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"Being Yourself is a Sin": The Impact of Evangelical Purity Culture on Sexual and Gender Minority People Socialized as Women[Ψ]

Tessi Y. Muskrat[1,2], Alexandra K. Porcaro[3], Madison G. Worley[2], Alexandra E. Franco[2], Joshua G. Parmenter[3], and Francisco J. Sánchez[3]

Abstract

Evangelical Christian purity culture is an abstinence-based, gender essentialist approach to teaching children and adolescents about sex. Key purity culture concepts include the existence of sexual virginity and the importance of its preservation, heteronormative relationships with strictly enforced binary gender roles, and the idea that sexual exploration is dangerous and morally destructive. The present study uses a critical feminist lens to explore the experiences of sexual minority (SM) women, and assigned female at birth (AFAB) people raised

[1]Department of Religious Studies & Women's & Gender Studies, University of Missouri-Columbia, Columbia, MO, USA
[2]Department of Educational, School and Counseling Psychology, University of Missouri-Columbia, Columbia, MO, USA
[3]School of Counseling & Counseling Psychology, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA

Corresponding Author:
Tessi Y. Muskrat, Department of Educational, School and Counseling Psychology, University of Missouri-Columbia, Columbia, 16 Hill Hall, MO 65211, USA.
Email: Tessi.Muskrat@missouri.edu

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and socialized as women in purity culture. Our study analyzes 12 in-depth interviews using consensual qualitative research (CQR) methodology. Purity culture messages and expectations significantly impacted participants in five domains: embodied female experience, sexual oppression, interpersonal power dynamics, SM specific oppression, and healing and resistance. Participants internalized oppressive messages that produced sexual shame while also exhibiting resistance to purity culture messaging and expectations. Recommendations for practitioners and future directions for research are discussed.

Keywords
LGBTQ+, sex, religion, feminism, abstinence-only sex education, sexual shame

Significance of the Scholarship to the Public
The present study documents ways sexual minority (SM) women, and assigned female at birth (AFAB) people socialized as women were impacted by evangelical Christian purity culture messaging, as well as the ways participants resisted and healed from such experiences. Participants' experiences underscore the ways counseling psychologists can help SM women and AFAB people undo internalized oppressive purity culture narratives through therapy, education, and advocacy.

Evangelical Christianity is a religious subculture identified by shared social norms and conservative theological beliefs (Burke, 2016; Gallagher & Smith, 1999; Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000). The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) describes evangelicals as "a vibrant and diverse group" (National Association of Evangelicals, 2025) and identifies the four primary characteristics of evangelicalism as: conversionism (i.e., holding the belief that all persons are sinners and must have a "born again" conversion experience or be punished in hell for eternity after death), crucicentrism (i.e., theological emphasis on the crucifixion death of Jesus Christ as necessary for the forgiveness of sins), biblicism (i.e., the belief that the Bible is the ultimate authority and should be obeyed by both individuals and society), and activism (defined as "the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts"). The NAE does not expound on the diversity within evangelicalism, but evangelical Christianity is viewed as a primarily White institution, with the Religious Landscape Study reporting that 76% of evangelicals identify as White, 11% as Latino, and only 6% as Black (Pew Research Center, 2025).

Beyond the four primary characteristics described by the NAE, there is some variation in attitudes and beliefs within evangelicalism. Lancaster et al. (2021) used latent class analysis to identify evangelical subgroups, identified as traditional, questioning, and open. Traditional evangelicals, according to this study, are evangelicals who express less openness toward sexual, gender, and racial minority people as well as lower appreciation of knowledge that originates outside of their group (Lancaster et al., 2021). Traditional evangelicalism, from which evangelical Christian purity culture arises (Gallagher & Smith, 1999; Moslener, 2015; Sellers, 2017), is marked by an emphasis on gender essentialism (i.e., belief in a gender binary tied to the sex assigned at birth; Irby, 2014), a patriarchal family structure consisting of clearly defined gender roles (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000), and complementarianism (i.e., the belief that the Bible prescribes complementary roles based on gender in which men hold the authority or "headship" in all social and relational spheres and women are expected to serve in submissive or supportive roles; Bryant, 2009; Burke, 2016). Key concepts emphasized in evangelical Christian purity culture include the existence of sexual virginity, which must be preserved as a sacred gift for one's spouse at marriage; heteronormative relationships with strictly enforced binary gender roles; and the idea that sexual exploration is dangerous and morally destructive (Gish, 2018; Moslener, 2015; Natarajan et al., 2022).

Many components of purity culture continue to be taught around the world, with a special emphasis on sexual abstinence before monogamous heterosexual marriage (Gardner, 2011). Recent research has found that within evangelical Christian communities, the "popular purity discourse" (Irby, 2014, p. 263) includes the expectation that persons assigned female at birth (AFAB) and socialized as emerging women should repress their own sexuality by wearing modest clothing and maintaining rigid gender roles (Bryant, 2006; Estrada, 2022; Irby, 2014). Additionally, Natarajan et al. (2022) found that women of color within evangelical purity culture internalized White idealization and, when asked to describe a "pure" woman, described a woman whose appearance fit within Eurocentric beauty standards. Personal stories and clinician experience suggest that exposure to purity culture creates a significant and lingering impact on adults' mental and sexual health (Estrada, 2022; Muskrat, 2023; Sellers, 2017; Muskrat, Submitted for publication).

