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## **What's Faith Got to Do with It? Christian Sexual Scripts and the Transition to Marriage**

Sandra Abidemi Banjoko

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LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY  
School of Behavioral Health  
in conjunction with the  
Faculty of Graduate Studies

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What's Faith Got to Do with It?  
Christian Sexual Scripts and the Transition to Marriage

By

Sandra Abidemi Banjoko

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A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Philosophy in Couples, Families and Systems

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June 2021

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Each person whose signature appears below certifies that this thesis in his opinion is adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree Doctor of Philosophy.

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

What's Faith Got to Do with It?

Christian Sexual Scripts and the Transition to Marriage

By

Sandra Abidemi Banjoko

Doctor of Philosophy in Systems, Families, and Couples

Loma Linda University, June 2021

Zephon Lister, Ph.D., Co-Chairperson, & Jackie Williams-Reade, Ph.D., Co-Chairperson

The purpose of this research project was to examine how messages from the sociocultural context of conservative Protestant women influence the sexual scripts that inform the beliefs and expression of sexuality in marriage and how they process, navigate, express, and manage their sexuality during the transition from singlehood to marriage. In this grounded theory study interviews were held with 16 married heterosexual conservative Protestant women, all in first marriages of five years or less. The results of this study highlight the gaps in the process of preparation during the women's premarital experience, exposing the conflict caused by the moral incongruence of sexual expression in marriage. We found three main constructs of sociocultural influences (familial, church and the larger culture) that play a role in how conservative Protestant women perceive their sexuality and in turn, influence the expression of sexuality in early marriage. The conclusion of this research was used to develop the Negotiation and Navigation of Sexual Self Marital Transition Model. Carrie Doehring's (2015) concept of lived theology was used to add meaning to the model.

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Background**

Globally, approximately 21% of the Christian population is Protestant. By comparison, Catholics account for 50%; Pentecostals, 17.5%; and Orthodox Christians, 11.5%. The two main branches— liberal and conservative —constitute what is commonly referred to as mainline Protestantism. Liberal Protestants hold that the meaning of scripture should not be taken literally but should be interpreted within contextual reimits. Conservative Protestants emphasize the unchanging nature of God’s revelation; in other words that which was relevant in the past is still valid today (Jacobsen, 2011). Hence, for conservative Christians, Bible translations carry traditional interpretations, critical to understanding true discipleship (Bruce, 1983). Conservative Protestants believe that the Bible is the doctrinal authority on how they should demonstrate their Christianity. Adherents are required to study the Bible for themselves, ultimately to determine what they believe.

Members of conservative Protestant churches comprise a substantial majority of Protestants worldwide (i.e., 80%). Of this figure, Anglicans (80 million) represent the largest group, followed by Presbyterians (75 million), Lutherans (65 million), Baptists (50 million), and Methodists (40 million; Hunt, 2015; Jacobsen, 2011). Protestants may account for 21% of the world’s Christian population, yet the literature concerning how sexuality impacts Protestants in general—and more specifically conservative Protestants—is lacking (Claney et al., 2018; Crockett et al., 1996; Leak, 1993; Lefkowitz et al., 2004; McFarland et al., 2011). With regard to married women, a relatively small number of researchers have examined how conservatives Protestants navigate sexuality in marriage

and the extent to which cultural scripts and gender-normative ideas determine appropriate sexual behavior according to the church. Thus, the scarcity of research on Christian sexuality motivated this study, based on sexual script theory (Gagnon & Simon, 2005) and designed to elucidate Christian women's expression of sexuality during the early stages of marriage; in addition, grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1998) was applied in the approach to interview analyses.

### **Significance of the Study**

The term "conservative Protestant" denotes someone who believes in the fundamental doctrine that Jesus Christ alone grants eternal salvation (through conversion). The conservative Protestant believes that written scripture provides the theological basis for religious thought for which the exact meaning is fundamental (Hunter, 1981; Perry, 2019; Schermer Sellers, 2017; Woodberry & Smith, 1998). This study was designed to understand the intricacies of sexuality as practiced by Christian couples; thus, married conservative Protestant women constituted the study sample. The purpose of this research project was to elucidate how these women transitioned from singlehood to marriage and how they navigated the change that accompanies sexuality in early marriage.

Second, sexuality was defined as one's capacity to respond to their physical environmental stimulants that may produce a sexual response due to their cognitive and social constructs (Goettsch, 1989). It encompasses thoughts, fantasies, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, roles, and relational components (World Health Organization [WHO], 2017). It may be experienced or expressed through a variety of human or social attributes and

involves the interaction of cultural and sociopolitical contexts (WHO, 2017).

Consequently, sexuality is a social construct or cultural product that, in turn, shapes sexual behavior (Bass, 2016).

The researcher sought to gain a better understanding of how the lived experiences of Christian women give meaning to their sexuality as newlyweds. Conservative Protestant women were interviewed in this study to understand how religious values and beliefs impact the transition process during the honeymoon or early nesting stage of marriage. Results from this study can provide insights into the sexual development process individuals—especially conservative Protestant women—experience as they transition from singleness to marriage.

### **Conservative Protestantism and Sexuality**

Religious practices involve “the pursuit of meaning in ways related to the sacred” (Van Drie et al., 2013, p. 1635), which refers to a higher power, God, or transcendent being also related to observed beliefs, practices, and feelings of divinity; therefore, people’s religious upbringing and commitment to faith may influence sexual expression and religious identity (Abbott et al., 2016). The degree of a person’s conviction may determine the extent to which religion modifies individual beliefs and how—with the added impact of society and culture—sexuality is navigated and expressed (Jones & Hostler, 2002).

Studies examining Christians have focused largely on extrinsic religiosity through variables such as church attendance. Thus, researchers studying sexuality have minimally explored the relationship among religious culture, personal faith, sexual expression, and

eroticism. This limited focus demonstrates the urgent need to better understand the manner in which Christian sexuality shapes sexual identity. Extrinsic religiosity envelops a limited view of sexuality and religion and fails to connect crucial aspects of religion and culture that are critically important in shaping the experiences of conservative Protestant women as they relate to the expression of sexuality before and in marriage; thus, this study was conducted to fill a gap currently in the literature (Ahrold et al., 2010).

Conservative Protestants, particularly women, may experience the inhibition of sexual expression (Claney et al., 2018; Daniluk, 1993; Mahoney, 2008; Wagner & Rehfuss, 2008), which may engender feelings of denial and disrepute (Claney et al., 2018) and serve to disempower those who desire the right to sexual exploration and expression. Thus, how sexual scripts are formed and expressed by women, given Christian ideals and culture, must be understood.

The complex nature and limited scope of the literature on Christian sexuality underlines the need for more in-depth interrogation of sexual disparities experienced by women within the church (Hunter, 1981; Perry, 2019; Schermer Sellers, 2017; Woodberry & Smith, 1998); moreover, closer attention to gender-normative values, ideologies, and beliefs is imperative. The researcher, therefore, explored female conservative Protestant perspectives on sexuality to provide insights into how the single-marital transition process might differ within the context of religion and culture (Gagnon & Simon, 2005). Sexuality in conservative Protestantism differs from sexuality in other religions, for example, Roman Catholicism, because of their disparate views of the Bible. Whereas Protestants' emphasize the literal interpretation of scripture and its absolute authority, Roman Catholics focus on the church itself. Conservative Protestant generally believe

that sex is a marital privilege, also referred to as marriage-confined sexuality (Sharma, 2008; Turner, 2017). They view premarital sex as forbidden fruit, resulting in sociorelational issues, such as divorce, the transmission of sexual diseases, and unwanted pregnancies. Conservative Protestants believe that premarital sex promotes personal guilt and self-blame that emerge from the violation of interpersonal codes of conduct and biblical rules (e.g., writings outlining God's will). Entities like the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Church articulate these rules. The 28 fundamental beliefs of the Seventh Day Adventist Church and the Anglican Communion statement on Human Sexuality (Anglican Communion Office, n.d., Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, 2019; Seventh-Day Adventist World Church, n.d., Turner, 2017) represent the rules as articulated by other denominations. In sum, conservative denominations give primacy to marital sex in support of biblical ideal and mandate (Genesis 1:27).

Another difference from Catholics is the Protestant view of sexual expression solely for marital pleasure (Turner, 2017). Protestants assert that sexual desire in marriage offers protection against undesired pregnancy with the practice of artificial contraception, a view that Catholics denounce; nevertheless, about 80% of Catholics ignore the rules regarding artificial contraception and practice birth control (Turner, 2017). Thus, the primary principle that sets conservative Protestants apart from their Protestant counterparts as well as Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholics is their personal and collective emphasis on sexual morality.

From a conservative standpoint, heterosexuality is normative to scriptural ideals. In this regard, complementarity, or "compulsory heterosexuality" (Sharma, 2008), is

critical. This notion not only permeates ideologies concerning sexual exchanges between persons of the opposite sex but also sets the tone for the performance of particular gender roles. Christian femininity implies female subservience, which denotes passive, nurturing, and empathetic behaviors as ordinary feminine virtues (Aune & Sharma, 2008, 2009; Turner, 2017). These beliefs, in turn, shape subordinate femininity, or sexual passivity, restricting women's sexual expression to the marriage bed.

Through personal and collective morality, conservatism dictates accountability as a critical principle, by which the commitment to faith, beliefs, values, and church traditions supports conservative feminism in response to what is considered appropriate, reasonable, and acceptable (Sharma, 2008). In that female sexual behavior is closely scrutinized or monitored in the church, women may experience restrictive patterns of passive or confined sexuality that can be oppressive, disallowing complete sexual responsivity before and after marriage. This phenomenon then perpetuates feelings of guilt concerning female sexual identity. Women are encouraged to take responsibility for conforming to their church community's theology regarding sexuality by policing their own sexual expression, remaining silent on their views of sexuality, failing to act on sexual desires, and concealing acts of sexual activity.

Consequently, patriarchy in the conservative tradition may promote female oppression, supported by religious ideals designed to hinder sexual femininity; however, accountability may also foster a sense of community, thereby providing empowerment against secularity and sexual pressures. Notwithstanding, conservative Protestants' marital-confined view of sex might have shifted. In one study 61% of conservatives who pledged abstinence had premarital sex with someone other than their spouses; 23.3% had

premarital sex with their spouses, and 15.7% never had premarital sex (Uecker, 2008). Comparatively, 65.4% of Catholics, 70.9% mainline Protestants, 82.8% Black Protestants, and 38.1% Mormons also had sex with someone other than their spouses. These numbers demonstrate the possibility of a Christian sexual revolution, in which conservatives have become less tradition oriented; therefore, the feminization of sexual freedom among contemporary conservatives is likely to be impacted and presents a remarkable opportunity for examining this shift, for which this study bears significant promise.

### **Research Objectives and Research Questions**

Based on the forgoing discussion, this research covers sexual script theory, articulating the meaning of sexuality; moreover, sexual script theory, including symbolic interactionism and social constructionism, served as the theoretical basis to explain how sexual narratives are manifested through social interactions (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Given that, the aim of this research was to elucidate how Christian women navigate the transition process into wedlock, the researcher sought to provide answers to two overarching questions about sexuality:

- 1 To examine how messages from the sociocultural context of conservative Protestant women influence the sexual scripts that inform the beliefs and expression of sexuality in marriage.
- 2 What is the experience of conservative Protestant women as they navigate the change of sexual expression from premarital to marital, especially during the process of transition.



These questions, posed to a sample of conservative Protestant women, we designed to provide a deeper understanding of how Christianity and sexuality are interwoven; moreover, the study shed light on the role of religion in navigating the process from singlehood to the marital union with special attention to the meanings of sexual behaviors within socially ascribed norms. Thus a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1998) was used to facilitate a deeper understanding of how Christian women navigate the period of transition away from courtship rituals in preparation for sexual practices in matrimony. By addressing sexuality from a religious stance, the researcher explored the gendered norms, values, doctrines, and beliefs of the dyadic process of sexual exchange from the perspective of female partners. In so doing, the researcher explored how the three layers of sexual scripting—intrapsychic, interpersonal, and cultural scenarios (Gagnon & Simon, 2005)—explain sexuality as a social construct. In general, the researcher explored how Christian women ascribed meaning to their sexuality, given their religious or social backgrounds.

## **CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

To date, research on Christian sexuality, has focused primarily on extrinsic religiosity—religious service attendance, spiritual beliefs, and traditions of Christian eroticism (Abbott et al., 2016; Ahrold et al., 2010; Claney et al., 2018; Davidson et al., 1995). Unfortunately, this narrow view precludes other crucial aspects of the cultural basis of sexuality in a religious context (Ahrold et al., 2010). Because of the complexity of the research subject, examining the roles of sexuality and culture in the transmission of values, beliefs, and customs proved beneficial. This approach was used to explore diverse perspectives on the scripting process.

### **The Sexual Scripting Process**

The sexual scripting movement commenced in the 1970s as a response to the proponents of biological sexuality (Gagnon, 2004). In turn, diverse schools of thought emerged, including social constructionism and postmodernism. At the time, advocates purported those sexual scripts or patterns of behavior were social constructs gained through socially ascribed meanings established in cultural or societal norms. Thus, the concept of scripting relating to sexual behavior refutes the idea that the “sexual represents a very special, if not unique, quality of motivation” (Simon & Gagnon, 2005). Accordingly, sexual behavior is but one critical aspect of culturally derived experiences.

Hence, scripting, as a conceptual tool, can be used to examine the process of the sexual conduct of specific behaviors that convey complex meanings. These scripts provide a set of guidelines or beliefs, which inform behavioral practices in the same way that an actor uses scenarios on stage to reenact reality (Gagnon, 1990). Sexual scripts are,

therefore, transmitted through cultural expressions of the social context of actors (Wiederman, 2005). Consequently, intrapsychic maps guide understanding of the way individuals' feelings, thoughts, and behaviors are driven.

Five core assumptions underlie scripting theory:

1. Relative sexuality is a concept that explains how sexuality remains a nonuniversal phenomenon rooted in biological and social contexts; moreover, sexuality is a facet of the human experience “elicited through [a] sociocultural setting” (Gagnon, 2004).
2. Through sexuality, one finds similarities in natural acts, but variations in their meaning endure across diverse cultures and people.
3. Sexuality remains a by-product of the historical context; therefore, various techniques, explorations, and observations represent the cultural perspective and not the objective examination of multiple worldviews. Thus, sex research not only produces social facts but also promulgates those facts. For this reason, changes in the “choice of scientific perspective involve changes in observable [explanations]” (Gagnon, 2004, p. 133–134).
4. Sexuality is “acquired, maintained and unlearned” in the organized social structures of society. In other words, people learn how to behave within the sexual or cultural context with which they identify (Gagnon, 2004).
5. Finally, sexuality and gender are both social constructs of appropriate patterns of reproduction, gender, and moral conduct, of which scripts are cultural symbols (Gagnon, 2004).

These five core assumptions illustrate how sexuality and culture are interrelated (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). By facilitating an understanding of the impact of Christianity on sexual behavior, the current research has shed light on how scripted responses are products of the religious beliefs and values of the era. These expressions occur at the various levels of normed behaviors for which sexual scripting is distinguished in three significant frameworks.

### **The Levels of Sexual Scripting Theory**

Based on the work of Gagnon and Simon (2005), three primary levels of normative sexual practice have been identified: (a) cultural scenarios or social background, (b) interpersonal experience of the individual, and (c) exclusive individual intrapsychic experience (Davidson et al., 1995; Gagnon & Simon, 2005; Jones & Hostler, 2002; Simon & Gagnon, 1986, 2003). Applying these three levels, the researcher examined how Christian women decided on the timing of sexual encounters, chose intimate partners, and consented to sexual acts.

#### **Cultural Scenarios**

Cultural scenarios are direct or indirect reflections of what is appropriate to a specific culture. In the context of this research, the cultural situations were the Christian religion and society at large. Societal scripts identified the proper or suitable objects, aims, and desirable qualities of sexual interactions. These scripts provided the individual or “actor” with guidelines concerning the appropriateness of a sexual act, including the time, place, circumstance, and potential partner; however, cultural scenarios are not

necessarily predictive of individual behavior and may be inapplicable to some situations (Jones & Hostler, 2002, Weeks et al., 2003).

Thus, Christianity plays an instrumental role in the conceptualizations of sexuality for Christian believers. In keeping with the previous concept of religion, Christian women may be more religious than their male counterparts (Hammermeister et al., 2005). In this regard, a gendered perspective may help to explain how ascribed roles, norms, and behaviors are socially constructed or established in religious beliefs and doctrines. For example, women are raised to nurture, support, and manage emotions, which may be congruent with biblical teachings.

Consequently, specific to the research at hand, Christian women may receive doctrinal guidelines on when sexual behaviors are appropriate and may internalize feelings of disapproval with nonconformance, leading to guilt responses. As a result, Christian women may adopt sexual practices that may be incongruent with individual and societal expectations and may demonstrate sexual behaviors disharmonious to their expression.

### **Interpersonal Scripts**

In sexual script theory, the interpersonal is a level at which the person or individual actor internalizes learned behavior(s) and becomes a partial scriptwriter in the scripting process (Weeks et al., 2003). At this level the external environment impacts individual thoughts and ideas of sexual behaviors. In the Christian community, women may interpret the meaning of sexuality from an actor's standpoint through cultural and social impact. Christian women may, therefore, make meaning of their sexuality through personal and religious experiences or cultural norms. These norms are dependent on

social factors like age or stage of life. In fact, the life cycle plays a crucial role in determining the attributes of acceptable normative behaviors.

One could surmise that cultural scenarios and interpersonal levels are essential. These two levels of scripting may help to explain the complexities of transitioning from singlehood to marriage, given the dynamicity of sexuality; moreover, sexuality is gender-normative and links to values of sexual restraint, control, misogyny (Jones & Hostler, 2002; Wiederman, 2015).

In addition, research has suggested that females tend to abide by the sexual norms of society (Wiederman, 2015). Female roles exist on the principles of behavioral restraint, personal control, and managing the reputation of the community to which Christian women belong (Cranney & Štulhofer, 2016; Wiederman, 2015). Likewise, social influences on female sexual expression include the risk of pregnancy and an increase in parental sex education (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002).

### **Intrapsychic Scripts**

At the individual level, the intrapsychic experience articulates a set of rules for intrapersonal interactions. These rules may consistently establish how to behave and what to expect in intimacy, both feelings and expectations. The intrapsychic level may describe how motivations shape an actor's behavior (Wiederman, 2015). The researcher used intrapsychic scripts to scrutinize the role of desire, fantasy, and interest or drive in the sexuality of Cristian women.

Intrapsychic scripts may concern “biographical, physical and characterological traits . . . that the actor may regard as optimally desirable sexually” (Whittier & Simon, 2001, p. 144). These traits determine what the actor may want and the reasons for the

desire; therefore, concerning Christian women, a “turn-on” or sexual need is typically constructed within the broader context but is primarily personal. Hence, personal views allow for questioning and identifying what appeals to female internalizations and reservations (Jones & Hostler, 2002; Whittier & Simon, 2001).

Particularly in the cultural realm, the assumption of shared or similar experiences as well as expectations becomes apparent. For example, it would be a great disservice to look at all Christian women and assume that a sense of guilt is associated with premarital sex based on the norm of acceptable sex occurring only in marriage. So then, for example, when a woman marries a man who agrees with the cultural norm of marital sex but holds an impartial view on premarital sex, the couple does not operate with the same intrapsychic script. The dissonance may lead to relationship challenges, social anxieties, and marital conflict (Wiederman, 2015). Within these remits women may choose multiple ways to experience sexuality that could result in abstinence in singlehood or leaving the church to experience the freedom of sexual representation (Sharma, 2010).

The researcher sought to understand better how sexuality may involve cultural scripts of shared experiences or expectations. Thus, this study can nurture a better understanding of the implications of Christian sexuality and how gender-normative ideologies of sex and culture and the interrelation between the two are of critical importance. To have a holistic understanding of the subject, the researcher interrogated the meaning of cultural scripts relating to Christian sexuality.

### **CHAPTER THREE: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

In the context of this study, the term “conservative Protestant” denotes Christians who identify as fundamentalist Protestant believers in the theology of Jesus Christ, who alone grants eternal salvation, and the scriptural authority of the Bible (Hunter, 1981; Perry, 2019; Schermer Sellers, 2017; Woodberry & Smith, 1998). This definition informs the reader’s understanding of the concept of conservative Protestantism and provides insight into how Christian women demonstrate and experience sexuality.

