can be positioned as incompatible with the conceptualization of female empowerment. By sharing the narratives of women with expansive experiences within the evangelical church, including my own, I can add to the work being done by feminist theologians in relation to female sexuality in evangelical spaces.

Additionally, it is within this methodological perspective as a self-identified ‘outsider within’ the evangelical church, that I engage, interpret, and analyze the research undertaken. As a vantage point, this position utilizes my understanding of conservative evangelical teachings and practices, and its pertinence in the recruitment and interview process of the research project. Furthermore, as an ‘insider’, i.e., with lived experience in the evangelical community, I able to speak the ‘native language’ (Watts, 2006) of the participants, meaning we share a common knowledge of terms, conceptualizations, and ideas related to cultural evangelicalism. Therefore, the outsider-within position supports all aspects of the research, providing in-depth interactions with the participant to extensive insider knowledge contributing to the data analysis.

Katie Christine Gaddini (2019), in her ethnographic study of women in the evangelical church, adeptly articulates both the advantages and disadvantages of her positionality, reminiscent of the ‘outsider-within’.

I occupied an ‘insider’ position as a middle class, white woman, who had been a practising evangelical for most of her life. This position opened up several advantages: I

was granted access to participants easily, and my familiarity with Christianity generated a socially embedded knowledge which eased my interactions with participants. At the same time, having left Christianity a decade prior, I also occupied an outsider position. In addition, my racial and class positionality undoubtedly shaped my interactions with participants of colour and those from working class backgrounds (p. 407-8).

Therefore, while positionality of the outsider-within yields demonstrable advantages, there is potential for disadvantages, as what appears to be a shared experience between the researcher and participants may result in a false sense of mutuality. There is a risk that the researcher and/ or participant could make assumptions based on a suspected shared thought, opinion, or experience. These assumptions of mutuality or shared knowledge could inhibit the accuracy of the data analysis, as there is a higher probability that the researcher will create postulations that may have benefited from further analysis. In the next section, I explore my utilization of small-scale focus groups, and my dual role of facilitator and co-participant, further expanding upon my methodological positioning as an ‘outsider-within’.

Focus Groups: A Shared-Space

For this project, I utilized the feminist qualitative research methodology of focus groups, in which I was able to collect original data. The small-scale focus groups were composed of women with evangelical backgrounds and experiences related to purity culture teachings. In addition to several other eligibility requirements outlined below, the focus groups were effective in producing in-depth qualitative research data and reflected the narrative-centered priority of the research design. The following sections outline the research: rationale of the chosen methodology, recruitment process, session structure, and data collection procedure.

Rationale of Methodology

In preparation for this research and upon reflection on its purpose, it became evident that choosing focus groups as a means of data collection was a fitting choice. Previously as an undergraduate student, I had the opportunity to participate in a classroom rooted in feminist pedagogy, which prioritizes the voices of those in the learning space and encourages critical thinking. It was within this space that I began to recognize the structures of inequality by listening to the experiences and knowledge of my peers. This context is reflective of consciousness-raising spaces, popularized by feminists in the 1960s, which acted as spaces for women to share their experiences.

Within every story I have ever heard from a woman, I have found some voice of me. The details are of course unique to the speaker – they are our differences. But the meaning which they make is common to us all. I will not understand what is common without hearing the details which reveal it to me” (Toni McNaron, n.d., as cited in Mackinnon, 1989, p. 86).

As articulated by Sue Wilkinson (1998), the benefits of focus groups include, addressing feminist ethical concerns about power and the imposition of meaning; generating high-quality, interactive data; and offering the possibility of theoretical advances regarding the co-construction of meaning between people (p. 111). In this project, the focus groups were constructed to be a sharing space in which the interaction between the researcher and the participants inhabits a conversational form, rather than the traditional one-on-one interview format which relies on specific questions asked by the researcher. By sharing in the process of knowledge production, both the participants and the research guide the conversation. Moreover, focus groups aim is to act like a consciousness-raising space, in which the participants can engage with one another in examining their experiences (Munday, 2014). Sharing their responses to the open-ended

questions produced by the researcher, in a group setting allows the participants to contextualize their experiences, thereby gaining a greater understanding of this ideological influence on their sexuality. Additionally, it is vital researchers recognize that ‘any research that analyzes people’s accounts of their lives must include an awareness of the social context in which such accounts are expressed and of the social and cultural locations for which they are drawn’ (Kerr, Cunningham-Burley, & Amos, 1998 as cited in Jowett & O’Toole, 2006). This awareness allows the researcher to acknowledge the strengths and limitations of focus groups; specifically, the impact social dynamics have on participant engagement. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the inherent power of the researcher (Jowett & O’Toole, 2006), therefore I need to be actively aware of my own subjectivity in the formation of questions, my interaction with the participants and the interpretation of gathered data.

Prompted by the utilization of online meetings in the duration of Covid-19, it was a practical decision to recruit and hold the sessions online, via the platform *Zoom*. This form of recruitment allowed me to broaden my recruitment criteria to include the entirety of North America as meeting the geographical eligibility. The data collected was recorded [video and voice], then transcribed and analyzed for thematic content. Researchers can generate data not just on content, but also on the processes through which the content is produced (Munday, 2014). For example, this includes data collected through observing both verbal, including intonation, and non-verbal communication, such as body language and silence.

As mentioned previously, as a young woman who grew up within this ideological culture, I engaged in the focus groups as both a facilitator and participant, simultaneously recognizing the contributions I can add to the dialogue while respecting the space needed for the narratives of the participants. I chose to use smaller groups to support my goal in creating a setting that allowed

participants ample space to voice their experiences and engage in discussion, whilst avoiding side conversations and the formation of group politics that can develop in larger group settings (Jowett & O'Toole, 2006).

Recruitment

Participants were recruited from a private online Facebook group created for individuals who have left, or have identified problematic teachings within, the evangelical church but continue to practice Christianity. As the researcher, I had no part in creating this group and sought permission from the administrators to recruit participants for this research project. Once I received permission, I posted an ad on the group's Facebook wall (i.e., a public space for anyone to post and comment). The ad outlined the purpose of the research, eligibility requirements, and participation involvement. The eligibility requirements included: woman-identifying, approximately between 25-40 years old, grew up/background in an evangelical church/community, and raised within North America. Lastly, I greatly encouraged the participation of women of color and LGBTQ+ individuals.

The rationale for the eligibility requirements was based on several factors related to gender, age, and religious background. The participants needed to be woman-identifying, as the research was aimed at exploring the unique impacts purity culture has on women, different from their cis-male-counterpart. This distinction was explored in the literature review, as the exploration of purity culture's enforcement is based on the complementarian view of gender roles and sexuality. The age approximation was reflective of the temporal peak of purity culture, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, during which participants would have been adolescents or young adults. This requirement was flexible, as long as the participant felt they had exposure to popular tenets of purity culture practices and felt they could contribute to the focus groups'

discussion topics. Additionally, it was vital the participants grew up in an evangelical community, as evangelicals were the primary promoters of purity culture. However, evangelicalism is broadly defined and encompasses a number of Protestant denominations. To limit the additional data that may emerge from socio-cultural differences, I limited the participants to those residing within North America. This was also designated for practical purposes, as the group would need to meet online collectively, and would need to be able to encompass several time zones.

Lastly, I encouraged women of color and LGBTQ+ individuals to participate in the sessions. Reflective of a feminist intersectional approach, I sought to actively engage in examining how women with overlapping identities were differentially impacted by purity culture. As purity culture teachings are primarily directed at heterosexual, white adolescent girls and women, the exploration of the effects of this phenomenon on those who identify outside these narrow descriptors, is a critical aspect of the research.

A brief description of the overall research project was outlined to the potential participants as follows:

I am researching the impact of evangelical sexual purity teachings on women from this religious background. Having grown up in this community myself, I would like to explore the experiences of others who were involved in the purity movement, which was popular in the 1990s and early 2000s and was primarily directed at adolescent girls and young women. The title of the study is ‘Modest is Hottest: Reimagining Female Sexuality in Evangelical Communities.

Followed by a brief description of the research objective:

My primary research objective is to understand the continuing effects of these practices on a woman's sexuality and overall well-being. For example, as someone who was raised in an evangelical household, I can recall being told on multiple occasions to cover my chest, so as not to attract male attention. In many ways, this has created an internalized message that I should be ashamed of my body [posted April 2022].

Those interested in learning more about the project and/or interested in participating were asked to send me a private message on the social media platform or contact me via the email address provided. Those interested in participating were sent a consent form, which provided additional information about the research project, including a description of the project, an outline of potential benefits and risks, and contact information for the primary researcher and designated research ethics board. Once I received several completed consent forms, I sent out an online poll to determine which dates and times would be most accessible for participants to join the online focus group.

Focus-Group Participants

A total of five participants were recruited for the sessions, in one session there was three participants and the researcher, and the second group was two participants and the researcher. To further situate the participants in the research, I also collected information areas about the geographical region in which were born or are currently residing and whether they attended a Christian private school or public school. Their geographical locations were further markers in which to aid the exploration of purity culture effects, as the religious and political terrain of the United States can be significant in the reproduction of fundamentalist practices. Additionally, participants readily shared their educational background, making it an important marker in the participants' experiences of purity culture, as attending a private school [which engage in purity

teachings] during the formative years can have a significant influence on identity formation. The participants were assigned pseudonyms in an effort to maintain confidentiality.

The first group consisted of Susie, a white woman in her early thirties, raised in North Virginia, and attended a Christian private school until high school; Kassie, a white woman in her early thirties, raised in Florida, and attended a Christian Private school until high school, and Grace, a white woman in her early sixties, residing in Texas, and went to a public school. I made an exception in Grace's participation, despite not having been a youth during the 1990s-2000s, she was able to provide valuable insight into in her experience as a ministry leader who embraced purity teachings during this time.