Purity culture advocates argue that saving sex for marriage reduces psychological harm, improves sexual health, and reduces sex guilt. Such promises parallel those made by abstinence-only sex education advocates, who also promote sexual abstinence before marriage as the only sure way to avoid contracting a sexually transmitted infection or experiencing an unplanned pregnancy (Meeker, 2009). However, research suggests that the context of

one's sexual debut is more impactful than whether it occurs before or after marriage (Else-Quest et al., 2005), and abstinence-only sex education has not been found to decrease sexual risk behaviors such as engaging in unprotected sex (Santelli et al., 2017). Communities that promote abstinence-only sex education are often lacking comprehensive sexual education, and research has found that medically inaccurate education is common, as is information that promotes stigmatization of sexual and gender minorities (Santelli et al., 2017).

The Influences of Religion on Women and Sexual and Gender Minorities

Research on the experiences of women in evangelical religions provides various, sometimes conflicting, perspectives. Some researchers argue that these women exert agency by reinterpreting religious doctrines in a way that allows them to experience extra-religious benefits, such as feeling empowered by choosing religious compliance (Burke, 2016; Gallagher & Smith, 1999). Further, women in conservative religions may engage in practices that affirm their sense of being specially approved of by God, creating a religious identity that exists only in opposition to a perceived nonreligious "other" (Avishai, 2008). Some studies have found that the "sanctification" of sexuality (e.g., viewing one's sexual connection with their partner as holy) increased sexual satisfaction in both men and women—especially within marriage—whereas higher religiosity correlated with decreased sexual satisfaction in women (Leonhardt et al., 2020; Murray-Swank et al., 2005). In their meta-analysis of 135 studies from 41 countries, McCool-Meyers et al. (2018) found that being religious is a consistent predictor of all studied forms of women's sexual dysfunction. Evangelical teachings on sexuality emphasize that men experience irresistible sexual desire, whereas women are responsible to resist their advances and maintain sexual boundaries (Klement et al., 2022; Natarajan et al., 2022). Women may suppress their own erotic energy, according to McGrath (2024), as a way of maintaining proximity to the power White men hold within White evangelicalism. However, this suppression may produce sexual shame, lack of autonomy, and disembodiment (Payne, 2023).

Little is known about the specific experiences of sexual minority (SM) people raised in evangelicalism. In one survey, the approximate 10% of SM respondents who self-identified as evangelical also reported lower rates of happiness than those who identified as mainline protestants (Barringer & Gay, 2017). Research into the experiences of SM people in nonevangelical, nonaffirming Christian churches (e.g., Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), has found that spirituality and church attendance can produce both positive and negative outcomes. Lefevor et al. (2021) theorized that the degree

to which religion and sexuality has a positive or negative impact on SM people's health depends on factors such as stage of sexual identity development, current religious and spiritual beliefs, and how affirming their context is to their sexual and religious identities. SM people attending nonaffirming religious colleges and universities reported more struggle with self-acceptance, harassment, and mental health professionals attempting to change their sexual orientation than those attending Catholic and mainline Protestant colleges (Wolff et al., 2016). Many SM people reported conflicts between their sexual orientation and religious beliefs (Dahl & Galliher, 2009), and reported that negative religious experiences had a strong effect on their mental health (Dahl & Galliher, 2010). Conflicts between sexual and religious identities can produce feelings of inadequacy, guilt stemming from religious discourses around sex and sexuality, depression, and significant social strain (Dahl & Galliher, 2012; Parmenter et al., 2025). SM people reported experiencing positive outcomes (e.g., authenticity, well-being, positive social support) from affirming religious contexts and were more able to resolve their sexual and religious identity conflicts (Dahl & Galliher, 2009, 2012; Lefevor et al., 2020; Skidmore et al., 2023). Conversely, nonaffirming religious contexts can produce a negative self-image and hinder SM people's acceptance of their sexual identity (Page et al., 2013). Research has begun to explore the specific experiences of gender expansive identities (Lefevor et al., 2019). One study found that 58% of gender diverse participants had exited monotheistic religions such as Christianity, and that the presence of negative religious messaging towards gender diverse identities was associated with higher rates of internalized stigma (Exline et al., 2021).

In evangelical Christianity, the disempowerment of women and AFAB people, who were perceived and socialized as women, is intrinsic to the heterosexist, cissexist, and patriarchal systems governing leadership and family structures. Although research has explored the experiences of heterosexual women and college students in evangelical Christian contexts (Bartkowski & Read, 2003; Bryant, 2006; Burke, 2016; Gallagher & Smith, 1999; Irby, 2014), research has not explored how SM women and AFAB people experienced, were impacted by, and resisted systems of oppression perpetuated by evangelical purity culture.

The Present Study

Research exploring the experiences of SM women and AFAB people socialized as women within evangelical Christian purity culture is needed. Applying a critical lens when studying multiple systems of oppression such as those within evangelical Christian contexts generally, and purity culture

specifically, is crucial. People being raised and socialized as women are silenced within the patriarchal, cisheteronormative cultures of evangelical Christianity. Critical feminist methodology and therapy amplifies these voices and seeks to identify, critically examine, and challenge oppressive power structures.

The present study addresses a gap in the literature on SM persons in nonaffirming, conservative religions by examining the impact of purity culture on SM people who are AFAB. We ask: (a) What are SM women and AFAB people's experiences being raised and socialized as women in evangelical Christian purity culture? (b) How do SM women and SM AFAB people socialized as women navigate the impacts of purity culture? Exploring these experiences can provide important nuances into how purity culture messaging is internalized within this population, and may help identify what needs to be attend to in clinical practice. Our study expands upon existing research with primarily cisgender and heterosexual people within evangelical purity cultural contexts (Gish & House, 2023). Our research benefits counseling psychologists by deepening their insight on the psychological impacts of being raised in evangelical purity culture and can inform social justice initiatives surrounding inclusive sexual education and the impact of purity culture on public policy issues (e.g., government-funded abstinence-based sex education).