To outline previous literature and background works, three levels of sexual scripting theory were addressed in the previous chapter—cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic—to gain insights into how the church has led, negotiated, and influenced the formation of Christian sexual scripts, used interchangeably with “Christian sexual ethics,” covered in this chapter. This chapter also includes a description of the expression of sexual behavior expected of Protestant women at two critical stages: singlehood and marriage. Finally, a discussion of the research on the gendered experiences of women in the church as they transition from singlehood to marriage (premarital expectations versus marital) appears below. This study contributes to the knowledge of contrasting views that form the sexual scripts for feminine spirituality.

#### **Sexuality Through Christian Ethics**

The role of Christianity in the construction of female sexual scripts can be understood by examining the historical background of Christian sexuality in comparison with contemporary religious thought. The crucifixion and ascension of Jesus Christ



ushered in Christendom, which took shape and evolved into modern Christianity (Bennet, 2016), from which the progression of sexuality in early writings developed over time.

### **The Biblical Impact of Christianity on Sexual Literature**

For people who identify as conservative Protestants, the Bible is considered the primary sacred text on the social traditions of sexual conduct (Claney et al., 2018), a viewpoint explaining why conservative Protestants view sexuality through a biblical lens. Biblical principles teach that God created the blueprint for human sexuality in the beginning (Genesis 1:26–28, 2:18–25, ESV), reserving it for the confines of marriage (1 Corinthians 7:3–5, ESV).

In Genesis, God instructed Adam and Eve to engage in sexual relations, one with the other and to procreate freely without shame or guilt. In Genesis 4:1, the word יָדָע “yada” in the original Hebrew denotes the experience of sexual pleasure experienced by Adam and Eve, God’s first sexual beings. Yada—defined as “to perceive or to know intimately”—designates the biblical sexual experience occurring between a man and a woman. This word also appears in Genesis 18:19 to express God’s knowledge of man. The word yada conveys the congruence of sexuality and intimacy (Berecz, 2002), but after the fall (i.e., when Adam and Eve disobeyed God), sin entered the world and the meaning of sexuality changed radically.

In Genesis 3, humans strayed from the original and perfect plan God had conceived (Turns et al., 2013). Thus, throughout the Bible, sex is assigned to married couples, whereas in extramarital and premarital relationships it is prohibited along with other forms of sexual immorality. Even though the Bible addresses the idea of sexual

pleasure, no established representation of sexual ethics for Christians predates the advent of theological thought (Schermer Sellers, 2017).

### **Paul, Augustine, and the Reformation**

In this section , we will be addressing the influence and the significance of Paul the Apostle, Saint Augustine and Martin Luther on the formation of Christian sexual ethics and it's broader effect.

#### ***Paul the Apostle (Saul of Tarsus)***

Saul was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious teaching class, who was known as a zealous persecutor Christians (Acts 8:3, ESV). During a personal encounter with Jesus around 33 CE, Saul became Paul (the non-Jewish pronunciation of his name), which made him relatable to the Gentiles (non-Jews). Paul then became one of the most celebrated apostles of Jesus and has been credited with spreading Christianity and founding the first-century church for Gentiles in Asia Minor and Europe (Bennett, 2016).

The apostle Paul perpetuated Christian epistemology and articulated God's view of sex and marriage, especially sexual purity in his letters to the Corinthians. Addressing the Greco-Roman people, who at that time were hedonistic and practiced asceticism (Fuchs, 1983), Paul wrote:

The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but the Lord, and the Lord for the body. . . . Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? For it is written, the two will become one flesh, but he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person

commits is outside the body, but a sexually immoral person sins against his own body. (I Corinthians 6:13–18, ESV)

In terms of marriage, Paul stated in I Corinthians 7:1–6, “Each man should have his wife and each woman her husband.” He further directed: “The husband should give his wife her conjugal rights and likewise the wife should give her husband.” The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Do not deprive one another” (ESV).

In the same chapter he also addressed the issues of singleness and the temptations that may arise. He promoted the idea of singleness and chastity, saying to marry is better than to burn with passion (I Corinthians 7:8, ESV). In another letter addressed to the Thessalonians, he wrote:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you knows how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God. (I Thessalonians 4:3–7, ESV)

For those who are engaged, he wrote:

If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes to let them marry—it is no sin. However, whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. So, then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better. (I Corinthians 7:36–38, ESV).

Early writings (the Gospels and those of Paul) echoed the old traditions of biblical authors, who stated that marriage reflects God’s true message about sexuality—that sex is a gift given to both men and women for enjoyment within the confines of marriage (Fuchs, 1983). In summary, Paul’s writings revealed the ideal of fidelity and purity of mind and body as they pertained both to marriage and premarital relationships. Based upon these fundamentalist beliefs, the following discussion addresses the sexual ethics discourse of Augustine of Hippo.

### *Augustine of Hippo*

A Western Christian theologian of the fifth-century church, Saint Augustine of Hippo profoundly influenced the development of Christian sexual ethics. Although he played a crucial role in establishing theology for Roman Catholic and Protestant thinkers alike (Bennet, 2016), he is most remembered by some for his views and essays on sexuality, which led to the formation of Christian ethics (Fuchs, 1983; Schermer Sellers, 2017). From Augustine’s standpoint, sexual diversity (i.e., maleness and femaleness) and procreation are rewards from God; anything else does not come from God and is of the devil. From his perspective, God created sexual diversity as well as sexual unity for the sole purpose of procreation; anything outside this function, he viewed as lust, which is from the devil.

In his writings, Augustine concluded that uncontrolled passion leads to obsession. Believing that desire did not exist before the “fall” of man, he examined the original form of sexuality, which, to him, was procreation. He divided sexual behavior into two separate categories: healthy sexuality, which is procreative; and unhealthy sexuality,

which is lustful and passionate. Based on this train of thought, sexuality and sin became almost synonymous (Fuchs, 1983).

Testimony to the depth of Augustine's influence on the early church is shown in the following statement by Gregory the Great, a known follower of Augustine:

Because the first man fell from his state of innocence by sinning, he transmitted the punishment of sin to his children; for sexual appetite is the punishment of sin, and comes from the root of sin, so much that no one is born into the world without its exercise (as cited in Fuchs, 1983, p.83)

Another follower of Augustine, Pope Gregory was known for his pedagogy on female subordination as intrinsic to God's design in creation because God created man in his image (Schermer Sellers, 2017).

Given the significance of those founders of Christianity, including neo-Augustinians like Gregory the Great, Pseudo-Dionysius, Martin Luther, and other prominent men, the mind-body theology movement took root in Christian literature. Through this movement, celibacy became the ultimate proof of the ability to exert control over the body with one's mind and a badge of righteousness and religious elitism (Fuchs, 1983; Schermer Sellers, 2017). These traditions nurtured the glorification of virginity and celibacy, teachings, from the Middle Ages that moved throughout modernity. With these foci, women across generations have been disempowered and oppressed as sexual actors, even today. This phenomenon persisted until the beginning of the Protestant movement.

### ***The Reformation***

The Reformation was a time when conflict prevailed in the world of theology. At this time the religious world was dominated by Roman Catholicism, which was the

governing body on Christian matters. The movement was held accountable through scripture, and the church slowly became a place in which intellectual thought based on reason reigned supreme. At the time, marriage was principal, and the end goal of sex was procreation. Martin Luther, a proponent of fundamentalism, was also a strong supporter of St. Augustine's position on gender roles but was more open to sexual liberalization. He stated:

The woman certainly differs from the man, for she is the weaker in body and intellect. Nevertheless, Eve was a magnificent creature and equal to Adam so far as the divine image, that is, righteousness, wisdom, and eternal salvation, is concerned. Still, she was only a woman. As the sun is much more glorious than the moon (though the moon is glorious), so the woman was inferior to the man both in honor and dignity. (As cited in Schermer Sellers, 2017, p. 33)

During this period, the church underwent a shift, and church leaders actively debated the idea of female sexual desire. Because of minimal acceptance, other philosophies broke ground, challenging traditional values (e.g., Søren Kierkegaard and Rene Descartes (Schermer Sellers, 2017). Reformers like Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, with Martin Luther endorsed the idea of sex in marriage and romance. They also held the view that married persons should give themselves entirely to one another with joy and abundance. These ideas gathered in resistance to the old Roman Catholic teachings and attitudes that marriage was inferior to celibacy, and procreation remained a necessity for the continuation of the human race (Beeke, 2008).

Other denominations have been known to play a decisive role in the narrative of sex and gender in the church. One example is the Puritan movement that emerged during

a critical time when romance and sex gained support as forms of marital exclusivity. In the Puritans' view of sex in the context of marriage as a gift from God to be enjoyed, an essential part of the relationship took shape (Beeke, 2018). According to Puritan theologian, William Perkins, marital sex was a debt or an act of due benevolence that partners owed to each other. In *The Application of Redemption*, another Puritan thinker Thomas Hooker (1657/1972) stated:

The man whose heart is endeared to the woman he loves, he dreams of her in the night, hath her in his eye and apprehension when he awakes, museth on her as he sits at the table, walks with her when he travels and parties with her in each place where he comes. (p.149 )

Over time, the sexual narrative of acceptable and unacceptable expression evolved, and the understanding of scripture was equally challenged and accepted. A discussion of the way Protestantism translated into modernity follows.

### **The Current Atmosphere**

In the United States, silence emanated from the Protestant church on matters of sexuality until the 1950s. Later decades (leading up to the 1970s) saw the beginning of a sexual revolution involving the advent of birth control for women and the feminist movement (Van Der Wyngaard, 2018). At the same time, conservative Protestants of the evangelical branch initiated the sexual purity movement, which became the principal force in modern Christian culture, cutting across most Protestant denominational beliefs. Consequently, the church underwent a bipolarization, including sexual liberality and

restraint from sexual immorality. In this context the Protestant church needed a blueprint to follow, hence the arrival of the evangelical purity movement (Moslener, 2015).

As a result of the purity movement and the introduction of organizations like True Love Waits (Southern Baptist Convention) and the Silver Ring Thing (LifeWay, n.d; Perry, 2019), purity rings and father–daughter dances became commonplace in North American popular culture. During this time, books such as *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Harris, 1997), *Passion and Purity: When God Writes Your Love Story* (Elliot, 1984); and *The Bride Wore White: Seven Secrets to Sexual Purity* (Gresh, 1999) illuminated contemporary conservative viewpoints (Moslener, 2015; Schermer Sellers, 2017).

Conservative Protestants adapted to a different framework for Christian dating and courtship and the value of maintaining virginity, which has played a critical part in the current sexual landscape. Men were challenged to respect their “sisters in Christ” in terms of sexual purity, dating, and marriage; and women were warned to select a Christian partner and to value the “gift” of virginity in singlehood (Harris, 2003; Ingram & Walker, 2006; Moslener, 2015; Schemer Sellers, 2017).

The Protestant movement gained ground through abstinence rhetoric (Van Der Wyngaard, 2018). In fact, most of the messages and books on this subject were written by Christian authors. Slowly, these ideas made their way into Christian culture, becoming associated with biblical truth. Fundamentally, laws that helped to guard and control these ideas were, in turn, on par with scripture verses. The “prosperity gospel” of sexual purity dominated: “If you gave God sexual purity, he will, in turn, give you relational prosperity” (Van Der Wyngaard, 2018). The purity movement, therefore, ostensibly



began in reaction to the sexual revolution: Proponents subscribed to the idea that one needs sex for human fulfillment and happiness (Van Der Wyngaard, 2018).

This realization perhaps accounts for the reason that most conservative Protestant singles now report having sex or engaging in various sexual acts outside marriage despite the traditional standard of sex in marriage (Turns et al., 2013). One possibility is that changing social norms may account for fewer conservative beliefs regarding sex and sexuality, which may have changed the face of Christianity and its impact on contemporary sexuality. Consequently, the Bible remains a guiding principle that informs the appropriateness, or lack thereof, of acceptable or unacceptable Christian sexual behaviors, yet some may doubt the relevance of its teachings in contemporary religious societies.

During this time, other publications on sex were written for married couples, especially women, by conservative Protestant Christian educators and therapists who described the ethos of sex in the 1980s and 1990s. Compared to the books written for young and single Christians, these books were sexually educational and encouraged married people to be sexually active while simultaneously honoring God. These books also served as guides to sexual practice.

Two prominent figures of this era were Clifford and Joyce Penner, who cowrote *The Gift of Sex: A Guide to Sexual Fulfillment* (1981) and many other works. They led conversations on mutual pleasure, premature ejaculation, the impact of pornography on men, and female sensuality. Other books, such as *Intended for Pleasure: Sex Technique and Sexual Fulfillment in Christian Marriage* (Wheat & Wheat, 1981), added to the narrative of sex for pleasure and ways to achieve it by tackling sexual dysfunctions and

teaching female and male sexual anatomy and various sexual positions. *The Act of Marriage: The Beauty of Sexual Love* (LaHaye & LaHaye, 1976), *That Friday in Eden* (Mazat, 1981), and *Sex for Christians: The Limits and Liberties of Sexual Living* (Smedes, 1994) were written to help married Christians have a fulfilling and positive sexual experience. Authors were Southern Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, and Presbyterians.

In contrast, new titles illustrated the change in sexual ideals and activities but still conveyed the timeless view of sex within marriage, for example, *Delight, Your Husband: The Christian Wife's Manual to Passion, Confidence, and Oral Sex* (Rose, 2019). Such books revealed how the conversation about sexuality in the church had changed, but the main principle remained—that sex outside of marriage is wrong.

Reviewing the history of Christian sexual ethics shows that the cultural, sexual scripts of past generations had a substantial influence on the meaning of sexuality and sexual expression in the 2020s. Thus, Christian sexual ethics encapsulates messages of a broad range of religious perspectives; therefore, conservative Protestant discourse has played a significant role in the development of intrapsychic and interpersonal sexual scripts. This notion explains how interpersonal and intrapsychic scenarios can inform the transition from singlehood into marriage concerning female sexuality.

### **Expected Female Sexual Behavior**

Notably, the sexual behaviors of conservative Protestant women link to religious influence and sexual attitudes and values shaped through cultural norms and social interactions (Davidson et al., 1995; Dew et al., 2018). For conservative Protestant

women, God is believed to be more concerned with behavioral motivation (intentionality of the heart) than actual acts (Perry, 2019). When it comes to sexual immorality or impurity, the Bible's teachings on these topics are culturally understood to imply that sexual activity outside the marital relationship is a sin resulting from lustful desires. This principle applies to pornography because it naturally promotes lusting with one's heart. When it comes to activities such as masturbation (without pornography) or oral sex, however, no explicit mention appears in the Bible as to its wrongness or rightness except for the phrase "lusting in one's heart." Thus, conservative Protestants place heavier emphasis on the heart (spirit) than on physical discipline.

Sexual sins are typically regarded as the worst of all transgressions (Fuchs, 1983; Perry, 2019; Schermer Sellers, 2017). Premarital sexual activity contribute to feelings of inferiority because of homosexuality, adultery, premarital sex, pornography, and masturbation (Fuchs, 1983; Perry, 2019). Women raised in conservative households may invalidate their thoughts as a result of feelings of low self-worth, shame, denial, repression, and objectification (Claney et al., 2018; Daniluk, 1993; Fuchs, 1983; Perry, 2019).

Conservative Protestant women, therefore, tend to espouse complementarianism, the belief that "men are the initiators, leaders, providers, and protectors, while women are designed to be the sexual responders, helpers, and nurturers" (Perry, 2019, p. 13). This form of thinking informs and impacts sexuality in traditional Protestant culture by emphasizing femininity as a response to men's power and highlighting empathy, nurturance, and compliance as female traits. Conservatives consider subordinate femininity and sexual passivity as vital to a woman's sexuality as defined in marriage.

This opinion has been called “marriage-confined sexuality” (Sharma, 2008, p. 346); for example, the discourse of marital-confined sexuality was connected to the idea of Christian femininity in which married heterosexuality morality as well as appropriate conduct and body presentation were key aspects of Christian beliefs and values. Because of these factors, understanding how religion shapes normative sexuality among Christian women is crucial.

Specifically, conservatives view men as natural sexual initiators who are more physically inclined and are understood to struggle with lust when compared to women. From this perspective, for a man to say he is struggling with pornography or lust is more acceptable than for a woman to do so. Women are seen as sexual responders, not prone to lust or masturbation like men. Women who then identify as struggling with sexual sins are seen as hypersexual and lustful, both socially humiliating and stigmatizing (Perry, 2019). Nevertheless, belief in marital-confined sexuality and sexual purity is common among conservative Protestants, but racial disparities exist.

Concerning faith and the Bible, spiritual rebirth as the premise of conversion and the expectations of certain types of behaviors represent shared beliefs among diverse races. For example, for Latinos and Blacks, religious faith and churchgoing serve as safeguards to marriage and family life (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016). Women in these two racial groups are more likely than their White counterparts to struggle with racial and ethnic discrimination, which affects how they mate and marry as well as how they view their sexuality.

Of the two, African American conservative Protestant women submit to White-centric America’s view of sexuality and marriage while living the challenging reality of

being a member of a minority. Stereotypes of black female sexuality abound: In earlier Christian theology Black women were labeled as the seductive Jezebel or the asexual, respectable Mammy. These stereotypes, in place since the era of slavery, have been further perpetuated by Jim Crowism and are currently manifested in public policy, public opinion, and in the conservative Protestant church (Moultrie, 2017; Winters, 2019).

Because of these societal pressures, Black women became experts at policing their bodies and maintaining a respectable asexual mammy appearance. Black women are also expected to demonstrate respectability, which includes sexual modesty, temperance, and celibacy. They are encouraged to be guided by three primary messages: (a) sexuality is sacred, (b) sex is a gift reserved for a man and woman, and (c) premarital sex is forbidden. Another plight for this group of women is the issue of marriage. In the United States, Black women make up the smallest population of married women; this affects the appeal to wait until marriage (Moultrie, 2017; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016). Given that African American women face late marriage, the ideal of postponing gratification is quite real.

Likewise, religion plays a significant role in Latino communities. Although many Latinos are Catholic, Latinos who are conservative Protestants have a more traditional view of sexuality. In these churches, women are broadly characterized as either saints or whores. In the literature, this dichotomy traces back to the initial values of the time of colonization. With the settlement by the Spaniards and Christian missionaries, they brought with them patriarchal religious views concerning the body and the sexuality of women. In these churches today, women are consistently urged to be holy and accept the

responsibility of assisting their male counterparts to avoid sin (Brusco, 2011; Escobar & Rolfe, n.d.)

### **The Intersectionality of Christianity and Feminine Sexuality**

To date, numerous researchers have examined sexual attitudes and behaviors of the single Christian woman (e.g., Claney et al., 2018; Crockett et al., 1996; Leak, 1993; Lefkowitz et al., 2004; McFarland et al., 2011); however, few have investigated how conservative Protestant women navigate sexual expression within marital relations, especially during the transition. Thus, the researcher of the current study investigated how conservative Protestant women process, navigate, express, and manage their sexuality during the transition stage from singlehood into marriage. One model that helps to explain this phenomenon consists of three stages, which take into account how conservative Protestant culture affects women's interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts (Claney et al., 2018). These steps involve (a) the messages women receive about their sexuality, (b) the internalized experiences of these messages permeating their sense of sexuality, and (c) the actions that women take to examine and manage their sexuality.

#### **Cultural Sexual Messages**

In the first stage, the focus is on female exposure to cultural messages regarding women's sexuality. Among the chief messages women receive are the nature of sexuality (how sexuality is described, e.g., a gift versus "not a big deal") and the impact of sexuality on worth (e.g., the manner in which a woman is expected to be sexual). This stage includes the concept of a "sexual double standard" in which different sexual

expectations are placed upon men and women (e.g., men can express their sexuality without judgment and women cannot). Within their respective genders, roles are prescribed in the expression of sexual behavior; for example, one may have to choose between being sexually active and being labeled a “slut” versus being labeled a “prude” (Claney et al., 2018). This stage concludes with sexual expression management, which presents women as temptresses responsible for tempting men sexually. Such a designation affects how they dress, their positions in leadership, and their role in helping the men in their lives remain sexually pure.

