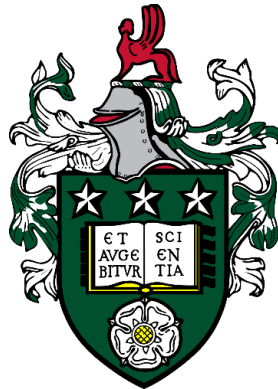# Habituating Purity: Evangelical Christian purity culture and its impact on young women in Great Britain

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Declaration

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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The right of Christabelle Thwaites to be identified as Author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

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Finally, writing these acknowledgements has reminded me just how tiresome and oftentimes isolating the PhD has been. So alongside those who supported me over the finish line, my last thanks is to myself, for doing what I do best: carrying on when I thought I couldn't.

Abstract

This project explores the presence of evangelical Christian purity culture in Britain and its impact on young women within this context. Purity culture refers to efforts in evangelical Christianity – a movement within Protestant Christianity – to encourage adolescents and young adults to commit to sexual abstinence until heterosexual marriage. This phenomenon emerged in the early 1990s in the USA, typified by the wearing of rings and signing of pledges to demonstrate a commitment to abstinence. Thus far, its presence and influence has mostly been examined within the USA, but there is increasing attention to its international reach; this project constitutes the first substantial study to exclusively investigate purity culture in Great Britain.

Drawing on a survey and interviews, this thesis argues for the presence of purity culture in a specifically British iteration – less overt than its American counterpart but nonetheless evident through a fervent emphasis on sexual abstinence, correlated to understandings of faithful (and biblical) Christian living. Five themes take centre stage – sin, marriage, the body, sexual violence, and shifting faith – the first two as key concepts within evangelical purity culture in Britain, the latter three as key areas of impact.

This thesis utilises Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus to explain how and why these impacts can be so profound, despite the fact that purity culture in Britain appears more subdued compared to America: the values and expectations of evangelical purity culture are gradually incorporated into the body as long-lasting dispositions, known as habitus. It is argued that, in evangelicalism, community and relationships are centrally important, but that sexual sin risks damaging these relationships; this is conceptualised as *the habitus of purity culture*. The impacts of purity culture can thus be particularly potent, as living with this habitus means living with the tension of simultaneously valorised and jeopardised relationships.

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Abbreviations

AOUM – Abstinence-only until marriage

CBMW – Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood

CU – Christian Union

EAUK – Evangelical Alliance UK

EDR – Emotionally demanding research

HTB – Holy Trinity Brompton

IKDG – *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* by Joshua Harris

MMR – Mixed methods research

NFI – New Frontiers International

PCBS – Purity Culture Belief Scale

RTA – Reflexive thematic analysis

SBC – Southern Baptist Convention

SRT – Silver Ring Thing

SS – Soul Survivor

TA – Thematic analysis

TLW – True Love Waits

UCCF – Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship

YWAM – Youth With a Mission

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Background and approach

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Research rationale

1.1.1 'Cakey'

Every summer from 2009 to 2014, I made the annual trip with my church youth group to Bath and West Showground in Somerset. We'd pile into a coach in our church car park and drive down the M5 full of expectation. Sometimes donning wellies, other years wearing flip flops, we'd pitch our tents and set up the communal gazebo. Once unpacked, we'd make our way as a group to join the crowds descending on one corner of the campsite. Weaving our way past the marquees and portaloos, it would finally come into view – the Big Top. A circus-tent-like structure with a stage at the centre – housing a contemporary worship band, a lectern with a Bible, and a large illuminated cross – the Big Top was the focal point of the campsite. It provided structure to our days with morning and evening meetings. We were there, along with thousands of other young people, to attend Soul Survivor.

Evangelical in teaching and charismatic in style, the Soul Survivor festivals were aimed specifically at teenagers.[1] Running from 1993 until 2019, these annual summer festivals drew numbers of around 30,000 (Religion Media Centre, 2023), who would then cram into the Big Top twice a day to attend sessions that mimicked church services. Extended times of worship were a structured part of these services, intended to facilitate personal and intimate encounters with God. Beginning with songs led by the band, this time of worship then transitioned into a period of 'waiting on the Lord'. This began with stillness and anticipation, tens of thousands sitting together quietly – until the silence was broken by a singular cry, laugh, or scream. Sometimes quiet, sometimes piercingly loud. Mike Pilavachi, the charismatic leader of Soul Survivor, would then reassure the crowd, in case anyone was disconcerted by this outburst. He'd explain calmly that the person in question is encountering the Holy Spirit – if it's a cry or scream, perhaps a release of pain; for laughter, a release or blessing of joy. We trusted Mike, and we trusted God. Solitary noises would develop into a low-level murmur across the tent, growing

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[1] In chapter 4, I define evangelicalism (§4.1), discuss charismatic evangelicalism in Britain specifically (§4.2.2) and also give further background on Soul Survivor (§4.2.3).

in volume until the music returned, and the band closed the service by leading the Big Top in collective song.

During these times of ministry, my youth group would take part too. Some of us would stand up and ask for prayer, moved by the sermon or encouraged by the prompts from those leading the service (they sometimes shared 'words' from God). We shed tears, we laughed, we prayed for one another. We found a space to be ourselves, to process and heal from life's difficulties, and to build relationships with each other – all under the supervision of youth workers. As we engaged with the ministry time, listened to talks, raised our arms and cried and danced to worship songs, we were figuring out who we were becoming and who we wanted to be.

We were eager to learn. To discover how to follow God and lead a Christian life. Soul Survivor resourced us – with sermons at each service and seminar streams we could choose from each day. These were all very accessible for teenagers; talks were littered with jokes and personalised with story, and tended to avoid heavy theological doctrine. One story Mike Pilavachi would tell was 'cakey'. As time goes on, my capacity to recollect the summers of my youth diminishes; for a while, I had almost forgotten about cakey. It was in my mind, somewhere: formative enough to hold onto, access to it no longer needed. Then, when conducting research for this PhD, one of my interview participants mentioned it. "He rolled out this old chestnut", Dani said during our interview, of "there's a chocolate cake in my fridge". Not long after, I interviewed Zara who, unprompted, mentioned the same story too. She called it the "don't open the fridge door sermon". I asked her to describe it to me. And it all came flooding back. Cakey. Neither Zara nor Dani knew the story by that term (or at least, they didn't use it), but that's how I remembered it.

The story is simple: Mike has a large chocolate cake in his fridge. That night when he goes to bed, he tries to sleep, but can't stop thinking about the cake. He gets up and walks to the kitchen, opens the fridge door, and looks at it. "No, I shouldn't", he convinces himself, summoning the courage to go back to bed. "Well, just a slice wouldn't hurt". So he wanders back to the kitchen, enjoys a piece of cake, and heads back to bed. Affectionately naming the cake, Mike addresses it in his mind as he lies awake, and describes his thoughts euphemistically: "oh cakey", he says (I recall the salaciousness of his delivery vividly), "you were so good, I just really want some more". And so back to the fridge he goes – and again, and again, until the whole cake is gone. By this point, he feels awful, and lies in bed feeling nauseous, uncomfortably full, bloated, shameful. He realises he has made a mistake. He has gone too far. He should never have opened the fridge door. It's a metaphor for sex.

In telling this story, Mike played on the persona he presented to the crowds at Soul Survivor – single, celibate, funny, foodie. As he wandered around the stage lamenting the appeal of the endearing 'cakey', we absorbed the message that temptation is a slippery slope to sin. That avoiding all sexual temptation of any kind is the best way to ensure no sex before marriage. That a natural response to giving in to said temptation would be to physically feel shame in one's body. That the guilt-ridden sickness associated with the experience of devouring the (metaphorical) cake will continue to haunt when presented with other (metaphorical) cakes in future. That something which God intended as good could be easily sullied. This story wasn't told in an optional seminar; it was shared in the Big Top, to everyone in attendance at the festival. As such, it was portrayed as an issue of prime importance. And who best to trust on temptation, than a mature man who has remained successfully celibate in a Christian world characterised by married couples, and a secular world seemingly full of sex?[2]

This story is typical of how evangelical subculture deals with sexual abstinence – and how inbuilt it is to evangelicalism more broadly, a part of what it means to be a Christian within this context. At the time, we laughed. We learned. We internalised the lesson that young, unmarried Christians don't have sex – and that if they do, they should be ashamed. The idea of the 'slippery slope' became a commonplace teaching, and this taught us that even seemingly innocent things like what clothes you wear or how you interact with people of the opposite sex were problematic and off-limits. The stronger your boundaries, the more committed a Christian you appeared. We learned that our bodies were the locus of spirituality, and what we did with them could have significant spiritual consequences – for ourselves, for our future selves, and even for others too.

Zara had the cakey sermon stuck on her bedroom wall. Many of us had cakey – or sermons just like it – stuck at the forefront of our minds. Don't open the fridge door. It's not what God wants. And so we followed a host of practices to adhere to, books to read, songs to sing, leaders to emulate, wisdom to internalise, Bible verses to follow, and accountability groups to attend, that would (in theory) ensure that we never opened the fridge door. The fact that Dani and Zara both remembered the cakey story and wanted to share it demonstrates the enduring impact that didactic stories like these can have on the adolescents that heard them. Indeed, more broadly, it demonstrates how memorable and significant this subculture was to those raised within it. During the summers I attended Soul Survivor, I was aged 13 to 18. These were

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[2] It is worth also noting that Pilavachi has since been at the centre of allegations of misconduct and spiritual abuse (Swerling, 2023), which were substantiated by both an internal Church of England investigation (Church of England, 2023) and an independent report by barrister Fiona Scolding KC (Scolding and Fullbrook, 2024). This is further discussed in chapter 8 (§8.2.1).

our formative years – growing, discovering, malleable. And these were our formative teachings – we clung to them dearly and with reverence.

1.1.2 A snowballing study

As I got older, I reflected on the lessons from my youth. Were they helpful to my personal development? Gradually, I dared to consider the contrary. Were some, perhaps, a hindrance? Processing these thoughts with the evangelical (and evangelical-raised) women around me, watching them grapple with the same questions – and more – compelled me to consider that this was a larger phenomenon. I moved cities, I moved churches, I met people through Christian events and networks. And still the story was the same: women who felt everything from confused to traumatised by the way their evangelical Christian upbringing during the early 2000s and 2010s dealt with sex, gender and sexuality – and, in particular, the intense evangelical emphasis on sexual abstinence until marriage.

It seemed it would be as easy as following the moral code epitomised by 'cakey'; simply don't open the fridge door. But what if you did open the fridge door? What then? How to pacify the subsequent moral bloatedness, personal shame, and apparent spiritual depravity? What if the door had only been partially opened? What if the door had been opened by force by someone else, without consent? Or what if, like many women I knew, the fridge door remained firmly closed until the appropriate time, only to discover the cake, in its isolation and inattention, had gone mouldy or had an acquired taste or was actually not something they enjoyed after all? What if maintaining such a tight grip on the door handle to ensure it stayed closed, made it unexpectedly hard to loosen? It was not as simple as Mike Pilavachi's 'cakey' maxim. These questions became the impetus and inspiration for this research. To complicate things further, I knew women who did not grapple with these questions, including some who expressed gratitude for the positive effect of Christian abstinence teaching in, for example, shielding them from peer pressure to engage in sexual activity at a young age. How then to marry these varying experiences?

In the midst of such confusion and contemplation, where and to whom did these women turn for solace, understanding, and sense-making? I noticed that many of these women I had personal connections to were ill-equipped and under-resourced to manage their fraught feelings that arose from reflecting on sexual abstinence teaching and the presumed life that accompanied it but never occurred. How did so many women from seemingly different social spheres and geographical locations seem to come away with corresponding experiences? Is it affecting them still? If so how, and why? Will they be listened to when they share their stories, or perceived primarily as a threat to evangelical orthodoxy and perhaps even the reputation of

Christianity? People find comfort in hearing stories similar to their own. For a while, these were few and far between – and predominantly came not from Great Britain, but the United States, where the label 'purity movement' and later 'purity culture' began to emerge, providing sought-after explanatory power for those raised in an abstinent-heavy evangelical culture during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Indeed, how did these experiences relate? Were the experiences of girls and women in British evangelicalism the same as what Americans were starting to identify as purity culture?

I channelled these contemplations into my educational pursuits, intending to explore evangelical purity culture in the UK as part of my Master's degree. In a relatively short period of time, an essay plan became a dissertation proposal, which then snowballed into a PhD application. In order to fruitfully explore the phenomenon of purity culture from a UK perspective,[3] I felt it was necessary to engage with women's lived experiences (rather than, for example, theological teaching) – preferably on a sizeable scale, though at the time it was not entirely clear what exactly this data would look like – as such a study on British purity culture had not previously been undertaken. A PhD thus seemed the most appropriate fit in terms of scope, available time, and resources. Thus far, 'purity culture' had begun to emerge as a label, and used to identify an evangelical, time-bound subculture within the United States (cf. §1.2). In order to do justice to a study of this phenomenon in the UK, it needed to be a substantial piece of research.

In what follows of this chapter, I summarise existing research on purity culture, and how this study furthers these. I first review literature to date in order to contextualise this work within wider scholarship and demonstrate the potential for this study (§1.2). I then give an overview of this project and provide a roadmap of the thesis (§1.3). Here, I outline the key argument of this study – that evangelical purity culture has existed in a specifically British iteration and that this has had a profound impact on young women raised within it. I put forth the theoretical contribution this study makes to purity culture scholarship, through a conceptual approach I call the *habitus of purity culture*. I outline the research questions and then close this chapter by delineating the structure of this thesis.

1.2 Literature review

Here, I trace the history of scholarship on purity culture, categorising it into two waves. The first (2010 – 2020) reflects the gradual identification of purity culture as both a phenomenon and a label (§1.2.1), while the second (2020 – present) captures a more fully

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[3] Note that this later changed from a UK focus to a Great Britain focus (cf. §2.1.3, which discusses this further).

established field building on prior foundational works (§1.2.2). These are not necessarily hard start/end dates, but rather approximate time periods which indicate the development of the field. I then identify evidence of evangelical purity culture outside of the US as a potential area for growth within purity culture scholarship (§1.2.3), noting that this study intends to begin to resolve this by focusing on Great Britain.

1.2.1 Beginnings: 2010 – 2020

The term 'purity culture' as a label began to be regularly employed from the late 2010s onwards, in both scholarly literature and internal Christian commentary. Prior to this, studies began to appear in the early 2000s using different names (such as 'purity movement', 'abstinence movement', or 'abstinence campaigns', usually prefixed with 'evangelical'). Here, I discuss significant contributions from 2010 to 2020, which I identify as the first wave of purity culture scholarship. During this time, it was an evolving and emergent academic field, with disparate studies organised around a shared phenomenon identified by various names, in the absence of collective consensus on terminology. The overarching contribution of scholarship during this time period was to identify, and eventually label, purity culture – situating it within a broader religious context (American evangelicalism), identifying a time period (1990s and early 2000s), delineating key figures and organisations, and beginning to outline the human impact.

The first academic monograph on purity culture arrived with Christine Gardner's 2011 book *Making Chastity Sexy*. Writing from communications studies, Gardner examined the language of what she described as "evangelical abstinence campaigns "True Love Waits, Silver Ring Thing and Pure Freedom (discussed further in §4.1.1). Drawing on her research on these campaigns in the US, Kenya and Rwanda (though she focuses more on the US) (2011: 10-12), Gardner argued that they used a particular rhetoric to make their message of sexual abstinence until marriage appealing: "American evangelicals are persuading teenagers to avoid sex by making abstinence "sexy"" (2011: 13). Overall, she argued that "evangelicals are using sex to "sell" abstinence", emphasising the future possibility of "great sex within marriage" as "a reward for abstinence" (2011: 13). Gardner's was the first study to actively investigate the mechanisms by which these evangelical campaigns were actively promoting abstinence until marriage. Shortly prior to this, however, there had been literature critiquing the concept of sexual "purity" by feminist writer Jessica Valenti (2009), and studies on the effectiveness of abstinence-only sex education (Regnerus, 2009) and abstinence pledges (Brückner and Bearman, 2005; Uecker, Angotti and Regnerus, 2008; Rosenbaum, 2009; Thomas, 2009) in the United States. Gardner's study, therefore, did not come out of nowhere – but it did begin to catalyse scholarly focus on these campaigns, identify them as part of an evangelical movement, and provide a detailed published record of the organisations and leaders involved.

Around the same time period, Sara Moslener began her now prolific body of work on American evangelical purity culture – if anyone is the founding father (or perhaps, more appropriately, mother) of such research, it is Moslener. Her 2009 PhD thesis explored "sexual abstinence and evangelicalism in the United States, 1979-Present" (Moslener, 2009). In it, she identified "the faith-based abstinence movement" and argued that this drew on an alliance of evangelicalism and the Christian Right in the political sphere of the US (2009: 4). Journal publications arising from this research (2010, 2012, 2017) demonstrated that Moslener was studying the same movement as Gardner (one which involved True Love Waits and Silver Ring Thing). Moslener's consequent monograph *Virgin Nation* cemented her contribution to purity culture research, arguing for a link between the rhetoric of sexual purity and conceptualisations of American nationalism (2015). She has continued to publish across both of the scholarship waves I have identified – below, I discuss her co-edited journal issue of *Theology & Sexuality* (2024), and forthcoming book on white evangelical purity culture in the US (2025).

Another notable publication during this time was Linda Kay Klein's book *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* (2018). Though this is not necessarily an academic study (it is published by the general interest Atria Books, a division of Simon and Schuster), it is nonetheless based on an extended (10-year) period of research, in which Klein interviewed women who had grown up with evangelical purity culture, and then re-interviewed them at a later date (2018: 291-292). It also demonstrates extensive knowledge of American evangelicalism (particularly the history of purity culture), and Klein makes references to academic studies by Moslener (2015) and Regnerus (2007). Part-research and part-memoir, this book tells of Linda Kay Klein's own upbringing within evangelical purity culture, along with those of her interviewees – "the stories of white American evangelical girls ... as they grew up" (2018: 31). Klein further clarifies that:

> the individuals whose stories are shared in this book are between their early twenties and their early forties, having been raised as evangelical Christian girls sometime between the late 1980s and the early 2000s. Many, but not all, grew up in my hometown [in the Midwest], where my interviews began. Most are using pseudonyms and, unless otherwise noted, all are white Americans.

Klein, 2018: 31

A key contribution of this book was to draw attention to experiences of shame within this movement (as indicated by the subtitle). Klein does this by presenting her own story, often in visceral detail, alongside the women she interviewed, sometimes using the language and literature of trauma to demonstrate the heavy, bodily impacts of undoing the shame she identifies as arising from purity culture. *Pure* has come to be treated as a (if not *the*) seminal study on purity culture in America.

Alongside these significant authors, further studies exploring the same phenomenon emerged during this time period, sometimes with particular areas of focus. For example, Breanne Fahs examined the "culture of chastity", paying particular attention to purity balls (discussed in §4.1.2), other "chastity clubs" and encouragement of abstinence until marriage (2010). In 2012, Heather White examined the virginity pledge popularised by True Love Waits, arguing that in affirming their abstinence, young pledgers "declared and performed a chaste heterosexuality" alongside making "public their Christian convictions" (2012: 243). Then, like Fahs, Elizabeth Gish also explored purity balls, arguing that they affirm the hierarchical nature of relationships in the home, church, and nation (2016), and in a further article argued that the "American Sexual Purity Movement" utilised "harm and damage rhetoric" (2018). Purity balls also appear in an article on evangelical purity culture by Jennifer Miller (2017).

As indicated in this collection of literature, abstinence pledges and purity balls were notable areas of focus during this time period. This is, of course, not an exhaustive list. Further studies during this time period include: Kathryn R. Klement and Brad J. Sagarin's investigation of "the messages" relating to rape myths in women-directed Christian dating books, one source of media arising from "evangelical Christian purity culture" (2016: 207); Sierra Schnable's exploration of "the evangelical purity movement" through the lens of masculinity (2017); Kelsey Sherrod Michael's argument that "modesty culture" in American evangelicalism serves as "surveillance" and how women seek to resist this (2018). These studies, all published towards the end of the 2010s, indicate a gradual growth and broadening of purity culture scholarship.

1.2.2 'Purity culture' studies: 2020 – present

The second wave of scholarship builds on the foundational works above, which established the basic contours of purity culture. From around 2020 onwards, there is increasing attention to the intersections of purity culture with social identities, issues, and spheres of impact, including: race, disability, mental health, the body, trauma, rape culture, and sexual abuse. I identify Katie Cross' 2020 article and Katie Gaddini's body of work (especially 2020; 2022a) as of particular significance for this project, as they explore purity culture from a transatlantic perspective by using both British and American participants. I also identify notable developments within this wave as an established consensus on the label ('purity culture'), and the increasing attention being given to race in relation to American purity culture (Natarajan et al., 2022; Moslener, 2025 forthcoming).

At the time of publication, Cross' study signified the first academic piece of research on purity culture which actively included and combined experiences from both American and British participants. 2020 saw the publication of *Feminist Trauma Theologies*, a volume edited

by theologians Karen O'Donnell and Katie Cross. Cross' chapter in this book identifies trauma arising from purity culture and offers a theological response, based on qualitative interviews with ten women, all of whom "self-identified as having experienced trauma through purity culture" (2020: 23). Central to Cross' chapter is a phenomenon she terms 'body theodicy', which articulates how the responsibility for such traumas is often laid at the feet of trauma victims themselves (cf. §7.1.3 for discussion of body theodicy).

Of Cross' ten participants, "eight were from the USA and two from the UK" (2020: 38, n.16). Cross herself is based at the University of Aberdeen, and though the majority of her small sample are American, her study nonetheless represents a step forward in purity culture scholarship through the hybrid nationalities of participants and the UK-based location of the researcher. The publisher is UK-based SCM Press, and the contributors to this volume are also predominantly UK-based (nine authors), with the remaining (five) US-based. Cross' own chapter too reflects this transatlantic nature, and the growing space within UK scholarship for purity culture research.

The inclusion of two participants from the UK is also noteworthy as it indicates these individuals self-identified as experiencing purity culture. Cross notes that "to a lesser but still significant extent, purity culture has also made its way to the UK. Two participants in this study, Anna and Rosa, grew up in the purity movement in British churches" (2020: 37, n.4). With such a small sample of British participants (two), Cross' chapter cannot in good faith be used as a reflection of purity culture in Great Britain. But her study was not intended as such; Cross simply sought out participants who, in their own view, had experienced purity culture. The combination of both UK and US participants was likely an organic occurrence, reflecting both Cross' own geographical location and the intentionally broad advertisement of her call for participants online to facilitate inclusion of US-based respondents (cf. 2020: 37, n.15). The presence of these two participants who "grew up in the purity movement in British churches" is significant in that, by taking part, they demonstrated both an awareness of purity culture and personal resonance with it.[4] As such, this constitutes initial evidence of purity culture in Britain, documented through scholarship which lays the groundwork for further study and offers some initial findings against which further research can be considered.

Katie Gaddini has also made notable contributions to the study of women's experiences in contemporary evangelicalism. Gaddini's doctoral research examined the negotiation of religion and gender by British evangelical Christian women, based on a year-long ethnography in London and semi-structured interviews with single evangelical women (2018). She has since

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[4] The wording of Cross' call for participants used the language of 'purity culture' (2020: 37, n.15).

published *The Struggle to Stay*, which draws together Gaddini's research on evangelical women in London along with various American participants to showcase similarities in experiences of single evangelical women (2022a; cf. 2019). Like Klein, Gaddini weaves together her own experiences with those of her participants, making her book part-memoir and part-monograph. She demonstrates a transatlantic unity of experiences of women in evangelicalism, supplementing participant's narratives with her own experience navigating American and British evangelicalism (as an American and daughter of a pastor raised evangelical, then completed a PhD in England and lived in London for a year, immersed in an evangelical church as part of ethnographic research). Overall, Gaddini argues that despite the marginality that arises from existing as a single woman in evangelicalism, these women choose to stay because they feel a deep sense of belonging within their evangelical communities.

One strand of Gaddini's research on women in evangelicalism has been exploring purity culture – a chapter of her book (2022a) is dedicated to this, and she has also written a book chapter on how single women negotiate and practice purity (2020). Gaddini frames purity culture within the broader struggle of being a single evangelical woman – the promise that obedience to abstinence will surely reap rewards of marital bliss is one of many unfulfilled expectations. In the chapter on purity culture in *The Struggle to Stay*, Gaddini notes its global reach: "Purity culture spread internationally during this same period. I met women from Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Ireland, and South Africa who all reported growing up with purity culture inside their evangelical churches" (2022a: 81-82). This indicates the potential for studying purity culture outside the US, and strengthens the growing picture of purity culture as not just an American phenomenon, but an international one too. Further publications by Gaddini have explored the phenomenon of female evangelical microcelebrities (2021), and evangelical identity in Britain and America during the political contexts of Brexit and the first Trump presidency (2022b). Gaddini's research establishes strong similarities between experiences of British and American evangelical women during the same time period, building a convincing image of a broad transatlantic evangelical subculture.

The role of race and whiteness in American evangelical purity culture has received increasing attention, particularly since the late 2010s against a backdrop of growing attention to race in the context of American evangelicalism. In particular, Madison Natarajan et al. explored American purity culture through the lens of race in an article entitled 'Decolonizing Purity Culture' (2022). They argue that "women of color" have been erased from purity culture scholarship thus far, which has tended to "assume that since purity culture is primarily a produce of white evangelicalism ... Communities of Color are not impacted to the same degree as white women" (2022: 318). This, they argue, is misguided, particularly "given the dominant

hegemonic standing of Christianity in the United States" (2022: 317), and how "white evangelical narratives greatly influence how we discuss race and sexuality in the US" (2022: 318). In addition to critiquing purity culture scholarship, Natarajan et al. also demonstrated whiteness *within* American purity culture itself, their results showing that the concept of "the ideal pure woman" reflects "Eurocentric" (white) beauty standards (2022: 321). Further, Sara Moslener's forthcoming book takes an intersectional approach to American purity culture by exploring race, sex and religion together (2025). As such, the previous lack of focus on race has begun to be addressed in the second wave of purity culture scholarship.

Other studies from this time period also demonstrate the diversifying of purity culture scholarship. Olivia Stanley has expanded awareness of purity culture on an international level through her autoethnographic account of purity culture in New Zealand (2020). Heather Morgan has reflected "on the intersection between autism and purity culture", and the heightened vulnerability that may occur at this juncture (2022: 77), and Sinenhlanhla Chisale has argued for a feminist disability theology to "deconstruct the purity myth" as described by Valenti (2020: 10). A small collection of scholars have begun to explore the relationship between purity culture beliefs and acceptance of myths about rape (Owens, Hall and Anderson, 2020) and domestic violence (Oritz, Sunu, Hall, Anderson and Wang, 2023), and Caroline Blyth employed a similar perspective in her book on teen girl Bibles which explored rape culture, purity culture and coercive control (2021).

Most recently, a special journal issue of *Theology & Sexuality* guest edited by Sara Moslener and Kathryn House (2024) brought together the work of the Purity Culture Research Collective, an affiliation of purity culture researchers based predominantly in the US (though of which I am also a member). Driven by both "public backlash to evangelical purity culture" alongside the "growing recognition" of the value of "public-facing scholarship", Moslener and House sought to "expand" authoritative literature on purity culture, and "combine traditional scholarship and ethnographic self-reflexivity" to create work that is useful "to audiences both inside and outside the academy" (Moslener and House, 2024: 84). Reflecting the diversification of the second wave, Moslener and House "encouraged submissions employing various methods of inquiry" (2024: 84), and many of the articles thus diverge from traditional academic approaches, for example employing poetry (Wolfe and Vickery, 2024) or being informed by psychotherapy (Payne, 2024). They reflect a diverse array of the outworkings of purity culture, in relation to: denial and control of the body and appetite (Wolfe and Vickery); purity rituals as initiation rites (Muskrat); whiteness (McGrath; Kim-Kort); heteronormativity and queerness (Sawyer and Houser); the status-quo and salvation (Gish); how evangelicalism uses emotional affect to promote purity by promising future happiness, reminiscent of Gardner's study on

rhetoric (Schultz). Melissa Payne's article in this volume also explores purity culture in Canadian evangelicalism, contributing to the developing picture of purity culture beyond the boundaries of the United States (2024).

It is also worth noting that critical developments in confessional spaces occurred simultaneously as purity culture studies developed in scholarship. The Christian world has responded to the identification and critique of purity culture, and some actively Christian (and sometimes still evangelical) responses have emerged. For example, Diana Anderson's *Damaged Goods* identifies problems with purity culture (particularly through virginity metaphors which symbolise an irreversible shift in someone's value) (2015). More recently, three American Christian authors published *The Great Sex Rescue*, which unpacked evangelical teachings on sex through a large-scale survey of over 20,000 women (Gregoire, Gregoire Lindebach and Sawatsky, 2021). Likewise, critiques of purity culture have also arisen in what is known as exvangelical (ex-evangelical) circles. Building on the #MeToo movement, former evangelical Emily Joy Allison drew links between evangelical purity culture and abuse in American churches in her book entitled *#ChurchToo* (2021).

1.2.3 Going further: purity culture in Britain

New avenues of research have opened up as purity culture scholarship has diversified. One of these new avenues is the presence of evangelical purity culture outside of the US. While this has had little focus so far, the aforementioned works by Olivia Stanley (2020) on New Zealand, and Katie Cross (2020) and Katie Gaddini (2022a) on both the UK and the US, suggest that there is evidence of purity culture across the Anglosphere, and perhaps also an international coterie or subculture of evangelicalism within which purity culture has flourished. It is important to emphasise, also, that the relative scarcity of an international focus thus far is not necessarily indicative of a gap or lacuna in scholarship – it is not something which has been overlooked, but rather a route for this emergent discipline to be advanced. This focus on the United States thus far is inherently unsurprising, given the well-established nature of purity culture as a predominantly American movement.

Why a study on Britain specifically? Katie Cross and Katie Gaddini both demonstrate the potential fruitfulness of such research by exploring purity culture as a shared phenomenon evident across the UK and the US. In Cross' chapter, one of her participants remarked that "UK purity culture has typically been 'less zealous' than its US counterpart, and that she often felt 'envious' of US Christians for whom purity culture was more prominent and accessible: 'They had it much easier'" (Cross, 2020: 37, n.4) – demonstrating both a *presence* of the same

phenomenon (purity culture), but a notable *difference* in its presentation ("less zealous").[5] The very benefit of such studies – in identifying an overarching international narrative of purity culture – also leaves variations specific to the British context undocumented, and yet to be substantially explored. While this is helpful in establishing it as part of a broader movement, it leaves the question of how purity culture might appear or present differently in specific national and social contexts unanswered. Focusing solely on Britain, then, ensures that any British divergences or notable characteristics are not subsumed to an overriding international religious culture, but rather can be identified and explored against this backdrop. This thesis thus furthers purity culture scholarship as the first intentional examination of evangelical purity culture specifically and exclusively within Great Britain.

1.3 Thesis overview

1.3.1 Original contribution to research: the habitus of purity culture and focus on Britain

In this thesis, I argue that evangelical purity culture has been present in Great Britain, particularly in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and that it has had a substantial impact on young women who were raised within these evangelical spaces. This British version of purity culture, while sharing some key similarities with its American counterpart, also has distinctive elements of its own – as demonstrated by the 'cakey' Soul Survivor story above, which does not exist in isolation, but as part of the fabric of charismatic evangelicalism in Britain in the 2000s and 2010s. I argue in this thesis that purity culture in Britain has existed as a constituent part of evangelicalism, making it more imperceptible but at the same time influential. Despite the variations between American and British purity culture, the experiences of participants in this study demonstrate that purity culture in Britain has nonetheless had, in many cases, a profound impact on them. In order to both *demonstrate the significance* of the impact of British purity culture, and *explain variations* in this impact among different women, I build a novel theoretical framework which expresses how evangelical purity culture is endurably incorporated into the body through a process of socialisation and internalisation. I call this the *habitus of purity culture*.

This perspective is indebted to two key areas of scholarship: the lived religion approach in sociology of religion, and the theoretical apparatus of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, including his concept of habitus. In this thesis, I view religion as inherently lived; not (merely) an abstract concept, or a collection of them, but something which shapes the day-to-day lives of individuals

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[5] As will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, the findings of this study are consistent with Anna's statement that purity culture in its British iteration is "less zealous" than its American counterpart, but – as Cross argues – nonetheless present and impactful.

and communities. Bourdieu's concept of habitus (to put it succinctly) gives a name to an individual's predispositions, which are both shaped by, and shape, how they relate to the world they live in. Habitus, then, is a useful concept as it shows one means by which religion is lived – gradually ingrained into someone's mind and very self, thus influencing their actions, behaviours, life choices, and even thoughts and worldviews. Indeed, I take a sociological approach to studying purity culture, examining the phenomenon in question through the lens of its human impact – rather than the theological sufficiency, authority or orthodoxy of the beliefs underpinning it.

To continue using Bourdieu's terminology, habitus of purity culture is shaped by the 'field' (social sphere) of evangelicalism, and the 'capital' (things of value) which influence social experiences within this field. A key feature of this habitus, I argue, is that it is relationally-oriented; relationships are centrally important, particularly with God, other Christians, one's self, and other individuals significant to the evangelical life course such as a marital partner. At the same time, in purity culture these relationships are all placed in jeopardy, at risk of damage through the possibility of sexual 'sin'. This habitus is consequently a fraught one. It is not only a state of mind but a very way of being, in which relationships are valorised yet simultaneously endangered. In this thesis, I argue that it is this tension from whence the key impacts of purity culture can arise. Overall, this study builds on and furthers purity culture research in two ways: through the exclusive focus on Britain (which establishes the presence of purity culture in this context and contributes to the growing acknowledgement of its influence outside the US), and through the original theoretical contribution using habitus (which demonstrates why purity culture is significant in its impact and at the same time explains why this can vary).

1.3.2 Project summary and thesis structure

As the first study to exclusively investigate purity culture in Great Britain, it was necessary to generate new data as there was no pre-existing data sufficient for this project. Data generation consisted of a mixed-method online survey, and five one-to-one semi-structured interviews, with women in Britain aged between 18 and 45. The survey yielded 580 responses (after filtering), and included 43 questions – a mixture of quantitative (such as tick boxes and Likert scales) and qualitative (open-ended text boxes). The five interviews provided further depth to the overall project dataset, allowing for exploration of certain topics in more detail and personalising this thesis through more in-depth personal narratives. Interviewees were given the pseudonyms Katy, Wendy, Lucy, Dani and Zara. As I will discuss further in the following chapter (§2.2), both the interview transcripts and qualitative survey responses were analysed using reflective thematic analysis (RTA). Through this analysis, I gradually identified five

overarching themes: sin, marriage, body, sexual violence, and changes to personal religious faith.

The data analysis process also involved active reflection on the research questions underpinning this project. Data analysis was not simply about poring over the generated data and identifying common topics, tropes and experiences – but doing this with purpose and direction. It therefore also entailed ascertaining how these themes related back to – and might answer – the research questions. These are as follows:

1. Has evangelical purity culture been present in British Christianity and, if so, in what ways?
2. What impact(s) has this had on women within British evangelical Christianity?
3. How can we explain the significance of these impacts?

Consequently, I structured this thesis with both the five themes, and these three research questions, in mind. The aforementioned themes best address the research questions if they are split into two. First of all, the themes of sin and marriage demonstrate evidence of purity culture in British evangelicalism and show what this looked like (therefore addressing research question 1). Second, the themes of body, sexual violence, and shifting faith show three notable areas of impact that British evangelical purity culture has had on participants (thus answering research question 2). Meanwhile, the development of the habitus of purity culture using sociological theory answers question 3, explaining how and why these impacts have been so significant (because purity culture has become ingrained within the body and therefore difficult to disentangle).

As such, the thesis is organised into three sections. It may be helpful to view the relationship between the thesis chapters, themes, and research questions as follows:

Thesis section/chapter	Research question	
Background		3. How can we explain the significance of the these impacts?
1. Introduction		
2. Methodology		
3. Theoretical framework		
Part 1: Conceptualising Purity Culture in Britain	1. Has evangelical purity culture been present in British Christianity and, if so, in what ways?	
4. Evangelicalism and purity culture in Britain		
5. Sin*		
6. Marriage*		
Part 2: Impacts and Aftereffects	2. What impact(s) has this had on women within British evangelical Christianity?	
7. Body*		
8. Sexual Violence*		
9. Shifting Faith*		
Concluding Remarks		
10. Conclusion		

 * denotes a chapter organised around one of the five themes identified through data analysis

The first of these sections, 'Background', introduces the necessary context for this research. It contains chapters 1 (Introduction), 2 (Methodology), and 3 (Theoretical Framework). In chapter 2, I outline the methods used for this study, why these were chosen, how they were implemented, and who I am as a researcher. It is split into three sections, which focus on: the design of this study (§2.1), including research motivations, research paradigm, and eligibility; data generation and analysis (§2.2), including the survey, interviews, and reflexive thematic analysis; methodological challenges (§2.3), such as unforeseen reception, the emotional demands of the research, and changing positionality. In chapter 3, I delineate the theory used in this thesis. I first locate this study as indebted to lived religion (§3.1), building on renewed attention to the role of religion in shaping everyday life, but critiquing the binary of institutional versus lived religion that may result. I then introduce Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework of habitus, field and capital (§3.2), which I utilise throughout this thesis and which underlie the habitus of purity culture.

The main bulk of the thesis is then split into two halves. Part one, entitled 'Conceptualising Purity Culture in Britain', addresses research question 1. This comprises chapters 4 (Evangelicalism and purity culture in Britain), 5 (Sin) and 6 (Marriage). Chapter 4 argues for the presence of purity culture in British evangelicalism, and has three parts. It first describes the key characteristics of American purity culture (§4.1), including a commitment to what I call 'holistic abstinence'. It then provides a backdrop of evangelicalism in Britain, outlining some of the hallmarks of field and capital within this context (§4.2), and finally draws on the survey data to demonstrate that some key characteristics of purity culture have been present in the British evangelical field (§4.3). This chapter argues that, while some markers of US purity culture are absent, there is evidence of key values (such as holistic abstinence), but that these are interwoven with the fabric of British evangelicalism rather than a distinctly identifiable phenomenon. It also presents the habitus of purity culture, emphasising that not only are community and relationships central to the evangelical, sexual sin places them all at risk. They are thus simultaneously valorised (through the evangelical field) and jeopardised (through the possibility of sexual sin), and the internalisation of this tension is what I call the habitus of purity culture.

I then turn to the five themes identified for this study. Chapter 5 presents the first of these (Sin), which I first define in the context of evangelical purity culture, including sexual sin (§5.1). I then argue for the centrality of sexual sin in the evangelical field (§5.2), and explain this hyper-fixation as rooted in concerns over its possible damage (§5.3). This damage is inherently relational, posing risks to one's selfhood, relationship to God, status in a community, and future marriage. These relationships (as outlined in chapter 4) are highly significant in the evangelical

field and thus any risks to them can be anxiety-inducing. This chapter further demonstrates the presence of purity culture in Britain, helps elucidate what this looks like, and advances my delineation of the habitus of purity culture (by expounding the central role of sexual sin within this concept). Chapter 6 presents the second theme (Marriage), which again contributes to the conceptualisation of purity culture in Britain by evidencing a fixation on heterosexual marriage – the appropriate confines for a sexual relationship which follows sexual abstinence. This chapter demonstrates the significance of marriage within British evangelicalism, including the role of abstinence in ensuring it (§6.1), outlines how sexual sin places the condition (and possibility) of a future marriage at risk of damage (§6.2), and also considers the significance of gender roles, another prominent theme in the data (§6.3).

Part two, entitled 'Impacts and Aftereffects', addresses research question two. It consists of chapters 7 (Body), 8 (Sexual Violence), and 9 (Shifting Faith). Chapter 7 outlines potential bodily impacts of purity culture, presenting participant experiences of impacts to the embodied mind (§7.1), including mental ill health and feelings of bodily dissociation, and to the sexed body (§7.2), through vaginismus and dyspareunia (pain during sex). Chapter 8 outlines impacts of purity culture relating to sexual violence, noting participant experiences of harmful responses to sexual violence, but also identification of purity culture as enabling it. The first half of the chapter considers the concept of personal culpability (§8.1), exploring internalised blame through habitus and secondary victimisation. The second half details intersections of sexual violence and evangelical life (§8.2), including descriptions of the evangelical field as an enabling environment, and arguing that the relational impacts of sexual sin are still perceived to apply even in cases of sexual violence. Finally, chapter 9 considers how purity culture can result in changes to personal Christian faith. This includes the causative role of key characteristics of purity culture in Zara's journey to atheism (§9.1), and how purity culture can be a contributing factor to deconstruction, the process of re-examining evangelical faith (§9.2).

The last part of the thesis, 'Concluding Remarks', consists of only one chapter, which draws the thesis to a close by summarising the preceding chapters (§10.1), sketching some directions for further research (§10.2), and reflecting on the impact of the research in both the academic sphere and wider society (§10.3).

1.4 Conclusion

This chapter began with a story, 'Cakey'. This narrative served as a vignette, a short but nonetheless valuable scenario which outlined the world of evangelical purity culture in Britain – on a personal level, for young women who grew up within this culture, but also on a macro level, as one of tens of thousands of young people attending a popular Christian festival. It introduced

both the area of study and my own situatedness as the researcher, which catalysed interest in the topic and established the rationale for this project. The second section of this chapter (§1.2) summarised scholarship on purity culture so far, splitting this into an initial wave which established both the label and the discipline (approximately 2010-2020), and a second wave (circa 2020 onwards) in which the field diversified. Here, I argued that combined studies of purity culture in both America and Britain (by Katie Cross and Katie Gaddini) demonstrated the fruitfulness of investigating this phenomenon on this side of the pond. I argued this could be developed through a study which does not necessarily assume homogeneity but creates space to explore purity culture exclusively in Great Britain – and positioned this project as doing just that. Finally, the third and final section (§1.3) gave an overview of the research, outlining the three research questions and offering a roadmap of the thesis, to guide the reader and illustrate how the thesis answers these questions.

Chapter 2. Methodology

One evening in spring 2022, I sat down at my desk, cup of tea in hand, ready for an evening of PhD work. It was a late working day, as I was due to commence my fourth interview on Zoom, with Dani. We started our interview at 8pm, and spoke for a little over an hour. By the end of the interview, I recall feeling tired – physically, because of the time of day, but perhaps also because of the broader context. This interview was situated within the process of gathering and generating data, a time period during which I felt increasingly wearied as a researcher, as I documented and confronted what felt like a vast array of personal stories in a short space of time. I made another cup of tea (decaffeinated owing to the late hour) and gave myself time to decompress. When I transcribed that interview, however, in summer 2022, the experience was somewhat different.

After the formal close of the interview, I stopped the recording, and we spent about 10 minutes chatting. This conversation was not included in the interview recording, so I had not heard it when listening back to the audio – but it was preserved in the auto-transcription, which I used as an aid when manually transcribing the interviews. Reading through this automated transcript, I recalled our conversation. Dani reflected that the interview had been a positive experience. She had been navigating who to talk to about the content of what we talked about; "in a way", she said, "it's quite nice to talk it all through and go, now I'm kind of proud of where I've come out". I smiled as I read this, and made an entry in my research journal: "I'm glad to be reminded that the interview was a positive thing for her". Knowing that it enabled someone to reflect on their own journey, and feel proud of it, rekindled the motivation underlying this research and the conviction of its value. This impetus behind the research and the consequent study design are both inherently linked. As will become clear in this chapter, I do not consider myself as the researcher to be a detached, distanced vehicle for the collection and analysis of data; the relationship between the researcher and the research itself is dynamic, each affecting the other, and this principle is woven throughout the following chapter.

In what follows, I take a chronological approach to discussing methodology. I begin with study design (§2.1), where I outline positionality (§2.1.1), methodological approach including mixed methods and the pragmatist paradigm (§2.1.2), and scope of this research through restrictions to eligibility (§2.1.3). In the middle section, I discuss data generation and analysis (§2.2). Here, I detail why and how I used a survey (§2.2.1) and interviews (§2.2.2), and the data analysis process which was informed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's RTA and supported with quantitative analysis (§2.2.3). The final section outlines some challenges which

obstructed my capacity as a researcher and proved disruptive to the research (§2.3). Here, I discuss the unforeseen reception of this study (§2.3.1), emotionally demanding research (§2.3.2), and changing positionality (§2.3.3). I also formulate two concepts to illustrate these experiences: the paralysis of vulnerability (in §2.3.2) and itinerant positionality (in §2.3.3).

2.1 Study design

2.1.1 Research motivations: Christianity, partnership and feminism as positionality

Later in this chapter, I note that being a reflexive researcher involves understanding one's role in developing themes during data analysis. Reflexivity, however, is not limited to the analysis process – it signifies a more holistic attempt to understand how one's own situatedness shapes the research, from inception all the way through to dissemination of findings. In my own case, positionality in terms of religion (Christianity), feminist commitments, and relationship status (as a previously partnered woman in evangelical spaces) acted as catalysts for this research.

The previous chapter began with a story, 'Cakey', which indicates that I was well-acquainted with the world of British evangelicalism. Beyond the Soul Survivor festivals, I was also very embedded in the life of my (low church) Anglican congregation, attending weekly youth groups, Bible studies, and being on the leadership team of our Sunday evening services. The youth provision nurtured our fledgling faiths, encouraging us to make the most of relevant resources and events; in the early 2010s we attended a charismatic youth residential called OneLife, and attended Worship Central, a conference hosted by Holy Trinity Brompton. Such acquaintance continued to grow during young adulthood: at university, I participated in the UCCF-run Christian Union and, with a group from my university church, volunteered at a refugee camp with missionary organisation YWAM. Later, I joined the Christian charity Tearfund as a young theologian. Many of these acronyms and names may be unfamiliar – they will be further explained in chapter 4 (cf. §4.2) – but the overall point here is that I was fully initiated into evangelical subculture. Yet, though I was firmly located in the evangelical world, and this was a label I was familiar with, it did not fully resonate. I did not live and breathe evangelicalism. I lived and breathed Jesus.

This project thus would not have materialised without the experiences that shaped me. This also includes the relationship status(es) I navigated within an evangelical world predicated on particular relational norms. In early 2025, I attended a research seminar by Kristin Aune hosted at the University of Leeds, in which Aune reflected on her PhD – an ethnographic study on gender in charismatic evangelical church network New Frontiers (cf. Aune, 2006) – 20 years on. She made the case for singleness as a standpoint epistemology, arguing that being

unmarried or unpartnered is a form of positionality in and of itself which can influence knowledge production by shaping (for example) how a study is designed and how participants construct their perceptions of the researcher. This prompted reflection on my own positionality in relation to relationship status, and the role of this in shaping this PhD. It is likely that I was already hyper-aware of marginality in relation to these topics because I had spent a significant portion of my young adulthood partnered with someone who was not evangelical, and who, relatively early into this partnership, expressed that they were not personally Christian. Such hyper-awareness existed despite being myself (at the time) steadfastly Christian, affirming multiple evangelical traditions (such as biblical 'literacy' and its application to ecclesiastical life), and occupying leadership positions in charismatic evangelical Anglican churches. In fact, if anything this hyper-awareness may have been *amplified* by these very circumstances, undergirded by an implicit understanding of the precariousness of my social circle's perceptions of me due to my partnered life. That I possessed a subconscious ability to navigate those situations – knowing what to omit or emphasise, what to endorse and what to keep private, and what milestones (such as engagement or marriage) might change things further – was likely a factor in what compelled me to pursue this research.

A further manifestation of the influence of positionality is my commitment to championing gender equality. This is not an abstract principle, but one which is likely closely linked to an upbringing in Christian circles which affirmed female leadership, and the tenacious devotion to social justice this upbringing fostered during adolescence. Yet, though this project was influenced by my own endeavour to investigate and platform experiences of women and evangelicalism, the relationship between this study and feminism is not straightforward. This research sits in the complex position of: 1) being motivated by personal feminism; 2) indebted to the advancements of feminist research; at the same time 3) not wanting to imply that research is inherently feminist simply because it *focuses* on women. Let me briefly unpack these factors. In relation to 1, this study originated from the feminist positionality of the researcher. Using the term 'feminism' today – subject to an array of interpretations and applications – may obfuscate positionality rather than provide clarity. What I mean by this is as follows: my own commitment to gender equality, and personal observation of a phenomenon unequally affecting women in the socio-religious spaces I occupied, catalysed an aspiration to create research which fostered awareness by platforming these experiences, and could be used in facilitating change in relation to them.

Second, this study was also built on the contributions of feminist research and its impact to academic scholarship. This is not to say all feminist research is homogenous; "just as there are several forms of feminism, so too there are several forms of feminist research" (Payne and

Payne, 2004: 89), and it would be "impossible to propose a singular definition" of feminist research (Phillips, 2015: 936). Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the impact of feminist research on scholarship more broadly through (for example) recognition of researcher positionality and the subsequent turn to reflexivity, and the amplification of women's stories with the objective of influencing positive change. Indeed, feminist research perspectives tend to be "critical of ... the idea of [researcher] objectivity", and "seek to get at "subjugated" knowledge of women's lives", uncovering subdued and perhaps suppressed life experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2010: 457). In both of these instances, this study is indebted to the impact of feminist perspectives on developments in social research. More specifically, I am indebted to the work of feminist scholars of religion and gender from a UK context whose work has made space for a study such as this one – such as: Dawn Llewellyn (2016); Sarah-Jane Page (2013; 2021; Page and Shipley, 2020); Kristin Aune (2002, 2004); Abby Day (2011); Karen O'Donnell and Katie Cross (2020); Nicola Slee, Fran Porter and Anne Phillips (2013; 2018).[6]

This brings me to point number 3. Gillian Wilson notes that "feminist research is grounded in a commitment to equality and social justice" (2023: 87), suggesting it is not only concerned with exploring equality conceptually but also contributing to its realisation. In designing this research, I was influenced by Fran Porter's comments in a similar vein: Porter notes that "feminist research is an emancipatory endeavour", beginning by "seeing and deconstructing ... mechanisms that oppress" women, but also doing the work of "reimagining and reconstructing" (2018: 83). Then during a workshop I co-organised on researching religion and abuse, Katie Cross delivered a presentation on feminist trauma theology, and described the transformation associated with feminist methods. All of this prompted me to apprehend feminist research as not simply *about* women but as actively *transformative*. Yet the transformative nature of this study is ambiguous. Many participants will have found the experience beneficial, through having an outlet to share and process their story. Others may experience solidarity through knowing they are not alone in their experiences. But these may not be the case for all participants – especially those who had positive interactions with purity culture. This research is, therefore, not actively and indisputably remedial. While it investigates the presence and impact of a certain phenomenon, it is difficult to ascertain exactly how this

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[6] This is not an exhaustive list but a collection of scholars across sociology of religion, theology, and religious studies. Many have been members of the Faith Lives of Women and Girls Symposium, a forum for feminist researchers which has resulted in three volumes on female faith (Slee, Porter and Phillips, 2013; Slee, Porter and Phillips, 2018; Slee, Llewellyn, Wasey and Taylor-Guthartz, 2023). Though the first of these books in particular stood "in the tradition of British feminist practical theology" (Graham, 2014: 384), they are increasingly interdisciplinary, contextualise this study in wider UK religious studies scholarship (well-established in foregrounding women's experiences of Christianity).

research may be used to redress negative impacts. Its transformative nature is not unequivocal but rather somewhat hazy.

How, then, to integrate all these contributing factors? In light of them, it is difficult to provide a succinct, articulate summary of the relationship of this study to feminism. Overall, it stands somewhere amidst this complexity, but it must be acknowledged that it ultimately derived from my own feminist positionality, consequently seeks to foreground and investigate women's experiences of evangelical purity culture in Britain, and has been enabled by legacy of feminist research that has come before.

2.1.2 Methodological approach: mixed methods and pragmatism

The proposal for this project envisioned a dataset notably different to the one eventually produced. It was initially intended to be formed of popular evangelical media resources (to be utilised as a window into contemporary evangelical discourse on sexual purity), and focus groups (to capture understandings of, and responses to, this content). The project aim at that stage was to examine current Christian sexual purity discourse; the proposed methods reflected this objective. Early in the project, the area of focus changed, in light of growing US-based studies which named and explored purity culture and its impact on women (cf. §1.2). The initial reception of such studies in the UK demonstrated that the *presence* and *impact* of purity culture in this context could be a fruitful avenue of research. The project focus was therefore reshaped to accommodate this, moving away from a study of current digital resources and discourse on sexual purity, instead reoriented to be an examination of the presence of purity culture in Britain particularly concerned with the enduring human impact.

Research design was guided by the principle of methodological integrity – ensuring the methods used fit the study in question and align with the rationale and purpose of the research (cf. Braun and Clarke, 2021; Levitt et al. 2017).[7] The project methods therefore also shifted organically along with the change in focus. Digital resources were removed as a dataset entirely. Focus groups were replaced with survey responses and interviews – an approach deemed more suitable to the changed project focus of lived experience. Further, on reflection interviews were a more appropriate medium than focus groups, more suited to gathering in-depth personal narratives relating to evangelical purity culture due to the anticipated variety in participant

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[7] Methodological integrity, proposed by Heidi Levitt et al. (2017), has two key constituents: "fidelity to the subject matter" and "utility in achieving goals" (2017: 10). In other words, it allows the researcher(s) to be best placed to capture the phenomenon under study (fidelity) and effectively address research aims and objectives (utility). With the shift in focus of this thesis, a change in methods was necessary to achieve both fidelity and utility.

beliefs and experiences, and potentially sensitive nature of discussion.[8] Additionally, while ethnography and participant observation have been employed in PhD studies on gender and British evangelicalism (Aune, 2004; Gaddini, 2018, cf. 2022a) and British evangelicalism more broadly (Guest, 2002; Strhan, 2015), this was not possible due to data generation taking place during the Covid-19 pandemic, so these methods were ruled out.

This study thus adopted a mixed methods approach – a combination of "methods from both quantitative and qualitative research strategies within a single project" (Clark et al, 2021: 24). This is now a well-established way of doing research: "mixed methods research (MMR) has been recognized and used as a distinct research methodology in the social and health sciences for the past 30 years" (Skamagki et al., 2022: 197). Such a strategy can add value to research and was pertinent to this one; the limited investigation of purity culture in Britain and consequent exploratory nature of this research provided strong justification for a study design capable of capturing multifaceted experiences across a substantial number of people without compromising on personal narratives. Methods consisted of a self-completion questionnaire – which utilised closed-ended (e.g. tick-boxes and Likert scales) and open-ended (e.g. text boxes) questions – along with individual semi-structured interviews. Thus while the questionnaire collected some quantitative data from a larger number of individuals (n = 580), it was complemented by qualitative from a small number of interviews (n = 5). Additionally, the survey itself also contained a considerable amount of qualitative data (within the open-ended text boxes), which was both unexpectedly vast and surprisingly rich (further detailed below, §2.2). This study therefore constitutes a qualitative-dominant mixed methods approach, following Sharlene Hesse-Biber's endorsement of "qualitatively driven approaches" to mixed methods and de-centring of MMR which privileges quantitative data (2010: 455). Though this study utilises both types of data, the bulk of the data generated was qualitative. Not only did it make up the majority of data, but both the analysis and thesis structure were driven by this qualitative data (discussed below in relation to interviews and narrative sociology, §2.1.3).[9]

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[8] Focus groups are not necessarily inappropriate for researching sensitive issues; some researchers have challenged such assumptions and cautioned against heedlessly ruling them out. These tend to either emphasise their advantages (such as stimulating discussion or providing support) or demonstrate that focus groups do not alter the likelihood of personal disclosures compared to interviews (Guest et al., 2017). The effectiveness of research methods is, however, subjective to the research in question. In the case of this study, I felt that the potential variety in personal beliefs of participants may predispose some to dominate or retreat from discussion within focus groups – particularly for individuals potentially feeling under pressure to appear aligned with evangelical orthodoxy. The anticipation of possible group dynamics in this context was enough to warrant serious consideration of whether focus groups may jeopardise the utility of findings, participants' comfortability, and salience of contributions.

[9] A mixed methods approach that is qualitative-dominant is relatively unusual. In MMR, quantitative traditionally dominate, while "qualitative methods are typically marginalized" (Walker and Baxter, 2019:

Adopting a mixed method approach raises the question of the theoretical underpinnings of this study. While quantitative research is "largely deductive in approach" and begins with a theory or hypothesis to be tested, qualitative research "is much more inductive", beginning instead with the data and formulating themes or observations based on this (Creswell, 2022: no pagination). These two approaches can thus express underlying views about the nature of knowledge (epistemology) and reality (ontology). Broadly speaking, the *ontological* orientation of quantitative research strategies is more closely associated with objectivism (that there is an objective, external, singular reality) and qualitative with constructivism (that reality is constructed by individuals) (cf. Clark et al., 2021: 32). Meanwhile, the *epistemological* orientation of quantitative research tends more towards positivism (said singular reality is measurable and observable) and qualitative towards interpretivism (reality and meaning are subjective; there are multiple possible realities) (ibid.). Constraints of word count limit how much these concepts can be engaged, but it is important to note the ostensibly incompatible philosophical orientations underlying quantitative and qualitative research strategies.

The advent of mixed methods research in the 1980s foregrounded this concern. During this time scholars argued whether these differing "philosophical assumptions" made mixed methods research "untenable" in what is now known as "the paradigm debate" (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018: no pagination). Indeed, if "we think of quantitative and qualitative research as paradigms ... in which epistemological assumptions, values, and methods are inextricably bound together, then we quickly get into a situation where quantitative and qualitative methods are incompatible" (Clark et al., 2021: 563). Though not fully resolved, the paradigm debate has now somewhat waned, as mixed methods gained traction for adding value to research: "writings have moved away from debates about epistemological incompatibilities and now focus on the (potential) value of increased understanding that comes from combining qualitative and quantitative approaches" (Walker and Baxter, 2019: 1). Such conversations have lost attention particularly with the emergence and popularity of pragmatism "as a philosophical foundation for mixed methods research" (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018: no pagination).

The pragmatist paradigm is what I also adopt in this study. Pragmatism is oriented to real-world problem solving and methods which suitably addresses often complex research topics and questions (Kaushik and Walsh, 2019: no pagination; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998:

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2), and employ "qualitative data as "handmaiden" or "second best"" (Hesse-Biber, 2010: 457). In contrast, this thesis takes a qualitative-dominant mixed methods approach (as I call it), in which both quantitative and qualitative data are integrated, but descriptive information is given precedent for the process of analysis. While both types of data are utilised (and essential to the study overall), it is the qualitative data which is fundamental to the central argument (the habitus of purity culture) of this thesis, and to the generation of key themes shaping the thesis structure.

21-22). It essentially takes "a middle road through" the divergent philosophical assumptions (Morgan, 2014: 39). Ontologically, pragmatism takes a middle road between objectivism and constructivism; in pragmatism, then, "the world is both real and socially constructed" (Morgan, 2014: 29). Epistemologically, it takes a middle road between positivism and interpretivism, thus in pragmatism "all knowledge of the world is based on experience" (Morgan, 2014: 39).[10] This middle road approach is reflected in the methods chosen for this study. There was an initial hypothesis (that purity culture seemed to be potentially influential in the UK) which the survey intended to investigate, implying there was an underlying reality. But tracing this hypothesis was also complex – if purity culture has been present here, what does it look like? How has it been experienced? How has it impacted people? The hypothesis was intentionally interrogative, and data analysis also intentionally generative, to facilitate analysis driven by the content of the data itself. A qualitative-dominant mixed methods approach facilitated understanding purity culture through the lens of lived experience, but without compromising on building a broader context for these experiences. The pragmatist paradigm enabled me to view reality as both real *and* constructed, and thus both conceptualise purity culture broadly in its British iteration *and* comprehend individualised lived experience of it.

2.1.3 Scope and eligibility limitations

Participant eligibility was limited to women, aged 18-45, within the geographical parameters of Great Britain. These three eligibility components were reflected in the call for participants, which advertised "a study on purity culture in British Christianity" and included three bullet points for eligibility: "a woman aged 18-45", "Christian (or formerly Christian)" and "based in Great Britain" . The use of the term "purity culture" may have both helped and hindered who came forward as participant. It advantageously located this research in relation to a current topic of prominence in confessional Christianity, which will have helped reach intended participants. It was also consistent with Katie Cross' use of the term in her study's call for participants (2020: 23; 37 n.15), which suggested familiarity with the term outside of academia and amongst current/former evangelicals, given that purity culture "is deeply ensconced and established in evangelical traditions" (Cross, 2020: 21). On the other hand, this terminology may have hindered others participating (notably, those with positive perspectives on their experience of purity culture), perhaps due to unfamiliarity with the term's signification (it is still in relative infancy, having emerged in the late 2010s) or a perception of the study as

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[10] The pragmatist approach also resonates with the theoretical framework adopted in this study, as Bourdieu's concept of habitus integrates both the commonality of experience due to socialisation, alongside the individuality of personal experience and agency.

critical (Cross notes that "the language of 'purity culture' is generally sufficient to indicate at least a critical perspective" [2020: 37, n.15]).

Possible terminology alternatives include the likes of purity "movement" (as per Moslener, 2009; the sub-title of Klein's 2018 book) or "evangelical abstinence campaigns" (as per Gardner, 2011). The term "purity culture", however, has received the most prominent reception and use in popular culture, and thus had the greatest likelihood of appeal and familiarity to current/former confessional Christians. Alternatively, the term "holiness" could also have been used, given the correlations between concepts of holiness and concepts of purity, and their application to lifestyle choices such as sexual relationships. Using this term would, however, have risked presenting the study as specifically about Holiness Pentecostalism (or perhaps also the Methodist Holiness movement to which Holiness Pentecostalism is in many ways indebted). This could have unhelpfully de-stabilised the study's locale in relation to American purity culture scholarship (in which purity culture is identified and treated as an evangelical cultural phenomenon), on which it was intended to build and to be used as a point of comparison. Pentecostals may have thus been under-represented in my participant sample, but the choice of terminology felt appropriate to ensure appeal and reach to participants who had engaged with purity culture in its evangelical understanding.

The 18-45 age bracket applied for both survey and interview participants. The lower end was kept at 18 (the threshold for legal adulthood in the UK) – this was an exploratory move, to allow individuals who may still feel they are experiencing purity culture to participate. The upper age limit was intentionally demarcated at 45. This would place the oldest respondents' year of birth at around 1977 (as data generation took place in 2022), and the commencement of their teenage years thus around 1990+. This felt appropriate as purity culture arose circa the early 1990s and was particularly targeted at adolescents and young adults (cf. §4.1). It is therefore particularly relevant to those under 45 at the time of data generation, and this was chosen as the upper age limit to ensure that participants of this study reflected similar ages (adolescents) during a similar time period (1990s and early 2000s) to those who had experienced purity culture in the USA. This allowed for consistency and comparison with prior scholarship on purity culture, which focused on experiences in the USA. This is, of course, not to imply that individuals aged 46 or above at the time of data generation may not have experienced purity culture, or that it is a phenomenon which emerged immediately and out of nowhere; indeed, experiences of purity culture amongst the 46+ demographic could be a fruitful avenue for further research, and shed light on the history and emergence of purity culture in Britain. Survey participants selected their age from 3-year groupings (18-21, 22-25, and so on). Anyone selecting "45 or above" was automatically redirected to an ineligibility landing page.