Method

Study Design and Positionality

The present study is a part of a larger qualitative project in which interviews were conducted with 57 adults who experienced evangelical Christian purity culture in their youth. The original project asked questions about participants' religious practice and religious change in order to understand the differing experiences of individuals exposed to purity culture. During data collection, some participants emphasized the ways purity culture had impacted their gender and sexuality rather than their religious experience. In response to this emerging finding, the Institutional Review Board approval was amended to include questions specific to the impact of purity culture on sexuality and gender expression. Twelve SM women and SM AFAB individuals' interviews were selected for analysis, as review of the data determined that data saturation was reached at this point and additional interviews did not provide new or different data. All data focused on religious practices and change was excluded from the present study. The decision to analyze this set of interviews as a separate project is supported by Levitt et al.'s (2018) guidelines for separating articles based on rich qualitative data.

Interviews were analyzed using consensual qualitative analysis (CQR; Hill, 2012). CQR was selected because it promotes feminist egalitarianism by requiring that all steps in the research process reach consensus, achieved through discussion and examination of all team members' views, while keeping in mind the positionality of the research team as a group and as individuals (Hill, 2012). Our research team consisted of four coders (including the primary investigator), an internal auditor, and two external auditors. Six team members identify as cisgender and one as nonbinary, and all four coders identify as cisgender women. At the time of analysis, three of the coders were graduate students in a counseling psychology program and one was an undergraduate student in religious studies and women's and gender studies. The research team also consisted of White, biracial (American Indian and European American; White and Hispanic), Latino, and Black ethnoracial identities. Five members of the research team openly identify as SMs. The primary investigator was actively engaged in evangelical purity culture during her adolescence and was a volunteer abstinence-only educator for several years. Another coder had experience with abstinence-only sex education during their adolescence. Other research team members had not experienced abstinence-only education or been exposed to evangelical Christianity or purity culture. One team member identifies as Roman Catholic and the others identify as agnostic, nonreligious, secular, or post-Christian. Consistent with feminist theory, the research team was mindful of how participants resisted cisheteronormative patriarchal structures.

Participants

Participants were recruited for this study via two digital-image fliers that directed them to the study landing page. The fliers were distributed on social media including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Dissemination sites on Facebook included groups known to include members who had been a part of purity culture (e.g., groups for former evangelical Christians and groups for adults who had been homeschooled in a Christian context). In order to reduce recruitment bias, fliers were also disseminated to groups and individuals who currently support abstinence-only sexual education, or who still participate in churches in which purity culture is taught. Once on social media, fliers and posts about the study were shared widely, and study participants noted they had worked to recruit friends and family members.

Study participants were between the ages of 21 and 40 years. All participants were AFAB, and all were socialized as women while within purity culture. Participants currently identify as women, genderqueer, genderfluid, or nonbinary. Additionally, all participants answered yes to the question, "Has your experience in purity culture impacted your sexuality or orientation in any

way?" Participants lived in the United States (n = 10), Canada (n = 1), and Australia (n = 1). See Table 1 for further key demographic characteristics for these participants. Participant recruitment and data collection were performed June to December of 2020. No financial or material incentives were offered or given to any participants.

Interview Protocol and Data Collection

The first author collaborated with a researcher in qualitative methods and a scholar of American religions to create the interview protocol. The final

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants

Participant	Gender	Sexual orientation	Race/Ethnicity	Relationship status
Jennifer	Woman	Bisexual, pansexual Queer	White	Married
Chris	Woman Genderqueer	Lesbian Queer	No response	Divorced
Sara	Cisgender Woman	Homosexual	White	Divorced cohabitating
Tracy	Genderqueer Woman	Bisexual Queer	American Indian, White	Married, poly
Michelle	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual, pansexual Queer	White	Divorced, cohabitating
Amy	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual Queer	No response	Married
Nicole	Cisgender woman	Homosexual, demisexual, biromantic, queer	White	Divorced, single
Riley	Genderfluid nonbinary Woman	Bisexual, pansexual Queer	White	Married, open, poly, cohabitating
Olivia	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual, demisexual Queer	No response	Married
Heather	Cisgender Woman	Queer	White	Married
Rachel	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual, pansexual, queer	Latinx, White	Married, open, poly
Victoria	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual, queer	Black	Single

interview protocol consisted of eight open-ended questions. Interview questions can be found in Supplemental File 1. The first author performed all semistructured interviews, which ranged from 26 to 90 minutes. All interviews were video and audio recorded via the online communication platform, Zoom. At the close of each interview, participants were invited to add any thoughts or comments they felt the questions had not addressed. Initial interview transcription was done via the automated transcription service Temi.com. Interview transcripts were compared to the audio recordings by members of the coding team, were corrected for errors, and given final review and approval by the first author. Participants were assigned pseudonyms and any details which could be connected to participants (e.g., where they lived or churches attended) were redacted.