The second group included Stephanie, a white woman in her thirties, who grew up in the Southern United States, and graduated from a Christian private school, and Mona, a biracial woman, in her early thirties, residing in the southeastern region of the United States, and attended public school. The duality of my role as facilitator and participant provided space to share aspects of my own social location; I am a white woman in my early thirties, I was raised in a small northern community in western Canada and graduated from a Christian private school.

The participant pool, including myself, was largely reflective of white, heterosexual women. The homogeneity of the groups was foreseeable, recognizing that this demographic was the primary target of purity teachings during the movement's peak in the 1990s-2000s. White hegemony in evangelicalism is two-fold, up until the 2000s a majority of evangelicals were white and even with an increase in racial and ethnic diversity (Pew Research Center, 2015), evangelicalism is embedded in euro-centric practices and traditions.

Session Structure

Due to the use of a virtual platform to conduct the focus groups, the participants needed to have access to an internet connection to join the *Zoom* sessions. They were asked to join the session from a quiet location, to minimize disruptions and ensure the confidentiality of other participants. Participants were encouraged to join on webcam and mic but were free to turn their cameras off, if preferred. I began the sessions by reminding the participants I would be recording the sessions and saving generated transcripts. I followed this by briefly introducing myself, a rationale for my dual role as a facilitator and participant, and a review of the research topic.

The participants were provided with potential questions before the session, as outlined in the consent form. The questions were formulated to be open-ended, providing space for participants to respond as they saw fit, recognizing the topics were of a sensitive nature. These are the following questions (or related prompts) utilized throughout the sessions:

- What are some of the experiences of purity culture that are most memorable for you?
- Is there a specific moment [from this timeframe] that has stayed with you? If so, why?
- How would describe your relationship with your body/sexuality? Is this relationship connected to your upbringing?
- Looking back, is there anything you'd tell your teenage self [in relation to purity culture]?
- Do you feel there are any changes to the view of female sexuality in evangelical communities today? Why, or why not?
- If you were able to create a change in the teaching and practices regarding female sexuality and gender roles in the church, what would it be?

While these questions were formulated to support the group discussion, I prioritized the natural flow of the conversation and avoided interrupting participant dialogue. To ensure each participant was given time to share their thoughts and experiences, I acknowledged the contribution of a participant and then engaged a fellow participant in responding to the current

topic. This was a helpful way to effectively group the conversation threads into thematic topics and support a cohesive data analysis.

At the conclusion of the sessions, I thanked the women for their participation, i.e., for sharing their experiences, thoughts, and vulnerabilities. I assured them it was of the highest priority that I include their contributions in an equitable and accurate manner, and in analyzing the data I would interpret and draw connections to external research, that I feel relate to their contributions. I extended an invitation for them to read the final thesis document and to contact me if they wished to provide feedback or discuss their contributions further. Furthermore, I sent an email afterwards to thank them once again for their participation and invited them to reach out if they wanted to talk or share anything else with me in relation to the research topic. Participants did share their appreciation of the sessions however no more data was collected post-sessions.

Data Collection and Analysis

The *Zoom* media platform allowed me to record the sessions and the generated audio transcriptions, which I saved as a file on my computer. Furthermore, I took brief notes during the sessions, recording specific questions I asked and highlighting thematic aspects of the discussion. After reviewing the recordings and transcriptions (noting the limitations of auto-generated transcription), I highlighted emerging themes. After examining the broader themes, I used an informal method of coding, in which I organized and categorized relevant data under the established themes. While I was reflective of the data gathered in the literature review in chapter two, my coding scheme was inductive, as it was grounded in the data collected rather than in previous knowledge of the topic.

CHAPTER 5: Question Nothing: 'Be the Good Christian Girl'

This chapter examines how the sequential life stories shared by each participant all began with recognizing the impact of sexual purity culture on their sense of self and their sexuality. This section is primarily devoted to exploring their formative years, from pre-teens to young adults, as the origins of their intersectional sexual and religious identity. It is within these adolescent years in which participants describe their experiences of emerging sexuality within the realm of their religious communities. As an introduction to each group session, I shared my interest and experience in purity culture, in hopes to convey a sense of vulnerability and openness with the group.

I came to this research idea as a dedication to one of my close friends... she kind of obeyed all the [purity] rules... but had these internalized messages of sex being sin... and she had to dress a certain way and she shouldn't tempt boys and she's the gatekeeper to sexuality...she got married and really kind of spiraled - where she had a hard time mentally and physically engaging in sexuality and intimacy with her spouse... so even though she eventually kind of left the religious community she had so many messages inside that she felt dirty having sex. And that really made me think, what are the long-term effects of these kind of messages that we're getting a lot of times in our formative years that are kind of playing out in our adult years as well?

I then asked participants to briefly share about their background, including their association with evangelicalism. In sharing their experiences, participants detailed salient biographical moments, beginning in their formative years, ranging from childhood to late teens. While each woman shared their personal narratives, it became evident there were commonalities in their upbringings. These commonalities encompassed shared environmental descriptions, such

as the demographic of their religious communities and educational settings. As a researcher, I was interested in examining how these commonalities were instrumental to constructing the participants' experiences of purity culture.

One of the most salient commonalities was related to the participants elementary education. All the participants, except for one, had been sent to a private Christian school that was adjoined with the church. It was in these spaces that participants recall the continuity and emphasis placed on purity teachings in the school and church setting.

I went to the Christian school that was attached to that church until like eighth grade which was all that it went up to at that time. So, we got purity classes during school and then most of us also went to the youth group that was like part of that church, and so we got purity lessons classes then, so it kind of doubled up. (Susie)

I went to this private Christian school that was attached to the church Trinity Baptist – [the school] went K [kindergarten] through [grade] five, my brother went there K through eight, and we went to youth group there Wednesday night [and] there on Sunday, so we basically lived there. The youth group had the women's conferences, where just the girls would go to the middle school chapel and like you would wear promise rings... you're promising and making a commitment not to have sex and saving yourself for marriage. (Kassie)

As Kassie articulated the sentiment of 'basically lived there', and Susie's comment on teachings being 'doubled up', relay the heavy involvement these participants had in the school-church overlap, both in terms of receiving purity teachings and the amount of time spent in these spaces. Perhaps not acknowledged during their attendance at these joint churches and schools,

the women now described these communities as ‘bubbles’. Susie aptly describes the effects of these small socio-religious communities.

I think when you grow up in such a small evangelical bubble and you're told your whole life that you can't question anything...and like from childhood, you're told like you cannot question these things, like you have to have ‘faith like a child’, so you just have to believe whatever you're told. And you're supposed to believe that your parents, and the people in authority...you're taught to trust them and like what they're telling me can't be wrong because that's what I'm being told to trust and especially when you're in that bubble of like also going to a Christian school, then that's the only other people that are around you... like you don't have any other influences.

These bubbles play two simultaneous roles, to form like-minded social and religious (and often, homogenous racial and class groups) communities, while separating from larger society in areas such as education. Akin to other group formations, it is not uncommon for people in religious communities to socialize, or ‘fellowship’, with one another. It is indeed a Biblical command to ‘continue meeting together’⁶, however, as the participants explained the community bubble essentially acted as an isolating buffer between their small communities and the rest of society, manifesting into a type of subculture. Entering spaces outside these bubbles lead to a form of culture shock; the participants described the experience of entering into the public sphere when they began attending public high schools.

We had to go to a public high school because they [the private school] don't have high school and that was like a huge culture shock... like a really, really diverse school, large black community school, large minority groups... like... we were basically rich in their

⁶ Hebrews 10:25 NIV “not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

eyes, like we have a pool, a private education, and these people have two-bedroom homes and you realize, like ... what? (Kassie)

These feelings of culture shock are not uncommon for students from private schools during the brief period of cultural adjustment involved in entering public education systems (Cross, Campbell-Evans, & Gray, 2018). These revelatory feelings about entering 'the real-world', consisted of two identifiable themes, the diversity of race and sexuality outside the participants' 'bubble' communities. In her experience, Kassie touches on the intersection of race and class, alluding to the wealth of her predominately white church and elementary school community and her perspective of a two-bedrooms homes as indicative of lower socio-economic conditions experienced by minority groups. In contrast, for Mona, her experience attending a majority white church as a biracial person made her feel 'super out of place'. She extends this whiteness not only to racial identity, but identifies the pervasive nature of cultural whiteness, commenting:

...the ways that people interact with the world outside of the context where they're a non-white majority...I've seen every[one] kind of, just like lean into whiteness like almost become whiteness in terms of the values and ideals and ways of approaching the world and ways of thinking about people and relationships, and culture.

Mona's comment reflects David Owen's argument that while whiteness is often positioned as 'invisible' in American society, in actuality people of color are very aware of this whiteness (2007).

Moreover, upon emerging from an insulated, 'bubble-like' community, Susie commented on the varying expressions of gender and sexuality present in the public school, differential to her experience of purity culture.

It really wasn't until I went to like a big public high school that I got any real sex ed. And the [private] school was very tiny, you were kind of with the same people all the time, and my mom works there so it was like, that was my whole community...And so I went to like a big public high school and it was like a culture shock to all of a sudden be around thousands of people. And also, like, not everybody was, like, came from the same background that I did... not everybody wore a purity ring, like nobody else had a weird purity ceremony. And so, it was just, it was very confusing. (Susie)

While purity teachings were normative within the participants' religious communities, these same tenets were not commonplace in the public sphere. The culture shock resulted from the repetitive messages emphasizing sexual purity taught in various, overlapping settings including church, school, and youth group attended by the participants.

The mutuality of their experiences was palpable when they began discussing the same popular evangelical dating and relationship books, a sort of cultural language only evangelical women who survived purity culture teachings could speak. They laughed together, mocking the number of times in which a male co-author felt the need to reframe female sexuality only in relation to male sexuality.

Grace: ...look at all of the books and all the speakers during the 70s, 80s, 90s, and even probably in the 2000s, - they're all men. There were all men speaking and narrating and they [were] the voice of sexual purity... I love it that now women are coming out, and like these three women [authors of *The Great Sex Rescue*], who are Christians, are coming out and going 'wait now let's, let's evaluate that narrative. And let's re-evaluate through a woman's lens' ...