The call for participants also emphasised eligibility as limited to women. This was restricted specifically to cisgender women and AFAB (assigned female at birth) non-binary people.[11] This is not to deny the importance (or gender identity) of transgender women's experiences. Rather, this study intended to investigate – to use the words of Linda Kay Klein – those "raised as girls" within purity culture (Klein, 2018: 51). Consequently, the pool of participants needed to constitute those *seen as* (and therefore raised and treated as) women and girls within British evangelicalism. In seeking to capture how young women and girls were affected, this meant excluding those who were not cisgender females at the time. As a result, cisgender men, and assigned male at birth non-binary people, were deemed ineligible for this study, as were transgender men after some deliberation.[12] Additionally, it felt unethical to include transgender people's experiences as auxiliaries to supplement cisgender experiences.

Survey participants were also asked a compulsory eligibility question relating to Christianity: "do you currently, or did you previously, identify as Christian or attend a Christian church?" (Q10). There were four possible responses: "Yes – Currently identify as Christian and/or attend a church", "Yes – Previously identified as a Christian and attended a church", "Yes – previously attended a church", and "No – None of the above". Selecting the fourth option would reroute participants to the ineligibility landing page. Eligibility was intentionally kept broad ("Christian" rather than evangelical) to enable exploration of the *boundaries* of evangelicalism and purity culture, and potential overlaps within Christian denominations.

The initial proposal for this study intended to focus on the United Kingdom. Upon further consideration, however, Northern Ireland was excluded on the basis of being notably distinct from England, Scotland and Wales due to the influence of Catholicism in sociocultural and national life. This is certainly not to say that England, Scotland and Wales are homogenous, but rather within the religious variation of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland stands out as particularly distinctive; Grace Davie points out that it "must be considered *sui generis*" given that "it is the only part of the UK where religion and politics remain closely ... intertwined" (Davie, 2023: no pagination) and Linda Woodhead likewise emphasises that across the UK, the "most important exception is Northern Ireland, in which Christianity has remained highly visible, powerful, politically relevant and personally significant" (2012: 6). This prevalence of Roman Catholicism, and likely resultant teachings of sexual abstinence prior to marriage, may have drawn participants who experienced abstinence teachings somewhat akin to those seen in

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[11] AFAB non-binary people made up a very small proportion of total participants (7 out of 580 participants, compared to 573 cis women), but were nonetheless intentionally included.
[12] Transgender men could have been potentially eligible as they could have been 'raised as girls' within evangelical spaces due to female sex at birth. However, eligibility would be difficult to determine – particularly dependent on age at transition and response from their religious community.

evangelical purity culture, but arising from and within a different socio-religious context distinct from evangelicalism. This could have risked altering the dataset, as participants may have been unfamiliar with evangelical culture itself but participated due to resonance with teachings about abstinence before marriage grounded in Christian doctrine. This, again, could have impaired potential comparison with purity culture in its American iteration. As such, this study shifted its focus from the UK to Great Britain. This is also not to imply that evangelicalism is absent in Northern Ireland, but rather that the inclusion of Northern Ireland may have skewed the participant sample towards Roman Catholicism in a way that failed to capture nuance between Catholic versus evangelical teachings (and cultures) surrounding sexuality and abstinence. This raised the question of how to measure eligibility in relation to these geographical parameters. Should eligibility be exclusive to British citizens who have resided here since birth? What about those who have lived abroad, even briefly (as may be the case for university students on years abroad, or those pursuing Christian mission work overseas, as common in evangelical circles)? Would this omit individuals with dual nationality or citizenship, those who moved here at a young age, or lived in Britain for a substantial amount of time – all of whom could have valuable and relevant experiences of purity culture in this context? Resolving these questions proved complicated, particularly within the boundaries of survey functionality. Question 7 asked "Which of the following options best describes your national identity?" with the options English, Welsh, Scottish and Other (those selecting the latter were asked to specify, Q7a). Question 8 then asked "What is your current place of residence?", with the options England, Wales, Scotland and Other. Again those selecting the latter were asked to specify where (Q8a), if they had previously lived in Britain (Q9); if yes, they were asked to clarify where, if no they were rerouted out of the survey (Q9a). Any respondents who had answered "Other" for either Q7 (national identity) or Q8 (current country of residence) had their survey responses manually reviewed to determine geographic eligibility; Q9 assisted with this review, along with any other useful geographic information in open-ended questions. This process erred on the side of caution; any survey responses with ambiguous eligibility were excluded.[13]

2.2 Data generation and analysis

I favour the phrase 'data generation' over 'data collection', as it captures the generative nature of assembling the dataset for this study. Introduction to the concept of data generation came via the work of Braun and Clarke. Though they use the word generative much more in relation to data analysis, they also routinely describe data as produced in this way. They use it

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[13] In hindsight a more straightforward question may have been "did you grow up in Great Britain?" (along with a national identity question). Owing to the necessary complexity of the survey and consequent demands as the researcher to manage exploration of numerous lines of enquiry at once, this did not occur to me at the time.

to distinguish, for example, datasets "generated from participants specifically for [a] project", as opposed to being "sampled from material" which is pre-existing, or "gathered" for other studies (Braun and Clarke, 2021: 70). As such, I prefer 'data generation' as it stresses that data has been purposefully acquired.

2.2.1 Survey: design, sampling, and limits to generalisation

The self-completion questionnaire was administered online via Online Surveys, as this the University of Leeds' recommended survey tool.[14] The survey was entitled "Purity culture in British Christianity", to communicate both the importance of the label 'purity culture' and locale of Great Britain to potential participants. It consisted of 43 questions across 11 pages. Page 1 ensured informed consent by providing a summary of the research, how data will be used, potential risks, and information about withdrawal, anonymity, confidentiality and data storage. Pages 2-4 gathered demographic information (age, gender, sex, sexual orientation, ethnic group, national identity, and current/former residence in Britain; Q3-7). These questions were designed based on Office for National Statistics recommendations on how to word and structure demographic questions (2021: no pagination). Page 5 measured religious background through questions on current/former Christianity (Q10), religion (Q11), church attendance (Q12, Q13), denomination (Q14), evangelicalism (Q15, Q16), and an open-ended text box inviting further information (Q17).

The rest of the survey focused on purity culture. Pages 6 to 8 measured interaction with it through questions on: participant familiarity with purity culture (Q18), participant definitions (Q19) and experiences of it (Q20), purity rings (Q21), pledges (22), abstinence events (Q23), virginity metaphors (Q24), and personal abstinence practices (Q25). Page 7 employed a pre-existing Purity Culture Belief Scale (Q26), devised by Amanda Oritz as part of her doctoral thesis (2018), and revised for this study. Oritz recommends use of the PCBS in future research, and also notes that it would be helpful for "additional research" to "refine and validate the proposed measure of purity culture" (2018: 60).[15] This was updated to trace both awareness and agreement of beliefs.[16] Page 8 documented interaction with cultural aspects of US purity culture through closed-ended questions on books (Q27), organisations (Q28), and teenage-oriented

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[14] This platform is also preferable as it enables compliance with the Data Protection Act (which requires that survey data be held within the EEA).

[15] This was later refined and updated, with an initial 21 statements (Oritz, 2018: 107) reduced to 14 (Oritz et al., 2023: 556). Data generation for this study took place prior to the publication of this updated scale, so it was also revised here for the purpose of this study.

[16] The PCBS was modified by: adding 6 statements (particularly relating to theological concepts like God, sin, and 'soul ties'); removing 3 statements; refining the sub-scales and altering the control items to reflect one evangelically orthodox teaching; including a Yes/No tick box response to determine if these statements had been encountered in a Christian setting (in addition to the Likert scale measuring agreement) (cf. Appendix C).

(Q29) or abstinence-themed (Q30) Bibles. It also asked open-ended questions about go-to resources on the Bible (Q31), biblical narratives/people (Q32), verses/phrases (Q33), and how these were used (Q34). Page 9 then gathered participant's own opinions on purity culture: if they felt it had been present in British Christianity (Q35), if it could be separated from Christian teaching on sexuality and gender (Q36), if it could be separated from Christian culture (Q37), whether it was un/helpful (Q39), and whether its impact was positive or negative (Q40).[17] The final survey page (10) gathered interest in interviews (Q42), and provided space for any additional comments (Q43). Page 11 was a completion page which provided researcher contact details.

It is important here to note the sample size of the survey, including some comments on sampling method, generalisation, and representativeness of the target population. As noted above, the target population for sampling was Christian or formerly Christian women in Great Britain aged 18-45 (who identified with the phrase "purity culture in British Christianity" in the call for participants). Consequently, the population size for this study had the potential to be incredibly vast. According to reporting by the Evangelical Alliance UK (drawing on the English Church Census), of the approximately 3 million churchgoers "attending church on an average Sunday" in 2005, 1.3 million of these attended "evangelical churches" (Evangelical Alliance UK, 2008). Of course, not all of these churchgoers will have been young women and girls – but given the 1.3 million statistic, it is possible that the number of girls and young women could be in the tens of thousands; at the least, this would be a sizable demographic. Further, what about other young women and girls who attended evangelical churches before/after 2005? This also raises the question of where to draw the line of who experienced purity culture – was it just churchgoers? What about those who may have encountered it outside of church altogether through other events or resources? The blurred boundaries of evangelical culture could thus increase the population size even further, as could the broad time period taken as a focal point for this research (1990s and early 2000s). This could place the target population figures within the hundreds of thousands. As such, achieving a truly representative sample of the population was simply not possible given the limitations of this project.

Nonetheless, it was determined that this study could still be useful, the survey intended as a pilot to explore purity culture in Britain in comparison to US research on purity culture.

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[17] An additional question (Q41) also asked participants to describe purity culture in three words. When designing the survey, this question included example words (such as 'personal', 'unfamiliar', 'Bible-based', 'controlling', 'empowering', 'well-intentioned' and 'problematic'), intended to indicate the open nature of this question and that these words could be positive, negative, or morally neutral. When reviewing the survey, however, I decided that these words would have likely prejudiced participants' answers, so the question was not used in data analysis.

Sample size was therefore determined by anticipated researcher capacity to process and analysis the data. The expected survey sample was 100-200, which would have been followed by approximately 10-20 interviews. Having designed the survey and successfully run a small trial with 4 respondents, the survey was launched in January 2022. Purposive sampling was employed – "selecting people who 'best fit' the requirements of the study, according to predefined characteristics" (Clark et al., 2021: 177) – based on the inclusion criteria outlined above. Snowball sampling was then used to reach potential participants, an approach to sampling in which "the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses them to establish contacts with others" (Clark et al., 2021: 177). The survey was shared within my own personal and professional networks (including extensive personal evangelical connections in multiple geographical regions across England, Scotland and Wales, as well as research centres, university departments, theological colleges, independent academics and speakers, and interested confessional individuals). As part of this strategy, the call for participants was shared via private messaging, emails, and social media – of which X (at the time Twitter) was particularly helpful.[18] This choice of snowball sampling was, ultimately, a form of convenience sampling – "one that is available to the researcher because of its accessibility" (Clark et al., 2021: 176). Though this kind of approach does suffer from "the problem of generalization" (as already discussed), it can be useful in providing "a springboard for further research" and to help "identify links with existing findings in this area" (Clark et al., 2021: 177). Highly successful snowball sampling meant that the survey was closed early due to a high volume of responses.

The survey sample is thus exploratory, so though I would advise caution over generalising these findings to all experiences of British evangelicalism, they nonetheless provide a window into lived experiences of purity culture by young women and girls during the 1990s and early 2000s, and provide a useful dataset upon which further research can be built. The high response rate (nearly 600) is helpful in building this picture; though "a large sample cannot *guarantee* precision", a larger size does "increase the *likely* precision of the sample" (Clark et al., 2021: 180). There is also significant diversity in respondents, particularly in terms of age, geographical area, and current/former Christian denomination, and this heterogeneity helpfully evidences a relatively diverse group of people in a context which could have easily given rise to sampling bias (though there is some regional bias, cf. §4.3.1). Nonetheless, the sample size is a potential limitation to the accuracy of this study, simply due to the potentially vast population size.

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[18] The post sharing the call for participants received 1393 engagements and 35,710 impressions.

2.2.2 Interviews

The approximate number of intended interviewees (initially 10) was chosen through reference to similar qualitative studies, such as doctorates or projects with similar resources, especially those originating in Britain, concentrating on womanhood, gender, Christianity and/or religion, and using interviews. This included, for example: Kim Wasey's doctoral research on young lay women's experiences of the Eucharist in the Church of England (10 interviews) (Wasey, 2012; cf. Wasey, 2013); a project by Sarah-Jane Page on masculinity and femininity in the Church of England (17 clergy interviews) (2013: 54); Alison Woolley's PhD on silence and the spiritual lives of Christian women (20 interviews) (Woolley, 2013: 148); Dawn Llewellyn's doctoral research on spiritual reading practices (36 interviews with women aged 21-80) (2016); Ruth Perrin's research on young evangelical women and biblical female role models (questionnaires from 50 women aged 18-30, and 6 focus groups each with 7-10 women) (Perrin, 2013: 112-113). By comparison, 10 interviews felt appropriate for this study, given they were intended to follow around 100-200 survey responses. This number was approximate, to allow for closing the interview process if data saturation had been reached. As a result of the unexpectedly high survey data, however, the number of interviews was reduced to 5.

The qualitative data in the open-ended survey text boxes – in which respondents had shared personal stories and experiences in substantial depth – necessitated consideration of whether interviews were still needed. Interviews were deemed necessary for two reasons: to facilitate exploration of specific topics that arose in the survey data, and to enable the intended narrative approach of this study. First, based on the survey results I wanted to explore British Christian youth subculture of the 1990s and early 2000s in further detail; many respondents identified experiences of purity culture outside of church environments, as well as certain courses and resources, all of which could be appropriately labelled under this umbrella. This included: Christian youth festivals popular at the time (Soul Survivor; New Wine; Spring Harvest); organisations which targeted adolescent evangelicals (such as UCCF, which ran many university Christian Unions) and their publications. The frequency with which they appeared warranted further exploration, and interviews enabled this by creating space for prompting, probing and follow-up questions.

Second, interviews facilitated the narrative approach intended for this project – a qualitative-dominant mixed methods study, exploring purity culture through personal narrative accounts (but at the same time contextualising this in relation to the British evangelical landscape, and to US purity culture). As a researcher with a background in British evangelicalism, I approached this research with a conviction that personal story is the best way to conceptualise purity culture – not simply as one-off events, individual social interactions, or

encounters with teachings/books/sermons/biblical hermeneutics, but rather as a collection of all of these over the course of someone's life. A particular evangelical teaching or resource book, for example, carries limited weight if treated abstractly. It is much more poignant when contextualised against the backdrop of the multi-faceted life of a young evangelical – when considered in tandem with how this person makes sense of it, what it means to them, how its influence is shaped by other corresponding or conflicting messages, and how all of this shapes their behaviour and perhaps frames their own self-perception or identity.

Such an interest in personal story is not novel in social research, and this incentive behind conducting interviews was also informed by the narrative turn in sociology. Narrative sociologists push back against the notion that sociological writing is (or should be) written in a certain format, which mirrors scientific writing – Susan Mannon and Eileen Camfield note how scholars have begun to recognise such writing as "a kind of literary genre" in itself "with its own rhetorical conventions" (2019: 181). "To write scientifically", they say, "was ... to highlight methods and data ... and to adopt a clinical and detached tone", and to thus "claim legitimacy or authority" (2019: 181). Within narrative sociology, however, sociologists "are not simply truth tellers" but viewed "more as storytellers", and question the assumption that employing a certain tone makes research more authoritative (2019: 182). This is an approach I adopt in this work, not only due to the conviction that purity culture is helpfully conceptualised through life experience, but also because functionality in academic writing is not incompatible with expression, emotion and poignancy, as the narrative turn has made clear.

The 5 interviewed women are Katy, Wendy, Lucy, Dani, and Zara (pseudonyms). The first four were identified from survey participants who expressed interest in an interview. As I was keen to explore British Christian youth subculture, they were also selected based on reference to some of this cultural milieu within their survey responses. The notable exception to this was Zara, who had come across my research online, and got in touch to express interest. As Zara had not completed the survey, our interview started more from scratch, and I felt that including Zara could diversify the interview sample in a way that could prove interesting and/or helpful, particularly as I (as the researcher) was less aware of her experiences prior to interview.

Four interviews were conducted online via Zoom, except for Wendy, who was interviewed in person at her home. Each interview was around 1 hour in length, and participants were sent an information sheet and consent form in advance (which included information on anonymisation, data storage, and use of data), allowing them to make an informed decision to participate. Interviews were semi-structured and, as is expected for this type of qualitative interview, an interview guide was prepared in advance (cf. Clark et al., 2021:

425-426; Appendix A). This allowed me to identify topics to address (based on survey responses, if applicable), but made space for follow-up, probing questions, and participants to shape the direction of the conversation (within limits). The guides were slightly different for each interview, as they were informed by their survey responses (except for Zara), but broadly followed a tripartite structure: introduction (myself, the research, and positionality; asking them to narrate their own journey with purity culture); British Christian youth subculture (exploring this in more depth, using questions based on their surveys e.g. Katy's mention of UCCF's Pure Course, or Lucy's mention of Silver Ring Thing); current state (personal opinions and feelings now, if their views have changed).

2.2.3 Reflexive thematic analysis and quantitative data analysis

For this study I used reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to analyse the qualitative data (in both survey and interviews), which made up the bulk of overall data. This also took place simultaneously alongside univariate and bivariate analysis of the quantitative data within the survey. Here, I note what RTA is and what it involves, before discussing the analysis process for this project specifically (a six-stage process of RTA alongside quantitative analysis).

RTA is, in short, a type of thematic analysis which emphasises the reflexivity of the researcher, and therefore encourages awareness of their active involvement in the analysis process. My use of RTA is based on the work of psychologists Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. Their approach has been widely applied across the social sciences since their seminal article on thematic analysis (TA) (2006), which "proved unexpectedly popular, both within their discipline, and beyond" (Braun, Clarke and Hayfield, 2019: 424). Braun and Clarke's thinking has since evolved, often in response to misapplications of their 2006 paper, and more recently they have developed their approach into RTA. Like TA, RTA "is not just one approach" as it is not a singular, standardised method (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 9). Nonetheless, there are some key characteristics of RTA – notably the prefix 'reflexive', which highlights "the researcher's role in knowledge production" (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 594). Other distinctive features of RTA flow from this principle. In an RTA approach, "themes do not *passively* emerge from either data or coding" (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 594). Rather, the researcher has an active role in their development: "themes are analytic outputs developed through and from the creative labour of coding" (2019: 594). As such, the research's own subjectivity is seen as a "resource" rather than an obstacle to be overcome (2019: 591).

The study utilised Braun and Clarke's six phases for RTA: familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; developing and reviewing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; writing up (2022: 36). These were used with some alterations – as is appropriate, as

"this phase-approach is not intended to be followed rigidly" (Braun and Clarke, 2021: 331). Phase 1 was unique, as the familiarisation process (of survey responses) initially happened simultaneously alongside data generation (conducting interviews). After interviews had taken place, I continued the familiarisation process during transcription, manually transcribing the interviews whilst listening to the audio recordings. This also involved making initial notes during transcription in a research journal.

Phase 2 involved coding but again, adapted for this study, also involved analysis of the quantitative survey data. It was also the phase which took the longest amount of time due to the vast amount of data, and the process of coding as working "systematically through [the] dataset in a fine-grained way" (Braun and Clark, 2022: 36). Both interview transcripts and qualitative survey data were coded manually. Taking the aforementioned pragmatist approach – viewing reality as both real *and* socially constructed – I searched within the data for indicators of purity culture, but at the same time paying attention to personal interpretations, understandings, and emotions.[19] The coding process in particular reflects this dual orientation, displaying an eclectic mix of both cultural milieu and personal meaning-making – examples of codes include everything from Soul Survivor to shame.

During phase 2, coding of qualitative data took place simultaneously with quantitative data analysis. For the latter, this consisted of predominantly univariate analysis – the "process of analysing one variable at a time" which produces "numerical representations or summaries of data" (Clark et al., 2021: 325). This was performed using the survey platform, which automatically generated frequency distributions for closed-ended questions, presented through bar or pie charts. For example, it generated a bar chart detailing the number (and percentage) of participants in each age group (Q2). This was helpful for visualising, for example, what percentage of participants had worn purity rings (6.4%), or how many had owned abstinence themed Bibles (0.5%). In short, univariate analysis assisted with tracing how many participants (both number and percentage) had selected different categories in their tick-box answers. These descriptive statistics could then be employed to make summaries of the data and comparisons with US purity culture. Additionally, I conducted some bivariate analyses – analysing "two variables at a time" to explore relationships between them and see "whether or not they are related" (Clark et al., 2021: 333). Again, this was enabled by the survey platform,

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[19] This is important to note here; RTA offers "flexibility in terms of the theory informing their use of TA" (e.g. induction/deduction, ontology, and theoretical orientations), but necessitates that researchers "articulate" these alongside "how exactly they enacted TA" (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 592). In the case of this study, the assumptions which informed my approach also shaped the way RTA was enacted during coding (in phase 2).

which had the functionality to filter by question response. For example, I manually filtered by each age group (question 2) to see if this had any relation to other question answers (cf. §4.3.2).

Phase 3 of RTA onwards focused solely on the qualitative data. This phase consisted of "generating initial themes" (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 36). Here, then, I began to identify themes throughout the whole qualitative dataset (interviews and qualitative survey results). To assist with this process, I clustered codes for each interview individually, then used this in tandem with codes from the survey to identify frequent motifs, patterns, or certain meanings. These initial (and still imprecise) themes were: social identity and relationships (1); powerful socialisation (2); the concept of sin (3); marriage and gender roles (4); trauma/abuse (5); deconstruction (6). Relating to theme 4, marriage and gender had initially been coded separately, but I gradually identified that gender was being used by participants specifically in relation to the *performance of gender roles within marriage* – gender was thus subsumed into the marriage theme (4).In RTA, phase 4 involves "developing and reviewing themes", and phase 5 "refining, defining and naming themes" (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 36). In the case of this study, the boundaries between phases 4 and 5 are blurred, and realistically represent one phase (theme development and refinement) which was ongoing and recursive. Here, I began to consider how the initial themes might be related, and how they might relate to my research contribution more broadly, and consequently identified relationality as a focal point. I began to observe the prominence of social identity and relationships (1) across the dataset. It was too significant to include as one theme, as it related so closely with the other identified themes: powerful socialisation (2) was the result of ongoing social relationships; sin (3) was correlated to relationships in that it put them at risk; marriage and the performance of gender roles (4) signified identity defined *through* a relationship; trauma/abuse often arose from the actions of social actors with whom the individual had an existing relationship (5); changed relationships naturally ensued from religious deconstruction (6). At this stage, then, relationality was intended to be the conceptual framing of the whole study.

Themes were gradually refined into what they are in this thesis (sin, marriage, body, sexual violence, and shifting faith), and the theoretical framework of habitus was constructed. I moved away from relationality and instead to the habitus of purity culture, which better captured *both* relationality *and* powerful socialisation (through a habitus which is socialised to view relationships as centrally important – cf. §4.3.3; 5.3; 6.2). The initial themes were refined as follows. Social identity and relationships (1), and powerful socialisation (2), were subsumed into the theoretical framework of habitus. The concept of sin (3) remained a theme, as did marriage (4). Trauma/abuse (5) was felt to be too diverse, as it encapsulated both bodily trauma and sexual assault, so it was split into two themes (body; sexual violence). Finally,

deconstruction (6) gave rise to the theme of shifting faith, renamed to reflect the frequent occurrence of the term.

During this dual phase 4/5, analysis was also moved to NVivo, because working with the volume of data begun to feel overwhelming and it enabled the collation of codes across interviews *and* survey results. Additionally, exporting data to NVivo meant I could continue to engage with the survey data (as I had been notified it would be removed from the survey platform). The move to NVivo was somewhat tedious but facilitated closeness to the data and a recursive process of analysis which assisted with theme development. Finally, Phase 6 (write-up) naturally followed, combining the themes with the purpose of storytelling.

It is important to note my active role in generating these themes. Some were chosen because I perceived an overwhelming prominence of patterns in the data, and felt they could not be ignored. But this was not the case for all: the themes of body and sexual violence were evident, but not overly prominent. The topic of sexual violence, for example, was absent for most participants. Nonetheless, it was included. Why? Its depth of harm. Likewise, the impacts to the body were not indicative of a majority, and perhaps represent the impact of purity culture at its most extreme. This theme was not necessarily "self-evident" but shaped by myself as the researcher (cf. Braun, Clarke and Hayfield, 2019: 433). This was an active analytical choice, not due to statistical prominence but because of the emotional gravitas and significance of broken bodies and sexual violence, and how participants' sense-making of these were repeatedly tied to purity culture when they *did* occur in the data. It is certainly not the case that the use of RTA enables the researcher to select themes based on preference; it is still the responsibility of the researcher to identify themes of significance in the dataset. What is notable with RTA, however, is the acknowledgement of said *identification* by the researcher themselves (as opposed to themes passively "emerging"). Participants were not asked about the bodily impacts of purity culture, nor were they asked about sexual violence in relation to it; the fact that multiple participants actively shared these experiences, then, (and directly related them to purity culture) was extremely significant in itself and warranted attention through thematic focus.

2.3 Methodological challenges: the obstructed researcher

This project was also not without its challenges. Multiple obstacles emerged during the course of the project which impeded the progress of the research: unforeseen reception of the research, the emotional labour of engaging with sensitive data, and the changing positionality of the researcher.

2.3.1 Unforeseen reception: data volume and public interest

The online survey quickly received an unexpectedly high number of responses. Though the rapid response rate did gradually begin to slow, the large number of responses necessitated an altered timeframe. In consultation with supervisors, the survey was closed early (announced in advance on the digital platforms used for snowball sampling). Despite the survey only being live for 18 days, there had been 652 responses – much higher than the expected 100 to 200 – reduced to 580 after manual filtering.

The sizeable volume of submissions was also accompanied by incredible depth in the open-ended questions. Rich qualitative data was present in questions 19 (definitions of purity culture), 20b (descriptions of experiences of purity culture) and 43 (additional comments) in particular. Interestingly, all of these questions were optional, and therefore non-compulsory to navigate through the survey. Despite this, 539 participants (of the 580) chose to write something for Q19, 289 for Q20b (which had the richest and most detailed qualitative data), and 150 for Q43. These questions contained large amounts of data when measured numerically; when exported collectively, the written responses to Q20b (for example) constituted 19,773 words of plain text. There was also a considerable amount of qualitative data in other open-ended questions: Q17 (which gathered additional information on current/former religious affiliation, belief, denomination or church); Q23b (descriptions of Christian abstinence/purity-themed events); Q32, Q33 and Q34 (all on uses of the Bible in purity culture). Again, all of these were open-ended text box questions, and all were optional.

This proved to be an obstacle in that analysis took much longer than expected, due to the volume of data to be familiarised with (in phase 1 of analysis) and coded (during phase 2). This abundance of data therefore significantly slowed down the pace of the research. Additionally, the unexpected reach and resonance of this study was made clear not only through these engaged participants, but how the research was received by the public. The following vignette gives an example of developments in public interest as this study garnered attention through research engagement activities.

Like most PhD students, I am very tired. Upon waking up in the morning, I therefore use the brightness from my phone screen to suppress the urge to sleep. This is a routine practice of mine, and one day in June 2022, I carried out this morning ritual. Picking up my phone from my nightstand, I began to scroll through my notifications. Contrary to the advice of many a wellbeing professional, I started the day by checking my emails. Two days prior, I had an article published with online research-informed media outlet *The Conversation* (Thwaites, 2022). The piece presented some preliminary research findings and was gaining traction – to my relief,

given the increasingly prominent requirement for PhD researchers to demonstrate public engagement and impact. Each time someone commented on the article, I received an automated email. So, I opened my email app to look for updates. A variety of emails had flooded my inbox. Anticipation turned to apprehension as I noticed multiple comments all from one man. His name was Albert. He had a lot to say.

Albert had written six comments on the article between 11.14pm and 11:42pm the night before, the content of which indicated he was somewhat vexed. Two of his comments were particularly impassioned and impertinent. "How typical and utterly cliché in this day and age to write a Christianity-bashing article", Albert wrote. "It has become something of a trend; an easy target for those who are agenda-driven and intellectually lazy. The level of intellectual rigour applied in this piece is limited at best … this incessant attack on Christianity, especially by the intelligentsia, is nothing short of cowardice". *I was not aware*, I thought to myself, *that I was an acting representative of the so-called intelligentsia. If only I had known! Perhaps I could have wielded such scholastic influence more effectively.* Albert then addressed me personally as the author. "Your article was clearly biased and agenda-driven", he said, eventually concluding with "Your article was an irresponsible, bandwagon-jumping, one-sided blatant attack on Christianity. Period!". The two comments in question were eventually removed by the editor.

Albert's comments were confusing to the extent that it was difficult to decipher his point – other than being vehemently opposed to everything I said. Further comments from other users followed, and the article received simplistic, erroneous, and sometimes hostile social media engagement. It also thrust my research (and contact details) into the spotlight, which was something of a double-edged sword: it enabled interested, well-meaning individuals to get in touch, but also exposed me to cold emails (such as being sent a table listing 15 murdered individuals in Muslim honour killings). Initially, such apparent contempt proved troubling; I questioned whether the research was worth it, if such nuance could be so easily lost. Though personally bothersome, these comments prompted reflection that people have things to say about the topic of this thesis. Things they either strongly feel they need to say, or very passionately believe – or both. Receiving comments like these, usually on social media, eventually became something to which I was accustomed; provocative comments, it turned out, were not an out of the ordinary response towards a PhD on purity culture covering topics such as gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, religious belief, and the power of religion to shape lives in modern day Britain.

As articulated in the previous chapter, this study filled a perceived need in exploring purity culture outside of the US and specifically in Britain. What became clear during the project was that this need was not purely an academic one, but a human one too. It was not simply a

potentially fruitful area for development in scholarship, it was also a topic that tapped into current social moods. Aside from the practical challenge of managing substantial amounts of data in a time-bound project, all of this raised an additional obstacle: the emotional impact to myself as the researcher. As I have discussed elsewhere (Thwaites, 2025), the unsympathetic and occasionally hostile reaction to *The Conversation* article led to an experience of chilling, "when researchers defer or deliberate about dissemination of research on a particular topic because they await possible hostile reactions" (Borgstrom and Ellis, 2021: 596). This term was originally used by Raymond Lee to describe politically conservative researchers who feared reaction from more liberal academics (1993: 34-35), but more recently Erica Borgstrom and Julie Ellis applied "chilling" to describe anxieties over sharing research on sensitive topics (in Ellis' case, research on dying) which challenged prevailing social conceptualisations (of death) (2021: 596-597). Such anxieties also became a reality for me, deterred by the aforementioned *The Conversation* experience from sharing this research. As such, I would argue that chilling can arise not only when anticipating hostility from other academics, but also anticipating hostility full stop – as Borgstrom and Ellis imply in their definition.

2.3.2 Emotionally demanding research: the capacities of the researcher and the paralysis of vulnerability

Negative and/or emotive experiences directly related to research have the potential to affect more than a researcher's inclination to disseminate findings. They can also impede their capacity to *conduct* the research. While the hostile reactions to *The Conversation* piece reshaped (perhaps even soured) my own relationship to this research (it became something which had the capacity to make strangers despise me), this was not the only experience to influence this relationship. This project was also emotionally demanding in and of itself, due to the nature of the research topic; reading and analysing the qualitative data in particular required the "emotional labour" (Micanovic et al., 2020: 6) of hearing and processing life experiences which were, in many cases, ones of pain. In recent years, the label 'emotionally demanding research' (EDR) has been used to describe research which has the potential to diminish researcher wellness (Smilie and Riddell, 2023: 77; cf. Kumar and Cavallaro, 2018: 649; Burrell et al., 2023; Calabria et al., 2023). In the case of this study, the emotive content of the data impacted my capacity to engage with it and therefore at times, to continue the research at all.

Within the survey submissions, many respondents were frank and sincere about their own experiences with purity culture. For some, this seemed neutral; for others, it was even positive. But for a vast number, there were stories of pain. Of feeling outcast by their community or friends because of their romantic relationship, of losing their role at church because they lived with a partner. Of feeling like they weren't good enough, because they fell into the

'temptation' of sexual behaviour or aroused such responses from others. Of feeling that their body was corrupt – that *they themselves* were inherently corrupt – and fearing the consequences. Beyond these emotional experiences, others had experienced sexual harassment or sexual assault. I recall reading a harrowing story of sexual assault, followed by an adverse response from someone's Christian community, and realised it was someone I knew. In the interviews, meanwhile, I sat across from women who kindly and generously shared their stories, and one interviewee (Wendy) disclosed a case of historic sexual abuse (cf. §8.1). In an article reflecting on this PhD project as "sensitive research", I wrote of the emotional toll of engaging with the data, and described it as thus: "feelings of anger, outrage, compassion, sorrow, injustice and disillusionment converged in my mind and lived in my body" (Thwaites, 2025: 52). The more I read through the survey responses, the more impacted I became, and "the analysis process drew me even closer to the depths of my data and accentuated the profundity of my unease" (ibid). As a result, reading survey responses, transcribing interviews, and coding data all necessitated regular periods of distance – while recommended coping mechanisms (such as time away, changing location or meeting other people) continued to be unavailable as the legacy of Covid-19 hung in the air.

In September 2022, I attended the final of a competition searching for up-and-coming young theologians called Theology Slam. I was there simply as a supporter (a friend of mine was a finalist), but as a space filled with many media-literate and academically-engaged confessional Christians, conversations turned to my PhD. A youth worker from southern England enquired with interest. "So how do you manage that?", he asked, a reference to the presumed emotional exertion of listening to stories about evangelical purity culture. "With difficulty", I replied. Pressing further, he asked if I was attending therapy, emphasising his innate understanding of what engaging with such experiences must be like. "How do you hold that?", he asked. "With difficulty", I repeated – somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but alluding to a taxing underlying reality. The more I talked about this experience of engaging with my data, the less enthused I became. Reflecting on this encounter in my research journal, I described the feeling as a "paralysis" – I occupied a strange mental state of feeling increasingly aware of how important it was to take care of my participants' stories, but realising that hearing them had, in fact, so affected me that it diminished my ability to engage with them.

The conversation at Theology Slam prompted this reflection, which I now conceptualise as *the paralysis of vulnerability*. The paralysis of vulnerability is as follows: being motivated to produce an empathetic, thoughtful, impactful piece of research, particularly because of its connection to profound experiences I had been privy to, but at the same time being so personally impacted by the research oneself so as to be obstructed in this endeavour. Borgstrom

and Ellis write that "crises of confidence feel especially difficult to shake when researching 'emotive' subjects'" (2021: 597), and this was certainly how I felt – but beyond a crisis of confidence, it genuinely disrupted my ability to read and analyse the data. The paralysis of vulnerability, then, encapsulated how I felt in the conversation with the well-intentioned youth worker. In short, I wanted to do justice to the stories that had been shared with me, but in hearing them I became so mentally worn-down that I felt incapable of doing just that. The research meant something to me personally, but this meaning made the process of actually *doing* it more strenuous. In an article on emotional risks to researchers, elke emerald and Lorelai Carpenter write that "vulnerability pursues us beyond the administrative requirements and protocols in to our writing, publication, and the reception of our work" (2015: 744). Indeed, often vulnerability pursues us to the depths of our professional capacity. Similarly, in their aforementioned article in which they discuss chilling, Borgstrom and Ellis note that "researcher vulnerabilities can become entangled with and fuelled by a concern to always act 'sensitively' and this can have a direct impact on managing aspects of the research process" itself – in the case of Ellis, when she experienced chilling, "being reflexive" had in fact "encouraged a level of critical introspection that at times felt almost destructive" (2021: 597). Likewise, I had been ensnared by own vulnerability, cognizant of the impression the research process had left. I had, in a way, been paralysed by my own vulnerability – my capacity to finish the research impacted by the emotive content of the research itself. Constraints of word count limit how much this concept can be developed here,[20] but it is important to note that researcher vulnerability in the context of emotive data was an obstacle which hindered progression of the project.

2.3.3 Itinerant positionality: Was this where my God died?

This experience – of finding that EDR disrupted my capacity as a researcher to engage the data – was amplified further by my own changing positionality. During this PhD, I underwent a deconstruction process of my own, and gradually transitioned from steadfast Christian to settled agnostic.[21] In 2022 I co-organised a workshop on the theme of 'researching religion and abuse'.[22] Here, biblical scholar Kirsi Cobb discussed her experience of researching abuse and trauma in Christian contexts, and her presentation centred around the phrase "was this where my God died?". This is a quotation from a book by David Peters on the role of faith,

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[20] I hope to develop this concept further elsewhere, particularly in relation to pre-existing literature on vicarious trauma. Additionally, there is not sufficient space to evaluate definitions of 'emotionally demanding research' (or 'sensitive research'); I would direct the reader to a journal article which more fully engages these concepts, and relates them to this research specifically (Thwaites, 2025: 52-58).
[21] I further define deconstruction in chapter 9 (§9.2.1) – it is best summarised as a re-examination of evangelical faith.
[22] This is the same workshop noted above, which prompted evolution in my thinking on feminist research as transformative (cf. §2.1.1; Thwaites, 2025: 55-58).

God and the Church in trauma recovery (2016). Describing a moment during his tenure as an army chaplain in the Iraq war, Peters reflects "was this where my God died? I cannot be sure, but I know something shifted inside of me" (2016: 4). Cobb then applied Peters' work to her own, noting that by doing research on trauma and Christianity, the researcher must journey from orientation, to disruption, to something new – maybe it will change one's faith, maybe it will eradicate it, maybe it will be reshaped. But that God will cease. Her presentation provided the language to understand my own experience. Earlier that year, I had left my Anglican church. Meanwhile, I had been grappling with social issues and deliberating on faith claims that became increasingly unpersuasive. Eventually, I acquiesced. People would often ask if the PhD caused this – whether being exposed to so many stories of growing up within church (in many cases also being hurt by it too) is what led to this exit. "No," I would reply, "but it maybe hastened the inevitable". Perhaps there was no version of events in which my faith remained the same by the end of this research. I am not sure where my God died. Within the pages of my work? Within the confines of the church building I left behind? Within the mind that held the stories of my participants? Within the home where professional met personal, and comfort met discomfort, during the Covid-19 pandemic?

This was a particularly unique situation, not simply because I underwent a change in my personal life, but because this reflected many of my participants' stories. Further, this blurring of personal and professional was enhanced by the realities of Covid-19 – my home became not just a living space but a work space. It was where I transitioned away from religion and into obscurity. In this same space, I met interviewees on Zoom, and they told me their stories. I sipped cups of tea as I listened, observed the mould on the walls, and glanced out of the window to a familiar sight of passing traffic. Their speech was audible within my living room; their histories entered into my living space. Now my walls carried their stories too. Later, I moved house, but I did not leave behind what I had heard. It was not only my walls that held their stories; now my body carries their stories too. Deconstruction was disruptive in that participants' words now reflected my own, again making it difficult to approach the data – seeing personal life play out in ones' 'day job' made it tediously inescapable.

Not only did this amplify the effects of EDR, it also troubled the distinction of 'insider' and 'outsider'. Questions of how one can comprehend someone else's experience and the turn to reflexivity have led to discussion of the insider/outsider 'problem' or 'debate' within religious studies (cf. McCutcheon, 1999; McCutcheon, 2003), including more recent moves to question the boundaries of these categories (cf. Chryssides and Gregg, 2019), such as Kim Knott's 4-point continuum of participant/observer roles which moves from "complete observer" (outsider) to "complete participant" (insider) (Knott, 2009: 262). Beyond this, I would argue that even a

gradient can be too restrictive. In my own case I gradually recognised positionality to be, not a scale or category (which implies stasis), but rather something dynamic. I conceptualise this as *itinerant positionality*, reflecting social location that is mobile. During the course of the research, my personal views shifted, as did my daily practices. Further, it was not just that the boundaries of insider/outsider had been blurred through my deconstruction, but that I navigated between them, moving from place to place. One day I was a deconstructed agnostic, another I would lean into my evangelical credentials, and others I occupied a liminal space between the two. By the write-up phase, the absence of regular exposure to confessional reflections on the religious phenomenon being studied eased the aforementioned emotional labour, and in a way I benefitted from identifying as an outsider. Yet, I had utilised an insider status during both data generation and analysis: my evangelical familiarity aided building rapport and trust in interviews (in some cases emphasising my exposure to cultural milieu and knowledge of people and events, in others emphasising feelings of marginality or critique within evangelical spaces) and my cultural literacy aided sense-making during data analysis. As Page and Shipley note in their monograph on religion and sexuality, "it is often not clear-cut in determining our "insider" or "outsider" status, and as researchers, we occupy both positions concurrently", regularly formulating and reconstructing this status (2020: 72). Likewise, my own positionality in relation to the research was not simply transformed from one thing to another, it was peripatetic, hence the phrase itinerant positionality.[23]

2.4 Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, I presented methodology through three distinct sections which take a chronological approach through the foundations of the research, how it was carried out, and obstacles that arose. I first outlined the design of this study (§2.1). In a discussion of positionality, I outlined personal characteristics (feminism, Christianity, and partnership) which prompted and shaped the research (§2.1.1). I presented my methodological approach, noting the principle of methodological integrity, use of mixed methods (which I described as qualitative-dominant MMR), and the pragmatist paradigm underlying them (§2.1.2). I closed this section by outlining the scope of this study and resultant eligibility limitations (§2.1.3). I then turned to the generation and analysis of data (§2.2), where I outlined justification for and implementation of the survey (§2.2.1) and interviews (§2.2.2). I then described my application of Braun and Clarke's RTA for qualitative data, also briefly summarising analysis of the

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[23] Word constraints limit a fuller explication of this concept, but I intend to develop it further elsewhere, and build on useful contributions outside of religious studies on the fluidity of positionality: Louise Folkes who highlights "the transience and permeace of the insider/outsider status" and positionality as something "in flux" (2022: 1314), and Victoria Reyes, who argues that researchers "strategically use their positionalities and capital" which she describes as an "ethnographic toolkit" (2020: 221).

quantitative data (§2.2.3). Finally, I turned to challenges which obstructed the research process (§2.3). I outlined the unforeseen reception of the research, which lengthened the analysis process (§2.3.1), discussed the difficulties of EDR (including formulating the paralysis of vulnerability) (§2.3.2), and then closed with a reflection on altered religious identity, conceptualised as itinerant positionality (§2.3.3).

Chapter 3. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I outline the theories and concepts which I use throughout the thesis, and which underlie *the habitus of purity culture* – a heuristic constructed in order to understand purity culture in Britain, developed gradually and experimentally through an organic and iterative process of reading and reviewing the analysed data. I articulate the habitus of purity culture more in the following chapter (§4.3.3); in this chapter, I describe the theory underlying it, which draw on two key influences: a movement in religious studies scholarship which emphasises the lived and everyday aspects of religious life (lived religion), and the conceptual tools of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (notably habitus).

This chapter is split into two halves. The first discusses lived religion (§3.1), summarising the emergence of this field and my indebtedness to it (§3.1.1) and the binary of institutional vs. lived religion that it can perpetuate (§3.1.2). I situate my research within the study of lived religion, though with the caveat that I seek to dismantle the aforementioned binary by focusing on what religious people actually do, think and feel (regardless of whether this takes place within institutions). In the second half of the chapter, I turn to Bourdieu (§3.2). Here, I outline the concept of habitus (§3.2.1) and the conceptual triad of habitus, field and capital (§3.2.2). Finally, I discuss applications of Bourdieu in religious studies, lived religion and studies on evangelicalism (§3.2.3). In this section, I note Helena Kupari's work, which synthesises habitus with a lived religion approach, and demonstrates how habitus can solve the binary from which this approach can suffer. I also explore a handful of uses of habitus in relation to evangelicalism, which are somewhat limited but nonetheless demonstrate the potential fruitfulness of the concept for studying evangelical Christianity.

3.1 Academic Locale: Lived Religion

3.1.1 Development of the field and relevance

The 'lived religion' approach focuses on the everyday and ordinary aspects of religious life. Since the mid-1990s, it has emerged not only as an approach to studying religion, but also as a field of study, with well-established texts and leading scholars. Lived religion is not necessarily a homogenous area, but represents a body of work reflecting a shared concern for how religion is lived, practised and embodied, especially by lay people. This shift in perspective arose out of a growing awareness that the focal point of religious studies had historically been institutions, beliefs, and religious authorities – to the exclusion of those at the margins (or simply the ordinary), and what religion is in the context of their lives. Lived religion developed

"as a response to scholars' growing awareness of the modern category of 'religion' as a power-laden cultural construct carrying the legacy of the Reformation, colonialism, and nationalism" (Kupari, 2020: 3). It signifies, therefore, an attempt to reorient studies of religion towards what has been previously, and enduringly, overlooked. In doing so, lived religion scholars also emphasise the diversity of religion on an international scale, challenging the monopoly of the West in shaping definitions of religion – laden as they are with biases towards (certain expressions of) Christianity.

This development also took place against a backdrop of concern about the increasing hegemony of secularisation debates, which was perceived to risk overshadowing other areas of study. In a 2016 article, Nancy Ammerman reflected on the "turn to lived religion", saying it "arose out of a widespread recognition that our discipline had gotten itself mired in endless debates over whether the modern world was or was not secularizing, debates mostly relevant to the North Atlantic world that threated to blind us to much of the very phenomenon we wanted to study" (Ammerman, 2016: 2). She also observed that "the study of religion has taken a cultural turn" (2016: 2), and it is indeed the case that lived religion arose within the wider context of the cultural turn in the humanities and social sciences. It can thus be argued that the renewed interest in culture and meaning-making across these disciplines is also evident in the lived religion approach, which has given "attention to discourse and identity and ritual" and, in particular, looks at "the way religion is embedded in the practices of everyday life" (Ammerman, 2016: 2).

The label itself – 'lived religion' – may initially seem questionable. 'Lived' is perhaps a superfluous prefix, 'lived religion' verging on pleonasm and the concept of 'religion as lived' erring towards tautology. For what is religion if not lived? How can religion conceptually exist otherwise? Is meaning-making about the world, and the manifestations of this in human life, not predicated on existence itself? Despite the coherence of this critique, I still find the term helpful. It signifies, simply and succinctly, the intention behind (and significance of) this approach to studying religion. True, what *is* religion if not lived – but if this is the case, why have the experiential, embodied, ordinary aspects of it often been relegated in the history of religious studies? They need not be lost amidst other foci; lived religion, as the name suggests, draws attention back to them. It is not a case of abandoning the levels of religious reality which academia has tended to focus on, but rather bringing the overlooked levels into new light.

The term itself is generally credited to historian David Hall, whose edited book *Lived Religion in America* (1997) introduced the concept "to the study of religion" in American scholarship "and American religious history", building on "a shorthand phrase that has long been current in the French tradition of the sociology of religion (*la religion veçue*)" (Hall, 1997:

vii). Amongst the contributors to this collection are Robert Orsi and Nancy Ammerman, who would later become known as founding scholars of the lived religion approach. This inaugural work was followed by Ammerman's seminal volume *Everyday Religion* (2007) which, as the name suggests, draws attention to the day-to-day religion of ordinary people. To these significant contributors in lived religion we can also add Meredith McGuire, whose book *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (2008) arrived shortly after Ammerman's. As indicated by these foundational scholars – comprised of both historians (Hall, Orsi) and sociologists (Ammerman, McGuire) – lived religion is interdisciplinary. The subsequent use of their works, and studies which have followed, paint a similar picture: Ammerman's 2016 review of articles on 'lived religion' (including those using the term 'everyday religion') includes ones from history, sociology, practical theology, religious studies, geography and archaeology (Ammerman, 2016: 6). The broad resonance of lived religion across disciplines is likely down to its value, but perhaps also its intangibility. Though I here refer to lived religion as a field of study (a label appropriate for giving a concise outline), it is probably best understood as an approach or even a scholastic trend: "the lived religion approach does not rely on a specific, fixed theory or method, but rather designates a broad research trend" (Knibbe and Kupari, 2020: 163). There is no shared methodology or definition that unifies its contributors and advocates; they are united, rather, in their aims and dispositions.

This trend, Kim Knibbe and Helena Kupari argue, has "developed, and gained currency, as scholars and sociologists of religion have increasingly taken issue with formerly unquestioned theoretical and methodological presuppositions" (Knibbe and Kupari, 2020: 163). Orsi similarly observed that the concept of religion, within "American higher education at the turn of the 20th century", denoted "a denominationally neutral version of Christianity recast as an ethical system" (Orsi, 2003: 170). Lived religion questions this definition, and instead "directs attention to institutions *and* persons, texts *and* rituals, practice *and* theology, things *and* ideas – all as media of making and unmaking worlds", for "there is no religion that people have not taken up in their hands" (Orsi, 2003: 172). Viewing lived religion as a trend or way of thinking about religion is thus a helpful way of understanding it; not as a rigid discipline which espouses particular methodologies and a formalised definition, but an approach which questions previously long-standing conventions and biases, and draws attention to the everyday and embodied aspects of religious life. In doing so, the lived religion approach has foregrounded parts of the religious experience that have been previously overlooked. There is now a firm place within religious studies for study of the ordinary, embodied, domestic, material, social, familial, relational, and even seemingly menial ways in which religion is

experienced, lived, and practised. This is a clear success of lived religion, and it is in this way that I am indebted to it.

The lived religion approach helps communicate the reality, and gravity, of evangelicalism: embodied, holistic, all-encompassing. An authentic portrayal of evangelical life cannot ignore the everyday, nor the ways in which it is both corporeal and social. As I make clear in chapter 4 (especially §4.2), evangelicalism is not just a belief system about the world, but a distinct way of living within it that goes far beyond religious texts, doctrines, or institutions. In the evangelical world, religion is inherently lived. It incorporates the material, shapes the social, inspires decisions, governs lifestyle choices, guides routines, influences language, determines thinking patterns, and is deposited within bodies. It is both within and outwith the walls of church buildings, incorporating but extending beyond abstract theological ideas. As this project is interested in the impact and significance of British purity culture on *people*, it seems apt to adopt a people-centric approach that views evangelicalism through the lens of lived religion.

This study focuses on a subculture of Christianity in a Western country group (Great Britain). This raises the question: is it appropriate to employ the lived religion approach? This is a fair query given that the "protestant theological undertone of concepts and theories" has been a key criticism levelled at traditional understandings of religion by proponents of lived religion (Kupari, 2020: 3). Not only is British evangelicalism an expression of Protestant theological tradition, it also has a close relationship with (and sometimes functions within) the Church of England (cf. §4.2). Is it, therefore, appropriate to use lived religion, a perspective built on reorienting religious studies away from institutionalised power and religious authority? There is some weight to this critique, but I nonetheless consider lived religion appropriate for this study. The reasons for this are twofold. First, evangelicalism (and, even more so, purity culture) cannot be understood without the everyday, which I further detail when defining evangelicalism and purity culture (§4.1), and which McGuire also makes clear in her 2008 book (above) which demonstrates the significance of everyday religion for understanding southern American evangelicalism. Secondly, I consider the notion that institutional religion stands in direct opposition to everyday religion to be unhelpful. I therefore do not see the prevalence of evangelicalism within the Anglican church as an obstacle for employing a lived religion approach. It is to this critique – and the limits it poses on the utility of lived religion – that I now turn.

3.1.2 Moving beyond institutional vs. lived religion

Though useful, lived religion is not without its limitations. Endeavouring to centre the role of the individual in shaping their beliefs and experiences outside of religious orthodoxy can, at times, lead to a disregard of religious institutions and organisations which could be unhelpful. As observed by Line Nyhagen, the lived religion approach "emphasizes that individuals do not simply 'copy' institutional religious prescriptions; instead, it posits that people have an active and reflexive role in shaping, negotiating and changing their own beliefs and practices" (Nyhagen, 2017: 495). This is a helpful emphasis – people do not necessarily mindlessly follow prescriptions from religious authorities, and there is a great diversity of religious experience that is not attached to any religious institution. But without nuance, it also has the potential to result in an unfortunate binary that places 'lived' in opposition to 'institutional' religion.

McGuire's work in particular lends itself to be interpreted in this way and has been criticised for this. Her seminal 2008 book was a welcome addition to a growing body of work. Well-regarded for drawing attention to the diversity of religious experience and to embodied spirituality through the concept of "embodied practice" (2008: 13-15; cf. 2016: 154-160), McGuire's monograph concentrates on the religious expressions of US Latinos and Latinas, and US southern white evangelicals. It has, however, also faced the regular critique of producing a dichotomy between institutional religion and lived religion. As one review points out, McGuire's commitment to "spotlighting the religious diversity that exists outside of religious institutions leads her to marginalize the diversity, contradictions, and multiple meanings that are found too in institutional religious settings" (Dillon, 2009: 926). This is perhaps a consequence of McGuire's case studies and focus on embodied religion, but it nonetheless "has the unintended effect of suggesting that religious institutions contribute little to "faith and practice in everyday life" (Dillon, 2009: 926). Ammerman too has more recently presented a similar critique: "when lived religion scholars exclude actions that are tied to traditional religious institutions, they not only exclude much of what most people would think of *as* religious practice, but also much of what people are actually doing" (2016: 10, emphasis original).

Consider, for example, the language McGuire uses. She notes that the term 'lived religion' is "useful for distinguishing the actual experience of religious persons from the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices" (2008: 12). The wording of "actual experience" suggests that what happens within institutions isn't *real* religion – that religious experiences happen outside of them. But are the experiences of religious persons *always* distinct from "beliefs and practices" advocated by religious institutions? Can practice, expression, and embodied religious experiences not take place within (or be formed or

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influenced by) institutions and organisations? Why must the "actual" experience of religious people exist in opposition to engagement with, or immersion in, a religious organisation?

McGuire does acknowledge later that personal religious practice may be "closely linked with the teachings and practices of an official religion ... [an] individual uses his or her group's stories and rituals to shape and interpret individual experience" (2008: 98). Nyhagen uses this very extract from McGuire to argue that "a 'lived religion' approach does not preclude the analysis of institutional forms of religion and individuals' engagement with them" (2017: 496). I am not convinced by Nyhagen's use of this quotation, as McGuire's language is ambiguous. What does "closely linked" mean? How exactly do individuals "use" the "group's stories and rituals" to "shape" their own experience? The phrasing implies an active and reflective process – is this always the case? It also implies that religion is ultimately experienced individually, perhaps later made sense of by reference to group religious traditions – but can religion not be principally collective or social in some cases? And what about the role of religious groups, institutions and traditions beyond "stories and rituals" – such as socialisation, long-standing customs, or doctrines that are perceived in everyday life? This "close link" is underdeveloped and again suggests that lived religion generally exists separately to institutional religion.

The problem of this binary becomes clear when focusing on evangelicalism in Britain. As noted above, McGuire looks at the lived religion of southern white evangelicals in the US. Her emphasis on how evangelicals find sacrality in the everyday (2008) is helpful (both in general, and for this study), as is her stress elsewhere on sensory experiences and emotions in everyday lived religion (2016). But her exclusion of 'official' and 'institutional' religion does not translate well to British evangelicalism, which exists in a different social landscape. Here, evangelicalism frequently operates (in England) within the parameters of the Church of England, and also incorporates a variety of organisations, networks, and para-church ministries.[24] Consider, too, how the boundaries of lived and institutional religion are blurred in the lives of individual evangelicals. Picture a church-goer immersed in a charismatic church which is a part of the Church of England, and follows its liturgies, prayers, and seasonal directions. If this person has what they consider to be an emotive encounter with God during an element of a church service prescribed by the Church of England, is this lived religion, or is it not? Alternatively, imagine a university student heavily involved with a Christian Union resourced and governed by UCCF (Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship). Policies and guidance prescribed by UCCF – for example on romantic relationships or interaction with non-Christians – may impact how this

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[24] Such as: EAUK, church networks like the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches and HTB, and para-church organisations like New Wine and Soul Survivor (cf. §4.2 for fuller descriptions of these organisations).

student behaves, and shape their viewpoints, friendships, and lifestyle choices. Is this lived religion, or is it not? Overall, it is difficult to categorise evangelicalism in Britain as either institutional or not, as either working within or outside of organisational structures, as either highly flexible or informed by tradition.

Furthermore, the equation of power with religious institutions and religious professionals does not necessarily apply in British evangelicalism – a subculture in which it is not uncommon to question top-down prescriptions, as evident in the fractures between the Church of England and factions of evangelical members.[25] The ambiguity of power and hierarchy outside of formalised structures means professional does not always equal powerful in evangelicalism. Lay people can be more powerful than a vicar, for example, if they are vocal and well-respected in the community – especially considering there are many unpaid, voluntary leadership roles within evangelical communities (leading ministries, e.g. student, youth or women's ministry; being on a worship team, tech team, or prayer team; leading a small group).[26] Further to this, the boundary between 'lay' and 'professional' can be blurred due to the prevalence of voluntary social roles in evangelical churches. A congregation member may lead a youth group, have experience running youth work for many years and maybe even relevant qualifications – but might not be paid. Is this a professional? The ambiguity of these roles further problematises the equation of authority with religious institutions (and professionals acting on behalf of these institutions).

The starting point of the theoretical framework for this thesis is, therefore, a lived religion perspective that takes seriously the everyday and embodied aspects of religious life, but without feeling the need to exclude institutions and organisations. If lived religion is about "what people *do*", then "starting with an artificial line between organized religion and everyday life is not especially helpful" (Ammerman, 2016: 10, emphasis original). In arguing for a lived religion approach that also accounts for religious institutions and organisations, I follow other scholars who have also pursued this perspective, such as Marie Nielsen and Kirstine Johansen, who argue "for a stronger focus on religious institutions as part of lived religion" in their article

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[25] For example, in 1994 the Church of England introduced the ordination of women to the priesthood, followed in 2015 by the introduction of female bishops. These prompted vocal opposition from some corners of the Church of England, including conservative evangelicals who mobilised through the Anglican campaign group Reform.

[26] Lay people could have more of a significant social role than the 'professionals'. For example, well-respected and charismatic lay members of a church may be able to question and shape responses to prescriptions from higher powers. Volunteer leaders may shape theological orthodoxy in a more significant way than paid members of staff.

on the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (2019; cf. Johansen and Nielsen, 2015; Nielsen, 2015).[27]

How can we move beyond this dichotomy? Ammerman argues that a continued and expanded focus on practice could enable this, as it is a uniting focus for lived religion scholars, who seem to agree that "lived religion is about "practices," what people do" (Ammerman, 2016: 9). Practice has "encompassed dimensions of embodiment, discourse and materiality", which Ammerman argues "can form the analytical structure for expanding the domain of lived religion to include the traditions and institutions that have so far largely been excluded" (Ammerman, 2016: 1). Ammerman's call to consider practice is an invitation to reorient focus onto peoples' lives. To investigate what people are doing, their habits and actions – whether this is within institutions or not. In what follows, I take forward Ammerman's recommendation by using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus to focus on what religious people are doing. This is an appropriate development on Ammerman's suggestion, and Ammerman herself point to the usefulness of Bourdieu (2021: 16). Using habitus directs focus onto the lived religion of participants in this study, on what people are doing. But it also goes beyond this – prompting consideration of their behaviours, thoughts, and feelings, as well as their activities, what shapes all of these, and why?

3.2 Bourdieu: habitus, field and capital

In this section, I introduce Bourdieu and his notion of habitus (§3.2.1), and related concepts *capital* and *field* (§3.2.2)*.* I then discuss engagement with Bourdieu in lived religion and studies of evangelicalism, and outline how my application of habitus responds to critiques of lived religion, build on its successes, and resolves the tension between institutional and lived religion (§3.2.3).

3.2.1 Bourdieu's concept of habitus

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is considered to be "one of the foremost social philosophers of the twentieth century" (Grenfell, 2008a: 1) and his prolific body of work continues to be widely read and cited – particularly his concepts *habitus, capital* and *field.* This 'Bourdieusian language' of interrelated concepts provides a unique set of tools which can be used to illuminate social phenomena. In using these tools, I align with Bourdieu's own perception of the close relationship between theory and practice. Bourdieu remarked: "I have never used the concept of praxis which, at least in French, tends to create the impression of something pompously theoretical ... I've always talked, quite simply, of practice" (Bourdieu

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[27] It is perhaps also notable Nielsen and Johansen focus on evangelicalism too, suggesting that it can be difficult to enforce the aforementioned binary in this context.

1990a: 22); Bourdieu emphasised that "he never really theorized as such; his starting point was always a particular social phenomenon or practice" (Grenfell, 2008a: 2). I share this ethos in my own approach, using Bourdieu's "conceptual apparatus" (Robbins, 2016a: 8) not as an abstract thought experiment but a means of making sense of purity culture and personal experiences of it. So, if habitus is "a powerful heuristic" which offers a "way of thinking" about an area of research (Maton, 2008:61), what exactly is it?

Habitus has been helpfully summarised as "the learned set of preferences or dispositions by which a person orients to the social world" (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014: 195). Initially developed from Bourdieu's fieldwork – to "describe the ways in which the traditional values of the Algerian tribespeople had become internalized in a way that dictated their dispositions in relation to modern values" (Robbins, 2016b: 43) – habitus ultimately became a concept which, in its broadest sense, was intended to "encapsulate the notion that we inherit predispositions" (Robbins, 2016b: 26). Beyond this, the legacy of the concept is one of some complexity. Bourdieu "continually revises it" (Crossley, 2013: 137), and his concepts have since accumulated "extended and modified meanings" as they have been "applied in various research situations" (Robbins, 2016a: 8). Nonetheless, I do not consider habitus' legacy of complexity to be an obstacle. Informed largely by Bourdieu's work towards the end of his life (i.e., the 1990s to 2002, during which he refines the concept), but with some reference still to his classic works, I attempt here to give a definition of habitus as appropriate for the purposes of this study.

The word 'disposition' is one which Bourdieu used frequently to elucidate what he meant by habitus. Before his death in 2002, Bourdieu delivered a conference paper in which he recollected his definition of habitus as "a system of *dispositions,* that is ... a system of *long-lasting* (rather than permanent) schemes or schemata or structures of perception, conception and action" (Bourdieu, 2017: 33, italics original). Habitus therefore refers to what people are *predisposed to* – their tendencies and inclinations. This means that habitus shapes someone's hobbies, tastes, habits, accent, how they dress, how they conceive of their place in the world, how they are inclined to think and their beliefs, and their tendencies to behave and act in certain ways. All of these will be shaped by this system of dispositions. These dispositions are not biologically innate but *acquired*; they develop from a process of socialisation, acculturation and internalisation. Thus, Bourdieu elsewhere describes the habitus as "a system of acquired dispositions" which are "socially constituted" (Bourdieu, 1990a: 13). These dispositions are also generative – the habitus generates action, behaviour and practice. Bourdieu emphasised the "*generative capacities* of dispositions" (1990a: 13, italics original), and habitus was thus described by Robert Nash as "a generative schema in which the forms of elemental social structures come, through the process of socialisation, to be embodied in individuals, with the

result that people necessarily act in such a way that the underlying structures are reproduced and given effect" (Nash, 1999: 177). Habitus can thus explain how a social group's beliefs are reflected in individual life choices.