Data Analysis

CQR was used to examine the experiences of SM women and SM AFAB people socialized as women within purity culture. CQR is a rigorous method that aided us in exploring the in-depth and unique experiences of SM women and SM AFAB people while also attuning to the commonalities across participants to identify shared phenomenon. Our approach not only attends to context and the participants' deeply personal experiences, but enhances trustworthiness by recognizing, critically reflecting on, and integrating multiple perspectives into the analysis—thereby centering the participants' voices (Hill, 2012). In compliance with recommendations by Hill (2012), each coding team member recorded their relevant experiences, biases, expectations, and beliefs about the study's topics before beginning the CQR process. These documents were available for reference at any time during the analysis process and were used internally to check if bias seemed to be affecting data analysis. Additionally, researchers used their own bias and expectation lists to interrogate their reactions to data and to other research team members throughout the process. For example, when the primary author identified a finding that was familiar to her own experience of growing up in purity culture, she withheld her personal interpretation of the data until team members not directly affected by purity culture had shared their analysis. When differing perspectives emerged, the team returned to the transcripts and audio recordings to listen for subtle differences in tone or pacing of speech within the context of the interview and discussed their impressions and biases until consensus was reached.

Development of Domains and Categories. CQR uses multiple rounds of coding to identify meaningful patterns in qualitative data and organize them into

domains, categories, and subcategories (Hill, 2012). Each round of coding is developed by team consensus and examined by auditors external to the team. This process reduces the possibility of personal bias or groupthink contaminating interpretation of the data (Hill, 2012). CQR coders begin with big-picture concepts and move deeper into the data at each step. In round one, each coding team member independently coded two interviews and developed a list of domains. The preliminary domains were discussed by the group and eight initial domains were agreed upon. Initial domains were adjusted as data analysis proceeded, until the final list of domains was determined. Domains were reviewed by the auditor team and finalized by the coders based on auditor feedback.

To develop categories, teams of two coders distilled each meaningful interview section into a "core idea" or summary of the main idea of each piece of transcribed interview data (Hill, 2012 pp.112–115). Each team of coders reached consensus on all core ideas, which were also reviewed by the internal auditor. The core ideas of a sample of four interviews were also reviewed by the external auditor, and all feedback was discussed and incorporated by the team before moving to the final coding step.

Cross-Analysis. In the final step, the coding team examined each domain's core ideas and analyzed them across interviews to develop meaningful categories present in multiple interviews. As recommended by Hill (2012), we described as "general" all categories that appeared in 11 or 12 interviews, "typical" as those appearing in 7–10 interviews, and "variant" as those appearing in at least two interviews but not more than six. Categories that included only one participant were excluded. In the final phase, a second external auditor provided additional validation of qualitative methodology and mentorship on writing the manuscript.

Results

Study participants spoke of experiencing the impacts of purity culture throughout adolescence and into adulthood. All participants were AFAB and their socialization was rooted in the male/female:man/woman gender binary that defines patriarchal evangelical Christian complementarian relationships. Most participants recalled their exposure to purity culture messaging beginning when members of their family or church remarked on their newly developing secondary sex characteristics (e.g., breasts). Awareness of their sexual orientation began around this time for half of our participants; the other half were adults before they identified as SM women or realized their gender diverse identities. The domains identified in this study are: Embodied Female Experience, Sexual Oppression, Interpersonal Power Dynamics, Sexual

Minority Specific Oppression, and Healing and Resistance (see Supplemental File).

Embodied Female Experience

Our participants found it difficult to separate purity culture from the experience of living in a body that was seen as female. Participants' church leaders, parents, and media (e.g., Christian teen magazines and books) taught them that women's bodies are a temptation for men and boys. Participants were expected to wear clothing to conceal their body and reduce temptation. Rules such as dressing modestly, wearing their hair long, and not speaking loudly or often with men were taught to be based on "Biblical" gender roles. Gender essentialism and universal heterosexuality were assumed. Mothers often introduced and enforced purity culture's female modesty rules when purchasing warm-weather clothing (e.g., swimsuits). Jennifer shared her story of this experience:

> As soon as I was old enough to be conscious of my body, I was self-conscious of my body. I remember being like 10 and wanting to get this two-piece swimsuit that I loved…like—boy shorts and a tank top. It was not a sexy swimsuit. I remember it was this huge argument with my mom of like, "no, you can't wear that." Mind you, I was also as flat as a board at that point. I had not filled out.

For participants whose AFAB bodies developed secondary sexual characteristics early, the need for self-expression through clothing choice often conflicted with parental or church modesty rules. Purity culture teachers (e.g., parents and church leaders) made clear that AFAB bodies were expected to be concealed and kept quiet. Sara noted, "I had three older brothers, and they were all allowed to do pretty much anything they wanted to do. And the expectation for me was to be good and small." Modesty rules were often presented as a protection for girls and women; however, participants internalized these oppressive messages. Riley shared their internalization of purity culture messages about AFAB bodies:

> The idea that, that (a) our bodies are somehow evil and that (b) that our bodies incite violence…I was told that men had trouble handling attraction…So I think purity culture really taught me to be prepared for sexual assault anytime I wanted to be emotionally close to a guy.

Some participants experienced purity culture messages as external (e.g., coming from parents and church leaders) while others internalized such

messages about sex. Tracy shared, "I did learn a lot about sex, but it was always from a 'don't do it, be careful, men are dangerous—but you make them that way' perspective." Tracy continued to share how they internalized purity culture messages to monitor themselves:

> I started maturing physically pretty young. And so, the sexual nature of my body was introduced to me so young and was such a liability and a danger that dancing was a self-conscious behavior. Walking up and down stairs was a self-conscious behavior. All clothing choices were self-conscious and not influenced so much by like my desires and preferences as they were "What shape is this? What part of my body is it gonna show?"

Some participants who internalized the need to hide their bodies from men began experiencing hatred of their own bodies, which manifested as disordered eating. Olivia explains, "If I could just disappear, people wouldn't see me sexually and I could be pure and whole."