Susie: So, like John Eldredge [Evangelical author] wrote, *Wild at Heart* [book] and *Captivating* [book co-authored by Eldredge's wife], which is the female version, and he writes a ton in *Captivating*, there's full chapters where he writes them... at end he's like 'here's my perspective as a man' and...like there's multiple chapters where you can almost like hear him butting in and just be like 'well yeah my wife just said that, but let me tell you what it's like from a man's perspective' Like we didn't ask you John, like, I don't care what you have to say about this... like you didn't let your wife say anything in your book, so!

(Participants laugh together)

Grace: Yeah, I loved that book at the time too. (laughter)

Kassie: Yeah, it was amazing... like you guys need to read that (sarcasm)

Susie: And now I'm like shut up, John!

This part of the discussion on sexuality shed light on the positioning of the needs of males over those of women. Women's sexuality is juxtaposed to accommodate male sexuality throughout the lifespan, starting in adolescence, when boys are framed as being sexually impulsive and girls the gatekeepers to their sexuality. The purity lessons directed at adolescent girls are directed at both maintaining their own purity, as well as their 'Christian brothers', this is exemplified in instructions for girls to dress 'modestly'. As explored in chapter two, the concept of modesty varies between time and location and has strong cultural nuances, however, this characteristic is rendered invisible in evangelical modesty discourse (Michael, 2019).

One participant shared the rule of thumb for acceptable modesty was determined by using one's fingertips as a measuring tool for acceptable clothing length.

Susie: The Christian school that I went to up until high school, if your dress was more than three fingertips width below your collarbone then it was immodest. And you can't

find a dress that goes up that high comfortably. Like it was literally, like it was so high it was uncomfortable, and you had to stand in front of a group of teachers and have them judge you and tell you if you were being immodest, and therefore, if so, what other immodest things were you doing? Like it was, it was the slippery slope argument of like, if you're going to wear that low cut dress more than three fingertips below your collarbone, like you're also probably drinking and smoking... like we were in seventh grade!

Kassie: Yeah, that reminds me of church camp, we always went to church camp every summer, as if we weren't at church enough. And the girls dress code was you had to wear a one piece, and a shirt over it...like bathing suit (one piece), and gym shorts [with a T-shirt over it] ...like, you're so little like you wouldn't even have a body at all in fourth grade.

While Kassie and Susie described enforced dress codes in these narratives, modesty can also take on a self-surveillance component (Michael, 2019), where external messages from authority figures or peers, shaming immodesty are internalized, and girls begin to regulate their dress and behaviour in accordance with the acceptable 'good Christian girl' unofficial guidelines.

Another aspect of the enforcement of purity culture, and its primary concern of female modesty, is the franchising of 'purity rings', Stephanie and Susie both wore rings as adolescents and young adults. Stephanie described the symbolism of the purity ring and the seriousness in which she took this declaration,

So, I had a purity ring... and I [also] wound a white thread around my ring finger a few times and put it under my purity ring and, like, vowed to myself that it would not leave my finger until my future husband cut it off my finger.

The symbolic capitalism of purity rings is two-fold, while it can act as a personal reminder of their pledge to the wearer, it also acts as a public declaration, a form of counter-cultural expression to remain sexually abstinent. Another public declaration of abstinence is a purity ceremony, also referred to as purity ball, in which a girl pledges to remain chaste before marriage in a formal and celebratory setting, and a commitment is made to her father, who acts as a symbolic substitute for her future husband. There is an overt sense of lighthearted ridicule from Susie, who took part in the ceremony, stating with relief that these ceremonies were far less frequent nowadays.

In late adolescence and young adulthood, the participants had varied sexual experiences, however, the continued desire to ‘be a good Christian girl’ was a sentiment shared by everyone. The narrative of being the good Christian girl, primarily focused on remaining sexually ‘pure’, became deeply embedded into the participants’ self-image. In the following sections, I explore the participants narratives of their sexual journeys. It was in hearing these accounts that I recognize and respect the personal stories of the participants, while simultaneously acknowledging the uncomfortable familiarity of them. In listening to these narratives, preserving ‘the good girl’ ideal appears to be beyond the participants’ control, as the consequences of purity culture become detrimental to their sense of identity. Reviewing the data there were clear overlaps in the participants’ adolescent experiences, primarily in their experience of private school education, strict church attendance, and subjection to purity teachings, however, I also want to recognize the personal, sexual, and religious experiences of individual participants, thereby centering their narratives, while simultaneously contextualizing these issues within a wider religious, societal, and political framework. In chapter six, I will explore how these events

were loosely identified as the ‘question everything’ moment for the participants in relation to their evangelical beliefs.

No (More) Sex: Spiritual Conviction or Evangelical Guilt?

One of the participants, Kassie, struck an equal balance between playful humor and palpable frustration when sharing her experience and opinion of the messages of purity culture. As with all the group participants, she shared details about her evangelical background, but it was one anecdotal comment she made that made me simultaneously giggle and exasperatingly nod in agreement. The participant echoed the same message given to all the participants as adolescents, ‘no sex before marriage!’ Like many adolescent purity pledgers, when the participant became a young adult, she began to engage in sexual activity with her boyfriend⁷.

...six months before our wedding I...took it [sex] back off the table, even though we had been having sex for two years - I was like, no, we have to stop again, we have to be obedient. And so, the six months leading up to it [the wedding] we went back to no sex...[sigh] the guilt and shame, guilt and shame. (Kassie)

The experience of being ‘convicted’, often understood as the Holy Spirit convicting one of their sinful behaviour is a customary way of describing internalized guilt for one’s behaviour that goes against (one’s belief) of a religious command. The term ‘convicted’ was used by the participant, however, for the parameters of this paper and the ambiguity that comes with the concept of ‘conviction’, as a researcher, I will exchange this term for guilt in correlation with the effects of purity teachings.

⁷ For further information on the ineffectiveness of abstinence-only sex education and pledges see Landry, Lindberg, Gemmill, Boonstra, & Finer, 2011; Kantor, Santelli, Teitler, & Balmer, 2008; Paik, Sanchagrin, & Heimer, 2016

This feeling of guilt was echoed by another participant, who was in a relationship with a ‘non-believer’, i.e., did not belong to the religious community, and felt pressure to marry her partner to avoid living together unwed.

...we started dating and I wanted to keep it secret from my church because I knew how they would feel about it and he wasn't a Christian...tried to hide it from the church, and then we went well, I, went through this whole, like, ‘oh my gosh, I've been such a sinner’. Long story short, we got married sooner than we had planned because I felt so guilty that we were living together. Yeah, we're sleeping together. So that was like the start of our marriage... (Stephanie)

Yet another participant, Susie, who did not engage in any pre-marital sex felt a pang of anger days before her upcoming nuptials, disillusioned by the strict no-sex rules of her youth, only to sign a piece of paper and suddenly be instructed to enjoy the God-given pleasure of the marital sexual union.

...all of a sudden, literally like I remember like the day before our wedding, being like so angry... like we're just supposed to like ‘flip the switch’ and have sex, it is supposed to be fine, like, whereas like before this, like yesterday, we felt all of this guilt for doing all these other sexual things... like you've got to be kidding me!

Despite the varying choices made by each participant, from choosing to marry young or refraining from sex until the wedding night, many of the participants associate feelings of guilt with sex. As mentioned in the literature, even when one is married, there can be a prolonged discomfort with sexual activity, as the psychological ability to ‘flip the switch’, between the internalized messages of sex as sin, to sex as good becomes confused (Leonhardt, Busby, Willoughby, & Park, 2020). Even sexual self-exploration is discouraged, with masturbation

being taboo within evangelical circles, as Susie shared ‘I was exploring my body the same time my (new) husband was...’, compounding the unease of the new arrangement.

In early adolescence, long before they had sex, participants were inundated with instructions about what type of marital partner they should be seeking. This chosen partner is referred to in various terms, such as God’s chosen spouse/mate, searching for a Women of God (WOG), or Man of God (MOG), or as one participant shared, ‘seeking their betrothed’. From an early age, the idea that one is to either pursue or patiently wait, for the ideal partner, i.e., reflective of religious gender roles, is emphasised. The goal of courtship is to find a spouse, therefore the person one dates should be a committed Christian, in addition to wider western societal norms of being well-matched. The participants’ experiences of finding mates reflected the obsession evangelical purity culture has in the reproduction of heterosexual, Christian marriages, and subsequent offspring.

To be in a relationship outside these confines, like engaging in pre-marital sex, is viewed as sinful. Stephanie shared her experience of feeling extreme guilt if she felt attraction to a male who was not yet ordained as her God-chosen partner. She described her early high school experience this way,

I was waiting to hear from the Lord, if had a crush on a guy I felt so guilty because I hadn’t heard from the Lord that, that was the guy I was supposed to marry...oh my gosh, I’m sinning because this isn’t my future husband.

Later in her teenage years, Stephanie’s mother and stepfather went through a divorce, despite the conviction that they had heard from the Lord that they were supposed to be married, creating a type of existential crisis for the participant. Messages about having sex at the ‘right’ time. i.e.,

post-marital, with the ‘right’ person, i.e., ‘divinely chosen’, impacts women, often beginning in their adolescence.

‘I didn’t realize it was sexual assault’

The statement ‘I didn’t realize it was sexual assault’ is not an unfamiliar sentiment shared by women within the evangelical community who have experienced sexual assault (McKinzie & Richards, 2022). When a participant shared her experience of sexual assault at the hands of a high school boyfriend, it was not until years later that she identified her experience as assault.