Naturally this raises the question, is there such a thing as a shared habitus? If habitus is socially acquired, it follows that individuals in the same social group will display similar – if not the same – tendencies, behaviours, and ways of being. Bourdieu addressed this possibility in *The Logic of Practice* (1990b). He explained that "the objective homogenizing of a group" or "class *habitus*" enables "practices to be objectively harmonized without any calculation or ... direct interaction or ... explicit coordination" (1990b: 58-59). (I consider this 'class habitus' to denote the unity of dispositions and practices within social groups i.e., not only within 'classes').[28] Bourdieu uses the word 'style' (or elsewhere 'lifestyle') to explain how this can look in a social group: "the habitus of a determinate person – or a group of persons occupying a similar or neighbouring position in a social space – is in a sense very systematic: all the elements of his or her behaviour have something in common, a kind of affinity in *style*, like the works of the same painter" (2017: 44). What would this 'affinity' in lifestyle look like in practice? Bourdieu gives the illustrative example of the "petty bourgeoisie", noting their shared manner of speech ("characterised by hypercorrectness"), financial tendencies ("thrifty"), and fertility decisions ("they have few children") (Bourdieu, 2017: 44-45).

How, then, do individual habitus and class (or group) habitus relate? A class or group habitus is "a class of biological individuals having the same *habitus*, understood as a system of dispositions common to all products of the same conditionings" (Bourdieu, 1990b: 59; italics original). As such, an individual's habitus in this context can be understood as a variation of a wider system, a product of shared social conditioning. Bourdieu explains that "class (or group) habitus ... could be regarded as a subjective but non-individual system of internalized structures, common schemes of perception, conception and action, which are the precondition of all objectification and apperception" (1990b: 60). For example, a habitus might shape worldviews, interpretation of events, daily habits and practices, and regular behaviours – and these might all be found across a social group. Thus, there can exist a set of dispositions, behaviours, values, and practices shared by individuals within a collective, arising from, in Bourdieu's words, from "the homogeneity of conditions of existence" (1990b: 58).

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[28] A note on the word 'class'. Bourdieu tends to use this word, and the phrase 'class habitus', because he contextualises his discussion by reference to class groups within societies. But 'class habitus' does not necessarily solely apply to class categories, rather it denotes more of a *collective* habitus; Bourdieu is here adopting his usual tendency of drawing on the explanatory power of social stratification.

Bourdieu then faced the criticism that habitus can homogenise people. He responded: "I am conscious of the danger of being seen as promoting the idea that human behaviour is monolithic and this is something that is sometimes said against the notion of habitus. But human behaviour is not monolithic" (2017: 44-45). Bourdieu had in fact previously expounded this point. In *The Logic of Practice,* he emphasised the diversity of human behaviour *alongside* the harmony occurring between individuals in a class habitus. He explains that the "singular *habitus* of members of the same class are united in a relationship of homology, that is, of diversity within homogeneity … each individual system of dispositions is a structural variant of the others, expressing the singularity of its position within the class" (Bourdieu, 1990b: 60). He continues this emphasis in his later response. Again using the term 'lifestyle' to denote the relationship between those within a class habitus, Bourdieu says that "[human behaviour] is very open, very diverse, but within limits, and the idea of lifestyle is suited to express the loose systematicity which characterises human behaviour" (2017: 45). Habitus is not innate but shaped by social conditioning. It is, therefore "a set of *acquired* characteristics which are the product of social conditions and which, for that reason, may be totally or partially common to people who have been the product of similar social conditions" (Bourdieu, 2017: 45, italics original).

This conversation about the relationship between the individual and the wider collective is at the very heart of the concept of habitus and what it intends to achieve. Habitus mediates between social structures and individuals. It explains how human behaviour, thought and action can be shaped by social phenomena without compromising the role of individual agency – because "habitus, as the word implies, is that which one has acquired, but which has become durably incorporated in the body in the form of permanent dispositions" (Bourdieu, 1993: 86). Habitus is, therefore, "the link between … the social and the individual, the objective and subjective, and structure and agency", bringing together "both objective social structure and subjective personal experiences" (Maton, 2008: 53). This was very much Bourdieu's intention for the concept – he explains that "all my thinking started from this point: how can behaviour be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules" (Bourdieu, 1990a: 65). Habitus is, in short, "the social embodied" (Maton, 2008: 64).

3.2.2 The theoretical triad: habitus, field and capital

Alongside *habitus*, Bourdieu developed the concepts of *capital* and *field*. Combined, these three ideas "constitute the three conceptual cornerstones of the Bourdieusian architecture of the social" (Susen, 2011: 368). Habitus cannot be properly understood without field and capital. Field is, in short, a social space. It is where "human action takes place" (Susen, 2011: 369), and someone can be situated within a variety of different social fields. Bourdieu "posited a social

world ... made up of multiple fields", where "large fields could be divided into subfields" (Thomson, 2008: 72). These sub-fields follow "the overall logic" of the larger field, but also have their "own internal logics, rules and regularities" (Thomson, 2008: 73). Patricia Thomson likens Bourdieu's field to a football field (2008: 68-69), noting that it is:

> a boundaried site where a game is played. In order to play the game, players have set positions ... The game has specific rules which novice players must learn, together with basic skills, as they begin to play. What players can do, and where they can go ... depends on their field position. The actual physical condition of the field (whether it is wet, dry, well grassed or full of potholes), also has an effect on what players can do
>
> Thomson, 2008: 68

Agents in a particular field will occupy certain social positions, which shape what they can do within it. Such positions are also subject to change – they may be improved, or worsen. A social agent must adapt to the 'rules' and expectations within a certain field, and what the field is physically like can impact what it is like to navigate it too. Fields therefore have "their own rules, histories, star players, legends and lore" (Thomson, 2008: 69). For example, Zara (one of my interviewees) talks about the "rules" (especially gendered rules) that dictated how young people acted within her church community growing up. Thomson's description also seems apt as Bourdieu did indeed talk of social life and social action as a 'game'. If habitus is the "feel for the game" (Bourdieu, 1990a: 9), field is the arena in which the game takes place. In the context of this study, the 'field' is British evangelicalism (cf. §4.2.3).

What, then, shapes how well social agents perform in this 'game'? A key factor is habitus. The social conditions common to people within a field are "embedded into individuals as 'acquired characteristics'" (Bourdieu, 2017: 45), resulting in a collective habitus in which many people share the same values, habits, and norms. But are there not further factors – such as possessing wealth, relevant knowledge, or social connections – that can contribute? Bourdieu's answer to this would be: yes, and this is *capital*. Field is a conceptual metaphor for the social world, a space in which people can be positioned differently, and valued differently. Capital denotes *why* people occupy different social positions in their respective fields – essentially, it denotes things of *value*. Those with high forms of (relevant) capital will be revered, and might – quite organically – end up in a position of power (whether that is a formalised role in a social hierarchy, or more informal power they are able to exercise over others). Meanwhile, those with much lower capital will likely find themselves further down the social hierarchy.

Bourdieu outlines three forms of capital: economic (whence the origin of Bourdieu's term 'capital' itself), social, and cultural (1986: 16). Bourdieu's broader concept of capital originally started out as 'cultural capital'. This emerged from his thinking on education and

socio-economic inequality, arguing that education reinforced social stratification and maintained existing inequalities because it measured success by knowledge ('cultural capital') that middle class students already possessed (e.g. Bourdieu, 1986: 17). He gradually expanded and refined the concept, and later saw capital as manifesting in three different ways, all of which a convertible and transferable into each other. Economic capital is the "traditional embodiment of capital" (Yang and Gao, 2016: 228) and "may be institutionalized in the form of property rights" (Bourdieu, 1986: 16). Social capital is "made up of social obligations ("connections")" and "may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility" (Bourdieu, 1986: 16). Finally, cultural capital comprises "cultural competences" (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014: 195), and "may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications" (Bourdieu, 1986: 16).

3.2.3 Applications of Bourdieu: religious studies, lived religion, and evangelicalism

Reflecting on this theoretical triad, how have other studies of religion used these concepts? More specifically, how does Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus relate to the lived religion approach I take in this study? And has it been applied to evangelicalism? Overall, there has been some engagement with Bourdieu within sociology of religion, little within lived religion specifically (with Helena Kupari being a notable exception), and some disparate uses of habitus in relation to evangelicalism.

Generally, Bourdieu's concepts have not received as much attention in sociology of religion as one might expect (given their utility, and widespread application in other areas of sociology). As Andrew McKinnon et al. note, "it is somewhat surprising that [Bourdieu's work] has had little impact on the sociology of religion" (2011: 355). However, amidst "discontent ... with traditional approaches to religion", some "sociologists of religion have started to look towards the work of Pierre Bourdieu" (Turner, 2011: 228). These tend to draw on capital and field. Some have sought to build on Bourdieu's concept of capital, usually adding a prefix. For example, it has been developed into 'spiritual capital' (Verter, 2003; Guest, 2007, who applies the concept to children of Anglican clergy; Fry, 2021 and 2023, who also looks at the Church of England), 'religious capital' (Stark and Finke, 2000, whom Verter and Guest criticise), and 'sacred capital' (Urban, 2003).

A similar development is evident with the concept of field. Robin Willey, for example, outlines a 'liminal religious field' to analyse charismatic religious practices and events such as the Toronto Blessing (2016). McKinnon et al. have used Bourdieu to discuss 'religious capital' and 'religious field' (2011; in relation to conflicts about sexuality in the worldwide Anglican communion), which McKinnon repeats alongside a brief use of habitus (2017; in relation to Church of England bishops). Though these scholars make reference to each other (Verter's 2003

article is frequently cited), these works are a relatively disparate body of academic articles. Notably, habitus receives little airtime. If it does appear, it is usually an add-on towards the end of discussion (e.g. in McKinnon, 2017), or an auxiliary to other concepts like field or capital (e.g. in Urban, 2003). This is unfortunate, as it has use for understanding religion. Terry Rey argues that "there is so much of value in Bourdieuian theory for the study of religion" and that this value "lies in Bourdieu's notion of habitus" (2007: 137); Rey had himself previously used the idea of a 'religious habitus', along with 'religious field' and 'religious capital', to discuss Haitian religion (2004).

Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling (2014), however, do actively engage with Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Mellor and Shilling make the case for a re-conceptualised 'religious habitus'. In light of criticisms that habitus is a permanent incorporation of religious tradition which leaves no room for individual agency (2014: 3-6), they "re-conceive the religious habitus as the reflexive crafting of a mode of being that locates human action, feeling and thought at the embodied intersection of worldly and other-worldly realities" (2014: 4). This is somewhat convoluted, and is probably best understood through their emphasis on how individuals re-shape their habitus: they view habitus as "a means through which individuals and groups seek to actively remake, craft or ... instaur their bodies and subjectivities via a reflexive mediation of the religious repertoires available within distinct traditions" (2014: 10). Mellor and Shilling's application of habitus demonstrates its utility for religious studies, but is also jargonistic, and I would argue unnecessarily so – they underplay the nuance Bourdieu himself brings to the concept. They respond to critiques that habitus is unchangeable by turning it into something else, akin to an active meditative process rather than an embodiment of the social, seemingly ignoring Bourdieu's reminder that habitus is not permanent but rather well-established, meaning change is not unattainable but simply arduous.[29]

In this study, I utilise habitus but in a way that re-articulates what I perceive Bourdieu intended it to be – socially constituted long-lasting dispositions. This does not need altering to be useful for studying religion, nor do the related concepts of capital and field need prefixes like 'religion' or 'spiritual' to have utility for this study. While religion features comparatively little in Bourdieu's extensive body of work,[30] it is his theoretical concepts – rather than any insights into religion specifically – that are applicable here, and also more broadly within the sociology of

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[29] In a previous article on 'the religious habitus' (in which little reference is made to Bourdieu), Mellor and Shilling also establish their concept of a 'religious habitus' as different to Bourdieu's because "individuals are fated in Bourdieu's account to reproduce the conditions of their existence" (2010: 30, n.2). This seems to be a running theme of their work; they see Bourdieu's version as flawed because they consider it subconscious determinism. Again, I consider this a shallow account of Bourdieu's concept.

[30] Bourdieu wrote a small selection of essays on religion, which mostly focused on either Roman Catholicism in France or Islam in Algeria (Turner, 2011: 229).

religion. Bryan S. Turner provides a useful overview of Bourdieu's engagement with religion and the usefulness of this (or not) for scholars of religion: "what Bourdieu actually says about religion in his small oeuvre of essays on religion is not very interesting" but "his conceptual framework ... does provide a powerful perspective", particularly in drawing attention to "embodied practices" (2011: 228). In other words, Bourdieu's conceptual framework is a potentially powerful antidote to the very failures of religious studies which lived religion seeks to undo – it enables users to draw out the embodied, practiced, and lived nature of religion, rather than focusing (too) heavily on beliefs and doctrines in an abstract, disembodied sense.

Within lived religion, there has been limited meaningful engagement with Bourdieu's work. While the "usefulness" of habitus "has been acknowledged in lived religion literature" (e.g. by Bender, McGuire, and Orsi), "more substantial engagements with his theorizations are rare" (Kupari, 2020: 5). Helena Kupari is the notable exception. Her 2016 monograph *Lifelong Religion as Habitus* – the result of PhD research on the religious practice of Finnish Karelian Orthodox women – actively takes a lived religion approach. She "focuses on everyday religious practice within the domestic and familial environment" (2016: 6), and her understanding of practice is "founded on Pierre Bourdieu's ... theorization of habitus" (2016: 7). Kupari understands her interviewees' religion as habitus, and "treats [their] dispositions as a type of collective habitus" (2016: 167). This helps her illustrate not only a lifetime of repeated religious practices amongst these women, but also how religion is "deeply engrained in their bodies" (2016: 161), "interwoven" with their social relationships and "familial roles" (2016: 154), and has shaped their response to life events (2016: 154). Kupari's use of habitus allows her to fruitfully draw out how her interviewees' religion shaped their everyday lives comprehensively and with longevity. She sets precedent for the approach I adopt in this study – taking a lived religion perspective, and utilising Bourdieu's concepts in order to consider *how* religion is lived, as well as *why* it is of such significance.

Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus is not only useful for the lived religion perspective, but also *solves* the binary lived religion has suffered from – the "simplistic juxtaposition of religion-as-practised by individuals and religion-as-prescribed by institutions" (Kupari, 2020: 1). Kupari proposes that "Pierre Bourdieu's social theory ... offers tools for tackling this issue" (2020: 1). How so? It mediates both structure and agency without prioritising either at the expense of the other. The 'religion-as-practised by individuals' approach in lived religion can unhelpfully de-centre social context. Bourdieu's work could provide the antidote, assisting scholars of lived religion in recognising religious actors as individuals who are simultaneously socially located – and, further, that someone's individuality and social context are not competing as the ultimate centre of true religious experience, but co-exist through habitus.

Uses of habitus in studies on evangelicalism specifically are relatively limited. Generally, these uses appear in journal articles or book chapters, though some are evident in PhD theses. Kelly H. Chong's book chapter on "feminine habitus" (2015), which explores belief and ritual amongst South Korean evangelical women, utilises the term habitus but does not meaningfully engage with the concept, other than to say that these women "construct" a "new evangelical feminine habitus" (2015: 110), and Chong makes no reference to Bourdieu. Similarly, in an article on British evangelical university students, Anna Strhan deploys the word 'habitus' but only briefly explains the concept, here to signify a means of internalisation of the Bible (2013: 226). Robin Willey's article on the "evangelical sexual marketplace" (2013: 1) is helpful in that it uses all three of habitus, field and capital, and identifies a "common evangelical habitus" (2013: 33), but mostly uses the concept of capital, arguing that evangelicals employ "erotic capital ... to attract life partners" (2013: 2), with field and habitus used to supplement this idea.

While most of these applications tend to point out the possibility of an evangelical habitus without much further exploration of how Bourdieu's theoretical framework may be employed, exceptions to this are Corinna Laughlin and Joanne McKenzie, who have used habitus in specific and intentional ways. In her PhD on the "social imaginary" of American evangelicalism, Laughlin uses the concept of "digital habitus" to establish a "digital unconscious" of evangelicalism (2018: 7) and also uses this concept in her monograph on technological innovation in American evangelicalism to discuss the "daily interactions and micro interactions that are facilitated by digital media" (2022: 9). McKenzie, meanwhile, uses the concept of 'cleft' or divided habitus to explore experiences and identifies of working-class evangelical church leaders in England (2017). The notion of a habitus at odds with one's "social context", though relatively "underexplored" in the work of Bourdieu himself, has been recently developed to study the impact of social mobility (2017: no pagination) – a trend on which McKenzie builds to articulate a divided identity amongst working-class evangelical leaders who then seek an "integrated self" (2017: no pagination). Overall, then, studies on evangelicalism using habitus (or Bourdieu's concepts more broadly) are relatively disparate, individually applying part(s) of Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus as relevant. They demonstrate the credibility of habitus for understanding evangelicalism, but also indicate that there is space to do more.

3.3 Chapter conclusion

Through this chapter, I have brought into conversation a recent development in religious studies (lived religion) (§3.1), along with established contributions to sociological thought (Pierre Bourdieu's work) (§3.2), both of which underlie the theoretical framework for this study (the habitus of purity culture). This concept is further articulated in chapter 4, drawing on data from this study (§4.3.3); this chapter has laid the groundwork for this by

outlining the theories used, and demonstrating how, in using these theories, I build on previous scholarship. I noted that engagement with Bourdieu from a lived religion approach is relatively rare, the main substantial example thus far being Helena Kupari (2016) (§3.3). I argued that Kupari's use of habitus sets precedent for my own, and I follow her conviction that using Bourdieu can develop the lived religion approach – in mediating between individual agency and social structure, habitus resolves the individual-institutional religion dichotomy.

Part 1: Conceptualising Purity Culture in Britain

Chapter 4. Evangelicalism
and purity culture in Great Britain

In this chapter, I establish the background for this study by describing American purity culture, outlining evangelicalism in the British context, and arguing that purity culture has appeared not as an abstract cultural trend but as a *constituent part of* evangelicalism in Britain. The purpose of this chapter is multiple: it sets the backdrop for this study by outlining both purity culture and the British context, but also draws these into conversation with the data by arguing for evidence of the former in the latter.

The first third of the chapter gives a brief history of US purity culture (§4.1). This opens with a definition of evangelicalism and then documents key organisations (§4.1.1), the purity industry and emerging picture of holistic abstinence (§4.1.2), a concurrent evangelical debate on gender roles (§4.1.3), and connections to US politics (§4.1.4). The middle third turns to the British context (§4.2), introducing British evangelicals (§4.2.1), the charismatic and conservative distinction (§4.2.2), field and capital in these two settings (§4.2.3) and the significance of community (§4.2.4). The final third of the chapter presents the bulk of the survey data, documenting demographics and denominational backgrounds (§4.3.1), discussing key markers of purity culture in this data (§4.3.2), and arguing for the presence of purity culture in Britain within evangelicalism itself and articulating the habitus of purity culture (§4.3.3). This final section builds on Bourdieu's concept of habitus as the social embodied, and argues for a habitus developed in the evangelical field which embodies both the valorisation of community and key relationships alongside their jeopardisation through sexual sin.

4.1 American context: the phenomenon of US purity culture

What, then, exactly is purity culture? In a study exploring its presence and impact on Britain, it is helpful to first establish where and how it emerged. Purity culture refers to efforts in evangelical Christianity from around the 1990s onwards to promote sexual 'purity' – in other words, sexual abstinence until (heterosexual) marriage. This is most well-known in the USA, where a movement emerged which centred abstinence until marriage, not just as an important Christian teaching, but an essential part of what it means to call oneself a Christian in the evangelical mindset. As I will describe below, evangelical organisations developed campaigns for sexual abstinence which targeted young people, and gradually a movement emerged in

which further behavioural expectations arose, all intended to ensure this abstinence was upheld – such as avoiding physical intimacy with a romantic partner or being alone with the opposite sex, modest dress (particularly for girls and young women) to prevent 'temptation', and wearing purity rings or signing pledges to symbolise a commitment to abstinence.

It is also necessary to briefly define evangelicalism here, since, as I have just outlined, this is the context in which purity culture arose. Evangelicalism is not a denomination. It can therefore be tricky to define, particularly as it exists in lieu of a formalised institutional structure offering canonised definitions and consecrated leadership. It is, rather, a movement in Protestant Christianity which began to emerge in the mid-1700s, consolidated from the mid-1850s, and has now become a prominent expression of Christianity on the world stage. It has "grown to become one of the most pervasive expressions of world Christianity in the early twenty-first century" (Atherstone and Jones, 2018: i), and Gaddini thus describes it as a "global religious phenomenon" (2022b: 128).

What do evangelicals believe? In a now seminal study on the history of evangelicalism, David Bebbington offered a definition which has come to be known as the Bebbington quadrilateral. This identifies four markers of evangelicalism:

> *conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism,* a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism.
>
> Bebbington, 1989: 2-3

Critics have since argued that Bebbington underplays the role of evangelical's Protestant heritage, especially reformation theology and 18th and 19th century Protestant revivals.[31] More recently, Timothy Larsen's 5-point definition of evangelicalism unites Bebbington's four points with these theological underpinnings. He thus describes an evangelical as: (1) "an orthodox Protestant", (2) "who stands in the tradition" of the aforementioned Protestant revivals, and emphasises (3) the "preeminent place for the Bible" (biblicism), (4) the "reconciliation with God through the atoning work of Jesus on the cross" (crucicentrism), and (5) the "work of the Holy Spirit … to bring about conversion" and a "duty" to share the gospel (conversionism and activism) (Larsen, 2007: 1). While these markers of evangelicalism may seem abstract in their theological orientation, they are significant to those within the movement, imbuing meaning, shaping wider beliefs, conduct, thoughts, and day-to-day actions. These beliefs are firmly held and highly regarded for evangelicals. As Katie Gaddini notes, being evangelical "is a deeply felt

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[31] See Haykin and Stewart (2008) for examples of this criticism and a response from Bebbington; cf. Noll who similarly notes "academic pushback to the canonical work" of Bebbington (2019: 7).

identity" (Gaddini, 2022b: 1280). It is also one which is often conceptualised as counter-cultural: "Protestant evangelicalism is *both explained and defined* in terms of its resistance to 'the world'" (Guest, 2007: 2), a set-apart community with their own collective identity.

4.1.1 The emergence of purity campaigns

How does purity culture begin? Defining the boundaries of a socio-cultural religious movement is an expectedly tricky task, situated as it is in relation to broader contexts, social moods and prevailing attitudes. A useful starting point is an American organisation called True Love Waits (TLW). This was launched by the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), a US-based evangelical Protestant organisation and network of churches. In 1987, SBC's publishing arm LifeWay began a Christian sex education project, in which TLW was suggested by LifeWay employee Richard Ross as a potential sex education campaign (Gardner, 2011: 6; LifeWay, 'True Love Waits History': 1). According to an account of TLW by Lifeway, the first TLW abstinence pledges were signed by young people at a Tennessee church where Ross worked as a youth pastor (Gardner, 2011: 6; cf. Lifeway, 'History': 1). True Love Waits was then formally launched in April 1993 at a national Southern Baptist youth ministry conference organised by Ross (ibid.).

The 1990s saw the growth of the TLW campaign, with the help of attention from the media (Gardner, 2011: 7). The rapid development of TLW is clear in its distinctive large youth rallies, where attendees would sign abstinence pledge cards to be displayed en masse. The TLW pledge cards read: "Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, my future mate, and my future children to be sexually abstinent from this day until the day I enter a biblical marriage relationship" (Gardner, 2011: 7). Other versions of the TLW pledge replace "to be sexually abstinent" with "to be sexually pure" (from a now defunct TLW website, preserved in Gish, 2016: 5) or "to a lifetime of purity including sexual abstinence" (Moslener, 2017: 608), indicating the apparent conflation of purity with the practice of sexual abstinence until marriage. It is also a promise made not just to one's self and future partner (the two parties involved in a future marriage), but also to God, and to other third parties (family, friends) and even potential offspring. According to LifeWay's figures, over 100,000 of these pledge cards were displayed at a 1994 annual SBC meeting in Orlando, Florida (LifeWay, 'History': 1), 210,000 were displayed in 1994 in Washington, D.C where 25,000 youth attended a rally (LifeWay, 'History': 2), 340,000 cards were displayed in Atlanta, Georgia in 1996 (LifeWay, 'History': 2; Gardner, 2011: 7), and 82,000 online pledges were made on Valentine's Day 2002 (LifeWay, 'History': 4; Gardner, 2011: 7).[32]

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[32] Note that these are all self-reported numbers by LifeWay themselves.

True Love Waits demonstrates the intensity with which the emphasis on abstinence until marriage – and assumption of its synonymity with purity and biblical Christian living – became a central focus within American evangelical circles during the 1990s. It has even been "widely credited with launching the contemporary evangelical sexual abstinence movement" (in other words, with launching purity culture) (Gardner, 2011: 6). Whether the emergence of purity culture as a movement can be attributed to the TLW campaign specifically is, I would argue, not entirely clear. Such an argument is frustratingly speculative – it is entirely possible that TLW captured a social mood which, in the absence of TLW, may have been consolidated elsewhere. Nonetheless, TLW catalysed a conviction into a campaign by bringing substantial attention to the notion of abstinence until marriage as a mainstay of evangelical life, particularly through dramatic displays of abstinence pledge cards. As a campaign affiliated with Lifeway, and therefore the SBC, True Love Waits affirmed abstinence until marriage as a pillar of what it means to be Christian within the evangelical imagination.

Other Christian ministries and resources sharing the same message of sexual abstinence until marriage started to emerge in the US not long after True Love Waits. This includes the organisation Silver Ring Thing (SRT), which popularised purity rings, symbolic of a commitment to abstinence until marriage. They are often worn on the ring finger (Klein, 2018: 11), evoking the idea of a wedding ring. SRT was founded in 1995 by Denny and Amy Pattyn (Miller, 2017: 4), who sought to encourage "a generation of teens to live with sexual purity and integrity" (Unaltered Ministries, no date), and were concerned by regional teen pregnancy rates (Gardner, 2011: 8; 200). Initially operating in Arizona (Gardner, 2011: 8), SRT established the purity message in the Western states, expanding on the work of TLW in South-eastern USA (Tennessee, Florida, Georgia and Washington D.C, as noted above). SRT events were similar in style to TLW rallies, but smaller, with attendees in the hundreds rather than thousands. These concert-style events were high energy, synthesising digital technology and pop music with a religious message (Gardner, 2011: 8). Such rallies and events took place across the US, garnering large crowds and utilising the appeal of Christian celebrities and singers (Gardner, 2011: 56). These events also often had a commercial element, sometimes charging an admission fee, or perhaps (like SRT events) free admission to an event at which purity rings, T-shirts, and other garments were on sale (Gardner, 2011: 43).

4.1.2 The purity 'industry' and the emerging picture of holistic abstinence

Purity rings are one example of various for-purchase products intended to promote abstinence which arose during this time period as part of an emerging purity "industry" (Klein, 2018: 23), or "material world" of purity culture as Moslener describes it (2017). Further examples of purity-themed products include t-shirts with purity slogans, and items bearing

catchy puns or instructions, like "don't play with fire" abstinence candles and "no trespassing" underwear (Gish, 2016: 3). Bibles too were branded with purity messaging, reinforcing the idea of sexual abstinence as an accurate and faithful application of biblical teaching in the modern day. SRT released an Abstinence Study Bible, which included "sixty pages of non-biblical material" on topics like dating and preventing sexual relationships with romantic partners (Klein, 2018: 23). Meanwhile, other Bibles marketed to teenage girls centred sexual purity and gender roles through supplementary material and notes (cf. Moslener, 2017; Blyth, 2021). Together, these products promoted abstinence by either aiding the avoidance of sexual activity, or symbolising one's commitment to it – and, by extension, one's faithful Christian identity.

In the late 1990s, another event associated with purity culture materialised: purity balls, also known as father-daughter balls. Purity balls were developed by Colorado couple Lisa and Randy Wilson in 1998 and are a formal occasion, typically including a dinner and dancing in formal attire, and a public opportunity for young girls to affirm their virginity and declare an abstinence-until-marriage commitment (Miller, 2017: 8; cf. Gish, 2016: 3-4). A distinctive feature of a purity ball is the involvement of the father, who pledges to safeguard his daughter's purity. One example of a common fathers' pledge includes a promise of individual purity and of paternal authority: "I, (daughter's name)'s father, choose before God to cover my daughter as her authority and protection in the area of purity. I will be pure in my own life as a man, husband and father. I will be a man of integrity and accountability as I lead, guide and pray over my daughter and my family as the high priest in my home" (preserved in Fahs, 2010: 132; Gish, 2016: 3). The making of vows, dancing, and dining may also be accompanied by a testimony or talk (cf. Fahs, 2010: 132), and a jewellery ritual, in which the daughter may be given a ring, or exchange jewellery with her father (Gish, 2016: 4). From the late 1990s onwards, purity balls spread throughout the United States and became increasingly popular within evangelical circles; Jennifer Miller notes that "within ten years of the first purity ball over 4500 balls were organized in 48 states" (2017: 8).

All of the aforementioned products, and the overarching purity message that united them, thus coalesced around and into a purity industry (cf. Klein, 2018: 22-23). The commercialisation of abstinence made it increasingly present. As Klein notes, "within the evangelical Christian subculture, the purity industry gave many adolescents the impression that sexual abstinence before marriage was *the* way to live out their faith" (2018: 23, emphasis original). Physical items – such as rings, pledge cards, jewellery, clothes and themed Bibles – act as both a visual reminder about the message and a vehicle to maintain it. These items bring the purity into people's homes, habits and routines, and "integrate purity messaging into a young person's daily life" (Klein, 2018: 24). At the same time, they publicly signal compliance with abstinence until

marriage. In a way, these symbols act as a means of monitoring adolescents' observance of a particular Christian code, making external and public what is otherwise internal and private: sexual desires and sexual relationships.

A wealth of literature, such as books and study guides, which advocated for sexual purity were also published and gained popularity in American evangelical circles during the late 1990s and early 2000s. One prominent example is *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (IKDG), published in 1997 by Joshua Harris. Promoting the purity message to teenagers and young adults, it was notable for its emphasis on courting over dating as a way to ensure purity. Harris identified a causal relationship between dating and sex before marriage, viewing the former as a slippery slope to the latter, and argued that couples who date usually enter a sexual relationship before marriage (1997: 31). His solution was deceptively simple: don't date in the first place (1997: 31). He also argued that purity represents more than abstinence before marriage, and included the absence of sexual thoughts and desires: purity "goes beyond sexual purity. While physical purity is very important, God also wants us to pursue purity and blamelessness in our motives, our minds, and our emotions" (Harris, 1997: 24-25). This book was widely purchased and read, purported by multiple sources to have sold over 1 million copies (Hailes, 2019), and was "arguably the most significant text in the purity canon" (Cross, 2020: 24). Harris published further books including *Boy Meets Girl* (2000), a follow-up to *IKDG* which recommends courtship and draws on Harris' experience with his wife, and *Not Even a Hint: Guarding Your Heart Against Lust* (2003), which calls readers to embrace a life of purity absent in 'sexual sin', and was re-released in 2005 as *Sex is Not the Problem (Lust Is)* alongside separate study guides for men and women.[33]

Other prominent and authoritative evangelical authors from this time period endorsing sexual abstinence until marriage include Josh McDowell, Eric and Leslie Ludy, and Dannah Gresh. Key books by McDowell include *Why Wait?* (with Dick Day, 1987), republished as *Why True Love Waits* (2002), appealing to 'true love' to situate purity within a broader narrative of romance actualised through marriage. Married couple Eric and Leslie Ludy's books similarly connected abstinence with romantic love, as demonstrated through *When God Writes Your Love Story* (1999) and its sequel *When Dreams Come True* (2000). These are also situated more broadly within the Ludy's body of work which not only unites abstinence with love and marriage, but emphasises gendered roles at the heart of such a love story and spousal relationship – Leslie Ludy, for example, has written further books on Christian womanhood and femininity (2007; 2008; 2014). Danna Gresh was another authoritative evangelical figure

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[33] Interestingly, Harris has since reappraised both purity culture and his part in it. In 2018, he discontinued the publication of *IKDG*, publicly apologised, and released a documentary called *I Survived I Kissed Dating Goodbye* in which he interacted with his critics and shared the shift in his perspective (Hailes, 2019).

during this time period. She founded Pure Freedom in 1996, an organisation teaching young girls about modesty and sexual purity through local events, such as overnight retreats for teenage girls and one-day mother-daughter gatherings (Gardner, 2011: 10). Gresh also published popular books on purity such as *And the Bride Wore White: Seven Secrets to Sexual Purity* (1999) and *Secret Keeper: The Delicate Power of Modesty* (2002), the latter of which gave rise to a ministry of the same name aimed at girls aged 8-12 (Gardner, 2011: 10). As with McDowell's and the Ludy's books, Gresh too associates abstinence with a contented marriage – as indicated by *And the Bride Wore White*, which by its very title correlates female abstinence and purity with identity as a bride and future wife.

It is worth taking a moment to reflect on the combined effect of this commercialised industry, key messages and authoritative resources, as well as the aforementioned campaigns (§4.1.1). There is a sense that maintaining sexual purity is not just about practising abstinence, but also committing to a vast array of other behaviours, and I call this *holistic abstinence*. We have seen that such behaviours can include: making public declarations about abstinence (pledges), wearing jewellery (rings) or clothes which signify this, being cautious about dating and romantic expression with partners (as Harris advises), dressing modestly (as Gresh counsels young girls), supporting the purity message (attending events, endorsing speakers or books), suppressing sexual desire by quelling thoughts and maintain a 'pure' mind (again as we see in Harris' book). These span individual conduct, personal thoughts, and interactions with other people, suggesting that abstinence is not simply about one's sexual activity but about one's whole life – it is holistic. Purity culture, then, is not simply about endorsing the *avoidance* of one thing, but encouraging *active pursuit* of others which symbolise said avoidance and assist with its maintenance. Linda Kay Klein captures the comprehensiveness of purity culture well: "the purity movement teaches that *every* sexual activity – from masturbation to kissing if it elicits that special feeling – can make one less pure" (2018: 12). Further, she notes that it is not just about external behaviour but also the mind, as "sexual thoughts and feelings can make one impure" (2018: 13), and beyond the self, it is "also implied that the sexual thoughts, feelings, and actions of others can be signs of your impurity as well (because surely you did *some*thing to make them think, feel, or do what they did" (Klein, 2018: 13).

4.1.3 Gender roles and marriage: the concurrent rise in complementarianism

During the same time period, a concern with gender roles emerged in American evangelicalism, and the concepts of 'biblical manhood and womanhood' became increasingly prominent points of discussion amongst evangelical leaders and organisations. These concepts communicate a complementarian view of gender, which sees men and women as occupying different roles which 'complement' each other. Linda Kay Klein thus describes

complementarianism as: "the idea that there are two distinct genders that have equal worth in God's eyes, but very different roles, responsibilities and expectations here on earth" (2018: 62). Klein continues, noting how these roles are rooted in traditional ideas of gender:

> The man is to be undeniably masculine, even as he practices patience and understanding as a leader, whereas the woman is to be irrefutably feminine and to lovingly consent to and support the leadership of the man. They *complement* one another ... creating the perfect whole. But if either gender strays from his or her designated role, the balance upon which it is said the stability of the family, church, and society rests is in jeopardy.
>
> Klein, 2018: 62

In this view, though these roles are different, with one leading and one being led, there is an emphasis on the equality of these roles in God's eyes (as Klein observes).

Proponents identify this view as rooted in the Bible, often referring to the 'household code' passages of the New Testament which outline the roles of husbands, wives, and sometimes children and slaves. One such groups of proponents is the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW). This is an American evangelical organisation established in 1987, deriving from a 1986 talk by evangelical biblical scholar Wayne Grudem in which he defended the complementarian view of gender (Grudem, 2009: 13-14). With further evangelicals on board, such as well-known theologian and pastor John Piper, the newly formed CBMW issued a statement of belief in 1988 known as the Danvers Statement, later supplemented with an edited volume by Grudem and Piper entitled *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (1991). The Danvers Statement affirmed the author's views of the "Biblical ... relationship between men and women", in both home and church, in response to perceived cultural "confusion", "distortion", and "ambivalence" in relation to gender roles, sexual relationships and marriage (Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: 'The Danvers Statement'). Ultimately, their mission (which continues to this day) was to establish the distinct roles of men and women in both home and the church, and advocate these as biblical principles.

This is not the only evangelical approach to gender, nor the only approach identified as 'biblical'. In response to these developments, other evangelicals founded Christians for Biblical Equality (now known as CBE International) in 1986 to communicate "the biblical rationale" for gender equality (CBE International, c2023: no pagination). This alternative approach is defined as Christian egalitarianism, or sometimes by opponents (e.g. those holding complementarian beliefs) as "evangelical feminism" (Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: 'Vision & Mission'). Similar to the CBMW, this approach is identified by its advocates as a *biblical*, and was "influenced by growing evangelical interest in biblical hermeneutics and resistance to certain doctrines of Scripture's 'inerrancy'" (Goddard, 2014: 383).

There are, then, multiple approaches to gender in evangelicalism – despite claims that each approach is a reflection of the 'true' meaning in biblical texts. Indeed, the apparent unequivocal biblical teaching on marriage has been cautioned against (Afzal and Stiebert, 2023), since depictions of what we might understand as 'marriage' found within the Bible are "murky" (Stiebert, 2023: 7), and given the "widespread association in the Bible between marriage and violence" (Afzal and Stiebert, 2023: 36). It is notable, however, that the evangelical circles from which CBMW arose and/or which hold fast to complementarian theology, are also the ones in which purity culture was prominent. In fact, Linda Kay Klein identifies complementarianism as a companion to the "religious purity movement" (2018: 62). The CBMW has ties to the Southern Baptist Convention (home of LifeWay publishing, which launched TLW), as CBMW council members hail from SBC-affiliated seminaries (such as Southern Baptist Theological College, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary), and since 2000 the SBC has adopted complementarian theology in which the husband must "lead" and wife must "submit" (Southern Baptist Convention, 2000). Many complementarian leaders (such as Grudem himself) had also signed a previous 1978 statement on biblical inerrancy (Chicago Statement), as had some purity culture thought leaders (such as Josh McDowell), affirming their evangelical commitment to biblicism. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that complementarian gender roles are framed as unequivocally biblical. This seems to reflect an increasingly solidified and united subculture in which traditional gender roles, the notion of biblical inerrancy, and the expectation of abstinence until heterosexual marriage gradually all became institutionalised as presumptive indicators of 'true' or faithful Christianity.

4.1.4 National and international contexts

The flourishing of purity organisations, the rise of a purity industry, and the emphasis on sexual purity in evangelical Christianity went hand-in-hand with the promotion of abstinence-only sex education in the USA. Abstinence-only until marriage (AOUM) sex education promotes abstinence as a (indeed *the*) preventative measure against unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease, and was a government-funded policy for sex education in the US in the time period during which purity culture emerged and flourished. Federal funding for AOUM programs emerged in the 1980s under the presidency of Ronald Reagan, with "increased attention to abstinence" arising from "the emergence of HIV/AIDs" (Gaddini, 2022a: 82). In 1981 the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) made funding available for organisations to promote abstinence from sex until marriage (Human Rights Watch: no date). Funding for abstinence-only sex education continued in the 1990s under President Bill Clinton. The 1996 Welfare Reform Act established grants for AOUM educational programmes, and their eligibility requirements demonstrate not only healthcare concerns relating to unplanned pregnancy and

STDs, but also a presumed link between abstinence until marriage and future prosperity (U.S Code 42 § 710).[34] AOUM programme funding then increased under President George W. Bush, whose administration advocated strongly for AOUM – a commitment made clear through the 2000 Community-Based Abstinence Education programme (CBAE). There were therefore three major government programmes dedicated to AOUM sex education (AFLA, the Welfare Reform Act, and CBAE) during the period in which purity culture was active.

Such funding was used by religious organisations, including Silver Ring Thing, who reportedly received more than $1 million between 2003 and 2006 (Gardner, 2011: 8). The provision of funding to religious groups and organisations was a significant source of criticism – some argued state funds were being used to promote religious doctrine, which was therefore unconstitutional – and resulted in SRT having their funding allocation challenged and ultimately withdrawn on the basis that they used government money for religious activities (Gardner, 2011: 9). Nonetheless, such funding was available for a time, and in addition to the financial support this provided, evangelical purity organisations (such as SRT) benefitted from the associated implicit endorsement of their message (and, further, suggestion of the purity message as not only faithfully Christian but also faithfully American).

Globally, the evangelical purity message also began to be exported elsewhere. As Katie Gaddini has noted, TLW expanded in 1994 "to countries such as Argentina, Australia and New Zealand, holding summits at which evangelical youth pledged to stay pure until marriage" and by 2004, aided by further funding from LifeWay, TLW extended its reach into "Kenya, Uganda, and seven other sub-Saharan African countries" (Gaddini, 2022a: 82). Silver Ring Thing, meanwhile, expanded into South Africa (Gardner, 2011: 8). In 2003, American international aid utilised abstinence messaging, as the Bush administration launched the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), under which "abstinence education expanded to developing and middle-income countries such as South Africa" (Gaddini, 2022a: 83). Directed at 15 (predominantly African) countries, PEPFAR endorsed an 'ABC' approach to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS, the first step of which was abstinence (Gardner, 2017: 3). The overall picture is of the globalisation of an abstinence message in two global target areas: the Anglosphere (through growing evangelical presence and campaigns), and sub-Saharan Africa (through US international HIV/AIDS relief, alongside evangelical campaigns).

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[34] To be eligible for this funding, educational programmes had to address things such as "the advantage of refraining from nonmarital sexual activity in order to improve the future prospects and physical and emotional health of youth" (42 USC § 710).

4.2 British context: the backdrop of evangelicalism

4.2.1 Who are British evangelicals?

Like their American counterparts, British evangelicals tend to accept particular theological doctrines and use this as a marker of their identity. Evangelical Alliance UK (EAUK), for example, utilise Bebbington's four markers in their definition of evangelicalism (conversionism, activism, biblicism, crucicentrism), and supplement them with a fifth from Alister McGrath (1995): *Christocentrism*, meaning "God's eternal Word became human in the historical man Jesus of Nazareth, who definitively reveals God to humanity" (Evangelical Alliance UK: no date[a]). They also tend to conceptualise their status as counter-cultural, noted above as a conventional tendency within evangelicalism – for example, emphasising their obedience to God as at odds with cultural trends of personal self-governance (Montemaggi, 2017), and commitment to community countering individuality (Olofinjana, 2024: no pagination).

Their social location, however, is different. The picture of evangelicalism in Britain is notably different to the US, occupying a more marginal role in public life. In a comparative study of two (conservative) evangelical congregations in Texas and London, Unsworth and Ecklund noted how the former is "in the US where conservative evangelicals wield considerably greater influence", the latter exists "in the UK where conservative evangelicals form a very small minority within the population" (2021: 203). As noted above, in 2005 there were an estimated 1.3 million people attending evangelical churches each Sunday, reflecting a small portion of the English population. More broadly, while Christianity retains some institutional influence through the Church of England – for example, in faith schools, Lords Spiritual, and links to "the royal family and institutions of the armed services" (Guest et al, 2012: 68) – this is relatively nominal, and large-scale surveys indicate a decades-long reduction in personal affiliation with Christianity in Britain.[35] At the same time, however, there have also been trends of stability and even growth in certain Christian circles. Guest et al. noted in 2012 that some denominational groups in Britain "succeeded in bucking the overall trend of decline" (2012: 65), notably "evangelical Anglicans and Baptists", with non-denominational house churches (2012: 70) and Pentecostalism (2012: 71) also flourishing. Overall, this paints a picture of thriving pockets of Christianity persisting amidst an apparent broad decline of Christian affiliation, particularly

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[35] England and Wales Census suggests declining affiliation during early 2000s: in 2011, 59.3% of the population described themselves as Christian (Office for National Statistics, 2022), a decline on 72% in 2001 (Office for National Statistics, 2015). The most recent British Social Attitudes survey to discuss religion similarly documented a two-decade long "decline in religious identity, religious observance, and religious belief in Britain" (Curtice et al., 2019: 4).

within evangelical, non-denominational and Pentecostal branches. It also points towards increased diversity within the denominational make-up of British Christianity, especially within Protestantism.

Who make up this group of evangelicals in Britain? Though there have been some studies on British evangelicalism in recent decades, these tend to be congregational ethnographies (Aune, 2006; 2008; 2010; Guest, 2007; Wignall, 2016; Strhan, 2015; Gaddini 2019, 2020, 2022) so findings "cannot be generalized or extrapolated for the whole movement" (Smith, 2021: 36). Data on British evangelicals can be difficult to ascertain for multiple reasons: the contested nature of the label (particularly in the aftermath of American evangelical support for President Trump, cf. Gaddini 2022: 128); the distribution of evangelicals across multiple denominations; the internal sense that evangelicalism is a faithful representation of Christianity and consequent identification as simply 'Christian' or 'Bible-believing'. In light of these, a helpful data source is a research series run by EAUK.[36] The various survey waves of this programme reflect a consistent demographic picture: around 92% White British, 70% graduates, "concentrated in … the South of England", and denominationally 30% Church of England, 25% Baptist and 25% "charismatic independent" (Smith, 2021: 36-37).[37] Additionally, elsewhere Greg Smith and others have highlighted that unlike American evangelicals, the political affiliation of British evangelicals is relatively even split (Smith and Woodhead, 2018: 211; Gaddini, 2022b: 129). Their beliefs about the Bible, Jesus and evangelism align closely with the aforementioned markers of evangelicalism, and their practices affirm dedication, reflecting high levels of prayer and church attendance (96% weekly), studying the Bible (90% daily or weekly) and regular small group attendance (77% once a fortnight) (Smith, 2021: 38-39). British evangelicals are thus no exception to the strongly-felt identity and devotion that comes with evangelicalism; a 2016 survey by EAUK showed that 72% of participants "saw lukewarm Christianity as a threat to evangelical Christianity in the UK" (Evangelical Alliance UK, 2016: no pagination). Evangelical Christianity, meanwhile, is far from lukewarm – it demands a wholehearted commitment and permeates into all spheres of a person's life.

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[36] This programme, called 21st Century Evangelicals, "takes the form of a quarterly online survey" and "is completed by a panel of volunteers recruited through the membership and networks of the Evangelical Alliance" (Smith & Woodhead, 2018: 211). It is also notable that survey respondent numbers vary, and can reach over 10,000 (e.g. as noted in Smith, 2021: 39).

[37] A note in race is necessary here, particularly within the context of black majority churches that reflect evangelical beliefs in Britain. In a study on evangelicalism, Anna Strhan states that "it is worth noting that while many black majority churches may be evangelical in terms of their theology, they are more likely to identify as Pentecostal rather than evangelical" (Strhan, 2019: 13; cf. Smith, 2015: 21). Nonetheless, the overwhelmingly white majority of participants in this study is discussed as a limitation in the conclusion chapter (§10.2).

4.2.2 Charismatic and conservative evangelicalism

An important distinction within British evangelicalism is that of charismatic versus conservative (or reformed) evangelicalism. To use Bourdieu's terminology, while British evangelicalism is one field in itself, charismatic and conservative evangelicalism could be considered sub-fields – they each have their own particularities, but broadly reflect the rules of the field of which they are a subset. Mathew Guest's 2007 monograph is helpful here – though it is an ethnographic study of one large charismatic evangelical Anglican church, Guest provides detailed contextualisation for this congregation. Guest traces the charismatic renewals of the 20th century (2007: 105-112), which flourished in the 1980s onwards as part of what is known as the 'third wave' or neo-charismatic movement (2007: 111). He notes the indebtedness of this movement to Pentecostal forms of Christianity, particularly through lively styles of musical worship which are "emotional, loud, exuberant and celebratory" and understandings of spiritual 'gifts' like "speaking in tongues, prophecy and healing" (2007: 109). Guest cites John Wimber – who was "centrally involved" in the charismatic evangelical "American Vineyard movement" – in establishing the influence of the charismatic movement in British evangelicalism (2007: 111). He also stresses that this was not a wholesale adoption of Pentecostalism, but rather embraced some of its expressive and emotive tendencies, fusing these with a more "genteel" tone and emerging as a slightly more subdued "middle class phenomenon" in contrast to the high-spirited Pentecostal church mostly "comprised of working-class Christians" (2007: 109).

Overall, the recognition of spiritual gifts, emotion-centred style of worship, and spirited music makes charismatic evangelicalism distinctive. Meanwhile, what makes conservative evangelicalism distinctive is the stress not just on the *authority* of the Bible (as in evangelicalism in general), but on the *infallibility* (and sometimes inerrancy) of the Bible. It is also known for a vocal commitment to 'headship' theology (i.e., complementarianism as a biblical representation of gender roles, to be faithfully enacted in the modern day). This has led to high-profile disagreements in recent decades, particularly from the conservative evangelical faction of the Church of England. Evangelical Anglican group Reform (now known as Church Society after a merger) was established in 1993 to oppose the introduction of ordination of female vicars in the Church of England, and was also public in its opposition to homosexuality (Guest, 2007: 52).[38] Both charismatics and conservatives/Reformed evangelicals can be found within the Church of

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[38] In more recent years conservative evangelical opposition to the ordination of women has led to alternative episcopal oversight, with conservative evangelical Church of England parishes who reject the ordination of women being served by a 'flying bishop' (Bishop of Maidstone from 2014; now Bishop of Ebbsfleet) rather than following the usual diocesan structure.

England (cf. Herriot, 2017) despite theological disagreement (cf. Herriot, 2015 – though note he identifies these streams as 'charismatic' and 'Calvinist').

Additionally, a third categorisation is that of 'open evangelicals', initially identified by Church of England priest and theologian (and later bishop) Graham Kings (Kings, 2003). The prefix 'open' indicates an openness both to theology outside of this tradition, and to more progressive social stances, such as an egalitarian approach to gender, or affirming female leadership in the church (Goddard, 2014: 384). Meanwhile, the 'evangelical' label indicates that this group still maintains a commitment to "traditional evangelical doctrines" (Vanhoozer, 2024: 73), such as the authority of the Bible and centrality of conversion.

4.2.3 Field and capital within charismatic and conservative evangelicalism

These distinctions are observable within the milieu of the field of British evangelicalism, with both charismatic and conservative evangelicalism possessing their own sub-fields. The stereotypical young charismatic evangelical in Britain in the early 2000s would likely have been found attending one of the well-known charismatic evangelical Anglican churches in English cities, such as St Aldates (Oxford) or St Michael-le-Belfrey (York) (cf. Guest, 2007: 28; Herriot, 2015) or church within the HTB network. HTB takes its name from Holy Trinity church in Brompton, London, which has been a beacon of "charismatic evangelical innovation" since the 1980s (Guest, 2007: 46), under the successive leadership of vicars Sandy Millar and, from 2005, Nicky Gumbel (Herriot, 2015: no pagination). HTB has since established itself as a multi-site congregation across multiple church buildings in London, as well as a national network of church 'plants' (newly established or revitalised churches) – they report to have "initiated more than 20 church plants" since 1985 (HTB: no date). As many of these have then also engaged in church planting themselves, the number of indirect 'plants' originating with HTB is likely much higher. Our stereotypical young charismatic evangelical may have undertaken an evangelism course called Alpha, which was gradually devised by the leadership of HTB, became the "brain-child of Nicky Gumbel" (Guest, 2007: 46) who was at the time curate of HTB, and grew rapidly in influence across charismatic evangelicalism in the 1990s (cf. Herriot, 2015; Guest, 2007: 176, 203).

Meanwhile, the stereotypical conservative evangelical in Britain in the early 2000s may have been found at flagship congregations such as St Helen's Bishopsgate or All Souls Langham Place (London), St Ebbe's (Oxford) or St Andrew the Great (Cambridge) (cf. Herriot, 2015: no pagination). Outside the Church of England, they may be found within an organisation called FIEC, the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, a network of independent churches in the UK not affiliated to an established denomination, usually leaning towards more

conservative evangelical values (such as complementarianism). If this hypothetical person was at university, they may have been attending a Christian Union affiliated with the University and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF). By 1990 over "15,000 British students were taking part in regular" UCCF activities (Guest, 2007: 25), and by the early noughties UCCF had established a vast reach in UK universities: "at the turn of the millennium, every university Christian Union in the UK except two was affiliated to the UCCF" (Guest, 2007: 25-26). Such individuals may have come to faith through, or engaged with, the conservative evangelical answer to Alpha, a course known as Christianity Explored developed by clergy from All Souls Langham Place. If they were enrolled in theological college, they would likely be found at Oak Hill, an institution with connections to UCCF and Anglican group Reform (Herriot, 2015: no pagination).

Christian camps were an annual feature of the summer for British evangelicals – charismatic and conservative alike, though *which* ones they attended may have differed. During the 1990s and early 2000s, charismatics could be found at family residentials like New Wine and Spring Harvest, and teenagers at the youth festival Soul Survivor. Spring Harvest reached "a high point in the 1990s" (Herriot, 2015: no pagination), having grown rapidly during the 1980s. Numbers in the nineties were reported at approximately 80,000 (Guest, 2007: 25) to 100,000 (Herriot, 2015: no pagination). New Wine and Soul Survivor were then particularly prominent in the late nineties and early noughties. Originating in 1989, New Wine was established by David Pytches, vicar of Anglican church St Andrew's Chorleywood, which had in turn been influenced by third-wave charismatic movement and hosted charismatic John Wimber on his aforementioned visit (Herriot, 2015: no pagination; Collins, 2024: 4). Soul Survivor was also a product of this church, founded by youth leader Mike Pilavachi in 1993, and later giving rise to a church congregation of the same name in Watford (Herriot, 2015: no pagination). Soul Survivor grew rapidly during the 1990s and 2000s, quickly expanding to multiple events to account for popularity and attracting crowds of around 25,000 in total (ibid.). Meanwhile on the conservative side, individuals may have been concentrated at family residentials Keswick Convention or Word Alive, the latter of which was initially run as part of Spring Harvest and later (2007+) independently by UCCF and Keswick Convention due to theological disagreements (Taylor, 2007). While Word Alive included a prominent stream for students (ibid.), younger demographics could be found attending activity camps targeted to "children and young people" such as those run by Scripture Union (Collins, 2024: 4).

All of these reflect not only the sub-fields of charismatic and conservative evangelicalism, but also what is considered capital in them. An individual navigating conservative evangelicalism may possess significant capital if they have, for example, been an engaged member of the aforementioned conservative churches, or regularly attended the right

summer camps; combining these would only enhance their capital further. As outlined in chapter 3, there are according to Bourdieu three forms of capital: economic, social, and cultural. What might these look like within these subfields of British evangelicalism, circa mid-1990s to mid-2010s?

Social capital is comprised of social connections – a network of "more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Yang and Gao, 2016: 228-229). Conservative evangelicals may carry social capital through connections with respected leaders or those attached to well-known organisations like UCCF; for charismatics, the same might apply with connections to HTB. Economic capital could be transferred into other types of capital (Bourdieu, 1986: 16), such as funding attendance at festivals or events, in turn growing enhancing social networks and growing cultural capital. Finally, cultural capital comprises "cultural competences" (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014: 195) such as skills, knowledge, and familiarity with cultural apparatus like language styles and symbols. Briefly, Bourdieu outlines three subsets of cultural capital: embodied, objectified, and institutionalised. *Embodied cultural capital* exists "in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (Bourdieu, 1986: 17). [39] Someone with this type of cultural capital might possess an innate ability to speak 'Christianese' – the jargon of Christian circles, involving phrases such as "relationship not religion" (especially in charismatic circles) or "saved by grace through faith alone" (in conservative circles). *Objectified cultural capital* exists "in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.)" (1986: 17). For example, evangelicals might read books by well-respected theologians – reading John Piper may signify such capital to conservative evangelicals. Finally, *institutional cultural capital* involves some kind of formal institutional recognition, such as an academic qualification (1986: 20-21). For example, someone might possess a theology qualification from Oak Hill and thus possess such capital within conservative evangelicalism.

4.2.4 The significance of community in the British evangelical field

Taking a moment to reflect on all these facets of British evangelical subculture, what is noticeable is the vast array of specifically evangelical milieu – the organisations, institutions, activities, events, communities, social spaces, resources, modes of expression, teachings and customs which make up evangelical life in this context. Overall, it paints a picture of a highly developed environment in which people enact, deepen, and live out their faith – and which

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[39] Embodied cultural capital is a lot like habitus. Indeed, Robert Moore notes that "the acquisition of embodied cultural capital is identical to the formation of habitus" (2008: 111). I agree that they appear the same, but there is an important conceptual distinction: capital denotes what is *valuable* in a specific field.

equips them to live out their faith outside of these spaces too. This resonates with Gaddini's words (above), that evangelicalism is a "deeply felt identity" (2022b: 1280) – why else would there be such substantial provision to support, cultivate, and affirm this identity? That this provision is well-established and popular indicates that supply is based on firm demand. It suggests that evangelicals are both expected to, and keen to, comprehend their faith as substantially shaping their daily life, and actively engaging with an evangelical collective as part of this. This seems to be the case across the charismatic and conservative sub-fields, both of which have extensive provisions to facilitate this and are united in their shared evangelical tendencies (e.g. commitment to evangelism, focus on the biblical text).

What this also suggests is that the British evangelical field is one very much oriented around community. This is also true theologically – evangelical theologian Elaine Storkey notes (in her book chapter in a volume on evangelical theology) that "human identity is derived" from God, "in whom we live and move and have our being" (2007: 167), and therefore in light of the unity of the trinity, "to exist at all is to exist in relation to others" (2007: 168). But it is also notably true in practice. So much of milieu the evangelical field – the networks, the festivals, the lively church communities – are not simply teaching resources or sources of guidance, but mediums of connection. A habitus developed within this field would thus be notably community-oriented, and, as such, notably *relationally*-oriented. Familiarity, exposure, and regular engagement with this evangelical field could mean this orientation becomes embedded into one's habitus with ease. This is an example of lived religion which escapes the lived/institutional binary (outlined in §3.1), because this milieu of British evangelicalism seamlessly integrates an individual's faith practices with specific organisations and institutions (e.g. the Church of England, HTB, UCCF, and so on). The significance of community in evangelical life is also apparent in Katie Gaddini's study on single evangelical women. In her 2022 monograph, she reports repeated references to "community" by her evangelical participants:

> It wasn't until much later, when I listened back to my interviews, that I noticed how often evangelical women mentioned "community." The word itself was used nearly a hundred times – and that was just during formal interviews. In more casual encounters, women spoke about the Christian community as if esteeming a new lover or raving about a cure-all supplement

<div align="right">Gaddini, 2022a: 25</div>

She later continues that it is through these communities and these relationships that said evangelical women develop their identities: "it is through community that women have their identities as Christians consolidated, validated, and mirrored back to them. In other words, only through relationships with one another can evangelical women become evangelical women" (2022a: 39). The field and capital I have outlined demonstrates that British evangelicals are

well-resourced with opportunities to engage with evangelicalism on a collective level – so much so that these opportunities become spaces in which their identity is, as Gaddini articulates, authenticated and reflected back to them.

Who, overall, is the British evangelical during the time period in question? It could be someone attending a charismatic church, perhaps part of the Church of England. It could be someone attending a Baptist church. It could be someone attending a small independent church, a larger congregation affiliated to an evangelical network like Vineyard, or even a house church. Perhaps they are a teenager attending Christian festivals in summer, and come home with a revitalised faith and a newfound sense of connection with their youth group. Maybe they raise their arms during times of sung worship; maybe they are open to the winds of emotion during these times. They probably regularly spend time in prayer, read their Bible, and try to make sense of biblical passages and their application to contemporary life in conversation with other Christians. They may be on a team at their church. They might have a Bible verse on their phone background or on their social media. Their Bible itself is likely worn, indicative of regular use and symbolic of a faithful disposition. They may express more charismatic understandings of the Holy Spirit, or more conservative commitments to gender roles and women in leadership. Perhaps they combine the two. Whatever their particular theological orientation (beyond what is evangelically orthodox), one thing is certain: who they are is formed, and refined, through their evangelical community.

4.3 Purity culture in British evangelicalism

4.3.1 Survey participants: demographics and denominations

In this final third of the chapter, I draw together the previous two parts by discussing evidence of purity culture in the British evangelical field. It is first prudent, however, to give a breakdown of the demographics of survey participants. Generally, the make-up of participants tended towards white (96.7%), heterosexual (72.8%), cisgender women (98.4%), predominantly English (82.8%), and mostly living in England (89.5%)[40]. There was variation in

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[40] In terms of gender, 571 participants (98.4%) were cisgender women, and 7 (1.2%) were assigned female at birth non-binary (Q3). Sexual orientation (Q5) skewed predominantly towards heterosexuality: 422 participants (72.8%) reported to be heterosexual or straight, 89 (15.3%) bisexual, 34 (5.9%) gay, 26 (4.5%) used the text-box to self-describe, and 9 (1.6%) preferred not to say. Ethnic group (Q6) similarly reflected an overwhelming majority, with 561 participants (96.7%) reporting to be White, 11 (1.9%) as Mixed/multiple ethnic groups, 4 (0.7%) as Black/African/Caribbean/Black British, 2 (0.3%) as Asian/Asian British and 2 (0.3%) as Other ethnic group. Of the white majority, 549 (97.9% of them) identified as White – English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British. National identity (Q7) skewed towards English, with 480 participants (82.8%), Scottish 28 participants (4.8%), Welsh 20 (3.4%), and Other 50 (9%) – most of the latter selected this option so they could write 'British' in the text box. Current place of residence was similarly skewed towards England (519 participants, 89.5%), with 36 in Scotland

age; of the 580, there was a diversity of age groups, though with the 18-21 age bracket notably smaller than others, and a slight skew to participants in their 20s, either 22-25 or 26-29 (figure 1). There was also variation, for those living in England, in which region they lived in: this was skewed towards Yorkshire and the Humber, which perhaps evidences some sampling bias within this region given that as the researcher I was based in Leeds at the time of data generation (figure 2).
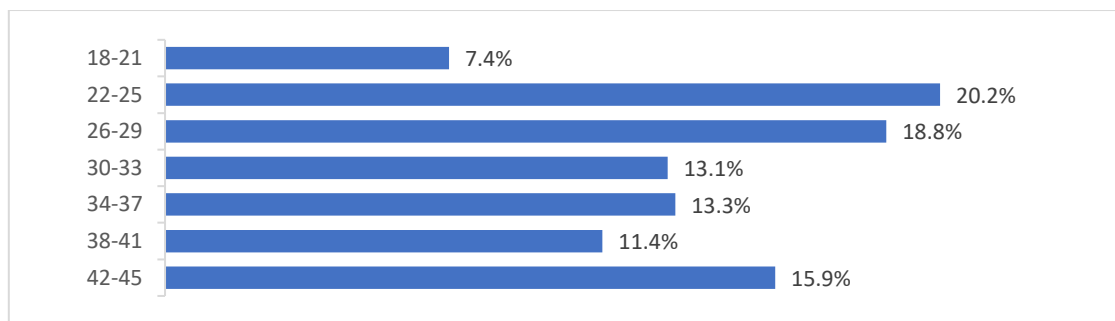

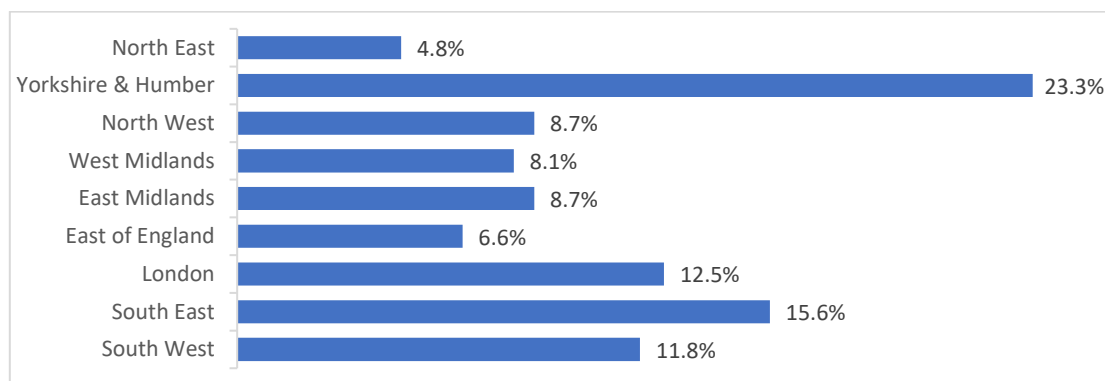Figure 1. Survey participant ages (Q2)

Figure 2. Regional areas of participants in England (Q8b)

When accounting for regions of England on a larger scale, however, there is a more even split: north 36.8%, midlands 23.4%, south 39.9%.