### **The Internalized Experience**

In this second stage, the individual experience encompasses two significant concepts: sexual scripts and sexual phenomenology. Sexual scripts relate to the cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic factors of how religion plays a critical role in the cognitive beliefs that women share about sexuality (Claney et al., 2018; Gagnon & Simon, 2005). In conjunction, sexual phenomenology refers to internal awareness, evaluation, and experience of being sexual. The process of negotiating the conflict of ascribed sexual scripts, the surrounding culture, and deciding what does and does not work is critical; furthermore, the integration of these three factors (sexual scenarios, surrounding culture, and the internalized conflict of the individual) constitutes the internalized experience.

Acknowledging the sexual phenomenology of a conservative Protestant Christian woman lends understanding to her feelings about her role as a sexual being and the degree to which she experiences or expresses her sexuality. A deeper understanding of this complexity also informs the subjective experience of the sexual process.

Understanding the “values-laden” attributes of sexuality, women can derive meaning about their sexuality and their self-worth. These components then integrate to provide a personal sense of conflict, in which women’s internal turmoil reflects cognitive dissonance between the acceptance of religious culture values and secularism (Claney et al., 2018). These ideas help to form an understanding of the internalization process of making and creating sexual scripts.

### **Women’s Intrapsychic Identity**

The final stage, which involves the exploration of women’s sexual identity, includes three separate categories: the cognitive exploration of sexuality, the behavioral exploration of sexuality, and conflict strategies (Claney et al., 2018).

#### ***Cognitive Exploration of Sexuality***

In this phase, the woman comes to terms with the reality of her sexual development. Depending on the messages she has received, she chooses to explore her sexuality or not. If she decides to do so, she may want to gain insight as part of her developmental process. For example, she may choose to discuss her sexual issues or questions with other women, pastors, friends, parents, and others to explore different thoughts as she forms her own identity. A woman who does not intend to explore may feel discomfort tapping into that knowledge or moral distress when thinking about an activity that is closed to her. This incongruence could be played out by ignoring the topic or not thinking about it at all until she can officially participate in it (Claney et al., 2018).

#### ***Behavioral Exploration of Sexuality***

In the second phase, women’s exploration of sexuality in response to physical and sexual desire includes individual activities (e.g., masturbation or pornography) and



partnered activities (e.g., sexting, oral sex, or intercourse). Whether she chooses behavioral exploration or not depends on the degree to which she values sexuality (Claney et al., 2018).

### ***Conflict Strategy***

The final phase addresses the conflict in thoughts that may arise from all the various scripts women receive. For example, some women seek social support by joining small groups, keeping busy, suppressing feelings, prayer, avoiding men or relationships so as not to have to deal with or be tempted by sexual thoughts. These actions also require women to establish sexual boundaries for appropriate and inappropriate behavior; however, conflict may at times arise, exhibited through deprioritizing sexuality and compartmentalizing it from religious identity (Claney et al., 2018).

During this stage, agency is the process in which women reflect on how to express and to practice sexuality within the boundaries of religious adherence (Sharma, 2010). The empowerment of female agency involves the control over ideas of what is permissible to fully experiencing sex safely and pleurably while experiencing faith and sexuality in ways that allow for the development of self-confidence versus guilt or shame (Sharma, 2008, 2010). In being able to practice agency, women may find a balance between the demands of the church and external influences.

Notably, female demographic characteristics may confound the relationship between religion and sexuality. Studies have shown that those who identify as White are of higher socioeconomic backgrounds and come from two-parent families and are, therefore, less likely to have engaged in sexual intercourse before marriage; furthermore, adolescent girls are less likely to have engaged in sex than boys (Uecker, 2008).

A natural outgrowth of the review of the literature, the primary focus of this study was external influences on the meaning of sexuality as a guide to conservative Protestant women's transition from pre and postmarital intimacy. It was designed to shed light on the implementation, transfer, and sustainment of sexual scripts across generations. An investigation of the complexity of how scripts transmit through cultural relativism was also a consideration in this study.

### **A Gap in the Literature**

A deeper understanding of sexual scripts that may perpetuate female-submissive sexuality is imperative (Sharma, 2008; Turner, 2017). Because of insufficient research on the impact of religion on sexual scripting behavior (McCormick, 2010) for conservative Protestant women (Claney et al., 2018), this study was designed to provide meaningful explanations of sexual scripts that may influence how conservative Protestant women transition from singlehood to marriage as they negotiate and express Christian sexuality.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY**

In this research a grounded theory approach was applied to the study of the sexuality of conservative Protestant women (Corbin & Strauss, 1998), one that was best suited to examine the role of Christianity in women's negotiation of the process of sexual expression in the transition from singlehood into marriage. The grounded theory approach allowed for the generation of theory to explain a phenomenon in the context of those who experience it (Corbin & Strauss, 1998; Morse et al., 2016). This methodology was useful in increasing knowledge about this topic and in generating theory with explanatory power.

### **Participant Population**

Study participants were women between the ages of 20 and 40, who identified as conservative Protestants and were in their first years of marriage (1–5 years). Participants were recruited from local churches in southern California (e.g., Inland Empire, Los Angeles, San Diego). The churches included conservative Protestant denominations that met the criteria of adherence to the fundamentalist belief in Jesus Christ as the sole grantor of eternal salvation (through conversion) and the belief in the authority and literal interpretation of the Bible (Hunter, 1981; Perry, 2019; Schermer Sellers, 2017; Woodberry & Smith, 1998). The selection of appropriate churches involved a screening process of information from Christian websites and official records (i.e., church documents). A review of these data sources helped determine whether churches met the requirements for inclusion in this study. Participants were recruited using flyers and word of mouth (snowball effect). They were screened based on the inclusion and exclusion

criteria; therefore, a woman who was (a) a practicing conservative Protestant; (b) heterosexual; (c) between the ages of 20 and 40; (d) married for 1 to 5 years; and (e) at the time of the study in her first marriage (i.e., never divorced) fit the inclusion criteria. Women who were (a) divorced, (b) separated from a partner, or (c) in a long-distance relationship were excluded. Twenty to 30 participants are typically needed to have a well-saturated theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018); hence, a minimum of 20 participants was sought for interviewing for this study.

### **Data Collection**

Participants for this study attended the local churches in the Inland Empire area of California in a conservative Protestant community; they were selected based on established criteria. Those who completed the informed consent process (i.e., were briefed about the study) and granted consent, received a gift card valued at no more than 10 dollars.

The researcher collected data using semistructured interviews to allow for in-depth exploration of participants' views. The informed consent and interview processes took place in a designated location, on a face-to-face basis, using taped audio recordings. The researcher informed participants of their right to decline or withdraw from the study at any time. Data analysis involved the use of field notes and other relevant sources.

The researcher provided participants with consent forms and explained the rules of confidentiality. Upon completion, the researcher revisited participants' questions or concerns before thanking them for their involvement in the study. All data sources, whether electronic or in print, were kept secured (e.g., encrypted files, password-

protected, locked files) to protect against breach of confidentiality. Only the research staff had access to the data in this study.

### **Interview Questions**

A semi structured guide was used to interview participants to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences and perspectives. The researcher formulated the interview questions using two test runs in which 10 volunteers were interviewed. The researcher conducted all sessions of interviews face-to-face and produced daily audio recordings.

### **Interview Guide**

The interview guide appears below. The introduction below contains the script used by the researcher to open the interview. The questions follow.

#### ***Introduction***

This study addresses your perspectives on your sexual journey from singlehood into marriage. For the sake of this study, singlehood would refer to any period in time before marriage. Before we proceed, I will provide a preemptive overview of the research in which I will introduce fundamental ideas about sex. I will then continue to discuss your background, before delving into your thoughts or experiences about the messages you received concerning sex or sexuality. Are you ready to begin?

#### ***Questions***

1. Could you please tell me a little bit about yourself and why you were interested in signing up for this study?

2. When people hear the word “sexuality,” they think of having sex, being a sexual person, and so on. What comes to mind when you hear the word “sexuality”?
  - a. Probe for ideas of sexual feelings, thoughts, behavior, and attraction toward other people.
  - b. Probe for her feelings about being sexy and being sexual.
3. What were the messages or ideas concerning sexuality you heard or experienced growing up?
  - a. Probe: What were the lessons you received from childhood?
  - b. Teenage years?
  - c. Young adulthood?
4. We all are socialized to think about sex and sexual expectations from the various communities we belong to, such as our families, friends, church, etc. What were some of the messages you received about sex and sexual expectations from
  - a. Family?
  - b. Partner or spouse?
  - c. Friends?
  - d. Church?
  - e. Culture?
  - f. Other?
  - g. What was the difference between what you heard when you were single versus when you were married?
5. Now, I am going to ask you a couple of questions about gender and the messages you have heard about the sexual expectations of men and women.

- a. Did you feel that they were similar? If so, how?
  - b. Did you think they were different? If so, how?
  - c. How did you feel about the messages you received about gender and sexual expectations? Can you give me an example?
6. Now I am interested in learning how Christian women navigate these experiences in real life—as a single individual who dated and as someone in an early marriage. What is your experience?
7. Some believe that over time, sexuality evolves or changes. How would you describe changes in your sexuality in the transition to marriage over time?
  - a. Can you tell me your story of what this transition of sexual expression or being sexual was like for you leading up to marriage and even now?
    - i. How about when you were dating?
    - ii. And in the period of early marriage till now?
    - iii. How do you think it was for your partner?
    - iv. How did you and your partner differ in this process?
  - b. What do you think may have contributed to the change(s) or lack thereof?
8. How did Christianity play a role in that for you?
  - c. If so, or if not, please explain.
  - d. Positive or negative?
9. What were the challenges you have faced in navigating the process of being a sexual being (meaning a person who experiences sexual attraction, desire, and so on)?
  - a. Have you overcome them? If so, how did you overcome those challenges?

- b. If not, what may account for the difficulty?
  - c. What challenges are you currently facing as you navigate your sexuality as a married Christian woman?
  - d. How are you working through those challenges? Can you give me an example?
10. What has been your experience of this transition process, in terms of sexual expression before and after marriage? Probe for areas that may need support after talking about this.
11. Is there anything else you would like to add?

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher transcribed each interview verbatim, reviewing each one thoroughly. Transcribed interviews were coded using a grounded theory framework. Open coding, which involved searching for themes in the data to discover major categories, was used first. In this process data were analyzed, and line by line coding took place (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Axial coding, which involved the reduction of categories to subcategories based on their properties and dimensions of the data, was done by identifying one coding category to focus on at a time and then returning to the data to create groups around the core phenomenon (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). The final step was selective coding, in which the researcher tested the theory or hypothesis to describe the interrelationship of categories.



## **Trustworthiness**

A good qualitative study typically focuses on the objectivity of the questions (to minimize biases), emphasizing valid data and the systematic rigor of fieldwork procedures (Morrow, 2005). It also focuses on the triangulation of findings across methods and data sources and their consistent use, the reliability of coding and analysis procedures, the permissible level of generalization (external validity), the strength of the evidence showing causal relationships, and contributions to theory. For this study, when analyzing the data, immersion was essential and thus, critical to the data collection and the transcription of the interviews. To achieve this, the researcher used detailed analytic memos during the research process (Corbin & Strauss, 1998); the memos covered ideas, interpretations, notes, and concepts throughout the study (Morrow, 2005). These information sources became part of the body of material for data analysis. Thus, consistent memoing by both researcher and research assistant occurred throughout this study to address any biases that arose, thereby ensuring the trustworthiness of the data.

To check additional researcher bias, the researcher asked participants to cross-check their transcripts (member checking) to ensure that they were congruent with the participants' responses and interpretations of events (Corbin & Strauss, 1998; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Another tactic was to enlist another person to code the data alongside the researcher (research assistants) to ensure that codes and themes were appropriate and valid. In terms of owning one's perspectives or biases, the researcher disclosed personal, theoretical, and methodological orientations, values, and assumptions that may have affected how the research was interpreted (Morrow, 2005). She considered differences

that may have affected the findings of the study, such as age, ethnicity, and culture, by addressing these differences in kept memos and the analysis of data.

### **Researcher's Statement**

As a family life educator, I have had the privilege of interacting with people who question the role of their faith in their sexual journeys. Similarly, while working as a medical family therapist in a women's health setting, I have also witnessed the struggles women experience in managing issues of sexuality. Over time, many of these women expressed their concerns to me regarding sexuality and Christianity. These discussions yielded various perspectives on virginity, marriage, dating, and courtship. Throughout this journey, I have been met with ambivalence and have witnessed the social anxieties of relational concerns as expressed by Christian women. When these conversations arose, I have had various responses, ranging from an unwillingness to discuss the issues to open disclosure to a general yearning for answers about sex and sexual postponement. Some awkward moments occurred in which clients decided to end therapeutic sessions or abruptly left the room. In general, sex and sexuality remain sensitive subjects that may evoke feelings of discomfort as women work through their thoughts and feelings concerning their sexuality.

Notably, married women's perspectives on sex often express disenchantment about sex in singlehood compared to the present reality of sex in marriage. Others' recollections of sexual interactions in the transition from singlehood to marriage reflected their belief that sex was usually less prescriptive. Some were apprehensive and felt ill-prepared to manage the sexual navigation process. Still, for others the support of family

and friends helped them to manage the process; for these they were rightfully grateful, despite numerous concerns.

Through my knowledge and practical experiences I questioned the process of sexual expression in the context of Christianity. Consequently, I reflected on the following questions: What does the Christian experience entail with regard to sexuality? How do Christians make meaning of their sexuality given their ambivalence? What are the needs of Christian women when navigating their sexual experiences? Does the church play a significant role in the process of negotiating sexuality? These concerns were meaningful and relevant to the research topic. Thus, a grounded theory approach was used in the study to allow for an in-depth understanding of culture and sexuality and the lived experiences of married Christian women.

As a conservative Protestant, I am predisposed to subjectivity; moreover, my core beliefs on sexual activity and my research goal of provoking conversations regarding Christian sexual ethics may have biased the research findings. As a result, I recognized that my feelings regarding sexual activity before marriage may have introduced unnecessary bias to the study. To safeguard against response or researcher bias, I was intentional in ensuring my conclusions did not reflect my experience as a Christian woman.

I performed due diligence in reviewing the transcripts with the participants and fact-checking the data while keeping a reflexive journal and paying close attention to detailed field notes. I also recruited research assistants to help with the coding of data to facilitate data accuracy.

### **Limitations**

Based on the population, location, and method of sampling, limitations can be presumed. At the time of the study, the researcher lived in an area in the Inland Empire of California, which had a significant Seventh Day Adventist population. Thus, the likelihood of the majority of the sample being Seventh Day Adventists was probable. Also, due to the social climate of the country at this time, recruiting participants with the title “conservative Protestants” proved to be difficult.

### **Dissemination Plan**

The researcher has planned to disseminate the final results of this study in academic peer-reviewed journals and to submit relevant reports in print or electronic media. The author also intended to have conversations in diverse settings concerning the findings of the proposed study. Also, the researcher aimed to broadcast the results through various media platforms and to make appropriate presentations to diverse audiences and practitioners. The goal was ultimately to contribute to research, scholarship, and practice, thereby adding to the body of literature for suitable fields of study. Generally, the researcher anticipated multidisciplinary collaborations with critical stakeholders in promoting Christian sexual ethics and gendered research concerning the issues of sex, sexuality, and Christianity.

**CHAPTER FIVE: ARTICLE 1**

**THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIOCULTURAL MESSAGING ON THE  
DEVELOPMENT OF SEXUAL SCRIPTS AMONG NEWLY MARRIED  
CONSERVATIVE PROTESTANT WOMEN**

**Abstract**

In this study, we examined how messages from the sociocultural context of conservative Protestant women influence the sexual scripts that inform the beliefs and expression of sexuality in marriage. We interviewed sixteen women who were in their first marriage for less than five years, heterosexual and conservative Protestant. We used a grounded theory methodology to explore how sociocultural messages might inform their sexual scripting transitioning into marriage. We found three main constructs of sociocultural influences (familial, church and the larger culture) that play a role in how conservative Protestant women perceive their sexuality and in turn, influence the expression of sexuality in early marriage. The findings highlight the critical need for creating opportunities for open dialogue around sexuality among conservative Protestant Christians.

**Keywords:** conservative Protestant, women, sexuality, sociocultural influence, sexual script

Sex ed in fifth grade was the first time I learned about periods or that type of thing. To me, looking back, that was so hurtful to me that my mom—she didn't know any better— didn't even talk to me about that stuff. My dad didn't talk to me about that stuff. It was very hush-hush. I signed a contract that I wouldn't have premarital sex. That type of thing. I feel like sex for so long was a bad thing.

—Tasha

### **Introduction and Background**

On a global scale approximately 21% of the Christian population is Protestant (Jacobson, 2011), yet despite their numbers, the literature concerning how sexuality is perceived and expressed among Protestants in general, and conservative Protestants in particular, is limited This limited knowledge extends to women within these denominations. For conservative married women, how they navigate sexuality in marriage and the scripts that inform these ideas and expressions have only been minimally examined (Crockett et al., 1996; Leak, 1993; Lefkowitz et al., 2004; McFarland et al., 2011).

Notably, studies examining sexuality among Christian populations have focused primarily on extrinsic religious practices such as church attendance and religious beliefs (Abbott et al., 2016; Cranney & Štulhofer, 2016). However, there are many other factors that are important to consider when seeking to understand female Christian sexuality such as cultural influences, gender and patriarchy, sexual development and sexual awareness (Abbott, et al., 2016, Dale & Keller, 2019). Given that the focus on extrinsic religiosity

(e.g. church attendance, how often one prays) envelops a limited view of sexuality and religion and fails to connect crucial aspects of religion and culture that are critically important in shaping the experiences of conservative Protestant women as it relates to the expression of sexuality before and in marriage, this study was conducted to fill a current gap in the literature (Ahrold et al., 2010).

Thus, this paper provides an examination of: (1) the sociocultural, religious and familial messaging and socialization that influence the understanding conservative Protestant women have of their sexuality and (2) the theoretical underpinnings of sexual scripting which influence how they think about sex and sexuality internally and the expression of it in single and married life.

Many terms are used to define conservative Protestantism. In the context of this study a conservative Protestant is someone who believes in the fundamental doctrine that Jesus Christ alone grants eternal salvation (through conversion). Additionally, conservative Protestants use the Bible as their primary religious text and use a literal interpretation of biblical scripture concerning acceptable sexual behavior (e.g. Southern Baptists, Seventh Day Adevetiist, Methodist) (Hunter, 1981; Perry, 2019; Sellers, 2017; Woodberry & Smith, 1998).

Regarding sexuality, sexuality encompasses thoughts, fantasies, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, roles, and relational components (World Health Organization [WHO], 2017). It may also be experienced or expressed through various human or social attributes and involves the interaction of cultural contexts (WHO, 2017). Consequently, sexuality is understood as a social construct and or cultural product that, in turn, shapes sexual behavior (Bass, 2016).

## **Culture and Sexual Scripting**

Normative sexual practice comprises three primary levels of scripting: (a) cultural scenarios or social background which means direct or indirect reflections of what is sexually appropriate to a specific culture, (b) interpersonal experiences of the individual, or how the interpersonal interactions within their external environment influence the individual thoughts and ideas of sexual behaviors, and (c) intrapsychic experiences such as internal rules that consistently establish the feelings and expectations of how to behave sexually and what to expect in sexual intimacy (Jones & Hostler, 2002; Simon & Gagnon, 1986, 2002, Wiederman, 2015). Societal scripts identify proper or suitable objects, aims, and desirable qualities of sexual interactions. These scripts provide guidelines for the appropriateness of a sexual act, including the time, place, circumstance, and potential partner, albeit these scripts may not always translate to the lived experience of Christian women (Jones & Hostler, 2002; Sharma, 2011). This is because larger sociocultural scripts interact with subcultural scripts, such as religious and family culture, that ultimately help inform and shape the interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts of conservative Protestant women.

### ***The Role of Christian Culture in Sexual Scripting***

For conservative Protestants, Christian culture significantly shapes the ideas and practices related to sex and sexuality. For example, throughout the Bible sex is assigned for married couples, whereas extramarital and premarital relationships are prohibited along with other practices that the scriptures deemed sexually immoral. The Bible notably addresses the idea of sexual pleasure, yet no established representation of sexual ethics for Christians predates the advent of theological thought (Sellers, 2017). Therefore,



beliefs about sexuality are not always found directly in the Bible but are intermingled with Christian tradition and secular culture and reinforced through sermons, songs, prayers, books and other religious activities (Dale & Keller, 2019; Stone & Duke, 2013). For example, in the American conservative Protestant culture, there is the common belief or promise that if one abstains from sexual activity, and staying “sexually pure” they will have a fulfilling sex life in marriage (Dale & Keller, 2019).