Despite intentionally rejecting purity culture's messaging about concealing their bodies, eight participants described still having intrusive thoughts related to purity culture messaging. Olivia spoke about struggling with internalization of purity culture's messages about AFAB bodies, sharing:

> Because I am a haver of cleavage that starts at my neck…just cleavage as far as the eye can see. And so when you have that and your whole life is built around finding shirts that aren't low cut, it's a real hard thing to kick. And so when I see people just having cleavage—like in a church service, they'll wear a sun dress and I'm like, "Jesus don't want to see that." And then I'm like, who is telling—Why? Who are you? Why are you thinking?…It's, it's one of those things that it pops up… And it's more shocking and I have to be like, "EW! Stop it."

Participants experienced proponents of purity culture (e.g. parents, pastors, youth pastors) exclusively focusing on monitoring the bodies and behavior of girls and women. They emphasized that they saw no similar scrutiny of men's or boys' bodies or behavior.

Sexual Oppression

Participants spoke about how they were taught about sex, how they worked to repress sexual desires and impulses, and how they interact with their sexual desires now. Participants found it difficult to separate purity culture rules that dictate ethical sexual behavior from the religious beliefs of traditional evangelical Christianity. Purity culture prohibited same-sex intimacy and

established strict boundaries around heterosexual intimacy, dating, and gender roles within marriage. Our participants engaged in practices designed to help them comply with purity culture rules and resist premarital sexual activity, including making abstinence pledges and wearing purity rings. Victoria and Jennifer both described being part of "accountability groups" or having an "accountability partner" to whom they were expected to report sexual activity, including masturbation and strong sexual desires.

Most participants experienced a lack of sexual education, which left them unsure of how their bodies worked. Chris spoke about how a lack of sexual education impacted her life:

> There's just so little education that you're not ready—that you don't know that if sex is repeatedly painful, it's not right. Sex shouldn't be painful…I had severe endometriosis…that's, again, a lack of sex education because not even periods were talked about.

Lack of scientifically accurate education combined with poorly understood church doctrines influenced beliefs about masturbation that created significant emotional distress and restricted exploration of self-pleasure as adults. Heather shared,

> I thought that every time I masturbated that I would, like, kill an egg inside me and…God was—would punish me and take away my ability to have children…I would masturbate and then cry. Because I was like, I'm basically having sex with myself. I'm a prostitute to myself and God's going to take away my ability to have children as a punishment.

Jennifer spoke of the intense anxiety and depression she experienced throughout her adolescence, which she partially attributed to her attempts to stop masturbating, which she believed was unnatural for women. Her journals at the time expressed her struggle to resist the desire to masturbate.

> I look back on those journals and just like, "You're a whore, you're a slut. Nobody could possibly ever love you."…I remember reading…an illustration of like every time you masturbate, you take a gift away from your future husband. And so that's how I, that's how I viewed it…I remember marking my calendar, I would circle the day that I had last masturbated and try to make it as far as I could.

Participants' fear and shame persisted whether they acted sexually by masturbating, with another person, or not at all. Many participants spoke about experiencing ongoing sexual struggles (e.g. low sexual desire, inability to

orgasm, sexual mismatches with male partners). They attributed their sexual struggles to a lack of awareness of their own bodies' sexual functions, combined with beliefs that it was their duty to prioritize the sexual pleasure of their husbands before their own sexual desires. Participants also described not understanding that they had the right to give or withdraw consent, even within marriage.

For many participants, sexual struggles continued into their marriages. Heather shared how purity culture was sold to her:

> They advertise it as you save yourself so that there is no shame on your wedding day…it was presented as a switch, right? Like turn sexual desires off until you get married and then you turn them on and everything's perfect and wonderful…Your wedding night is magical. (pauses) No. False advertising. Wrong.

Sexual repression to maintain abstinence often manifested as a struggle to resist masturbation and sexual exploration when single. After marriage, participants still lacked understanding of their body's capacity for sexual pleasure.

Interpersonal Power Dynamics

Purity culture's emphasis on complementarian relationship structures includes rules about when and how one is allowed to engage in a dating relationship and who should have power within families and churches. Because participants were all AFAB and expected to comply with purity culture messaging suggesting women submit to men, participants felt that they were not allowed to question purity culture teachings even when they felt that the teachings were unfair or illogical. When participants pushed back against even the most extreme purity culture teachings, social pressure and ostracization were often the result.

Half of the participants in this study were not allowed to date without chaperones. Others dated without labeling the relationship as romantic. Some engaged in sexual activity before marriage, which triggered intense shame. Amy shared, "A hard thing that I struggle with even to this day is the reality that I pushed us into getting married because of sexual guilt, because of religious guilt. Neither of us were ready."

Another participant, Nicole, spoke about the impacts of viewing herself from a young age through the lens of "future wife."

> Many things were harmful to me in that process. I think the biggest one was me surrendering my autonomy and my identity…viewing myself really from a very

> foundational identity standpoint as a future wife. And so connecting my identity to my association with another individual, and then therefore not being able to really internalize and look into, you know, who am I really? What do I want? What am I like? All of that sort of stuff.

Our AFAB SM participants experienced the heteronormative narrative of "future wife" as particularly impactful, as it erased both their SM and gender identities.

Amy explained how her belief that sexual exploration before marriage was a sin and would be punished by God kept her in a relationship that began with a sexual assault.

> As soon as I had even kissed the guy, I felt like I was stuck there because, well, now I've given myself to that person because we touched lips, you know? (laughs)…I felt like I had to, like, stay with that person forever, even though they were a piece of shit person, I mean, awful, awful, awful guy.