...mine [assault] was with a high school boyfriend and I honestly did not realize that it was sexual abuse, until years and years later, like, until probably right before I get married... [I] had been talking with my counselor about some things... and she recommended a documentary to me and I watched the documentary and at the very beginning they defined, like, what sexual abuse and sexual assault were and being able to see it in just like plain words as like ‘unwanted sexual contact or sexual contact like without consent’ and learning finally what consent was that like 25 years old, that was like a game changer. (Susie)

As Lauryn Estrada (2021) argues, purity culture creates an environment in which girls and women are at risk of being sexually illiterate, contributing to confusion over the non-consensual act of sexual assault. While evangelical purity culture focuses on sexuality, within the multitude of purity messages being disseminated, the concept of consent is disregarded, leaving women without access to language or resources to address sexual abuse (McKinzie & Richards, 2022). As a researcher and co-participant in these sessions, I attempted to draw conclusions as to why consent was ignored in many purity messages, my hypothesis, no matter how illogical and deeply ignorant of sexual violence, is why teach consent if that requires physical contact, the

forbidden action. This disregard is echoed in the abstinence-only sex education curricula, which does not teach how to access and use contraception, prevention of STDs, or giving and receiving consent, fails to equip youth in navigating sexual encounters in a safe and consenting manner. Susie shared the incredible confusion that accompanies sexual pressure, which she later identified as assault, with purity culture messages shaming sexual activity, regardless of her attempt to refrain.

During our discussion of sexual assault, Kassie shared that a family member had a similar experience, in that when she described a sexual encounter it became clear that it was in fact, rape.

...[my] youngest sister, same thing [did not realize it as sexual assault]. So, you gotta think we were raised by the same super religious mom... And [taught] only [sexual] abstinence like ‘don't have sex till marriage! Don't have sex till marriage!’, and then she [sister] obviously had sex with her boyfriend and then wouldn't tell mom for forever because of the guilt... [sister felt she] can't tell her, she'll [mom] be so disappointed and judge, judge, judge...and then she told her [mom] about it. We found out it was rape, like she didn't consent to it, but she [felt] did not get a choice because they were ‘boyfriend and girlfriend’, and he's saying he loves her and, like, she just didn't know what to do.

After Kassie shared this, an unexpected offshoot of discussion emerged, one that took me by surprise, and I had to mentally process it post-session. In relation to the issue of sexual violence, a participant pivoted the conversation to asking whether claiming rape is more palatable than ‘confessing’ to having sex within evangelical culture.

...because it [would] let her [Kassie's sister] off the hook of complicity if she blamed it on rape, not that it wasn't rape... Just saying that narrative is a lot easier to digest... and purity culture is very much [about] image control (Grace).

Initially, I was taken aback by the idea, but when it is examined through the lens of purity culture, which places female sexuality as an irredeemable gift that measures a woman's worth, the concept becomes more coherent, for if a woman was raped and thereby did not willingly surrender their virginity, it would absolve any question of 'immorality'. However, whether this 'gift' was taken consensually or coerced, the pervasiveness of rape culture in religious communities, situates woman's physical appearance and behavior as an excuse for the perpetrators' actions, holding the victim responsible (Klement & Sagarin, 2017). Therefore, when women engage in sexual activity, consensually or was raped, the messages of being 'damaged goods' continues to be a threat to finding a future spouse and her relationship with God (Gish, 2018). The doomsday message that young women are told that equates their morality with their sexual status, creates a system of shame and guilt (Gish, 2018; Valenti, 2009).

These group sessions coincided with emerging news stories of the Southern Baptist Convention's sexual assault scandals happening in the United States. A report was issued in which sexual assault survivors came forward with allegations against church leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention, accumulating to over 700 offenders. Survivors state they were ignored, silenced, and disparaged by church leadership, even being called a 'satanic distraction from evangelism', when they confided to leaders about these sexual offenses (Gross, 2022). While this news report was not a primary focus of the conversation, it was undoubtedly entwined with the thoughts, comments, and mood of the session. Near the end of one of the session, I asked,

How does that news [of the SBC scandal] ... How did that...impact you? Are you surprised? Not surprised? And do you think it kind of ties into... like [these] stories about... predatory relationships? And how women, especially girls, and boys are talked to about purity culture, and gender roles? And how do you feel that fits into the conversation. You know, that some of the male leaders, we're talking about [these scandals] ...kind of referring to it as an affair, rather than non consensual rape? ...she was a minor. So, I'm just kind of wondering do you feel like purity culture plays into these happenings?

Stephanie: Yeah, absolutely. I think it has a lot to do with that, especially like in the... in the 90s early 2000s, these books written by Christian authors basically told men that they don't have control over their life and their [sexual] thoughts ... something that I heard too, is that you know 'men can't control themselves and so it's our job as women to have to - what's the wording... "Don't make your brothers stumble" ... to cover our bodies. And so, I think that plays a lot into the whole predatory thing...Basically, these men are just being told that they can't control themselves, that they have this sexual urge that has to be fulfilled and you know if there's a girl, God forbid, or a woman, that is tempting then you must be, you know, whatever...because if you're tempted by her, she's obviously, you know, kind of like being this temptation. So, yeah, yeah there's very little responsibility put on the men as far as like, 'no, you can't control yourself'.

Mona: Yeah, so I absolutely think it does have to do with purity culture because so much of the scandal was not even just that it happened, which was like really bad that it did, but also the cover up. And I think that absolutely has to do with, like, people not feeling the freedom to talk about it.

This discussion on the current news of the Southern Baptist Convention scandal leads into the next section, which explores the invalidation experienced by sexual trauma survivors within the evangelical communities.

A Virtuous Response to Assault

In instances in which an assault survivor does come forward to share their experiences within the church community, the reception can be varied. As mentioned earlier, in the reports of the Southern Baptist Convention scandal, some survivors who came forward were met with hostility and disbelief. Relatedly, as explored in chapter two, survivors' experiences are left invalidated, as they are instructed to forgive their abuser, as reflective of Christian virtues (Scarsella & Krehbiel, 2019). This creates an issue of re-traumatization, in which the well-being of the abuser is prioritized over the survivors and no active discipline is executed (Scarsella & Krehbiel, 2019).

Another way in which a survivor may feel invalidated is when the church community responds with what can feel like a token gesture of religiosity. Susie shared the traumatizing experience of seeing her ex-boyfriend, who sexually assaulted her, a few years ago and the response of a church leader.

Susie: There was definitely a big focus on, not necessarily invalidating what I went through, but like, forgiving and moving on... and just saying like, like I remember one of the leaders of the church trying to kind of pray with me through it... she was validating that I had a lot of feelings about it and that it [seeing perpetrator] was, you know, re-traumatizing...but at the same time, it was like it's good, you know, to have a heart to forgive and move forward and like all that kind of stuff. It was still like invalidating of the circumstance basically...

Grace: -[invalidating] of the trauma. Not dealing with the trauma. It's just spiritual bypassing... *'God is good. God is love, forgive'* (mimicking an evangelical mantra).

The use of the term 'spiritual bypassing' is an adept description of how emotional issues are responded to within religious communities. The term was first coined by psychologist, John Welwood in 1984, which he defines as 'a tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks' (as cited in Rose, 2022). It has evolved to mean a range of spiritual terms used to bypass challenges, real-life occurrences, and/or how someone feels (Rose, 2022). This term resonates deeply with the invalidated effects of purity culture; instead of acknowledging the impact these teachings have had on women in the evangelical church, this harm is often responded to with 'thoughts and prayers', instead of with a resounding need for 'policy and change'.

Another participant shared her experience of supporting several female adolescents in her church in reporting their experience of sexual abuse to church authorities, i.e., a pastor and ministerial team. The story stayed with me; a haunting tale of a young girl being ambushed into dismissing the incestual abuse she experienced as an innocent misdemeanour perpetrated by her 'immature' teenage brother. Grace shared the inappropriate way in which the church counselor handled the situation, describing a meeting that took place to address the abuse.

I think [it was] two elders, the pastor-it makes me sick to my stomach thinking about it in retrospect- the pastor, the two elders, her dad, her mom, her brother, who's now, you know, probably, 30 or something, and his fiancé [in the meeting]... the mom would question her and was like, 'so it was probably just like child play like, it really wasn't sex was it?' She [the daughter] backed up her story... like 'no, it's just like, he showed me his

penis, you know' ... 'and he didn't touch you?', 'oh no, he didn't touch me'. So, she totally lied in front of all these people, but can you imagine a 13-year-old, being with your pastor, two elderly men, your father, your brother and his fiancé [in the meeting] like to stack the deck so high against a 13-year-old girl makes me shake right now...[and] that I put her in that situation, it was never turned into any authority.

There are several major issues with the way this offense was addressed. When church authorities are tasked as the primary investigators and disciplinary authority and mediators in criminal activities, the perpetrator is not adequately held responsible, leaving the opportunity for re-offence. Additionally, in this scenario, the victim and the perpetrator were brought into a meeting with multiple religious leaders and questioned, leading to the re-victimization of the young girl. The insensitive instruction to 'forgive' the perpetrator was used to re-enforce the responsibility placed on this young girl to adhere to Christian values of reconciliation, thereby safeguarding her brother's reputation. The church neglected to take appropriate action to protect the individual from harm, compounding the survivor's experience of intrapersonal trauma with institutional betrayal (Bogen, Haikalis, Lopez, López, & Orchowski, 2020). The participants agreed that these perpetrators would certainly continue assaulting women without criminal consequences. In a *Washington Post* article, Pease (2018) adeptly explores the issue of sexual violence within the evangelical church, stating,

The causes are manifold: authoritarian leadership, twisted theology, institutional protection, obliviousness about the problem and, perhaps most shocking, a diminishment of the trauma sexual abuse creates — especially surprising in a church culture that believes strongly in the sanctity of sex '(para. 10).

Obligations: Being the Model Christian Wife

In reflecting on sexual assault, the topic of ‘obligatory sex’ becomes uncomfortably blurry within the group sessions. This issue, and its dependence on a marital union between a man and woman, is reflective of the embedded heteronormativity of evangelical teachings and the experiences of most of the participants. Several of the participants shared their past experiences of feeling obliged to engage in sexual activity with their husbands, as reflective of their role as godly wives.