### ***Christian Cultural Sexual Scripts and the Dissonance Within***

When Christian cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts don’t align, internal dissonance is created. This dissonance may lead to relationship challenges, social anxiety, and premarital and marital conflict (Wiederman, 2015). For example, Christian women may receive doctrinal guidelines on when sexual behaviors are appropriate and may internalize feelings of disapproval in the case of “inappropriate” behaviors, leading to guilt responses. As a result, Christian women may adopt sexual practices that may be incongruent with their personal desires, religious values or societal norms. Within these restraints, women may choose multiple ways to experience sexuality (Sharma, 2010).

Religiously conservative Christians, particularly women, may experience the inhibition of sexual expression (Daniluk, 1993; Mahoney, 2008; Wagner & Reh fuss, 2008). Inhibitions may engender feelings of denial and disrepute (Claney et al., 2018) and serve to disempower a woman who desires the right to sexual exploration and expression (Dale & Keller, 2019; Hirsh, 2015; Sharma, 2011). Thus, how sexual scripts are formed and expressed by women, given Christian ideals and culture, need to be better understood; the complex nature and limited scope of Christian sexuality literature reverberate the need for more in-depth investigation of how sexuality differs among

women within the church (Hunter, 1981; Perry, 2019; Sellers, 2017; Woodberry & Smith, 1998).

### **The Role of Family in Sexual Scripting**

All people are impacted by the culture around them and their sexuality is not exempted. From childhood, how people talk, what they think, and who they become are learned from the world and others around us. The family is the primary agent for the socialization of sexuality formation (Pasqualini & De Rose, 2020). Parents play an important role in shaping sexual constructs from childhood into adolescence (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Pasqualini & De Rose, 2020; Regnerus, 2005). Regarding how sexuality is regulated, Christian families are understood to place boundaries around sexual behavior and process because of the belief that the boundaries are “divinely set”. This is coupled with the desire for children to avoid premature involvement in sexual activity so they can instead understand the importance of being faithful and honoring marital vows. Consequently, within the family of origin, Christian girls are often socialized to play an instrumental role in boundary setting in sexual encounters. The parameters of boundary setting may involve discussions concerning contraception and family planning, modesty in dress, and possible conflicts surrounding one’s own expectations of sexually appropriate behaviors and the standards of the church (Allsop et al., 2021).

For conservative Protestant parents, conversations around sex with children, especially adolescents, tend to focus on moral ideals such as moral values about sexual practice and contraception, as opposed to providing information pertinent to sexual growth and development (Regnerus, 2005). Compared to their nonconservative counterparts, they are less likely to have consistent talks concerning sex and sexuality.

Some conservative parents fear that opening the dialogue about sex might encourage children to become sexually active, so they prefer to wait until children are “old enough” to handle such conversations to avoid “destroy[ing] their innocence” (Pariera, 2016; Wilson et al., 2010; Wilson & Koo, 2010).

### ***Gender and Sex Scripting***

There are subtle differences in the way that sexual conversations occur depending on the gender of the parent and the gender of the child. In one study, mothers were more likely than fathers to report uncertainty about talking to their children about sex. Fathers were more likely to initiate conversations about sex if asked by their children, but mothers were more likely to talk about sex proactively (Wilson et al., 2010).

Interestingly, fathers with both sons and daughters talked less about sex as compared to mothers. Compared to parents of male children, parents with daughters engaged in more conversations about sex, its consequences, and associated harms, and were more likely to discourage early sexual initiation (Wilson & Koo, 2010). Although recent studies showed that conservative parents have become more open to dialogue about sex with their children, they still struggle with delaying sexual conversations with children and the belief that the latter might not be interested in parent–child sex talks because of competing influences such as media and the popular sex culture (Pariera, 2016; Pariera & Brody, 2017).

### ***Parent–Child Communication: Advantages and Disadvantages to Sexual Development***

Ideally, open parent–child communication helps children to receive accurate information about their bodies, relating to sexual maturation while improving the parent–child relationship. Children from conservative families may be disadvantaged because of

minimal conversations about sex, which occur through direct and indirect actions: (a) primarily mother-to-daughter teaching, (b) parental response to displays of sexual behavior such as found in media, and (c) religious restrictions that address modesty, shame, guilt, elective incentives for virginity; (Dale & Keller, 2019; Regnerus, 2005; Sharma, 2011; Sellers, 2017).

As a result, children from conservative Christian backgrounds often experience low sexual self-esteem, anxiety, confusion, guilt, and inadequate sexual information linked to discomfort with their bodies and responses to sex, which in turn may lead to sexual dysfunction (Dale & Keller, 2019; Jayne et al., 2020) and sexual dissatisfaction in later couple relationships (Hirsch, 2015; Pariera, 2016).

Notwithstanding the role of the school in sex education, conservative parents may allow proactive conversations about sex in school but still desire their children to abstain from sex until marriage (Dent & Maloney, 2016). Similarly, conservative parents may mirror the values of the church concerning sex within marriage and abstaining from premarital sexual behavior, demonstrating the direct influence of the church in socializing children concerning sexual values, beliefs, and ideals.

### **Research Objectives and Research Questions**

In light of these findings, this paper will explore the influence of sociocultural messaging on the development of sexual scripts among newly married conservative Protestant women. Specifically, this paper will examine the socialization of conservative Protestant women through sociocultural, religious, and familial messaging regarding their sexuality. To facilitate this process, the researcher explored how the three layers of sexual scripting—intrapsychic, interpersonal, and cultural scenarios inform this process (Gagnon

& Simon, 2005). A grounded theory approach was utilized to identify the theoretical underpinnings of sexual scripting which influences how they think about sex and sexuality internally and the expression of it in single and married life.

## **Methodology**

### **Recruitment**

Participants were recruited from social media sites (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Reddit) and local churches in the Southern California area that met the criteria of identifying with the fundamentalist Protestant belief that Jesus Christ alone grants eternal salvation (through conversion) and a belief in the written authority and literal interpretation of the Bible (Hunter, 1981; Perry, 2019; Sellers, 2017; Woodberry & Smith, 1998). The researcher's selection of churches involved a screening process of religious-Christian websites and official records (i.e., church doctrines). Participants were also encouraged to share the flyer with others to enact a technique known as snowball sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Participants were screened based on inclusion and exclusion criteria; therefore, women who were (a) practicing conservative Protestants, (b) in a heterosexual marriage, (c) aged 20–40 years, (d) married for 1 to 5 years, and (e) currently in their first marriage (i.e., never divorced) were included. Women who were (a) divorced, (b) separated from their partners, and (c) in a long-distance relationship were excluded. Twenty-eight women were screened, using the study's inclusion criteria, 19 were eligible, and 16 agreed to participate. Study participants' demographics included ages 25 to 34, identification as conservative Protestants, and marriage for an average of

2.5 years. Participants identified as White (8), Black (5), Asian (1), Hispanic (1), and Biracial (2) and were well educated with a bachelor's degree or higher.

Participants were recruited from May–September 2020. The Institutional Review Board of Loma Linda University approved this study.

### **Data Collection**

Interviews were conducted from August to October 2020. Data were collected using a semi structured interview guide to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences and perspectives. The researcher piloted the study using a retest process to form the final interview guide used for this study.

Participants were asked to review and complete the demographic and informed consent forms before their scheduled interview. They then took part in a web-based interview on a video conferencing platform (i.e., Zoom). Each participant was interviewed once with the potential for a follow-up interview to discuss or clarify answers from the first interview. Participants were asked questions about their sexuality, intimacy and Christianity, and views on sexual behavior. Sample questions include What were the messages or ideas concerning sexuality you heard or experienced growing up? and What were the challenges you have faced in navigating the process of being a sexual being (i.e., a person who experiences sexual attraction and desire)?

Individual interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviewees received a \$10 gift card for participation. Data collection was done until saturation of significant concepts and categories was achieved (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In addition to

the interview data, all project team members maintained field notes to augment the analysis process.

### **Data Analysis**

For this study a grounded theory approach was used to form a framework to understand how the sociocultural context informs the conservative Protestant woman's sexuality (Morse et al., 2016). The researcher transcribed each interview verbatim and reviewed each one thoroughly. Transcribed interviews were coded using a Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory framework. The researcher used QSR-NVIVO to code and analyze the dataset, which was analyzed using the constant comparative method. Data were grouped into central ideas from the interviews to form focused codes.

Theoretical coding was then used to generate relationships between the codes and categories in which themes were formed (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The researcher and research assistants participated in member checking and cross-checking codes to control bias in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Morrow, 2005). The theoretical framework was formed from the results of these codes. The study does not provide any information about the participants that could reveal their identity.

### **The Researcher**

The primary author of this study locates herself as a Nigerian American female who identifies as a conservative Protestant with Pentecostal foundations. As a single conservative protestant who grew up in predominantly Christian circles, the process of navigation and negotiating one's sexuality has also been a significant part of her journey. As a family life educator, she has had the privilege of interacting with people who

question the role of their faith in their sexual journeys. Similarly, while working as a medical family therapist in a women's health setting, she has also witnessed the struggles women experience in managing issues of sexuality and their process of expressing it.

As a single conservative Protestant, she acknowledges her predisposition to subjectivity; moreover, her core beliefs on sexual activity and her research goal of provoking conversations regarding Christian sexual ethics could bias the research findings. As a result, she recognizes that her thoughts regarding sexual activity before marriage may have introduced unnecessary bias to the study. To safeguard against response or researcher bias, she intentionally ensured her conclusions did not reflect her experience as a Christian woman. Due diligence was observed in reviewing the transcripts with the participants and fact-checking the data while keeping a reflexive journal and paying close attention to detailed field notes. Research assistants were also recruited to help with the coding of data to facilitate data accuracy and eliminate any biases that could emerge.

## **Results**

The purpose of this study was to explore how conservative Protestant women might understand their sexuality as an early married conservative Christian, given their sociocultural context. These influences were viewed through the lens of sexual scripting (Gagnon & Simon, 2005) to identify the influence of cultural scripts on the navigation of their interpersonal scripts, which impacted their negotiation of their intrapsychic scripts. The use of grounded theory produced three major categories, which helped to explain the



cultural influences: (a) family culture, (b) church culture, and (c) the larger culture as shown in Table 1.

*Table 1: Summary of Sociocultural Influences*

Theme	Key Categories	Key Findings
Sociocultural influences	Family	Sibling influence Parental influence External family influence Absent voices
	Church	Christian culture ideals Purity culture Church influence (negative and positive) Expectations from church community
	The Larger Culture	Media influence and cultural impacts Friends and peers

### **Influence of Familial Culture**

For many of the women in this study, family played a significant role in how they viewed sex and how sexual boundaries were formed. The women in this study described their sexual socialization in the home as “nonexistent” or “existent with boundaries.” The data collected showed

that the family was vital in developing sexual scripts and the origin of the social construction of their sexuality. From the data, three major areas were highlighted as distinct: (a) the mother’s influence, (b) the impact of siblings, and (c) the silence surrounding sexual issues.

Participants like Taylor learned early “from family [that] expectations were that we should not participate in any activities, whether it is dating, kissing, sex, anything until marriage” and was centered in Christian ideals. The family, including external family members like grandparents, aunts, and uncles, played a formative role in

educating and enforcing sexual ideals as well. According to the data the family was also the context for the groundwork for the development of guilt, shame, and fear. For most participants, the trifecta of guilt, shame and fear was used by their parents to help to enforce sexual ideals for their “protection,” sometimes going as far as to use fear tactics instead of having conversations about normal sexual development.

Alexia stated:

My mom tried so hard to keep me from having sex and getting pregnant that she even told me—I had a heart murmur when I was 18, 19—She told me, “If you get pregnant, you’re going to need a heart transplant.” Very extreme. This is always her story: “I had a friend.” Her thing was like “I had a friend who had a heart murmur. She had a baby. Now she’s short of breath, and she can’t perform her daily activities. Her life is miserable. Now she needs a heart transplant.” For the longest time, that was the message I had. I remember I was like “I can’t have a kid. I can’t have a kid because my body can’t handle it.” Having that message in my brain for over 10 years, it’s just like I truly believe if I get pregnant right now, I’m going to die because that was the message fed. I think that’s why it’s a big deal for me when she said, “You’re going to be an amazing mother” because she’s never said that. It’s always been, “If you get pregnant, you’re going to die.” Now it’s transitioned to like “When you get pregnant, you’re going to be a great mom.

The messages and conversations were often characterized by a lack of knowing the reasoning behind their parents’ ideals. The participants, who were told a “why,” understood that sex before marriage brings “dishonor to the family or pregnancy,” which brought it back to shame not only to God but to the family as well, and induced guilt as a

consequence of engaging in any sexual behavior. This was reported by eight of the 16 participants, who discussed how they experienced family-induced guilt after participating in premarital sexual intercourse. For example, Khloe described how she experienced no guilt after having sex with her boyfriend; however, she felt the guilt of disappointing her father for whom she had signed a sexual purity contract with at the age of 15. She said:

Definitely, guilt and shame. I felt guilty and shameful even for the stuff that we were doing, even though that wasn't sex because it's all kind of jumbled. Even though we didn't have sex, I still was doing stuff that I knew my parents wouldn't approve of because they thought that the church didn't approve of that. Knowing that, I had a lot of guilt and shame for even what I was doing, even though I wasn't having sex.

Within the familial construct a noted difference emerged in how sexual ideals and expectations were shared based on who was sharing it and who was present when it was shared. To provide more context, the mother's influence is addressed first below.

### ***Mothers' Influence***

Mothers were noted as very influential in these women's lives and how they perceived their sexuality, including gender ideals. For these participants, they either heard positive or negative messages about waiting for marriage. Those who heard positive messages focused on waiting for someone to share that special moment with and having "sexual integrity." For others, their mother shared fear-inducing stories of how their lives could be "destroyed" by having sex before marriage with the consequence of pregnancy. They were also seen to be instrumental in teaching their daughters about female and male sexual roles, how men are supposed to pursue and how to keep their sexuality for their

husbands as a gift. One participant's mother had conversations early on about thinking critically about her sexual decisions and how this positively influenced her sexuality in marriage:

The way God created sex is to be a situation between you and your husband, and it's something that is going to be beautiful, and it makes you one in not just a physical way, but in an emotional way and spiritual way. . . . She was great about it, and she basically said like "Good thing, you don't have to do it anytime soon." . . . If I'm uncomfortable, if I'm unhappy, if I'm whatever, then take a step back and say, "Okay, is this something that is good for me? Is this something that God would want for my happiness, for me to be best, whatever?"

For some, conversations around sex were delayed or raised because of exposure to sexual material in which the ideal of marital-confined sexuality was reaffirmed. Kendall and Khloe shared how they were asked to "cover their eyes" whenever any sexual behavior was portrayed on television to keep them "innocent." Over time they internalized the "implicit message" that sex "is dirty, it's bad, and it's only for marriage." Ironically, sex becomes acceptable in marriage, and "you're just supposed to be fine with it. How is that okay?"

Christina also provided an example:

Again, it was one of those things where everyone was talking about [sex] at school. I remember confronting my mom like "Hey, Mom. What's sex?" She's like "Oh, I'll tell you later." Later that weekend or that day or something she was busy. I kept on asking her because she kept on ignoring me.

Being married or growing older allowed for more direct conversation with their mothers because participants were old enough to handle these conversations. Their mothers also felt minor discomfort in discussing these concepts with their children and sometimes sharing their own stories of premarital sex even though the women shared how beneficial it would have been if they had been able to have these conversations much earlier. One participant shared how being a mother herself has enabled her to understand her mother's discomfort.

### *Siblings*

Another interesting concept that emerged from this study was the impact of having siblings, especially brothers. For Tracie, even though her mom was able to provide her sexual education as a physician and being able to describe "semen being glucose," her mother instilled in her gendered norms of sexuality and enforced them by making sure she was "home by 10 p.m. and other things" and that she had to "gatekeep" her sexuality by teaching her that "men only want one thing." Her brother "could do anything at any time . . . because he was a guy and could not get pregnant" and was not given any explicit messages about his sexuality. For other participants, their sexual education came in response to something her brother did; for example, one participant was lectured about the perils of pornography when her older brother was discovered watching it.

Participants had an understanding with their brothers that they were not allowed to do "what *they* were doing" even if they were the same age. Some were taught sexual mores apart from their brothers and were not allowed to be in the same room as their brother while they received their sexual education.

### *In the Silence*

For some participants sexuality was not discussed at home. For example, Georgia stated, “I grew up going to church. I think that at some point, I learned that sex was meant for marriage. I think that was the message I was given for sure by the church, but I don’t remember having those kinds of conversations with my parents.”

Alexa said, “In childhood, it was very much like something that my family did not talk about. To be honest, I think in childhood, it’s maybe whatever I saw on TV or in a movie. In terms of it being explained to me in a family setting, not at all.”

Sexuality was discussed at home in response to an event, leaving these participants to look for information themselves, depend on the education system, church, or their own sources for their sexual education—adults and married women. Tasha said, “To me, looking back, that was so hurtful to me that my mom—she didn’t know any better—didn’t even talk to me about that stuff. My dad didn’t talk to me about that stuff. It was very hush-hush.”

Participants expressed their disappointment and hurt with negative consequences. Stella, now a married woman, said:

It was difficult for me to be free. Even though it was uncomfortable, it was a safe space and we moved slowly; I wasn’t really engaging because I was so conscious about “Am I doing this right or is it okay for you?” I could pinpoint that to just never having open conversations with a married person who’s close to me, in my family or church family.

Another avenue of silence was present in the lack of conversation with their fathers. Some participants said that most of their sexual education—directly or

implicitly—came from their mothers, but their fathers were either silent or offered protection instead of conversations by using purity rings or raising them to be assertive.

Liz stated:

It wasn't a stipulation of you have to do this. It was really cute. Granted, he did it for me in such a way that I don't think it was an actual purity ring. I thought it was, but his thing with the narrative he gave me was like "I will protect your heart until you find someone else to, and then I will very willingly and lovingly give it to them but still watch out for him. I'll kill him if he moves too fast." I was like "I get you." Again, I never talked to my dad about sexual stuff. It was never like a "Don't have sex." It was literally like a heart, and it had that he would protect my heart, and he would look out for me, and he would always back me until he could trust someone that I trusted with that.

Lacy recounted a conversation with her father. He had said:

"You're married to me until you get married to your husband." . . . Being a virgin until marriage was still something that was important to him at that time in terms of his values. Our conversations were strained. I remember in high school—that's when he gave me this—He was like "It's not a purity ring. Just saying that you're committed to Jesus before boyfriends." I was like "That sounds like a purity ring, but okay." When I did end up having sex with my first boyfriend in high school, [he] was like "I'm not angry. I'm just disappointed." That was really interesting. Growing up, I knew really well where my dad stood when it comes to that even though he was doing his best to be gentle about it.

Only two of the participants said they received some form of education from their fathers. One father had children out of wedlock; the mother of the other participant was more reserved about sexual topics; thus the conversation was left to her father.

### **Influence of Church Culture**

Another primary agent of influence is the church and the culture embedded in it. Under this influence participants highlighted two significant factors in the experiences: (a) ideals influenced by the purity culture of the church and (b) expectations and roles advocated in their church communities.

### ***Church Ideals and Purity Culture***

Participants stated that the purity culture of the church played a significant role in forming interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts for this population. Like the messages they received from their families, the church was another institution that perpetuated the idea of sexual purity and sexual expression only in the context of marriage. For most of these participants, the church played a significant role in creating the sexual standards they lived by and served as the source of sexual education based on biblical principles and morality for their sexuality before marriage and even in marriage. Some participants stated that although sex was not explicitly discussed from the pulpit, parishioners understood that sex was something “that should be done by a man and a woman under the marriage covenant.”

Liz explained:

The narrative from the church was very much like—It was almost—sex was never seen as like something to bring you closer. It was seen as a means to an end. It was seen as a one-time thing you do to have a kid, and that is all. . . . I



think the way the church displayed it is like you have sex once to have a kid or if you're married, you just skip sex and have the kid. It was never seen as a way to be close and a way to build your relationship on that.