In terms of their religious beliefs, 531 respondents (91.6%) selected Christian, 36 (6.2%) selected No religion, and 13 (2.2%) selected other (Q11). This survey question was also preceded by an eligibility question, which also helpfully indicates that the majority of participants are currently still engaged with Christianity in some way: 491 (84.7%) are currently Christian and/or attending a church, while 78 (13.4%) previously identified as a Christian and also attended a church, and 11 (1.9%) simply previously attended a church (Q10). When asked about church attendance specifically, 462 (79.7%) responded currently attend a

(6.2%), 22 in Wales (3.8%), and 3 Other (0.5%) – of these 3, one lived in Jersey, one had recently moved from England to the Netherlands, and one had moved to the USA around 5 years prior.

Christian church; the remaining 118 (20.3%) did not (Q12).[41] Those attending indicated lengthy church attendance, with the biggest category being 10+ years (37.2%) (Q12b).[42] Participants were also asked if they had previously attended a (different) Christian church, of which 549 (94.7%) answered yes (Q13), and these were similarly skewed towards lengthy time period – 249 of these (45.4%) had attended these previous churches for 10+ years, with numbers gradually declining for shorter lengths of time (Q13a).[43] Denominationally, I wanted to ensure I documented *previous* church affiliation, not just current, so this data is a little more complicated to present: Q14 asked 'would you describe yourself/your church/your previous church(es) as... (You can tick multiple options for each. Please select all that apply)' and responses are detailed below (table 1).

	Myself	My church	My previous church(es)
Anglican/Episcopalian	220	261	271
Baptist	29	44	128
Catholic (not Roman Catholic)	24	19	21
Charismatic	87	79	153
Conservative evangelical	25	38	124
Deconstructing	80	6	4
Evangelical	128	156	237
Methodist	44	41	77
Non-denominational	114	63	100
Pentecostal	11	11	43
Post-evangelical or ex-evangelical	63	5	2
Presbyterian (including Church of Scotland)	10	10	13
Progressive	85	25	15
Roman Catholic	3	2	14
Quaker	7	4	4
United Reformed Church	10	11	15
Other	28	15	23

Table 1. Survey participant denominational backgrounds (Q14)

It is presented above (table 1) with larger numbers highlighted in a sliding colour scale: over 40% of participants (232+) is dark blue, 20% or more (116+) medium, and 10% (58+) light. Previous churches skew towards Anglican and evangelical (both over 40%), with Baptist,

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[41] Those attending church skewed towards high congregational engagement, with 334 (72.3%) attending once a week or more, 82 (17.7%) a few times a month, 28 (6.1%) once a month, 17 (3.7%) a few times a year, 0 once a year, and 1 (0.2%) less than once a year (Q12a).

[42] Of the 462 currently attending church, they had generally been attending their churches for quite a while – these figures were slightly skewed towards over a decade, then broadly split across the remaining categories: 172 (37.2%) had been attending 10+ years, 65 (14.1%) 5-10 years, 75 (16.2%) 3-4 years, 73 (15.8%) 1-2 years, 68 (14.7%) less than a year, and 9 people (1.9%) selected 'other'.

[43] Of the 549 people who previously attended a (different) church: 249 attended for 10+ years (45.4%), 148 (27%) for 5-10 years, 90 (16.4%) for 3-4 years, 51 (9.3%) for 1-2 years, and 7 (1.3%) for less than a year (Q13a).

Charismatic, and conservative evangelical numbers quite high (all over 20%), as well as Methodist and non-denominational (over 10%). In terms of current churches and personal identification, Anglican and evangelical are again the most prominent, but charismatic, non-denominational, post-evangelical, deconstructing and progressive also notably feature. Interestingly, the latter three of these are also not matched with similar levels in 'my church' but rather appear in 'myself', indicating not only a shift away from evangelicalism for some, but also that this may be a personal endeavour rather than one reflected in their church congregation (if they attend church at all).

It is important to note here that despite highest numbers appearing in Anglicanism, this is not a study on the Church of England; as will be made clear, church congregations are not the only location in which encounters with purity culture can take place. In fact, much of it takes place *outside* of church walls and in other environments within the evangelical field, as I will argue below. This question does, however, highlight the prior denominational location for individuals who may have been *accessing* the evangelical field – Anglican and Baptist in particular (as well as charismatic, evangelical, and conservative evangelical, though these three are not church *denominations* themselves but rather indicate evangelical expressions of Christianity).

4.3.2 Survey data: purity culture in Britain and comparisons with America

As noted in chapter 2 (§2.2.1), the survey asked participants about their thoughts and experiences of purity culture, and exposure to phenomena present in American purity culture. Here, I present the results of these questions and use them to compare with what I previously outlined as significant in purity culture as it appeared in the USA (§4.1). First, participants were initially asked about their familiarity with (Q18), and experiences of (Q20), purity culture (figures 3 and 4).
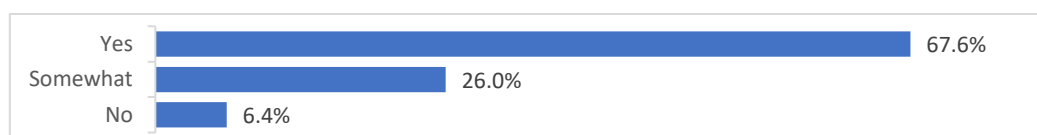

Figure 3. Survey Q18: Are you familiar with the term 'purity culture'?

Figure 4. Survey Q20: Would you say you have experienced purity culture?

These numbers indicate a substantial amount of familiarity with the term itself, and relatively high numbers of participants who had experienced purity culture: over 95% felt some

familiarity with the phrase, and nearly 90% felt they either had, or may have, experienced it personally. When broken down by age group, the results are broadly similar for both of these questions, though both familiarity and experiences of purity culture seem to be slightly higher for respondents in their 30s (figures 5 and 6).
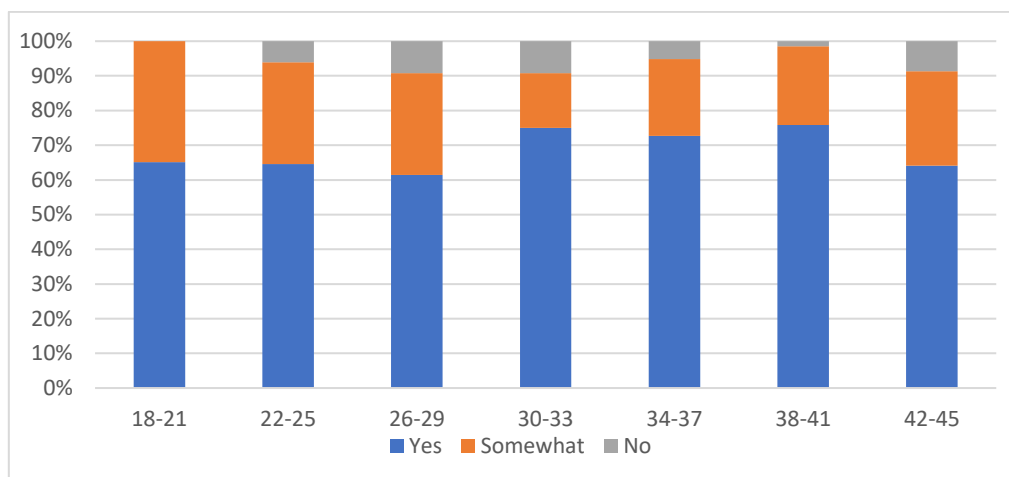

Figure 5. Survey Q18 by age groups: Are you familiar with the term 'purity culture'?
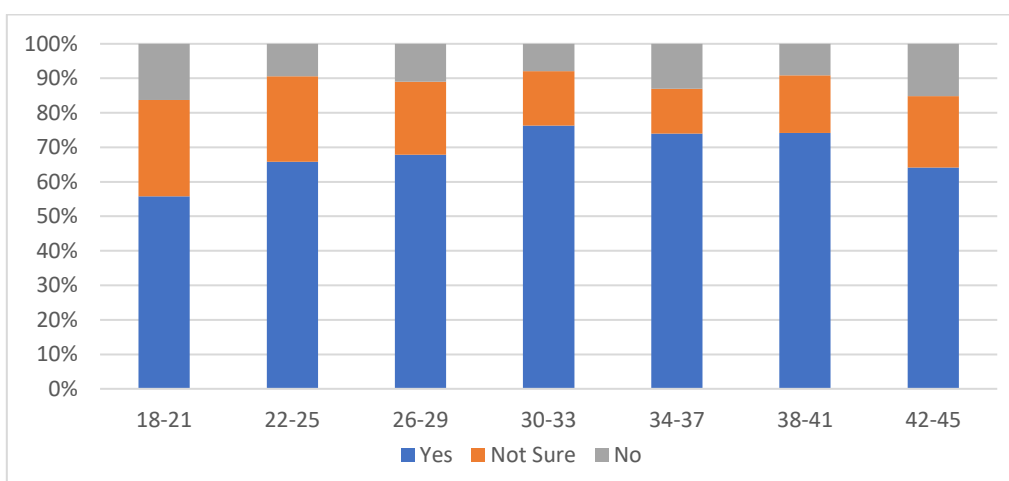

Figure 6. Survey Q20 by age groups: Would you say you have experienced purity culture?

This indicates a possible (slight) prominence of purity culture amongst participants born circa. 1982-1992, experiencing their teenage years from around 1995-2001 (for the oldest amongst this group) or 2005-2011 (for the youngest in this group). This resonates with the consensus of purity culture in America, the height of which is broadly situated in the late 1990s and early 2000s – though with an approximate (potential) prominence of 1995-2011, this may be skewed slightly later in Britain.

Participants were then asked about common markers of US purity culture such as rings, pledges, books and organisations. Overall, these indicated little evidence of some key American purity culture markers: only 6.4% of respondents (37 people) had ever worn a purity ring

(Q21), and 5% (29 people) had signed a purity or virginity pledge (Q22).[44] Even more miniscule, 0.5% (3 people) had owned an abstinence-themed study Bible (Q30). Having said that, around half of participants (283 people, 48.8%) had owned a teen girl Bible, indicating an apparent market for teenage-targeted Bibles in Britain (which likely would include messages about Christian dating and relationships) but an absence of demand for abstinence-*specific* Bibles. There was evidence of some familiarity with well-known purity culture books and American purity organisations (table 2 and figure 7).

	Heard of	Read
I Kissed Dating Goodbye (Joshua Harris)	264	83
Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Courtship (Joshua Harris)	142	51
Not Even a Hint (Joshua Harris)	71	17
And the Bride Wore White (Dannah Gresh)	66	13
Lady in Waiting (Debby Jones and Jackie Kendall)	65	10
When God Writes Your Love Story (Eric Ludy and Leslie Ludy)	63	13
Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (Piper & Grudem)	201	48
Why True Love Waits (Josh McDowell)	194	28
Why Wait? (Josh McDowell)	105	17
Passion and Purity (Elisabeth Elliot)	79	32
None of the above	175	204

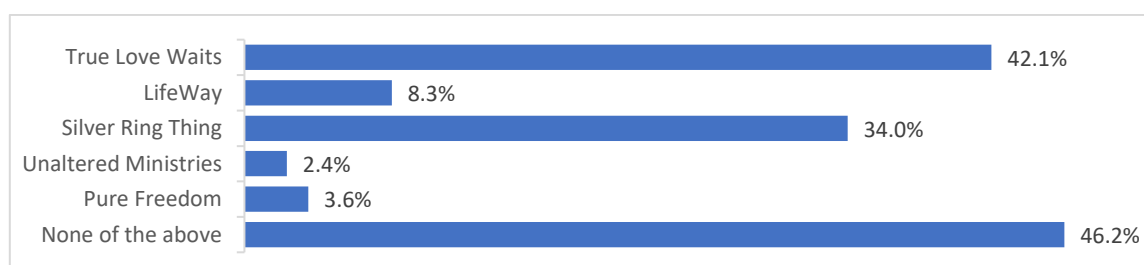Table 2. Survey Q27: Have you heard of, or read, any of the following books?

Figure 7. Survey Q28. Have you heard of any of the following organisations? (Please select all that apply)

For table 2, again this was highlighted in a sliding colour scale: over 40% of participants (232+) is dark blue, 20% or more (116+) medium, and 10% (58+) light. The high numbers of participants who appear to have heard of these books, coupled with the low numbers of those actually reading them, potentially indicates substantial *awareness* but limited *engagement* with American authors taken as authoritative regarding abstinence. The one exception to this is Harris' first book *IKDG*, which nearly half of participants had heard of, and some had read.

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[44] As these numbers are so low, they are not considered in detail, despite asking those who did wear a ring/sign a pledge why they did so (Q21b and Q22b). However, this qualitative data is interesting and I intend to explore reasons young women and girls in Britain *did* take part in these practices elsewhere (cf. §10.3).

Moving on to abstinence practices, this was relatively varied in terms of compliance amongst participants. Question 25 gathered behaviours relating to abstinence (figure 8). Abstinence until marriage, modest dress in Christian settings, and lower-level abstinence practices ranked the highest, at around half of participants.
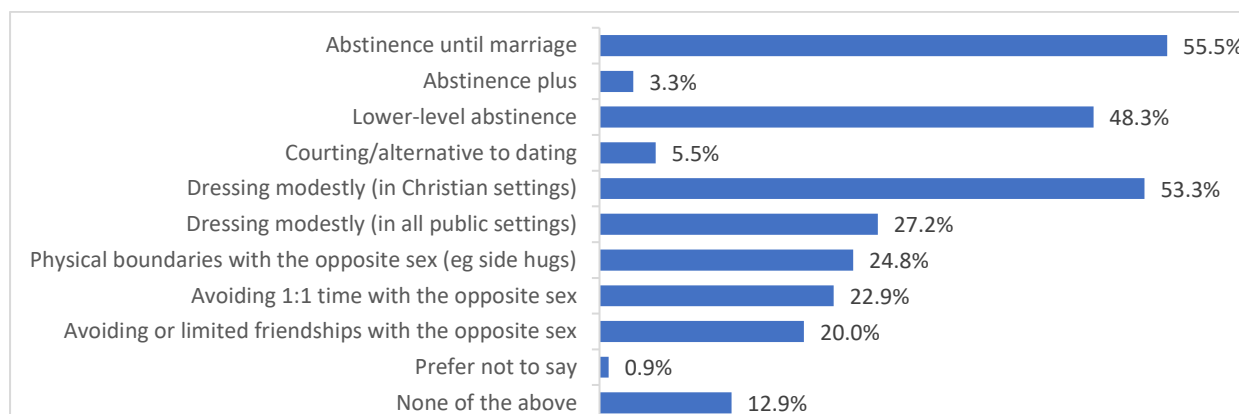

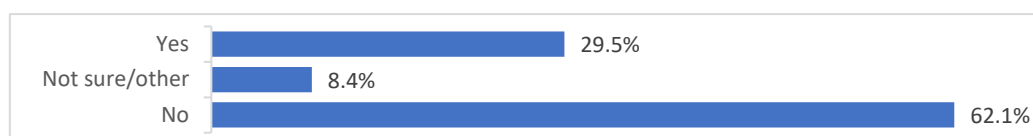Figure 8. Survey Q25: Have you ever engaged in the following practices? (Please select all that apply)[45]

Figure 9. Survey Q23: Have you ever attended a Christian abstinence- or purity-themed event?

Evidence of specifically abstinence-oriented events was moderate but not particularly high, with around a third of participants recording such attendance (figure 9). Interestingly, however, around half of participants (48.6%) had encountered virginity metaphors or symbols in a Christian setting, such as a flower, bone china teacup, used gum, used bike or vehicle (Q24).[46]

We have seen that the majority of participants have, or may have, experienced purity culture. The Purity Culture Belief Scale (Q26) helps establish what teachings and ideas they have encountered in relation to this. It presented specific statements, and measured both encounters with them (Yes/No) (Q26b) and agreement through a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) (Q26b). Of interest here is encounters (Q26a), as this builds a

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[45] 'Lower-level abstinence' was described in the survey as: "boundaries with partner e.g. limits on some sexual activity before engagement/marriage". 'Abstinence plus' was described as: "additional abstinence practices e.g. not kissing until engagement or wedding day".

[46] As with the questions on purity rings and pledges, constraints of space within this thesis mean this topic cannot be discussed in depth. Again, this is interesting, so the limitations are unfortunate – I intend to publish further on the use of the Bible in evangelical purity culture in Britain, based on this data.

picture of what teachings may have been present in Britain.[47] The results can be seen in table 3 (over 50% is shaded blue, and 75%+ dark blue).[48]

Statement	Yes	No
1. Women should dress modestly to avoid sexually tempting men	80%	20%
2. Virginity is a gift to give your spouse on your wedding night	87.7%	12.2%
3. God's will is for sex to happen within a marriage relationship	97.9%	2.1%
4. It is more acceptable for a man to not be a virgin on his wedding night than a woman	28.4%	71.6%
5. Waiting to have sex until marriage will make the wedding night and future sex life that much better	76.2%	23.8%
6. Women should cover themselves up; men can wear whatever clothing they choose	46.4%	53.4%
7. Sexual thoughts and feelings outside of marriage should cause guilt	67.8%	32.2%
8. You lose a piece of yourself every time you have sex with someone new	71.9%	28.1%
9. A woman who dresses immodestly causes her brothers to stumble	67.6%	32.4%
10. Women should not have sexual desire	22.9%	77.1%
11. Purity is primarily about virginity	60.3%	39.7%
12. Having premarital sex will make you unattractive to your future spouse	55.2%	44.8%
13. If you remain a virgin until marriage, God will bless you and your spouse with a great sex life	43.1%	56.9%
14. It is normal for a man to struggle with pornography, but not normal for a woman	50%	50%
15. Sex outside of marriage will make you damaged goods	62.9%	37.1%
16. It will be difficult for your future spouse to forgive you if you have sex with someone else before marriage	51.4%	48.6%
17. If you are patient and sexually pure, God will bring you the perfect spouse	52.8%	47.2%
18. Women are, by nature, more sexually pure than men	26.4%	73.6%
19. You should feel ashamed if you have sex outside of marriage	72.9%	27.1%
20. Women should be cherished as pure creatures	40.9%	59.1%
21. It is the woman's fault if sexual boundaries are crossed in a dating relationship	21.6%	78.4%
22. Men are visual	61.7%	38.3%
23. Men are unable to control their sexual desire	46%	54%
24. When you have sex with someone you form a 'soul tie'	67.8%	32.2%
25. Pre-marital sex is a sin	96.2%	3.8%
26. Pre-marital sex is the foremost/worst sin	33.4%	66.6%
27. Pre-marital sex impacts your relationship with God	83.6%	16.4%

Table 3. Survey Q26a: Have you ever encountered this teaching in a Christian setting?

This paints a relatively varied picture, however the results of the PCBS are most interesting when broken down by sub-scale. The revised PCBS had 4 sub-scales: shame and guilt; gender;

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[47] Though it is noticeable, when comparing the results of Q26a and Q26b, that even when exposure to statements is moderate to high, agreement is very low (cf. Appendix C: Purity Culture Belief Scale).
[48] The colour gradient has been altered from the previous tables (which were split by 10%/20%/40%+), because the variation in these results is incredibly high, and having three colours or more made it visually more difficult to comprehend.

idealization; theological implications.[49] Tables 4-7 present the four subscales, and show the results of Q26a (exposure) for each of these statements (cf. Appendix C for sub-scale results in full).

Shame & guilt subscale	Yes	No
1. Women should dress modestly to avoid sexually tempting men	80%	20%
7. Sexual thoughts and feelings outside of marriage should cause guilt	67.8%	32.2%
9. A woman who dresses immodestly causes her brothers to stumble	67.6%	32.4%
12. Having premarital sex will make you unattractive to your future spouse	55.2%	44.8%
15. Sex outside of marriage will make you damaged goods	62.9%	37.1%
16. It will be difficult for your future spouse to forgive you if you have sex with someone else before marriage	51.4%	48.6%
19. You should feel ashamed if you have sex outside of marriage	72.9%	27.1%

Table 4. Survey Q26a – shame and guilt subscale

Idealization subscale	Yes	No
2. Virginity is a gift to give your spouse on your wedding night	87.7%	12.2%
5. Waiting to have sex until marriage will make the wedding night and future sex life that much better	76.2%	23.8%
8. You lose a piece of yourself every time you have sex with someone new	71.9%	28.1%
11. Purity is primarily about virginity	60.3%	39.7%
13. If you remain a virgin until marriage, God will bless you and your spouse with a great sex life	43.1%	56.9%
17. If you are patient and sexually pure, God will bring you the perfect spouse	52.8%	47.2%
20. Women should be cherished as pure creatures	40.9%	59.1%

Table 5. Survey Q26a – idealization subscale

Theological implications scale	Yes	No
24. When you have sex with someone you form a 'soul tie'	67.8%	32.2%
25. Pre-marital sex is a sin	96.2%	3.8%
26. Pre-marital sex is the foremost/worst sin	33.4%	66.6%
27. Pre-marital sex impacts your relationship with God	83.6%	16.4%

Table 6. Survey Q26a – theological implications subscale

Gender subscale	Yes	No
4. It is more acceptable for a man to not be a virgin on his wedding night than a woman	28.4%	71.6%
6. Women should cover themselves up; men can wear whatever clothing they choose	46.4%	53.4%
10. Women should not have sexual desire	22.9%	77.1%
14. It is normal for a man to struggle with pornography, but not normal for a woman	50%	50%
18. Women are, by nature, more sexually pure than men	26.4%	73.6%
21. It is the woman's fault if sexual boundaries are crossed in a dating relationship	21.6%	78.4%
22. Men are visual	61.7%	38.3%
23. Men are unable to control their sexual desire	46%	54%

Table 7. Survey Q26a – gender subscale

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[49] One question also acted as a control item – Q26.3 'God's will is for sex to happen within a marriage relationship' (97.9% of participants had encountered this, indicating high exposure).

These are helpful visualisations as they demonstrate where the moderate to high exposures are – and, at the same time, where the low exposures are – and therefore what correlates with American purity culture, and what does not.

These sub-scales indicate a very high correlation with statements relating to shame and guilt; *all* statements in this subscale were encountered by at least 50% of participants, most by more than 60%, and two by more than 70% (table 4). This suggests high levels of exposure and evidences significant emphasis on self-evaluation of one's role in maintaining purity and abstinence as a moral responsibility, expecting introspection and remorse when this maintenance fails. Statement 1 ('women should dress modestly to avoid sexually tempting men') was rated particularly high for exposure (80% of participants), indicating that most participants had encountered the idea that women are responsible for managing men's sexual desires and behaviours by the way they dress. Over a third of participants had also encountered the related idea that women dressing "immodestly" *causes* their "brother to stumble" (67.6%, statement 9), reaffirming assumptions of female causality and responsibility for others' purity. A similar number of respondents (67.8%) had encountered the idea that "sexual thoughts and feelings outside marriage should cause guilt" (statement 7) in a Christian setting, suggesting that it is not only sexual activity which should be avoided outside marriage, but also thoughts and feelings too. Overall, encounters with these statements act as evidence of the promotion of holistic abstinence, I concept I introduced above (§4.1.3) to account for how, in purity culture, abstinence is not simply about sexual activity but one's whole lifestyle, extending to the absence of certain private thoughts and sexual desires, public practices such as modest dress, and affirmation of commonplace beliefs (such as pre-marital sex having some kind of spiritual consequences).

Table 5 indicates moderate to high correlation with purity culture teachings relating to idealization – suggesting that virginity is central and will impact a future marriage, but with notable divergences in relation to women being "cherished as pure", and also "blessing" (this is unpacked further in §6.1.3). The theological implications subscale is relatively small, with only 4 statements, having been created for the purposes of this research (table 6). Three of these statements rate highly, reflecting widespread understanding that pre-marital sex is a sin (cf. §5.1.2), that it impacts one's relationship with God (cf. §5.3.2), and some evidence of the concept of 'soul ties' (cf. §6.2.2). Finally, there is weaker exposure for the gender statements, though these are certainly not completely absent, but indicating more variation of experiences (table 7). There is scope for much further detailed analysis of this scale, however due to the limits of this study and the high volume of data, this is not possible here (this is one question of a 43-question survey, furthered with tens of thousands of words of qualitative data). What the PCBS *does*

achieve here, however, is evidencing particular elements of purity culture in Britain: relating to shame (and perhaps resultantly, moral transgression), virginity (especially in relation to a future marriage and the self), and spiritual implications (sinfulness, impact to standing before God, and being spiritually tied to another person).

We have seen that the majority of participants felt they had experienced purity culture (just under 70%), others were not sure (20%), and only just over 10% felt they had not experienced it (fig. 3). At the same time, we have also seen that engagement with the markers of US purity culture seemed varied; just under half of survey respondents had heard of TLW and Joshua Harris' *IKDG* book, but at the same time more than half had heard of *none* of the purity organisations. Meanwhile, purity rings and pledges received very little engagement (6.4% and 5%, respectively). This raises the question: how can purity culture exist in Britain without some of its key characteristic symbols? These subscales are helpful as they demonstrate the presence of some key purity culture values (as well as some areas of divergence), and point towards the presence of holistic abstinence even without the associated material culture. The overall picture is one of participants who feel they have experienced purity culture without rings or pledges – and encounters with these beliefs begins to explain how this might have occurred.

4.3.3 The interweaving of purity culture and British evangelicalism

In the previous section (§4.3.2) I presented data from the survey to demonstrate that purity culture has been present in Britain, based on the experiences of participants in this study. Even in the absence of the purity *industry*, it seems that much of the values, teachings and ideas of American purity culture appear – and (as I will argue here) in this context they appear not as a distinct phenomenon, but rather woven into the fabric of British evangelicalism. While the quantitative data (above) establishes this, the qualitative data builds on it, elucidating where such statements and ideas (such as those in the PCBS) were encountered, and for what purposes they were used. Codes identified during the analysis process indicated that key sources of purity culture for participants were, for the most part, not targeted campaigns or resources specifically on abstinence (as in the style of TLW), but part of broader evangelical provision for young adults to equip them in Christian living more generally. For example, analysis resulted in codes that simply reflected notable organisations and events in the evangelical field, and in particular: church youth groups (100 references to "youth groups" across 82 survey respondents); university student culture (45 references to "university" across 37 respondents, plus an additional 18 references to "uni" specifically), sometimes in relation to "Christian union" (26 references across 22 respondents), CU (13 references across 13 responses) or UCCF (5 responses across 5 respondents); and Christian summer festivals (27 references to "festival" across 25 respondents) like Soul Survivor (42 references across 39

participants), and occasionally Spring Harvest (10 references across 8 respondents) and New Wine (9 references across 8 respondents). The largest of these codes are "youth groups", "university"/"uni" and "Soul Survivor", indicating that youth and young adult provision in the evangelical field made up the main source of encounters with purity culture. These codes were ultimately not used in theme development, but this process did draw my attention to how many times well-known organisations or events were referred to by respondents (so much so that I wanted to explore British evangelical youth subculture further through interviews, cf. §2.2.2). Further, not all of the survey respondents were (or had been) evangelical; in fact, a lot of them never had been, but their responses indicated exposure to purity culture via key markers in the evangelical field.[50]

Very occasionally, participants made reference to specific abstinence-themed courses, such as the 'Pure' course associated with UCCF (mentioned by 3 respondents), 'Romance Academy' (1 respondent) by youth worker Rachel Gardner (3 respondents mentioned her separately), or Steve Chalke's 'Lessons in Love' (4 respondents) – all of which originate from British contexts and authors. These were specifically abstinence-focused resources, but also related these to concepts of love, marriage, and gender; for example, the Pure course, authored by a "UCCF staff worker", "underlined conservative gender roles and placed expectations on young women to 'be helpful' to 'the guys' in terms of what we wore, how we acted etc.'" (#4, Q20b). While this originated from a student-facing organisation (UCCF), Lessons in Love appears to have been used as a resource for more teenage-aged youth groups: "we were put through the Steve Chalke 'Lessons in Love' course" in "youth group". Sometimes participants attended a one-off abstinence or purity-themed session, such as a "student night teaching on purity" (#46, Q20b) or "a 'student teaching day' on relationships when I was at university" (#570, Q20b), but often these were housed within the aforementioned youth groups, or Christian camps and residentials: "I have a distinct memory of attending Soul Survivor and

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[50] Participants do not need to be/have been evangelical in order to have encountered this. A sizeable proportion of survey respondents are what I call the 'Never Evangelicals'. Participants were asked two questions on evangelicalism: whether they currently identify as evangelical or attend an evangelical church (Q15), whether they previously identify as evangelical or attend an evangelical church (Q16). 103 respondents (17.8%) selected 'No' for both – these are the Never Evangelicals. The majority of the Never Evangelicals said 'Yes' (53) or 'Not Sure' (23) when asked if they had experienced purity culture (76 in total). How so? This raises the question of if it is appropriate to categorise purity culture as part of the evangelical field. Analysis of these 76 responses (particularly the qualitative data from the 53 'Yes' responses) indicated that they had accessed the evangelical field despite their status as Never Evangelicals. When asked about their experiences of purity culture, they mentioned: Anglican childhood church (8 participants); Christian camps and residentials (7 participants), including Scripture Union, New Wine and Spring Harvest; youth-oriented purity events (5 participants), Christian social circles (5), university (4, including 3 mentions of CU).

attending a talk where we promised to not be sexual and had the opportunity to receive "forgiveness" for anything we had done previously" (#499, Q20b).

More broadly, however, encounters with purity culture were situated within the wider evangelical field, usually closely related to something carrying capital (like a well-known organisational or respected author in that sub-field). Indeed, analysis of qualitative survey data indicated that such encounters were packaged within guidance, events and resources intended to equip listeners and attendees with the tools to live faithfully (often biblically) as a Christian. Later in this thesis, I quote a phrase used by interviewee Wendy which captures how purity culture was seemingly ever-present but at the same time indistinct: she described it as being "in the air" (§8.1.1). In a similar vein, another interviewee Katy used the term "inculturation" to describe her evangelical upbringing and how gender, sex and relationships were treated in this context. These resonate with Katie Gaddini's findings that "all the London-based women I met knew that their church leaders wanted them to remain pure before marriage, yet few could recall exactly how they knew this" (2022a: 85). Wendy noted that it was simply subsumed into standard evangelical life through her discussion of church youth group: "we probably had sessions on sex before marriage, cause everyone did back then", she shared, but emphasised that this was delivered with an assumption that it was simply the norm. When I asked if they ever had youth group sessions on the topic specifically, she answered:

> I'm sure we did yeah … but it was sort of by then so generally accepted, it was like we're gonna do a session on why did Jesus die, we're gonna do a session about why we don't have sex before marriage, we're gonna do a session on prayer, it was almost like run of the mill Christianity.

Wendy summarised this environment as feeling that "it's always in the ether, like this is a mark of a true Christian". There was no British True Love Waits or Silver Ring Thing, but there did not need to be; the evangelical field was well-resourced in its emphasis on holistic abstinence, not as a targeted campaign or wider movement but as part of the message to young people about what it means to live as a Christian. Take Christian festivals, for example. Attendees are not there to learn exclusively about abstinence, but to be equipped to live a faithful Christian life. A young person attending Spring Harvest or Soul Survivor may in the same afternoon hear a talk about abstinence and another about leading worship. Likewise one session in a church youth group or Christian student group is one of many. Other instances identified in relation to these were informal encounters with peers, such as "conversations with … members of Christian Union (university) surrounding sex" (#367, Q20b).

The consistent emphasis on holistic abstinence yet simultaneous assimilation of this into the cultural milieu of the evangelical field demonstrates a particularly British iteration of purity

culture, in which it exists not as a distinct movement but a constituent part of evangelicalism. Purity culture being "in the air", part of normality, and harder to "recall" where it came from may imply that it is less present, less evident, and less impactful. This is not necessarily the case. As I will demonstrate throughout the rest of this thesis, there are many women grappling with the effects of exposure to evangelical purity culture in Britain. Why, then, is this so? How can something so seemingly subdued – particularly compared to its American counterpart – continue to carry such weight? Bourdieu's concept of habitus helps explain this. As articulated in chapter 3 (§3.2.1), habitus encapsulates how values, beliefs and expectations from the field can become so influential to those who occupy it: through a "system of long-lasting ... schemes ... or structures of perception, conception and action" (Bourdieu, 2017: 33). They become lodged in the mind and body as orientations to the world, value systems, tendencies, tastes, hobbies, behavioural tendencies and even patterns of thought.

Habitus is therefore a useful tool for conceptualising how evangelicalism can impact people on a deep personal level, and demonstrating why this impact can be so significant. Living within evangelicalism is not simply exposure to a subculture, a collection of external experiences – it is an internalised value system, a way of life. In chapter 3, I discussed Meredith McGuire's emphasis on the embodied nature of religion (§3.1.2). McGuire contends that "lived religion is constituted by the practices by which people remember, share, enact, adapt, and create the 'stories out of which they live.' And it is constituted through the practices by which people turn these "stories" into everyday action" (2007: 197-198). To this I would add: it is also constituted through the way in which it can be incorporated into the body, shaping someone's very self, cognition, and action. Habitus shows how – developing on the lived religion perspective – evangelicalism persists in the bodies and minds of people within it. This is, in actual fact, not necessarily revolutionary; in a way it simply puts a name to, as one participant puts it, how "the things you get taught as a kid can stick with you" (#323, Q43). But habitus is especially useful for understanding evangelicalism (including evangelical purity culture) in Britain, as opposed to America, because it explains its potency despite its position as a relatively marginal social group. Dani mentioned in her interview that while "evangelical Christians" are not that "culturally dominant" and are in a "minority" in Britain, the "subculture" could nonetheless "be quite *personally* influential". "If you are involved in that subculture in your personal life", she said, "you'd sort of just go 'well that's what we do' or 'that's what we don't do', you know?".

Further, it is possible for individuals located in the same field to develop a shared habitus; as I outlined in the previous chapter (§3.2.2), "a group of persons occupying a similar or neighbouring position in a social space" may find that "the elements of [their] behaviour have

something in common, a kind of affinity in style" (Bourdieu, 2017: 44). One characteristic of this shared habitus, for example, would be highly valuing the Bible. As a result, someone with this habitus would likely read the Bible regularly, consult it as an authoritative guide for their life, consider it to be a true revelation from and about God, and consistently seek to improve their own knowledge and understanding of it through learning activities. Another characteristic would be an inherent understanding of the importance of abstinence until heterosexual marriage. Despite variation of age and geography, participants may reflect something of a shared habitus, oriented to vehemently maintaining sexual purity through commitment to holistic abstinence. The idea of a shared habitus does not mean that experiences are homogenous, and of course habitus can be affected by a myriad of factors. Rather, habitus mediates between social structures and individual agency – Bourdieu describes how individuals maintain their agency while their actions, decisions and behaviours are conditioned by their habitus: "Social agents ... are not automata regulated like clocks, in accordance with laws they do not understand", but rather "they put into action the incorporated principles of a generative habitus" (1990a: 9). As such, individuals raised in similar conditions (such as the evangelical field) are simply *likely* to generate a similar habitus.

For the purpose of this thesis, I generate the concept of *the habitus of purity culture*. This refers to a habitus raised in the evangelical field, but also draws out a particularly unique experience shaped by this field: the tension of internalising both the valorisation, and jeopardisation, of key relationships. What I mean by this is as follows. We have seen that evangelicalism is inherently community-oriented – it is an identity which shapes a person's life in deep and profound ways, and thus aligns the self first and foremost with others sharing this identity, within a well-resourced social field which builds these relational connections (cf. §4.2.4). Meanwhile, the purity culture present in the evangelical field centres the idea that, if someone is non-compliant with holistic abstinence, there may be significant (and damaging) consequences. In the following chapter, I articulate the concept of sexual sin – the means by which this damage can occur. The results of this damage are directed onto the very relationships evangelicals hold dear: their own self-identity, their status before God, their role in a community, and their future marriage. Overall, the habitus of purity culture conceptualises how a habitus generated within the evangelical field will be pointedly relationally-oriented, but at the same time will have internalised concern that sexual sin may damage (and even ruin) these relationships. This is an incredibly fraught habitus to live with; the very things held dear could be lost by one's own actions.

4.4 Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, I have given the context of US purity culture, established the field of British evangelicalism, and argued for the presence of purity culture within this field. The first part of the chapter (§4.1) delineated a brief history of American purity culture, tracing its emergence through key organisations like TLW and SRT (§4.1.1), the development of the purity industry and concept of holistic abstinence (§4.1.2), concurrent rise in affirmation of conservative gender roles (§4.1.3), and relationship with US politics (§4.1.4). The second part of the chapter then outlined the British context (§4.2). Here, I demonstrated that British evangelicals share similar theological beliefs to their American counterparts but are located within a different socio-religious landscape which makes them more of a religious minority (§4.2.1), and distinguished between charismatic and conservative evangelicalism (§4.2.2). I then discussed field and capital in relation to these two (§4.2.3) and the importance of community in the evangelical field (§4.2.4). In the final third of the chapter, I drew both of the two preceding parts together, arguing for the presence of purity culture in British evangelicalism (§4.3). After giving some background information on the demographics and denominations of participants (§4.3.1), I presented analysis of the survey data which showed little engagement with some key purity culture markers (like rings and pledges), but evidence of holistic abstinence and other statements indicative of purity culture (particularly those relating to shame, idealization, and theology, as in the PCBS) (§4.3.2). Based on this, I presented the argument that purity culture has been present in Britain not as a distinctive movement or separate entity but as a constituent part of evangelicalism (§4.3.3). I closed the chapter by arguing that the habitus of purity culture usefully draws out the potency and impact of purity culture in this British iteration – because it becomes durably incorporated into the body, which consequently balances valorised relationships at risk of ruin through sexual sin.

Chapter 5. Sin

"there I was being told, as a 14 or 15 year old, that I was at risk of ruining myself and somebody else … and that I could do all of this just by wearing a t-shirt that had lettering on it"
– Katy

This is the first of five thematic chapters, each based on a theme identified within the data. The first two of these themes – sin (here) and marriage (chapter 6) – are key concepts for understanding evangelical purity culture in Britain. They therefore make up the rest of Part 2 of this thesis, continuing to build on the previous chapter in demonstrating the existence of purity culture in Britain and building a picture of what this is like. Meanwhile, the latter three themes (body, sexual violence, and shifting faith) are grouped within the final part of this thesis – part 3, on the after effects of purity culture.

The quotation above is from Katy, one of the five interviewees for this study. In each thematic chapter, one person from the data takes prominence, in order to ground this thesis in personal story and lived experience. In this chapter, it is Katy whose experiences are woven in and discussed throughout. Katy is a white, English, married, heterosexual, cisgender woman, in the 26-29 age bracket at the time of data generation, and was raised in a conservative evangelical Church of England parish. Now, she is still a Christian, still identifies as an evangelical, and attends an evangelical church – but many of her views have changed since adolescence. In our interview, Katy talked about the church environment she grew up in, and how she has since struggled to unpick the messages she internalised about sex and abstinence. Her quotation above demonstrates how prominent a preoccupation this was in the evangelical field Katy occupied and, consequently, in her own habitus. By not complying with holistic abstinence – in this instance, by wearing a certain type of t-shirt which could "tempt" young men – Katy was at risk of "ruining" herself, and even somebody else.

This risk of ruin is central to this chapter. Purity culture places at risk all of the relationships that are so highly valued within the evangelical field. Yet they are at risk of ruin, and sin is the means by which this ruin can occur. As outlined towards the end of chapter 4, this is the habitus of purity culture, at once managing both the valorisation and jeopardisation of these relationships. In this chapter, I illustrate this significant role of sin within this habitus, and demonstrate the prominence of this concept within the data. Thus while this is a data analysis chapter, it is also important for furthering the development of the theoretical intervention of this thesis.

First, I define sin in the context of purity culture (§5.1), briefly considering the significance of sin within evangelical theology and identity (§5.1.1), before discussing sexual sin (§5.1.2). Having defined sexual sin as anything outside of God's plan for sex within heterosexual marriage, I then outline its centrality in British evangelicalism (§5.2). I observe this in the data in three ways: a fixation on sexual sin (§5.2.1), the idea that sexual sin is the worst sin (§5.2.2), and the perception of abstinence as an identity marker (§5.2.3). Finally, I turn to the relational impacts of sexual sin (§5.3). I argue that it is perceived to be damaging in four ways: to the self (§5.3.1), relationship with God (§5.3.2), relationship with and role in community (§5.3.3), and a future marriage (which I discuss in the next chapter). These jeopardised relationships demonstrate the potency and power of sexual sin, and explain the attention it receives within evangelical purity culture.

5.1 Defining sin in the context of purity culture

While I could discuss in-depth the multitude of theological discourses on sin over the history of Christianity, the parameters of focus are limited for the purposes of this study. Of interest here is the understanding of sin that has shaped experiences of participants. Here, I establish that while sin is a theological concept, its function is not purely abstract but also serves to delineate the boundaries of what makes an evangelical. Sexual sin – an important concept for purity culture, given that it focuses on abstinence until marriage to preserve sexual purity – sits within this broader category.

5.1.1 Sin in evangelical theology and identity

The concept of sin is central to evangelical theology and underlies the crucifixion of Jesus. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, along with idea of salvation achieved through these events, represent key doctrinal tenets of Christianity. These are immovably central concepts to evangelicals (reflected, for example, in Bebbington's crucicentrism, cf. §4.1; 4.2.1). As Timothy Larsen has argued, "when theologians reflecting other traditions have moved the center of gravity in Christian thought toward doctrines such as the incarnation, the life and teaching of Christ, or the Fatherhood of God", evangelicals have continually maintained the "cruciality of the cross" (2007: 9). What, then, exactly is sin to evangelicals? How does it function in these self-defining theological ideas? Its definition is two-fold – sin constitutes wrong action, and results in estrangement between humans and God. When explicating the evangelical understanding of sin, it is common to refer to the biblical book of Genesis. Genesis 3 narrates Adam and Eve's defiance of God's commands, with the result that sin is introduced into the world – it demonstrates how Adam and Eve committed a wrong action, and also how it separates them from God. For example, Miyon Chung uses this bipartite definition of sin in

evangelical theology, describing the sin of Adam and Eve as both "disobedience" and "self-imposed alienation" (2007: 110).

EAUK's basis of faith draws out how sin functions within the key tenets of evangelical belief. It contains 11 statements, 4 of which use the word 'sin'. These include: that "people, made male and female in God's image" are "corrupted by sin"; that Jesus was "truly human, yet without sin"; the "atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross ... paying the price of sin and defeating evil so reconciling us with God"; "the justification of sinners solely by the grace of God through faith in Christ" (Evangelical Alliance UK: no date[b]). These statements demonstrate that sinfulness is a key part of humanness. Indeed, what evangelicals see when they look at the world is one which is "sinful, lost, broken and hurting" (Larsen, 2007: 12), for this corruption of sin is a part of the human experience. This basis of faith also re-iterates that this is resolved through the crucifixion, which involves not only forgiveness of sin but reconciliation with God.

In Britain, theological disagreement during the turn of the 21st century brought about renewed focus on the crucifixion and, as a result, on theological concepts in which sin plays a key role. The early 2000s saw heated debate amongst prominent British evangelicals over the crucifixion of Jesus, following the publication of a book by Steve Chalke and Alan Mann in which they briefly considered whether or not the crucifixion constituted "cosmic child abuse" (2003: 182-183).[51] The ensuing debates focused on what happens at the crucifixion. The doctrine of atonement took centre stage, with discussion focusing on *how* the crucifixion reconciles people to God, and in 2005 EAUK and London School of Theology convened an 'Atonement Symposium' (Wood, 2011: 73, n.67). Within these debates, the role of sin was unchanged. What was up for discussion was not whether Jesus' sacrifice atoned for sin, but how. There remained an underlying consensus that Jesus' work on the cross was salvific and that it reconciles sinful human beings to God.

These debates were relatively high profile, particularly given the involvement of key evangelical organisations and figures such as the Evangelical Alliance UK, evangelical theological college London School of Theology, Anglican Bishop of Durham Tom Wright, Spring Harvest, Keswick Ministries and UCCF (Wood, 2011: 127–144). They were not merely abstract intellectual discussions. They also served to delineate the boundaries of British evangelical belief and identity; "the doctrine of the atonement remains a salient theological concept used by British evangelicals in the construction of their collective identity" (Wood, 2011: i). Different models of atonement constitute further internal identity markers (such as the adoption or

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[51] They argued that it did not – however, this phrase nonetheless became infamous in the following debates.

rejection of the penal substitution model) (cf. Wood, 2011: i), however what is important for this thesis is not the specifics of these debates, but how they re-iterate just how central sin is for British evangelicals. Sin is at the centre of evangelical orthodoxy, and by extension evangelical identity. Conceptually, sin is the most serious harm that come from human behaviour. Practically, sin is central to the theology which evangelicals use to distinguish themselves from the world and even other Christians.

5.1.2 Sexual sin

Within evangelicalism, certain things are considered sinful – such as behaviours, actions, and thoughts. This includes pre-marital sex. The concept of 'sin' makes engagement in sexual activity prior to marriage a much weightier burden than, say, a moral wrong doing – it places the wrongdoer in question on the side of cosmic evil and theological impurity, contrary to the goodness of God. The PCBS in the survey for this study presented participants with the statement 'pre-marital sex is a sin' (Q26.28). When asked if they had encountered this teaching in a Christian setting, 96.2% of respondents said 'Yes', demonstrating the identification of sex outside (specifically before) marriage as fundamentally sinful.

This was also supported by the qualitative data within open-ended survey questions and interviews. These not only affirmed exposure to this idea but some also unpacked *why* marriage (specifically heterosexual marriage) was considered to be the appropriate confines of sexual expression – because it was seen as God's design. Many participants used this specific wording or similar, such as 'God's ideal' or 'God's plan'. One described purity culture as "the culture in churches that emphasises Gods plan for sex/sexual activity (between a man and a woman in marriage)" (#368, Q19). Another gave a similar definition: "Teaching that heterosexual marriage is the only place for expression of sexual intimacy. Anything other is outside God's will..." (#425, Q19). Others too expressed this idea, using comparable language: "I think it is God's ideal design" (#183, Q43), "sex within marriage was Gods [sic] plan" (#331, Q34), "how God intended it" (#580, Q38a), "A believe [sic] that refraining from all sexual contact before a heterosexual marriage is God's will" (#223, Q19), "my church ... strongly encouraged youth group (14+) to practice abstinence as it was what God wanted and his plan for us" (#506, Q20b).

Some survey respondents also pointed to the use of the Bible to affirm God's design: "sex is taught to be a gift from God within marriage in the Bible" (#374, Q36a). The Genesis story in particular was referred to as an example of God's intentions: for example, "Adam and Eve" were used to show "god's ideal plan for human relationships" (#273, Q34). This biblical text is useful for this purpose as the narrative outlines God's intended creation prior to the presence of sin: "Genesis was used as a paradigm for sex's place in marriage ... that's how God made it ... Genesis

was chosen as the overarching paradigm because it was before the fall, and therefore an idealised situation" (#316, Q34). In evangelical subculture, these are the confines of sexual expression because God has deemed it so, as reflected in the Bible. Anything outside of these restrictions is sinful because it defies God's design.

I came across this idea that sexual sin is deviation from God's design during data generation. Many survey participants discussed sin, leading its identification as a key theme during data analysis – but prior to this, I conducted interviews. The first of these was with Katy. Her survey responses were detailed, suggesting that she could further detail her upbringing within British evangelicalism. Katy's story begins with her youth, immersed within a Church of England parish in the south of England – much of what she shared was about her teenage years within this context. Katy describes this parish as "low church conservative evangelical" – labels which "it would probably own". The parish contained a handful of churches, one of which Katy attended from the age of 5 until she left for university, and another where she attended Friday night youth group as a teen. We talked, amongst other things, about how sex was perceived and discussed within the youth provision from these two churches.

At one weeknight Bible study, Katy and her peers took part in what she described as a "what should and shouldn't you touch before you're married exercise", in which they had to sort through "various different interactions that men and women might have and say whether they were okay or not okay". She recalled that, while she "can't remember what was said" specifically, the "overarching narrative" was "the line being, broadly speaking, anything that is sex, or makes you want to have sex, it's a bad thing to do before you get married". She elaborated that "sex ... was presented as a sin if it wasn't in ... those correct heteronormative long-term relationship marriage contexts", re-iterating her comments in the survey, in which she discussed how "all deviance from sex within a heterosexual marriage was considered outside of God's design, and therefore sinful" (#19, Q34).

Here Katy conveys the key idea of what makes things sinful within this context – it is sin by negation, sinful because of the absence of appropriate relational conditions. Other survey participants communicated this notion too: one discussed how biblical texts were used to "reinforce the idea that sex in marriage is 'god's best' and anything else is sinful" (#173, Q34), another shared that "the purity teaching was definitely about heterosexual couples within marriage and was taught as the only way. Anything other was sin" (#153, Q36a). As a result, the scope of possible sins is broad. It covers any sexual expression that does not take place between two (cisgender, heterosexual) married people. As one participant put it: "any divergence from these gender and sexual ideals are deemed shameful and sinful" (#121, Q19). This could include, then, extramarital sex or adultery, any sexual activity between heterosexual people who

are unmarried (regardless of their relationship to one another), and any homosexual sexual activity.

Any of these could come under the umbrella of 'sexual sin', denoting anything that could be considered wrong due to digression from God's plan for sexual expression. 23 participants used the phrase 'sexual sin', and though this is a small percentage (around 4%) of total respondents, the fact it was used *at all* when it does not appear in any questions or survey wording suggests, at the very least, that it is appropriate to use in this context. Generally these participants did not actively give a definitive definition of sexual sin, but when meaning was inferred from the surrounding text, it seemed to suggest anything outside of the boundaries of marriage. For example: "in order to be 'pure' you must not engage in sexual sin, e.g. sex outside of marriage" (#447, Q19); "modesty and sexual sin (particularly pertaining to sex before marriage" (#511, Q19).

Another interviewee, Lucy, also used the phrase 'sexual sin'. Thus far in the thesis I have not yet introduced Lucy's background, so I will do so here. Lucy is a white, cisgender woman who identifies as bisexual and was, at the time of our interview, in her early 30s. She is ordained within the Church of England and, now based in the Anglo-Catholic side of Anglicanism, identified as post-evangelical or ex-evangelical, having previously attended Anglican and evangelical churches (survey Q14) and formerly identified as evangelical herself (Q16). During her upbringing, her church youth group did the Silver Ring Thing course, and she also attended a Christian summer camp called Detling, smaller in size than the likes of New Wine, but providing a platform for broadly the same evangelical messages, including having an evening youth session on abstinence. Lucy recalled, at one of these camps:

> a missionary telling us about his relationship with his wife and how, before they got married they told teach other every sexual sin that they'd committed. And that that was a really important and necessary conversation, and that it was important for us to not commit sexual sin, but if we did we had to tell our spouse about all of it.

Lucy's use of the phrase "sexual sin" evidences the same familiarity with the concept as the above survey participants, and also resonates with Katy's understanding of sex as a sin (outside of appropriate marital conditions).

Additionally, the underlying assumption is that only heterosexual people are permitted to be sexually active. The overriding picture is that God intended sex to take place within heterosexual marriage – some participants demonstrate this by using the phrase 'one man and one woman', sometimes alongside 'for life' or 'one flesh' (likely a reference to Gen. 2:24, Matt. 19:5, or Eph. 5:31). For example, one participant described how the Genesis story was used to teach "one man, one woman, they become one flesh … anything else is contrary to God's design"

(#296, Q34). Another participant includes "'traditional views of sex and marriage (one man, one woman, for life)" within her definition of purity culture (#103, Q19). There is no room for digression beyond these heteronormative expectations, given that it is God's design. In her interview Katy discussed beliefs her childhood church endorsed as "absolutely true", and this included "gay marriage being, you know, a corruption of the true meaning of marriage". Some survey participants discussed how even simply *existing* as someone who diverges from these expectations can be perceived through the lens of sin – that someone's very being could be sinful. "Purity culture is very heavily reliant on a woman identifying as straight and female", one participant explains, "anyone not identifying as such is made to feel like they are partaking in a deeper level of depravity and at the bottom of the cess pool" (#312, Q36a). Put more simply: "homosexuality [is] sinful in such [a] cultural context" (#15, Q19); "anything other than heterosexuality is sinful" (#65, Q20b); "don't be gay or you will go to hell" (#184, Q20b). One participant wrote that "at an evangelical church, I was told that homosexuality does not exist and that I was not bisexual" (#558, Q20b), their own sexual orientation denied as even a possibility. It is seen, in these cases at least, as the ultimate disobedience from God's design of heterosexual cisgender marriage.

5.2 The centrality of sexual sin

Having defined sexual sin in context of evangelicalism, here I outline the centrality of this concept to evangelicals. This is the crux of the distinctiveness of evangelical purity culture – not simply the idea that sex outside marriage is sinful, but that this is a key preoccupation for evangelicals. This preoccupation manifests in multiple ways, and I have drawn out three which seem to be the most present in the data: sexual sin as a fixation or obsession (§5.2.1), the idea that sexual sin is the worst possible sin (§5.2.2), and the notion that sexual abstinence before marriage is an identity marker for evangelical – or 'real' – Christians (§5.2.3).

5.2.1 Sexual sin as fixation

In our interview, Katy talked about how the parish she attended growing up had a consistent focus on sex and abstinence. The weeknight Bible study and Friday night youth group would both be "focused at us as teenagers"; sometimes the content was shaped by a course they were following (at one point they did UCCF'S Pure Course), a Bible passage or simply "dedicated sessions because sex would seem to be becoming an issue in the group". She describes how:

> it was very much done along those kind of ... heterosexual lines and along kind of marital norms, by which I mean, the expectation was that the end point of any given relationship should be ... getting married. And that if you were, kind of, thinking about one night stands, or sleeping around, or anything like that ... this would have been, profoundly, *profoundly* like, you'd've been taken aside and encouraged to think about ... what you

were planning on doing with your purity ... I don't know if it was ever quite put in those terms ... we would think about it in terms of, kind of yeah, being a virgin and keeping things special, I suppose, that euphemistic turn of phrase

This was the context in which she grew up. Attending the two youth-focused programmes every week – plus church on a Sunday – means Katy was not only an established member of this community, but also regularly encountered its values. She says it was these three settings in which she "was exposed" to "purity culture with a big P and a big C".

Katy also emphasised that she felt the teaching and focus on sex and abstinence within the church context of her youth was well-intentioned. She explains:

so there was kind of, you know, dedicated ... for us, sessions that were I'm sure put together with the best of intentions. I have no doubt that all of the purity culture that I was exposed to as a teenager ... was well intentioned. I have absolutely no question that there was no, desire to scar any of us for life ...I have *no* doubt that that is coming from a place of genuine conviction and genuine concern

Perhaps it was this very concern that so drove the vehement focus on it. As mentioned above, some of the dedicated sessions arose because "sex" was seen as "becoming an issue". Some teenagers were coupling up: "we were kind of starting to ... pair off, as it were" and as a result "people were kind of looking and going 'Oh God, they're so young! What are we gonna do? We've got to teach them about sex. What does that mean?!'". This suggests that the focus on this topic was intentional, stemming from a perceived need to educate young people who were at an age when they may start to become sexually active. Whatever the intention, the result was that Katy was not only exposed to these ideas, as an inherent part of the evangelical field, but also internalised them too. She discussed how she adopted this vehement focus on abstinence and sexual sin herself: "the whole way it was depicted was, it was *so* exceptionalised that actually, I had a fixation on it, as a particular problem ... it was a real hang up". In other words, Katy was so ingrained within this field that she internalised its messages – they became a part of her habitus.

Similarly, some survey participants described the preoccupation with sexual sin as an 'obsession' or (like Katy) a 'fixation'. Twenty people used this language across twenty-two survey question answers, in reference to the deep-seated focus on sexual behaviour, virginity, and abstinence until marriage amongst unmarried Christians. Some of these uses occurred when participants were asked how they would define purity culture (Q19): "being obsessed by the idea that to be 'pure' just means to not have sex before marriage" (#573), "a fixation on a person's sexual behaviour prior to marriage" (#120), "obsession with virginity before marriage and the idea that sex should stay in marriage" (#146), "an obsession with teaching young Christians about sexual purity and virginity" (#187), and "message to not take part in any sexual

activity outside of marriage. Delivered in an often aggressive, obsessive and overbearing way" (#170).

Other instances of survey participants using words like 'obsession' or 'fixation' came from answers in which people described their own personal experience. One woman explained how "there was a lot of pressure to abstain from sex before marriage. Every year at the CU mission there was a talk about it. It felt like the most important thing in christianity [sic] – an obsession" (#41, Q20b). She also mentions that the result of this was that "it left me very confused – sex before marriage is wrong and sinful. Sex within marriage is wonderful. How do you 'flick that switch' from something being wrong but then suddenly right?" (#41, Q20b, contd.). Another respondent talked about how, "as a young person, every single event for teens in Christian culture was OBSESSED with sex and purity messages dominated and pervaded all other topics" (#342, Q20b, emphasis original). She continued to describe an experience similar to Katy's 'what's okay and not okay' exercise: "I was once given a worksheet that rated behaviours on a traffic light system as more dangerous to ok. Lying down was a red light" (#342, Q20b continued). The result of this preoccupation was that her own Christian commitment felt questioned: "At every turn evangelicals have made me feel like an inferior or not a real Christian just because I don't subscribe to patriarchal, binary fixed views on sex and gender." (#342, Q20b contd.). This association with Christian identity is another aspect of the vehement focus on sexual sin (§5.2.3).

Others also emphasised that these personal experiences came from evangelical cultural contexts – for example, "I attended an Evangelical youth group in my teens (not my own church, but a nearby church) and attended Christian youth festivals that put a heavy stress on the sinfulness of sex outside of marriage" (#156, Q20b). Overall, what these participants describe as an 'obsession' was not localised to one particular medium, programme, or event. It was present in youth groups, festivals, and Christian Unions. To these, we can also add: "sermons, youth events, seminars etc. on the subject of sex within marriage, how to live that as a teen/young adult. Def HUGE amounts of focus on it even when not termed 'purity'" (#420, Q23a, emphasis original).

5.2.2 Sexual sin as the worst sin

In addition to some participants seeing this preoccupation as obsessive, a number of survey respondents also shared that it felt as if sexual sin was presented as the worst possible sin. As part of the PCBS, participants were presented with the statement "pre-marital sex is the foremost/worst sin" (Q26.26). Katy responded that she had encountered it in a Christian setting ('Yes', Q26a), and ticked 'Strongly Disagree' (Q26b). A third of respondents also said they had

encountered it in a Christian setting (33.4%; cf. table 3, table 6). While this is a number in the minority, it is nonetheless a significant number of people (194, out of 580), and qualitative survey responses suggest that people who *had* experienced this wanted to emphasise it. Further, even for those who didn't encounter this teaching, they could have still encountered it in a non-direct way. The absence of explicit teaching does not inherently imply the absence of implicit suggestion. As noted in the previous chapter, many participants experienced purity culture in this way, through the assumption of abstinence and implicit teachings, or simply 'in the air' (cf. §4.3.3).

In some cases the intense preoccupation led to sexual sin being not just any sin, but the worst of all. One participant describes, for example, "lots of teaching in youth group, focus on pre-marital sex as the main sin issue" (#268, Q20b). Some people referred to the idea of sexual sin as the worst sin when defining purity culture (Q19), suggesting it was integral to their very definition: "a culture emphasising women's sexual purity, often putting sexual sins above other sins" (#324) and "the belief that abstaining from sex before marriage makes us more holy/pure in the eyes of god. The emphasis of sex as being worse than other sins" (#352). This resonates with some personal experiences in Christian settings, such as "youth events" which "often emphasised sexual 'sin' as the ... main one" (#299, Q20b), and "churches" which "pressured the idea of saving yourself for marriage and you are damned if you break that. Almost like it was the ultimate sin" (#140, Q20b). In a similar vein, another respondent discussed the idea of "people who have had multiple sexual partners being unclean or sinful and requiring somehow a greater forgiveness than those who sin in other ways (e.g. lieing [sic] or disrespecting others)" (#38, Q19)

The idea that this particular group of sins can cause one to be 'damned', or require a greater level of forgiveness, is interesting – and, arguably, seemingly incompatible with the evangelical understanding of sin. If, as described earlier on in this chapter, sin is absolved through the crucifixion, how is sexual sin exempt from this? This incompatibility is not lost on the participants of this study; many of those who encountered this idea also tended to push back against it. For example, one participant discussed, in her definition of purity culture, how "for some reason this "sin" [pre-marital sex or sexual desires] is seen as culturally as somehow worse to commit/more important than others" (#71, Q19), expressing apparent confusion over why this is the case ("for some reason", "somehow"). Another participant rebuffed this idea, stating "we are all sinners and I think that sometimes sexual immorality is made out to be the worst sin of all. Jesus will always forgive" (#294, Q32). This incompatibility also led some participants (usually still Christians themselves) to describe purity culture as inherently un-Christian: "Purity culture tends to focus on continuing shame, so I don't think it is Christian.

Jesus teaches that we can be set free from sin ... that all sin is equal ... aiming for purity is a fallacy that places the responsibility on ourselves when Jesus' sacrifice is sufficient" (#430, Q37a). For those participants who did agree that pre-marital sex is a sin, some wanted to emphasise that "like all sin, God forgives" (#561, Q38a), and it is thus not the worst of all sins.