...the obligatory sex [is talked about a lot in] *The Great Sex Rescue* [book]... so the [idea] was something that like ‘just never say no’ and so I made a pact to myself [and] I made a pact with my husband that I will never say no, like, you know [to sex]... you know, he was sweet and nice and did not take advantage of that, in that he wouldn’t force me if I was like sick or not feeling well or whatever, you know... so he never took advantage of that, but what it did in my mind, I think, was that it sort of changed the way that I felt about sex, and it also started changing the way that I felt about my pleasure within the sexual realm. And it I think it had a big effect on my desire for sex and the way that I do sex in general because it was just all about the obligation, you know, and so it was years ago that I kind of was like ‘wait like this is not okay’ (Grace).

A similar sentiment was shared by Stephanie,

[the idea] men need respect, women need love, men’s deepest need is sex, and women's is emotional connection...that like affected my marriage more than I knew at the time, because what I was constantly hearing was that I had this obligation to have sex with my husband or he would cheat, and it would be partly my fault because I wasn't putting out enough. Or at the very least, [he] would start looking at porn and it would be my fault

because I wasn't, you know, putting out enough. And so just that like feeling of being obligated was the big turnoff for me.

The destabilizing and contradictory transition from being assigned as gatekeepers to male sexuality to feeling obligated to engage in sexual intercourse with one's spouse can not be overstated. As illustrated earlier, post-marital sex is not as simple as 'flipping a switch', in relation to obligatory sex, there is a compounded duality of dealing with residual feelings of guilt for engaging in sex with the overlapping fear of the potential consequences of not fulfilling a husband's 'innate desire' for sex.

The all-encompassing blame women experience within the paradigm of gender essentialism was shared by the group; one participant listed the faults 'blamed for men lusting or having normal sexual thoughts... blamed for just existing'. Women's bodies and sexuality have been a point of contention within evangelical communities, fortunately, much-needed satire about the dangers of the female body have emerged, the participants shared in laughter over a meme that suggested women should apologize for having butts!

For two participants, reading the evangelical-based sex and relationship book, *The Great Sex Rescue: The Lies You've Been Taught and How to Recover what God Intended*, by Shelia Wray Gregoire (2021), was momentous, acting as much-needed affirmation of their sexual struggles. Stephanie described it this way, '*it's like a bomb went off in my head- it was a great book, but it made me angry because I realized all the crap that I had been taught had affected my marriage*'. In discussions about my research outside these sessions, *The Great Sex Rescue*, was also brought up multiple times, piquing my interest. Flipping through the first few chapters, it became clear this book combined the language of evangelicalism while addressing the desperate need for sexuality to be discussed within these circles. The authors respectfully confronted the

problematic teachings found in other evangelical relationship books, dispelling the myth that women are created to engage in obligatory sex for the sole satisfaction of their spouse. These myths omit the importance of women experiencing sexual satisfaction, and as Grace noted, when she began seeking pleasure in sex, she felt a sense of freedom in her sexuality.

In tangent to obligatory sex, was the re-enforcement of traditional gender roles within the home and church community. One participant identified an aspect of gender roles that challenged her understanding of self within the traditional conservative church. Reflected in the video conference call session, this participant, Grace, was outgoing, a self-described extrovert, with a strong personality, which she articulated was not the model of the submissive, gentle, and quiet women, exemplified in her religious community.

I just felt like to be a Christian woman I had to do certain things and be submissive and, you know, fit what the church was teaching and what so many women in my church role modeled, like they were all just like tender, sweet, quiet, women that I was around... I was like, 'gosh, I just gotta change'... so when you don't feel like you fit in and you feel like that God made you a certain way, but that you've got to fit the stereotype that so many women at the church did, then it's always like you're putting a circle into a square or whatever... whatever the analogy might be.

Grace's struggles to fit the stereotypical role of the godly woman were compounded by her husband's sweet and gentle nature, which did not fit the narrative of the evangelical, patriarchal-driven marriage exemplified in the late 1980s-90s. This narrative is an important illustration of how enforced binary gender roles affect everyone, as patriarchal norms also narrow the scope of acceptable manliness.

Another participant, who also transgressed the stereotypical persona of a conservative Christian wife described earlier, shared her personal struggles to unlearn the internalized message that being a godly wife meant shouldering most of the household chores.

...when I got married, I will say that the biggest adjustment... was [me] putting the demands of the house on myself, and he's [husband] never asked [me to]. He's never been passive aggressive about it. He's never been like 'wow the house is such a mess'... like literally never made a comment. And I'm like, beating myself up, and I'm teaching [Kassie is a teacher], like we're both working... I don't know why I'm also assuming that I'm supposed to have the house role... but I think it's just my mom was always 'Ephesians 5', 'Ephesians 5', your husband is the breadwinner...⁸

Listening to her speak about this enactment of traditional gender roles, I had two contradictory reactions. First, this participant was in her early 30s, instinctively I cringed at the narrative of women being responsible for domestic chores, as it feels like this role should have been absolved decades ago. Followed by the recognition that these gender role narratives are deeply ingrained into western society and this issue of domesticity is ongoing particularly in conservative religious spaces. Once again, the pervasive blame felt and/or observed by several participants if the home was not being kept-up or their children were misbehaving, are propagated by teachings that claim these chores are women's God-given responsibilities, designed to support their husband, the head of the household.

The 'Good' Gay Christian

⁸ Ephesians 5: 22-24 NIV “²² Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.”

In this study, I quickly recognized exploring the impacts of the evangelical purity culture was going to be deeply reflective of white, heterosexual normativity and religiosity. Therefore, many of the individuals and communities involved in the purity movement reflected a homogenous group of white, heterosexual, middle-class evangelicals. However, within these communities, the narratives of women of color and queer women are critical dialogues to explore. One participant, Mona, shared her experience of being a biracial, bisexual evangelical Christian, navigating the effects purity culture had on her understanding of sexuality.

[purity culture] has influenced me, but it was like under the radar, or I had discounted it because it wasn't extreme. So, a little bit about me... female and bisexual, and I am the third of four children. I'm mixed, I'm part Mexican and Italian and German.

Mona was the only participant to share her ethnicity and sexuality. This observation reflects on the invisibility of whiteness and heterosexuality, as the assumption of heterosexuality was prevalent in the discussions. In her experience of the heteronormative landscape of evangelical communities, Mona commented:

I also grew up in a very like hetero normative culture, I didn't come out to myself until less than two years ago, only took me 27 years to figure out something that had been true for me since I was 14.

I can like remember the exact moment, and my surroundings. I was like, in the backseat of the car on the left side behind the driver's side, and my family was driving out of church, going through the parking lot, and I looked out the window and I don't remember actually whether I said it or I thought it, but I had this sort of like thing that came to mind, which was like, 'oh yeah, just because you feel drawn to someone doesn't mean you're like attracted to them, maybe just really admire them'. So that was my mantra, and that

was the like concept that I had within my life of being like [wanting] to be a good Christian, and I've been told that being a good Christian is to be straight. And so, all of these other things I'm experiencing in my life, I can just like very easily rationalize away. I very clearly remember my 14th birthday party where it was a sleepover and I had thoughts about what it would be like to kiss my best friend, who is a girl. Yeah, so, um, they're like a number of things that like went through my head and I just literally did not engage with it at all. So, I had some like awareness of emotions and attractions I was having but I literally [had] like zero engagement.

Mona's mantra reflects the process of identity negotiation that a queer evangelical may partake. Perhaps this is stating an obvious tenet of conservative evangelical beliefs, but heteronormativity is central to the reproduction and maintenance of the nuclear family, thereby rejecting gay relationships. By rationalizing her same-sex as platonic admiration, Mona maintained the good Christian girl narrative that enforced heterosexuality.

Throughout her narrative, Mona referred to the concept of the 'good gay' person, in the context of the church. To avoid disrupting the flow of storytelling, I made a note to myself to ask for further explanation on what she meant by 'good gay'; as expected, she explained it was okay to identify as gay, but not to engage in same-sex relations, this is common rhetoric in evangelical circles. The participant then commented on while many people knew she was gay, with varying levels of acceptance, she negotiated this identity under the guise of celibacy. In a research study, which interviewed gay congregants of several Protestant churches, gay members highlighted the aspects of their identity which helped negotiate their acceptance as a church member, for example, being in monogamous relationships, or upholding gender stereotypes (McQueeney, 2009). This splitting of oneself into acceptable and unacceptable traits based on church doctrine

can have a boomerang effect, with gay congregants navigating between identities (Grannum & Irwin-Diehl, 2021).

Mona shared the hurtful conversation with a close friend that demonstrates these rules of homosexual (un)acceptability, when she went from the non-practicing ‘good gay’ to affirming.

...when I came out to my best friend... it was fine and then when I became affirming, I told her that. And she told me that... she started like very much trying to have conversations with me about my views, which is like [she was] very concerned for my salvation. And I was asking her to like stop talking about it because the things that she was saying are hurtful and, like, at this point I didn't have feelings for her anymore, it was like something kind of earlier. But like, eventually, she told me that the only way she could give me the boundaries in conversation that I asked for, was if she were to just see me as if I'm an unbeliever, because if I'm not a Christian, if I'm already lost than like there's no point in her trying to like convince me, but if I'm a sister in Christ then she needs to like, correct me with like, I think she even said the word ‘disciplinary’ or something. And she was insisting that all of this was because she loves me.

This part of Mona’s story was poignant, a reverberating sadness filled the discussion. This idea of treating someone as an ‘unbeliever’ to align with their fundamentalist Christian’s beliefs of conversion is not unfamiliar to me. The sentiment strips the individual of their ability to identify themselves, i.e., Mona identifies as a believer, but her friend chose to ignore this based on Mona’s sexuality and labels her as a non-believer. The conflation of sexual orientation with one’s ability to be a ‘true believer’ is often directed at the LGBTQ+ community, for to be a true believer they must be the ‘good gay’.