One idea that was often discussed was the idea of virginity. The participants described how their virginity was the benchmark for holiness and purity. Sometimes it was metaphorically worn as a badge of honor. It became a transactional piece that allowed others to know how much worth and value one brings to a marriage and the community, so much so that after marriage, some of the participants had a noted sense of loss because virginity had been heavily ingrained in their identity. Most of the participants discussed how their sexuality was policed by the idea of fear, which was closely influenced by guilt and shame either by sharing fear-inducing stories of what would happen or had happened to people who disobeyed this commandment.

Stella said:

Homosexuality is wrong, and if you have an STD, you probably deserve it because that's why God created marriage so that you're only with one person, and you don't have these issues of AIDS and chlamydia and XYZ. With church, even now, I think yes, it's very interesting, but those are the messages. It's not talked about but then demonized if it's not within marriage. Then if you happen to find yourself in a situation as unfortunate as contracting a disease, it is your fault because you didn't do what God said.

Alternatively, teaching sexual analogies that describe what happens when a woman's virginity is gone can affect her finding a spouse. Most of the participants recalled experiences in their childhood, teenage years, or adulthood from a church

program or camp. Many shared examples of stories in which their sexuality was compared to a flower: Every time a woman gives herself to a man, she is “losing petals from her flower.” Another analogy was that of cake: Every time she sleeps with someone, she gives away “a slice of your cake.” Lacy elaborated: “It was a lot of metaphors around giving away pieces of your heart and that only Jesus can make it whole again. I think there is one of putting food dye in water and (how having sex) affects like you being stained (like the dye).”

### ***Church Community***

Participants acknowledged the effect of the Christian community on their understanding of their sexuality. They shared the social consequences of failing to behave according to the standards of their community. According to this code the complexity of being a sexual individual who also belongs to a collectivistic community at the same time was raised many times in terms of membership in an honor-and-shame culture, not necessarily honoring God but honoring the community (i.e., parents, the pastors, the congregations, and even one’s peers) and shame (i.e., bringing shame to the community) for engaging in behaviors considered sinful. Kendall recounted her experience in talking to church friends about sex and the shame she felt:

We had been friends for a year at that point. It took me another year for me to tell them like “By the way, just so you know, like don’t assume people are virgins when they’re getting married and make a big deal out of it” because I was totally not. They were like “Why didn’t you tell us?” I’m like “Because I thought you knew already.” That tells me about their messages. It was a lot of like—the few people I did tell that I was sexually active before I got married were checking

in on me like “How’s your spirituality? How’s your faith going?” Trying to hold me accountable to a thing that I didn’t want to be held accountable for or it wasn’t their place to—They got nosy, I guess, which just contributed to the feelings of shame. I’m not supposed to be doing this. There’s this black mark on me—on my soul—that I can’t ever get rid of. I have a big church message from growing up—every time you have sex with someone, it’s like you’re ripping off a piece of your heart and giving it to them.

Being one’s brother’s keeper and not doing anything that will “make your fellow Christian man stumble were emphasized. You shouldn’t be wearing anything that shows your cleavage. You shouldn’t be making out to arouse your boyfriend because then they might have bad thoughts, or you might have sex,” said Georgia. For most of the participants, engaging in sexual behavior meant either lying to others to be able to engage in community or withdrawing for fear of being judged. Two participants shared their sorrow over watching congregants excommunicated from their congregation because of premarital sex with one resulting in pregnancy. Only women were punished, and the men were given “a slap on the wrist.” One participant shared her fears:

I think I was so afraid of disappointing people. I was so afraid of having to tell my friends that I’d had sex. I feel like we do put it on this pedestal of like it’s like the most important thing ever. You could drink and do drugs, but don’t have sex. That is the ultimate. Ultimately, I was afraid of disappointing people.

A few of these participants found the accountability demanded by of their church community helpful to keeping them aligned with their religious beliefs and standards. For others, their church community was where they found the answers they were looking for

and sought advice about making decisions they might have regretted. Kamree shared a positive experience she had with someone in her church community:

She was our service school teacher. At the time my cousin, my sister and I, we had all decided we're losing our virginity this year. We were like 15, 16, 14. We had a conversation with . . . our service school teacher. She really did a good job telling us why it's important. It's important to know if you're ready, if this is really something you want to do. Not telling us that we shouldn't do it at all but really trying to explain how important it is for us to make that decision.

### **The Larger Culture**

The last agent of influence defined by the participants' experience was the larger culture, that is, any other influence not part of the church or their families that has implications for these women's sexual scripts. Two emerging influences for this category were media and friends.

### ***Media***

Participants shared how their sexual ideas were heavily influenced by secular media composed of nonreligious material, and Christian media. In terms of secular media, the way they learned and formed sexual scripts derived from television, movies, and magazines like *Cosmopolitan*. Those who had no conversations with their parents or church personnel about sex looked to secular media to give them the answers they sought. These messages ranged from being "sexually free" to contrasting messages like "not giving it up too freely." Many participants agreed that although the messages promised sexual freedom, they were also centered on male pleasure. Gabriella stated:

I got a lot of messages about how being sexy is being beautiful. You have to be attractive in order to be successful. I think that a lot of those things have stuck with me, too, over time. Sometimes I still think those things...the more you show, the better, or whatever . . . with magazines and things like that...I was always reading things about how to better please your partner. It was all about everyone else.

Taylor described the expectations of male sexual behavior and the weight of protecting sexual boundaries:

Sexual expectations of men is that they are going to be doing it all the time. They are going to want it all the time. They're always thinking about it, and that they cannot control it. And so it is up to you to turn on and off the switch. Yes, the messages were usually aggressive and like "Oh, they're going to break your heart. They're going to leave you. They're going to use you."

In order to counter the secular media sources, Christian media was used to share teachings and information primarily disseminated through books, especially religious sexual ideals. Most participants reported that *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (citation) was a popular book given to them and brought into study groups during their teen years. Furthermore, *Captivating* (citation) taught principles of femininity that one participant described as "active male, passive female." Some other participants mentioned books like *Messages to Young People* (citation) and *Adventist Home*, (citation) which were required reading; however, most of them admitted to never finishing the books. Taylor said:

It leaves people in the dark, and if they do want to find out stuff, they have to go to the world. Not that I think that anything's wrong with some of the things

that are out there, but it's important for people to have a variety of information. The information that I found within my religion or around my church has just been, "Don't do it." Then no one talks about doing it.

### ***Friends***

An interesting view presented from the data was the importance of one's friends, not only as a source of information but also as a source of empowerment, self-exploration, and accountability. Friends were regarded as more influential than family and sometimes church when the participants created interpersonal sexual scripts. Most of these women credited the friends they made outside the church during their teen years or young adulthood with whom they questioned what they had been taught as opposed to what they wanted to do or become. Lacy said:

As I got more into high school, I started having a number of friends who weren't connected with my church, and that was a rude awakening. The friends who were very sexually active and were very open about that, and who came from atheist or more secular homes and didn't have those same messages [about sex]. Christina stated:

... "Good girls don't have sex"—there was a girl, and it was pretty common knowledge that she was having sex. I said, "Gosh. She's such a horrible person." My friend was like "Just because she's having sex doesn't mean she's a horrible person." I was like "Oh." I just never thought of people as multidimensional, that there's more to somebody than just these actions, and there's so much that goes into somebody's decision to have sex. It just was like

“Oh, you could be nice, and you could be fooling around with boys.” That’s not mutually exclusive.

For participants who engaged in premarital sex, their friends were instrumental in how they created their internal narratives about being a “good girl” instead of a “bad girl” who has sinned against God either by reminding them that their worth was not tied to their sexual history or by reinforcing the shame and guilt imposed by the church and their families.

## **Discussion**

In the current study how the familial culture, church culture, and the larger culture informed conservative Protestant women’s understanding of their sexuality were explored. Sexual script theory was used to bring insight to the ways in which these major themes played a role in the conceptualizations of the participants of their sexual selves, their erotic interactions, and their meaning making. Sexual scripts help to elucidate how one’s sexuality is understood and navigated through social interactions that impact one’s cultural and historical context These are learned both through “classical and operant conditioning” (McCormick, 2010).

In this study, how these women came to learn the sexual scripts informing their personal view of their sexuality derived from three major influences: familial culture, the church culture and the larger culture as shown in Table 1 above.

### **The Influence of Familial Culture**

In sexual scripting one's familial culture plays an important role in forming interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts (Gagnon & Simon 2005). This study reiterated what many studies have

shown, that for this sample, their sexual socialization begins at home (Eisenberg et al., 2006, Pasqualini & De Rose, 2020; Regnerus, 2005); however, with this population family values were rooted in Christian values, and their experience with sexual socialization was either direct or indirect.

Direct influence comprised conversations that explicitly informed the participant about expected sexual behavior, ideals, and attitudes, and indirect influence came implicitly from actions and silence (Regnerus, 2005). In terms of direct communication, mothers tended not only to take on the role of teaching their daughters about sex (Wilson et al., 2010) but were also tasked with policing and sparking fear in their daughters, sharing stories about how premarital sex can ruin their lives, lead to pregnancy, and cause death. Conversations about sex were focused more on moral ideals than education about sexual development, sexual practice, and contraception (Regnerus, 2005). Mothers were the primary influence in the development of these women's cultural sexual scripts, especially in learning with whom, when, and how sex is to be enacted and the setting of sexual boundaries (Allsop et al., 2021).

In cases of participants without mothers, grandmothers took on the education responsibility, assuming the social role of the mother in leading the discussion of sexuality. Some participants, however, were able to converse with their mothers about sex when they grew older or married and were considered ready to have sexual conversations



(Pariera, 2016; Wilson et al., 2010; Wilson & Koo, 2010). Participants lamented that by then it was too late.

In terms of indirect influences, most of the participants stated that the lack of or dismissal of sexual conversation conveyed an understanding that sex was a topic they were not allowed to discuss, participate in, or ask questions about (Sellers 2017). An interesting finding was that Fathers, often silent on the matter and leaving the conversation to mothers, offered purity rings, virginity contracts, and protection, including threats to harm anyone who sexually violated their daughters. Only two participants shared that their fathers had discussed sex with them.

Another major pattern that emerged from the study was how siblings changed how sexual conversations took place. From the literature, fathers with sons and daughters were seen to communicate less about sexual topics than mothers do (Wilson et al., 2010). However, in this study, parents with sons had their conversations separate from their daughters. If a conversation occurred in the presence of their daughter, it was in reaction to an event. Having older siblings created more opportunities for the women to listen to conversations about sex, either through the trickling down of information from their parents or conversations with their siblings alone.

Parental responses to sex-related conversations or materials causing reactions that the participants internalized is noteworthy. For example, parents' telling their daughters that sex is only for marriage and knowing about it is unnecessary until they are married can lead to ignorance about the body, desires, and wants. This can later develop into issues with anxiety, guilt, confusion, and low sexual self-esteem, which these participants

noted had impacted their marital relationships (Dale & Keller, 2019; Jayne et al., 2020; Sellers, 2017).

The results of this study show the importance of creating a balanced view of sexuality within the family framework. If the familial context provides space for conversations about the uniqueness and value of gender, sexual development, boundaries, and appropriateness, daughters can learn how to have open conversations with space for negotiation (Balswick & Balswick 2013). They can learn about their sexual selves in ways that foster confidence, agency, and interactional competence with themselves and the world around them (Dale & Keller, 2019; Sharma, 2011).

### **Influence of Church Culture**

Another primary agent of influence that emerged from this study is the church. Previous studies have shown that church culture is a major influence on the lives of female members via church ideals (based on purity culture) and their communities (Dale & Keller, 2019; Sellers, 2017; Sharma, 2011).

Church cultural experience was noted to play a significant role in how interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts for these women were formed. Similar to the sexual scripts that they learned from their families, the church was another institution that perpetuated the ideal of sexual purity in singleness and sexual expression in marriage; the concept of virginity equated with a woman's virtue (Sharma, 2011; Turner, 2017). For these women sex was taught as marital privilege, and anything outside that was a violation of interpersonal codes of conduct and biblical rules (Sharma, 2011). Another concept that was often discussed with these participants was the "badge of honor" that their virginity holds, which was coined as the virginity badge in this study. As seen in the

study done by Bay-Cheng et al. (2018), this study also supported the paradox that a woman's social worth and character is derived from her sexuality while at the same time, so much of her sexuality is also dependent on her ability to control men's, with virgins being viewed more favorably than other women who have engaged in sexual activity before marriage. Their virginity was the benchmark for purity and holiness, a transactional piece that allowed others to know how much they were worth. It brought honor to their families. It helped to gain social standing and seemed to hold value in their community, so much so that after marriage, some of the participants noted a sense of loss of identity. Others, who chose to have sex prior to marriage, felt they had to maintain the façade of their virginity, in some cases by lying to continue to be accepted by their communities (Sharma, 2011; Sellers, 2017). This idea begins to permeate every part of their lives to the point of denying that one has ever had sex, to be able to be a member of your church community still and have a role of leadership as well. This shame begins to permeate their lives and, in some cases, makes them feel less than and degraded. It was not surprising to hear these women talk about how the virginity badge still played a role after being married; subconsciously, some of the women were able to acknowledge that they felt a sense of loss without their virginity badge and were forced to find their new identity into being wife instead but not a sexual being.

Participants also experienced accountability and, for some, the policing of their sexuality. These were expressed by using fear accompanied by guilt and shame. Christian ideals were enforced through sexual analogies, fear-inducing stories about the consequences of premarital sex or social shame. Sexual analogies were used to teach what happens when a woman gives up her “gift of virginity” and how it impacts her

finding a spouse. Participants shared a variety of metaphors they were taught to illustrate how their virginity was tied to their worth. For example, virginity was likened to a cake, and every time a woman had a sexual partner, she would give away a slice. If she gave away all her “slices,” she would have nothing left for her spouse; and she would be undesirable. The women internalized the messaging that sexual interactions reduced their self-worth while causing a sense of guilt and shame (Dale & Keller, 2019; Sharma, 2011). A few of these participants, however, found the accountability of their church community helpful to keeping them aligned with their religious beliefs and standards. Others found the answers in their church community and sought advice about making decisions they would have regretted (Sharma, 2011).

Repeatedly, the participants described how the church culture reinforced social consequences to reiterate and uphold sexual ideals. A heavy emphasis was placed on the standards of Christian femininity based on cultural gendered ideals (Dale & Keller, 2019; Sharma 2011). Usually strong consequences were inflicted on women, with women being the primary agents that use religious teachings to control sexual behavior, although the teachings are written by men, with male partners receiving minimal reprimand (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). One participant stated that she had witnessed multiple women called out in front of congregations, publicly shamed and excommunicated for being pregnant, while the offending male was not acknowledged. The Christian community is very reminiscent of a collectivistic culture (Sharma, 2008) that uses honor and shame to keep its members in good standing with the community as a whole. Participants disclosed how they weighed their options of what to share or what to keep in secret in order to remain in the community (Sharma, 2011).

With this, the church, can also become a place where open, safe conversations can happen where sex is not dangled as a "gift" that they will be given for good sexual behavior during their singleness. These women all shared the need for Christian communities and leaders to create a space in which religious teaching can empower Christian women to find ways to create a holistic curriculum in which one's sexuality is not separate from who they are spiritual, versus the idea of a "sexual prosperity gospel" that promises a good sex life in marriage if they can commit to no sexual behaviors before their wedding. A marriage that they felt that they were unprepared for due to confusing messages, the shame that comes with asking for help and much guilt to navigate. Most participants rarely had the opportunity to have conversations about their sociocultural scripts dealing with sexuality, and the dissonance carried over into their marriages and even affected their view of God. Thus, a need exists for more practitioners to work with Christian women to navigate the complexities and help them deconstruct their sociocultural context.

### **Influence of the Larger Culture Outside**

The larger culture refers to any other influence that is not part of their family or church text that has an effect on their sexual script formation. Media and friends were some of the major impacts noted under this category. All participants reported that media played a role in the construction of their views of their sexuality. With the lack of information from their families and the pressures from their church culture, most of the participants looked outside for answers and acceptance. A number of participants stated that sexual scripts were developed by consuming television, movies, magazines, radio, and music videos. Unfortunately, this added more confusion. Participants received

conflicting messages from the world and the church, causing cognitive dissonance in what they should do, what they wanted to do, and what they needed to do (Dale & Keller, 2019).

A participant said that the media played a major role in the way she saw herself, what is sexy, and what is not sexy. Based on that sexual script, she constantly compared herself to what men would find attractive. For many participants the cultural messages promised sexual freedom, all centered around male sexual pleasure. They reported that church culture also emphasized the idea that being a good wife meant keeping her husband satisfied.

In order to counter secular media messages, they either looked to or were given Christian books all based on purity ideals by authors such as Joshua Harris (2003) and others.

Many participants described friendships as more influential than family and church when creating their interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts. They discussed the influence of friends outside their church and familial communities in terms of information, empowerment, and self-exploration. These relationships challenged and enlightened participants. They witnessed behaviors antithetical to what was taught without the consequences of what they understood to be true, pushing them to examine what they believed and why they believed it. Above all they were able to experience for themselves aspects of forgiveness and acceptance when they could not do so in their church and familial spaces.

From this study, it is evident that children, teenagers, and young people who do not have accurate or adequate information of resources to interpret the body's natural

sexual expression and desires often experience stress, confusion, and guilt. Which are correlated with overall discomfort with sexual desire and arousal and can lead to eventual sexual dysfunction (Dale & Keller, 2019; Jayne, 2020). Participants from this study shared how messages around abstinence-only sex education based on morality alone, especially in the church, are known for their use of harmful analogies about sex and stories that enforce religious ideals of sexual purity as the primary token of self-worth. For these women, they are taught that sex is bad, dirty and dangerous until one is married and then it becomes holy or pure. With this, they are unfortunately not given a sense of personal ownership or given the space to explore what it mean to have a body with sexual functions and not only useful or can be acknowledged in reference to someone else. Sexual desires, curiosity, and exploration are entirely normal and developmentally healthy for adolescents, and body exploration and curiosity are normal and healthy for young children (Dale & Keller, 2019).

This study has shown that parents to create a non-judgmental, open space. Healthy sexual conversations can be modeled and embraced. Most participants rarely had the opportunity to have conversations about their sociocultural scripts dealing with sexuality, and the dissonance carried over into their marriages and even affected their view of God. Participants in the study showed their enthusiasm to have an opening for discussion for discussing sex and being surprised about how much they learned about themselves in sharing their stories. It is regrettable that a research interview process was the first time a married woman could discuss sex freely and process her sexuality without shame and judgment. Thus, a need exists for more practitioners to work with Christian women to navigate the complexities and help them deconstruct their sociocultural

context. This experience suggests that safe open forums are necessary for Christian about sex, their sexuality and their spirituality. With teenagers, young adults, married individuals, and especially women. These spaces can provide opportunities for girls and women alike. To deconstruct what they have heard, what they have been taught, and the ideals that have been enforced and will allow them to make their judgments and decisions based on their lived experiences, values, beliefs that they have come to form over the years.

### **Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions**

The data from this study highlight the importance of talking about sex and sexuality with children and age-appropriate ways throughout their lives by not only focusing on the Christian morality behind it but also by bringing in sexual development, sexual process, contraception, safe sex practices, and creating a space in which they too can learn and embrace not only God's plan for sex but also being able to own their bodies their and sexuality. This needs to be communicated versus an ideal versus a future ideal that would be "awakened" when the time is right. Without any idea of what it is, what it entails, and how they will also be active participants in their sexual process.

In turn, this will help Christian women have more sexual ownership and make their own sexual decisions confidently, not just over their bodies but their desires, urges, and practices. With whatever "virtue" may mean to them with their theology of God in an evolving world and church culture, that God and sex can indeed be used in the same sentence versus the "oxymoron" that a participant shared that it was.



Whether it is a parent, a pastor, an elder, a teacher, a therapist, or a sex educator, being intentional about discussing and examining their cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic scripts, where and who created them, do they agree with it, what beliefs do they hold that they no longer agree with but are embedded in them that they still feel guilty to do or act out? To be able to create opportunities which will help Christian women to explore theological and religious frameworks while sifting through their cultural and interpersonal sexual scripts. This will enable clients to create more informed intrapsychic scripts. Parties of influence must be mindful of holding a balance without sacrificing one for the other, allowing clients to decide for themselves to keep what works for them and release what no longer serves them.