5.2.3 Abstinence as identity marker

Finally, the third strand of this preoccupation with sexual sin is the notion that it calls into question someone's Christian identity and commitment to their faith. In our interview, Katy talked about how abstinence was seen as something which distinguished young Christians from other people. Outside of this bubble was perceived as a threatening environment, in which Katy and her peers must battle against prevailing but immoral ways of life. Katy reflected how her Christian youth upbringing was:

> creating a sense of us and them, you know it was a 'the world will teach you that ... it's normal to have sexual desire and normal to want to sleep with lots of people and... it's all about you' ... and we were just told that all of that was wrong, basically, and so it was constructing a kind of 'in but not of the world' discourse. I have a whole, like, mental list of my favourite stock evangelical phrases ... and that's one of them. This kind of 'in but not of the world' it was a ... you're gonna have to go into these, school and university – university was presented as a real kind of, threat ... in terms of sex – erm, you're gonna have to go and you're gonna have to be brave and you're gonna have to be different, cause anything else would be, like, conforming to the world rather than conforming to, to Christ.

Abstinence was thus seen as a reflection of compliance with higher moral standards, compared to people who were not Christian. It was also, therefore, a marker of Christian identity. Practicing abstinence until marriage separated Katy and her peers from the rest of society:

> we were kind of ... encouraged? To kind of see ourselves as, you know, light on a hill, sexually pure in a way that our immoral generation wasn't. There was no *way* I was gonna be having conversations with, people at school or people at uni ... about this because you know, I was kind of encouraged to see it [sex] as something kind of, private and bad and dark and wrong. Erm, but also kind of, I'd already been taught to see them as, automatically morally corrupted, if you like. And that's a slightly grandiose term for what was going on but ... I'd already had the line drawn in the sand for me – it wasn't me, negotiating that moral territory

Katy's use of the phrase "light on a hill" is most probably a reference to the salt and light imagery used in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which symbolise the expected impact of Jesus' followers on the world – to stand out, provide illumination, and publicly point towards God. The passage reads:

> You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.
>
> Matthew 5:14-16 (NRSVUE)

In employing this imagery – perhaps even subconsciously – Katy delineates how sexual purity becomes a marker of identity which distinguishes the in-group from those outside. The suggestion of her phrases "light on a hill" to an "immoral generation" is that these Christians perceive themselves as providing guidance and light to those outside of Christianity who are, by implication, lost and in need of direction. Katy also expressed this same idea in her survey answers. She described being taught to "hold ourselves to this higher standard, over and against what "the world" would have us think about sex" (#34, Q19). Sexual purity, and a concurrent lack of sexual sin, thus distinguishes a Christian from the immoral world.

Some survey participants also noted this worldview which posits evangelical Christianity as counter-cultural (which I previously noted as a tendency within evangelicalism. §4.1), and sexual purity as a part of this distinction. One respondent used Katy's "stock evangelical phrase" of "in the world but not of it", saying of "sexual purity" that "it can be expressed in terms of being 'in the world but not of the world'" (#322, Q19). Another included "the rejection of current cultural values of sex" in their definition of purity culture (#359, Q19). Another said that certain Bible passages were used "to remind me [of] that the fact I lived so differently to my non Christian [sic] friends would be rewarded one day with a good Christian marriage" (#425, Q34),[52] while one participant recounted "I remember services warning us of the badness of men who weren't Christian and how important it was to wait" (#108, Q20b). Both cases here suggest that these non-Christian friends and/or men operate according to a different moral code. Some participants expressed agreement with this worldview in their current personal beliefs: "despite the harms of purity culture, yielding to a call of holiness in a cultural of rampant sexual individualism is revolutionary and Christ-like" (#227, Q38a); "we are called to live different to our culture, so the apparent freedom of sexual expression for non Christians [sic] is different for us" (#243, Q37a). Avoiding sexual sin thus symbolises a counter-cultural lifestyle – distinct from 'the world' and the culture that comes with it (anything at odds with the evangelical teaching of sex only within heterosexual cisgender monogamous marriage).

This idea that the avoidance of sexual sin (and presence of sexual purity) reflects someone's commitment to Jesus and indicates their Christian identity also appeared in the survey (41 answers across 37 participants). Some of these responses focused on normative

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[52] Cf. 6.1.3 on the idea that abstinence may lead to a 'reward' of good marriage.

statements associated with what it means to be a Christian – the *should* and *oughts* that these people were told, believed, or discerned to be foundational within the evangelical field. For example, one respondent described how "in my experience purity culture wasn't ever directly spoken about or taught it was just something that was there in the background as a general understanding of how young people should act as Christians" (#110, Q43). Another similarly outlines how "there was a clear expectation that committed Christians would save themselves for marriage" (#55, Q20b).

The responses in this code suggest that the absence of sexual sin was a key part of living a Christian life: "the idea that abstaining from sex and sexual behaviour is part of living a faithful Christian life" (#484 Q19), "no sex before marriage; a focus on sexuality as a key aspect of one's faith and the way one lives out one's faith" (Q19, 451), "a general belief that sex outside marriage is not for Christians" (#83, Q19). The same respondent that used the 'evangelical stock phrase' of being 'in the world' also noted the idea that sexual purity "can function as a measure of your spirituality as a person of faith" (#322, Q19). Anything outside of the set parameters is, then, distinctly 'unchristian' as in the words of one participant: "I have previously belonged to churches and a youth group (back in the day!) where purity culture was at very least advocated for, and at times where a non-adherence to purity culture was spoken of as unchristian behaviour that would lead a person to hell" (#77, Q20b). Note also here that not only is it 'unchristian' but leads to significant spiritual consequences (cf. §5.3.2).

Meanwhile, some responses in this code used the word 'identity' – "growing up this was a huge part of evangelical identify [sic]" (#251, Q20b); "for me and a lot of people I know, sexual purity and Christian identity are linked and it's hard to separate them" (#348, Q37a). Others used language with connotations of true or real Christianity. For example, when asked if they think abstinence until marriage is an essential part of Christian belief and practice (Q38), one person said "I used to think it was – that it was the mark of a "true believer". But I now strongly disagree" (#208). Similarly, another person described purity culture as "the expectation that 'true' Christians 'reserve' sexual performance ... exclusively for ... heterosexual marriage" (#83, Q19). Interestingly, they both put the word 'true' in either quotation marks or inverted commas, perhaps signalling some disagreement with what they describe.

Most participants did not wear purity rings or sign pledges – 37 participants (6.4%) wore a ring, and 29 (5%) signed a pledge – but some of those who did suggest that they represented more than just commitment to sexual purity, and also symbolised their Christian faith. When asked what informed their decision to wear a purity ring (Q21a), one person said "It was about more than purity in a sexual sense, although that was part of it, but more represented my commitment to Christ" (#428). Another person said they felt "like it was expected, an

important part of being a Christian and something that was fundamental" (#239). Similarly, when asked what informed their decision to sign a pledge (Q22a), participants said things like "Everyone did it. I assumed it was the right way to be a Christian" (#101), "Acceptance that this was the norm and how things "should" be" (#491), and "I felt like my holiness depended on it & it was a way to show God I was really his & really serious about my relationship with him" (#140). For these people, it came from an expectation that committing to sexual purity was required of them to symbolise their Christianity.

Overall, compliance with holistic abstinence symbolises commitment to Jesus and to living out a 'true' Christian life. This was so integral that one person describes how "virginity/abstinence until marriage has become such a dominant focus in evangelical circles that's [sic] it's almost become synonymous with 'being a Christian'" (#510, Q38a). The vehement focus on sexual sin in evangelical Christianity can be seen in multiple ways – in what some participants described as an 'obsession' (§5.2.1), in the notion that sexual sin is the worst thing (§5.2.2) and the understanding that sexual purity is a constituent part of Christian identity and distinctiveness from others (§5.2.3). Often, these are linked together – for example, one participant talks how the obsessiveness led to her feeling that her own Christian faith was lacking: "Abstaining from Sex before marriage was talked about all the time with young people. Almost every meeting organised with girls in the church was about how to not have sex … Looking back I'm angry at how obsessed the church was with sex and made to feel at young age that I wasn't a good enough Christian" (#284, Q20b). All off this can become internalised in a person's habitus – like in Katy's case, sexual sin can become not just external messaging within the field (even if implicit), but an internal commitment and fixation.

5.3 The risks of sexual sin: relational impacts

We have seen the heavy weight placed onto sexual sin within the evangelical field, and in the lives of many participants during their adolescence and young adulthood. But what are the potential consequences of these sins? Why is this focus so intense, and the scope of prevention strategies so broad, encompassing not just absence of sexual activity but holistic abstinence? Within the evangelical field, sexual sin is perceived as damaging in four possible ways – to the self, and to one's relationships with God, their community, and their future spouse. It is these risks that give sexual sin such potency, as it risks harming one's own self and three relationships central to evangelical life. This tension – living with simultaneously valorised and jeopardised relationships, values which are then internalised into the body – is the habitus of purity culture, as articulated in chapter 4 (§4.3.3). In this section, I outline three of these four potential impacts (self, God and community), continuing to draw on Katy's interview alongside other survey responses.

5.3.1 "A stain on your character that cannot be erased": sexual sin and the self

The first risk of sexual sin is its potential damage to the self. As argued in the previous chapter, evangelicalism is integral to one's own self and is a strongly held identity (§4.3). But this selfhood is not necessarily stable – it can be stained, tarnished, damaged and even ruined. All of these words are used by participants to describe the risk that sexual sin poses to the self. In the words of one respondent: "virginity is something you have and then you 'lose' it. Losing it before marriage is the ultimate sin and is a stain on your character that cannot be erased" (#18, Q19).

The quotation at the start of the chapter, which comes from my interview with Katy, communicates this idea. Katy shared various stories from her youth, recalling activities that she and her peers did in gendered groups which taught holistic abstinence. This included, for example, the "what's okay and not okay" exercise (§5.1.2). She also described another session from when she was around 14 which stood out in her memory:

> We were split up into boys and girls ... and we each had to write out a series of kind of recommendations for the opposite sex that would help us to stay pure, erm, and I remember ... 'don't wear slogans across her chest because it encourages boys to look at your boobs', erm and that was the boys saying, 'we find this unhelpful, so you should stop doing it'.

This is now something that Katy looks back on with dismay, but at the time, it was par for the course. Katy reflected that "now with what ten? Twelve? Years of experience, and thinking about rape culture and victim blaming ... I cannot believe that was not only raised, but not questioned". It was not unusual and thus not interrogated. The quotation that begins this chapter comes from later in our interview, when Katy returned to this t-shirt idea and reflected on its potency:

> I was never at risk of wanting to murder somebody, hopefully I never will be! But there I was being told, as a 14 or 15 year old, that I was at risk of ruining myself and somebody else, potentially, just by following my, you know urges, which are of course natural, and that I could do all of this just by wearing a t-shirt that had lettering on it. Like it's completely crazy looking back on it, completely crazy. But this was a, you know it was a real hang up.

Katy's language here is poignant. She uses the word "ruin" to describe the potential consequences of wearing such a t-shirt. The implicit idea here is that temptation would lead to sexual sin through prompting sexual thoughts/desires in another person, or perhaps through a 'slippery slope' of behaviour leading to sexual activity. The worst possible outcome of this seemingly trivial action is that Katy could ruin herself – and somebody else too (c. §5.3.3). A

method of holistic abstinence – modest dress – is the means by which this sin, this ruin, could be avoided.

Katy also reflected on an analogy for sex before marriage she encountered which symbolises this risk, and she used the language of 'ruin' here too. At one of Katy's weeknight youth groups, the leader compared "having sex to a sticking plaster", "saying that every time you have sex, it sticks slightly less, and bonds you to the other person slightly less well". Katy expressed disagreement with this idea now, but noted how at the time these youth leaders "stood and they said, you know, every time it becomes less effective and so every time you do it before you get married is a kind of, you're ruining yourself, the future, in a biological way, not just in a kind of spiritual way". The idea that this is not spiritual but biological in its damage demonstrates just how potent and significant this risk was perceived to be. Exposure to such an idea – that sexual sin 'ruins' the self – is also not specific to Katy. It appears in Linda Kay Klein's book as a key concept in the overarching message of American purity culture: "the purity message is not about sex. Rather, it is about *us*: who we are, who we are expected to be, and who it is said we will become if we fail to meet those expectations" (2018: 14). "After all", Klein continues "what other sin is said to fundamentally change you forever?" (2018: 11) – while other sins are forgiven, "sex outside of marriage is the only "sin" that I have ever heard described as changing *you*" (2018: 12, emphasis original).

Metaphors for the loss of virginity or sex before marriage are also not isolated within Katy's experience. The PCBS asked participants if they had encountered virginity metaphors/symbols "such as a flower, bone china teacup, gum, used bike or vehicle" (Q26.24). 48.6% of respondents (282 people) answered 'Yes' which, even if just shy of a majority, is nonetheless significant. Some participants also described these metaphors in their qualitative responses (15 answers across 14 respondents). While this is a small proportion of respondents, it is notable as they included these metaphors of their own volition prior to coming across the PCBS (which was later on in the survey). The fact that they were all given without prompting, and prior to the survey question on it, suggests it was a memorable part of their experiences.

Examples given included a tarnished apple (#285, Q20b), a chocolate box which signified that "each time we engage in sexual activity with someone we give away a chocolate" (#220, Q20b), "soiling a piece of paper" (#223, Q20b), Sellotape which gradually loses its stickiness (#340, Q20b; #456, Q20b), toothpaste which had been squeezed out of its tube (#317, Q20b; #450, Q20b), a broken cup (#450, Q20b), and chewed up gum or a stamped on flower (#434, Q20b). These were sometimes accompanied by an illustration: "youth group event where the pastor got us all to pluck flowers from a rose (symbolic of our virginity)" (#434, Q23a). In Katie Cross' 2020 article on purity culture, she also highlighted mention of such

metaphors by her participants – one (Sarah) recalled "the chewing gum one", and another (Natalie) recollected "a paper heart being passed round" with individuals "invited to tear a piece of the heart off", and further still participant Rosa described a flower being passed round and crushed (Cross, 2020: 24). Linda Kay Klein likewise identified metaphors for the loss of sexual purity, such as a used car which was "stained, rusty, and more and more broken down", a "clear glass of water versus the one to which food coloring has been added", a half-eaten "cookie or candy bar" or (akin to Katy's 'sticking plaster' metaphor) a "piece of tape" which "picks up more and more dirt ... until it is too dirty to stick to anything" (Klein, 2018: 9).

The way these participants talk about these metaphors shows what these illustrations signified: that any sexual activity prior to marriage causes some part of one's self to be lost, and that as a result the person is damaged or broken. As Katie Cross articulates, these metaphors "infer that women's bodies are 'broken' or 'tainted' and made lesser by pre-marital sex" (Cross, 2020: 24). Significantly, such breakage or taint is seemingly irreversible. Like petals torn from a flower, or rips to a piece of paper, there are tears to the self. One participant describes how these "visual aids" were used to make "clear to us that having sex before marriage was some kind of higher order sin" (cf. §5.2.2), "which would break and despoil us permanently in a way that could never be undone or reversed" (#450, Q20b). It is *because* it is such a terrible sin that its damage runs so deep. This impact is not only long-lasting but incredibly wide-ranging. As one person puts it:

> if you had sex before you were married a part of you was damaged and could never go back to the way it was before. ... Part of you would change for the worse physically, emotionally and spiritually. It was like you would be ruined and spoiled if you had sex before you got married ... It was implied to me that if I slept with someone outside of marriage I was giving a piece of myself to them that I could never get back, it wouldn't just be physical but spiritual, a literal piece of my soul (which I know now is nothing to do with Christianity but to do with soul ties)[53]

#557, Q20b

This is not Katy's survey response, but the language is remarkably similar to her interview. Both of them note that the impact is not simply spiritual, and use words like physical (here) or biological (Katy). These responses are in keeping with the broad trends seen in related questions in the PCBS: 71.9% of respondents (417 people) had encountered the teaching "you lose a piece of yourself every time you have sex with someone new" in a Christian context, and 62.9% (365 people) had encountered the teaching that "sex outside of marriage will make you damaged goods" (Q26.17).

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[53] Cf. §6.2.2 for discussion of soul ties.

Another interviewee, Lucy also expressed a sense that once she was no longer a virgin, she had lost some part of herself. In her interview we talked about how she and her now husband maintained a long-distance relationship during university, and that through their monthly visits they "settled into a pattern of not having sex but ... gradually sort of got closer and closer to it". She described how, once they did, this prompted an intense emotional upset: "the first time that ever happened ... I cried hysterically and that was my first experience of penetrative sex". This distress was rooted in an altered sense of identity, and she continued: "and like screamed into my pillow crying and was, my sense of identity changed, because ... I couldn't define myself as a virgin anymore and that was important to my understanding of who I was and who I was before God" (cf. §5.3.2). Lucy had worn – and continued to wear – her SRT purity ring, publicly hiding this part of her relationship and thus maintaining the persona of who she felt she *should* be.

More broadly, a number of survey participants also discussed how sex before marriage can make someone damaged, dirty or tainted (38 question answers across 34 participants). These did not tend to include virginity metaphors or imagery, but nonetheless expressed a similar sentiment to them – that "any sexual thought or act outside this paradigm [heterosexual marriage] can irreparably damage your soul" (#246, Q19). As one participant recalled: "I just remember being told over and over as a young girl in Sunday school, Bible Study groups etc. that I needed to avoid sex at all costs, and that I'd be sullied if I did anything sexual before marriage" (#98, Q32). This language of being sullied or dirtied was reflected across this code. Others said similar things like "Emphasis importance of not engaging with sexual activity before or outside heterosexual marriage, viewing someone as tainted or imperfect if they do so" (#107, Q19). The potency of this teaching is so strong that its effects continued even when the appropriate conditions were met – one participant described being "Brought up with these views predicated. Felt dirty when I did have sex as a married person." (#112, Q20b). Such long-lasting effects indicate that the understanding of sex as 'dirty' may have become embedded in her habitus. It suggests that, based on repeated exposure to the evangelical field and to the concept of sex as something which dirties or taints, it became second nature to view sex in this way. This idea now incorporated into her body through habitus, this participant seemingly struggled to undo this thought-pattern even when she had entered into the 'right' conditions for sex. It was, in the words of Bourdieu, a long-lasting disposition.

What is it about sexual sin specifically, compared to other sins, that causes it to taint someone so enduringly? If sins can be forgiven, why does this one do so much personal damage? Survey questions 32 to 34 – which ask participants about use of the Bible within purity culture – can shed some light on this. Some participants made reference to a passage in 1 Corinthians, in

which Paul describes sexual sin as a sin against the body. In total, Paul was by far the most cited biblical authority across the survey (162 references in total). When this code is split further, the biggest sub-codes within 'Paul' were 1 Corinthians (62 references, including 33 to 1 Corinthians 6) and Ephesians (26 references, including 22 to Ephesians 5). Within the 1 Corinthians 6 sub-code, there were 22 references to a specific passage which focuses on sexual immorality. It reads:

> Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

1 Corinthians 6:18-20, NIV[54]

Some participants who cited this passage made reference to short snippets (such as 'flee sexual immorality' or 'sexual sin is against yourself'), while others simply put the verse reference (such as '1 Corinthians 6: 18-20') or more broadly the whole chapter ('1 Corinthians 6'). However it was cited, this biblical chapter – and these specific verses – received much attention from survey participants. In these verses, Paul argues that sexual sin is distinct in that involves sinning against one's own body, distinguishing it from "all other sin" which take place "outside the body". This gives legitimacy to the idea that sexual sin does something impactful to the self. It does not necessarily explain the mechanics of *how*, but it gives biblical basis to the idea that sexual sin impacts the person in a way that other sins do not.

5.3.2 "Sex before marriage would damage my relationship with God: sexual sin and God

The second potential consequence of sexual sin is damage to one's relationship with God. As outlined at the start of this chapter, sin constitutes wrong action and results in estrangement between humans and God – a barrier reconciled by Jesus' salvific act at the crucifixion (§5.1.1). As one survey participant described, "anything sinful weakens your relationship with God" (#347, Q38a). Sexual sin fits into this broader category. However, in the same way sexual sin is unlike other sins in the way it impacts the self, it is also unlike other sins in the way it impacts a person's relationship with God. The impact of sexual sin is much more powerful. While this was not a particularly present theme in my interview with Katy, it did appear in the qualitative survey data.[55]

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[54] In this thesis I normally use the NRSV-UE for biblical references. I have chosen to use the NIV (New International Version) here as the wording of these verses in this translation best reflects the phraseology common in evangelicalism ('sexual immorality').

[55] Katy did not discuss God or Jesus much in our interview, focusing more on life as a teenager within her evangelical church(es). She did, however, mention a realisation regarding God in her twenties: "the penny

The PCBS presented participants with the statement 'Pre-marital sex impacts your relationship with God' (Q26.30). When asked if they had encountered this teaching in a Christian setting, the majority (83.6% of participants, 485 people) answered 'Yes' (Q26.30a). It is the open-ended survey questions, however, that expound the negative and damaging nature of this impact. "I was usually just told sex before marriage would damage my relationship with God", one participant stated (#216, Q32). Often participants discussed the potential impact to their relationship with God alongside impacts to other relationships (such as their community or future spouse) and the self. One of them said, for example, that in purity culture it is "inferred or explicitly stated that compromising your purity in this way [i.e. outside of heterosexual marriage] creates barriers between yourself and God, as well as future 'Godly' romantic partners" (#322, Q19). Others used slightly different wording with undertones of personal value to communicate a similar idea about a person's changed status within these relationships. For instance: "the idea that a person's purity and/or acceptability to God and their faith community is intrinsically linked to their sexual behaviour or experiences" (#499, Q19) and "the belief that a person's worth in society and to God can be affected by their sexual activity or sexual history" (#503, Q19). These ruptures to relationships are, therefore, sometimes all grouped together as the collective consequences of sexual sin. A damaged connection with God is an integral part of these relational consequences.

While some participants emphasised the impaired connection to God, others also said the converse; while sexual sin could damage a person's relationship with God, abstinence could, correspondingly, facilitate and enrich it. One participant decided to wear a purity ring for this very reason, saying that "I wanted to feel purer & thought that wearing a ring would bring me closer to God" (#238, Q21a). Others used language of closeness with God to describe the effects of abstinence: "As a teenager, the youth group I attended suggested purity as the only way to be close to god" (#419, Q20b); "teaching abstinence before marriage, and heterosexual marriage as the only option. This leads to an association of spiritual maturity/closeness to God with how tightly one can control one's sexuality" (#348, Q19). Again this sometimes referenced multiple relationships that could be affected, with one person describing "the decision to abstain from sex before marriage so as to remain pure before God and for their future husband/wife in order to create a better connection with both God and their husband/wife" (#210, Q19).

The magnitude of the damaged relationship with God is conveyed through survey responses that use language which has pointedly negative and even frightening connotations –

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actually dropped, and I went 'Oh my God this is fine', like there is not some angry God in the sky that is watching all of your life and just kind of drawing red rings around your naughty sexy thoughts" and she therefore started to "feel morally okay".

such as 'hell', 'hate', 'damnation' or 'punishment'. Some described this relationship breakdown as leading to God's hate. This seemed to involve not just divine disapproval of a sinful action but the idea that God now hates someone personally. When asked whether they thought that abstinence until marriage is an essential part of Christian belief and practice (Q38), one participant explained: "Don't think God cares. But at the time I was absolutely terrified God hated me for the sexual feelings I had before marriage" (#480, Q38a). Another expressed exposure to this idea that God hated them in their discussion of Bible passages: "I could never understand why Jesus could be so accepting of the sex workers and yet Christians around me were telling me god would hate me for sexually sinning" (#71, Q32). Another participant described how they used to be told "that God hated lust and those who think sexual thoughts and masturbated, as well as those who acted with others" (#49, Q34) – again demonstrating teaching that God hated not only the behaviour or act ("lust") but the person doing it ("those who").

For some, this broken relationship with God was also seen as extending into active punishment. One participant told a particularly harrowing story when describing her experiences of purity culture:

> Growing up I was told that sex was a sin, that if I had sexual feelings I wasn't in line with god and I was a sinner ... When I was in university I was on the Christian Union committee. I had sex for the first time during this time. The sex was horrific, I ended up in hospital because I lost about 3 pints of blood due to a vaginal tare [sic] caused by sex. The sex wasn't suspicious, it was consensual ... However I think that my body reacted because I felt that I was sinning. Because I ended up in hospital a few of my Christian friends found out. I was told that I bled because god was punishing me ... This was so traumatic for me. I had just nearly died but my Christian friends were more bothered about my salvation than my health.

#44, Q20b

This story demonstrates the framework through which these events were perceived – a significant health scare which involved losing an alarming amount of blood and being hospitalised was considered to be punishment from God for having sex. Another participant also described fear of God's punishment, saying she was "extremely worried ... that I'd be punished by God for dating non-Christians" (#98, Q32). This fear relates not so much to specific sexual activity but rather who she dated, reflecting holistic abstinence. She did, however, also express anxiety over sexual behaviour too: "I worried over and over that I'd go to hell because I'd kissed and engaged in some sexual behaviour with my boyfriend" (ibid.). This form of punishment is particularly severe. It suggests not only eternal separation from God, but also God-ordained suffering in perpetuity.

Other responses also discussed hell and damnation as potential consequences of sexual sin. They included, for instance, a participant noted above who "previously belonged to churches and a youth group" where "non-adherence to purity culture" would "lead a person to hell" (#77, Q20b). One response resembled the story above (of blood loss being God's punishment), as it also involved being presented with unwelcome moral teaching from a Christian Union surrounding a hospital visit:

> I didn't have relationships until I came out as a lesbian at which point my pastor harassed me with things like 'if god came back today you would be going to hell' ... when I challenged that it didn't make sense he would say it's because I'm not right with God. I ended up spiralling into depression and self harming ... I looked to the Christian union for support who instead, one day while I was waiting to get to hospital for self harm [sic], decided they would show me an hour talk on why homosexuality is wrong.

<div align="right">#312, Q20b</div>

This person's experience also demonstrates how non-compliance with holistic abstinence can be perceived as causing a rupture to one's relationship with God and even leading to hell. Another participant emphasised damnation in her definition of purity culture as "the teaching in conservative evangelical churches that sex only belongs in heterosexual marriage and that any sexual activity outside of that is (or pretty much is or is implied to be) damnable" (#293, Q19). She then recounted her experiences within the evangelical field, including "a sermon on John 15, the vine" (#293, Q20b); the "interpretation" of this passage "terrified me that of [sic] I did not toe the line on 'right' Christian behaviour I was going to end up in hell fire. It was quite clear the preacher considered anyone not in that building in that town that morning was outside of God's love and was damned" (ibid.). The overall result of this negative and looming language – hell, hate, damnation, punishment – is to broaden the scope of potential spiritual destruction. They signify that the relationship with God is not just ruptured, but has shifted from one of love to one of hate. The eternal nature of hell and damnation denote the permanency of this broken relationship.

5.3.3 "I was not welcome to play any serving role in church": sexual sin and the community

The third risk of sexual sin is the potential damage it can do to a person's relationship with their community. This is much broader than an individual relationship (e.g. with God or a future spouse). Rather, what is put in jeopardy is a person's position, role, and acceptance within a collective – their church congregation. This can lead to social exclusion – notably through loss of friendship, a community role, or even excommunication.

A number of survey participants wrote about the negative impact of sexual sin on their social life within their Christian community (46 answers over 44 survey respondents). One

aspect of this impact was the loss of friendships within one's Christian community. Some participants talked about the loss of individual friends due to sexual sin: "I fell out with one of my friends because I started living with my fiancé and was thus impure" (#15, Q20b); "I lost my best friend from having sex with my boyfriend before marriage" (#513, Q20b). The latter respondent said this was "largely due to my shame rather than her direct actions" (ibid), suggesting that internalised social expectations (perhaps through habitus) came between them. The negative social impact could extend more broadly to someone's peer group within the community. For example, one participant described how "Christian girls wouldn't even talk to me or look me in the eye as they all thought I had slept with someone" (#479, Q43). Another explained that after being sexually active in a relationship, "members of the opposite sex were advised not to be friends with me and we were told that we should only socialise in large groups" (#242, Q20b). The jeopardisation of one's community, at its most extreme, can also be seen in the case of one participant who experienced excommunication: "I was asked to stop being a communicant at my former Church because I was openly not conforming to purity culture, which was thought to be 'corrupting' other members of the congregation" (#82, Q20b). This also points to the notion of community contamination as a result of sexual sin, with exclusion being used as a preventative measure against ostensible social pollution.

Similarly, in our interview Katy also talked about the impact to her friendship group. The teenagers that attended Katy's church youth provision were her "main friendship group outside school" . She is still in touch with them today – she is now married to one them – and she described how she both "loved and love them". Most of them are still "really close" and have "stood the test of time". The group has, however, been deeply impacted by their upbringing: "I still don't think we could have ... a kind of open conversation about our sex lives. I think that would be so awkward and uncomfortable and already kind of fraught with so much moral kind of tension, and anger, a potential for upset". It is not only a source of tension; Katy said in her survey that "we hurt each other as a friendship group at times because we still exceptionalize one-night stands, sex outside marriage, masturbation" (#19, Q20b)

Interviewee Lucy also expressed an understanding of the potential impact of what her church congregation would view as sexual sin. Prior to getting married (and also prior to getting engaged), her and her husband slept together for around 3-4 years. Though it was, as Lucy described, a "part of our relationship", it was also kept under wraps, and they chose not to live together to keep it that way:

> When we got married the preacher ... he was one of the lay readers at church ... he said that as part of the sermon he wanted to ... to use our abstinence as an example ... of the importance of faith in our lives, and I said 'I don't want you to talk about that'. Because

he wanted to say the fact that we still lived separately, implying that we weren't having sex erm, and in fact we *did* live separately because I didn't want people to know that we were having sex.

Lucy and her partner intentionally lived separately, to affirm to their community that they were practising sexual abstinence. This demonstrates an implicit awareness that not doing so must be wrong in the eyes of the church congregation, and also a compliance with holistic abstinence as it shapes living arrangements, taken as indicative of sexual purity.

Another aspect of this damaged relationship to the community was through the loss of a social role – like volunteering, a leadership position, or playing music. One survey respondent described how: "When I was 21, I moved in with [my] boyfriend and was then asked if we were having sex by two men I didn't know, I was then told I couldn't be in any teams (helping with youth and singing on church band) at church" (#284, Q20b). She "subsequently left the church and haven't been back since" (ibid.) (cf. chapter 9). Similarly, someone else lost their social role and access to the community due to moving in with a partner: "I was not welcome to play any serving role in church eg [sic] welcome committee", she shared (#301, Q20b), a quotation I used in the title for this section to demonstrate the social impact of sexual sin. This participant was also restricted from attending homegroup: "I was told by my female homegroup leader that homegroup was a place for people who wanted to move forward with their relationship with Jesus (ie [sic] not me because I was living with a partner outside marriage having sex)" (#301, Q20b). Again, she "didn't attend for much longer" (ibid). In a different case, living with a partner led to a formal complaint: "A letter of complaint was submitted about myself and another volunteer as we were each living unmarried with our respective partners" (#426, Q20b).

Leadership roles seem to have been particularly impacted: "as young adults one of my friends was stopped from being a youth leader because he moved in with his long-term girlfriend" (#133, Q20b). Another participant described being active in instigating removal of leadership roles themselves, saying "I noticed and was complicit [in a] sense of shame/disregard of church members who were sexually active and unmarried, including instances of leaders being asked to stop leading when they began a relationship with a non-Christian" (#76, Q20b). The loss of such social roles is heavy – as outlined in chapter 4, the evangelical field is one well-equipped with vehicles for connection, and in which community takes centre stage (§4.2; §4.3.3). As such, a habitus developed in this field is oriented to community. Taking away opportunities to be engaging with such a community would be a powerful blow, particularly when it is not just an *opportunity* but an established *role* someone already occupies.

Participants' descriptions of loss of their community roles also demonstrate that it is not just sexual sin that introduces risk; non-compliance with holistic abstinence more broadly also runs the risk of social exclusion. This includes, for example, what someone is wearing or who someone is dating – even if they are not actively committing sexual sin, because holistic abstinence symbolises the absence of sexual sin and showcases a commitment to maintaining it. One participant was "forbidden to lead worship in certain outfits" (#127, Q20b), for instance, and another's sister was "prevented from going on stage until further notice when she was 12 because the church leaders decided her clothes were too provocative" (#10, Q20b). Others who dated outside of their own community were also penalised: "I was asked to step down from helping at a youth holiday camp because I was dating a non-evangelical and it was a 'slippery slope'" (#293, Q20b); "My sister was barred from being part of the worship as her partner (who she went on to marry) was not part of the congregation of her church, so the church leaders did not trust that she was not 'living in sin'" (#501, Q20b). The implication is that church members have a responsibility not only to avoid sexual sin, but to demonstrate and perform this avoidance in their lifestyle more broadly. Social roles may thus be dependent on compliance with holistic abstinence.

For some, this was complicated further as their church congregation was not just their main community but also their source of employment. Sexual sin introduces risk to someone's relationship with their community and, consequently, to the stability of their work, as in the case of this participant:

> I joined a ... CofE church as a children's and families worker. I began dating someone whilst I was employed there. I was subject to lots of probing and uncomfortable questions about the nature of our relationship and whether it was sexual or not. I told the vicar on a number of occasions that I was uncomfortable with these questions, but he persisted. He found out that me and the person I was dating were having sex and he cornered me into 'repenting' of doing this. I felt forced otherwise I felt my employment would have been at risk.

> #186, Q20b

For this person, the social risks introduced by pre-marital sex extended to their employment, because this church community was also their place of work. Others too seemed familiar with this possibility that sexual sin could make such employment precarious: "There is the unspoken understanding that ... in a position of working for a church or serving in particular areas of the church, one should adhere to a 'higher standard' of sexual purity" (#551, Q20b). Even if not ordained or formally given authority to lead a congregation as a vicar or pastor, these standards still apply, meaning that (for example) paid youth worker, student worker, or worship pastor positions are accompanied by the assumption of the absence of sexual sin.

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5.4 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has focused on one of the five themes identified for this study: sin. Beginning with a discussion of sexual sin in the evangelical worldview (§5.1), the first part of this outlined sin in evangelical theology (§5.1.1), and defined sexual sin as anything outside of God's intention for sex within heterosexual marriage (§5.2.2). Section two then illustrated the centrality of sexual sin within British evangelicalism, and how avoidance of it involves employing mechanisms of holistic abstinence (e.g. not wearing a t-shirt with lettering) (§5.2). It drew on Katy's description of sexual sin as a 'fixation' (§5.2.1), and utilised survey responses to discuss sexual sin as the worst sin (§5.2.2) and a perception of sexual abstinence as an identity marker signalling Christian faith (§5.2.3). This keen focus on the avoidance of sexual sin assists with both identifying purity culture in Britain (it resonates with a comparable fixation in US purity culture on avoiding all sexual behaviours, thoughts and feelings, and preventing the elicitation of them in others, cf. §4.1.3), and outlining what it is like to live within an evangelical field committed to said avoidance (an intense environment which can lead to internalising a dedication to holistic abstinence through habitus). In the third and final part of the chapter, I argued that the harm of sexual sin lies in its human impact (§5.3), with the capacity to damage the self (§5.3.1), relationship with God (§5.3.2), and status in a Christian community (§5.3.3). There is a fourth and final area of impact (to a future marriage), but this is not outlined here as it is the focus of the following chapter. Overall, sexual sin poses risks to one's very self and to relationships that are integral to evangelical life and identity (God, community, spouse). Consequently, it can be a source of constant anxiety and even a 'fixation', living in fear of these risks and constantly striving to prevent their realisation. It is, therefore, also a central concept for the habitus of purity culture – a habitus in which relationships are centrally important (due to their role within evangelical identity), but constantly put at risk through the potential damage of sexual sin.

Chapter 6. Marriage

"people would go along essentially to try and meet a partner. And that's fine, but it felt like if you weren't the partner they wanted to meet, they weren't interested in you"

– Dani

As well as the concept of sin, marriage was also mentioned frequently in the data, particularly in open-ended survey questions. Marriage is therefore one of the five key themes identified as part of this study, alongside sin, body, sexual violence, and shifting faith. The two concepts of marriage and sin are also linked: marriage is important for the idea of sexual sin because it denotes the appropriate confines of sexual expression. The absence of (heterosexual) marriage is thus what makes something sinful. Marriage underlies the stress placed on sexual abstinence and shapes why this is important; you cannot have 'abstinence until marriage' without it. Like sin, then, marriage is also incredibly important for understanding evangelical purity culture. The presence of both of these themes within the data for this study affirms that evangelical purity culture has been present in Britain, and further elucidates what this has looked like for those raised within it. This chapter therefore contributes to and closes my response to research question 1 (how has purity culture been present in Britain), and concludes part one of this thesis (conceptualising purity culture in Britain). It contributes to the key intervention of this study – the habitus of purity culture – by demonstrating that marriage is one of the relationships at risk but which is, at the same time, central to life in the evangelical field and ingrained in the resulting habitus.

Marriage was also emphasised in interviews, and for this thematic chapter I reference my interview with Dani throughout, to personalise and ground discussion of the centrality of marriage. Dani is a white, English, heterosexual cis women, who was aged 30-33 at the time of data generation. She grew up attending church and has continued this into adulthood, though this journey has been somewhat fraught; it has been shaped by the expectation of evangelical partnership as a universal and certain experience, and her disagreement with heteronormativity.

The first part of the chapter demonstrates the significance of marriage within British evangelicalism (§6.1). First, I discuss the social role of marriage (§6.1.1), noting the intense pursuit of partnership in the evangelical field, and arguing that marriage acts as social capital in this field. I then discuss the spiritual role of marriage (§6.1.2), and demonstrate that marriage is imbued with further significance by being identified as God's plan. I argue that it is the combination of the two (social and spiritual) that can give rise to the centrality of marriage.

Having outlined the significance of marriage, I then discuss how holistic abstinence is framed as a means to securing happiness within marriage (§6.1.3).

The second part of the chapter outlines how sexual sin introduces risk and jeopardises a future marriage – the very relationship I have just argued is centrally important within evangelical life (§6.2). This follows on from discussion in the previous chapter on the relational impacts of sin (to self, God, community) – marriage is the fourth and final locus of the relational impact of sexual sin. This is notably different to the former three in that, in this case, the potential damage of sexual sin is directed at a future relationship, one which is yet to exist (§6.2.1), and one notable area of potential damage is through the concept of 'soul ties', which introduces a third party into a spousal relationship (§6.2.2). The third and final part of the chapter presents evidence from the data generated for this study on the significance of gender (§6.3). In this section, I note that the theme of gender was prominent across the dataset, usually occurring not abstractly but specifically in relation to gender roles as performed and articulated through a marital relationship (§6.3.1), and also through exposure to assumptions that the maintenance of purity and abstinence falls predominantly to women (§6.3.2).

6.1 The primacy of marriage in evangelicalism

Here, I outline the primacy of marriage in the evangelical field (which is internalised through habitus), which is formulated in two ways. First is the social role of marriage, which I illustrate using Dani's story to demonstrate the focus on heterosexual marriage in the evangelical field, and argue that marriage (specifically endogamous marriage) is a form of social capital within British evangelicalism. Second, I turn to the spiritual role of marriage. Here I discuss how, although marriage is not a sacrament or formal rite in evangelicalism, it is nonetheless framed spiritually – as God's design. This is even more true in the conservative evangelical subfield, where complementarian views are prominent and in which marriage is consequently seen as the fulfilment of divinely ordained gender roles (cf. §6.3). It is the combination of the two – social and spiritual – which results in the primacy of marriage. Finally, I then build on this centrality of marriage to show the critical role of abstinence as a means to securing the promise of marital happiness.

6.1.1 The social role of marriage

I met Dani on Zoom late one weekday evening. Beyond the semi-structured nature of the interviews, which a set of questions to prompt discussion, the direction of the interview was determined by the participant – shaped by their own experiences, perspectives, and reflections on purity culture. For Dani, this was heavily tied up with her own deconstruction process. At the time, I was slightly confused about why we were talking so much about deconstruction. Reading

back over the interview transcript, however, it became clear: purity culture was a part of this deconstruction journey. Dani's ongoing grappling with Christian identity had been shaped by the tension she experienced existing within the evangelical field. I discuss deconstruction further in chapter 9 (§9.2), but Dani's is notable here because, at heart, what Dani and I were talking about was the *root* of this deconstruction: her experience observing, and not conforming to, social norms. One of these norms was the expectation of marriage, tied up as it was with further norms central to purity culture: abstinence, heteronormativity, and gender roles.

Dani, like Katy, was raised within a Christian family and in church communities in England, and her upbringing was immersed in the evangelical field. "I grew up in a Christian family ... always going to church, you know, most weeks er which was ... definitely kind of evangelical-ish C of E, definitely kind of lower [church]". Like lots of other teenagers within British evangelical youth subculture during the early 2000s, Dani attended annual summer camps with others from church. These were usually hosted at private schools, and she went from the ages of 11 to 18.[56] These camps are where Dani was "introduced to" purity culture; "there was definitely an emphasis on ... pre-marital sex ... conservative values around that I suppose, so that was just always a sort of cultural given kind of, peer pressure to not, around that really". After taking a gap year with a Christian charity, Dani attended university, where the teaching of these camps manifested predominantly through the university Christian Union, and occasionally through some of the student provision at her charismatic Anglican church. Dani also did a year abroad during her degree, which she described as "a chance to kind of get out of that environment, of that culture I'd always been in"; as a result, "having that distance from it all put a lot of things in perspective ... and sort of started my deconstruction process". After university, she moved to London, and started attending what she describes as a "kind of HTB" church – the final evangelical church she would attend. In these contexts, Dani encountered the expectation that you should be abstinent until marriage, alongside the assumption that this marriage would be a heterosexual one – and that there would be a marriage at all.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Katy focused predominantly on her teenage years in church youth groups. Dani, however, focused more on life during, and in the years after, university. As she described the culture of the "HTB-like" London church, it struck me how much it was oriented towards heterosexual relationships and married couples:

> [it] was very denominated by 20s and 30s and still a bit of a hang on from [university] CU in many ways and, people would go along essentially to try and meet a partner. And

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[56] Dani also (less frequently) attended Soul Survivor and Momentum, but the focus of her discussion was the summer camps at private schools which she attended yearly.

that's fine, but it felt like if you weren't the partner they wanted to meet they weren't interested in you. I found that really hard.

The church culture which Dani describes here demonstrates how social interaction in the evangelical field can be shaped by the prospect of marriage. This community was dominated by young adults in search of a spouse, and though it is not necessarily surprising that single people in their 20s and 30s are searching for a partner, the intensity of this focus – and how it shapes social life – is notable. These young adults were so committed to this endeavour that whether or not someone was a viable partner for heterosexual marriage dictated whether or not they were worthy of interest at all.

Dani went to this church "for a couple of years", and explained that she "really tried to get involved, *really* tried". Eventually, the chasm between her needs (to feel aligned with and included in her community) and her reality (of dissonance and loneliness) became too great. She left, and found community elsewhere, in a church she described as "liberal" and "inclusive". The way Dani described the differences between her London church and this new community emphasises just how much being an eligible partner shaped her experience in the former:

I feel seen as a person, not as a woman, not as a, eligible ... person. I ... feel seen as me, rather than an object, just by going to this different church and being not in that culture anymore. Erm, and that's really hard to describe how freeing that is to anybody who hasn't been through it.

The language Dani uses to describe how she felt in the evangelical church – "object", "woman", "eligible" – sheds light on this culture of expecting, and pursuing, married life. Her identity was perceived in this social context primarily through the lens of marriage prospects, leading her to feel seen not as a person, but an objectified woman being assessed for her spousal suitability.

Some survey participants also expressed comparable sentiments about the centrality of heterosexual marriage. Like Dani, one woman discussed how her evangelical church community had been dominated by the expectation and pursuit of marriage. After university, this participant attended a non-denominational church for around seven years (#4, Q17), where she was "for some time part of the young adults ministry" (#4, Q20b). She describes this as "very much a 'marriage market' with many people looking for a relationship" (#4, Q20b). This church was akin to Dani's London congregation in that it was a "very large evangelical charismatic church" (#4, Q17) where social life (amongst young adults, at least) was predicated on engaging in a 'market' of eligible partners. For others, marriage was not only anticipated but commended. One respondent mentioned their former Anglican church "praising couples that got married young then had children" (#110, Q20b). Another respondent – who identified themselves, and their current and former churches, as conservative evangelical – described the "idolisation of

marriage and encouragement to marry young" (#268, Q19), and an "obsession with marriage and desire for young people to be married as soon as possible" (#268, Q20b). Like the idea of a 'marriage market', these responses point towards the primacy of marriage in shaping the life course. This something Zara also expressed in her interview. Describing the church she attended whilst at university, Zara explained that there was "a sort of attitude of, if you're here and you're young, you're doing it because you're auditioning for marriage". There seemed to be an implicit assumption that present young adults wanted to identify and review spousal options: "[it was] like if you're here then you're clearly in the running for some kind of a pick-n-mix situation", Zara joked. Similar to the culture at Dani's 'HTB like' church, Zara's university church maintained an aura of being a marketplace for marriage.

The responses of some survey participants demonstrate that the centrality of marriage was not limited to individual churches, but was evident in the evangelical field more broadly, through events and resources. One participant recounted: "I remember going to summer camps and young married couples talking about how their marriage was so important" (#110, Q43). This was also tied up with abstinence teachings, as "it was assumed they had saved themselves for marriage and what a beautiful thing it was" (ibid.). Further, marriage was not just a goal driving social behaviour but also the focus of targeted resources – such as "marriage prep" (#21, Q20b), "pre marriage sessions" (#478, Q20b), and the "marriage course" (#189, Q23a). Though it is unclear what specific resource the former of these refers to, the phrasing of the latter two suggests they took part in The Pre-Marriage Course and The Marriage Course – resources developed in the 1980s and 1990s by a married couple on staff at Holy Trinity Brompton (Alpha International, c2024), originator of the HTB network. These courses are well-known in British evangelicalism, have since been exported worldwide and have reached, according to their own statistics, over 1.5 million couples across 117 countries (ibid). That these are such a widely used resources, originating from an authoritative organisation and source of teaching resources within evangelicalism (HTB), suggests that marriage is important within the evangelical field.

Not only is marriage the norm in the British evangelical field, some survey participants also mentioned that marriage tended to take place at a young age. One participant described how the "social pressure to get married or enter a serious relationship that will eventually lead to marriage starts very young I.e. 18+" (#5, Q20b). As a result, they say, "many people marry quite quickly with their first proper partner so get married around their early twenties" (#5, Q20b). This tallies with some participants who described their age at marriage as in their early twenties, such as 22 (#305, Q35a), or getting engaged at 21 and married at 23 (#299, Q43). For others this may be younger. For example: "Paul's 'if you're going to have sex then just get married' line justified a lot of lustful 19 year olds getting married in my university Church!"

(#281, Q34). Some also related this trend of marrying at a young age to abstinence teaching. They suggested that couples may pursue marriage quickly in order to cut short the period of sexual abstinence: "adding abstinence before marriage does lead to a younger age of couples marrying ... otherwise there's a judgement that you might already be having sex" (#273, Q37a); "too many people ... are pushed into short engagements to 'maintain purity'" (#128, Q37a); "getting married too young because that's what's expected to prevent you from 'burning with lust'" (#295, Q20b). These participant responses point towards a trend within the British evangelical field of marrying young to a first serious partner.

To this growing profile of the ideal evangelical (heterosexual, sexually abstinent until marriage, then married young) we can also add: married to another evangelical. As noted by Dani (above), young adults would attend her large, evangelical, city-based church "to try and meet a partner", suggesting that their search for a partner is focused on those who share the same expression of Christian faith (evangelical). Likewise, some survey participants noted the expectation of endogamous marriage – this did not necessarily need to be within the confines of one congregation, but limited to those who share the same evangelical leanings. One participant, for instance, described being taught that "dating should only be considered if the intention to marry was there from the start. It was expected that this would happen only within a Christian evangelical opposite sex context" (#32, Q19). They were, therefore, "told to only date within our denomination" (#32, Q20b).[57] No participants expressed specific mandates to marry only within their church congregation – but if a potential partner needed to share the same evangelical beliefs, the immediate evangelical social circle seems a good place to start. One participant, for example, described how dating another Christian was frowned upon because he was unknown in their evangelical circle:

> I started dating a boy and my Chritian [sic] Union leader told me 'don't be yoked with an unveliever' [sic]. She assumed he was an unbeliever because he in just one term of university he hadn't attend one of the 2 'kosher' churches in town. He was, in fact, anglo catholic and she had never spoken to him properly

#293, Q20b

His attendance (or lack of) at the 'right' churches was taken as a measure of his evangelical leanings; as a result, he was deemed unsuitable. It is not surprising that romantic relationships would result from these communities, particularly given that the evangelical field is oriented to high community engagement, thus inducing regular attendance and relationship building –

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[57] Q14 of the survey asks about denominations of church(es) attended. This participant selected 'Evangelical' and 'Non-denominational' for 'My previous church(es)'. This suggests that 'dating with our denomination' meant dating within evangelicalism, considering only those who share the same approach to Christian faith (it would be difficult to date within the 'denomination' of a non-denominational church).

romantic relationships in such an environment, amongst those sharing the same worldview, would be a natural consequence. It is notable, however, that in some cases endogamous marriage is not just an organically arising custom but an *expectation*.

This tendency is consistent with Kristin Aune's findings, in her research on a small congregation within the evangelical New Frontiers network during the time period under investigation in this thesis. Aune's 2006 article focuses on marriage in an NFI congregation, and though she argues for renewed attention to the impact of the contemporary socio-cultural context on British evangelicals, she also notes the NFI's "preference for endogamous marriage", meaning "marriage within NFI itself or at least to another evangelical" (2006: 654). Though Aune's study focused on one small congregation, and mine on disparate and largely unconnected individuals, combined, they suggest that evangelical endogamy is a regular practice. At the very least, endogamous marriage is conventional in certain pockets of British evangelical subculture; more likely, it is customary across the field. Eventually, social patterns may beget social practices – the 'done thing' becomes ingrained in to the habitus of those who regularly observe it in the field, who in turn engage in these practices, and reinforce the behavioural pattern themselves.

This is also one way in which this relationship differs to those outlined as at risk in the previous chapter (self, God, community): marriage acts as social capital. As noted in chapter 4, Bourdieu developed his concept of capital into three forms (economic, social, cultural), enabling him to identify a wider array of possible resources that confer power and status within a particular field (§4.2.3). Bourdieu clarifies that social capital is "made up of social obligations" or "connections" (1986: 16), and it explains how people use relationships with others to establish their status within a certain field. In short, it is about connections with other people which can be used advantageously. Assuming it is to another evangelical, marriage is a social relationship which can lead to a raised social position and strengthened social influence.

Once married, people can wield newfound authority on matters of romantic relationships, sex, married life, family life and dating, and even faithful Christian living more broadly. In our interview, Dani discussed the "regular student night" at her university church, run by an organisation called Fusion. One evening was a "sex and relationships" themed session, where they explained "the party line" of "you shouldn't be having sex with anyone you're not married to".[58] I asked Dani a bit more about this. "It was led by a couple in the church", she clarified, and followed it up with a tongue-in-cheek "what else" – revealing the normalcy of such

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[58] Also, like Katy's youth group, Dani's student group was then split by gender and given personalised talks – for the women, "not getting emotionally attached", and for the men, "not objectifying people, not watching porn".

sessions being led by married couples from the congregation. Similarly, a survey participant described both the raised social status of couples and, alongside this, the assumption that they are in a position to influence others: "I can find that as soon as someone is in a relationship or gets married really young, its like it puts them in a position of invisible hierarchy in the church, and they want to give advice to their sisters all about their singleness and waiting etc." (#548, Q34). She also expressed that this advice is not always welcome: "to be honest I get tired of it and do feel patronised, I would rather talk about something else!" (#34, 548).

The guidance of married couples does not just apply to teachings about sex and relationships. Some survey participants indicated that married couples had more expansive influence, as it was common for them to occupy church leadership positions. At one participant's university "charismatic evangelical church", for example, "all the leadership were hetero couples", their "small group leader was married at … 17 to her child hood sweet heart" (#478, Q20b).[59] Another respondent similarly explained that "when you look within the walls of the church building … our churches are lead [sic] by married people who teach [abstinence until marriage] as an ideal" (#276, Q38a). This suggests that marriage is not just expected, but also *privileged* in the evangelical field and modelled by its leadership. Marriage – at least to another evangelical – is a relationship which can grant access to certain social roles and raise social status.

6.1.2 The spiritual role of marriage

To evangelicals, marriage is not only a commitment between two people and a legally recognised status – it also has spiritual significance. It is seen as God-given – part of God's intended framework for human relationships, and also one in which God partakes. Heterosexual marriage is considered to be God's 'design', as outlined in the previous chapter (§5.1.2), and it is God's will that sex happens within the confines of this relationship – there is an assumption of what Sonya Sharma calls a "marital-confined sexuality" (Sharma, 2008: 348). Both sex and marriage are a key part of this framework – the two go hand-in-hand as part of God's design. In other words, 'abstinence until marriage' is meaningless without the 'marriage' part. As one survey respondent described, purity culture is "very marriage focused, 'saving oneself for marriage' but with an assumption that people will get married and that this is the end goal of remaining 'pure'" (#203, Q19). Abstinence takes place *because* it is assumed there will eventually be a marriage, which provides resolution and meaning to the time spent waiting.

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[59] This church also ran a "waiting dating mating" course, indicating the presence of purity culture (#478, Q20b).

This resolution – both sex and marriage together – is bestowed by God, and this is reflected in the use of the word 'gift' by some survey participants. Some used this term to describe sex specifically, but within the context of marriage: "the gift that sex is within marriage" (#267, Q34); "We were taught that sex is a gift from God to be enjoyed between husband and wife" (#328, Q20b); "sex is taught to be a gift from God within marriage in the Bible" (#374, Q36a). One participant described how the evangelical church she attended at university "told single people sex was not a right we were entitled to it was a gift" as part of a session on the Bible book Song of Solomon, which focused on sex and marriage (#478, Q20b). 'Gift' was also used to describe marriage more broadly, without reference to sex: "marriage is held as an [sic] goal and a gift for Christians and Christian relationships" (#273, Q37a).[60] This language affirms the idea that sex is generously bequeathed by God specifically to married heterosexual couples, and suggests that marriage originates from God as a divine intention.

God is also not a distant architect, but considered to have a role in the marriage relationship. Some survey participants, when asked about relevant Bible passages (Q33), gave the example of "a cord with three strands is not easily broken" (#109), a reference to Ecclesiastes 4:12.[61] This verse is not explicitly about marriage – it is located in Ecclesiastes, a book which offers short adages and is categorised as 'wisdom literature' within the Christian Bible. The verse in question reads "And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broke" (NRSVUE), describing how three cords woven into one strand is stronger than a single one alone. As this is an obscure verse not explicitly about spouses, it suggests that it may be known by some in the evangelical field specifically as a metaphor for the marriage relationship, made up of three 'strands' (husband, wife, God). According to this image, marriage is a triad, a relationship in which God partakes. Further, God's active involvement strengthens a marriage. One participant continues, after citing this verse and one from Ephesians 5 about submission, that these Bible passages were used "as a description of how men and women should love one another in a Christ centred way" (#389, Q34). Within this threefold relationship, God is not only involved but at the centre. Further, in some circles of British evangelicalism, marriage has additional spiritual significance in that it is seen to reflect gender roles which God ordained for men and women. This is discussed further below (§6.3).

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[60] It is also noteworthy that this description of sex is framed positively, as implied by the word 'gift', which suggests that it will bring some benefit or enjoyment to those who receive it. Of course, this is only the case within this God-ordained context of heterosexual marriage, as one participant conveys: "'God loves sex, there's even a book about it… it's great and a gift for marriage only otherwise it's basically terrible'" (#434, Q34) (the 'book' presumably being Song of Solomon).

[61] The other respondents who referenced this verse worded it in a similar way: "the cord of three strings" (#94), "a three stranded cord is not easily broken" (#228), "a cord of 3 strands not easily broken" (#389).

6.1.3 Holistic abstinence and the expectation of marital happiness

Overall, the social and spiritual functions of marriage within the evangelical field imbue this relationship with particular significance. It is considered, in the words of one participants, "the ultimate in relationships" (#215, Q34). This, in turn, shapes the habitus to both value and expect marriage. Abstinence then has a role in shaping what this marriage might be like, as in some cases a happy, fulfilling marriage with a good sex life is seen as a *result* of faithful abstinence. The PCBS presented participants with the statement "if you are patient and sexually pure, God will bring you the perfect spouse" (Q26.19). When asked if they had encountered this teaching in a Christian setting, 52.8% (306 people) said yes, and 47.2% (274) said no (cf. figure 10 overleaf). At just over half of participants, 306 is a substantial number to have encountered this. One participant further outlined this idea in an open-ended question: "I think purity culture distorts Christian teaching on sexuality and gender ... giving it an almost prosperity-gospel leaning. As though, if by remaining 'pure' you will be given the perfect husband/relationship in return" (#356, Q36a). The phrasing at the end ("in return") implies this is transactional, and (like the statement in the survey) the word "perfect" suggests that the spouse will be an idealised one.

This participant's use of the term prosperity gospel is also noteworthy. The prosperity gospel "contends that those who demonstrate strong expressions of faith will receive divine blessings and favour" (McDaniel, 2016: 288). Generally associated with Pentecostalism and charismatic forms of Protestant Christianity (cf. Bowler and Reagan, 2014: 189; cf. Sharpe, 2013: 164), it has flourished in the United States and global South (Sharpe, 2013: 164), but failed to make headway in British Christianity (Hunt, 2002: 89; cf. Ould, 2023). It is perhaps unsurprising that the prosperity gospel has made little impact in this context, given that British evangelicalism takes its roots from the Protestant reformation and consequently (especially the conservative evangelical subfield) tends to be marked by commitment to the Calvinistic doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone (*not* through works or deeds) (cf. §4.2.2; §5.1.1). A theological stance that purports prosperity (whether spiritual, material, or both) to be a direct result of human action would thus be somewhat unpalatable to many British evangelicals. This participant is drawing out (and problematising) evidence of some prosperity gospel "leanings" or tendencies they observe in the idea that abstinence results in an ideal partner.

Other participants described the positive outcome of abstinence slightly differently – not as a perfect partner, but rather a great sex life once married. Again in the PCBS, respondents were presented with the statement "Waiting to have sex until marriage will make the wedding night and future sex life that much better" (Q26.5). Asked if they had encountered this teaching

in Christian settings, 76.2% (442 people) said 'Yes', and 23.8% (138 people) 'No' (fig. 10). This is a much greater margin than statement 19 (52.8% said yes), suggesting that the positive consequence of abstinence may more often be identified as marital sex life rather than the marital partner themselves. Some participants also affirmed exposure to this idea in their open-ended questions. One outlined this idea earlier on in the survey, before the PCBS: "teaching congregants to abstain from sex outside of marriage with often the promise of a great sex life once in marriage" (#534, Q19). Another participant mentions it when describing her changed viewpoint: "I now don't believe that God grants you a perfect sex life if you stay abstinence for your spouse" (#329, Q36a), suggesting that she once previously did. Others expressed this idea in relation to the application of biblical passages – one participant described how the Bible was used as "a promise of delayed gratification. Purity now...amazing sex post marriage! As if" (#166, Q34),[62] and another said "If you don't awaken love before it's ready (song of songs) you'll have an epic romance and sex life like the couple [in Song of Songs]" (#465, Q34).
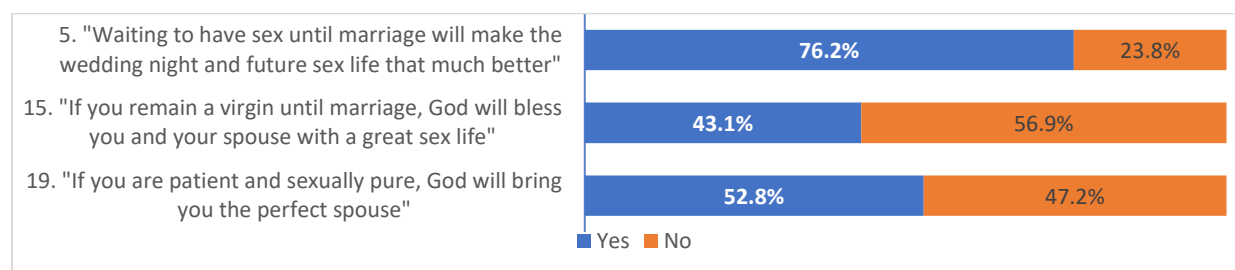
Figure 10. Survey Q26a. Have you encountered this teaching in a Christian setting? (if/then statements)

Survey participants were also presented with the statement "If you remain a virgin until marriage, God will bless you and your spouse with a great sex life" (Q26.15) in the PCBS. The wording of this is very similar to statement 5 ("waiting to have sex until marriage will make the wedding night and sex life that much better"), as both imply that abstinence will positively impact sex life once married. Yet the results are noticeably different. For this question, 43.1% (250 people) said yes, they had encountered this, and 56.9% (330 people) said no. This difference is interesting, and indeed seemingly inconsistent at first glance; the 43.1% 'Yes' for statement 15 is considerably less than the 76.2% 'Yes' for statement 5.

What has prompted this variation? The key difference is the wording. Statement 5 suggests that abstinence leads to an improved sex life, while statement 15 suggests that abstinence will lead God himself to *bless* a couple with a *good* sex life. The language of the latter actively affirms blessing from God as a result of action, and that this blessing is not just *improvement* or a positive by-product ("that much better", Q26.5) but bestowed, categoric

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[62] This participant did not give any specific verses used in relation to this "delayed gratification" idea – they said they have "tried my best to forget them" (#166, Q32).

goodness ("great", Q26.15). Statement 19 (above) also, like statement 15, reflects not just a 'should' but an 'if/then' ("if you are patient and sexually pure, God will bring you the perfect spouse"). While statement 5 frames abstinence as beneficial ("waiting … that much better"), statements 15 and 19 are conditional ("if … God will bless"; "if … God will bring"). The difference in response rate (76.2% for Q26.5, compared to 43.1% for Q26.15, and 52.8% for Q26.19) suggests that the active correlation between behaviour and blessing is less well-established within British purity culture, compared to the idea that sexual purity will improve a couple's sex life once married.

This nuance is a helpful point of comparison to purity culture in United States, in which there is an assumption that abstinence will lead to blessing in marriage – this is, in the words of Gaddini "the evangelical promise that if you wait, then your marriage will be blessed; a promise which proliferates through sermons, Bible study texts, and books" (Gaddini, 2021: 7). Further, Christine Gardner (2011), and more recently Olivia Schultz (2024), have both maintained that evangelical purity culture in North America uses the promise, or reward, of a happy marriage with a good sex life to *instigate* compliance with abstinence. Gardner argued that "American evangelicals are persuading teenagers to avoid sex by making abstinence "sexy"" and, as a result, "sex – along with marriage – is presented as the reward for abstinence" (2011: 13). The strategy employed by evangelical abstinence organisations (promulgating an apparent counter-cultural message whilst utilising imagery of cultural credence) results in abstinence becoming "more than just delayed gratification; it is a *promise* of sex in marriage that is better than if one had not waited" (2011: 51; emphasis added). As such, "the reward for abstinence is not just a marriage but a good marriage, which is defined as great sex" (2011: 49). The language Gardner uses – "reward", "promise" – makes clear that this is both secure, and conditional on, abstinence. Schultz likewise argues that American evangelicalism uses the expectation of a happy marriage and good sex life to induce abstinence (2024). Like Gardner, she also views this as a type of rhetoric, a strategy used to persuade – but Schultz further draws out the emotional side of this, emphasising that this rhetoric is effective because it appeals to human aspiration for fulfilment and desirable life outcomes. This is also framed as transactional: "in *exchange* for abstaining from temporary sexual gratification during their youth, adolescents were assured of lasting affective rewards: a happy marriage, fulfilling sexual intimacy, and eternal bliss in heaven" (2024: 148; emphasis added).