Half of the interview participants had partners who supported their sexual healing journey. Other participants said their marriage was conflicted due to religious differences, differences in sexuality, or other relational issues. In some cases, participants did not feel safe to come out to their husband about their recently discovered bisexuality. Many participants experienced estrangement from family members or friends as a result of their departure from purity culture rules and norms. Participants who maintained relationships with their parents often felt the need to establish boundaries to preserve their physical or sexual autonomy. Amy gave an example of this:

> I remember multiple times, even when I had moved out and I came home to visit, my mom was like, I don't want you wearing that around my children, you know? Um, and it was like, I'm a grown adult now. I can do that (laughs).

Some participants continue to adjust their behavior to accommodate for their parents' beliefs and thus avoid confrontation.

SM Specific Oppression

As SM people, participants confronted the heteronormative purity culture teaching that sexual attraction will only be directed toward members of the opposite sex. Within purity culture, acceptable sexual expression only takes place within "Biblical marriage," defined as one cisgender man and one cisgender woman, legally married and monogamous for life. Participants were

taught that all other sexual expressions are sinful and will result in eternal torment in hell. Sara experienced this teaching explicitly when she came out as a lesbian in adulthood and received a message from a woman in her church who said "Being gay isn't a gift from God any more than being a murderer or a thief". This belief in eternal condemnation contributed to Heather's reaction when she initially suspected her same-sex attraction during adolescence:

> I had a thought—or like a half of a thought—when I was like 12. And the thought was, (whispering) maybe I'm gay. And I shut that shit down so fast, like milliseconds…I shut that down so fast because I couldn't be gay. I couldn't, I can't be, you can't be gay. I couldn't be gay. And so I lived like that for another 15 years.

Michelle had a sexually intimate relationship with another youth group girl during her teen years, but never recognized it as a same-sex relationship until her mid-twenties. Michelle blamed purity culture for her inability to recognize the relationship for what it was because, "I couldn't date a girl. You don't do that. You don't date girls. Girls don't date girls."

Rachel, who converted to Christianity in her late teens after already being sexually active, rationalized her same-sex relationships within the context of her new religious system, "I used to say, 'Oh, I wasn't bisexual. I was just sexual'…'cause I had to deny the existence of real homosexuality or anything like it…I wasn't [not] straight. I was just a slut or something."

Sara also communicated how sexual activities intertwined with internalized oppressive messages, "I know I'm not supposed to [have sex], but it would be worse if I was doing it with a girl. So maybe I should just let boys do whatever and hope it makes me straight." Sara is one of five participants who spoke of attempting to mask or change their sexual orientation through excessive or unwanted sexual activity with men.

For the SM women and SM AFAB people in this study, "coming out" could mean disclosing their sexual orientation, their deconversion from Christianity, their nonmonogamous relationship structure, or their gender identity. Each participant shared their unique experiences of weighing the benefits and consequences of coming out in each relevant area. Three participants (Amy, Michelle, and Olivia) felt that coming out as a SM publicly is unsafe or not worth the potential consequences, such as relationship conflicts with their partners, vocational barriers, or ostracization from family. In the case of Sara, claiming her orientation meant coming out as gay and immediately losing her church, friends, and support system, "I haven't even kissed a girl yet. And I'm already condemned to hell. All I did was say I was gay. I haven't even gotten to do anything fun for all the retaliation."

Current Healing and Resistance

Many participants spoke of the ways they actively engaged in healing and resistance against past purity culture messaging. Interestingly, only five participants reported being able to consistently wear clothing based on their own preferences, concealing or exposing their breasts and legs as desired. Some participants mentioned the benefits of complying with purity culture, including avoiding pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STI), and heartbreak. However, they were quick to say that they probably could have avoided such consequences without the negative experiences they attribute to purity culture. Chris, for instance, said, "I wasn't a teen pregnancy statistic, and I didn't get an STI because I didn't have sex till I was 25 because I was so scared." Recovering from the oppression of purity culture meant intentionally taking ownership of their own sexual education and learning to identify their sexual desires. Some participants engaged in exploratory sexual activity. Others used educational materials, such as a book written for children that Heather read: "[I] cried through it because I was like, this is such a shame-free way and an inclusive way to talk about our bodies and sex." Michelle talked about using message boards on the internet to learn about sex: "there was a lot of unknown, and I felt like there was a lot of self-research that had to happen to find out answers to a lot of things." Participants who have children, or hope to have children in the future, described how they teach or plan to teach their children about sexuality in a shame-free way. Heather shared, "when I think about my future children, knowledge is power. There's no shame in—in knowledge." Tracy spoke of how they refuse to allow shaming of AFAB bodies for themself and their children:

> My 13-year-old wears fishnets and crop tops and parades around and she wants to take pole dancing lessons. And I feel very confident that this is an exciting exploration of who she wants to be when it actually becomes sexual for her. And if anybody has any thoughts about how she should be behaving, then they need to check themselves because she's a kid and she can do what she wants to do safely.

Many participants still have conflicted feelings about sex and are actively engaging in attempts to heal from purity culture messaging. Chris spoke of the lingering impact of purity culture on their sexuality as a lesbian genderqueer person.

> I'm 38 now. I am still in therapy trying to accept my body, that pleasure is okay because I have such a strong connection between the old thinking that desire is bad. Like, I just, I had so much shame all through my teenage years, and even as an adult,

> because we were told that what we were feeling, which is completely natural and normal, is wrong.