The findings of this study must be viewed within its limitations. The population used in this study should not be seen as a representation of all conservative Protestants because other contexts such as state, country, denomination, may produce different results. These participants were from Southern California. The findings, this study still adds to the current research in Christian female sexuality and helps to make way for additional research in this area.

More research is needed to address the nuances of Christian sexuality and conservative Protestant perspectives. In addition, lived experiences of Christian women need to be taken into account as they navigate their sexual desires, roles, and schemas through multiple layers of social facets. Future research is needed in how conservative Protestant women and men create their sexual scripts from their sociocultural influences in different parts of the US and in other countries as well to determine similarities and differences in the range of sexual attitudes and how cultural sexual scripts for Christians,

change from region to region. Also, more research is needed to explore how conservative Protestant men also understand their sexuality based on their socio-cultural context and how these two sides (female and males understanding of their sexuality) navigate their sexual scripts with a dyadic relationship.

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## **CHAPTER SIX: ARTICLE 2**

### **WHAT'S FAITH GOT TO DO WITH IT? EXPLORING SEXUAL TRANSITIONS OF CONSERVATIVE PROTESTANT WOMEN NAVIGATING SEXUAL EXPRESSION FROM PREMARITAL TO MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS**

#### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to explore how conservative Protestant women process, navigate, express, and manage their sexuality during the transition from singlehood to marriage, a subject about which little research has been conducted. In this grounded theory study interviews were held with 16 married heterosexual conservative Protestant women, all in first marriages of five years or less. The results of this study highlight the gaps in the process of preparation during the women's premarital experience, exposing the conflict caused by the moral incongruence of sexual expression in marriage. The conclusion of this research was used to develop the Negotiation and Navigation of Sexual Self Marital Transition Model. Carrie Doehring's (2015) concept of lived theology was used to add meaning to the model.

**Keywords:** Lived theology, transition, sexual expression, moral incongruence

I think there is a big change because I think all of a sudden, one, you're supposed to flip this switch inside you that turns sex from something shameful into sex that's like God created sex to be beautiful in marriage...it's hard, I think, to get rid of that shame piece so easily and also being sexual. It's like "Oh, now I can tell people that I'm having sex," where before it was something much more private, and now it's acceptable in the Christian community and expected that you're having sex.

—Georgia

## **Background**

Although conservative Protestants comprise 80% of the world's Protestant Christian population (Jacobsen, 2011), limited research has been conducted on them and to a lesser extent on their premarital and marital sexuality (Claney et al., 2018;; Lefkowitz et al., 2004; McFarland et al., 2011). Even more so, gendered sexuality research on Christian conservatives is minimal (Claney et al., 2018; Daniluk & Browne, 2008; Ellison et al., 2011; Irby, 2014; Mahoney, 2008; Sellers, 2017) with limited focus on conservative Protestant women (Sharma, 2008, 2010).

Primarily, literature on Christian sexuality has centered on religiosity and church attendance (Ahrold et al., 2010; Ellison et al., 2011; Rosenbaum & Weathersbee, 2011), marital expectations (Ellison et al., 2011), sexual attitudes and behavior (Christopher & Kisler, 2004; McFarland et al., 2011), and extramarital and premarital sexuality (Hernandez-Kane & Mahoney, 2018; Perry, 2019). Most of the studies on Christian sexuality have been conducted with adolescents (McFarland et al., 2011; Perry, 2019;

Regnerus, 2005; Rostosky et al., 2004; Uecker 2008) compared to young adults (Ellison et al., 2011) and aging couples (McFarland et al., 2011).

A small body of research has been conducted on” sexual sanctification “in marriage (Hernandez, 2011; Hernandez-Kane, 2018; Leonhardt et al., 2020; Pargament, 2011) and marital satisfaction (Hackathorn et al., 2015; Leonhardt et al., 2020), yet little is known about how conservative Protestant women navigate the process of transition of their sexuality before and during marriage (Claney et al., 2020, Irby, 2014). Given this gap in the literature, this study was designed to enhance understanding of conservative women’s experience of the manner in which they navigate the change in sexual expression from premarital to marital during the process of transition.

### **Marriage and the Conservative Protestant Woman**

Past research has shown that the age of first marriage is usually earlier for conservative Christians compared to those following other religious traditions (Ellison et al., 2011). As of 1993, White conservative Protestants were more likely to marry by age 19 compared to Roman Catholics and Mormons (Hammond et al., 1993).

Conservatives privilege marriage and the nuclear family, regarding premarital and extramarital sex as a violation of biblical principles (Irby, 2014; Rosenbaum & Weathersbee, 2013). This often results in guilt and shame (Sharma, 2011). Studies found that conservative Protestant women reported submission and subservience with passive and repressed sexuality (Aune & Sharma, 2009; Sharma, 2008; Turner, 2017).

### **Marriage-Confined Sexuality**

Congruent with conservative religious teachings, only heteronormative (Irby, 2014) marriage-confined sexuality (Hernandez et al., 2011; Hernandez-Kane &

Mahoney, 2018; Mahoney et al., 2013) is condoned. Sex outside marriage is considered “forbidden fruit” (Sharma, 2008; Turner, 2017) and a religious violation of marital sanctification (Hernandez-Kane & Mahoney, 2018; Leonhardt et al., 2020).

Consequently, religious beliefs about marriage-confined sexuality may reduce open parental discussions about sex, sexually transmitted diseases, and unwanted pregnancies (Mahoney, 2008; Rosenbaum & Weathersbee, 2013).

Alternatively, some studies revealed that marriage-confined sexuality may enhance couple intimacy and mutual acceptance (Hernandez et al., 2011; Hernandez-Kane & Mahoney, 2018; Mahoney et al., 2013). These studies also showed that belief in the sanctity of marriage enriched couples’ commitment and shared interests (Mahoney et al., 2003, 2013; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005) and benefited problem-solving, forgiveness, and sacrifice (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009; Sabey et al., 2014). Notably, these benefits provide a narrow but meaningful view of marital sexuality.

Conservative Protestant women, therefore, tend to espouse complementarianism, the belief that “men are the initiators, leaders, providers, and protectors, while women are designed to be the sexual responders, helpers, and nurturers” (Perry, 2019, p. 13). This form of thinking informs and impacts sexuality in traditional Protestant culture by emphasizing femininity as a response to men’s power and highlighting empathy, nurturance, and compliance as female traits. A deeper understanding of sexual scripts that may perpetuate female-submissive sexuality is imperative (Sharma, 2008; Turner, 2017). Because of insufficient research on the impact of religion on sexual scripting behavior (McCormick, 2010) in particular for conservative Protestant women (Claney et al., 2018), this study was designed to provide meaningful explanations of sexual scripts that may

influence how conservative Protestant women transition from singlehood to marriage as they negotiate and express Christian sexuality.

## **Method**

To understand the intricacies of sexuality for Christian women, conservative Protestant women were the focus of this study. It was designed to elucidate how these women's transition from singlehood to marriage relates to their navigation of the change in sexuality in early marriage. The researcher specifically investigated how conservative Protestant women process, navigate, express, and manage their sexuality during this transition.

First, the term "conservative Protestant" was used in this study to denote someone who believes in the fundamental doctrine that Jesus Christ alone grants eternal salvation (through conversion). The Bible is the primary religious text for conservative protestants of which they use a literal interpretation of biblical scripture (Hunter, 1981; Perry, 2019; Sellers, 2017; Woodberry & Smith, 1998).

Second, sexuality was defined as one's capacity to respond to their physical environmental stimulants that may produce a sexual response due to their cognitive and social constructs (Goettsch, 1989). It encompasses thoughts, fantasies, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, roles, and relational components (World Health Organization [WHO], 2017). Sexuality may also be experienced or expressed through a variety of human or social attributes and involves the interaction of cultural and sociopolitical contexts (WHO, 2017). Consequently, sexuality is a social construct or cultural product that in turn shapes sexual behavior (Bass, 2016).

## **Participants**

Twenty-eight women were invited to participate using the study's inclusion criteria, of which 19 were eligible, and 16 agreed to participate. Study participants ranged in age from 25 to 34, identified as conservative Protestants, and were married for an average of 2.5 years. Participants identified as White (8), Black (5), Asian (1), Hispanic (1), and Biracial (2) and were well educated with a bachelor's degree or higher.

## **Recruitment**

Participants were recruited from social media sites (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Reddit) and local churches in the Southern California area that met the criteria of identifying with the fundamentalist Protestant faith. The researcher's selection of churches involved a screening process of Christian websites and official records (i.e., church doctrines). Participants were also encouraged to share the flyer with others to initiate snowball sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to find additional participants. All participants were screened based on inclusion and exclusion criteria; therefore, women who were (a) practicing conservative Protestants, (b) in a heterosexual marriage, (c) aged 20–40 years, (d) married for 1 to 5 years, and (e) currently in their first marriage (i.e., never divorced) were included. Women who were (a) divorced, (b) separated from their partners, and (c) in a long-distance relationship were excluded. Participants were recruited from May–September 2020. The Institutional Review Board of Loma Linda University approved this study.



## **Data Collection**

For this study, interviews were conducted from August to October 2020. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences and perspectives. The researcher piloted the study using a retest process to form the final interview guide used for this study.

Participants were asked to review and complete the demographic form and the informed consent form before their scheduled interview. They then took part in a web-based interview on a video conferencing platform. Each participant was interviewed once with the potential for a follow-up interview to discuss or clarify answers from the first interview. Participants were asked questions about their sexuality, intimacy and Christianity, and views on sexual behavior. Sample questions included the following: What were the messages or ideas concerning sexuality you heard or experienced growing up? and What were the challenges you faced in navigating the process of becoming a sexual being (i.e., a person who experiences sexual attraction and desire)?

Individual interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviewees received a \$10 gift card for participation. Data collection was done until saturation of significant concepts and categories was achieved (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In addition to the interview data, all project team members maintained field notes to augment the analysis process.

## **Data Analysis**

For this study, a grounded theory approach was used to further understand how conservative Protestant women navigate the change in sexual expression as they

transition from the premarital to the marital phase. The researcher transcribed each interview verbatim and reviewed each one thoroughly. Transcribed interviews were coded using a Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory framework. The researcher used QSR-NVIVO to code and analyze the dataset, which was analyzed using the constant comparative method. Data were grouped into central ideas from the interviews to form focused codes.

Theoretical coding was then used to generate relationships between the codes and categories in which themes were formed (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The researcher and research assistants participated in member checking and cross-checking codes to control bias in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Morrow, 2005). The theoretical framework was formed from the results of these codes. Pseudonyms were used to identify participants in order to maintain anonymity.

### **The Researcher**

The primary author of this study locates herself as a Nigerian American female who identifies as a conservative Protestant with Pentecostal foundations. As a single conservative protestant who grew up in predominantly Christian circles, the process of navigation and negotiating one's sexuality has also been a significant part of her journey. As a family life educator, she has had the privilege of interacting with people who question the role of their faith in their sexual journeys. Similarly, while working as a medical family therapist in a women's health setting, she has also witnessed the struggles women experience in managing issues of sexuality and their process of expressing it.

As a single conservative Protestant, she acknowledges her predisposition to subjectivity; moreover, her core beliefs on sexual activity and her research goal of

provoking conversations regarding Christian sexual ethics could bias the research findings. As a result, she recognizes that her thoughts regarding sexual activity before marriage may have introduced unnecessary bias to the study. To safeguard against response or researcher bias, she intentionally ensured her conclusions did not reflect her experience as a Christian woman. Due diligence was observed in reviewing the transcripts with the participants and fact-checking the data while keeping a reflexive journal and paying close attention to detailed field notes. Research assistants were also recruited to help with the coding of data to facilitate data accuracy and eliminate any biases that could emerge.

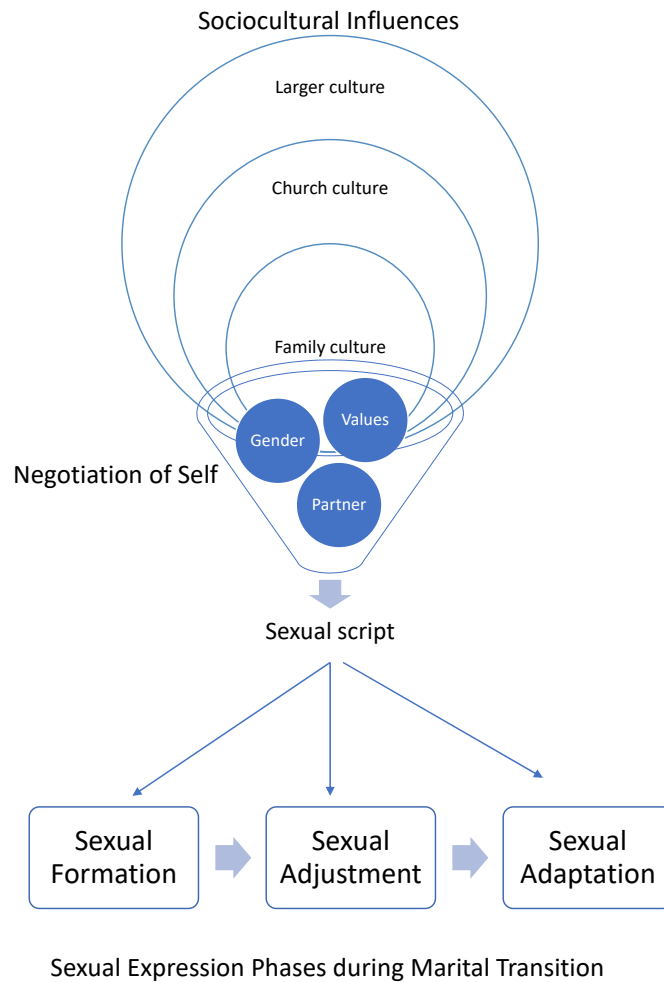
## **Results**

A grounded theory model was created from the data collected from this study. This model centered on the experience of conservative Protestant women and how they navigated and negotiated sexual expression from premarital to marital as shown in Figure 1. The three phases that women pass through in the navigation of sexual expression are the (a) sexual formation phase, (b) adjustment phase, and (c) sexual adaptation phase. The model also accommodates the interphase negotiations that women conduct as they move from phase to phase. These constant renegotiations are the (a) renegotiation of gender ideals, b) renegotiation with the partner or husband, and c) renegotiation of values.

### **Sexual Formation Phase**

The primary focus of this phase was how conservative Protestant women navigate sexual expression before marriage while adjusting their values and gender ideals and

negotiating with their partners. This is the phase that is foundational in the process in which girls and young women begin to explore their sexuality on an individual level and also with others, whether they are having sex or not. Elements of this phase are the (a) sexual awareness of the women, (b) compartmentalization of guilt and shame, and (c) sexual expectations and the renegotiation of sexual ideals that they had been taught or learned from childhood until they decided to marry; thus, this period is marked as her time of singleness before marriage. This includes factors that influence their process of navigating how sex would look and be like for themselves and in relationship with others. These can be influences (e.g., sociocultural sexual scripts) from their childhood, adolescent and young adult years or until marriage, including their engagement period.



*Figure 1: The Negotiation and Navigation of Sexual Self Marital Transition Model*

### ***Sexual Awareness***

For most of the participants, the time of singleness (including the engagement period) was not only a time of questioning internalized beliefs, values, and ideals but also learning how to handle the power of sexual expression and behavior, coupled with acknowledging that they also had to be socialized to set sexual boundaries with men. In this phase, the women made an effort to maintain their purity or virginity and sexuality.

Here they experienced conflict about sociocultural sexual scripts, church dogma, and expectations and how their ideas and beliefs aligned.

Participants who engaged in premarital sex (75%; including oral sex and intercourse) felt a sense of shock and, for some, disappointment about how easily and quickly engaging in premarital sexual behavior could occur, especially for those who had sworn they would never have sex before marriage. In fear and shame, one participant admitted to ending a relationship because she feared that she could not keep her sexual purity in a relationship with someone to whom she had an intense sexual attraction. This experience was one that many participants related to and expressed. Many of them shared stories of how they terminated relationships or were tempted to do so because of the sexual tension or the sexual passion that they were too frightened to explore or navigate for fear of engulfment by it. Others stated that they constantly negotiated with themselves and their partners about “how far is too far” and whether they had gone too far. Then they would “regroup and reassess . . . sexual boundaries.” One participant shared her struggle in her dating relationship, stating:

I think the first time we kissed, it was a very cinematic feeling. I’m kissing in the rain. Then you’re like pressing against each other; you’re doing all these things. Then afterward, you’re like “Oh shoot. I thought that it would be like a light kiss, no tongue, no body contact.” I was like “I just stepped past that real fast.” Then I think afterward...there’d be boundaries that we pushed, and then we have these convos later of like “Man, I feel really bad about what we did. We should try to push the boundary back.”

Two participants shared how they would end relationships as soon as they had sex once. The guilt for them was easier to maintain if they had sex one time with only that one person. Stella stated,

“I did it [sexual intercourse] premarriage with all sorts of guilt, and so I didn’t do it a lot. I would do it once and then stop. It’s very, very interesting. . . . I—literally with the partners I’ve had—I’ve only done it once with them premarriage. I’ve never had sex twice because I would always feel this debilitating guilt.”

For those who did not engage in premarital sex, avoidance became their way to remain safe. They believed that “If I am not doing it, then I will not touch it.” These participants relied on accountability from close friends and church groups and God, placing boundaries and measures on relationships to ensure that they would be able to save themselves till marriage. For example, one participant stated that she and her partner set limits on how much time they spent together— “till 10 p.m.”—and whenever sexual tension that could lead to sexual behavior arose, her partner would have to leave her house.

### ***Dealing with the Trifecta (Guilt, Shame, and Fear)***

With sexual awareness comes sexual responsibility and navigation of the challenges of what women believe and what their bodies want. In this phase, women are forced to navigate the moral incongruence between their moral beliefs and their sexual behaviors or desires. During their period of singleness, participants were challenged to look for ways to make sense of the dissonance they felt. For those who engaged in premarital sexual behavior, loneliness was a common theme.

Although none of the participants specifically identified feelings like loneliness, it was a common theme in their experiences. For most of them, engaging in sexual behavior caused them to hide or lie. Only two participants were open with their friends or parents about sexual activity before marriage. The others understood that if others knew, they could lose their social standing and friendships as well. Kendall said:

Then I got over the shame, and we got further. There was just a lot of feeling like...I had to hide myself. I couldn't be honest with people that I loved. Once I was sexually active for the first time, that was really hard-hitting.

With nowhere to turn, especially not to God because of their shame and guilt for disobeying Him, participants stated that they had to learn how to compartmentalize their sexuality, their personalities, and their relationships with God to be able to cope; otherwise, they looked to outside influences to make sense and to find acceptance for their decisions.

Taylor stated:

I felt guilty. Maybe that's a lie. Maybe I did feel disconnected. I didn't feel disconnected by [God]. I felt because of my shame, because of my guilt, I disconnected from God. I didn't feel like He was disconnecting from me.

For participants who were able to remain virgins until marriage, guilt and shame also arose. Masturbation was a typical sexual behavior that caused distress for the participants. It even led one participant to seek therapy, believing she had a sexual addiction for having strong sexual urges.

Georgia asked:



What is the biblical stance on masturbation? I still am questioning that. If you figure that out, I would love to hear it. How many Christian women do it who are single and trying not to have sex? Because I felt like I did, and I wanted to try and save that for marriage. I felt like I did want to save that piece for my husband because I felt like it was really special. It is something that's important.

This was also noted in how guilt was processed in light of their religious convictions, which most participants acknowledged as a struggle that would not end until they were married. This moral incongruence not only caused internal distress but also stress in their relationship with God. Some prayed for a husband to find sexual release; others prayed to be delivered from the desire to sin sexually.

Christina said:

I describe it as this cycle of "Okay, God. I'm not going to do it again." And you're doing okay, doing okay, then it happens. You're just like "Ugh, ugh, okay, I'm doing it. Okay, God, I'm sorry." And then it just keeps going.