The results of PCBS statements 15 and 19 (fig. 10) show a substantial number of participants have been exposed to these if/then ideas about abstinence and a future marriage. This evidences *some* similarity with US purity culture but not an overwhelming consensus; the fact that these percentages are moderate in number (43.1%, statement 15; 52.8%, statement

19), especially compared to statement 5 (76.2%) which does not feature the if/then conditionality or language of blessing, suggests that the promotion of these ideas is more limited within British evangelical purity culture. In short, they are present but not overwhelmingly pervasive. There is an expectation that if you are abstinence, you will have a good marriage, including a good sex life. While this may sometimes be framed in an 'if/then' sense (do this, then this), it seems more common that a happy marriage is simply *expected* to happen – a good sex life within a good marriage is an *implied* outcome, rather than explicit one, a result of following the right path and doing the right thing.

6.2 Sexual sin and the jeopardisation of marriage

In the previous chapter, I argued that sexual sin can pose risks to relationships in four possible ways, and discussed the first three – self, God and community (§5.3). The fourth potential consequence of sexual sin is damage to a future marriage. This is notably different to the first three sites of damage, as it is about a prospective relationship – something which does not yet exist. Yet, there is an understanding that it can be impacted by actions in the present. In this section, I demonstrate that a large number of participants were anxious about the impact of sexual sin on a marital relationship, focusing on its damage to a future partnership (§6.2.1) and harm through the concept of soul ties (§6.2.2).

6.2.1 Damage to a future spousal relationship: "the relationship would be tainted"

Within the PCBS there were 3 statements of relevance to the notion of a damaged marriage. First of these is 'virginity is a gift to give your spouse on your wedding night' (Q26.2), to which 87.8% of participants (509 people) said 'Yes', they had encountered this teaching (Q26.2a). This suggests that this was a familiar Christian idea for a comfortable majority of respondents. It was also reflected in some open-ended question responses, such as this one: "The topic for study in church youth group was regularly related to sex and relationships. General teachings were that sex should be kept for marriage and every sexual act you did before then took away from what you could give your future husband or wife" (#107, Q20b). This again supports this idea that sexual sin causes an offering for a future spouse which could be lost. Participants were also asked if they had encountered the teaching 'having premarital sex will make you unattractive to your future spouse', to which 55.2% (320 people) said 'Yes' (Q26.13.a), and 'it will be difficult for your future spouse to forgive you if you have sex with someone else before marriage', to which 51.4% (298 people) said 'Yes' (Q26.18.a). These last two are a more marginal majority than statement 2 (87.2%), but are still a significant portion of participants.

Further, similar ideas also appear in the qualitative survey data, indicating that for those who did encounter the idea that sexual sin damages a future marriage, it was memorable and noteworthy. One participant encountered it at a panel discussion as part of her church's monthly service for youth (14-18 year olds):

> I came away thinking that if I ever did anything sexual or was involved romantically with a non-christian [sic] or a member of the opposite sex, it would mean that if I did ever want a relationship with a 'Good Christian Man' in the future, he wouldn't love me wholely [sic] and the relationship would be tainted because of my past actions

#202, Q23a

Others expressed the same idea that a future spousal relationship would be sullied in some way: "previous relationships somehow tarnishing future relationship with one's husband" (#512, Q19); "the idea that ... one's future relationships would be tarnished or spoiled if you had sex before marriage" (#348, Q20b). Another describes hearing "horror stories" from speakers "about how they had sex before they married their spouse and it tainted their relationship with their current spouse and with God" (#250, Q20b). It is not particularly clear what this 'tainting' involves – just that it is serious, undesirable and must be prevented. Other participants expressed similar sentiments but framed slightly differently. For example, through the idea that their current behaviour could "hurt" their future partner ("talks from youth leaders about remaining pure for our future husband ... that it would hurt him if we even kissed someone else before meeting him" [#ID,Q20b]), or that they would encounter relationship difficulties ("we were taught that having sex outside marriage would lead to problems in later relationships" [#55, Q20b]). These quotations show that the damage to a future marital relationship is not simply the absence of a 'gift' of virginity, but that the relationship itself is tainted or damaged. In a field – and consequential habitus – in which marriage is centralised and valorised (cf. §6.1), the potential for it to be tainted would be frightening. This makes the risks associated with sexual sin particularly pronounced, because it has the potential to harm a relationship which has likely been embedded in the habitus as centrally important to one's life and identity.

6.2.2 The marital damage of 'soul ties'

Sexual sin is also viewed by some as creating an irreparable bond which can damage (or even ruin) a future marriage to someone else. Within purity culture, the loss of virginity is not only harmful because sexual sin damages the self (§5.3.1), but also because it implies an ongoing connection to another person which can negatively impact a future marital relationship. Loss of virginity thus introduces a third party (or more, depending on the number of prior sexual partners) into a marriage which, consequently, prevents the marriage from flourishing. This is communicated through the idea that sexual sin 'ties' people together, connecting them in an

unbreakable way, which is seen in the data through a glue analogy and the phraseology of 'soul ties'.

In the previous chapter, I noted some examples of metaphors for the loss of virginity, when discussing the perceived impact of sexual sin to the self. One analogy that appeared the most in these responses was the idea of two pieces of paper glued together and ripped apart. This suggests not only that the person is damaged, but also that what they have lost is stuck to another person. Participants usually pointed out that this analogy was accompanied by a metaphorical illustration. For example, one survey respondent described how:

> our youth leader used an illustration with two paper people cutouts – he stuck them together with glue, waited for it to dry, and then tried to separate the two paper people. We were told this was what happened if we had sex before marriage – two people were glued together and you couldn't separate them easily or cleanly. Instead bits of you remained with the other person (and vice versa)

#317, Q20b

Other survey respondents described remarkably similar experiences. For example: "I remember someone from the Christian union giving a talk where they glued two pieces of coloured paper together and them tore them apart" (#132, Q20b); "My youth leaders also would stick two sheets of different coloured paper together with glue and try and peel them apart" (#220, Q20b); "a teacher stood at the front with two pieces of paper glued together, ripped them apart, and told us that this is what giving yourself to another person does" (#328, Q20b). This metaphor is significant for this chapter because it implies that the pieces of oneself that are lost now belong to someone else. When the pieces of paper are ripped apart, "bits of you are left on each other and it's a mess" (#340, Q20b). Similar adhesive imagery also appears in the response of one participant. They did not refer to the 'glued together paper' metaphor but described the same underlying teaching: "I remember being taught that sex is the glue of marriage, and the more sexual partners you have before marriage, the more you lose your stickiness, i.e. the more trouble you will have bonding properly with your spouse" (#334, Q20b). This demonstrates that a key impact of prior sexual relationships is the resultant difficulty 'bonding' with a spouse.

This same idea is also expressed through the concept of 'soul ties'. This also appeared in the PCBS, as one of the manually added questions for this study (informed by my own encounters with the term in evangelical circles, and resultant investigate instinct to explore its potential commonality). To the statement 'when you have sex with someone you form 'a soul tie'', 67.8% (393 people) said 'Yes', they had encountered this teaching in a Christian setting (Q26.27.a). A handful of participants also mentioned soul ties in their optional open-ended

question responses. One recalled "the idea of soul ties being created through sex" (#103, Q20b), and another recollected "I remember one talk we were given on sex that focused on the problematic 'soul ties' teaching pushed by some churches" (#4, Q19). This term it seems to have a specific meaning within this field. In evangelicalism, 'soul ties' denotes an unbreakable bond that sex creates between two people, building on the idea that sex can facilitate emotional connection to dissuade people from having sex, lest this ruin their relationship with their future spouse. This is a concept which is niche to the outsider but known to the evangelical. It appears, for instance, in Katie Gaddini's book chapter on purity, based on doctoral research with evangelical women at an Anglican London church (2020: 103). One of her participants, when discussing sexual purity, explained that "having sex with someone is gonna create, you know, soul ties" (2020: 112), strengthening the hypothesis that this is a colloquial and customary term to British evangelicals which carries particular meaning.[63]

The term 'soul ties' does not arise from a Bible passage or translation of a certain phrase or verse. Rather, it is simply a familiar term in the evangelical field. One participant states this explicitly: "People talk about purity culture as if it's biblical. Consider 'soul ties' as an example; this isn't a term used in the Bible or even referred to in any other way, yet it's taught as a biblical or Christian principle" (#439, Q36a). Having said that, it *is* used as an interpretive tool for reading the Bible – one participant recalls "Genesis 'a man shall leave his mother and father etc'" as being used "AS DEFINITIVE PROOF OF SOUL TIES?!" (#246, Q33; emphasis original). When asked how the Bible was used in the next survey question, they similarly respond: "'Soul ties' narrative used to threaten and control'" (#246, Q34). Reading the Bible through this lens may give the idea of soul ties additional legitimacy and power.

As well as the participants who used this term, others referred to this idea of sex joining people spiritually and eternally without using 'soul ties' specifically. Some did use the word 'tie' on its own – one recalled the Bible "being used to teach that once you had sex with someone you were spiritually tied to them" (#348, Q34), and another recounted the teaching that "once you have slept with someone you are tied to them" (#399, Q34). Others expressed this idea using language of eternal connection or attachment: "there was an emphasis on the eternal consequences of sex before marriage and the idea that you are forever connected spiritually to your sexual partners" (#341, Q20b); "if you have sex something changes in your [sic] permanently and you are joined with another forever" (#317, Q34). Overall, the idea is that you

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[63] Gaddini also notes that this participant is representative of "the ideal Christian women" – having been raised "in a devout evangelical Anglican family", "worked for the church" and "reported she had not dated much or ever had sex" (2020: 112) – suggesting that what she says may be familiar to others and reflect the typical evangelical field.

are joined in an irreversible way to another person – it is the same as 'soul ties' without using that language.

Being joined in this way to another person is damaging to a future spousal relationship because the assumption is that parts of a person have been lost – parts intended for a spouse. To add insult to injury, they are now stuck to somebody else. This idea is captured by one participant, who encountered a story which hypothesises that former sexual partners hold a piece of someone's heart: "I remember being told about someone in my church who when they got engaged and had a picture of their wedding day and in the front row of the church was every woman they had slept with and each one of them had a piece of his heart in their hands" (#557, Q20b). This is a participant I also quoted in the previous chapter, who described the impact of sex before marriage as physical, emotional, and spiritual, and also referred to the idea of 'soul ties' (§5.3.1). The story they share is noteworthy in two ways. First, the setting of a wedding day suggests that it is intended as an allegory for the marriage, and how this is impacted by these former sexual partners. Second, the use of heart imagery suggests that these previous sexual relationships impair the emotional connection between spouses – that one of them is incapable of loving in the way they should be because they do not have their whole heart.

Overall, all of these participant responses suggest that sexual sin damages a marriage relationship and, more specifically, a *future* marriage relationship – actions in the present can have long-lasting consequences. The loss of virginity does not simply result in the an absence of a voluntarily given gift or offering, but is also significant because it suggests that what has been lost now belongs to someone else. This is also reflected in the concept of soul ties, and the comparable glue metaphor which communicates the same idea of being tied to a sexual partner. The result of sexual sin is that a spouse's love might be diminished, the couple might encounter relationship difficulties, and, worst of all, a marriage can be tainted or damaged. As I demonstrated above (§6.1), marriage is centrally important within the evangelical field and consequently within the resulting habitus. People within this field internalise the expectation of, and even desire for, marriage – but at the same time, they are at risk of ruining it.

6.3 Gender

This final section of the chapter considers the significance of gender within the data generated for this study. As noted in chapter 2 (cf. §2.2.3), "gender" appeared repeatedly in the data and as a result, began to be identified as an initial theme during the data analysis process. As gender was frequently used by participants in relation to the performance of gender roles (within the context of marriage), gender was subsumed into the broader theme of marriage. It is important to note, however, the frequency of the concept of gender in the data generated for

this study, especially within the qualitative survey answers, and to ensure that subsuming the concept of gender into the theme of marriage does not mean it gets lost. In what follows, I discuss two ways in which gender appeared in the data. Firstly, many participants made reference to gender roles, not simply as abstract concepts but in terms of expectations to be fulfilled in a marital relationship, and as rooted in Bible passages. This is discussed first below in §6.3.1. Further, many survey participants also communicated their exposure to the assumption that the preservation of abstinence was a responsibility which fell to women in particular. This gendered direction of teachings and expectations about sexual abstinence is discussed second, in §6.3.2.

6.3.1 Gender roles

Many participants actively linked ideas about traditional gender roles for men and women to evangelical purity culture. This is observable in two ways: some survey participants actively communicated this point through their open-text box answers; others made it clear by referring to gender roles in their definition of purity culture (Q19). With regards to the former, towards the end of the survey some participants expressed that there is a relationship between evangelical purity culture and traditional gender roles often found within conservative evangelicalism. For example:

> I think conservative Christian teaching on gender roles is extremely linked to purity culture, and I don't think you can have one without the other.
>
> #394, Q36a

> I think Purity culture comes out of (erroneous and misguided) conservative evangelical teaching on gender distinctiveness and the supposed roles of genders.
>
> #506, Q36a

In a similar vein, one participant discussed taking part in UCCF's *Pure* course during their time at university, and noted that this course drew on traditional gender roles:

> I took part in what was a pilot of the (somewhat well-known due to its controversies) Pure Course. The author of the course was at the time a UCCF staff worker at my university. I still have the course booklet with my notes and it is striking how it underlined conservative gender roles and placed expectations on young women to 'be helpful' to 'the guys' in terms of what we wore, how we acted, etc. The course was overtly complementarian and underlined different roles in relationships, even saying that feminism has distorted relations between the sexes.

It is notable that a course on maintaining purity, as the title indicates, expressly endorsed complementarian gender roles, indicating a potential correlation between complementarianism and teachings about sexual abstinence; cf. §4.1.3, in which I discuss the concurrent rise in

complementarianism during the height of purity culture in the US, and Linda Kay Klein's view that complementarian theology is a companion to purity culture (2018: 62).

Meanwhile, the second way participants linked gender roles to purity culture was through definitions of purity culture, which they were asked to provide in question 19 of the survey. One participant, for example, defined purity culture as a "set of beliefs" relating to sex and gender, which maintained not only abstinence until marriage, but also ideas about how to be a man or woman within a Christian evangelical context:

> Purity culture is something which has been inherited by British churches from American conservative evangelicalism. It is a set of beliefs in regards to sex and gender which seek to preserve traditional ideas like abstinence outside of marriage and stereotypes realed [related?] to what it means to be a good Christian man / woman. eg. [sic] women should be pure and homely whereas men should be strong leaders. Often it comes with complementarianism.

> #66, Q19

Again, they also used the term "complementarianism" to identify these ideas about gender as a specifically Christian theology within a conservative evangelical context. Others too included gender roles in their definitions of purity culture. For example:

> Remaining 'pure' before marriage (i.e. refraining from sex before marriage) *and the roles of men and women in relationships*.

> #563, Q19 (emphasis added)

> Obsession with sex to the exclusion of all other issues; extreme policing *of fixed traditional gender roles* and the construction of virgin/whore dichotomy for women.

> #342, Q19 (emphasis added)

Such references to specific "roles" for men and women is notable, given that the survey question asked solely for a definition of purity culture - it indicates that, to these participants at least, complementarian theology is perceived as a natural bed-follow to evangelical purity culture.

It is also worth noting that when participants referred to such gender roles, they were not understood as isolated concepts but specifically as roles fulfilled in marriage – and, further, as an expression of what Christian marriages should look like. For example, one participant described purity culture as:

> The insistance [sic] on *cishet relationsips [sic], no sex before marriage and male headship as the only true form of Christian romantic relationship*, with biblical context used to support this stance.

> #296, Q19 (emphasis added)

Note also the reference to the Bible here, which was also frequently evident in other survey responses which discussed gender roles and spousal roles (often as one and the same). Both sexual abstinence and gender roles seem to have been portrayed as biblical to some participants:

> Hard line on *biblical view of what purity is* - no sex before marriage etc. Also plays into gender roles and expectations
>
> #541, Q19 (emphasis added)

> Theological or (self-called) *'Bible-based' teaching* particularly about relationships and the ethics of sexuality, which emphasises purity – i.e. virginity, abstinence before marriage, and particular gender roles both before and within marriage (especially pertaining to sex).
>
> #43, Q19 (emphasis added)

As noted above (§6.1.2), the concept of marriage possesses spiritual significance in the context of evangelicalism (which, along with marriage as social capital, results in the primacy of marriage). This spiritual significance is enhanced further when marriage is perceived as a fulfilment of divinely ordained gender roles. This viewpoint is particularly prominent in the conservative evangelical subfield, home to a complementarian view of marriage in which husband and wife each make one half of a whole, as designed by God. I noted above a participant who cited a verse about submission from the household code passage in Ephesians 5 alongside the chord of three stands verse (cf. §6.1.2), and also noted in chapter 5 that Paul was by far the most cited biblical authority in the survey, with 26 references to the letter to the Ephesians, and 22 references to Ephesians 5 specifically (cf. §5.3.1). The passage in Ephesians 5 is a typical example of a group of passage in the New Testament known as Household Codes. These "address ethical instructions concerning relationships of various kinds", particularly husbands/wives, but also parents/children and masters/slaves (Afzal and Stiebert, 2023: 55). These codes are a central feature of complementarianism – Ephesians 5 in particular is "very widely cited in complementarian theology" (ibid.) – which advocates for the leadership of the husband and servanthood of the wife.

This is also something Dani picked up on. In our interview she noted the emphasis on "gender roles", particularly in the conservative evangelical church she attended during university. She actively used the word "complementarian" to denote Christian spaces in which there is an expectation that "men are the people that can lead in church and therefore ... should lead the family". Indeed, it is commonplace in evangelicalism for women to be "expected to fill the normative roles of wife and mother" (Gaddini, 2019: 410; cf. Aune, 2002). The household code passages give such an expectation a further mandate by establishing them as faithfully

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biblical in a field which highly values the authority (and sometimes inerrancy) of the Bible. As Kristin Aune has argued, the actual enaction of male headship can vary – "for some, headship signifies husbands' prerogative in decision-making; other give this privilege only for important decisions, still others only if stalemate is reached" (Aune, 2006: 653). What is important, however, is that all these different manifestations are understood through the lens of 'headship' in the first place – how evangelical couples formulate their roles within marriage is based on their (interpretation of) an apparent biblical directive.

Additionally, it should be noted that some participants who did make reference to traditional ideas about gender, such as the headship/submission model evident in complementarian theology, characterised these roles negatively, using words like "oppressive", "patriarchal", "possession" and "misogyny". Some survey respondents, for example, defined purity culture as:

> Purity culture is a conservative set of beliefs, behaviours, and practices which were commonplace in evangelicalism in the 1990s and 2000s, some of which are still pervasive today. It purports to advocate for *a biblical view of purity* but tends to put a disproportionate emphasis on *gender stereotypes that are typically advantageous for white men and oppressive to varying degrees to others, particularly women*.
>
> #221, Q19 (emphasis added)

> No sex before marriage. *Possession of women by men-* father followed by male life partner.
>
> #129, Q19 (emphasis added)

> Erm... *Rape culture Misogyny Patriarchal beliefs*   Very strict modesty codes for women *Awful 'complementarian theology '* that keeps men and women in very specific breadwinner/ housewife and child raiser roles Men are told they are head of the household, wives should submit Purity culture is responsible for a culture of coercive power and control and encourages abuse. See #churchtoo threads.
>
> #184, Q19 (emphasis added)

> The teaching in conservative evangelical churches that sex only belongs in heterosexual marriage and that any sexual activity outside of that is (or pretty much is or is implied to be) damnable ... *It includes 'complementarian' teaching, that men and women are different*. Men are as to Christ and women are as the church, which is to be subservient and have the role of 'helpmeet'. *This patriarchal system* is presently [sic] as not like the world, as men in being like Christ are living sacrificially, but the practical reality is it gives them authority and makes them leaders, and women cannot preach or teach. Although virginity is upheld as the ideal, the cultural impact is women are judged and policed for their clothing and perceived behaviour ... Feminism is deemed disobedient.
>
> #293, Q19 (emphasis added)

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These characterisations of gender roles also on occasion make reference to their "biblical" or "complementarian" basis (italicised above), indicating not only a critical stance in relation to traditional gender roles, but a critical view of *Christian* conceptualisation of gender roles specifically.

6.3.2 The gendered burden of abstinence

A second key way that gender appeared in the data was through participants' descriptions of abstinence teachings and expectations as being actively directed towards (and assumed of) women and girls. 45 survey respondents actively discussed, through their open-ended text questions, the idea that the expectation of preserving sexual abstinence was aimed more towards women/girls (which were coded together as "gendered expectations"). Some of these responses include:

> Sexual abstinence aimed mainly at young women.
>
> #336, Q19

> A culture of preoccupation with maintaining sexual boundaries, including in dress, conversation and thoughts, especially directed at girls and women and often presented as key in defining Christian life and values.
>
> #532, Q19

> The expectation that particularly females abstain from sex outside of the context of marriage.
>
> #331, Q19

> An enforced/encouraged set of rules and expectations on people to only engage and appear to engage in sexual activity within opposite sex marriages. Aimed mainly at girls/women.
>
> #556, Q19

> A culture that promotes no sex before marriage exclusively to young women / girls & teaches them to equate this to their religious and personal purity.
>
> #238, Q19

> Against sexual activity of any sort outside marriage, particularly for women.
>
> #142, Q19

> Teaching and expectations encouraged by evangelical church to you women to stay pure until marriage.
>
> #151, Q19

These responses cannot all be repeated here due to constraints of space, but it is worth presenting some of them, to demonstrate the regularity with which this idea appeared in the dataset.

Additionally, extracts from some of these responses also provide evidence of some key terms frequently used in relation to this idea that expectations for abstinence are aimed at young women and girls. These include: "pressure" on women/girls to comply, the idea that maintaining purity is women's "responsibility", and resultant "policing" of women as part of these gendered expectations. All of these terms are also italicised below (emphasis added), so they are easier to identify. Examples of uses of "pressure" include:

> *Pressure* applied by evangelical denominations to *girls and young women*, pressuring them not to have sex before marriage. It generally seems to have the opposite effect.
>
> #17, Q19

> *Pressure* to conform to a strict set of rules and requirements, mainly surrounding *women's* sexual abstinence ...
>
> #218, Q19

> The *pressure for girls* to remain a virgin/abstain [sic] from sex.
>
> #419, Q19

> No sex before marriage, *pressure on women especially* to be 'pure' and virginal. Not to get involved with people of the opposite sex. Same sex relationships are absolutely sinful
>
> #462, Q19

> Because men do have expectations but *women have far more pressure put upon them*. Also any sexuality other than straight is also seen as unpure [sic].
>
> #531, Q36a

Examples of use of "policing" include:

> *Policing of primarily women's bodies and sexuality* to prevent their 'corruption' by sin and keep them 'pure'.
>
> #525, Q19

> Books shared with me that advocated no sex before marriage. *Having clothing policed (*not feminine enough, dress to short). Had people tell me I shouldn't do X because it might cause my partner to sin ...
>
> #162, Q20b

The expectation that good Christians don't have sex outside of a heterosexual marriage. This applies particularly to women - men who become Christian after they have been in sexual relationships are more quickly forgiven as for men it's 'harder to resist their natural urges' ... It's also interpreted by many men as *permission to police what women wear and do* - so if the man is aroused the woman should change her behaviour, and for example wear full sleeves on a hot day ...

#516, Q19

The last two quotations also indicate that said "policing" is linked with viewing women as responsible for maintaining purity – both their own, but that of others too. This brings us to the final example of a key term, uses of "responsibility, which include:

Promising to abstain from sex till marriage with a particular focus on *women being responsible for this*. E.g. watching what you wear.

#284, Q19

Fixation on perceived virginity with shaming and silence as key tools. Largely *aimed at girls who are deemed responsible for their own actions and the actions of others*, including adults. Heteronormative sexualisation of children, women and situations in order to maintain control by authority figures.

#395, Q19

An enforced way of thinking about how to interact with the opposite sex that focuses on keeping pure, avoiding sexual experiences until married, limiting sexual expression and primarily *placing the responsibility* of the purity of both genders onto the woman

#157, Q19 (emphasis added)

Other participants also expressed a similar idea of women/girls' responsibility, but expressed through different language, such as saying that the "onus is particularly on girls/women to dress and act demurely so as not to lead boys/men into sin" (#491, Q19), or similarly described "onus on the women to stay 'pure'" (#381, Q19). Another participant described how this expectation of responsibility was communicated to adolescent girls through the use of toy dolls: "They showed us barbie dolls and talked about how men perceive girls (we were 13ish at the time) and how we should prevent men from having ungodly desires" (#182, Q20b).

Further, the responsibility for purity being placed at the feet of women and girls was also iterated in participant responses through the idea of preventing temptation. Again, this was an expectation that was gendered in nature; as the below quotations indicate, it was not simply about all individuals being equally responsible for preventing temptation, but about women/girls preventing temptation of men/boys specifically in response to their apparent inability to curtail sexual desire (all emphases added):

154

Refraining for sexual actions before marriage. That men are unable to control sexual urges, and so *women have to modify their behaviour to try and avoid men being 'tempted'.*

#162, Q19

A conservative culture that encourages women to not have sex before marriage, *or 'tempt' boy[s]/men.*

#540, Q19

A heteronormative association of the worth of women and girls with their virginity and sexual purity, and the expectation that *women and girls will change and hide their bodies to avoid tempting men and boys.*

#168, Q19

The church I grew up in was a very conservative evangelical church which placed a lot of pressure on young women to dress and act in a certain way. As a teenager I felt nervous around men as we were taught *that it was our responsibility to not 'tempt' them by provocative behaviour or dress ...*

#144, Q20b

Some women who participated in this study also drew on the idea of preventing men/boys "stumble" when discussing the expectation to prevent temptation of the opposite sex. One described a "modesty narrative around 'making men stumble'" which was often used "as an example" of preventing others' sin (#148, Q32). "I don't hear many other examples used", she continued, "mainly this one". Another participant similarly described the encountering teaching about the "belief" that "woman are 'stumbling blocks", which she emphasised was "harmful" and can "lead to a lot of general shame and guilt" (#378, Q19). These two women actively chose to use the concept of stumbling, but their experiences are perhaps indicative of a broader phenomenon, as two thirds of participants (67.6%) had encountered the teaching "a woman who dresses immodestly causes her brothers to stumble" in a Christian setting (cf. Table 3, as discussed in §4.3.2).

Finally, to return to the gender roles discussed earlier in this chapter (§6.3.1), the gendered burden of abstinence was also occasionally framed within the context of these spousal-gender roles. Some participants emphasised that the preservation of virginity was viewed as *for* a spouse (and usually a husband specifically) (again, emphasis added):

The notion that falls on (majority women) to remain 'pure' *for their husbands/ partners* before marriage ...

#10, Q19

155

The promotion of sex exclusively between married couples with an emphasis on women in particular preserving their virginity *for their spouse*.

#52, Q19

The concept that (mostly) women should not have sex before marriage and keep themselves 'pure' *for their future husband*.

#509, Q19

An emphasis on people waiting until marriage to have sex, and on remaining 'pure' to save themselves *for their future spouse*. Often the emphasis is on girls/ young women.

#210, Q19

The language of these statements – all using "for" – indicates that the preservation of virginity was viewed in relation to a spousal relationship and intended to be bequeathed to someone else. Enacting and maintaining abstinence is thus an implementation of an evangelical Christian woman's anticipated role as a wife.

6.4 Chapter Conclusion

Bringing part 1 of the thesis to a close (conceptualising purity culture in Britain), this chapter focused on the theme of marriage to both affirm the presence of purity culture in the British evangelical field, and build a picture of a key concept which shapes life in this field. Part 1 of the thesis addresses research question 1: has evangelical purity culture been present in British and, if so, in what ways? The three chapters (4-6) collectively answer this question by establishing evidence of purity culture as a constituent part of the British evangelical field – despite Christianity some key differences to its American version (such as a general absence of rings and pledges, and low exposure to some PCBS statements), purity culture can be seen in this context through a comparable fervent emphasis on holistic abstinence, which permeated the British evangelical field and is attested to by the experiences of participants. As I have argued in these three chapters, this field is one which is distinctively community-oriented, and indeed heavily relationally-oriented; as such, a habitus shaped by this field will likewise reflect these values. At the same time, the prospect of sexual sin jeopardises relationships of value to the evangelical. Sexual sin can damage personhood, the self before God, and one's status in a Christian community (§5.2). In this chapter, I argued that it can also damage a future marital relationship. The habitus of purity culture explains the tension of balancing the concurrent valorisation and jeopardisation of these relationships, and the potency of this tension as it becomes settled in the body.

In the first part of the chapter, I demonstrated the centrality of marriage within British evangelicalism (§6.1). I outlined the social role of marriage, with reference to Dani's experience of the evangelical field as a marketplace for marriage, highlighting social tendencies to marry at a young age and to another evangelical, and maintaining that marriage acts as social capital within this field (§6.1.1). I then noted the added spiritual significance of marriage, and that these social and spiritual roles combined give rise to the primacy of marriage (§6.1.2). Reflecting on the role of sexual abstinence within this, I discussed how holistic abstinence is framed as a means to securing a future happy marriage, though with notable distinction from the concept of a reward or 'blessing' (as in American purity culture) – in Britain it is not a *guaranteed promise*, but rather an *implicit assumption* that abstinence will benefit a future marital partnership in some way.

Having established just how important marriage is in the British evangelical field, in the second part of the chapter I outlined how sexual sin places said marriage at risk of damage (§6.2). I drew on responses from survey participants to expound the idea that sexual sin could damage a *future* marriage, and that non-compliance with sexual abstinence would 'taint' the relationship and 'hurt' a future spouse (§6.2.1). I explored this idea further through the concept of 'soul ties', which refers to unbreakable ties with former sexual partners that then damage the individual themselves (who gradually lose their 'stickiness' as parts of them are ripped away and 'stuck' to others), who thus becomes less able to devote themselves to their spouse (§6.2.2). The third and final part of the chapter considered the significance of gender, particularly in relation to the performance of gender roles within marriage (§6.3). Here, I presented data from the dataset generated for this study, emphasising that gender was a prominent theme across this dataset, which did not exist in isolation but correlated strongly to ideas about marriage.

Part 2: Impacts and aftereffects

Chapter 7. Body

"I'm really glad that someone is taking the time to pursue a doctorate on this subject. I find it horrifying that I'm in my mid-30s, and yet I still see my own body as something 'other' and something unsafe because of how I was raised. Purity culture was probably one of the most damaging things for me."
– #439, Q4

Alongside sin and marriage, I identified three other themes as prominent in the data: body, sexual violence, and shifting faith. These shape the following three chapters. Together, these chapters make part 2 of this thesis, which addresses research question 2 (what are the impacts that British evangelical purity culture has had on women?). Each of these three chapters outlines a key area of impact: to the body (both mental and physical); in relation to sexual violence; leaving evangelicalism and even Christianity altogether. Throughout these chapters, I also continue to use the concept of habitus to answer research question 3 (how can we explain the significance of this impact?). Ultimately, I argue that these impacts have been both potent and enduring because evangelical purity culture can become ingrained in someone's habitus which, though ultimately changeable, is nonetheless deep-rooted.

Thus far, the thematic chapters of this thesis have been organised around an interview participant, narrating elements of their story in order to personalise and draw out the theme in question. Chapter 5 (sin) centred Katy's experiences, and chapter 6 (marriage) Dani's. Meanwhile, chapters 8 and 9 discuss Wendy and Zara, respectively. However, no singular interviewee maps neatly onto the content of the present chapter; body as a theme does appear in the interviews, but was not discussed as overtly as other topics, and is more prevalent in the survey data. This chapter therefore diverges from the usual pattern of taking one interview participant as a narrative focus, and incorporates some profiling of survey participants along with relevant aspects of Zara's experiences.

In this chapter, I outline the bodily impacts of evangelical purity culture. Here I am again indebted to the lived religion perspective, and in particular Meredith McGuire, who uses the concept of "embodied practices" (2007; 2008: 13-15; 2016: 154-160) to advocate for the embodied nature of religion, arguing that this has been marginalised in studies of religion which

have instead historically attended to the "institutional conception of religion" (2007: 188).[64] Practices can include rituals such as hand-holding, changes to posture, dancing, breathing, and may be done individually or collectively (2007). McGuire argues that "human bodies matter because those practices – even interior ones, such as contemplation – involve people's bodies, as well as their minds and spirits" (2007: 187). But human bodies do not *only* matter because they are involved in religious practice(s). They also matter because they are the sites of human experience – of physical movement, bodily sensations, emotional experiences, pain and pleasure, memory, psychological states, and so on, all of which can be shaped by religion. The body is important in and of itself, and is relevant to studies of religion not just because it enables religious practice(s), but also through the myriad possible ways that the body may be involved in, or impacted by, religion. Bourdieu's concept of habitus is helpful here, as it expresses how the social world (in this case the evangelical field) becomes embedded into the body. McGuire has advanced the lived religion perspective by drawing attention to the embodied nature of religion; this could be further developed to encompass not only practice originating from and orchestrated by the material body (customs, habits and rituals), but also the way in which religion is embedded into the body itself.

In what follows, I draw attention to how evangelical purity culture can impact the body. In the first half of the chapter, I focus on participants' experiences of psychological impacts (§7.1). I call this section 'the embodied mind', using this phrase to denote my understanding of the mind as an inherent part of the body, and of mental illness as something which is experienced through the body. Here, I discuss experiences of depression, self-harm and suicidal ideation (§7.1.1), panic attacks (§7.1.2), and the feeling of a dissociated mind and body (§7.1.3). In the second half of the chapter, I turn to the concept of the sexed body (§7.2). Here, I profile three survey participants, two of whom described their experience of the medical condition vaginismus (§7.2.1; §7.2.2), and one of whom discussed dyspareunia (painful intercourse) (§7.2.3).

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[64] As outlined in chapter 3, McGuire's emphasis on embodied practice has been criticised for its potential to lead to a dichotomy between lived versus institutional religion (cf. §3.1.2). Dillon, for example, notes that in focusing on religion *outside* of religious institutions, McGuire consequently downplays lived religion and embodied practice *within* religious institutions (2009: 926; cf. §3.1.2). Indeed, in chapter 3 I argued that this binary of lived religion versus religion within institutions in unhelpful, because it fails to acknowledge the myriad ways religion is lived, embodied, and practised in the context of religious organisations and institutions. I noted that this is particularly unhelpful in the context of this study, as I see the habitus of purity culture arising from a process of socialisation which often involves (for example) evangelical networks, parachurch organisations, and the Church of England (cf. §3.1.2). Nonetheless, though I find this binary unhelpful, I am indebted to McGuire's identification of the embodied nature of religion, and to her contribution in bringing attention to religion as experienced and practised through the body itself

7.1 The embodied mind

One way the impact of purity culture can manifest in the body is through the mind, as brain and body are not separate entities but rather interrelated and interconnected. Indeed mental illness is not distinct from the body: consider the anguish of intense negative emotions; the physical bodily symptoms of mental illnesses; the ways in which mental health can be worsened or improved by one's environment, the condition of the body, or bodily movement. The psychological impacts of purity culture are thus also embodied impacts. McGuire warns that "without the full involvement of the material body, religion is likely to be relegated to the realm of cognitions – beliefs, opinions, or theological ideas" (2016: 160; cf. 2007: 197). Cognition, however, is not distinct from the material body. The mind is not important solely because it allows "interior" religious practices such as "contemplation" (McGuire, 2007: 187), but is also central to existence itself. Habitus is again useful, as it unites them together; rather than seeing them as separate entities, the mind and body are integrated in the process of embodying the social through habitus. In the case of this study, the embodied mind is important because multiple participants noted it as a site of impact based on their experiences of purity culture.

7.1.1 Depression, self-harm and suicide

Some survey participants shared their experiences of mental ill health in the open-ended survey questions. These included depression, anxiety, self-harming, suicidal ideation, and sometimes a combination of these together. Participants attributed these, in varying degrees, to exposure to purity culture. Taken collectively, these experiences demonstrate not only how evangelical purity culture can impact the mind, but also the longevity of this impact, particularly when they occur when the participant is in a heterosexual marriage, and/or even when they are no longer Christian. In what follows, I discuss one participant's description of a period of depression, three participants' experiences of self-harming, and two participants who mentioned suicidal ideation.

Turning first to depression, one participant described the guilt and shame surrounding sexuality which arose from evangelical youth events she attended. Combined with an uncertain self-identity, this culminated in a period of depression. In her own words:

> I got engaged at 21, believing my sexuality was only contained and permissible if I was in a long-term relationship with the intention of getting married. We were married at 23. Any sexual contact before we got married felt 'wrong'. I didn't know who I was ... Sex did not come easily to us, the shame and guilt of it never quite going away. I was 30 before I was able to recognise who I was and what I needed in sexual relationship and that involved a period of depression.

#299, Q43

160

She also clarified that: "the teaching about purity didn't come from my parents. It was mainly youth events that sowed the seed" (Q43, #299); though Methodist in church background, her upbringing also involved "a lot of in put [sic] of evangelical youth work" (Q17, #299). When asked about her experiences of purity culture, she referred back to this youth work:

> Youth events often emphasised sexual 'sin' as the ... main one. A lot of emphasis at youth events seemed to be around what you did with your body and came with shame and guilt for feeling or thinking anything sexual as a teenager ... Youth with a mission [YWAM] drilled it home. Sex and sexuality was only something that was permissible inside of a marriage, before we'd understood what our sexuality was or who [we] were as adults.

#299, Q20b

This quotation demonstrates that sex and sexuality were taught as a risk that could only be managed within a specific institutional and relational structure (marriage). She explicitly identifies youth work as a source of this long-standing shame and guilt, and her emphasis on "youth events" points towards her young age during this time, and perhaps also the vulnerability of youth ("before we'd understood what our sexuality was or who [we] were"). Note also that this participant encountered the idea of sexual sin as the worst sin (she describes it as the "main one"), which I previously outlined as an example of how sexual sin is centralised within purity culture (§5.2.2). The notion that feeling/thinking anything sexual is wrong – evidence of holistic abstinence – seems to have so permeated this participant's mind and body that feelings of shame and guilt over sexual behaviour remained even once married, and that this all culminated in a "period of depression".

Three survey respondents mentioned self-harming. One participant, who no longer attends church and described herself as 'deconstructing',[65] discussed self-harming behaviours as a response to fear that she had become sullied. When asked about her experience of purity culture, she shared: "Was taught that until youre [sic] married, sex is shameful as is masturbation, self discovery, dating without intention [for marriage], any physical intimacy is 'dirty'" (Q20b, #452). In the next question, she was asked if she had worn a purity ring, to which she answered 'Yes' (Q21). In the optional follow-up question ("What informed your decision to wear a purity ring?"), she said: "Just thinking I was saving myself for love but more because I was terrified of being dirty. It actually caused some self harm scratching and obsessive scrubbing of my body and hands when I had 'taken things too far'" (Q21a, #452). In both of these written responses, she uses the word 'dirty', and the scratching and scrubbing she describes as self-harm seem to be aimed at trying to remedy feelings of uncleanness. She also

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[65] This participant selected 'Deconstructing' under 'Myself' when asked about denomination; her previous churches were 'Anglican' and 'evangelical' (Q14).

does not define the boundaries of taking "things too far", though her response to Q20b (quoted above) suggests that the bar could be relatively low. This participant's survey answers shows a clear link between the language of defilement and her physical, embodied response.

This respondent was also heterosexual, but the two others who mentioned self-harming were not, and both of them mentioned disapproval of their sexuality in relation to mental ill health. They also both mentioned self-harming alongside another mental illness (anxiety in one case, depression in the other). The second participant to mention self-harm was a bisexual woman in her early thirties, who is no longer evangelical but previously attended a church which was part of Pioneer, "a network of evangelical churches across the UK"(Drew, 2023), which holds to the EAUK basis of faith (Pioneer, no date). She described this as: "charismatic evangelical though I felt became increasingly legalistic and conservative evangelical towards lgbtq+ issues over time – their purity culture was always one of abstinence though" (Q17, #478). She had also attended a youth group which utilised evangelical resources and youth events,[66] and a "charismatic evangelical church" at university.[67] Her mention of self-harming and anxiety came at the end of the survey, when she was asked if she had any additional comments:

> Purity culture for me did not even touch on lgbtq+ issues except to imply it was bad – bisexuality was not mentioned. This resulted in me not coming out until I was 28 – the inability to explore my own sexuality fully and without so much guilt until I was a married woman made discovering more about me and understanding my own sexuality led to anxiety and self harming. Purity culture is harmful. I am convinced of it.

#478, Q43

This participant attributes her mental health difficulties to the environment of purity culture, which not only prohibited sexual activity before marriage but also – through an emphasis on heteronormativity and an assumption that any other sexualities were "bad" – prevented her from exploring her own sexuality, imbued "guilt", and delayed her coming out as bisexual. The phrasing she uses – "led to" – indicates causation, creating a direct link of blame and identifying the source of her anxiety and self-harming.

The third participant to discuss self-harm was a woman in her mid-late thirties, who is from an evangelical church background, and still a Christian but no longer attending church.[68]

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[66] "As a teen in a[n] ecumenical youth group (URC/Church of England church using Urban Saints) we went to Christian rock concerts and youth away weeks/conferences (elim spring harvest) where there was usually some content on purity – they had purity rings on tables etc" (Q20b, #478). Urban Saints is "a member of the Evangelical Alliance ... in full agreement with their Basis of Faith" (Urban Saints, no date).
[67] She describes how this church also ran a "waiting dating mating" course, and "all the leadership were hetero couples", indicating its likely status as an evangelically orthodox congregation promoting (both directly and indirectly) abstinence until heterosexual marriage.
[68] She selected 'Evangelical' for 'My previous church(es)' (Q14), and indicated that she had previously attended an evangelical church but not identified as evangelical herself (Q16).

Her story is bound up with her sexual orientation (lesbian) and involves a "pastor" from a previous church she attended before university, whom she described as harassing her. In her own words:

> I didn't have relationships until I came out as a lesbian at which point my pastor harassed me with things like 'if god came back today you would be going to hell'. He stopped all my work as a youth leader and said I wasn't allowed to work with the children until I was 'right with God'. Even after I moved to uni[versity] across the country, he used gas lighting, spoke in riddles and metaphors that made no sense, arguing in circles and when I challenged that it didn't make sense he would say it's because I'm not right with God. I ended up spiralling into depression and self harming which only pushed him further to point how far from God I was.

#312. Q20b

This participant then described turning to her (presumably university) Christian Union during a time of need upon being hospitalised for mental illness, and being met with a discussion on the immorality of homosexuality:

> I looked to the Christian union for support who instead, one day while I was waiting to get to hospital for self harm, decided they would show me an hour talk on why homosexuality is wrong. I still have the notes that she oh so kindl[y] took for me and let me have as I went off to hospital

#312, Q20b

This experience is eerily similar to that of another participant, who I noted in chapter 5 (also was hospitalised, due to a vaginal tear, and friends from her university CU responded in a way she found not only unhelpful but "traumatic" [Q20b, #44], cf. §5.3.2).

The participant in question here does not explicitly identify purity culture, or a stress on sexual abstinence, as a contributing factor to her depression and self-harming. This differs to some of the other aforementioned participants, and it is important to faithfully represent this woman's survey responses. Rather, the implication from her story is that the heteronormativity underlying the church pastor's and CU members' interactions with her was a contributing factor. It is therefore still significant, and important to include here as it reflects a constituent part of purity culture (heteronormativity) within an evangelical context. Elsewhere in her survey response, this participant also shared that "sexual sins in general were taught to be the worst, so for me personally, the fact I was gay was a massive deal ... I was told I was a 'clashing symbol' [sic] because ... I said the right things about being a Christian but my lifestyle meant I wasn't. I hadn't even had a relationship; any relationship" (Q32, #312). This suggests that she was also exposed to purity culture more broadly (especially given the reference to "sexual sin"), and that her exposure to such heteronormative teachings took place within this context.

One participant, another woman in her mid-late thirties at the time of data generation, shared that her upbringing in purity culture negatively impacted her transition into adulthood, and mentioned the possibility of suicide within this difficult period. Though currently a Christian, she does not attend church, having previously attended a conservative evangelical church for 5-10 years. When asked if she had experienced purity culture, this participant responded 'Yes', and further described her experience as follows:

> I was raised in purity culture which left me wholly unprepared for the realities of adult life. I married young, it didn't work out and I almost died by suicide rather than divorce. When I did divorce the harms of purity culture continued as I found churches with expectation[s] of purpetual [sic] singledom, or even once I had found a life partner, continued celibacy until marriage despite being a thirty something mother of two.

#296, Q20b

It is important to emphasise that while this is qualitative data, it is but a brief summary of a complex reality, provided within a limited survey field, and without opportunity for follow-up. It does not clarify much regarding the circumstances surrounding this apparent suicidal ideation. At the same time, this mention of considering suicide – specifically in the context of being asked about her experience of purity culture – was a detail of her story this participant actively chose to share. It suggests that the difficult circumstances surrounding the breakdown of her marriage, and the intense distress associated with the possibility of divorce, were somehow related to the impact of purity culture leaving her feeling "unprepared" for "adult life". It implies that these situations (collapse of a young marital relationship and resultant divorce) were the "realities" she felt ill-equipped for. She also provided a definition of purity culture which elucidates what the environment she was "raised in" was like. Her definition of purity culture was "the insistence on cishet relationships, no sex before marriage and male headship as the only true form of Christian romantic relationship, with biblical context used to support this stance" (Q19, #296). This is useful as it illustrates the environment she credits for her "unpreparedness" and the resulting difficulties including nearly dying by suicide. It evidences defining characteristics of evangelical purity culture, including emphasis on sexual abstinence until marriage and heteronormativity. Male headship and use of the Bible also reflect the conservative evangelical sub-field specifically.

These experiences resonate with one found in Katie Gaddini's book *The Struggle to Stay*. As noted already, Gaddini investigates the experience of singleness for evangelical women in both London and the US. One of her British participants is called Jamie. She was "raised in a strict Pentecostal family in Scotland", attended church "at least twice a week", and grew up being taught that "having sex" was "sinful" (2022a: 102). When Gaddini asked about Jamie's engagement to another Christian at university, she quickly discovered the pain wrapped up with

this relationship: "I was severely depressed at that time. I was very suicidal. I was hurting myself", Jamie shared (2022a: 102). When Gaddini enquired "if her depression was related to crossing sexual boundaries", Jamie replied "I think that was a big part of it"; Gaddini summarised that the relational consequences of this, "estrangement from her Christian community", led "Jamie to turn against her own body. She had experienced the dark side of purity culture" (2022a: 103).

These experiences are also significant because they show how the psychological impacts of purity culture shape action. As noted above, mental illness is not isolated to the mind – it can result in (often maladaptive) coping mechanisms, shape actions, and drive behaviours. In the case of three participants, mental distress manifested in self-harm – a further impact to the body, and physical manifestation of psychological state. This demonstrates that not only is religion incorporated into the body, it can also manifest through behaviours and actions – even of apparent religious insignificance or indifference. What I mean by this is that the impact(s) of religion can drive further behaviours which are not, in McGuire's words, 'embodied practices' and not part of any intended religious expression. Self-harm is here not an embodied practice with religious meaning or significance. Rather, it is the manifestation of the impact of experiences of religion. This also affirms that (as noted above) the material body is not antithetical to cognition – contra McGuire, who seems concerned that religion may be at risk of being "relegated to the realm of cognitions" (2016: 160). These participants experiences demonstrates just how closely connected their body are to their minds, and how deeply ingrained the social has become within them both. Katie Gaddini notes the experience of marginality for single women in evangelicalism is a pain that is not simply static but "gives rise to emotions that move contagiously among bodies" and "more importantly, these emotions *move* bodies" (2022a: 175). In a similar vein, the burden of holistic abstinence – of purity not just in terms of sexual abstinence until marriage, but of avoiding it so *intently*, of its connection to self-identity, and of compliance with heteronormativity – moves bodies too.

7.1.2 Panic attacks

Another participant shared in her survey response that she had a panic attack on her wedding day. This woman was in her early thirties, raised attending a Baptist church and well-acquainted with evangelicalism, as a former evangelical herself. In the final survey question, she discussed how her commitment to abstinence impacted her relationship with her partner:

> I abstained until marriage. I had one serious boyfriend who is now my husband. Our relationship before marriage was tainted by guilt and shame that we had 'gone too far' by frequently crossing lines we had drawn. We were together 4 and a half years before being married, and we've been married 7 years. I'm still working on undoing the shame

and telling myself that sex is now a good thing. I had taught myself to close up whenever I was aroused and that's also been a hard mental pattern to unlearn. I was also terrified of my wedding night and had a panic attack on my wedding day.

<div align="right">#429, Q43</div>

Her experience demonstrates that even when she attained the appropriate, God-ordained circumstances for sexual activity (heterosexual marriage), this did not resolve feelings of "guilt and shame", and these persisted even after the couple had married. It suggests that an idea (that sex is bad and must be vehemently avoided) became a learned practice within her own body ("I taught myself to close up") – a long-lasting disposition. This disposition was so embedded in her mind and body that she has had to work hard to actively "unlearn" it. The fact that this process of "undoing" continues after 7 years of marriage indicates just how deeply ingrained in her habitus the notion that sex is bad must be. Why has this fear become so deeply internalised in her own body – so much so that it led to a panic attack on her wedding night, and its effects continue to endure?

Helpfully, this participant provided quite a lot of detail in the optional open-ended questions. These highlight the significant influence of evangelical purity culture despite the fact that it was relatively implicit. She described her experience of purity culture as follows:

It's only been the odd sermon or mention, probably most often at uni. Really the whole topic of sex and sexuality is extremely taboo, in my (Christian) family too. Yet somehow I have been strongly influenced by it and would say it was very prevalent, perhaps it's just embedded in the church culture. I think there is just this unspoken expectation that you're not having sex, and that being sexually active is shameful.

<div align="right">#429, Q20b</div>

This "unspoken expectation" seems to have been come from multiple sources in this participant's life – church "culture", the Christian environment at university, and her Christian family too – all reflecting the British evangelical field. The impact of this is also evident in this participant's engagement with practices of holistic abstinence – these included not only abstinence until marriage, but also avoiding or limiting friendships with the opposite sex, dressing modestly, and avoiding one-on-one time with anyone of the opposite sex (Q25).

The seeming contradiction between the implicit but nonetheless influential nature of purity culture is one this participant draws out herself. This is also notably distinct from American evangelical purity culture, which she again addresses in her survey responses. She notes that "In comparison to what I've read about the US, my experience of purity culture was only about the fear and shame and things that could (or would) go wrong if you had sex before marriage. There wasn't any promise of God rewarding you ... other than that it was a natural ...

follow-on from abstinence that if you did get married it would be a healthier relationship" (Q43, #429) (cf. §6.1.3). Her experience does seem noticeably different to what we might find in American purity culture. She had never worn a purity ring (Q21) or signed a pledge (Q22), nor had she attended a Christian abstinence- or purity-themed event (Q23), she never owned a teen girl (Q29) or abstinence-themed study bible (Q30), and she had never heard of organisations such as SRT or TLW (Q28). The only thing from her experience that resonates with American purity culture is that she had heard of a small handful of books (*IKDG* by Joshua Harris, *Why True Love Waits* by Josh McDowell) and read one (*Boy Meets Girl* by Joshua Harris). Even without all of the distinctly American aspects of purity culture, this participant has been pointedly influenced by it. It seems she has encountered a distinctly British version of purity culture which is not as actively and explicitly endorsed but rather "embedded in the church culture". She has likely incorporated these messages surrounding sex into her own habitus as a result of regularly and consistently occupying the evangelical field. Consequently, she has internalised these messages into her own body to the extent that she was intensely fearful of her wedding night – so much so that she had a panic attack – and continues to work on "undoing" the shame surrounding sex.

While this participant has undoubtedly faced negative impacts arising from her experience of evangelical purity culture, she also shared some positive consequences too. It is important to preserve this nuance if I am to faithfully recount her story. While the negative impacts are ongoing, she nonetheless observed some benefits:

> But I will say that when we first had vaginal sex (after getting married) it did feel special. Was it worth all the negative feeling for years before and after? Don't think so. I feel misled. (It's painful to think that though, because I was committed to it for so long and thought I was doing the right thing, also I am proud of the achievement!?) But, I do think experiencing purity culture was better for me than having slept with other guys because ... I think I would have slept with them, but honestly not because I wanted to but because I didn't know how to say no! So now I'd be recovering from abuse. I think if I was just taught how to say no, and taught some feminism and my rights, that would have done me so much better than purity culture.

#429, Q43

She has identified two positives here. First, that sex felt "special" once married. This is complex, however – she also questions whether it was worth the "negative feeling" that coexisted with attempting to preserve virginity. Was it worth the aforementioned "guilt and shame" (Q43), was it worth being "terrified" of the wedding night? Seemingly not. The second positive outcome evident here is that an abstinence-oriented environment provided protection. It prevented her from engaging in sexual activity at a young age which she feels she would have been ill-equipped for and therefore protected her from possible abuse. Yet at the same time, purity

culture seems to have been a contributing factor to this vulnerability. She says she was not taught "how to say no", and that being taught "some feminism" and her "rights" would have remedied this; presumably these were deemed unnecessary amidst an assumption of abstinence. It might seem strange to identify some beneficial outcomes of the environment which caused extreme fear and led to a panic attack, but such is the multifaceted nature of human experience, one which this participant continues to process; she concluded her survey with "thank you for this, it's actually been quite helpful for me to work through this" (Q43, #429).

7.1.3 The dissociated body

In the US, some of Linda Kay Klein's participants had too experienced panic attacks (2018: 169-170, 197, 218-219, 240), along with other physical manifestations and attempts to dissociate with one's own body and sexuality. In her book *Pure*, she writes of what she calls a 'war' with the body. Describing experiences similar to those in this chapter thus far, she explains that: "based on our nightmares, panic attacks, and paranoia, one might think that my childhood friends and I had been to war. And in fact, we had. We went to war with ourselves, our own bodies, and our own sexual natures" (Klein, 2018: 8). Such conflict with one's own body, arising from its apparent depravity and sinful nature, is also evident in some participants of this study. This was particularly apparent in my interview with Zara. Though Zara's story takes more of a centre stage in chapter 9, it is also useful to note here, because of her experience feeling dissociated from her own body:

> when I think about how I felt about my body at that time, I was completely disconnected from it. I've been thinking recently, there's this idea of like ... being aware of what's happening inside your body and how you feel and like, that awareness I never used to have that at all. I used to look down at my body and just be like it feels like it's, like an appendage as opposed to part of me.

Zara's candid description of this psychosomatic disconnection is sobering, demonstrating a physical bodily impact from growing up in an evangelical field which prohibited sexual expression. This context was also particularly unique – Zara reflected in our interview that she felt very "hyper sexualised" as a child, her (and others') appearance "always being discussed", and now questions whether an adult involved in this process (a clergy member and authority figure) was "a latent paedophile". As a result, Zara's habitus will have likely been influenced not only by the evangelical teachings about abstinence, and the sinfulness of sexual activity, but also by this context too. She thus explained that the feeling of disconnection with her body was both "very much part of the socialisation" but also a mechanism for self-preservation in an environment that felt unsafe: "if you're feeling threatened and you wanna protect yourself", you

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"shut down". She summarised feeling like "I've spent so much of my young life, totally unaware of my own relationship with my body, and I just think that's … a huge cruelty".

Zara was not the only participant to feel a sense of dissociation with, or 'shutting down', her body; 12 participants used some variation of the word 'repression'.[69] One of these was interviewee Dani, who identified repression and cited the purity culture of her evangelical upbringing as a source of this:

> In my teenage years at Christian (Evangelical - CPAS-run) summer camps and at university (Evangelical) Christian Union and in a uni (Charismatic…) church I came across preaching, talks, seminars and other guidance promoting purity culture. I feel it has led to me being more repressed than I might be otherwise, has put me back years in personal relationship building and caused body issues too

#405, Q20b

Another woman who "grew up Anglican charismatic evangelical, went to large-ish Salt and Light network church at uni, then a Salt and Light housechurch after uni" described how she was "so afraid of my sexuality that I repressed it completely until my late 20s" (#247, Q20b). The turning point in her late 20s was seeking "counselling because I accidentally masturbated and thought I must thereof [sic] be evil. I was so kept away from my sexuality that I didn't know where my vagina was until I was 27 years old" (#247, Q20b). The use of the word 'evil' indicates an association between sexual activity and morality, suggesting that the (not just prohibition but) demonisation of such behaviour was a source of this 'repression'. Meanwhile, a non-binary participant also referred to repression. They described how the concept of sexual sin thwarted any attempt for them to explore their sexuality: "teachings about sex being sinful scared me away from any kind of dating or interactions with boys while growing up, to the point that I repressed my sexuality and didn't experience any kind of sexual attraction until I was in my 20s, and believed for a while that I was asexual" (#394, Q20b).

The way participants have described these experiences suggests that such an othering of the body is rooted in an attempt to distance the self from the body because the latter is seen as sinful. It is not only *doing* sinful things but is *itself* sinful. It is a danger to be contained and restricted. For example, one participant described her body as feeling 'unsafe', as in the quotation used to open this chapter: "I find it horrifying that I'm in my mid-30s, and yet I still see my own body as something 'other' and something unsafe because of how I was raised" (#439, Q43). These experiences resonate with what Katie Cross describes as 'body theodicy'. Her chapter on purity culture is based on interviews with ten women, all of whom "self-identified as having experienced trauma through purity culture" (2020: 23). Central to her

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[69] I.e. 'repression', 'repressed' or 'repressive'.

investigation of these experiences is a phenomenon she terms 'body theodicy', in which blame of one's body plays a significant role. Cross demonstrates that her interviewees have experienced negative bodily impacts arising from purity culture, such as vaginismus, sexual violence or "bodily trauma" (2020: 27). The concept of body theodicy communities how the responsibility for such traumas is often laid at the feet of trauma victims themselves. Theodicy is "historically conceptualized as a theological attempt to defend the love and goodness of God" in face of evil (2020: 22); body theodicy absolves God of the blame for this suffering by redirecting it onto the sufferers themselves. Thus, Cross writes:

> Theodicy has the potential to shift from being an idea or set of arguments … to a piece of theology that becomes trapped within the body (hence '*body* theodicy'); an internal process of blame and condemnation of the self. The trauma these women experienced as a result of purity culture is not ascribed to God, but to their own actions and to their inherently 'sinful' bodies.

Cross, 2020: 27

Purity culture, Cross argues, not only gave rise to harmful behaviours which caused traumatic experiences – it also caused victims to blame their own bodies for these experiences. They learned to view their bodies as fundamentally sinful and thus responsible for these traumas. The sinful nature of the body relates directly to sexual sin: body theodicy "occurs where the theological accusation is made that women suffer due to the 'sin' of 'sexual impurity'" (2020: 22). In short, the *body itself* is conceptualised as sinful, and the tension of living within such a body may manifest in self-blame (as in body theodicy) or, as in case of some participants of this study, in dissociation from the body altogether and repression from any kind of sexuality. As Katie Gaddini surmises, "women's bodies serve as both the cause and the expression of woundedness" (2022a: 171). It is the locus of moral and spiritual failure – but it is also the site of injury.

7.2 The sexed body

As well as the psychological impacts, responses from some survey participants demonstrate that purity culture can also manifest in the body through vaginismus and dyspareunia, conditions relating to vaginal pain and dysfunction. These were reported by three participants – a very low proportion, but nonetheless significant as, despite low reporting figures, the seriousness of these experiences means they warrant attention. There were also no survey questions to prompt disclosures of medical conditions such as these, meaning that these participants shared these experiences of their own accord and without specific invitation. In this section, I describe the experiences of these three women – two of vaginismus, one of

dyspareunia. These reflect the bodily impacts of purity culture at perhaps its most extreme and most potent – particularly when combined with other risk factors.

7.2.1 Vaginismus: #196 or 'Sarah'

As I am profiling these three participants in more depth than usual, it feels appropriate to give them pseudonyms so as to emphasise the personal nature of their stories. The first of these is survey participant 196, whom I call Sarah. At the time of data collection, Sarah was in the 26-29 age bracket, and residing in London. She is a white, English, cisgender woman who identifies as bisexual. There is a limit to what we can ascertain about Sarah's church background as a survey respondent (I cannot ask her more in an interview), but her responses demonstrate that she previously identified as evangelical herself and attended an evangelical church.[70] She also attended a previous church for over 10 years, with her church background reflecting both charismatic and conservative evangelicalism.[71] Sarah expressed familiarity with purity culture (Q18) and that she had experienced it personally (Q20).[72] Though no longer a Christian, the impact of this religious background continues to permeate Sarah's life.

Sarah shared that she suffers from vaginismus, a condition which involves the involuntary tightening or contracting of vaginal muscles upon penetration (from, for example, tampon use, penetrative sex, or cervical screening) according to a clinical review (Crowley, Goldmeier and Hiller, 2009; cf. McEvoy et al., 2021: 680). Her words are powerful, and show both the potency and longevity of the influence of purity culture on her life:

> Although I am now married (to a fellow deconstructed evangelical), I suffer from vaginismus, which negatively impacts our sex life. The NHS specialist I saw said that vaginismus is partly psychological. I feel that the guilt and negative messaging I experienced under years of purity culture is definitely a massive contributing factor. I feel that purity culture is deeply damaging and still has a negative impact for me, even though I am now married and have left Christianity.

> #196, Q43

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[70] When asked if she has previously identified as evangelical, and/or attended an evangelical church, Sarah selected 'Yes – both' (Q16, #196).

[71] Sarah previously attended a small (congregation size 1-30 people) church (Q13b) for over 10 years (Q13a). When asked about Christian denomination, Sarah selected 'charismatic', 'conservative evangelical', 'evangelical' and 'Pentecostal' under 'My previous church(es)' (Q14).

[72] She had also: worn a purity ring (Q21), "influenced" by American "authors Susie Shellenberger (Focus on the Family) and Danna Gresh"; signed a purity pledge (Q22), having been at an abstinence-themed event "witnessing others making a purity/virginity pledge in front of the church" (Q23); encountered virginity metaphors (Q24).

This answer was in response to the last question of the survey, which was optional and asked participants if they had any additional comments they would like to share. This is significant, as it means Sarah actively chose to disclose this experience. In doing so she also explicitly identified purity culture as a direct – and "massive" – "contributing factor".