Unlike the other participants who expressed feelings of guilt for engaging in, or felt tempted by pre-marital sexual activity, Mona shared her process of concluding that pre-marital sex needed to be a personal decision.

...the craziest thing for me though, is that I felt absolutely zero guilt about it [having sex] internally. And I've heard people say that like if they've grown up in purity culture and they had all these feelings about themselves and their bodies and sex that like they might like shut down during sex or like they don't enjoy it, or whatever... and I liked it very much and didn't feel bad about it and maybe it's because I was manic [participant has Bipolar disorder] at the time, but I yeah I noticed I didn't start to feel bad until the next day... I started to think about like what, what others think versus how did I feel about what had happened. So thankfully I didn't spiral. And I did end up like finding other resources and I ended up coming to the conclusion, like for myself, that I think it needs to be everyone's, like, personal conviction between them and God. In the same way that like some people drink and others don't. And the most important thing, related to marriage is that like once people have made that commitment to each other that sort of covenant, to like not break that commitment...but like if people haven't married, then like maybe it's okay.

Mona commented that her younger self would be completely aghast by this idea, as like other participants, she grew up believing that any sexual activity was to be confined to a Christian, heterosexual marital union. By transgressing the first aspect of the marital union, i.e., heterosexuality, the pre-condition of virginity can either be a means of maintaining purity or feel irrelevant to LGBTQ+ evangelical Christians (Fisher, 2009; McQueeney, 2009). This

transgression of heterosexuality opens a space for LGBTQ Christians to reflect critically on other aspect purity teachings, creating new dialogues around sexuality.

In conclusion, while each participant has unique stories of their experience of purity culture, their collective narratives provided a greater insight into the movement's effects beginning in the formative years. As demonstrated, the developmental stage of adolescents to young adulthood held impactful moments for religious and sexual identity formation for each of the participants. Recognizing that adolescence is a critical stage of identity formation, it is unsurprising that participants are still unraveling the impacts sexual purity culture has on their sense of self. In the next chapter, the participants describe this unraveling, illuminating the process of deconstruction to an unaware participant- the researcher!

CHAPTER 6: ‘Question Everything’: Deconstructing Purity Culture

When I began this research thesis, my conceptualization of purity culture was primarily rooted in personal experiences and observations ingrained in a Canadian socio-political environment. Conversely, all the research participants reside in the United States and their experiences of purity culture are/were deeply embedded in a religious-political landscape. Exploring the impacts of evangelical teachings on female sexuality is further contextualized by the ever-changing, tumultuous landscape of American society and politics, ranging from contemporary issues of gun control, abortion rights, immigration policies, and racial violence. The looming threat of the non-existent separation of church and state contributed to varying experiences of disillusionment, or as frequently described by participants as a form of ‘cognitive dissonance’, towards the American evangelical church.

Moving forward, this chapter focuses on the latter part of the participants’ adolescent years until the present time. This time period is fraught with the ‘question everything’ sentiment, in which participants began unraveling the teachings of their youth, with purity culture being a focal point. The participants not only engaged with issues of female sexuality within purity culture but how the foundation of evangelicalism is interwoven with issues of nationalism, race, age, and class. As explored further in the next section, dismantling the effects of purity culture led the participants to a process of what they called ‘deconstruction’.

Defining Deconstruction

Each participant appeared to engage in a reflective process that positioned purity teachings as a catalyst in identifying other problematic evangelical practices. This process of ‘question everything’ as one participant remarked, is referred to by many present and former community members as ‘deconstruction’, a phenomenon that is foregrounded in this chapter. The

practice is also referred to as ‘faith deconstruction’, ‘the deconstruction movement’, or ‘evangelical deconstruction’. When I first heard this term, I was confused, it was not referred to in any of the reviewed research, and yet seemed central to the participants’ identity formation. A general *Google* search of ‘deconstruction -evangelical’ yielded a range of answers, both praising and condemning the practice.

In searching for the origins of this term, I noted a tenuous connection to philosopher Jacques Derrida’s work, who applied his theory of deconstruction to written text and interpretation. In relation to this research, it can be understood as a close examination, questioning, and at times, dismantling of one’s religious beliefs, often in relation to a greater cognizance of historical, social, and cultural realities (Shenvi, 2021). Deconstruction is most commonly undertaken by people raised in the church who come to question previously held beliefs they had grown up with (Hailes, 2019). Curious to know more about this term in relation to the participants’ experiences, I asked the participants to tell me their conceptualization of deconstruction, the origins of their deconstruction, and the ongoing process.

Defining deconstruction is rather elusive, as there are no set parameters, rather it is a personal process with no specific start or end point or specified outcomes. I wondered aloud why I, as someone raised in the evangelical community, had not heard of this term. It was readily explained to me that evangelical ‘deconstruction’ was predominately connected to American Evangelicalism. I can only speculate that while non-Americans also ‘deconstruct’ aspects of their religiosity, the term uniquely reflects the immersion of evangelicalism with American culture and politics, as seen in the adoption of abstinence-only sex education into public schools. Vaughn Booker (2021) comments ‘understanding political practices determines the understanding of religious practices- Evangelical Christianity remains heavily defined by

conservative political activism' (p. 2). This connection between politics and religion becomes more evident when participants share their deconstruction origin stories, as I will explore in the latter part of this chapter.

To gain a further conceptualization of evangelicalism I shared my speculations with the first session group,

Researcher: I don't know if the term evangelical is used quite the same in Canada versus the US [United States], I feel like the US has a lot more... unique social-political feeling to it –

Susie: that's a nice way to put it! (Murmured agreement and laughter)

The three of us agreed that we did not grow up calling ourselves evangelicals, rather identified ourselves based on our churches titles, i.e., Southern Baptist, non-denominational, and Christian Reformed. Kassie echoed about the vague establishment of referring to evangelicals is an 'umbrella term'. I asked the participants, if they 'associated it [evangelicalism] with a political or social stance, they both simultaneously responded with 'oh, for sure', and 'yeah definitely'.

To further my understanding of how one deconstructs from evangelicalism, I asked the participants to help conceptualize deconstruction.

Kassie: I think everybody defines it differently. It's just a good term, a general term, to describe like... everyone's different in their process [of deconstruction]... like, I'm a huge rule follower... I love a rule, I will stick to it if you spell them out... And then when you actually become an adult and have a conceptual understanding, and you read the Bible, and you expose yourself to more people, and you're like this is not what this [the Bible] is saying at all, [you feel] kind of feel cheated ...so I would say deconstructing for me, is [seeing] how I was raised, with a set of these strict gate keeping shameful beliefs and

[how] the Bible was thrown at you... rather than like used in a loving manner, like it was used to shame.

Susie: I think, like you [Kassie] said, deconstruction can have so many different meanings and I think it is like, at least from what I've seen on the internet and also from what I've gotten messages from people like on my Instagram account, is that it is a pretty unique to America, like American evangelicalism ... But like for me, it is pretty similar to what you said, Kassie, is just kind of taking all these different things that I was taught growing up that I blindly believed, without any reason or without any, like, science behind it... I mean now like, I am in healthcare, and so everything I do has, has to have evidence behind it. And so, growing up and just blindly believing things and being told to just have 'faith like a child' and not really question anything, like I feel like I'm taking all of those beliefs and like taking them apart one by one and just trying to figure out where did this come from, like did it come from someone who was credible or did it just come from my mom saying this thing, or did it come from like a random pastor? ... And I think in terms of like reconstruction... I think sometimes that can be like a weird, like trigger word for people because a lot of people, especially in kind of more conservative circles, associate deconstruction with de-conversion. And there are a lot of people that have been deconstructed and said I don't want anything to do with the church anymore and I don't want anything to do with any kind of faith anymore, and I think that sometimes that has to be part of your process but there's also on the other side of it, a lot of people that will say like, you have to reconstruct, and then it becomes like another rule you have to follow...everyone is at different places in their journey and we all have had different experiences like may not all come to the same conclusion, which is ok. But when you

grow up being told that, that your beliefs is the only right belief and you have to tell everybody, and if they don't believe it then they're eternally damned, like, that's kind of a hard thing to break yourself from, even in terms of just being able to be like okay, me and this person believes slightly different things about this and it's still okay, so like respect them as a person.

Kassie: It's hard because... for me, it gave me like a vocabulary and a name to describe what I was doing (Susie nods in agreement), because it's like the scientific part in your brain is like zooming in for a close up look and questioning how I grew up - but it's like a one word term to communicate with people like 'I'm not how I was raised and I'm looking very closely at what I was taught'.

As recounted, deconstruction/deconstructing describes a multitude of processes in which one reflects on one's religious beliefs and does not inevitably lead to de-conversion (leaving the religion) or reconstruction (rebuilding religiosity). The process may be subtle, as Mona noted,

I feel like I've never had to describe my process as deconstruction because so much of the way I've engaged with theology has been, like, through like intellectual study... less deconstructing and more just like adjusting as relevant.

While for others, deconstruction may be sudden, triggering a sense of crisis in their (religious) identities. Deconstruction may also mean rejecting some evangelical teachings, often related to homophobia, sexism, and racism, while maintaining, or deepening their faith (Lea, 2020).

While many of the participants in this study were unapologetically engaged in addressing issues in the evangelical church, specifically purity culture, it is not uncommon for people to feel like deconstructing is a 'coming-out' process [as described on social media groups], in which they expect a backlash from their religious community members and families. Kassie shared a

common response by conservative Christians when they hear a person is deconstructing, or simply taking a more progressive stance on an issue, claiming they have become indoctrinated by societal values. Her response ‘well, actually no, that is the tool you [conservative church] used [when I was] growing up in the church, in private schools, and with a white-washed curriculum; you are in a bubble, you don’t see diversity’. Reflecting on these descriptors, the process of deconstruction is keenly connected to the ‘outsider-within’ positionality, as participants are simultaneously embedded in the experiences of evangelicalism but critiqued as ‘indoctrinated’ when they question the churches’ teachings.