Participants in nonmonogamous relationships spoke most explicitly about their experience reclaiming their sexuality. The sexual freedom of nonmonogamy allowed space for the sexual development and exploration participants felt they missed before their marriages. For bisexual participants who suppressed their identity due to purity culture, dating outside marriage played a key role in exploring and understanding their sexuality. Rachel, who is bisexual and actively polyamorous, is still married to a conservative Christian who chooses to remain monogamous while supporting his wife's sexual and relational freedom. For Rachel, this arrangement is very empowering.

> I'm determined to not be—to not feel shame or to not let shame, like, keep me from experiencing the things I want to…in an ethical way…there's a mixture of deconverting and also just gaining more confidence in my own skin too, which having sex with a lot of people you really are attracted to helps build that confidence.

Other participants spoke of finding sexual healing within monogamous marriages, both with and without the support of a psychotherapist.

Finally, some participants articulated setting clear boundaries in their relationships in order to affirm their identities. For example, Chris, Sara, Heather, and Victoria all asserted that relationships needed to be unconditionally supportive of their SM identities in order to sustain the relationship. Sara explained:

> There were a couple of people that hung on for a little while saying like, "I'm okay with you being gay," you know, like it's not a big deal. And I got to a point where I was like, so when I get married, are you going to come to the wedding? And if…the answer to that was no, then my answer was no.

Discussion

The present study is, to our knowledge, the first to use qualitative data to examine the impact of purity culture on the lives of SM women and SM AFAB people socialized as women within purity culture. Using CQR to analyze interview data, we found that the teachings, rules, and social norms of purity culture negatively impacted our participants through their embodied female experience, experiences of sexual oppression, interpersonal power dynamics, and SM specific oppression. Our study reinforces existing literature on SM people's experiences with religious organizations while contributing to the

limited body of research on the experience of purity culture for SM AFAB people socialized as women. Findings also provide implications for future research and feminist therapy practices.

Clearly defined gender roles and complementarianism in relationships were found throughout participants' experiences with purity culture. Consistent with research on evangelicalism (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Lancaster et al., 2021), gender diversity was ignored within purity culture and participants were unable to express any sexual attraction that was not cisheteronormative. Participants, who were AFAB and socialized as emerging women, were expected to support the biological weakness of men (e.g., men's sexual desire) by wearing clothing that would conceal their bodies (Irby, 2014). The oppressive expectation that women are responsible for controlling the sexual desire of men through their dress and behavior has been linked to rape culture beliefs and rape supportive messages (Klement et al., 2022; Owens et al., 2021), beliefs which participants were taught and, in some cases, internalized.

Abstinence-only sexual education has been shown to provide incomplete and unscientific information (Santelli et al., 2017), an issue which was experienced by many of our participants. Participants reported how purity culture teachings caused them significant problems in understanding their body's functions and their own sexual health. Consistent with existing research, several of our participants also experienced some form of sexual dysfunction, which has been linked to high religiosity in previous studies (McCool-Myers et al., 2018). Many of the SM challenges identified by Skidmore et al. (2023) were experienced by our participants, including identity conflict, discrimination, internalized stigma, and sexuality struggles.

Our study provides additional nuances on the experiences of SM AFAB people and their experiences of gendered sexual oppression and nonaffirming evangelical Christian contexts. Our participants experienced difficulty coming to terms with their sexual orientation (Wolff et al., 2016), shame due to purity culture's focus on restricting sexual activity (Lefevor et al., 2020), and mandatory concealment of their SM identity (Lefevor et al., 2021). Simultaneously, SM participants who also held gender diverse identities had to navigate being misgendered as women and sexually objectified (Pradell et al., 2024).

Adolescents who are socialized as women within the patriarchal structure of traditional evangelicalism are granted less power than any other person in an evangelical setting. Their perceived compliance to purity culture rules is surveilled and constantly open to correction by adults in the community (Muskrat, Submitted for publication). Our participants spoke at length of the harm they experienced as a result of the patriarchal, heteronormative structures of purity culture. They also shared a multitude of ways that they are

claiming their power in their relationships and gender and sexuality. Participants displayed resistance and pursued their own healing by educating themselves, seeking therapy, engaging in sexual exploration, and practicing robust boundary setting with family and friends still engaged in evangelical purity culture. Previous research has not explored ways in which SM women and SM AFAB people from high-control and nonaffirming religions seek their own healing through resistance to systems of oppression such as cisheteronormativity and patriarchy.

Limitations

Although attempts were made to mitigate the self-selection effect during recruitment, respondents overwhelmingly viewed their experiences in purity culture as negative. Exploring the experiences of people who identify their experiences with purity culture as positive may enhance understanding of when—and why—purity culture works for some adherents. As feminist researchers, it is important to not marginalize voices of current proponents of purity culture but rather seek to understand if and why they find it liberating and empowering. Another possible limitation of the present study was the combination of CQR with a critical feminist perspective. Although we believe our critical feminist perspective is a strength that added to the rigor of CQR methodology, the postpositivist epistemology of CQR may have been misaligned with a critical feminist framework.

Purity culture is often viewed as a primarily White evangelical institution and it has contributed to the racial oppression and colonization of many racial and ethnic groups (Moslener, 2015; Natarajan et al., 2022; Schultz, 2022). In this study, the sole Black participant spoke extensively about how her purity culture experience was imbued with racial microaggressions. Her SM identity intersected with race and gender to create an intensely harmful experience for this participant. The two biracial participants in our study did not reference their racial identity in their interviews, and as our interview protocol included no questions specific to participants' racialized experience of purity culture, we did not gather data on this topic. Future research should identify and challenge how systems of Whiteness and racism within purity culture impact the experiences of SM people of color. Although three of our AFAB participants identify as genderqueer, nonbinary, or genderfluid (in addition to identifying as women), all three were early in their exploration of their gender at the time of these interviews, and comments specific to gender were limited. Additionally, our research aims and interview questions were not specifically tailored to the experiences of gender diverse people in purity culture. Due to these limitations, our findings could not explore the breadth and depth of

experiences among gender diverse AFAB people raised in purity culture. Our findings should not be assumed to generalize to populations who are not White, AFAB persons raised and socialized as women.