### ***The Sexual Expectations and the Renegotiation of Sexual Ideals***

When renegotiating sexual ideals, the woman is armed with an awareness of sexuality, sensuality, and a taste of the erotic. She is forced to negotiate what she feels, what she believes, and the morals that have been ingrained in her from childhood. This is the period that sets a precedent for how she will present in her marriage sexually. She now has to decide what sexual expression will look like, how her relationship with God fits, and how realistic her standards and beliefs are to practice. In this phase she also learns how to negotiate sexual expectations with partners (e.g., deciding how far is too

far) or to allow herself to accept defeat in this area of sexual purity. Alexia recounted how she navigated this period with her husband-to-be:

Initially, we were very naive. We were like “No big deal. We’re not going to do anything.” That’s not realistic. We started kissing. Then we were like “Okay, we can’t make out. We can only kiss because making out is a little too much and resembles or it’s like the initial part of having sex.” It’s like that’s how we navigated. . . . Once we were kissing, I was like “Oh, okay, hold your horses. This is a little much. This is not safe.” We knew that wasn’t something that we could keep doing and not potentially going further than we wanted to before marriage.

It is important to note that this phase was experienced in two parts: the pre-engagement and engagement periods. During the post-engagement period (the period from engagement till marriage), the participants shared how they were forced to navigate what it meant to be a sexual person with desires, negotiate between guilt and shame, and how their sexual ideals were challenged and negotiated slightly differently depending on whether she was engaged or not. Post-engagement, participants were forced to choose between "creating stricter boundaries" or using this period to "explore" what sexual expression could look like in anticipation of marriage. Being engaged allowed for more freedom with approval from their community for being "almost married." Some participants were sexually active before being engaged but then decided to stop having sex before the wedding, as Georgia stated:

We went through a period where we did not have sex before we got married. It was like we were trying not to have sex, and then we did. Then we stopped having sex before the wedding...I felt like we both wanted it to be our wedding night to

be a little bit more special. Like we were wanted to take back something that we felt like we lost. We both had had sex before, and we wanted it to be special again.

While for others, waiting till marriage to have sex was done with constant renegotiation with herself and her partner and learning how to navigate what it means to be close to marriage but cannot engage in marital sexual activity. Boundaries around sexual behavior were either recreated, maintained, or loosened.

From this phase, the conservative Protestant woman moves into the adjustment phase with all she has learned and experienced.

### **Adjustment Phase**

During the adjustment phase, the main focus is on how the woman navigates sexual expression in marriage based on the sexual scripts of marriage she had been given while concurrently negotiating her values and gender roles and negotiating with her husband. She no longer anticipates marriage. She is now in the marriage and it may be different from the expectations she may have had.

The adjustment phase follows immediately after the vows are taken with God as their witness. What makes this phase important is the level of crisis the participants acknowledged in their experience in wading through the challenges they had in singlehood and how they translate that once married. Although the premarital phase has a clear end, the end of the adjustment phase is not so clear. But two main factors must be navigated and negotiated to move forward past this phase. The woman is challenged to navigate the reality of her marital sexual ideals and the status upgrade she has been given by virtue of the wedding ring she wears. As Khloe shared:

We didn't engage prior to marriage. In dating we were mindful of that, just trying to get to know each other and save that for marriage. Transitioning, it was very difficult, still very not knowledgeable of what my body likes. When we first got married, it was still a lot of experimentation, it was a lot of probing to see what my partner was okay with and me being okay with that too.

### ***The Negotiation of Marital Sexual Ideals***

In this phase of sexual expression, the conservative Protestant woman must explore how her interpersonal scripts conflict with her intrapsychic sexual scripts. During this time she must explore her convictions, ideals, and theologies surrounding her sexuality in the environment where she had been told that she would experience sexual freedom. She now has a permanent partner who also influences how she relates in the marital bed to his needs, ideals, and desires. In this phase she is forced to negotiate and navigate the expectations of what marital sex is supposed to look like or feel like.

Christina (whose statement was featured in the opening of this paper) and many other participants discussed how adjusting to this new sexual environment was not as easy as they had been told. Many of them likened this experience to a “switch.” Before marriage, they had to turn their sexuality off, and suddenly they are asked to flip it on because they were married. Kendall said:

I still think I have a tough time talking about it with my partner because it's so weird still to think about talking about sex and sexual things. Even anatomy used to be like “Ugh. Don't talk about it. Ugh. That's gross.” Then, now, it's supposed to be not gross. It's supposed to be beautiful. How can you tell yourself for 17

years that “Oh, it’s gross. It’s gross. It’s gross.” Then, for it not to be gross all of a sudden? You can’t just transition in a snap.

Many participants acknowledged how unprepared they were for the reality of the marital sexual experience and how different it was from premarital sex, when sex was deemed emotionally risky and they were more vulnerable. Under the influence of their spouses, most of the women realized that they had a limited understanding of sex, even for those with prior sexual experience.

Lacy described the concept of “sexual ownership,” which typically emerges at this point:

My husband! He’s so artsy or whatever, but he has this image of when each person within them has their own secret garden that includes your own sexuality and what that means for you individually as a person. He came into the relationship with his own already established blooming secret garden of his sexuality. I came in, and I neglected my secret garden because I didn’t want to look at it, I didn’t want to talk about it, and it had been damaged, and I wasn’t nourishing [it]. I wasn’t really even walking around in it because I didn’t want to or whatever. When you come into a marriage with someone, you then create a third secret garden that’s the two of you together. That doesn’t have to incorporate anything else from your gardens but should be bringing in elements of you both equally.

At the beginning of our marriage, it was like I didn’t know what I could bring to the table sexually. I didn’t know what I wanted to bring to the table. I didn’t know what I wanted to ask for or what I enjoyed. It was just a big shrug. What he

really asked of me was “I want you to figure out what you like, even independently of me. Just be with yourself and figure out yourself. . . .”

As far as the cultural messages and the messages from church, to use the garden metaphor, it’s the woman’s job to be a good gardener in the man’s garden. I’m like “Oh, yes, I’m going to make your experience beautiful and nice because you’re sexual and I’m not.” You shouldn’t even have a garden. You’re a godly woman. What are you doing with a garden? In a funny way, I feel like my marriage—because my husband is who he is—he handed me a pair of shears and a shovel and was like “Go fucking dig your garden. I’m not here for this to be mine like I don’t want it to just be mine,”

In this phase, the woman faces the task of figuring out who she is and what sexuality means to her and how she wants to express it with her husband with her biblical principles, still asking, “How far is too far?” One participant was conflicted about what she could ask for sexually. Could she ask to be choked? Could she ask for handcuffs? Was her marital sexual experience still holy if she did? Some participants stated that this time allowed them to explore and figure out who they were; with the help of their spouses and negotiation, they were able to practice negotiating with them during the premarital phase.

As the woman vacillates between her embedded beliefs and the sexual person she wants to be, her new status as a wife adds another layer to navigate.

### ***The Wedding Ring Club***

All the participants in this study acknowledged a difference in their view of themselves sexually and how others viewed them because of their new status as wives.

Most of the participants acknowledged what a surprise it was no longer to hide their sexuality and sexual attitudes and behaviors but to have sex—quite often. Many of them shared disappointment about giving up so freely after marriage something they had once so carefully guarded, and realizing how much of their identity was tied to their virginity as a single woman.

Another shift was in the evolution of expectations. One participant stated, “The Christian expectations never end; they just evolve.” In this phase, women are now welcome to the inner circle of people who not only have sex but can discuss it freely. Now their parents make sexual jokes and engage in innuendo. Their married small group at church discusses how to “please your spouse,” and the community asks when they plan to start a family. Some of the participants were bewildered to learn that even in marriage, they still had to live up to standards, contradicting the idea of the freedom they had promised. Even with all of this pressure, they understood that life on this side of the metaphorical fence was not only more free but also less lonely as long as they kept their premarital sexual experiences to themselves.

Stella stated:

I’m like “Fascinating now that I’m married, . . . yes, people feel like it’s okay to tell me how much sex we should be having, what is going to happen when I don’t.” . . . When you’re dating, it’s like “When are you getting engaged?” When you’re engaged, it’s like “Oh, when are you getting married?” When you’re married, it’s like “When do you [plan to] have kids?” . . . I don’t know if they know what they think. It’s like new access to ask questions about your sex life, when you should have a baby and what you might not be doing when you haven’t

had a baby by a certain . . . time. Definitely, a change—more openness to discuss these things than when I was single—with the church community and the family community.

After coming to terms with the reality of sex in marriage and accepting a new social status, the sexual adaptation phase begins.

### **Sexual Adaptation Phase**

In the sexual adaptation phase, the main focus is determining how to navigate sexual expression in marriage and finding a comfort level to negotiate values and gender ideals with a partner. The woman learns not only to navigate but to feel ownership over her sexuality, that is, take more control of the narrative that includes aspects of past phases as well as the sexual self she would like to become. Depending on the work done in the previous phase, she now moves into a place where she learns how to create a new normal for herself and her partner, negotiating her marital ideals and reconciling her theological and religious beliefs. This phase is noted to have no end due to the premise that the sexual self is constantly changing and evolving; however, in this phase, three factors (creating a new reality, renegotiation of marital sexual ideals and reconciling beliefs) are constantly present with an awareness of oneself.

#### ***Creating a New Reality***

In this phase participants navigated the complexities of who initiates sex and when it is permissible based on the sexual roles the couple had formed. They wondered, “Do I allow myself to make the first move when am I aroused, or do I stick to my feminine role of waiting for the man to pursue?” These issues required negotiation. Khloe said,



The initiation part is something that I'm still struggling with. I'm usually ready to show up when my husband wants to. I think it's something that I don't really think about. I know that's weird. I just don't really think about initiating when I feel. It's not something that I like "Oh, yes, that sounds good. If you were to bring it up, sure. Yes, that's great."

In this phase the woman makes new meaning of what her sexuality means to her within the context of her marriage. She either embraces change or she accepts that whatever her sexual experience is now is what it shall be.

### ***The Renegotiation of Marital Sexual Ideals***

In the creation of a new reality, the participants described renegotiation arising in their lives even after the period of adjustment. Half the participants shared their current struggle with full presence during sex; however, they eventually created a new meaning and embraced what sex meant to them; nevertheless, they struggled to engage fully.

One participant stated:

Yes. It's hard to associate myself with being a sexy person because I wasn't allowed to be for so long. Now, embracing it even though I know I can be, [chuckles] it's difficult to hold on to that. I relate a lot with what your other participants said about feeling like—It feels like I'm acting sometimes. I'm not. It's genuine, but it's like I put on my hat for this activity that we're doing and then take it off again.

Georgia said:

I don't think I'm alone in this, but it's hard to orgasm right away. That's still a journey that I'm on. Because it's such a mind game. It's not a mind game. It's so mental in order I think to be able to have an orgasm—I feel like I'm oversharing.

This stage involves adjusting to the perceived changes in sexual expression, sexual engagement, and one's sexual mindset as well as jumping over the mental hurdles to determine what her sexuality is now and what it could be.

### ***Reconciling Beliefs***

The final influential part of the marital phase for the conservative Protestant woman is the reconciliation of her religious and theological beliefs, which involves reconciling what she believes about her sexuality in relation to God with how she decides to practically apply her beliefs. Her personal relationship with God is a determining factor; that is, a paradoxical view of sex (a) in relation to God and the concept of His forgiveness as opposed to judgment or (b) in relation to her guilt and shame, which are impacted by her fears. In this process she creates her sexual identity and correlates the narrative of what her sexual self should be and what she is allowed to do or participate in. For example, Alexia shared how she has come to make meaning of sex and God:

I'm learning that in having a relationship with Jesus, he doesn't put restrictions to stop you from having fun. That was the message I had growing up. It's like "You can't do this. Don't do that. No, no, no, no." Thankfully, as I've gotten older and learned more about God, I recognize that certain things are put in place to protect us. For me, personally, why should sex be saved for marriage?

Well, for one, I'm learning because I've had previous partners, it would have been more beneficial if I had no memories of previous partners because that does

affect my sex life now with my husband. Two, if you have premarital sex and have multiple partners and you have kids—we all know baby mama drama and all the drama that comes with having a kid with someone you don't end up marrying—and then they get with someone else, and you have to do custody battles, and there's drama. That's a lot of drama.

God doesn't want that for us. He wants us to be happy and enjoy this beautiful thing that he created. The image and message of sex is something that was so dirty and perverted. Now, currently, in my marriage, sex is a beautiful thing that God created in marriage. It's a protection that God provides for us because we weren't meant to live life, giving little pieces of ourselves to so many different people. We were meant to give our whole self to our spouse.

Depending on how the woman navigates this part of the marital phase, she either embraces her sexual self fully in the positive knowledge of how God sees her and sex, or she creates a world in which God and sex are separate in order for her to fully submit to her desires and hopes that one day she can be fully integrated.

The transition phases helped to shed light on the process of sexual expression for this sample in marriage; however, factors impacting how they moved from phase to phase emerged during interphase negotiations.

### ***Interphase Negotiations***

According to the data, the idea of interphase negotiations emerged as an instrumental concept in exploring the phases, especially in the transition from premarital to marital sexual expression. Three factors, or “dials,” are used as a woman moves through and engages in each stage. These are briefly introduced below and discussed in

detail in the discussion section. Her movement in and through the phases is constantly adjusted based on her cultural and intrapersonal sexual scripts, partitioned into three factors: (a) constant renegotiation of values, (b) constant renegotiation with her partner or husband, and (c) constant renegotiation of gender ideals.

**Constant Renegotiation of Values.** Through every phase, the woman constantly renegotiates her Christian ideals, values, the meaning of sex as she defines it, and the impact of her faith on her sexuality, which helps her to make her own sexual decisions. Taylor provided an example of doing so this looks like:

Then still back to that thing that nobody really talks about . . . and nobody's talking about—What is too far and is there too far? I know generally what I'm not trying to do, but I still feel like there's a lot of area between when I'm not trying to do and where I am now. I'm still like—I was supposed to buy handcuffs and I haven't bought handcuffs.

It seems like what's portrayed from the church, unsaid or said, is that you're supposed to be only having missionary sex, missionary style, vanilla style. Then exploring new things or other things . . . seem[s] dirty in some way even though I have a license. I'm married. It's consensual, and I want to try new things. There's still something like “Mm, but is it holy?”

**Constant Renegotiations with Partner(s) or Husband.** In this process, the woman is challenged to explore her sexual scripts within the dynamic of her relationships. She creates what sexual boundaries, negotiating how far is too far for the dyad but especially for her. Depending on how she decides this, she either allows herself to be challenged and grow or she becomes the person she believes others expect her to

be. How safe and authentic she feels with her partner impacts how she moves through the phases. The safer she feels to be her full sexual self, the easier she moves in and between the phases. This was also apparent in the experiences of participants who had partners who wanted to also wait till marriage. All the participants who were on the same page with their partners ended up successfully waiting for marriage to engage in intercourse. Participants who wanted to wait and whose partners did not have the same values were unsuccessful in waiting for marriage to engage in intercourse.

**Constant Renegotiation of Gender Ideals.** The final factor of influence on the process of sexual expression from premarital to marital for the participants is gender ideals, which they were constantly challenged to negotiate; this included initiation and expected female behavior as a woman, girlfriend, and wife based on their sociocultural influences. In the negotiation of this factor, the woman creates her sexual boundaries and performs in terms of her internal sexual scripts. Issues arise, such as modesty, virginity, expectations of what a wife is and does and how she is supposed to respond to her husband's sexuality.

Christina stated:

I would say in college...the man should pursue in dating, in courtship, and in marriage. I think that goes into and you shouldn't deny your husband because it's really important for him to have sex. There's a big push of like "Don't deny your husband's sexuality. Don't make fun of it. Don't put it down. Don't deny that need that he has. Focus on the word *need*." Yes, the male will probably have a higher drive than the female. I heard that one a lot. So then, that was a weird thing in marriage [chuckles] of like "Oh, I actually have a higher drive than him

sometimes.” Yes. That one wasn’t talked about at all or like “Females don’t want it as much as males.”

With the phases of transition and the interphase negotiations working simultaneously, a better understanding emerges of what the process entails and how it is expressed.

## **Discussion**

Grounded theory and sexual script theory were used in this study to explore the challenges of sexual expression as conservative Protestant women transitioned from premarital to marital sexual expression. The aim of this study was to examine (a) how the women navigated their sexuality and its expression, (b) what was negotiated in the process, and (c) the model the transition from premarital to marital sexual expression followed. Based on the results of this study, the dissonance between their expected female sexual behavior and the reality of their own sexual ideals was key in the transition of sexual expression shown in Figure 1. That major influence underscored how these women conceptualized, explored, practiced, and managed their sexuality in a manner closely tied to their sociocultural factors and their view of how God sees them.

For the creation of this model, the women spoke about the three factors contributing to the way they moved in and out of the phases. The results showed that these women were forced to sift through, based on their values, gender roles, and premarital partner(s) or husband and informed by their sexual scripts and experiences. These three factors were constantly renegotiated with every sexual decision and form of expression and strongly impacted their personal sexual growth, phases, and sexual self-

esteem at every stage. In this model, interphase negotiations can be considered the variables that are constantly being negotiated; they sift through what they want versus what they have been taught or know. As they move from one phase to another, they are constantly ‘funneling’ through their gender ideals, values and negotiations with their partner within the context of their sexual sociocultural influences as active participants of their process. This process is constantly being negotiated as they navigate their sexual process from phase to phase until it is time to move into the sexual adaptation phase (i.e., end goal of the process).

In every phase a continuous dissonance or conflict was present between the expectations and the reality of their own sexual ideals, enacted through their choice of sexual expression. In other words, the challenges in sexual expression that they faced all boiled down to the dissonance in what they have been taught, what they believed, and what they want to do. Although the phases are separated, they are very much integrated. One does not proceed to the next phase without bringing information and experiences from the last, which then informs the current phase.

In order to understand this conflict, attention was given to the dissonance that they felt or moral incongruence they experienced as well as the functioning of their lived theology in the process of sexual expression. Taking into account the sociocultural influences of conservative Protestant women (such as family, church, friends and media), navigating differing sexual standards can be complex, creating dissonance between their embedded, deliberative, and lived theologies.

Practical theologian Carrie Doehring (2015) conceptualized a layered understanding of theology. The first layer is embedded theology, or the beliefs and values

instilled from childhood and sometimes left behind in adulthood; these may rise to the surface during stressful events. The second layer comprises (a) the beliefs and values individuals choose and come to believe as an adult (deliberated theology) and (b) the inner logic of their values and beliefs that make sense emotionally and spiritually (lived theology). Through the negotiation of their embedded theology during a crisis of sexual self-development, women can engage in deliberative theology.

At this juncture, the degree to which the individual is differentiated (i.e., the religious and theological ideas or laws have been identified and made one's own; Doehring, 2015) is vital. In order for women to fully understand their sexuality and be able to express it fully, they need to cognitively and behaviorally explore what that looks like and apply conflict reduction strategies (Claney et al., 2018), which are heavily supported by their lived theologies.

Those with positive outcomes in this study were the participants able to find balance, not only with their intrapsychic sexual selves but also with their view of God and relationship with their partner or husband. These participants were able to achieve balance through self-awareness of their sexuality; self-reflection of their thoughts, actions, and faith; and the differentiation of self from their partner and their religious and theological beliefs, also addressed in the literature (Balswick & Balswick, 2013; Claney et al., 2018; Dale & Keller, 2019; Doehring, 2015).

### **Phases of Transition and Interphase Negotiations**

In this three-phase process, influenced by the three major factors of interphase negotiations (constant renegotiation of values, gender ideals, and with partner(s) or husband), this model cannot be generalized for the larger population, but it can illuminate



the way sexuality is navigated and what needs are negotiated in forming a sexual self. In terms of the sexual process of transitioning from premarital to marital sexuality, three phases were highlighted. The first phase (sexual formation phase) focused on the conservative Protestant women's period of singleness before marriage and the navigation and internalization of the cultural sexual scripts or messages received in childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood with the interpersonal influence of a romantic interest or sexual partner. The second phase involved the adjustment period in which they were challenged to learn what sexual expression looks like in the context of marriage with the cultural sexual scripts she had been given. Because they no longer anticipated marriage, they were forced to deal with any expectations or ideals they had brought in from the premarital phase. In this phase the participants noted experiencing conflict within themselves, with their partners, and with their God. The final phase was the sexual adaptation phase, which represents the continuous evolution of who they are sexually and who they would like to become in light of their religious and theological views and their husband. In other words, they learned or are learning to be fully integrated—sexually and spiritually.