Despite this contention, deconstruction has become a popular movement. As mentioned in chapter four, in recruiting participants for this project, I connected with an online social media group created for past, present, or questioning evangelicals. While I was unaware there were dozens of said pseudo-support groups, it was not completely surprising. Commentary on evangelical deconstruction describes the movement as being primarily made up of young people (Hailes, 2019) who are disillusioned by the moral failures of the church and the leaders put on pedestals, which they recognize as having ‘really rotten fruit’ (Skye Jethani, as quoted in Lea, 2020, para 2). Influential American Christian columnist, Rachel Held Evans wrote,

I predict millennials in particular will continue to drop out of religious life, and the ethnic divides within American Christianity, which many sought to heal with a quick-fix approach to “racial reconciliation” that bypassed repentance and justice, will only widen. (Quoted in Herrmann, 2021, p. 416).

While the movement has amassed what I would imagine to be thousands of people, the experience of deconstructing can be isolating. East Tennessee State University Professor, Andrew Herrmann (2021) describes his experience of leaving evangelical fundamentalism:

I stripped my faith down to the bare bones. Stripping one's self of one's worldview, and watching one's worldview crumble around and simultaneously within you is liberating and...the most appropriate term I can muster is *ängst*, the deep-seated uncanny horror of the aloneness of one's own singular existence (p 417).

To combat the feeling of loneliness, the research participants, and thousands of others, join social media groups that act as a shared space to ask questions, express hurt, and seek advice⁹.

Deconstruction Origin Stories

After conceptualizing what the participants meant by deconstructing, I asked if they could articulate when their process of deconstruction began. It became obvious that the entwinement of religion with politics was part of each participant's deconstruction narratives. As mentioned earlier, the separation of church and state in the United States has become murky, and each participant noted political events when asked about their deconstruction process. Notably (yet, not too surprising!) all five participant mutually identified the 2016 election of Donald Trump as President of the United States as a defining moment in their journey of deconstruction.

...election time, like 2016, which I feel like is the story of most people who have been deconstructing in the recent like past few years is like Trump's election. It was very eye opening to see like, especially my parents, just go all in and say that this was God's candidate, and this was somebody that was a Christian...And the whole like 'the Republican Party is the "Christian party" and so that's what we have to vote for'. And like leading up to that election I remember having conversations with my mom and just saying like 'as a woman, I don't think I can vote for Trump, like, I know that you've always told me that, you know, to vote republican but as a woman I don't I feel like I

⁹ This number is reflective of the 5000+ member base of the private Facebook group in which I recruited the participants for this research project.

can'... the fact that this was like right after like the access Hollywood paper came out and I was like, I can't vote for someone that says those things about women and, like publicly degrades women... like it doesn't make me feel good as a woman. And so, I started having these conversations with my parents and then it just kind of evolved from there...

(Susie)

I think, 2016 election, and then especially 2020... I do feel like 2020, and more recently... is like the most disillusioned I've been feeling, even though like it kind of started for me a while ago, like now is really disheartening and everything... Because, like it's one thing to like vote for Trump because, like you think that his tactics are just for the campaign and once he gets to be president, he'll like calm down a bit and it's another thing to vote for him knowing exactly like what he does and who he is and how he leads and yeah anyways, I'll start ranting if I don't stop myself now... (Mona)

...it was just like the cognitive dissonance that I was like seeing [evangelicals voting for Trump], and it kind of started to open the door for other questions of like... what I even believed and where I was learning it from and was it, you know, reputable sources?

(Susie)

The positioning of the Republican Party as the Christian-aligned party, and the accompanying rhetoric that Trump was God's candidate had a disillusioning impact on the participants. Two of the participants described their parents as hard-core Trump supporters, creating tension in the adult-child-parental relationship. Susie sarcastically mimed evangelical Trump supporters, saying 'we're Christians, we love Jesus- but we also support this person who treats people terribly and says terrible things- we are just going to support him because he belongs to the American political party aligned with the church'. Both Kassie and Susie stated

they needed to set boundaries with their parents, establishing a list of things they were not going to talk about, mainly the confluence of religion with politics.

In addition to the tension felt between Kassie and her mother's support for Donald Trump, she also described her mother as a 'Q-anon-er' to the extreme. She comments,

[mom] raised us in the religious home, like paid for us to go to private school, was a stay-at-home mom... like she was my filter, so it's just strange to be raised as a Christian and then see where she is now.

Here Kassie is describing the valued attributes of a traditional Christian mother, manifesting a sort of cognitive dissonance between her mother's beliefs now and the image she held of her mother when she was a child. I inserted my own observations about generational relationships and religious beliefs; there appears to be tension between parents and their adult children, as several of the participants regard their parents' political beliefs as inconsistent with Christian values.

The entwinement of conservative American politics with the evangelical church in influencing policies around female sexuality is alarming. From comments on abstinence-only sex education to abortion legislation to disputing adoption claims, the participants discussed how female sexuality was a focal point in the evangelical church - Republican Party relationship.

In regulating sex, the contradictory issues of access to birth control and abortion in the United States contributes to the loss-loss situation for women.

Grace: ... vote Republican... vote for Trump because of the abortion issue. But then it's like, then you [evangelicals] want abstinence... and then you don't want sex education...then you want all the books banned that talk about anything like this ... and then you're pro death penalty... and then you're against any social services policies that

would aid the women and the children once they're born. It's like sorry you can't have all that together. That's just too big of a bag of mixed nuts.

Researcher: yes, like this isn't about pro-life, its about pro-birth, because once those lives are out there, it's like, yeah, we're not going to give services to these people

As demonstrated, once the participants began questioning the correlation between evangelical Christianity and conservative political rhetoric, the 'question everything' floodgates opened. In terms of purity culture, participants asked rhetorical questions like, 'who told me, I can't wear a bikini?', 'was it appropriate for a male youth pastor to comment on my appearance?' Kassie articulated it this way 'they want to control women as far as sex... be a stay-at-home mom, have children, be anti-abortion- but it's not about theology, it's about control'. This echoes Andrew Herrmann's (2021) argument,

The antiscientific evangelical attitude toward sex, gender, and sexual education has little to do with sex qua sex. This is about having domination over individuals'— particularly women's—autonomy and bodies; that men can make the rules reinforcing their interpretation of God's plan, which align with their concepts of patriarchy. It is unabashedly misogynistic and heteronormative. There is no better evidence of this than the purity culture of fundamentalist evangelicalism (p. 421, para. 5).

As noted in chapter two, these antiscientific attitudes towards sex have manifested into government policies through the collaboration between evangelical leaders and conservative politicians. The implementation of problematic programs, such as abstinence-only sex education, or changes to ALFA, and the current debates over access to abortion, demonstrate the effects of religious control over female bodily autonomy.

The origins, or ‘aha’ moment, that kick-started the process of deconstruction for many of the participants was the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump. This defining moment in American-evangelical history, which has received ample attention, highlighted issues of nationalism, sexism, and racism within evangelical circles. For many American evangelicals, this meant reflecting on the long-held values of the evangelical denomination, making the process of deconstruction ongoing.

Ongoing Process

As explored earlier, deconstruction does not take a specific path or endpoint. For some, it may mean rejecting previously held beliefs and/or de-conversion, for others it could contribute to a deepening of their faith. However, perhaps most salient is situating deconstruction as an ongoing process. At its core, deconstruction can be understood as engaging in critical thinking about one’s religious beliefs. Several participants commented that deconstruction made them more empathetic and compassionate, normalizing experiences outside those performed in their religious communities.

Most palpable in the discussion was the frequency with which participants mentioned apologizing; a majority of participants shared their regret in their contribution to upholding the gender-based judgements embedded in purity culture teachings.

I apologize that I taught that [purity culture ideology] and, you know, passed it on to probably a lot of people, because I taught a lot of people in the course of my time as a Christian, you know, lots of youth, lots of young women... (Grace).

I probably passed them [evangelical books] on to my sisters... I have two little sisters and I feel so bad. And I've apologized to them I'm like, ‘sorry that I was like holier than thou’

and like getting on them for having sex, like, how dare I? So stupid, I'm so sorry that was so wrong of me, but that's like how my mom drilled it into me... (Kassie)

The amount of people that I have apologized to in the past like two or three years for just the person that I was until I was like 27 -28 [years old] ... like, I apologized to so many people, it just seemed like I was a terrible person... [but] I realized that like I was working with what I had... I was going off of the only information I had, but I still did not treat people well and was like so judgmental over things that I had no reason to be judgmental of, and also had like no knowledge of to begin with. (Susie)

These narratives describing the multiple apologies several participants felt they needed to offer demonstrates the negative focus placed on sexuality for these participants at a young age, and the normality of judging peers based on their [perceived] sexuality, within the evangelical community. Part of deconstructing purity teachings was recognizing the overemphasis placed on sex [as sin] and a movement towards the normalization of sexuality. This mental shift is exemplified in the responses Kassie and Susie gave to Grace's question, 'what you would tell someone now, what your viewpoint is on sex and sex before marriage?'

Kassie: I don't really offer like criticism to people at all I've just tried to support people where they're at...

Susie: I think if someone were to specifically ask me or come to me with a question or [ask for] advice about it [sex], I think the thing that I'm most concerned about now is like comprehensive sex ed... and so making sure that people know, even just like what their options are and what safe sex even is...and I'm kind of in the same boat as Kassie is like, I'm not gonna judge anyone for their like sexual choices...I think everybody is different and everybody is at different places in their life and has different life experiences...And

also, like having dealt with sexual assault and sexual abuse before in my own life, I know that that is like an unwanted part of a lot of people's stories.

These responses place value on avoiding any judgements, rather supporting the person's wellbeing and providing information about access to reproductive health services. Susie also poignantly comments on the reality of sexual violence in many people's life, a topic that is often avoided in evangelical discussions of sexuality. More, these responses are in direct contrast to the teachings Kassie and Susie grew up with and the support they wish they had received.