There are two things to note from Sarah's quotation which demonstrate the intensity and duration of the influence of purity culture in this way: that she is married, and no longer a Christian. Being married means that Sarah now exists within the defined relational restrictions for sexual activity, which should – in theory – absolve any feelings of guilt or sinfulness. Further, her spouse is also a former evangelical, meaning they would have been (prior to their exit from evangelicalism) an appropriate spouse, and should prevent feelings of shame or that the relationship was forbidden. Sarah is also now not a Christian – she identified as 'no religion' (Q11) and 'deconstructing' (Q11a) in the survey and repeated in the quotation (above) that she has left Christianity. In theory, then, she has left the evangelical field, and as a result the sociocultural environment which valorises and promotes abstinence until marriage. Purity culture, in her own words, reflects "the belief that any and every kind of sex and sexual thoughts before marriage is wrong" (Q19); if she is now married, and indeed no longer Christian, why is this belief still physically manifesting in her body?

Sarah's experience of vaginismus is perhaps one of the most extreme examples of the internalisation of evangelical purity culture. It indicates that the "negative messaging" she encountered became ingrained in her habitus to the point of bodily internalisation, so much so that it manifests as an involuntary physical response. It therefore may not matter very much if she is married, or has left Christianity, if it continues to be ingrained in her mind and body. Indeed, it is much harder to reshape one's habitus than it is to physically leave the social environment in which it was produced. This is, of course, ultimately a speculative assumption, particularly given my application of Bourdieu's theory of habitus to Sarah's story – but one that seems logical given Sarah's own identification of purity culture as a contributing factor.

A clinical review on vaginismus from the British Medical Journal has shown that though there has been no clear consensus on the cause(s) of vaginismus, previous research reports that certain women have been affected by the condition. For example, "affected women often come from families and cultures with strong beliefs about the dangers of penetrative sex. Negative views about sexuality in general, and sexual activity before marriage in particular, have been reported" (Crowley, Goldmeier and Hiller, 2009: no pagination).[73] This affirms Sarah's view that

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[73] Other factors which have also been reported to play a role in the development of vaginismus include "cultures where there is a taboo on single girls discussing sex and a bride's virginity is crucial", "aversive

her background in Christian purity culture was a contributing factor. The contribution of religious socio-cultural background to vaginismus is still relatively understudied; however, more recently the condition has begun to be understood from a "biopsychosocial perspective" which emphasises the interaction between the biological, psychological, and social (McEvoy et al., 2021: 680). These authors emphasise the importance of "psychosocial understandings of vaginismus" in particular, which "acknowledge the role of implicit and explicit attitudes in the vaginismus response and the sociocultural context from which these attitudes might originate" (McEvoy et al., 2021: 684). They reference religion as one possible context, remarking that in "conservative religious societies", sex before marriage can be seen as "sinful" resulting in "methods of suppression" of sexual relationships, and that the potentially resultant "guilt around sexual behaviors" can lead to "sexual dysfunction" (2021: 686). They also note that vaginismus could be a "phobic reaction" stemming from extreme fear or aversion (2021: 694). Given the "guilt and negative messaging" that Sarah experienced for "years", it is possible that she internalised such an aversion to sexual activity, finding it difficult to undo even once she entered a sanctioned relationship. Whatever the ultimate (and perhaps complex) causation of Sarah's vaginismus, it nonetheless demonstrates both the intensity and the longevity of the potential impact of purity culture.

7.2.2 Vaginismus: #468 or 'Sophie'

The second participant to mention vaginismus was survey respondent #468, who I call Sophie. Again, Sophie was well-acquainted with evangelicalism, having previously identified as an evangelical and attended an Anglican, charismatic, and evangelical church(es).[74] She explained that the purity culture she encountered at a young age came from both her parents and Christian youth culture:

> Within my family, my mum made it clear that the expectation was that sex would be saved for marriage. She did this by dropping comments, 'obviously x,y,z', telling me that she and my dad has waited for marriage, referring disparagingly and critically to those who had sex in other contexts or had different beliefs. At church and at youth festivals (e.g. soul survivor) there were workshops on being a 'Girl of God' i.e. not masturbating or giving in to sexual temptations; and a general assumption/expectation that sex was to be saved for marriage.

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sexual experiences" and "traumatising gynaecological examinations" (Crowley, Goldmeier and Hiller, 2009).

[74] Sophie responded 'Yes (both)' to 'Have you previously identified as an evangelical or attended an evangelical church?' (Q16). She selected Anglican, Charismatic, and Evangelical under 'My previous church(es)' (Q14). She also mentions attending "youth festivals" such as Soul Survivor (Q20b). Combined, these responses paint a coherent picture of an adolescence immersed specifically in British charismatic evangelicalism with close links to the Church of England.

Sophie encountered the endorsement of not only abstinence until marriage but holistic abstinence (as suggested by "not masturbating or giving in to sexual temptations"). The implication of titles such as 'Girl of God' tie these ideas to spiritual identity and to one's relationship with God too (as previously discussed in §5.3.2). The combined effect of both parental and evangelical authority delivering the same message seems to have made the impact of purity culture on Sophie particularly pronounced. She shared that she now has vaginismus, and traces its cause to the teachings she encountered during her upbringing, combined with further personal circumstances:

> I am unmarried and now want to explore sexual behaviour more fully, but face the challenge of doing so having never had intercourse at the age of 40 (there's a film about that!) I also have sexual inhibitions – vaginissmus [sic], which I believe derives partly from the teachings I received as a child, and partly from deeper psycho-emotional patterns in my family history. I didn't even realise until my mid 30s that it was unusual not to be able to experience penetration (by tampon or finger, even my own) without pain, or that this was a condition which might need treatment and support. It is partly the silence and lack of permissions in the Christian culture I grew up in which ... meant I never discussed these things or had exposure to information which would have helped me in this.

This again demonstrates that the psychological and physical impacts of purity culture are complex, bound up with further vulnerabilities. It also shows the conceptual value of habitus, in that it makes space for this nuance: no one person exists *solely* in the evangelical field, and while many people within this field may experience some kind of collective habitus, which broadly reflect the shared values of the field, their individual habitus will also develop in relation to other social contexts in which they find themselves. Habitus explains the similarities across a group – especially ones that exist within a specific field consistently from a young age – while also accounting for individual circumstances and personal agency. The potential impact from exposure to purity culture may be shaped by pre-existing vulnerabilities which make someone susceptible to internalising it. In Sophie's case, vaginismus seems to be a combined result of the "teachings she received as a child" alongside other contextual factors. She does, however, also explicitly identify the "silence and lack of permissions" in the Christian "culture" she "grew up in" as a further obstacle which intensified her experience of vaginismus and thwarted the road to seeking treatment.

As an aside, it is important to note that – like the participant who had a panic attack on her wedding night – Sophie also identified some benefits to her experience of growing up in

evangelical purity culture. In the final survey question, after discussing vaginismus, she shared that:

> However, there were also benefits for me. I realise that I never, until recently, felt emotionally that I wanted to have sex (though the physical feelings were there). The Christian teaching protected me from feeling compelled into sexual experiences that I didn't want or may have regretted.

#468, Q43

This sense of protection is similar to the participant who had a panic attack on her wedding night – a feeling that growing up in an abstinence-oriented environment shielded her from sexual experiences she was perhaps not ready for. She continued: "I also think there is SOME value in a counter-cultural sexual teaching for young people, to counteract some of the messages of mainstream culture. I just think it's all far too polarised and extreme" (Q43, #468). Again, Sophie's contemplation on both the advantages and hindrances that arose from purity culture were nuanced; the "benefit" of feeling shielded from potentially unwelcome sexual activity at a young age co-existed with her experience of vaginismus.

The stories of Sarah and Sophie might have arisen within British evangelicalism, but they are similar to another story – that of Katie Cross' participant Jane, who "lives in the American north-west" (2020: 28). Jane was raised in "a conservative non-denominational church", taught that sex was for heterosexual marriage, and recalls a dinner with her father where she was given a purity ring and they each made vows to each other (2020: 28). This reflects a more typical American experience of purity culture (cf. 4.1.2). Jane too experienced vaginismus. Cross reports that Jane's honeymoon was far from idyllic, and attempts to have sexual intercourse with her new husband resulted in intense pain and a feeling that "everything was on fire" (2020: 28). Continued "severe pain during penetrative sex" led to a gynaecologist's identification of "pelvic floor muscle spasms", and Jane finally had the terminology to identify her experience when she learned of vaginismus (2020: 28) – the very term Sarah and Sophie used in their survey.

7.2.3 Dyspareunia: #557 or 'Susan'

Another participant, who I call Susan, expressed a similar but distinct physical experience, which is known as dyspareunia. Like vaginismus, dyspareunia is a "sexual pain disorder" and is the medical term for painful sexual intercourse (Crowley, Goldmeier and Hiller, 2009). At the time of data generation Susan was between the ages of 22-25 and followed the usual demographic pattern of participants as a cisgender, heterosexual, white English woman. While she was still Christian (Q10; 11), and still identified as evangelical herself (Q15), she was no longer attending church (Q12). She had, however, attended her previous church for over 10

years (Q13). Susan is now married and described how her and her then fiancé intentionally attempted to disassemble any negative ideas about sex in anticipation of their wedding day and marriage. Yet, she still experienced dyspareunia:

> My husband and I both grew up being taught to save sex for marriage and we had agreed to do that from the beginning of our relationship. It became clear throughout our engagement that I was very affected by purity culture. ... My husband and I lowered our physical boundaries in the couple months running up to our wedding day to gradually dismantle the sex is bad mindframe I had rather than having to do it all at once when we were married ... Even with this, I have had pain during intercourse due to psyhcological [sic] issues from purity culture. And it was very difficult to talk about sex and trying to make it more enjoyable. I have done a lot of work to change this and have a much better mindset around sex now than ever before. It just saddens me that church taught me all of this damaging stuff that I have had to change and work through myself.

#557, Q20b

Susan's experience demonstrates that the "sex is bad" mindset was deep-rooted. Like other participants in this chapter, acquiring the appropriate relational context for sex did not dispel the entrenched sense that it was wrong. On the contrary, Susan states that in being taught "sex before marriage is wrong", she was also being taught that "sex is wrong" full stop (#557, Q20b). Her description of trying to "work through" this and do "a lot of work to change" it sounds very much like such a mindset was ingrained in her habitus. She had to actively work to disassemble it, and this process was arduous and lengthy. The dyspareunia she describes – and attributes to psychological results of purity culture – indicates that this mindset was not just embedded in her mind but buried in her *body*.

We have seen that Susan attributes her experiences of painful sexual intercourse to purity culture. In her survey responses, she also helpfully provided a detailed account of her Christian background, which further elucidates what she means by this. Overall, this paints a picture of an upbringing immersed in the evangelical field.[75] Susan's denominational background was a mixture of Baptist, evangelical and non-denominational (Q14), she "grew up in ... a New Frontiers church" (#557, Q20b) and attended Soul Survivor. She describes this church as being "heavy on their teaching of no sex outside of marriage", and that "It was often heavily implied if you had sex before you were married a part of you was damaged and could never go back to the way it was before" (#557, Q20b). She described actively dressing modestly while attending this church:

> I was always conscious of what I wore at church, particularly [when] I worked there as an intern ... I bought clothes that covered me up and were quite baggy ... I remember

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[75] Elsewhere in this thesis, I used parts of Susan's story to elucidate the idea of irreparable damage and 'soul ties' (§5.3.1; §6.2.2).

preaching at my church on a Sunday during summer and I wore a sun top, and a good friend said after to me 'You slut, preaching with your shoulders out.' As it was my friend, it was a joke but I think that really says a lot about the perceived expectations for how women should dress.

<div align="right">#557, Q20b</div>

She also expressed an innate awareness of holistic abstinence, possessing an understanding that "it is wrong and sinful to even think about sex before marriage" (#557, Q20b) and thus deducing that abstinence was not only about sexual behaviour but also internal thoughts. She also encountered the 'Cakey' story when attending Soul Survivor:

The main speaker gave his pretty well-known talk about comparing sex before marriage to eating a whole chocolate cake in the middle of the night. It's a very entertaining talk but in retrospect, just more fuel for abstinence-only teaching that doesn't actually explain why you shouldn't have sex before marriage other than asserting that sex will ruin you if you do it before having a ring on your finger

<div align="right">#557, Q23a</div>

Susan sums up all of these experiences by noting that purity culture, for her, was implicit. "A lot of what I have experienced from purity culture was not overt", but "it was like I absorbed values that were hinted at in church but mostly never spoken about outright" (#557, Q20b). This reflects the purity culture I have set out in this thesis – an expectation that young adults maintain holistic abstinence, but more covert than American purity culture because it is wrapped up within the evangelical field more broadly. The language of 'absorption' also echoes the process by which habitus emerges – the social embodied, the values of the field becoming gradually incorporated into the body through repeated exposure and socialisation.

7.3 Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the body as a site of impact of evangelical purity culture in Britain, as experienced by some participants of this study. The first half explored impacts to the embodied mind (§7.1). Here, I presented the stories of survey participants' experiences of mental ill health attributed to purity culture in a variety of manifestations, including depression, self-harm and suicide, and also observed a similarity between these and one of Katie Gaddini's British participants (§7.1.1). I then discussed another respondent's experience of having a panic attack on her wedding night (§7.1.2), and explored multiple participants' (including Zara's) sense of dissociation between their mind and body, and Katie Cross' concept of body theodicy, in which the body is identified as the source of blame (§7.1.3). In the second half of the chapter, I turned to the concept of the sexed body, presenting manifestations of purity culture's bodily impacts through vaginismus (§7.2.1; §7.2.2) and dyspareunia (§7.2.3). Overall, what all of this

shows is that purity culture – even when 'watered down', even in its British iteration which is less overt, even without the bells and whistles of American purity culture – can *still* be significantly impactful on the body. It also demonstrates that the body is not only of interest to scholars of religion when it is doing something we identify as 'religious' or 'religious practice' – it can also be relevant in other ways, including as a site of impact.

Chapter 8. Sexual violence

"I was assaulted by someone in the congregation … I think when this happened to me, [I felt] I was somehow culpable"
– Wendy

Of the five themes I identified across the data for this study, the fourth was sexual violence. This chapter takes this theme as its focus, and outlines another area of impact of British evangelical purity culture. As indicated by the opening quotation, here I share Wendy's story to personalise the theme in question. As with the previous chapter, the experiences discussed do not represent the majority of participants. Rather, I have identified sexual violence as a theme because of the seriousness and significance of its impact, and its occurrence across multiple participants' stories who identified purity culture as playing a role within these occurrences.

For the purposes of this chapter, I define sexual violence as any non-consensual sexual activity. I follow the definition of sexual violence provided by the charity Rape Crisis England & Wales: "'Sexual violence' means any sexual activity or act that happened without consent. This includes rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse and sexual harassment (to name just a few)" (Rape Crisis, no date [a]). Much of the existing academic literature on sexual violence exhibits "inconsistency of definition", as identified in a review of this literature by Nimue Miles (2023: 3). This may be due to differing research priorities and contexts, "differences in legalistic, medical and social definitions", and the prevalence of "denial and differing perceptions of experiences" (2023: 3). Miles thus endorses "a comprehensive approach" by using sexual violence as an "all-encompassing term" (Miles, 2023: 3). Similarly, the definition provided by Rape Crisis is valuable in its simplicity and comprehensiveness. This allows for inclusion of experiences as they are defined by participants themselves; I follow Rape Crisis' preference to "use words that are meaningful" to the victim/survivor themselves (Rape Crisis: no date [b]), and therefore use sexual violence as an umbrella term to summarise similar experiences without homogenising them. This also accounts for diversity due terms carrying different meanings (for example, different types of sexual violence are considered different crimes in the UK). Additionally, I use the phrase 'victims and survivors of sexual violence' or simply 'victims/survivors', avoiding preference for either term, as not everyone relates to these.[76]

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[76] Rachel Condry discusses concerns with the term 'victim', noting that some "have rejected outright claims to victim status because of concerns that taking on a victim identity would engender powerlessness and passivity, preferring instead the term *survivor*", but the "debate over the appropriate terminology continues today" (2010: 243).

In what follows, I examine two avenues of impact for sexual violence evidenced in some participants' responses. First I discuss feelings of personal culpability (§8.1), arising from both internalised blame (as in Wendy's experience) (§8.1.1) and secondary victimisation from others who infer the individual's culpability (§8.1.2). Second, I discuss the intersection of experiences of sexual violence and evangelical life (§8.2). Here, I give attention to some survey participants' descriptions of the church as an enabling environment (§8.2.1), and finally conclude by returning to Wendy's story, noting that the relational impacts of sexual sin are still perceived to apply even in cases of sexual violence (§8.2.2).

8.1 Personal culpability

In this part of this chapter, I discuss how purity culture can influence the aftermath of sexual violence through implications of personal culpability. I first discuss the notion of self-blame, and share Wendy's experience of feeling culpable for a sexual assault which occurred during her childhood (§8.1.1). Here, I consider how a subculture which places heavy emphasis on the importance of holistic abstinence (the evangelical field) has the potential to engender feelings of culpability for sexual violence, and how the impact of this self-blame may be deepened as it is internalised into someone's habitus. I also introduce the concept of secondary victimisation, and draw on the experience of four survey participants to demonstrate how unhelpful responses to the disclosure of sexual violence may lead to secondary victimisation (§8.1.2).

8.1.1 "I was guilty": internalised blame

Wendy and I met at her home on a spring afternoon. As she made us cups of tea in the kitchen, we spoke of the good weather and decided to do our interview outside in the garden. "So", I asked after we had sat down outside and chatted for a while, "what's your story?". Wendy is a cisgender, heterosexual white woman, and at the time of our interview was in her 40s and a curate in the Church of England. She had been attending church her whole life, her background reflecting a combination of Anglican and evangelical churches and wider evangelical culture.[77] Though she is still situated in the evangelical side of the Church of England, much of evangelicalism no longer resonates; she described her current position as "a curate in a charismatic [Anglican] church having spent a decade deconstructing" (Q17).[78] Wendy described how she was raised "in a Christian home" which was a "loving family home", and "grew up going

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[77] Wendy was also immersed in British evangelicalism, particularly during her adolescence and twenties – she attended Spring Harvest and Soul Survivor, engaged with her university CU, was involved with Christian Aid, , and volunteered abroad with Oasis Trust (founded by Steve Chalke, discussed for his prominence during evangelical theological disagreements in the early 2000s, §5.1.1).

[78] She also answered that she does not currently identify as evangelical but attends an evangelical church (Q15), having previously identified as evangelical *and* attended an evangelical church (Q16).

to the local C of E Church which was ... a low, very friendly village church". It was also at this church, Wendy shared, that she had been assaulted during her childhood.

Wendy mentioned this early in our interview, when discussing her Christian upbringing. She reflected on the complexity of looking back at this church as both the place of this experience but also a loving community, and how even at a very young age she had learned the notion that girls and women were responsible for managing boy's and men's behaviour. In her own words:

> I'll always value it [as] the church that taught me to love Jesus. Erm weirdly though it was, it was at church, when I was 7, I was assaulted by someone in the congregation. Who was like a 19 year old with special needs I now understand it, but at the time I, I'd sort of grown up knowing that ... somehow even by the age of 7 or 8, I knew that, erm girls were not supposed to go anywhere near men, ever, until their wedding day which, I don't remember anyone explicitly ever saying that, but somehow that was the message I got. So I think when this happened to me, I was somehow culpable, even though I was an 8 year old kid and yeah it should never have happened ... so that sort of was always there in the background from about the age of 7 or 8.

This was unexpected, as Wendy had not mentioned this in her survey. This conversation also felt at odds with the pleasant environment we found ourselves in – the cups of tea in garden chairs amidst the gentle warmth of spring, the peaceful backdrop of birdsong, the children's trampoline bathed in sunlight. Meanwhile, Wendy spoke about how, when this incident happened, she had already internalised the idea that she was to blame. The way she described this – "I was somehow culpable" – indicates feelings of guilt, that she saw herself as the one at fault. She also explicitly related this 'culpability' to interacting with the opposite sex and to the avoidance of this prior to marriage: "girls were not supposed to go anywhere near men, ever, until their wedding day". Given that, as Wendy clarifies, no one ever "explicitly" said this, it is difficult to ascertain exactly where this belief came from – it is possible that some of these ideas arose from society at large. The idea of avoiding *interacting* with men prior to marriage does, however, point towards Christian (and specifically evangelical) input, and to the idea of holistic abstinence as in evangelical purity culture.

While she has since processed this incident in therapy, Wendy's journey to this was a long one. The feeling of her own culpability was amplified in the years that followed, as she participated in evangelical youthwork which strongly encouraged abstinence until marriage, and seemingly failed to acknowledge the possibility that this teaching was being directed at people who may have experienced sexual assault. One example of this is a Spring Harvest youth session which involved the signing of purity pledges and a time of prayer ministry. Wendy attended the Spring Harvest festival every Easter from the early nineties onwards, for "16 years

in a row", starting at age "10 or 11".[79] In many ways Spring Harvest facilitated positive experiences, and a sheltered space for teens and pre-teens to experience some freedom – Wendy noted now it provided an environment to spend time with friends under distanced parental supervision. In terms of content, "it was quite a conservative evangelical teaching occasionally ... some years was very chilled out and some years then, like True Love Waits came". This TLW session emphasised the teaching that "you must wait til you're married ... but with it came, just this pressure that ... if you didn't, like, the end of the world was nigh". TLW pledge cards were handed out and Wendy recalled how "we were all there pledging, *all of us*. You couldn't not, like, everybody did it". The combination of expected repentance for sexual sin, along with a very uncomfortable prayer ministry time, evoked the feeling of culpability for her childhood sexual assault:

> The prayer ministry I remember creeped me out. And it was all, if you've ever done anything sinful, as in been anywhere near a boy, which I never would because I was so terrified of ever getting it wrong and being sentenced to hell and judgement that I just was like 'going near a boy?! I have to share a bus with them to school what if one of them touches me?!' Erm, but also knowing that this thing had happened to me when I was 8. And I remember this prayer ministry and ... it was like 'oh we pray that as the holy spirit comes down it would like cleanse your, the top of your head' and then would [be] like describing all the body parts as it went down and then it starts being like 'it will go up in your vagina' and it- I just remember being like this feels, horrible and I feel like, what happened to me was my fault.

Wendy's description demonstrates that this experience was not only uncomfortable due to the intense fear of sexual sin ("anything sinful") and explicit language (e.g. about body parts), but also very personally distressing, as it engendered further feelings of guilt for what had happened to her. This session – which she described later in our interview as "that weird True Love Waits service" – was specifically run for the older youth (aged around 14/15 to 18) in attendance at the festival. Perhaps this lack of forethought for those who had experienced sexual violence reflects the assumption that a group of this age will have very little (if any) sexual experience. In many ways, this is understandable. Wendy's experience indicates that such an assumption is, nonetheless, unhelpful.

Continued involvement in the evangelical field throughout Wendy's adolescence further amplified these feelings. While abstinence until marriage was occasionally reinforced by her

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[79] Wendy also attended the Soul Survivor festivals every summer from the late 90s (as a teenager) to around 2011 (later as a youth worker). Her experience of Soul Survivor was that while these festivals did still teach abstinence, they were distinct in not focusing on fear: "they probably did have the like, don't sleep with your boyfriend ... it's better to wait til marriage, but it was almost like, it's better. And it wasn't like, God is gonna kill you if you don't, which is the message I seem to have picked up before then cause like you will drop dead if, yeah".

church during her teenage years, her university environment was particularly impactful. Wendy described attending a "very conservative – *very conservative* – Anglican church", which, for example, did not allow women "to preach or teach".[80] This conservative evangelical church was for a while popular with members of the university Christian Union, and its commitment to evangelical orthodoxy (particularly around both sharing the gospel with non-believers, but also traditional ideas about gender and sex) was evident in behaviours such as "coming on campus and telling any boys who looked at girls like 'you're sinning'". Wendy then shared that:

> it's experiences like that that sort of, reinforced ... some of the pain of, I've really messed up. And it's like ... [there] just was no concept that women might not have control of their bodies and you are telling them these message[s], and it was almost like the shame was heaped on you if you got anything wrong ... even if you have a choice over your body and you do something, that doesn't mean you should be shamed ... erm, yeah those were the sort of, the culture I grew up in.

In identifying an absence of recognition that women "might not have control of their bodies", Wendy draws out how such an intense focus on holistic abstinence can be problematic when it falls on the ears of those who have experienced sexual violence. The way she describes this as "the culture I grew up in" suggests that it was not simply an isolated incident of victim-blaming, but rather a tendency within the evangelical field (or, at least, her experience of it) to fail to account for sexual assault when vociferously promoting abstinence until marriage. For many teenagers and young adults hearing this message, this may go unnoticed; those who have not experienced sexual violence may be less prone to detect this lack of understanding. But in Wendy's case, this environment "reinforced" the feeling of personal responsibility and the "pain" that came with it.

Wendy also noted how an emphasis on holistic abstinence created the perception that if anything non-consensual did happen (as in her case), this was down to a failure to manage this abstinence. She reflected on this atmosphere when discussing how she begun to process the assault:

> I ended up ... in therapy, ... that's when I started to get healed of what'd happened when I was 8, but the backdrop of it had been I think this 'you let yourself get touched by a man' and it was, it wasn't even anything like, that went even that far, it was just wrong, it was not what I wanted, and therefore I was guilty because of this thing. Which is just so twisted and evil and wrong, and then along with it just came that constant drip, drip reminder of girls don't do anything, like holding hands might be risky [be]cause of what it leads to.

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[80] For example, Wendy was told that this "was not God's best", to which she responded that her mother preached when she was growing up. She was met with the following response: "This woman looked me square in the eye and went 'well we pray that God will have the grace to forgive her'".

Holistic abstinence traces occurrences of sexual sin back to a prior event. This could be, for example, romantic gestures or non-penetrative sexual activity, but also something as seemingly insignificant as looking at someone a certain way, wearing certain clothing, spending time with someone of the opposite sex, or even "holding hands". The comprehensive nature of holistic abstinence means it manages risk by preventing it at the earliest possible opportunity, and positioning all parties involved (but especially girls/women) as active agents within this risk management. In doing so, however, it can also create a distressing environment for anyone who has experienced non-consensual sexual activity. If being extra careful ("girls don't do anything") protects you from the possibility of sexual sin, the implication is that if something has happened to you, this is because you have failed to sufficiently follow these protective measures. Wendy affirmed this, sharing that by her mid-teens, she "didn't have any male friends my age or older, they were all younger, because they felt safer ... and it was this background of like, don't let anybody go near you, but I had. Like, even though it was actually abuse". This behaviour illustrates Wendy's adoption of the premise that she is responsible for boys'/men's behaviour. She was attempting to keep herself safe by keeping them at a distance, having deduced from her environment that she must not "let anybody go near" her.

Wendy's language in this quotation also articulates the impact of purity culture despite it being implicit. The phrase "drip, drip reminder" demonstrates that it was both constant and seemingly moderate, even imperceptible at times. Not only were they external but, I would argue, they became ingrained in Wendy's habitus, making her perception of personal culpability all the more powerful. Wendy internalised not just the evangelical expectation of sexual abstinence but the value system that came with it – that abstinence until marriage is the right thing in God's eyes, that "girl's don't do anything" because it could jeopardise this, and that if you successfully follow through with this then a happy, uncomplicated marriage will ensue. Elsewhere in our interview, she reiterated just how entrenched all of this became, enduring as "voices in her head":

> I think the legacy of purity culture means I would struggle to be married, because I just think, even though I don't believe any of it, it's almost like the voices in your head ... it just blows up relationships because you just can't get rid of those voices in your head, even though I don't believe them. It's really weird.

For Wendy, the valorisation of sexual abstinence until marriage was not a tidal wave, powerful and short-lived, but more akin to a dripping tap, inconspicuous and enduring. Perhaps it was this very normalcy of, and repeated exposure to, purity culture which caused it to accumulate in Wendy's habitus, and to persist through dispositional thought patterns she describes as "voices in your head".

Where did these voices come from? As far as I am aware, based on our interview, no one explicitly said to Wendy that the assault was her fault; in fact it seems, other than her parents, no one else knew about it (until her mid-teens, and even from then on she rarely shared it).[81] Rather, the purity culture she felt impacted by was relatively implicit, positioned as simply what Christians do. "It's weird when I think about it", Wendy explained, "[be]cause I don't really remember being told the things of purity culture, it was just they were like in the air".[82] While her family was "pretty chilled out about how faith was practiced", Wendy contrasted this with "church" which "felt more like here's the things you should believe", suggesting the source of this "air" was the evangelical field. This description points towards a more British iteration of purity culture, in which holistic abstinence was assumed, and encouraged not by outspoken endorsement but tacit messages. This implicit nature may also explain Wendy's confusion about how she internalised such ideas in the first place: they became embedded in her habitus. Wendy herself identified the notion of abstinence until marriage as a deep-seated one. When asked in the survey "do you think abstinence-only until marriage is an essential part of Christian belief and practice?", she answered "No" (Q38). She expounded this with the following reflection: "Can't actually believe I ticked no! ... while I have no issue with anyone else not being abstinent I know [I] would never forgive myself I wasn't. Too deeply ingrained – more deconstruction required!" (Q38a) (cf. §9.2.1 on Wendy and deconstruction).

Deeply ingrained indeed, breathed in through exposure to purity culture "in the air" throughout childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. It is harder to identify and thus unpick, but repeated exposure to this field and to the micro-affirmations of purity culture can nonetheless settle in the body and the self. To use Wendy's somewhat atmospheric and gaseous semantic field of 'air', we could describe purity culture (as experienced in the evangelical field) as having relatively imperceptible levels of toxicity which, once embedded in the body, are then experienced in a higher concentration which may be increasingly hazardous. On its own, a single instance of being told not to allow men "near" you may seem relatively marginal – as might a sermon on women taking responsibility for men's sexual temptation, or a passing comment that expresses an assumption that women are always in control of their bodies. The cumulative effect, however, incorporated into the body through habitus, is much less trivial.

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[81] Wendy eventually told a friend when she was aged 15, and had a brief conversation with this friend's father (who was their vicar). She recalled that while this conversation was well-meaning it took place "in the days before safeguarding", and felt ill-equipped and awkward; "so then I was like, I've got the message do not talk about this again, erm, and it wasn't until I got to youth work training that safeguarding came up, and I talked ... to two other people, erm, and that was sort of it"

[82] I found this phrase – "in the air" – to be a useful way of encapsulating the implicit nature of purity culture in British evangelicalism, and used it in a later interview with Dani, who also felt that it resonated with her.

Two survey participants also identified similar feelings of culpability in the aftermath of sexual violence which originated in their own self-blame. One woman, who shared that when she "lost [her] virginity" it was non-consensual, described blaming herself "for [her] own perceived failings" (Q20b. #228). I discuss her experience further below (§8.2.2), as it also evidences the relational impacts of sexual violence. Another woman described blaming herself for a sexual assault, due to exposure to teachings about sex only being permissible within marriage, and metaphors about how sex makes one dirtied or damaged:

> Very much taught that dating [as] a teen was unnecessary (esp[ecially] by my older brother who was dating in his late teens), overtly judged by parents – particularly dad – for being too affectionate & physical with exes, what I wore was judged as too tempting to guys and I often snuck clothes out, attended summer camps and youth groups where we were taught the whole tarnished apple metaphor and it was emphasised that sex was only for marriage etc (and all of this led to being sexually assaulted in my 20s, cheated on and then blaming myself....).

#285, Q20b

From her description, these ideas came from a mix of summer festivals, youth groups and parents. The ones from "summer camps and youth groups", which relate to the apple metaphor and an emphasis on abstinence until marriage, directly point to an evangelical Christian context. The combined effect of all this is that in the aftermath of being sexually assaulted (and "cheated on"), she attributed responsibility to herself ("blaming myself"). Like in Wendy's case, this is not an experience of explicit victim blaming, but rather a broader field in which teachings and practices surrounding sexual abstinence coalesce into a prevailing understanding of implicit victim culpability, which is gradually internalised through habitus.

8.1.2 Secondary victimisation

Two other survey participants also encountered the notion of culpability, but with a noticeable difference – the source being not internalised blame, but suggestion of liability from others when disclosing a sexual assault. One woman described how this happened when she shared that she had been sexually assaulted:

> When I told the pastor's wife that I had been sexually assaulted in my 20s, she led me through a prayer of repentance, as the assumption was I had done something to cause the assault, even though someone had let themselves into the room while I was sleeping. My experience of purity culture is negative, and damaging.

#439, Q20b[83]

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[83] This participant did not divulge the denomination of this church, but did clarify that her experience(s) of purity culture relate to her previous church(es) (Q20a), and that her previous church(es) were:

This response from the pastor's wife indicates that she has made an assumption about the participant's culpability.[84] The implication is that something has to be atoned for – hence the "prayer of repentance" – and therefore that there has been some wrongdoing. A different participant reported a markedly similar experience. When asked about her experience of purity culture, she said: "For example, in response to reporting a rape being told God would forgive me for having sex before marriage (as the first response)" (20b, #118). Again, the notion of forgiveness implies that the participant herself had been at fault. This response also reinforces the idea that abstinence until marriage is the ultimate goal for young Christians; what is centralised here is not the disclosure of rape, a highly distressing and potentially traumatic experience which is also a criminal offence, but rather the resulting impact for the requirement to avoid sex prior to marriage. It suggests that abstinence takes precedence above all else, and that it is the responsibility of young Christians to avoid all sexual encounters – even non-consensual ones.

The concept of secondary victimisation is useful here for elucidating the negative impact of such incidents for victims and survivors of sexual violence. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) defines secondary victimisation as occurring "when the victim suffers further harm not as a direct result of the criminal act but due to the manner in which institutions and other individuals deal with the victim" (2016). As Rachel Condry outlines, the notion of secondary victimisation is one which "is said to have particular salience for victims of rape or sexual assault" (2010: 220). Indeed, it is a useful concept as it shows how the harm of sexual violence can be ongoing: "instances of victimization ... can appear to be contained events, suspended in time, in a fixed location" but "the experience of victimization is in reality much more complex", and "victims can continue to experience the effects of victimization long after the event" (2010: 219). Secondary victimisation can be caused by a variety of factors, including "repeated exposure of the victim to the perpetrator, repeated interrogation about the same facts, the use of inappropriate language or insensitive comments made by all those who come into contact with victims" (EIGE, 2016). In short, it is about further harm after the incident itself, particularly in the process of disclosure and in judicial proceedings which often follow. The concept is most often associated with victims' and survivors' experiences in legal contexts, particularly through "their treatment in the criminal justice process" (Condry, 2010: 236). The process of secondary victimisation can, however, also occur outside of the legal system. It may

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Anglican, Charismatic, Conservative Evangelical, Evangelical, Non-denominational and Pentecostal (Q14). She also indicated that while she has never identified as evangelical herself, she currently attends, and has also previously attended, evangelical churches (Q15; Q16).

[84] This is also notable as the participant reported it not just to a peer but to someone in a position of authority (the vicar's wife) – given that this was a disclosure of a crime, it is alarming that there were seemingly no safeguarding measures in place (or followed).

be experienced "from informal sources" such as "kin, friends, or others in their local communities" (Condry, 2010: 239). Condry writes from a UK perspective, and emphasises that societal attitudes in this context can contribute to such experiences of secondary victimisation. She observes that the "act of disclosure has the potential to trigger" further harm, and anticipation of such consequences may also constitute a barrier to disclosure, separate to "barriers at the level of the criminal justice system" (2010: 239). Condry explains that the prevalence and deep-rootedness of victim-blaming myths, which are "deeply embedded in our culture" may contribute to these barriers; she cites a study from Amnesty International UK on the presence of "victim-blaming myths" which may centre on what the victim/survivor was wearing or their number of previous sexual partners (2010: 242).

It is important to note that British evangelicalism exists within this broader social context, and those who exist (or indeed grow up) within this field live within it too. Significantly, however, much of this may be amplified in evangelical purity culture. Condry argues that "feelings of shame, stigma, and fearing blame from others will be stronger in patriarchal cultures with strong moral codes and prohibitions around female sexuality and proprietary attitudes towards women" (2010: 239). In the British evangelical field, we see proscriptions around sexual activity, and any behaviours considered to prompt or influence this, which are particularly directed towards girls and women. These prohibitions also have a moral basis – they reflect a "strong moral code" in the words of Condry (ibid.) – as they are grounded in ideas about how life *should* be lived, a 'should' not just by reason but by divine design (cf. §5.1). The language of 'sin' applied to sexual activity prior to marriage cloaks it in connotations of transgression and depravity. In this context, sexual assault may therefore contribute to even further distress – both because it seemingly disrupts a divinely ordained expectation, and because this consequently may pose a barrier to disclosure due to fear over the responses this may prompt.

The experiences of the two survey participants described here (#439 and #118, above) evidence further harm due to how a disclosure of sexual assault has been dealt with. They therefore constitute two experiences of secondary victimisation, based on the EIGE definition above, which emphasises that it is not about the criminal act itself but in responses to the victim/survivor which we know from Condry's work can originate from friends or communities, such as fellow church congregants. Being "led … through a prayer of repentance" (#439) implies that this woman has committed a sin herself, and this wrongdoing requires an intervention from God. In other words, it is an example of victim-blaming, even if indirect and obscured through theological language. Similarly, the participant who was told God would "forgive" her when she disclosed a "rape" because it meant she had had "sex before marriage" (#118) also

experienced victim-blaming; the notion of forgiveness points towards transgression or fault on the part of the participant herself. Both of these incidences constitute "use of inappropriate language or insensitive comments" made by someone who has "come into contact" with the victim/survivor, which the EIGE lists as an example of a cause of secondary victimisation which can cause further harm after the incident itself (above; EIGE, 2016).

The experiences of two other survey participants also point towards secondary victimisation, but in a slightly different way – due to poor and/or lack of response, rather than victim-blaming specifically. First, one woman shared that anonymously disclosing a sexual assault was met with an inappropriate reply: "when I attended a Christian camp I wrote anonymously in a question box 'if god wants us to stay pure and we're viewed as impure when we have sex, what about when I was raped? Why didn't god stop it?' One of the leaders answered extremely inappropriately" (Q20b, #71). She does not clarify further what this answer entailed, but it seems safe to assume from her language that this reaction was unhelpful and perhaps also harmful.

Second, the experience of another participant demonstrates that as well as inappropriate responses, a lack of response can also be harmful. Antony Pemberton and Eva Mulder have sought to strengthen the concept of secondary victimisation and consequently developed the idea of secondary victimisation as epistemic injustice. One problem they identify is that secondary victimisation is often understood solely as harmful *responses* to a crime. They argue that this is not always helpful, because it assumes an active response in the first place, when the absence of a response can also be harmful. This can be observed in the following survey participant's response, when discussing her experiences of purity culture:

> Don't do anything sexual before marriage it's a sin and you will be impure and if you dress in a way that arouses men if you get raped it's your fault (There was a rspe [sic] in my youth club. The girl told the male youth leader. There was no suggestion whatsoever of counselling or support to report to authorities)

#184, Q20b

Pemberton and Mulder explain that one "issue is that secondary victimization … is understood in light of the responses from societal institutions" (2023: 3). They argue, however, that "negative experiences of victims frequently result from *the lack of responses* from societal institutions" (2023: 3; emphasis added). The example given by this participant reflects what Pemberton and Mulder seek to emphasise – there is a lack of appropriate follow-up when someone (presumably young, given the use of the word "girl") discloses a sexual assault, and further to someone in a position of authority ("youth leader"). The suggestion from this response is that the lack of action taken was harmful, not only through a failure to provide

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pastoral care for the girl in question, but also due to the absence of prompting to report a crime. These two examples ("inappropriate response", #71 and lack of response, #184) are less specific than the two other survey participants described above who experienced victim-blaming ("prayer of repentance", #439 and "God would forgive me", #118). Nonetheless, they point towards experiences of secondary victimisation due to evidence of poor responses that led to further harm upon disclosure of sexual assault.

8.2 Intersections with evangelical life

In this second part of the chapter, I discuss intersections between life as an evangelical (occupying the evangelical field and possessing a habitus shaped by it) and experiences of sexual violence. First, in the case of some participants who identify the evangelical field as having a contributory role to the occurrence of sexual violence (§8.2.1); second, as a site of impact, through the negative effects to relationships from sexual sin which seem to still apply even in cases of sexual violence (§8.2.2). In the former I draw on survey responses, while in the latter I conclude the chapter by returning to Wendy's experience, using her story as an example of how relationships can seemingly still be impacted when sexual 'sin' is non-consensual.

8.2.1 "The church contributed to his decision": enabled sexual violence

As demonstrated above, Wendy and some other survey respondents felt that purity culture shaped the aftermath of sexual violence. Meanwhile, some participants felt that purity culture impacted their experience by contributing to an environment which *enabled* sexual violence, and again the fact it was actively communicated at all makes it noteworthy. This did not apply in Wendy's experience, so here I draw on 4 survey participants, and briefly Zara's experience (whose story is the focus of the following chapter).

The final survey question created space for any further comments. One participant used this to share that: "My first boyfriend was from this church. He raped me whilst we were in a relationship. I believe the church contributed to his decision to do so." (#125, Q43). That is the full extent of this question response, and the respondent did not expand further on how the church contributed. The rest of her responses, however, help build a picture of her church background and her experience of purity culture, all of which presumably took place in one previous congregation (hence "was from this church"). This participant was in her mid-30s, still a Christian and had been attending an Anglo-Catholic congregation for over 10 years. Prior to this, she attended another church also for over 10 years, which she identified as charismatic,

evangelical, and conservative evangelical.[85] When asked if she had experienced purity culture, she selected 'Yes' (Q20), and when prompted to describe further she shared: "clear from teachings at a previous church when I was growing up that sex before marriage was a sin and would lead to he[ll?]".[86] As one survey response, even with open-ended text answers, there is a limit to how much can be inferred. But the information provided does suggest that an evangelical church she attended growing up – presumably charismatic in style and conservative in theology – promoted traditional purity culture teachings, and that this played some part in being raped by her then-boyfriend, another member of this congregation who had thus been exposed to these same teachings.

A different survey respondent disclosed that she had been sexually abused and groomed in her teens by a youth leader from an evangelical youth group, who was in his late twenties. When asked whether she had experienced purity culture, she also selected 'Yes' (Q20) and described it as follows:

> I went to an interdenominational youth group that was much more evangelical than the Anglican church I attended as a child and young person. We were taught very clearly that sex outside of marriage was not acceptable, which is certainly not something my very liberal parents had told me. The leader who was most outspoken about this was a 27 year-old-man. I was 15 when we met and we were in a 'relationship' for about 18 months (ending when I was 16). He said that God had been leading him to me, and said 'God says it's all right' when he touched me. In retrospect, I was groomed and sexually abused by him, and it has taken years to get over the trauma of this experience

#437, Q20b

In this case, the evangelical environment enabled this abuse in terms of access and longevity; this man's leadership position granted him access to this teenage girl, and appeals to spiritual authority were utilised to justify this sexual abuse. It is notable that this experience is shared here, in a question asking specifically about experiences of *purity culture*, suggesting that the participant has made a cognitive link between the two – and, additionally, that the clear emphasis on avoiding pre-marital sex she encountered in this evangelical youth group was again somehow relatedly linked to this man grooming and sexually abusing her. Elsewhere in her survey, when asked to define purity culture, this participant followed her definition with a reflection that it can co-occur with abuse: "the practice of teaching young people, particularly young women, that it is important to remain "modest" and abstinent, refraining from sexual

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[85] This is clear from question 14 (the denominational table): for 'myself' she selected Anglican, Catholic (not RC) and Post-evangelical/Ex-evangelical; for 'my church' she selected Anglican, Catholic (not RC); for 'my previous church(es), she selected Charismatic, Conservative Evangelical, Evangelical.
[86] This last word was unfinished; I have presumed she meant to say 'lead to hell', but there is of course room for interpretive error.

contact before marriage. It is deeply patriarchal and frequently associated with abuse" (#437, Q19).

Recent years have seen growing interest and attention devoted to the concept of spiritual abuse, and how coercive and controlling behaviour may manifest in relation to specifically religious contexts. Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys have been at the forefront of this development (Oakley and Humphreys, 2018; Oakley and Humphreys, 2019). They have defined spiritual abuse as "a form of emotional and psychological abuse" which is "characterized by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context" (2018: 31). Some of the characteristic features they identify are observable in the youth leader mentioned in the quotation above. Oakley and Humphreys outline 12 main characteristics of spiritual abuse – 8 characteristics of coercion and control; 4 characteristics of the "spiritual aspects of abuse" (2018: 64). The latter includes the "use of 'diving calling' to coerce" and "use of God's name or suggested will to coerce" (2018: 64). Both of these are evident in the quotation, as the youth leader justified his actions by saying God had "been leading" him to her, imbuing a sense of a divine calling and implying it was God's will. His phrase "God says it's all right" suggests not only that God has made it permissible, but that the man in question has somehow ascertained this through presumable close (or *closer*) proximity to God.

It is also worth noting broader context, in which stories of abuse have come to light in Christian (often evangelical) settings and often involve older male perpetrators (cf. Everhart, 2020). Take, for example, Soul Survivor: allegations of misconduct by Mike Pilavachi were reported in 2023, prompting Pilavachi to be suspended, and later resign, as associate pastor of Soul Survivor church in Watford (Swerling, 2023). These claims have since been corroborated by Anglican (Church of England, 2023) and independent (Scolding and Fullbrook, 2024; cf. Scolding, Henderson and Fullbrook, 2025) reports. These did not relate to sexual violence, but rather "an abuse of power" by Pilavachi and specifically "spiritual abuse", from "coercive and controlling behaviour" leading to wrestling, massages, and "inappropriate relationships" with "young male interns" (Church of England, 2023). It is notable, however, that Pilavachi's position of power was utilised, much like in the case of survey participant #437; the Church of England reported that Pilavachi "used his spiritual authority to control people" (ibid.). Further, reporting emphasised Pilavachi's persona as a "naïve celibate" (Eastham and Leake, 2024), suggesting that public celibacy was presumed as a protective factor in his interactions with others. This draws a link between abstinence and sexual activity (or lack thereof), and leaders' safeguarding risk. Additionally, building on developing scholarship relating to spiritual abuse, Emma Tomalin has argued for a "link between spiritual abuse" and gender-based violence (2023: 324). This is rooted, she says, in "strongly patriarchal elements justified by resource to religious texts and

teachings that maintain women's subordinate status to men and can therefore make women more vulnerable to spiritual abuse and less likely to challenge it" (ibid.). Johanna Stiebert similarly notes a link between spiritual abuse and gender-based abuse, particularly in relation to the weaponisation of Biblical texts and "teachings that maintain male hegemony and women's subordinate status" (2023: 4).[87] The experience of survey participant #437 contributes to this growing field of literature, as further evidence of spiritually-laden mechanisms employed in instances of sexual abuse and gender-based violence.

The third survey participant relevant here is a Scottish woman who also experienced an abusive relationship as a teenager and identifies purity culture as a causative factor for sexual abuse. She identified her denominational background as a mixture of Anglican/Episcopalian, Charismatic, Conservative Evangelical and Evangelical. During her church upbringing, she was "raised with the sellotape becomes less sticky the more it is stuck to different things' metaphor" (cf. §5.3.1), had purity culture "constantly pushed in youth group", and encountered a "church teaching series" on the theme of sexual abstinence (#456, Q20b; Q23a). She was also recommended Joshua Harris' book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (cf. 4.1.2), and encountered purity culture on an international scale, saying: "then it became a REAL shitshow when I went to YWAM [i.e. a YWAM base in] in Hawaii, and then the influence Bethel started to have globally" (#456, Q20b).[88] She summed up her experience of purity culture as: "It's abusive and I hold it largely responsible for my rapes in my abusive relationship when I was 18" (#456, Q20b). She later in her survey described herself as "traumatised" by purity culture (Q36a), and shared of her current denomination: "Currently religiously identify as 'real fucking angry' because evangelicalism will fuck a bitch uuuuuuuup" (Q17). While this participant does not identify exactly *how* purity culture could be responsible for the rapes in her abusive relationship, the active identification of "evangelicalism" as the source of these experiences, along with use of the

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[87] Others too have documented how conservative Christian teachings emphasising traditional gender roles and headship theology may be used to justify abuse (Barnes and Aune, 2024: 103), pressuring forgiveness or "compelling" wives to "submit" (Aune and Barnes, 2018: 10). More broadly, in light of the #MeToo movement, the resultant #ChurchToo trend has drawn attention to individuals who "have suffered sexual harassment and abuse in their religious and worship communities" (Stiebert, 2021: 343). This has prompted awareness not only of such experiences by congregants, but experiences *at the hands of* religious leaders, often enabled by spiritual authority and power imbued from leadership (cf. Everhart, 2020). Others have "blamed evangelical purity culture" specifically "for creating conditions that enable sexual violence" (Van Den Brandt, 2025: 362). Emily Joy Allison, a former evangelical with a public platform who coined the #ChurchToo, has drawn causal links between purity culture and abuse: she defined purity culture as "the spiritual corollary of rape culture created in Christian environments by theologies that teach complete sexual abstinence until legal, monogamous marriage between a cisgender, heterosexual man and a cisgender, heterosexual woman for life" (2021: 31).

[88] YWAM has also very recently received press attention for public accusations (including by British YWAM-ers) of spiritual abuse (Das, 2025a) and attempts to "'cure' sexual sin" (Das, 2025b). The language of 'sexual sin' evidences congruence with the evangelical understandings of sexual sin outlined in this study, and they also made reference to the concept of 'soul ties' (Das, 2025a)

terms "traumatised" and "abusive" to describe purity culture as a phenomenon, reinforce the central role she ascribes to it.

The fourth survey participant of relevance here also attributed a causative role to their church background when discussing unwanted sexual experiences. When asked about the use of the Bible in purity culture, she recalled commands for submission (for wives) and how one's body "belongs" to their marital partner:

> Wives should submit to their husbands - have heard this a few times, often with 'husbands should love their wives as Christ loves the church' ie [sic] they should be self-sacrificial, but still it's the man who is in charge and makes the decisions and if you don't do your marriage like this you'll have problems. Your body belongs to your spouse - I don't know if I was explicitly taught that I couldn't say no to my husband, but I felt that way for the first few years of marriage, that if he wanted it I had to at least try

#429, Q34

This participant did not explicitly make reference to any form of sexual violence – she did not, anywhere else in the survey, use the phrases abuse, rape or assault – but it is worth noting here, because she expresses a feeling that she "couldn't say no", and directly traces this to a Bible verse about husbands and wives having ownership over one another's' bodies (1 Corinthians 7:4). This is also the woman who had a panic attack on her wedding day due to feeling fearful of the wedding night (cf. §7.1.2).

Finally, Zara expressed during our interview her that there were "a lot of … sexually abusive people" present in the church congregation she grew up in, and that they were "enabled" by the overarching culture which was highly gendered, promoted holistic abstinence, and heavily emphasised forgiveness. This latter meant that perpetrators of sexual assault were repeatedly allowed back into the fold: "it was always a case of 'we have to forgive them and invite them back', and 'why won't you accept that they've apologised?' And I'd just be like I'm a teenager I shouldn't have to put up with this *crap*, like, why are you allowing them back into our space?". Later in our interview, we returned to this topic, and at this point Zara identified these individuals as "rapists":

> also the fact that … there were rapists around, I was lucky I wasn't assaulted. I think one of the reasons I shut down like I did was because my friends had all been assaulted by that point, erm, there were like, abusers … teenage abusers but still abusers. And they were enabled by it all.

I asked if they were enabled "by the kind of teachings that were being perpetuated there?"; Zara replied "And by the insistence on forgiveness. It was like, 'don't do anything sexual, but if you're a boy and you say sorry afterwards it's okay'. Right?". This insistence on forgiveness is seemingly tied to gender – for boys it can be made 'okay' if they apologise, and others are

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expected to forgive. In an article on spirituality and sexual abuse, Beth Crisp points out that some victims/survivors "have been told they should follow Christ's example and forgive those who have abused them", and that expecting such forgiveness means failing to realise "just how serious the impact of sexual abuse is" (Crisp, 2007: 308-309), It seems that such forgiveness was expected in the case of Zara's childhood peers. The apparent juvenile age of the perpetrators may make the communal response to these assaults more complicated (Zara described them as "teenage"), but there was nonetheless an expectation of forgiveness and assumption that they could remain a part of the congregation, with apparently no input from the victim/survivor(s).

Though they are but a handful, why do these participants describe their experiences in this way, actively identifying purity culture as a causative factor, their evangelical field as an 'enabling' environment? Indeed, it may initially seem startling to attribute such experiences of sexual violence to a religious phenomenon which ultimately promotes what is seen to be a morally upstanding way of life. How could it give rise to such a moral transgression, and further, to such a perpetration of harm towards another human being? Here, I find helpful Alistair McFadyen's chapter in *Feminist Trauma Theologies* (2020). McFadyen traces recent changes to legislation in England and Wales – particularly the introduction "a specific offence of coercive and controlling behaviour" (2020: 89) – to evaluate the violent-incident model of domestic victimization, and similar conceptualisations in classical trauma theory which frame domestic victimization as a boundaried, usually extreme, interruption to reality. McFadyen notes that, while this model does have utility within clinical and judicial settings, it can fail to capture patterns of behaviour by privileging (ostensibly isolated) incidents and may place undue emphasis on violence. The reality, however, is different: "Coercive control need not be violent. Neither it is the episodic, incidental *interruption* of everyday normality; it *is* normality" (McFadyen, 2020: 81). McFadyen's move away from a violent-incident model of domestic victimization, and towards one of coercive control, is pertinent. His framing of domestic victimization not just as isolated incidents apparently inharmonious with the realities of day-to-day life, but rather *entrenched* within these realities, is helpful here because it demonstrates that occurrences of sexual violence are not detached from their wider environment but are part of these everyday circumstances. In short, they are contextually and relationally embedded.

What might this embedding look like? Perhaps the 'enabling' environment is rooted in an insistence on forgiveness. Perhaps a woman feels unable to say no to unwanted sexual activity in a marital relationship because she has learned that her body belongs to her spouse, and that submission is a fundamental characteristic of biblical womanhood. In other cases, we might not know exactly – but it is clear that, to these participants, the backdrop of purity culture

played a role in the perpetuation of sexual violence, by creating an environment in which sexual violence could be subsumed within everyday normality.

8.2.2 Perception of relational impact

In chapters 5 and 6, I argued that the idea of sexual sin provokes fear because of the risk it poses to key relationships in the evangelical field (§5.3; §6.2). I illustrated how these relational impacts of sexual sin were concentrated in four areas: the self, God, one's Christian community, and a future spouse. I used the concept of evangelical habitus to demonstrate how all of these relationships are valorised in the field (and, in turn, one's habitus), and explain why sexual sin can be so alarming – because it puts these relationships in jeopardy. Despite the fact that experiences of sexual violence are non-consensual, for many, the perceived impacts of sexual sin still apply. Indeed, they may even amplify the distress of such experiences by framing them as a digression from God's design and consequently damaging to relationships which are central to evangelical life.

In our interview, Wendy mentioned feeling that the sexual assault from her childhood impacted her relationship with God. This was something she discussed in passing, amidst a conversation about when she finally started to tell people about the assault (in her mid-teens whilst attending Spring Harvest):

> When I was 15 or 16 ... I remember my friend [and I] ... we were walking [around the campsite] 'til about 1 in the morning. And then I said to him 'look, this happened to me when I was 8'. It was the first time I'd told anybody, in my memory – apparently I had told my mum when I was 8 but I didn't remember that ... so I kind of fessed up to my parents and they were like, I think almost shocked that I would be damaged by what'd happened. But I think it was actually the reason it was so damaging was because of what I thought it did to me and God.

While the idea of a relationship with God was not the focus of our conversation here, what Wendy says is nonetheless significant. It is evident from this extract that Wendy had viewed the assault as damaging because of the negative impact through "what I thought it did to me and God". At the time, I did not press further on what this change might have looked like, so it is unclear exactly what this may mean. What is clear, however, is that Wendy felt this assault changed her before God somehow, and that this changed status was the primary source of the "damage" she felt it did.

Some survey participants likewise showed evidence of this idea of impacted relationships as a result of sexual assault. This included, first of all, a changed perception of the self. One respondent discussed an assault at university, which shaped how she viewed herself: "I was sexually assaulted in uni when I was still a virgin. Purity culture caused me to view myself

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as 'used' and unlovable" (Q20b, #421). In the aftermath of the assault, she attended an evangelical event which intensified these feelings:

> Immediately after I had been assaulted I attended a 'relationships' workshop at an evangelical church which basically boiled down to if you have sex before marriage you're dirty and unlovable ... The experience was horrific, I wanted the ground to swallow me up I felt so uncomfortable.

<div align="right">#421, Q23b</div>

The words 'dirty and unlovable' echo the language of being tainted or damaged as a result of sex prior to marriage, as discussed in chapter 5 (§5.3.1). This participant also recounted, regarding this relationships workshop, that "the message also made me feel extremely upset and angry as I already believed in Jesus and I still got assaulted, so where was I supposed to go?" (Q23b, #421); this was an environment from which she expected support. She also reported leaving the church for a period of time because of this – "by this point I'd started figuring out that purity culture was BS and effectively left the church for 2 years because of it" (Q23b, #421). Other participants – who had seemingly not experienced sexual violence themselves – also reiterated the possibility that purity culture may impact how victims/survivors view themselves. "It can be damaging to abuse/SA survivors ... who might feel 'defiled' because of their past", one shared (Q43, #463). Another emphasised that "there are many reasons why people are not virgins at marriage, including abuse and rape. It retraumatises these people to place them within the 'damaged goods' narrative" (Q38a, #296).

Other participants noted anxieties about the impact of a sexual assault on their role in the community and/or future spousal relationship. One survey respondent described how she felt no longer welcome in church, or even deserving of love, after she had been raped due to the perceived impact of losing one's purity. She shared: "Purity culture and the idea of keeping myself pure meant that when I was raped in my adolescence I didn't share my story because I was afraid I had lost my purity and was no longer worthy of love or welcome in the Church or in general" (Q20b, #96). Another participant also shared that being raped led her to lose access to her church community: "never learnt about consent and was thrown out of my church when I was r*ped outside of marriage. [Purity culture is] Not just negative – dangerous" (Q43, #283). In this instance, it did not just impact the dynamic of her relationship to her church community; she was actively removed from it.

As I demonstrated in chapter 5, the social impact of sexual sin can be weighty (§5.3.3). The response of one participant shows that she felt this impact despite the fact that her experience was non-consensual. She discussed the deep effects of this as follows:

I ended up in some not so great situations because I 100% blamed myself for my own perceived failings. Nobody ever told me I had a voice and could take charge of my own situations you know? When I lost my virginity it wasn't exactly by choice :/ and the whole thing, and leading up to it, had been messy and confusing and emotional. Once I lost my virginity I spiralled into the most horrendous black place which took years to come out of. I truly felt like now I was no longer a virgin, I couldn't do any of the things I had wanted to do – missions work, marry a lovely Christian guy, even play in the worship team at church etc. It felt like my world had ended and I didn't know what to do with it.

<div align="right">Q20b, #228</div>

This answer (which was to Q20b, on her experience of purity culture) provided incredibly rich data, and while it is too long to reproduce in full, it is important to point out that more of her reflections confirm that this sexual encounter was non-consensual. Towards the end of this answer, she discussed how these experiences impact her parenting now that she has a daughter of her own:

Since having my own daughter, so many of these issues have been playing on my mind ... I want her to ... have the courage to say no. Or yes! It has made me kind of take a step back from my entire faith and begin reevaluating [sic] it to be honest ... My girl deserves better than ... to feel like she can't say yes OR no to sex because ... [she] doesn't want to be unkind to the one offering / forcing it. And certainly never to believe that anything she does ruins who she is as a person.

<div align="right">Q20b, #228</div>

This response articulates how she would like her daughter to have a different upbringing, and suggests that what she desires for her daughter (choice) was not present in her own experience. Additionally, the use of the phrase "the one offering/forcing" again indicates that losing her virginity (whatever this means, but presumably penetrative sex) was against her will. The repercussions of losing her virginity were seemingly far-reaching. She identifies two areas of impact: to a future marriage, and to her access to her Christian community. The loss of a potential Christian partner disrupts the expected trajectory of adulthood in the evangelical field, while the inability to do "missions work" and "play in the worship team" reflects a loss of access to playing an active role in this field. The magnitude of this impact should not be underestimated, barring her from key relationships (spouse, church community) and restricting access to characteristic events in the evangelical life course (e.g. marrying a Christian man). These losses were not just expectations that now evaded her – they were all things she "wanted" to do herself, perhaps internalised into her own habitus. The aftermath of non-consensual sex was profound – she believed her whole world imploded ("it felt like my world had ended"), a conviction that led her to a "horrendous black place", the protracted journey out of which demonstrates the longevity of these perceived repercussions ("took years to come out of").

8.3 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has taken as its focus the fourth theme identified for this thesis, sexual violence, and demonstrated that this is another area of impact of evangelical purity culture in Britain as experienced by some participants of this study. First, I discussed participants' experiences of purity culture provoking feelings of personal culpability for sexual violence (§8.1). Here, I discussed Wendy's feelings of guilt, through internalising messages of blame in the evangelical field into her own habitus (§8.1.1), and some survey respondents' experiences of secondary victimisation through interactions with others in the evangelical field (§8.1.2). The second sphere of impact in relation to sexual violence was intersections with evangelical life. Here I summarised some participants' feelings that their evangelical community enabled sexual violence (§8.2.1), and noted the relevance of these to a growing field of literature on the links between spiritual abuse and gender-based violence. Finally, I outlined how the relational impacts of sexual sin are still perceived to apply even in instances of sexual violence (§8.2.2).

Chapter 9. Shifting faith

"It was only last year that I said for the first time out loud that I don't believe in God. With the caveat that, if there is a God, I don't think it's the God that I was taught about. And if there is a God that I wasn't taught about, where the hell's he been?"

– Zara

This chapter outlines changes to one's evangelical faith as a potential consequence of purity culture, as demonstrated by some participants in this study. It constitutes the third (and final) chapter of part 2 of this thesis, which assesses some key impacts that British evangelical purity culture had has on women, along with chapter 7 (body) and chapter 8 (sexual violence). In what follows, I outline how purity culture can lead to shifts in personal faith, and the variety of outcomes this might ultimately lead to. Following the pattern for thematic chapters adopted in this thesis, I tell the story of one interview participant (Zara), weaving this into discussion alongside further examples from survey respondents.

The chapter is split into two halves. The first half focuses on Zara's story, detailing how she gradually transitioned from evangelical to atheist, and how her exposure to purity culture in the evangelical field played a role in this journey (§9.1). Here, I focus on the preoccupation with abstinence within this field (§9.1.1), the emphasis on gender roles and marriage (§9.1.2), and Zara's uniquely vulnerable habitus, due to a variety of personal factors, which may have amplified the negative effects of purity culture (§9.1.3). In the second half of the chapter, I turn to the concept of 'deconstruction' (re-examining evangelical faith) and discuss the role of purity culture in prompting this re-examination (§9.2). After introducing the concept (§9.2.1), I present a threefold model of deconstruction, which broadly categorises the outcomes of this process as: dwelling (§9.2.2), disaffiliation (§9.2.3), and deconversion (§9.2.4). I conclude the stories of the five interviewees by mapping them onto these three categories.