### ***Sexual Formation Phase***

The process of negotiating the conflict of ascribed sexual scripts, the surrounding culture, and deciding what does and does not work in sexual practice is critically essential and takes shape in the sexual formation phase (Claney et al., 2018). For most of the participants, the sexual formation period was a time in which their internalized beliefs, values, and ideals were challenged and their sexual awareness was awakened. They faced the decision to determine whether their embodied theology was still congruent with their

belief system (Doehring, 2015). Religious teaching was regarded as the foundation for their embedded theology. Participants allowed these embedded beliefs to become the compass that directed not only their own moral judgments but also projected their views and beliefs onto their peers and partners as they pertained to the morality of their own sexual expression (Daniluk & Browne, 2008; Hyde, 1994). Finding a way to uphold the standard of Christian femininity while renegotiating their sexual ideals invited fear, shame, and guilt. Within that framework they looked for ways (conflict strategies) to maintain their purity or virginity or accept defeat (Claney et al., 2018).

While maneuvering to preserve their ideals and what they had been taught about purity from a young age, many Christian women encountering physical sexual arousal experienced a sense of shock when their bodies responded to intense sexual passion with their partners especially because they had once held strong convictions against such responses. For these women their embedded theology was subconscious. When facing dissonance in their sexuality, they were challenged to evaluate which beliefs still held value. They sorted through those which were “life-giving versus life-limiting” (Doehring, 2015). Sometimes the women responded to this moral incongruence by ending relationships because of the guilt and shame that arose, unable to uphold and protect their purity. Others rationalized, “At least I am going to hell with a partner.” Women were invited to practice deliberative theology if they were able to navigate through the process and establish new beliefs.

### ***Sexual Adjustment Phase***

On the basis of purity culture, many institutions teach that sex in marriage will be good and satisfying (Sharma, 2011). The idea of the “prosperity sexual gospel” (Van Der

Wyngaard, 2018) is pervasive. Those who profess this gospel believe that if they wait until marriage, they will have good sex. Participants acknowledged wading through challenges and the level of crisis they experienced in the transition from singlehood to marriage during the adjustment phase. Two main factors must be navigated and negotiated to move forward from this phase: (a) negotiation of marital sexual ideals and (b) new social status. The meanings and decisions they made in the premarital phase, now affected their current lived theology and how they would navigate these new terrains while carrying residual guilt from the premarital phase into marriage.

In this phase, the conservative Protestant woman explores what it now means to have marital sexual relations with her partner. The participants shared the complexities of moving from a place where no sexual activity, behavior, or expression was allowed to one where they freely could express themselves fully in their marital beds. Inner conflict between their exposed embedded theologies and their lived theologies was forced into deliberation (Doehring, 2015). Many of the participants noted how unprepared they were for the reality of marital sex and all the subtleties that accompany it. In view of the vulnerability of the marital relationship, participants were challenged to learn how to sexually tune in to themselves and their partners. This is where differentiation of self takes place, and one is able to develop a strong sexual sense of self that is self-validated and congruent with personal beliefs (Balswick & Balswick, 2013; Perel, 2007; Schnarch, 2013). For some, it was the surprise of the realization that they had never conceptualized their sexuality, even more lived as the expectation that their role was to respond to their husband's sexuality versus owning their own. Even with the freedom of marriage, however, the question of how far one was allowed to go sexually still remained. As the

participants vacillated between their embedded beliefs and the sexual person they wanted to be, their new social status as wives added another layer to navigate.

The women stated their upgrade to wife not only changed how they viewed their sexuality but also how others viewed it. Participants shared multiple stories on the contrast between having to hide their sexuality and sexual behavior to talking freely about it and being asked about it so openly without judgment or fear of being cast out from their communities. In this phase they were celebrated for participating in the same act that they would have been shamed for earlier.

### ***Sexual Adaptation Phase***

During the sexual adaption phase participants conceptualized what sexual ownership looked like for them while taking control of their own sexual narratives. They chose what they wanted to retain from previous phases as they moved forward, creating a new normal.

Based on how they made sense of their disappointments, values, beliefs, and the practices and behaviors they chose to embrace during the adjustment phase, they created their new reality. They determined how open they would like to be in bed or—like some of the participants—decided that having sex with the lights off was the most they could tolerate for the time being or maybe forever.

In the renegotiation of marital sexual ideals, the participants struggled to engage in sexual acts because of residual sexual guilt or negative beliefs about sex (e.g., sex is dirty) that they carried from the premarital phase (Dale & Keller, 2019; Sharma, 2011). This plays out in spectating, a common phenomenon in the marital phase. The women stated that they liked having sex, but it felt like an out-of-body experience in which they

watched themselves have sex. The results confirmed that this occurs when the woman is preoccupied with sexual performance or appearance, causing more anxiety and the inability to engage fully (Balswick & Balswick, 2013). Most of the participants who experienced this attributed it to feeling disconnected and sometimes struggling with unresolved guilt; however, those who were in open and honest relationships with husbands they regarded as their best friends had positive experiences during this phase, highlighting the importance of emotional security in the marital relationship in achieving sexual satisfaction and the freedom of sexual expression with the spouse (Balswick & Balswick, 2013).

Along with applying cultural gendered scripts involving setting the boundaries of sexual behavior, protecting themselves from the male gaze, satisfying their male partners, and maintaining their religious traditions, intertwined with constructions of good and bad sexuality (Sharma, 2011), focusing on their own needs and feeling spontaneous, sexually alive, and carefree in their sexual expression (Perel, 2007; Sharma, 2011) proved to be difficult. When women's bodies are objectified or subdued and their sexuality is reduced to a social construct (the promise to maintain virginity) and when women are dependent on their marital role to upgrade their sexuality to a privilege, they are disserved and consequently lack the understanding that sexuality is not just relegated to sexual activity but can be creatively explored in numerous dimensions.

Clinicians, educators, clergy, and other practitioners can help conservative Protestant women find ways in which they can still align with their lived theology of sexuality (their faith, values, and religious beliefs). With an understanding of navigation and negotiation of their sexuality through the premarital, adjustment, and marital phases,

therapists and counselors can help conservative Protestant women become more spiritually and sexually integrated instead of split by patriarchal ideas that have kept them trapped in the virtue–lust duality (Perel, 2007) for centuries. They, too, can live lives in which eroticism, sensuality, and virtue can coexist.

### **Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions**

The proposed process model illuminates the challenges conservative Protestant women face, especially in the process of transitioning from premarital to marital sexual expression. To practically benefit this population, the phases and how these women move in and out of them as well as how they are influenced by their deliberative theologies must be understood.

Looking through the lens of spiritual formation makes visible what form engaging in deliberative theology can take (Doehring, 2015). For the single conservative Protestant women to transition into marriage, especially sexually, she must be able to differentiate her own sexual ideals from the beliefs of others, not only sexually but spiritually. Doehring's (2015) ideas about helping them create awareness and wholeness involve the following: (a) determining whether the religious and theological meanings surrounding their sexuality have been articulated and understood as their own, (b) assessing their identification and exploration of what embedded theologies they hold about their sexuality, (c) determining whether the theologies they hold and live by have been destructive to their growth or positive in facilitating the exploration of their sexual selves, (d) determining whether they have aligned their embedded beliefs with what they currently favor or accept to be true for them, and (e) assessing the outcome of their

process of making meaning of their sexuality within their deliberative theology framework. Following the recommendations listed here not only creates a healthier space for conservative Protestant female sexuality and the religious self to be seen and discussed, but it also helps them to become more integrated, more knowing, and more sexually secure in themselves and in their relationships.

An implication of this study is the importance of sexual premarital education. As conservative women transition to marriage, they must be given space to explore sexual topics, sexual health, and their lived theologies in premarital counseling particularly in helping them to create an environment of safety and disclosure with their partners (Slater & Cummings Aholou, 2009).

Although this study may be helpful for understanding the process conservative Protestant women engage in to navigate their sexual expression as they move from premarital relationships to marital, the population used in this study should not be seen as a representation of all conservative Protestant women because different contexts (such as state, country, and denomination) may produce different results. These participants were samples from Southern California. Although these limitations affect the generalizability of the findings of this study, it still adds to the current research in Christian female sexuality while helping to make way for additional research in this area.

Since this study focused on early marriages, more research is needed in exploring if there are more phases to be uncovered as conservative women age and are married for longer. It would be beneficial to see if there would be more phases for those that have been together longer and what factors may emerge. More research is also needed to address the nuances of Christian sexuality from the perspective of the conservative

Protestant women. In addition, the lived experiences of Christian women must be considered as they navigate their sexual desires, roles, and schemas through multiple layers. Future research is needed on (a) how conservative Protestant women and men create sexual scripts from sociocultural influences, (b) the impact of race and ethnicity and (c) how they process their sexual expression from singleness to marriage in other parts of the United States and in other countries to gain a broad perspective.



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## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **Summary of Findings**

In this study, we sought to broaden the body of research that examines how Christian women navigate their sexuality in marriage and learn how cultural scripts and gender-normative ideas determine appropriate sexual behavior within the church. This study also created awareness of the complexities of the dissonance that Christian women face and the need for open communication and spaces in which sexual topics are discussed without shame and judgment. Therefore, the findings from this study offer insight and future direction for parents, caretakers, clinicians, researchers, clergy, sex educators, and Christian communities to support the girls and women entrusted in their care. To be able to do this, we utilized a sample of conservative protestant women.

The study aimed to elucidate how conservative Christian women navigate the transition process into wedlock of sexuality. This study provided answers to two overarching questions. The first being, how might conservative protestant women understand their sexuality, given the influence of their sociocultural context? While the second question focused on the experience of conservative protestant women as they navigate the change of sexual expression from premarital to marital, especially during the transition process.

The first research question explores how conservative Protestant women might understand their sexuality, given their sociocultural context. These influences were viewed through the lens of sexual scripting to reveal the influence of their cultural scripts on the navigation of their interpersonal scripts, which impacted the negotiation of their

intrapsychic scripts. The use of grounded theory produced three significant categories, which helped to explain the cultural influences: (a) influence of family culture, (b) influence of church culture, and (c) the larger culture.

Their familial context played a significant role in viewing sex and how sexual boundaries are formed for these women. The women in this study described their sexual socialization in the home as "nonexistent" or "open with boundaries." The data collected showed that the family was vital in developing sexual scripts and the origin of the social construction of their sexuality. From the data, three major areas were highlighted as distinct: (a) the mother's influence, (b) the impact of siblings, and (c) the silence surrounding sexual issues. According to the data, the family was also the groundwork for developing guilt, shame, and fear. For most participants, the trifecta was used by their parents to help to enforce sexual ideals for their "protection," sometimes going as far as to use fear tactics instead of having conversations about normal sexual development.

Mothers were noted as very influential in these women's lives and how they perceived their sexuality, including gender ideals. For these participants, they either heard positive or negative messages about waiting for marriage. Those who heard positive messages focused on waiting for someone to share that special moment and have "sexual integrity." For others, their mother shared fear-inducing stories of how their lives could be "destroyed" by having sex before marriage with the consequence of pregnancy. They were also instrumental in teaching their daughters about female and male sexual roles, how men are supposed to pursue, and keeping their sexuality for their husbands as a gift.



Another interesting concept that emerged from this study was the impact of having siblings, especially brothers. Participants had an understanding with their brothers that they were not allowed to do "what they were doing" even if they were the same age. Some were taught sexual mores apart from their brothers and were not allowed to be in the same room as their brother while receiving their sexual education.

Unfortunately, when it comes to the sexual conversation discussed at home in response to an event, leaving these participants to look for information themselves depends on the education system, church, or sources for their sexual education—adults and married women. Some participants said that most of their sexual education—directly or implicitly—came from their mothers. However, their fathers were either silent or offered protection instead of conversations using purity rings or raising them to be assertive.

In terms of church culture influence, participants highlighted two significant experiences a) ideas influenced by the purity culture of the church and b) expectations and roles advocated in their church communities. For most of these participants, the church played a significant role in creating the sexual standards they lived by and served as the source of sexual education based on biblical principles and morality for their sexuality before marriage and even in marriage. Some participants stated that although sex was not explicitly discussed from the pulpit, parishioners understood that sex was between men and women under the marriage covenant. Most of the participants discussed how their sexuality was policed by the idea of fear, which was closely influenced by guilt and shame either by sharing fear-inducing stories or sexual analogies of what would happen or had happened to people who disobeyed this commandment. Participants shared

the social consequences of failing to behave according to the standards of their community. The complexity of being a sexual individual who also belongs to a collectivistic community at the same time was raised many times in terms of membership in an honor-and-shame culture, not necessarily honoring God but honoring the community (i.e., parents, the pastors, the congregations, and even one's peers) and shame (i.e., bringing shame to the community) for engaging in behaviors considered sinful. A few of these participants found the accountability demanded by their church community to keep them aligned with their religious beliefs and standards. For others, their church community was where they found the answers they were looking for and sought advice about making decisions they might have regretted.

For the last agent of influence defined by the participant's experience, the larger culture, that is, any other influence not part of the church or their families has implications for these women's sexual scripts. Two emerging influences for this category were media and friends. Those who had no conversations with their parents or church personnel about sex looked to secular media to give them the answers they sought. These messages ranged from being "sexually free" to contrasting messages like "not giving it up too freely"; many participants agreed that although the messages promised sexual freedom, they were also centered on male pleasure. In order to counter the secular media sources, Christian media was used to share teachings and information primarily disseminated through books, especially religious sexual ideals.

An exciting view presented from the data was the importance of one's friends, not only as a source of information but also as a source of empowerment, self-exploration,

and accountability. Friends were regarded as more influential than family and sometimes church when the participants created interpersonal sexual scripts.

In conjunction with the first research question, having the sociocultural influences and how they make meaning led to how conservative Protestant women navigate the transition process from singlehood to early marriage. The discourse illuminated the nuances in the transition from premarital to marital sexuality for conservative Protestant women. A grounded theory model was created from the data collected from this study. The conclusion of this research was used to develop the Negotiation and Navigation of Sexual Self Marital Transition Model. Carrie Doehring's (2015) concept of lived theology was used to add meaning to the model. The model centered on the experience of conservative Protestant women and how they navigated and negotiated sexual expression from premarital to marital, as shown in Figure 1. The three phases that women pass through in the navigation of sexual expression are the (a) sexual formation phase, (b) sexual adjustment phase, and (c) sexual adaptation phase. The model also accommodates the interphase negotiations that women conduct as they move from phase to phase. These constant renegotiations are the (a) renegotiation of gender ideals, b) renegotiation with the partner or husband, and c) renegotiation of values.

In this three-phase process, influenced by the three significant interphase negotiations, a constant renegotiation of values, gender ideals, and with a partner(s) or husband), this model cannot be generalized for the larger population. However, it can illuminate how sexuality is navigated and what needs are negotiated in forming a sexual self. In terms of the sexual process of transitioning from premarital to marital sexuality, three phases were highlighted. The first phase (sexual formation phase) focused on the

conservative Protestant women's period of singleness before marriage and the navigation and internalization of the cultural, sexual scripts or messages received in childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood with the interpersonal influence of a romantic interest or sexual partner. The second phase involved the adjustment period in which they were challenged to learn what sexual expression looks like in marriage with the cultural, sexual scripts she had been given. Because they no longer anticipated marriage, they were forced to deal with any expectations or ideals they had brought in from the premarital phase. In this phase, the participants noted experiencing conflict within themselves, their partners, and their God. The final phase was the sexual adaptation phase, representing the continuous evolution of who they are sexually and who they would like to become in light of their religious and theological views and husbands. In other words, they learned to be fully integrated—sexually and spiritually.

For creating this model, the women spoke about the three factors contributing to the way they moved in and out of the phases. The results showed that these women were forced to sift through their values, gender roles, and premarital partner(s) or husbands and informed by their sexual scripts and experiences. These three factors were constantly renegotiated with every sexual decision and form of expression and strongly impacted their personal sexual growth, phases, and sexual self-esteem at every stage. In this model, interphase negotiations can be considered the constantly being negotiated variables; they sift through what they want versus what they have been taught or know. As they move from one phase to another, they are constantly "funneling" through their gender ideals, values, and negotiations with their partner within the context of their sexual sociocultural influences as active participants of their process. This process is constantly being

negotiated as they navigate their sexual process from phase to phase until it is time to move into the sexual adaptation phase (i.e., end goal).

In every phase, a continuous dissonance or conflict was present between the expectations and the reality of their sexual ideals, enacted through their choice of sexual expression. In other words, the challenges in sexual expression that they faced all boiled down to the dissonance in what they have been taught, what they believed, and what they want to do. Although the phases are separated, they are very much integrated. One does not proceed to the next phase without bringing information and experiences from the last, which then informs the current phase.

In order to understand this conflict, attention was given to the dissonance that they felt or moral incongruence they experienced as well as the functioning of their lived theology in the process of sexual expression. Considering the sociocultural influences of conservative Protestant women (such as family, friends, adult sexual culture), navigating differing sexual standards can be complex, creating dissonance between their embedded, deliberative, and lived theologies.

Whether it is a parent, a pastor, an elder, a teacher, a therapist, or a sex educator, being intentional about discussing and examining their cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic scripts, where and who created them, do they agree with it, what beliefs do they hold that they no longer agree with but are embedded in them that they still feel guilty to do or act out? To create opportunities that will help Christian women explore theological and religious frameworks while sifting through their cultural and interpersonal sexual scripts. This will enable clients to create more informed intrapsychic

scripts. Parties of influence must be mindful of holding a balance without sacrificing one for the other, allowing clients to decide for themselves to keep what works for them and release what no longer serves them.

Looking through the lens of spiritual formation makes visible what form engaging in deliberative theology can take (Doehring, 2015). For the single conservative Protestant woman to transition into marriage, especially sexually, she must be able to differentiate her sexual ideals from the beliefs of others, not only sexually but spiritually. Doehring's (2015) ideas about helping them create awareness and wholeness involve the following:

2. Determining whether the religious and theological meanings surrounding their sexuality have been articulated and understood as their own.
3. Assessing their identification and exploration of what embedded theologies they hold about their sexuality.
4. Determining whether the theologies they hold and live by have been destructive to their growth or positive in facilitating the exploration of their sexual selves.
5. Determining whether they have aligned their embedded beliefs with what they currently favor or accept to be true for them.
6. Assessing the outcome of their process of making meaning of their sexuality within their deliberative theology framework.

Following the recommendations listed here not only creates a healthier space for conservative Protestant female sexuality and the religious self to be seen and discussed, but it also helps them to become more integrated, more knowing, and more sexually secure in themselves and their relationships.

Although this study may help understand the process conservative Protestant women engage in to navigate their sexual expression as they move from premarital relationships to marital, the population used in this study should not be seen as a representation of all conservative Protestant women because different contexts (such as state, country, and denomination) may produce different results. These participants were samples from Southern California. Another limitation of this study was the size of the sample: Only 16 women were interviewed. Although these limitations affect the generalizability of the findings of this study, it still adds to the current research in Christian female sexuality while helping to make way for additional research in this area.

More research is needed to address the nuances of Christian sexuality from the perspective of conservative Protestant women. In addition, the lived experiences of Christian women must be considered as they navigate their sexual desires, roles, and schemas through multiple layers. Future research is needed on (a) how conservative Protestant women and men create sexual scripts from sociocultural influences and (b) how they process their sexual expression from singleness to marriage in other parts of the United States and other countries to gain a broad perspective.

Whether it is a parent, a pastor, an elder, a teacher, a therapist, or a sex educator, being intentional about discussing and examining their cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic scripts, where and who created them, do they agree with it, what beliefs do they hold that they no longer agree with but are embedded in them that they still feel guilty to do or act out? To create opportunities that will help Christian women explore theological and religious frameworks while sifting through their cultural and interpersonal sexual scripts. This will enable clients to create more informed intrapsychic

scripts. Parties of influence must be mindful of holding a balance without sacrificing one for the other, allowing clients to decide for themselves to keep what works for them and release what no longer serves them.

### **Modifications Made from the Original Proposal**

There were three major areas of modifications: the research question, data collection, and sample size. Since this paper was a grounded theory study, as the codes began to emerge, the second research question was changed from "what is the impact of Christianity on the sexual experience of conservative protestant women as they navigate the change of sexual expression from premarital to marital, especially during the process of transition?" to "what is the experience of conservative protestant women as they navigate the change of sexual expression from premarital to marital, especially during the process of transition?".

In terms of data collection, data were collected during the aftermath of COVID-19 and the Trump administration. Unfortunately, this made finding participants hard to do. With the term 'conservative protestant,' many prospective participants were wary of the title even though it was defined for them based on the study's definition. After many months of recruiting participants, it was agreed that 16 participants would be permissible as long as we could reach saturation, which we were able to do.



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