At the conclusion of our meetings, I asked the participants whether purity culture has changed in churches. This question was followed by a brief silence. Their answer: Maybe? Probably not. They landed on, 'they've just changed the language'. The complementarian rhetoric continues but is softened by the use of 'equal but different' paraphrasing. One participant used the evangelical-based social media influencers, *Girl Defined*, as an example of 'purity culture 2.0', in which the hosts deploy purity-infused rhetoric like, 'living out God's design for sex/sexuality' while avoiding the term purity, a growing [controversial] buzzword.

As one participant speculated, perhaps there is/will be a shift away from purity culture as young people have access to information and resources about sexuality outside their communities, primarily via the internet. Whether increased awareness, prompted by technological advances or generational differences, I am certain that the participants' views on sexuality are transformative. Stephanie was committed to having open conversations about sex and relationships with her daughters, Susie was creating an online presence focused on deconstructing purity culture myths, Mona was engaged in queer-affirming Christian spaces, Kassie was there to support her younger sisters in their navigation of sexuality, and Grace was

committed to undoing the narrative of purity culture she had shared as a young adult. These women demonstrated their active engaged in transforming the narratives of purity culture.

CONCLUSION

The evangelical purity movement is deeply engaged in re-enforcing traditional gender and sex roles reflected within American culture. The emergence of the evangelical purity movement in the 1990s- 2000s highlighted the centrality of monitoring [female] sexuality in evangelical communities. Commentators hypothesize the movement was in response to the perceived threat to traditional nuclear family values following the women's liberation and gay liberation movement (Joffe & Mauro, 2007). In an effort to maintain fundamentalist religiosity as central to American culture and governance, far-right conservatives aligned with sympathetic politicians in hopes to impact government laws and policies (Joffe & Mauro, 2007). This can be observed in the policies that funded the implementation of abstinence-only sex education in public schools, despite the curriculums' inaccurate teachings and neglect to provide essential sexual health information (Joffe & Mauro, 2007; Kantor, Santelli, Teitler, & Balmer, 2008).

Within the realm of sexuality, evangelical fundamentalism asserts men are motivated by sex, and women by their emotions. On this premise, women are positioned as gatekeepers to male heterosexuality, as men are characterized as unable to control their innate desires (Klement & Sagarin, 2016). This narrative negates female sexual desires and positions female sexual purity as reflective of their morality (Valenti, 2009), resulting in feelings of guilt and shame when they are judged as violating these narrow constructs (Estrada, 2021; Gish, 2018; Michael, 2019; Muldoon & Wilson, 2017). Additionally, the focus on controlling female sexuality subjects women and girls to forms of 'divinely' sanctioned sexism manifesting as a result of patriarchal normativity (Muldoon & Wilson, 2017).

In reflecting on the complexity of gender, sexuality, and race within evangelical religiosity, my theoretical framework was designed to support the exploration of my thesis

question ‘how has evangelical purity culture affected women who have grown up within these socio-religious communities?’ This framework includes feminist theology and critical whiteness theory, which share common tenets that explore social relations within systems of power. The primary objectives of feminist theology are to challenge the androcentrism of various religions, particularly evangelicalism within this research, and the impact of patriarchal teachings have on women within this ideological landscape. I also drew on critical whiteness theory as a means to explore the white, euro-centric traditions and beliefs embedded in evangelicalism, and in extension, purity culture teachings.

I engaged with the outsider-within as a methodological perspective, which supported my positionality within the research as a feminist researcher, raised in an evangelical landscape. To explore the affects of evangelical sexuality purity culture on women within these communities, small-scale focus groups were created to provide a space for women who grew up during this movement to share their experiences. This was unique from previous research conducted on this topic, which often relied on quantitative data, or did not focus specifically on the evangelical purity movement. This data revealed participants shared similar religious, educational, and demographic markers, i.e., predominately middle-class, white, and attended a conservative church that was closely linked to their school. I structured the data and analysis chapters (five and six) chronologically, exploring their adolescent years first, then their adult years. This decision was made because the data clearly reflected descriptive childhood narratives, followed by the current opinions, beliefs, and reflections of the participants.

Reflective of the literature review, each participant shared moments in which the teachings and practices of their evangelical communities evoked feelings of shame, guilt, or confusion in relation to their sexuality. Participants shared a range of stories and insights, which

I divided into multiple sub-headings in chapter five, reflective of their personal experiences and wider issues related to purity culture and its construction of gender and sexuality. They covered topics related to guilt associated with engaging in sex, the issue of sexual violence and the church's response, the impact of gender roles narratives, and the enforcement of heteronormativity within the evangelical church.

Chapter six focused on the latter part of the adolescent years to the present time and was shaped by the participants' engagement with the evangelical 'deconstruction' process. The process of deconstruction, in which one critically examines the beliefs and values of their religious upbringing, foregrounded much of the participants' thoughts and opinions about purity culture, as well as other socio-political issues salient in American evangelical churches. It is within the deconstruction narrative that participants were able to detail their personal journeys in understanding the effects purity teachings had on their concept of their spiritual and sexual self. Their views of sexual purity have shifted away from the narrow evangelical constructs, instead, they have embraced a more liberatory approach to gender and sexuality.

As demonstrated, the goal of this research was to provide space and centralize the narratives of women who grew up in the evangelical church and were impacted by the teachings of purity culture. Feminist research, and the accompanying framework and methodology utilized to conduct this research, provided a space in which as a researcher I was able to learn, or as Maggie Maclure articulates, engage in a sense of 'wonder' that data evoked. The participants provided me with the language to describe a process I too engaged in, but did not realize had a name, or a massive movement: evangelical deconstruction.

Critically examining one's beliefs and values, particularly those imparted to one at a young age, creates the opportunity to challenge the harmful consequences of these traditions.

This is astutely articulated by Gillian Grannum and Rebecca Irwin-Diehl (2021),

For better and worse, religion and spirituality may be extremely influential in the formation of our beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, values, and perspectives.¹ For those who have had significant exposure to formal religious traditions, particularly during childhood and adolescence, religious values and norms are often a guidepost by which oneself and others are evaluated and judged. On the constructive side of the equation, spiritual-religious traditions can offer a cognitive framework for comprehending the world, a community of support and identity, and a compass for navigating moral decision-making in relationship with self and others (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Ciarrocchi & Deneke, 2005; McConnell et al., 2006). On the destructive side, these same traditions may prove to be oppressive and toxic, especially as it relates to the development of a person's sense of self as a sexual being (Schermer-Sellers, 2017)' (p. 2, para. 2).

As a feminist researcher, calls to action are critical aspect to the practical engagement of the issues explored within the research topic. Therefore, I want to conclude this research project by briefly identifying areas of transformation that have taken place in the evangelical church. In areas of transformation, there is a growing number of books being written by Christian authors about the intersectional issues of nationalism, toxic masculinity, homophobia, and racism present in the church. Some of these books include, *After Evangelicalism: The Path to a New Christianity* (Gushee, 2020), *Worldview Theory, Whiteness, and the Future of Evangelical Faith* (Cook, 2021), *Taking America Back for God* (Whitehead & Perry, 2020), *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Tisby, 2020), *The*

Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth (Barr, 2021), and as mentioned previously, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (Du Mez, 2020). These (recently published) books align with many of the topics discussed in the group sessions; is this a hopeful sign of change?

Furthermore, as demonstrated throughout the group sessions, the participants, in addition to thousands of other Americans, are in the deconstruction process, a movement that has the potential to transform, or at least call attention to, issues plaguing the evangelical church. From my observation of evangelical deconstruction social media groups, members are engaging with topics ranging from homophobia, racism, nationalism, sexuality, mental health, and etc. It is within the deconstruction movement that there is growing acknowledgement and action being taken to address the effects of oppressive evangelical practices. In some cases, members share their personal experiences of confronting abusive ministerial staff, struggling with fundamentalist family members, or leaving their church. They are creating noise, raising alarm bells about the abuse, discrimination, and harmful teachings they are witnessing in their church communities. They do this by creating content on social media platforms, writing articles, providing resources to one another, and providing financial support to programs outside their church tithes. Inside the church, these actions can be seen as rebellious, but I can imagine [much like how I feel], this is also an act of survival, of social justice, of living out one's faith.

However, despite these hopeful happenings, the evangelical church, in all that encompasses, has a long way to go in dismantling the foundation of white-centric hetero-patriarchy, but to echo the sentiments of Mary Daly (1973) regrettably these hierarchical structures are uninterested in shifting. This research project was dedicated to exploring an aspect of this problematic foundation, the controlling of female sexuality, via the examination of purity

culture as a socio-temporal phenomenon in which to analyze the effects of these teachings. As Sierra Schnable (2017) aptly articulates

Uncovering the layers of this movement [purity] reveals that it is engaged in the ongoing construction of femininity, masculinity, sexuality, and the family in ways that position young women's bodies as the battleground upon which patriarchy and progress war for control of sexual agency (p. 64).

While concluding this thesis, I found myself frequently visiting the *Instagram* page dedicated to calling out harmful purity culture messages. I have sat with these messages; they were reflective of the narratives shared by the research participants, as well as my own experiences. Here are a few:

'purity culture is rooted in patriarchy'

'purity culture teaches and reinforces harmful sexual assault narratives'

'purity culture taught us shaming others was loving'

'purity culture taught us that pronouns were more harmful than homophobia and transphobia'

'purity culture encourages disembodiment and distrust of our bodies'

'purity culture and sexism disguise themselves as school dress codes'

'purity culture is rape culture'

-deconstructingpurityculture (Instagram)

Limitations

To navigate the effect of purity culture on women of color and LGBTQ individuals would have required more participants who belonged to these groups. The narrative of one focus group participant, Mona, provided commentary into these multiple identities, which I deeply value. However, while this voice was significant, the data was primarily reflective of white, cis-gendered, heterosexual women's experiences. Therefore, while the contributions of women of color and LGBTQ+ persons are critical to fully understanding the intersecting socio-political and religious consequences of purity culture, the group sessions readily explored the effects of purity culture on white women in evangelical communities, which reflects the demographic majority of the movement's peak.

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