Implications for Theory, Practice, Advocacy, Education and Training, and Research

There are a number of important research directions raised by this study to further existing theory. Although purity culture messaging is primarily directed toward managing the sexuality and bodies of those who are AFAB, assigned male at birth persons are also impacted by abstinence-only sex education, make purity pledges, and experience cisheteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity in purity culture. The impact of these experiences on cisgender men, transgender men and women, and other gender-diverse people was not within the scope of this study. As noted in the limitations of the present study, future research is needed that specifically explores SM people of color's experiences of purity culture and the idiosyncratic forms of internalized oppression SM people of color face.

Our findings provide important implications for clinical practice with AFAB SM people socialized as women within purity culture. Although every person's experience is unique, qualitative research uses the stories of individuals to understand themes of common human experiences. Internalization of oppressive messages is a common coping strategy of oppressed persons, in which "the voices of the oppressor become mistaken for the voice of self" (Brown, 2018, p. 77). Our study highlights a number of ways in which the oppressive messages of purity culture impacted—and were internalized by—participants. Healing from oppressive messaging requires separating the oppressor's voice from the self and learning to exercise one's own power to reject internalized messages and replace them with a liberating narrative. Participants applied a variety of strategies while working toward their own liberation. In the process of their deconstruction of religious and purity culture beliefs, they developed their own thoughts and opinions which often differed from their parents, friends, and even husbands. The ability to choose to change one's mind when presented with new information and to be able to trust one's own inner knowledge are key aspects of attaining intrapersonal power. Participants found therapists who understood the process of internalization and supported them as they worked toward their own healing and liberation especially helpful.

Clients who have experiences with purity culture enter therapy with a wide range of needs regarding religious and sexual identities, which may shift over the course of treatment as participants deconstruct harmful religious messaging

and develop new ways of making meaning and addressing their spiritual needs. Conflict between sexual orientation and religion is a significant factor for many SM adults with evangelical Christian backgrounds, and effective therapists address this conflict in a way that supports the client's journey, empowers them to gain self-awareness, and approaches whatever religious or spiritual beliefs they may hold from a nonjudgmental stance. In some cases, guiding clients through a reframing of scripture and tradition may be helpful, along with recommending affirming Christian communities and resources for continued self-education (Bowland et al., 2013; Goodrich et al., 2016; Mahaffy, 1996). In other cases, creating space for clients to work through exiting and healing from religion can be vital. Religious communities, whether Christian, Pagan, Wiccan, or other religious practices can be a powerful support system for SM women and SM AFAB people. Education and training programs should provide specific modules that explore the role of religion in AFAB SM people's experiences to ensure counselors neither overlook this resource if clients find it supportive nor push for it if clients find that religious communities trigger past trauma (Parmenter et al., 2025; Rostosky et al., 2008).

Our findings point to the need for practitioners and advocates to promote and provide services to those negatively impacted by purity culture—especially SM women and SM AFAB people. Participants' experiences underscore the importance of access to remedial scientifically accurate and identity affirming sexual education for adults who are exploring and actualizing sexual autonomy for the first time. Clinicians can partner with community organizations to provide this education at a community level while also advocating for inclusive, scientifically accurate and consent-based sexual education curriculum to be a part of public education for adolescents. Further, the creation of community spaces and educational interventions may foster collective healing and resistance to internalized purity culture messages.

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ORCID iDs

Tessi Y. Muskrat https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4686-570X
Alexandra K. Porcaro https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3798-8564
Joshua G. Parmenter https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3291-171X
Francisco J. Sánchez https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9879-7019

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Author Biographies

Tessi Y. Muskrat, MA (she/her), is a counseling psychology doctoral candidate at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Her research centers the voices of those who have experienced sexual and gender-based trauma in religious contexts and explores ways this population practices resistance to systems of oppression while working toward their own healing.

Alexandra K. Porcaro, MA (she/her), is a counseling psychology doctoral student at Arizona State University. Her research interests focus on factors related to the mental health of LGBTQ+ people, including stigma against bisexual+ individuals and the intersection between religiosity and sexuality.

Madison G. Worley, MEd, PLPC, MAADC-II, HRS (she/her/hers), graduated from the University of Missouri-Columbia with a master's in counseling psychology. She is a provisionally licensed professional counselor who serves survivors of intimate partner violence and individuals with substance use disorders.

Alexandra E. Franco, BA (she/her), is a former graduate student at the University of Missouri. Her research interests focus on the mental health and self-esteem of sexual minorities, as well as the minority stress factors that impact them.

Joshua G. Parmenter, PhD (they/them), is a licensed psychologist and an assistant professor of counseling psychology at Arizona State University.

Their research utilizes an intersectional framework mixed methodologies to center the intersectional experiences of queer, transgender, and nonbinary Black, Indigenous, and people of color's experiences of oppression and healing practices.

Francisco (Cisco) J. Sánchez, PhD (he/him), is an associate professor of counseling psychology and the Associate Dean for Student Success and Inclusive Excellence in the College of Integrative Sciences and Arts at Arizona State University. His research primarily examines the impact of traditional gender roles on sexual and gender minority men. He is also actively engaged in translating psychological science to inform policymakers and the judiciary.