Of these five interview participants, Zara was the only one who I came into contact with independently, outside of the survey. She came across this research and expressed interest due to her personal experience growing up in evangelical purity culture in Britain. Zara was clear about the intentions behind her involvement from the beginning; she wanted, first and foremost, to be heard. She also wanted to begin to facilitate accountability for harmful experiences, and was wary of her story being used to benefit the Church of England – an institution which had failed her. It is with this in mind that I share her story, and indeed include it within this study – the chief beneficiary of which I intend to be the participants themselves (and others like them). Mindful of this, let us turn to Zara's personal history.

9.1 From evangelical to atheist: Zara's story

Zara is a white, English, cisgender woman, and at the time of our interview was in her thirties. She "grew up in the Church of England"; her father was a vicar within this denomination, and church became "really fundamental to our sense of kind of identity and community as a family". Much of what we discussed in our interview revolved around her teenage years, during which time Zara and her family lived in what she described as a "very conservative" village in southern England, filled with "very highly educated upper middle class families". Seeking to break out of the 'vicar's daughter' identity, Zara sought out other Christian spaces. In her early teens, she befriended a fellow vicar's daughter and started attending their church – a "free church", "loosely affiliated" with a nearby Baptist church, which was "known for being very evangelical". Gradually, Zara became immersed within some of the flagship markers of the British evangelical field of the early 2000s. With this friend, she also started attending the Soul Survivor church in Watford, which Zara described as "the point where we kind of got exposed to the broader kind of evangelical community". She attended the Soul Survivor festivals, took part in Soul Survivor's outreach event 'Soul in the City' in the early-mid 2000s (by her own estimation),[89] and began attending Spring Harvest Holidays with her family.[90] In total she spent "a good 3 weeks out of every summer holiday in evangelical Christian spaces from the age of about 14".

During her youth, then, Zara straddled these communities, tied to her family's Anglican church, where her father was the vicar, but spending a lot of time at her friend's church too, and involved in the evangelical world that was Soul Survivor (the church, events like Soul City, and the festivals). Zara reiterated how well-connected she was within British evangelicalism herself – she noted that "I had a lot of intersections with other youth groups", recalling that a "friend of mine came along to Soul Survivor with us and she was like, 'Zara how do you know everybody here?', because with Spring Harvest being the holiday that we had every year, I really did know a lot of people". Along with staying in contact with people from these holidays, Zara also "ran the Christian Union" at her secondary school, and therefore "worked with some of the youth leaders" in the town. Overall, she had "many different layers of Christian community going on".

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[89] 'Soul in the City' was "about service to the city of London", Zara recalled. Youth groups from different churches partook in the event, which involved things like "cleaning up gardens" and "community assistance".

[90] The Spring Harvest being referred to here is 'Spring Harvest Holidays', distinct from the Spring Harvest festivals. Spring Harvest Holidays is a holiday provider in France with a Christian ethos, and offers "on-site Bible study and worship sessions" for holiday-goers (Spring Harvest Holidays, c2022). This is separate to the annual evangelical festivals based in the UK, also operating under the name 'Spring Harvest', which Zara attended once at the age of 15. Both, however, are affiliated with the registered charity Essential Christian (ibid; Spring Harvest, no date), which is actively evangelically oriented and expects event speakers to cohere with the EA's basis of faith (Essential Christian, c2025).

By the time of our interview, Zara identified as an atheist (a word she used herself). Her eventual exit from evangelical Christianity, the Church of England and overall the Christian faith, had a variety of contributing factors. As she narrated her experience, I noticed how much it was one marked by pain. This included her father developing a progressive disease which for a time went undiagnosed, an ordeal made further distressing by the associated loss of his job, their house and their community: "he literally got kicked out of the church ... the bishop talked him into resigning and it was, just incredibly abusive, we lost our home, we lost everything". On top of this, an important influence was also how the evangelical spaces she occupied during her teens promoted purity culture. In what follows, I outline multiple factors surrounding Zara's upbringing within evangelicalism that led her to leave. Alongside the treatment of her father, this included: a preoccupation with abstinence (§9.1.1); expectation of conformity with gender roles and marriage (§9.1.2); feeling sexualised from a young age; and all of this taking place amidst further risk factors for vulnerability (§9.1.3).

9.1.1 The preoccupation with abstinence

I asked Zara if she had been exposed to teachings about purity and abstinence during her adolescence. "Tons of it", she replied. "Where would you like to start?", I enquired, to which she responded "I think it all starts with the church I joined when I was 13", (her friend's free church). "I think that's the root of it". Zara attended this church's "youth group", where she encountered the idea that she should be abstinent until marriage. The ages of those within the youth group ranged from around "11 to 16", and Zara "found a lot of value" in this friendship group and through having friends of "different ages". When I asked Zara about "teachings about sexuality and abstinence" within this context, she shared "it was all- practically all we were taught about. I mean, I don't really remember learning about much else. It was a constant preoccupation". This language is reminiscent of Katy's, who described the focus on abstinence as a 'fixation' (§5.2.1) .Youth group was key to the delivery and implementation of this preoccupation; Zara noted how the church services and youth group events served different purposes, so "it was sort of seen as like, you go to the church service for the ... sermons and for the kind of theology of it. Erm, but youth group time was about abstinence".

From her description this "preoccupation" within Zara's church youth group sounded relatively informal, despite its influence. When asked if they had "purity or abstinence themed events" or "courses or bible studies", Zara recalled "no, nothing like that. Nothing like that, it was more conversational, it was more, if it'd been more structured I think it would've been easier to pull apart". This is consistent with the British iteration of purity culture which I have presented in this thesis – a constituent part of evangelicalism, less identifiable and less overt than its American counterpart. The use of the term "conversational" captures how this emphasis

on abstinence manifested. It points towards more informal mechanisms – somehow abstinence became an intense focus despite the absence of targeted courses, events, or Bible studies. Zara gave an example of "when a couple [from] the youth group had sex for the first time", at the age of "maybe 15". As a result, the girl was "driven to the local Costa Coffee" to "have a conversation about the fact that she'd lost her virginity and that wasn't very good was it". She did not clarify who took this teenager for the coffee – the implication is perhaps a youth worker, or church congregant with some responsibility within the youth provision, but this is not certain. This sheds light on the environment which Zara described as being preoccupied with abstinence but through more "conversational", informal methods, making abstinence central in a way that was implicit rather than (in Zara's words) "structured".

This focus on abstinence was also evident beyond the youth group in other evangelical spaces. Zara reflected, for example, how it was "a constant conversation" and recalled "being really angry at Soul Survivor one year cause I was just like, 'everyone keeps talking about abstinence but no one's talking about how to have a healthy, romantic relationship'". Despite Zara's acknowledgement and critique of this at the time, she nonetheless practiced abstinence herself. She embraced its importance so much so that abstinence became tied to the foundation of her Christian faith: "you kind of feel like if I let go of this [virginity] I'm letting go of this God that I really, really believed in … that's how I felt, I felt like it would be letting go of God". The persistent focus on abstinence in the evangelical field (manifesting both locally in her church, and at large events like Soul Survivor festivals) seemingly became lodged within Zara's own habitus. The fact that she remained committed to abstinence whilst questioning whether she agreed with it reveals just how deep-rooted this commitment must have been. This is something Zara herself pointed out. She met her now-husband as a teenager, and "the first 4 years we were together we didn't have sex" – she described being "very determined on that". Zara continued this after she left church, something which, with hindsight, she found bemusing: "I've got a lot of questions now … I see it now as an extreme trauma reaction, because, I don't know why I would have stopped going to church and continued with that line of life long after I've left it". This points towards the deep-seated nature of Zara's commitment to sexual abstinence, and of the lengthy process of untangling a formerly well-established behavioural disposition from her habitus.

9.1.2 Gender roles and marriage

This story also highlights the gendered norms Zara encountered within this environment – something which she both identified and pushed back against from a relatively young age. When describing the Costa Coffee incident, Zara stressed that the response to the couple who slept together was gendered in its delivery, and that "it was the girl that was taken

for coffee, not the boy". Similarly, when Zara was asked when she would marry, this was directed at her individually, rather than her and her partner jointly: "I was being asked when I was gonna get married from the age of 18, 'cause it was assumed you know you've been dating your partner for 2 years so when are you getting married? Erm but it was always on us, not the boys". Gender roles seemed often tied to evangelical understandings of marriage from Zara's account. She described, for example, disagreeing with how one of the local youth leaders spoke of her upcoming marriage: "she was saying that like the husband had to be responsible for the spiritual welfare of the whole family ... she just sort of said 'but isn't it great that once you're married, you don't have to take responsibility for yourself and it's up to them', and I was like, 'hell no!'". These ideas about marriage reflect a complementarian view of gender and the roles of husband and wife, which I noted in chapters 4 (§4.1.3) and 6 (§6.1.2) as central to conservative evangelicalism, and an expression of faithful Christian living in this sub-field. As with abstinence, Zara's decision about whether to be married was, for a time, symbolic of her very faith: "there was a point as well where like my conversations about whether or not I should get married became, a sort of battleground for whether or not I wanted to be in the church". As I recounted in chapter 6 (§6.1.1), at her evangelical university church Zara again encountered the expectation of marriage, feeling that there was an assumption that young, single people at the church were "auditioning" for marriage. Zara's experience demonstrates that marriage was central to (and the enactment of it synonymous with) evangelical faith, affirming the primacy of marriage in evangelicalism previously illustrated in this thesis (§6.1).

The centralisation of marriage within evangelicalism led Zara to feel pressured to marry her partner, a social expectation she rejected at the time, but which nonetheless shaped her experience of getting married at a later date. In our interview, she shared that she "nearly did get married" at the age of 20, to her now husband; "we had the church booked". Zara emphasised that she reached this point because others encouraged her too, including her own parents – "the pressure was ridiculous, the pressure to be married was *so* ridiculous", she summarised. Now in her 30s, by the time of our interview Zara had been married (to this same partner) for 4 years. But the process of claiming the concept of marriage as something she wanted for herself was a fraught one:

> We got married 4 years ago now and erm, I'm so glad we d- like it was such a weird thing getting married like I feel like they stole some of that from me. Because the process of getting married, it was beautiful, it was lovely, of course it bloody was. But it was also, it was like a shedding off of a skin if that makes sense? And then I just kind of thought 'do I actually like marriage? Am I just doing what I have been socialised to do?'. And ... of course the answer is, I'm very happy and it was the right decision but it was ... it spoilt it. It definitely spoilt it. Erm, just kind of feeling like, 'oh well I'm finally doing what they wanted this whole time', you know.

The way Zara described this process – of re-thinking the meaning of marriage – also suggests that her internalisation of evangelical ideas about marriage, through her habitus, played an important part. Having been raised within a field that valorised and centralised marriage (with specific ideas about what this marriage should look like), it seems that Zara absorbed these tendencies herself. This is indicated, for example, by her use of the word "socialised" (above), suggesting it was something she organically picked up from her social environment. Her use of the phrase "shedding off of a skin" similarly indicates a rejection of something which had become ingrained in her very body and had to be actively removed. The magnitude of this impact is not to be underestimated; for Zara, the intense pressure to marry "spoilt", in a way, her own journey to marriage. Undoing such a long-lasting disposition proved taxing but worthwhile; she shared that "I had to restructure what marriage is, in order to want to [get married] in any way".

Zara's experience of feeling marginalised by the intense pressure to be married, and expectation of conformity with gender roles, was also compounded by the realisation that she is queer. She shared how discovering and reading feminist theory helped her rethink ideas about gender and marriage which she had previously abided by:

> Judith Butler's gender performativity has been, like a breath of fresh air. First time I read Sara Ahmed, I read erm *Queer Orientations*[91] and it just broke everything open for me. It was, that was the point where I realised 'I'm definitely queer' ... I'm reading this and I know this is me. I know that this is the way that I view the world, I view the world outside of those gendered norms, and the reason I'm so hyper aware of those gendered norms is cause I was *so* subscriptive to them for so long.

Zara also expressed how these gendered norms were very visible, and repetitively used the word 'rules' to describe them: "I knew the rules, I was told the rules", she shared in reference to the gender norms which she 'subscribed' to for a long time. She also made clear that they were not solely "implicit", but these gender roles was actively observable in expectations of behaviour: "there *were* kind of rules. You know like when we were doing a church event the girls would help with the tea. The boys would all sit around ... they were allowed to say no and we were not". Zara's journey to realising and embracing her own sexuality holds added complexity due to this backdrop. She emphasised that the field she occupied as an adolescent was one in which "queerness was really, really frowned upon. Really frowned upon", and gave the example of a girl from her youth group marrying a woman, a wedding the congregation "refused to attend". The evangelical field in which Zara was heavily involved was, therefore, one

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[91] Zara is most likely here referring to Ahmed's book *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006).

which prescribed social norms based on constructions of gender – beliefs which Zara came to realise she did not share, and laboured to unravel.

9.1.3 A uniquely situated habitus: sexualisation and heightened vulnerability

A further influence which shaped Zara's upbringing within, and rejection of, evangelicalism and Christianity was feeling sexualised from a young age. Zara described how "as I got older, I got more and more uncomfortable"; she felt "very sexualised", "very gendered", but at the time "didn't have the words for it" and "just knew that, something had changed and as I was getting older and I was maturing, people's responses to me were really changing". As Zara matured, she felt "hyper-sexualised", and that her looks and her body were a frequent focus: "my appearance was always being drawn to my attention ... we were always being discussed". She clarified that this was not solely down to the experience of going through puberty. Rather, this feeling was specifically related to the evangelical field she inhabited and, in particular, her friend's church:

> the way I try to say it to people that are not part of Christian communities like, I grew up in a community ... where my virginity and my hymen were an open discussion. And I still have *real*, real impact from that like I find it, I find it *so* hard. Erm, I hate- like as soon as somebody looks at me like they want something from me, or like they're objectifying me or ... they're reducing me to like, a sex object, I get really angry and really hurt really fast.

This impact was viscerally embodied. Zara expressed disengaged with her body and "any ... notion of ... sexuality" from the ages of 16 to 20 as a result of feeling sexualised. Again, she felt this was rooted in more broadly common societal experiences which were amplified by her evangelical upbringing:

> it's one thing to like have this is your choice and you're wrestling with it, right? It's a whole other thing when you start disconnecting with your sense of self, and I think women, we are already so heavily socialised to not value our bodies and disconnect from our bodies and to be ashamed of our bodies, that to put anything that reinforces those norms is doing nothing but damage.

In chapter 7, I drew attention to participants' experiences of bodily repression and dissociation, including Zara's experience of feeling disconnected from her own body, like it was an "appendage" (§7.1.3). This reinforces what Zara communicates in the above quotation – a profound bodily manifestation of being taught to view bodies (and female bodies especially) with shame.

The final factor which contributed to Zara feeling ill at ease and discomfited within evangelicalism was her heightened vulnerability. She was vulnerable, in part, because she attended a church community from a young age (around 13/14) that her parents were not a

part of, and therefore did not benefit from parental oversight in this space – her parents were "very trusting" of this other church, but also largely pre-occupied during Zara's adolescence because she had a disabled sibling with significant support needs. This vulnerability was then magnified by surrogate parental figures who ostensibly kept Zara safe, but in reality made her feel uncomfortable and sexualised. Zara expressed concerns in our interview over her friend's father. This was a family which welcomed Zara: "I spent a lot of time with her family and her parents were very evangelical … you know my home was very unstable, and I was very vulnerable so it was erm, nice to be welcomed into a family". She shared that they looked out for her, but this is something she has since re-evaluated, as even though "they were very kind" to her, "it was their idea of kindness, it was a sort of erm, we know what's best for you so we're gonna make the decisions, to protect you, kind of kindness". In particular, Zara identified inappropriate behaviour towards herself and other children from the father within this family:

> At the time there were a few parents who didn't really feel comfortable with him being around their kids. And I remember being, just so fervently defending him, because it was my best friend's dad, right?

> There was one horrible year where he volunteered us all to run Santa's grotto and bought all the girls these horrible tiny little elf costumes. And I just remember, like I refused to wear it but my sister wasn't quite as stubborn as me back then and I remember, all the parents looking *absolutely horrified*. It'd just been the most awkward thing ever. And me and my sister had a conversation afterwards and we were like, 'why did no one stop him?'

Making clear in our interview that Zara felt this man's behaviour was inappropriate – a view that also seemed to be shared by others in the congregation – Zara consequently questioned whether he may have been a "paedophile". This was a word she used twice:

> But I really, I think that … my friend's dad was a latent paedophile. Erm, which is hard to be sure of. But I remember his wife pulling him back all the time, and being like no you're going too far, you're being too invasive. Erm, and it was exceptionally invasive, I mean it was, and I'm very strongly of the opinion now that any middle-aged man that has a vested interest in what teenagers' sex lives look like really need to take a hard look in the mirror.

> It was her dad that ran it [the church], who's the guy that I think is probably a paedophile because I really cannot think of any other reasons why he and-, him and his wife treated me the way they did. It, to me it's the only logical answer really.

This description illustrates how this man's behaviour transgressed the boundaries of social acceptability, so much so that Zara can only make sense of it by using the label paedophile. It is perhaps also noteworthy that the gendered nature of this evangelical environment may have facilitated the continuation of this behaviour. The wearing of "elf costumes", for example, was expected of the girls, while the boys had permission to refuse: "like every public event, you

know, back down to those stupid elf costumes, like, the boys were always allowed to say no and we were not".

These additional risk factors demonstrate the utility of the concept of habitus for this study. By demonstrating how the values of the field become so integral to those occupying it (embedded through deep-rooted dispositions), habitus can explain why Zara practised abstinence, why she remained so committed to it after leaving evangelicalism, and why the constant attention to her body along with micro-affirmations of women's bodies as sexual obstacles took root as somatic knowledge, entrenched in her own self through bodily dissociation. Other individuals like Zara, exposed to the same evangelical field, may have had similar experiences, as in a shared habitus or 'class habitus' (Bourdieu, 1990b: 58-59) At the same time, habitus is also useful because it allows for diversity and variation dependent on an individual's own circumstances. While Zara may share some important similarities with others through class habitus, there are also aspects of her own life that are unique. Bourdieu emphasises that there is "diversity within homogeneity", so even within a class habitus, "each individual system of dispositions is a structural variant of the others, expressing the singularity of its position" (Bourdieu, 1990b: 60). So while Zara may express similar tendencies to others exposed to similar social environments, her habitus is nonetheless distinctive and expresses "the singularity" of its context(s). It reflects a process of internalising the gendered norms, expectation of marriage, and assumption of abstinence which characterised the evangelical field of her youth – but it is also built on the discomfort of feeling inappropriately sexualised by an older adult, on the absence of authority figures with the availability and capacity to interrogate this behaviour and remove Zara from its reach, and further, on the distress of losing her home and community when her father was removed from his position as vicar. In Zara's case, she was perhaps more susceptible to the potential negative impacts of evangelical purity culture due to her unique social location, which may also go some way toward explaining why her departure from Christianity was so fraught and protracted.

Zara is now an atheist. She is no longer evangelical, and beyond this, is no longer a Christian. She does not attend church; she does not believe in God. Despite beginning this journey of withdrawal as a young adult, it has taken a long time for Zara to openly vocalise its results: "It was only last year that I said for the first time out loud that I don't believe in God. With the caveat that, if there is a God I don't think it's the God that I was taught about. And if there is a God that I wasn't taught about, where the hell's he been?". Zara's story, as told here, is indicative of evangelical purity culture in Britain during the early 2000s in many ways. It draws out many of the distinctive aspects previously outlined in this thesis, including an intense preoccupation with sexual abstinence, advocation of marriage and gender roles, and

identification of the (female) body as a locus and cause of sexual sin. It also shows how these components contributed to her withdrawal from both evangelicalism and the Christian faith more broadly. Further, her story illustrates the utility of habitus, evidencing how purity culture can become incorporated into one's mind and body in a way that is difficult to detangle.

9.2 Deconstruction and the causative role of purity culture

Zara is not the only participant to have engaged in a process of re-examining her faith; on the contrary, this was a theme across the dataset. I call this process of questioning deconstruction, which is defined further below (§9.2.1). The results of deconstruction can vary, and do not necessarily lead to a rejection of Christian faith. I categorise these results through a triadic model of deconstruction. This is not a comprehensive list of the possible consequences of deconstruction, but rather identifies three common results: dwelling (staying in evangelicalism); disaffiliation (leaving evangelicalism, perhaps for other forms of Christianity or alternative spirituality); deconversion (walking out the door of Christianity altogether). Having outlined these categories, I then observe how they map onto the narratives of the five interviewees in this study: Katy and Wendy exhibiting some form of dwelling (§9.2.2), Lucy and Dani disaffiliating, and both moving over to LGBTQ+ inclusive expressions of Anglicanism (§9.2.3), and finally Zara undergoing deconversion (§9.2.4). Using all five interviewees here to explain these three concepts also allows me to tie up their stories, concluding the thesis by bringing their journeys (thus far) to a close.

9.2.1 Deconstruction and its outcomes: dwelling, disaffiliation and deconversion

'Deconstruction' has been adopted over the past decade to refer to the process of questioning and reassessing evangelical Christian faith. Leaving religion, including the Christian faith and community one was raised in, is of course nothing new, and people who actively leave their religion have been known throughout history as 'apostates'. Recently, however, 'deconstruction' has gained traction in popular usage by those engaging in a process of questioning, critiquing, and re-examining evangelical Christianity.[92] For example, when American former pastor Joshua Harris (of *IKDG* fame) publicly shared that he was no longer Christian, he used the word 'deconstruction' (Harris, 2019). Additionally, the term is often used colloquially alongside 'exvangelical', which refers to former evangelicals (cf. Hermann, 2021: 425). 'Deconstruction' has also begun to appear in books such as *The Deconstructionists Playbook* (Cheathem and Ta, 2021) and *(Un)Certain: A Collective Memoir of Deconstructing Faith*

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[92] In the academic sphere, discussion of religious 'deconstruction' is found predominantly in philosophy and draws on Jacques Derrida (cf. Schrijvers, 2009). The concept of deconstruction discussed here specifically refers to the term appearing in popular usage to refer to re-examinations of evangelicalism.

by Olivia Jackson (2023). Interestingly, both of these are compilation books; the former is an actively confessional collection of devotions from over 60 authors, while the latter collates the experiences of around 400 participants, alongside the author's own, in a shared memoir. These numbers suggest that deconstruction resonates widely, and outside the US – approximately half of Jackson's participants hail from the UK, and the book itself comes from this context, released by British publisher SCM Press and written by a UK-based author who clarified elsewhere that she was keen to explore deconstruction outside of America in this book (SCM Press, 2023).

Three out of the five interviewees made use of the word 'deconstruction'. This includes Zara (above), but also Wendy and Dani. Wendy used it in her survey ("too deeply ingrained – more deconstruction required!" for Q38a, as quoted in §8.1.1) to reflect a current process of challenging what she was taught to think about abstinence. She also used it twice in our interview. First, to refer to a friend exploring "purity culture and deconstruction", and second, in relation to the culture of a course which encouraged openness to interrogating the heart of one's faith. This was known as Pioneer Training Course and "was just people pushing boundaries, and all deconstructing their faith and being like, is it about sitting in rows and not doing the wrong thing? Or is it actually about seeing what God's doing and joining in and life and justice". For Wendy, deconstruction is a process of re-examining her faith, which has led to her "junking a whole lot of the moral stuff", including teaching about abstinence.

Dani, meanwhile, used 'deconstruction' three times in our interview. She explained that her year abroad during university granted her distance from the evangelical field which "sort of started my deconstruction process" as it gave her an "outside perspective". As noted in chapter 6 (marriage), a notable struggle within this environment for Dani was the focus on dating to marry, and assumption that spending time with the opposite sex pointed towards this. Being abroad during her degree removed her from the "peer pressure" of this environment. Later in our interview, she referred to a friend who was "further along in a kind of deconstruction kind of phase". She then also described the experience of rethinking her faith: "I think I still am going through, ten years later … deconstruction of my faith, erm, I would still I'd say I'm still a Christian but, you know, not always at all sure of very much".

Like Zara, Wendy and Dani, some survey respondents identified with deconstruction, and other related terms – 80 participants selected 'Deconstructing' for 'Myself', when asked about denominations, and 63 selected 'Post-evangelical or ex-evangelical' (Q14) (cf. table 1). This indicates that over 10% of survey participants were not only familiar with deconstruction but felt it was an accurate reflection of their current status. Additionally, some respondents actively used deconstruct/ion/ing in their qualitative survey answers in relation to purity culture specifically (29 uses across 23 responses). One participant, for example, shared: "It's

taken me years to deconstruct the negative impact purity culture had on how I view my body and my sexuality. So much shame and guilt used to control our behaviour as teenagers" (#134). Here, 'deconstruct' is used specifically with reference to the impact of purity culture. Other participants also connected the two. For example, when asked if they thought abstinence until marriage is an essential part of Christian belief and practice, one woman responded "I did back when I identified as a conservative evangelical, but not as I've deconstructed" (Q38a, #509). For this participant, the deconstruction process was bound up with their departure from conservative evangelicalism. Others too saw deconstruction in this way:

> I'm not sure where I am with Christian belief in general. I am certainly way past purity culture belief though and it's possibly one of the aspects with the longest/deepest lasting consequences to trying to deconstruct, and as such one that I would consider most damaging in the church's remit.
>
> #420, Q38a

> The purity culture that both me and my spouse were exposed to was hugely damaging to both of us ... Despite the fact that we married and are each other's o my [only] sexual partners we struggled with our sex live for the first 5 years of our marriage as I couldn't get through the feelings that what we're doing was somehow wrong and shameful. My deconstruction has been the most empowering thing for me and has greatly enhanced our relationship.
>
> #198, Q43

> Healthy deconstruction is possible – my current church teaches about Christian living while avoiding the problematic purity teaching I have experienced before.
>
> #339, Q37a

For these participants, rethinking purity culture was a foundational part of the process they label as 'deconstruction', and a key factor they sought to break ties with. Indeed, if purity culture is a constituent part of the evangelical field, a re-assessment of one's commitment to evangelicalism would naturally encompass an evaluation of the purity culture elements of it too.

Others expressed similar sentiments about purity culture complicating and posing challenges to their faith, without using the language of deconstruction – but nonetheless indicating the diverse ways in which evangelical purity culture can lead to a re-examination of evangelical Christianity. In particular, the assumption of getting married young which accompanies the expectation of abstinence seems to have posed challenges:

> I think abstinence until marriage is a good thing and is my personal choice, but also it should be a choice that each individual arrives at themselves rather than a blanket/legalistic requirement of all Christians. That said, when I first heard this

teaching as a teenager I did not imagine I would still be single and therefore a virgin in my early thirties - I think this has *felt complicated for my faith* at times.

<div align="right">#2, Q38a</div>

Purity culture can also be very negative in the way that boys and girls are separated and then they don't know how to relate to each other - then it becomes all about fantasy and some kind of hope for utopia which marriage and a sex life never are so then there's *disillusionment and disappointment and confusion*.

<div align="right">#234, Q36a</div>

As indicated by these quotations, an anticipated evangelical life course – of abstinence followed by happy marriage and a fulfilling, uncomplicated sex life – which does not materialise (or occur within the expected timeframe) can prove perplexing. It may lead to "disillusionment and disappointment and confusion" (above) after following the rules, complying with holistic abstinence and doing it 'God's way' – yet then failing to arrive at the hoped-for God-ordained marriage.

Across these experiences it is clear that, while deconstruction is a process that involves a broad reconsideration of a collection of evangelical beliefs and practices, it is also one deeply bound up with purity culture. It is, in short, not *just* about purity culture – but purity culture is a key part of it. As deconstruction is a process, it can lead to a variety of outcomes. I organise some of the overarching outcomes into three categories: dwelling, disaffiliation and deconversion. Though not comprehensive, these categories are helpful (aside from the fact they are satisfyingly alliterative) as it is important to avoid homogenising experiences of deconstruction, and also to avoid mischaracterisations of leaving church (or a particular kind of church) as leaving religion altogether. In an article on the religio-spiritual lives of UK feminists, Kristin Aune heeds against such a tendency: "disaffiliation from church should not be assumed to constitute religious decline; church attendance is just one measure of religiosity" (Aune, 2015: 139). She warns of unsophisticated understandings which fail to note that leaving church does not necessarily mean leaving religion; religiosity can have multiple facets, of which church attendance is only one. Thus, the three categories generated here are intended to capture the complexity that arises from critiquing the evangelical field whilst possessing a habitus inherently shaped by it – this will look different for different individuals, based on their own personal circumstances, experiences, priorities and challenges.

9.2.2 Dwelling: Wendy and Katy

While three of the interviewees use the term deconstruction, all of them in fact exhibit traits of this process (re-examining evangelical faith in some way). The results of these processes are different, and the five of them reflect the categories of dwelling, disaffiliation,

deconversion. Turning first to dwelling, this refers to remaining in the evangelical field – it is those who re-examine and stay, choosing to balance their critical approach towards some aspects of evangelicalism alongside continued presence in the evangelical field. Examples of this can be seen in Katie Gaddini's *The Struggle to Stay* (2022a) to which I have referred throughout this thesis. In this book, Gaddini questioned why evangelical women experiencing the marginality of singleness choose to stay, demonstrating that a sense of community and commitment to evangelical values buffered against defection (though balancing both marginality and presence in evangelical proved to be a source of tension).

We see dwelling in the stories of Wendy and Katy, who continue to remain inside evangelicalism, though having developed a more critical stance. While Katy did not actively use the word 'deconstructing' herself in her survey or interview, it is notable that she identified as such in a multi-select tick-box question of the survey. When asked about denomination, she selected 'Anglican' and 'Evangelical' for 'my church', and 'Anglican, 'Evangelical' and 'Deconstructing' for 'myself'. The co-existence of both self-identifying evangelicalism along with deconstruction is interesting, and situates Katy in a place of dwelling, firmly in evangelical Anglicanism but resonating with the process of questioning and critiquing. She affirmed in our interview that she now attends an Anglican church, which she said is a "pretty low church". In describing this church and how it engages with the Bible (as authoritative, but "in no way scared" of examining it), Katy revealed that it is the more conservative evangelical aspects of her upbringing she has moved away from: " and so, yeah, so that's very much the kind of church I've found myself at, but I think I mentioned that, you know I do see that as a turning away, in some ways, from the sort of church that I, grew up [at]". In her survey she emphasised the conservative evangelical learnings of said childhood church ("grew up attending a firmly conservative evangelical Church in a fairly firmly Conservative parish. Things changed at uni!") (Q17), and elsewhere established how her views on certain Bible passages changed "after I moved away from the more Conservative aspects of my evangelicalism" (Q32). Katy's deconstruction process, then, involved a questioning of the conservative parts of evangelicalism – and particularly the vociferous promotion of holistic abstinence in a way that raised sexual abstinence to a point of 'fixation'.

Wendy is likewise dwelling as a deconstructed individual in the evangelical field. At the time of our interview, she was a curate in the Church of England, and remained within the charismatic evangelical side of Anglicanism. For her, deconstruction involved unpicking what she had learned in order to reconstruct a revitalised Christian faith – turning away from a faith characterised by moral proscriptions and to one personified through love in action. This process

began in her twenties, catalysed by observations from her youth work and mission work abroad:

> those years of sort of, don't sleep with anyone til you're married as the Christian message, and in my ... mid to late 20s, I just started questioning everything. So I was a Christian youth worker but I was like, the young people are finding life in things like going on ... trade justice marches with Christian Aid, they weren't finding life whenever we talked about not having sex ... Whereas the stuff about changing the world, it just felt a bit more Jesus-y ... and it was a bit like ... loads of my friends are sleeping with their boyfriends and doing things, they haven't dropped dead like, they haven't got the teen pregnancy or the STI that you were *definitely* gonna get, or HIV or whatever the latest scare was and, yeah it just, I started questioning. I spent a couple of years in Uganda, with Oasis Trust .. and I just sort of saw what Christianity really looked like! ... the Ugandan Christians, their faith was just so different. It was about daily life, it wasn't about a set of beliefs and what you could and couldn't do. It was like, look after your neighbour and feed the poor.

This is a lengthy quotation, but included here because it conveys Wendy's journey. It begins in adolescence, as a Christian life oriented around "what you could and couldn't do", with abstinence until marriage at the heart of it. Gradually, you begin to see the "questioning", the shift from an emphasis on belief to an emphasis on practice. Wendy also articulated in our interview that this was not in actuality something new, but a recovery of the faith her parents modelled to her:

> my family was pretty chilled out about how faith was practiced, so like we learnt the bible and we prayed and stuff but we also had random people live in our house who were homeless ... it was really practical whereas church, felt more like here's the things you should believe. Home was like, we just practiced stuff that loves people.

Wendy's deconstruction journey represents a rejection of a perceived distortion of true Christian belief and the core of Jesus' message – of, in her words, "faith being about loving people". Like Gaddini's participants, Wendy is unmarried, and navigates the marginality of singleness alongside her continued presence in evangelical spaces. She is also a single mother, and her faith journey shapes how she parents. "I'd love it if she found faith", she said of her daughter, "'cause I think it's the best way to live. But I don't want her to find the faith I grew up with". For Wendy, deconstruction was about finding the space *within* Christianity to question and prod at her existing beliefs and the cultural practices she had been exposed to in the evangelical field, and to reject some of these whilst remaining committed to following Jesus as authentically as she sees possible.

9.2.3 Disaffiliation: Lucy and Dani

Lucy and Dani represent the second category, disaffiliation, having deconstructed (or perhaps more accurately, still deconstructing) and moved out of evangelicalism. Disaffiliation refers to those who leave evangelicalism in some way. What they leave *to* is left intentionally open, to give space for the nuance with which deconstruction takes place and the resultant variety of paths that may follow. Some may disaffiliate and attend churches in other denominations; others may cease to engage with institutional religion but continue to maintain some form of personal Christian faith or spirituality. Both Lucy and Dani have repositioned themselves within an alternative branch of Anglicanism, Lucy finding a home in Anglo-Catholicism and Dani in what she describes as a "liberal" Anglican church. For both of these women, finding a version of Christianity that was LGBTQ+ inclusive, but also one which was absent in the ferocity and focus of evangelical purity culture, was significant.

Lucy's journey is best summed up in her final survey question, where she summarised that "I am an ordained person still unpacking the deep impact of purity culture on my life" (Q43). Lucy is the one interview participant whose story is not the focus of a thematic chapter – not because her experiences are unimportant (certainly not), but simply because the themes I generated do not necessarily map precisely onto interviewees' experiences – so I want to take a moment to flesh out her story, which was introduced in chapter 5 (§5.1.2; 5.3.1; 5.3.3). Lucy began attending church with her parents at the age of 6, and recalled becoming a Christian at the age of 10 by "praying the prayer and making the decision" for herself. Like Katy, she attended a Church of England parish which housed multiple churches, and those she spent most time at she described as "more evangelical than they are anything else". As noted in chapter 5, as well as taking part in the Silver Ring Thing course (including both wearing a ring and signing a pledge, as "evidence of how serious I was about my faith"), she also attended Detling summer camp, an evangelically-oriented small festival which promoted abstinence teaching through the examples of married couples who publicly shared their stories (§5.1.2).

By the time of our interview, Lucy was married to a man, but it is important to note that she is also bisexual, and the realisation of her own sexual orientation prompted a re-assessment of evangelical understandings of sex and sexuality. Having already developed an "affirming theology" independently ("I formed it for myself without much support in that kind of evangelical environment") and having "really close gay Christian friends", Lucy reformulated her understanding of sex at theological college:

> when I was at college I … finally sort of thought through what it meant for sex … if the only sex you can ever have, if you're a gay woman who is never gonna have penetrative sex with a man, then, the sex you're having with your wife, *is* sex

During this time, she also realised her own sexuality:

> I also realised at theological college that I'm bi, erm, and that was totally cut off for me as a teenager ... I've spent ... maybe ... 3 years looking back at my teenage life and being like 'oh shit I fancied her'. Like ohhhhhh!

These developments moved Lucy away from both an evangelical understanding of sex, and its place within heterosexual marriage, but also the comparable guidance she was receiving from the Church of England that "the only place for sex is in a heterosexual marriage".

Around the same time, Lucy gradually transitioned away from her evangelical roots, into the more Anglo-Catholic side of the Church of England. When recalling this process in our interview, there was a sense that the resultant lack of attention to abstinence and individual's sex lives was refreshing:

> Lucy: the other thing that happened while I was doing theological training was erm, God made a home for me in the more catholic end of the church ... so I have experience of like, 3, catholic churches, erm, still Church of England but that kind of way of worshiping.
>
> Chrissie: Kind of like Anglo-Catholic?
>
> Lucy: Yeah. Oh 4 maybe. Like, my experience of those churches has been largely more permissive, so, erm, the priests in ... two of those churches are gay and have a ... lifelong partner, who they're not married to but erm, and, they strictly shouldn't- ... or aren't having sex with but, I don't know, erm, none of my business! Whether they are or aren't but, there's like a sense of ... this is your own responsibility and your own business ... no more than yeah other aspects of your life that you might choose to keep private, between you and God.

This disinterest made a change from the Christianity of her upbringing. By her own admission, Lucy was "an evangelical for twenty years", so the majority of her life experience has been "inside of the evangelical church", and significantly, "*all* of my experience when people cared about my sex life is from then", she shared. The contrast in these branches of Christianity – despite both being located in the Church of England – is clear from an encounter Lucy had with an evangelical couple: "a very evangelical ... couple came to my church here, and specifically told the vicar that they weren't living together and weren't sleeping together. And the vicar was like, 'why do I need to know that?!'". We both laughed at this comment, aware of the dissonance between evangelicals hyper-aware of publicly demonstrating abstinence, in the context of an Anglo-Catholic church simply uninterested in this piece of information.

While Lucy found a home for her faith in Anglo-Catholicism, it is notable that the heteronormativity of evangelical purity culture seemingly stifled her own sexual development and awareness of her bisexuality, as some survey participants expressed this too. The primacy of heterosexual marriage in the evangelical field (§6.1) can be marginalising for anyone who is

not heterosexual, as it positions any other sexual orientation as a deviation from God's design, and as such is often not presented as even a possibility for someone's lived experience. For instance, one survey respondent shared that "purity culture was the perfect place to hide as a terrified closeted lesbian, even from myself!" (#246, Q20b). Another participant, who was bisexual and "attended an evangelical church as a teenager" which "had direct – arguably aggressive – stances on abstinence before marriage" likewise identified the presiding heteronormativity: "sex before marriage was a huge sin – the only worse one being gay sex ... Being a queer women [sic] adds another layer to how damaging this culture was because at the time it wasn't that I was ashamed of it, it just didn't even cross my mind because it simply wasn't an option" (#513, Q20b). Like Lucy, it was not that their sexuality was shameful or morally wrong – it was not even an option at all.

Dani, who was the focus of chapter 6 (marriage), also disaffiliated as a result of her deconstruction process, in which a re-assessment of evangelical purity culture played a central role. Dani's move from charismatic evangelicalism to a more "liberal" Anglican church (her word) in a way mirrors Lucy's as – though Dani is heterosexual herself – she emphasised her LGBTQ+ allyship and felt that maintaining this commitment was increasingly difficult in a heteronormative evangelical field. Dani engaged with the evangelical Christian Union whilst at university, and during this time a friend from CU came out to her as gay: "he came out to me and that was a big deal for him, and felt like, erm, a bit of a b- not burden for me, but like, I was very aware that he wanted to, he felt very self-conscious about it so didn't tell anyone". Around "a month later, another friend did the same" and similarly "that felt like a big deal". This experience of two friends coming out to her prompted Dani to reflect on her own support and advocacy for them. She shared that it "started my process of, I should be a, I feel like I'm an ally, I should be more of an ally", including "within the church". When Dani moved to London and attended her "HTB-like" church, she continued to question the way they dealt with sexuality – the church "wouldn't really say anything about homosexuality for a long time", until there was eventually a "somewhat controversial" sermon by the vicar. In contrast, Dani feels much more at home in her current church, which she described as "welcoming to LGBQ people [sic], there are gay couples ... trans people come along", and is part of the Inclusive Church network.[93]

Dani also felt increasingly marginalised as a single woman in a field which valorised and centralised marriage. In chapter 6, I outlined how Dani's "HTB-like" church was oriented to the

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[93] Inclusive Church is a registered charity and network of churches, recognised in confessional circles as being an LGBTQ+ friendly space; it is organised around a shared commitment to "a church which celebrates and affirms every person and does not discriminate" on characteristics such as "disability, economic power, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, learning disability, mental health, neurodiversity, or sexuality" (Inclusive Church, c2025).

development of heterosexual relationships for the purpose of marriage. This orientation, and indeed presumption, was also evident prior to this, in Dani's experience at university. There, she joined a CU "hall group" (which she described as "like small groups in … uni halls") where she befriended a fellow (male) student – one of the ones who later came out to her as gay. Despite this friendship being platonic, others within their Christian social circle "saw us having a nice time together and assumed" there was a romantic connection; "it was a quite an intense subculture", she continued, "and because I was spending time with a man … it was blown out of proportion". This instance again evidences the assumption of both heterosexuality and partnership, perhaps arising from the 'intensity' of the focus on these in the evangelical field. It was also within this field that she was "made to have such hang ups … about sex and relationships". Dani noted that this went beyond simply identifying this as wrong, or even sinful: "even if you … have more of a conservative view of, no sex before marriage … there's ways to do that without adding on lots of guilt … and making it seem like *such* a huge thing when there's so many other ways in which, if you think that's a sin, other things are sins for instance you know". In contrast, Dani's current church seem much less interested in her romantic and sexual relationships. As I noted in chapter 6, in leaving the previous HTB-like church and settling at her current one, Dani felt "seen as a person", not just an "eligible" candidate for marriage (§6.1.1). Again like Lucy, Dani feels recognised and valued regardless of her romantic status at her new church.

The marginality of singleness within the evangelical context is increasingly well-documented, including in the British context by Kristin Aune (2002; 2004; 2008a; 2008b) and Katie Gaddini (2022a). Aune's work is especially relevant as it reflects approximately the same time period (late 1990s and early 2000s) as the one in which Dani and other participants were raised. Her research on the evangelical New Frontiers network, and particularly ethnography at one of its congregations she calls Westside, paints a similar picture of singleness as a marginal position, which Aune defines as "evangelicalism's construction of women's singleness as a non-normative status" (2008b: 60). Possessing this marginal status led to some disaffiliation from the church: "at Westside, the construction of marriage as the normative status rendered being single non-normative and led to disaffiliation of unmarried women" (2008a: 285). She gave the example of Jenny, a divorcee attending Westside who felt marginalised next to younger, married (often male) individuals. When "asked why she did not leave and attend a more egalitarian church", Jenny replied "maybe I will" – three years later, "not only was Jenny no longer attending Westside" she "had also lost her faith" (2008b: 60). Aune identifies this sense of marginality across the experience of "most of the single women at Westside" (2008b: 60) – a feeling later reflected in Katie Gaddini's participants, evangelical women still grappling with

whether to remain in or abandon the evangelical communities in which they are side-lined (2022a), and so too in Dani's experience.

Overall, Dani walked out the door of evangelicalism, symbolised by walking out of her charismatic evangelical church in London. The intense preoccupation with abstinence, the heteronormativity, and the centrality of marriage – all related, and all characteristic of an evangelical field of which purity culture is a constituent part – prompted a process of deconstruction. This is not yet concluded, and Dani shared: "I went through ... I think I still am going through, 10 years later or whatever, erm, the deconstruction of my faith". Yet, it has led her to disaffiliate from evangelicalism. In her own words: "I think I slowly realised I wasn't, in my heart of hearts, that evangelical. I just felt like I had to be".

9.2.4 Deconversion: Zara

As Zara's story took prominence in this chapter, it feels apt to end on it too. We have seen already that Zara's path has led to atheism, an exit not just from evangelicalism or the Church of England, but Christianity altogether. This does not need explicating as much here (compared to the other four interviewees), as this chapter has recounted much of this trajectory already. Towards the end of our interview, however, Zara summarised the impact of evangelical purity culture on her life, and this acts as something of a denouement to both her story so far but also to this thesis. It draws together all of the strands which led to Zara's religious exit and to the loss (and gradual recovery) of the self. When I asked where this came from specifically, Zara responded that it was "the purity movement":

> Zara: I think the shortest way I can summarise the impact it's had on me is that- in taking away my sense of self when I was too young to have really developed it.
>
> Chrissie: Mm. Is that specifically, kind of the church and Christian belief as a whole, or is that specific to like what it talks about sex–
>
> Zara: It's, it's the purity movement ... What it did is taught me a lesson very early on in life that people will try and take away your freedoms under the guise of protection but in order to control you. And that for women that's seen as acceptable and normal. ... And by the insistence on forgiveness. It was like 'don't do anything sexual, but if you're a boy and you say sorry afterwards it's okay'. Right? Like it taught me a really strict gender binary. ... So it felt like it wasn't just about controlling our sexualities it was about controlling the way that we were gendered. And the way that we were understood as valid women, as valid humans, as good Christians, as good potential wives, good potential like mothers. ... And the fact that it's taken me into my thirties to start really deconstructing it, I think, probably is the best way to explain the impact it's had.

This draws together multiple strands of purity culture: a gender binary, plus a concurrent insistence on forgiveness that reflected this, and expectations of sexual abstinence that were

heightened for girls, along with notions of protection, control, and ultimately losing her sense of self. While further contextual factors did shape her experience (such as the treatment of her father within the Church of England), purity culture played a fundamental role in the faltering of, and ultimate defection from, Zara's Christian faith and the life it gave rise to.

9.3 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has focused on the fifth and final theme identified for the purposes of this study: changes to someone's personal religious faith. It also concludes part 2 (impacts and aftereffects), which addresses research question 2 (what impacts has purity culture had on women within British evangelical Christianity?) by outlining three key areas of impact identified within the data (body, sexual violence, shifting faith). The first half of this chapter documented Zara's journey from evangelical to atheist (§9.1), noting the preoccupation with abstinence in the evangelical field she grew up in (§9.1.1), the significance of gender roles and marriage within this field, building on the centrality of marriage outlined in chapter 6 (§9.1.2), and her unique situatedness as exposed to further risk factors, creating a habitus even more vulnerable to the negative effects of purity culture (§9.1.3). In the second half the chapter, I then outlined the concept of 'deconstruction' (the process of questioning and re-evaluating evangelical faith), and the role of purity culture in participants' experiences of deconstruction (§9.2). I defined deconstruction with reference to both interviews and survey responses, introducing a triadic model of its potential outcomes which was proposed as a new model of deconstruction (§9.2.1). I then explored this threefold approach further, by looking at the journeys of the five interviewees: Wendy and Katy in relation to dwelling (§9.2.2), Lucy and Dani as disaffiliating (§9.2.3), and finally Zara as deconversion (§9.2.4). Overall, this chapter has argued that purity culture can be a contributing factor to deconstruction, and thus changes to evangelical faith is one of its areas of impact. In doing so, it has drawn together popular discourse on deconstruction with academic research on purity culture, outlining a causal relationship between the two and laying the foundations for further study.

Concluding remarks

Chapter 10. Conclusion

10.1 Thesis summary

This thesis has examined the presence of evangelical purity culture in Great Britain and its impact on young women within this context. It has built on prior scholarship, which has begun to pay attention to purity culture outside the US, by focusing specifically on Britain – the first study to take this context for purity culture as an exclusive focus. It argued for a specifically British iteration of purity culture, and developed the concept of the habitus of purity culture to explain the depth and longevity of its impacts in this context – due to being encountered in the evangelical field and then durably incorporated into the body.

Chapters 1-3 (Background) set the backdrop for this research, made clear how it was conducted, and introduced the theories utilised. Chapter 1 (Introduction) laid the groundwork for the rest of the thesis, providing a rationale for the research (particularly my own background within British evangelicalism), a review of the literature on purity culture thus far (which has begun to acknowledge evidence of it in Britain), and a roadmap to the thesis. Chapter 2 (Methodology) detailed how the research was conducted and why, outlining the study design (motivations, approach and scope), data generation and analysis (survey, interviews and RTA), and some methodological challenges (reception, emotional demands, and changing positionality). Chapter 3 (Theoretical Framework) introduced the theoretical backdrop, noting indebtedness to lived religion, use of Bourdieu, and how the concept of habitus also furthers the lived religion approach by dismantling the institutional-lived religion binary.

Chapters 4-6 (Part 1: Conceptualising Purity Culture in Britain) established purity culture as a constituent part of British evangelicalism, and outlined some key concepts to help establish and elucidate this. They thus addressed research question 1 (has evangelical purity culture been present in British Christianity and, if so, in what ways?) by demonstrating that yes, it has been present, particularly through a fervent focus on avoiding sexual sin and consequent emphasis on holistic abstinence within British evangelicalism. Chapter 4 argued for the presence of purity culture in a distinctly British iteration. It outlined a brief history of American purity culture and its key characteristics (such as the concept of holistic abstinence), summarised the British evangelical field, and then argued for the presence of elements of purity culture within this field. It also developed the theoretical intervention of this study (the habitus of purity culture) by drawing together the importance of community in evangelicalism, and

concern over the relational damage of sexual sin in evangelical purity culture. It articulated how this habitus is a fraught one, with key relationships simultaneously valorised and jeopardised. Chapter 5 (sin) demonstrated the centrality of sexual sin within British evangelicalism as encountered by participants of this study, further pointing to the presence of purity culture in this context. It argued that this centrality stems from its potential to cause damage (particularly to the self, one's standing before God, and one's role and status in the evangelical field), which is key to understanding the tension of living with the habitus of purity culture. Chapter 6 (marriage) built on the previous chapter by establishing marriage as a fourth potential area of damage arising from sexual sin. It established the primacy of (heterosexual) marriage within the evangelical field, due to both its social and spiritual roles (as socially normative and constituting social capital, and a reflection of God's intention for humanity and the appropriate confines for a sexual relationship). As well as evidencing the presence of purity culture in Britain, these chapter also demonstrated that a habitus developed within the British evangelical field would highly value self-identity, relationship with God, position in a community, and a future spousal relationship – but that committing sexual sin would place all of these in jeopardy.

Chapters 7-9 (Part 2: Impacts and Aftereffects) articulated some key areas of impact of purity culture, as experienced by the participants of this study. This part of the thesis addressed research question 2 (what impact[s] has purity culture had on women within British evangelical Christianity?) by outlining impacts to the body (chapter 7), in relation to sexual violence (chapter 8), and to one's personal faith (chapter 9). Opening this part of the thesis, chapter 7 discussed impacts to the body through the embodied mind, and the sexed body, again drawing on the notion of habitus to emphasise how the values of purity culture can become durably incorporated into the body. Chapter 8 outlined impacts relating to sexual violence in two ways: first, feelings of personal culpability (due to internalised blame and secondary victimisation); second, through intersections with the evangelical field (the field as an enabling environment for sexual violence, and relational impacts of sexual sin still being seen in instances of sexual violence). Wendy's conceptualisation of purity culture 'in the air', presented in this chapter, helped elucidate how it can still be impactful (and ultimately gradually absorbed through habitus) despite often being relatively imperceptible. Finally, chapter 9 examined how purity culture can lead to a shift in evangelical Christian faith. After tracing Zara's journey from evangelicalism to atheism, and key elements of purity culture as having a causative role in this, this chapter then focused on the concept of deconstruction. It introduced possible outcomes as dwelling, disaffiliation and deconversion, tracing each of the five interview participants' journeys in relation to these, and again drawing on the concept of habitus throughout to account for not only the impact of the social embodied, but also variation arising from personal

circumstances. Overall, in this thesis I have offered a novel perspective within a bourgeoning area of academic research by demonstrating the presence of purity culture in Great Britain, and explaining its impact (both in its profundity and its variety) through the habitus of purity culture.

10.2 Research impact

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) defines research impact in two ways: "academic impact", and impact "to society and the economy" (UK Research and Innovation, c2025). Here, I use this twofold approach to outline the significance of this research through its impact. I first discuss how this study furthers purity culture scholarship, and summarise its theoretical contributions – notably the habitus of purity culture, but also the paralysis of vulnerability, itinerant positionality, holistic abstinence and the triadic model of deconstruction (§10.2.1). Second, I examine the societal impact strand by reflecting on the human impact of this research, particularly for the participants involved (§10.2.2).

10.2.1 The academic sphere: theoretical contributions

This research builds on and furthers the interdisciplinary field of purity culture scholarship, by advancing initial explorations of purity culture outside of the USA. Building on the work of Katie Cross and Katie Gaddini, who have explored purity culture as a transatlantic phenomenon across the UK and the US, this study constitutes the first substantial piece of research to focus on this phenomenon in the British context. It demonstrates that despite the different socio-religious landscape of Great Britain, evangelical purity culture has been evident here too, but in its own British iteration which is less overt – characteristically British in its more subdued and muted tone. This also makes it more difficult for those experiencing it to identify and unravel its effects. This is where the key theoretical intervention of the thesis demonstrates its utility. The *habitus of purity culture* explains why its effect are so profound and enduring, despite the fact that evangelical purity culture being a much less vociferous phenomenon in Britain compared to America: because it is incorporated into the body as long-lasting dispositions. The habitus of purity culture is notably fraught, as it internalises the valorisation of community and relationships apparent in the evangelical field, but equally begets fear that these relationships will be damaged (or lost) through sexual sin.

In some cases, this tension may result in bodily manifestations (chapter 7), perhaps as coping mechanisms (e.g. bodily dissociation or repression of sexuality) or arising traumas (e.g. panic attacks). In others', it may result in the internalisation of blame for sexual violence, or a strongly held belief that one's very self, and their relationships with others, have been damaged by sexual violence (chapter 8). In others still, the tension of living with the habitus of purity

culture may prompt a process of deconstruction, leading to a myriad of potential outcomes including critically remaining in the evangelical field, disaffiliating from evangelicalism and perhaps moving to other expressions of Christianity, or deconversion from Christianity altogether (chapter 9). This is not an exhaustive list, but rather one indicative of some of the impacts of evangelical purity culture in Britain as seen in the participants of this research.

The use of habitus in this thesis is beneficial not only in its contribution to the study of purity culture, but also to Bourdieusian scholarship more broadly. I follow Terry Rey in seeing the value of Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus for studies of religion (cf. §3.2.3). Bourdieu's theoretical triad arose from his assessment of how education reinforces pre-existing hierarchies of power and maintains a socially stratified society (cf. §3.2.2). Yet, they also have broader value beyond the sociology of education. In showing how the things of value (capital) in certain social spaces (fields) are durably incorporated into the body (through habitus), Bourdieu's conceptual framework has wide-ranging potential, and this study affirms this potential for sociologists and scholars of religion.

There have been prior applications of Bourdieu's theoretical concepts (habitus, field and capital) within religious studies. As previously made clear, however, these applications are relatively limited thus far and tend to add a prefix (such as 'religious' or 'spiritual') to the concept in question (cf. §3.2.3). As argued in chapter 3, I do not feel that a prefix indicating the religious studies locale of the research is necessary – it suggests the concepts need altering in some way to have utility for theorising about religion. Prefixing the word "religious" to "habitus" implies that the effects of such a habitus may only be evident in traditionally "religious" ways (e.g. behaviour in a church building, affirmation of certain value systems, or uptake of specific rituals). Meanwhile, the lived religion approach adopted in this study emphasises that religion is not distinct from, but rather permeates across, everyday life. Habitus is thus a useful concept for communicating the extensive outworkings of religion; it demonstrates these outworkings across bodies, identities, behaviours, actions, and social realities both within and outwith contexts that would traditionally be categorised as religious. In doing so it resolves the binary of institutional versus lived religion (identified as a potential pitfall of the lived religion approach; cf. §3.1; 3.2.3). This study contributes to scholarship on habitus by demonstrating that it is a natural conceptual partner to the lived religion perspective. In addition to the habitus of purity culture, other concepts were developed for the purpose of this study which could be utilised elsewhere. Two of these relate to methodology. In chapter 2, I introduced *the paralysis of vulnerability* to demonstrate the sometimes paralysing effects of conducting emotive and socially impactful research on the researcher. It is, in short, when moving research moves you – at once instilling a feeling of wanting to do justice to the personal stories and life experiences

gathered from participants, but equally feeling so personally impacted by these stories that one's capacity to actually do the research is diminished. Also in chapter 2, I conceptualised my own situatedness as the researcher as *itinerant positionality*, reflecting not only the dynamic and changing nature of one's position in relation to the research, but also how the researcher navigates them during the research process. In my own experience, I moved between positions, never landing firmly on one but repeatedly travelling between them, as relevant to the task at hand. These two concepts may be useful to social researchers in any discipline – not just religious studies – who feel that they resonate with or capture some aspect of their research experience, though they may be of particular value to novice scholars in sociology of religion.

Two other theoretical contributions have emerged from this piece of work: *holistic abstinence* and the *triadic model of deconstruction*. Holistic abstinence refers to the promotion of not simply sexual abstinence (until heterosexual marriage), but a vast array of other behaviours, beliefs, and lifestyle expectations which can accompany it in purity culture (§4.1.2). This could include, for example, modifying behaviour around members of the opposite sex, wearing modest clothing to avoid 'tempting' others to sexual sin, suppressing sexual thoughts, not living with a long-term partner (if unmarried), and even expressing familiarity with biblical passages that teach about sexual immorality. These are all intended to ensure abstinence, but also act as symbols of compliance. Meanwhile, the triadic model of deconstruction offers a framework for thinking about deconstruction through the lens of common potential consequences: dwelling, disaffiliation, and deconversion (cf. §9.2). Central to this model is the idea of deconstruction as a process, rather than an end result in and of itself. Both of these concepts will be of interest to scholars and researchers of purity culture, evangelicalism and/or religious leavers regardless of their discipline (though likely located within religious studies, sociology, anthropology, psychology, modern history, or somewhere at the intersections of these).

10.2.2 The societal sphere: human impact

While this study contributes to a growing (and arguably now flourishing) area of research, it is the participants who are intended as its chief beneficiary. The ultimate aim, as outlined in chapter 2 (cf. §2.2.2 on narrative sociology), is to tell stories: to make space for active listening to people who feel quietened and/or ignored, to draw out similarities across these experiences and, in doing so, to explore a phenomenon of significance to a sizeable group of people, analysing how and why it impacted them. It may be that this study could then be used in the creation of resources for better practice, or to prompt reflection, contemplation, and perhaps accountability. This is something some survey respondents picked up on:

I wish you all the very best with this powerful research. It is courageous to dive into an area that I believe will uncover an immense amount of pain and abuse of various sorts. Perhaps your thesis and the conversations it prompts will shine a bright and ultimately healing light on complex issues. Thank you.

<div align="right">#301, Q43</div>

This is such an important issue; I am glad you are working on this research and hope it will lead to helpful changes in Christian cultre [sic]

<div align="right">#190, Q43</div>

This would indeed be a valuable outcome, which would hopefully foster further societal impact. Nonetheless, this thesis does not directly create specific resources, as this is not the fundamental intention of the work. Hearing, and comprehending, these women's stories must come first. The human impact of this research is twofold: first to the participants themselves, and second to those others who see some of their journey reflected within this study. Participation created an opportunity to share and reflect on personal experiences which thus far may have been relatively unspoken, in the knowledge that someone will read it and take it seriously. For some, it also gave a name for effects that were previously unidentified: "filling out this survey has helped me identify something which I have never had a name for, and I now recognise it to be purity culture. It's [sic] impact on my life has been wide ranging and deep". In chapter 2 I described how it was at times wearisome to carry these stories (I utilised the phrase 'emotionally demanding research'). I want to be clear, however, that being privy to them was (and is) also a privilege.

The last question of the survey (Q43) was an optional open-ended question. It was entitled 'Do you have any additional comments? Please feel free to use this space to share anything else you would like to before completing the survey'. Of the 580 respondents, 150 chose to write something in this box. Within these comments, there is one repeated phrase which serves as confirmation that pursuing this project has assured women across evangelicalism Britain that their experiences are important. This phrase comes up across 29 participants' responses, to be exact. 'Thank you'.[94] Others still wished the project well ("good luck with your research!"), highlighted its importance ("this is such an important issue"), and expressed enthusiasm that it was being pursued ("I'm so glad someone is doing this research – thank you, thank you, thank you for making it important")! These women actively went to the effort of saying this; I am sure they are not the only ones who think it.

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[94] This also include those who say 'thanks' as well as 'thank you'.

10.3 Avenues for future research

There are two notable limitations of this study, and these relate to race and class. First, an exploration of class in relation to evangelicalism and/or purity culture in Britain could be a fruitful avenue for future research. Class is particularly pertinent to evangelicalism in the British context given that there appears to be a close correlation between class and the demographics of evangelicals (cf. §4.2.1) – does purity culture exposure change when accounting for this variable? Are its effects altered? Second, the participants of this study are overwhelmingly white (cf. §4.3.1). While this does tend to reflect the stereotypical picture of evangelicals in Britain (cf. §4.2.1), it does raise questions as to whether purity culture may also be found in black majority Pentecostal churches, and also whether its articulations may be different based on race. In chapter 1, I mentioned that the function of race and whiteness within purity culture is now receiving increasing attention in studies of purity culture in the US (Natarajan et al., 2022; Moslener, 2025 forthcoming). This is less so the case in Britain, perhaps because this area of scholarship is still in its infancy in this geographical context, and also because the religious landscape of the UK is notably different to the US. Katie Gaddini notes that an "important distinction among evangelicals concerns race", and in the UK context, "the majority of white evangelicals ... attend Anglican parishes, while – at least in London – most Black evangelicals, often West African and Caribbean immigrants, attend Pentecostal churches" (2022b: 129). As such, though there may be theological resonance across evangelicalism and Pentecostalism, this distinction in identity leads the picture of evangelicalism in Britain to be captured as overwhelmingly white. There is certainly scope for further study on the intersections, overlaps and relationships between evangelicalism and Pentecostalism in Britain, and presentations of purity culture across these intersections.

In addition to these limitations, which could be fruitfully explored in future research, there are also aspects of *this project specifically* which I could further present and develop, all of which would be a suitable fit for peer-reviewed journal articles which build on this thesis. For example, methodological concepts from chapter 2 (paralysis of vulnerability; itinerant positionality) have the potential to be developed and brought into conversation with literature on reflexivity, positionality, and emotionally demanding research. Due to word constraints they were introduced and defined but detail was limited; I hope and intend to explore them further in future publications.

There is potential to deepen the utilisation of Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus by critically reflecting on the mismatch of habitus and field that arises from the deconstruction process. This might be supported by Bourdieu's concept of hysteresis, which refers to the misalignment that arises when a habitus is developed within a field that later undergoes

significant change. Could deconstruction constitute a reverse hysteresis? One in which field remains the same, but habitus gradually undergoes significant change? This could be a fruitful avenue of enquiry.

Another area of interest that was ultimately cut from this thesis was a more in-depth discussion of heteronormativity, using data from participants which evidenced a feeling of marginalisation due to sexualities that were deemed non-normative in their experience of evangelical purity culture. Though said heteronormativity is signalled throughout the thesis, and discussed in relation to Lucy and Dani's deconstruction journeys (§9.2.3), there were further comments from survey participants which I did not have the space to include. These included some discussion of sin in relation to sexuality (not just practice but *being*), as well as suppression of sexuality because anything outside of heterosexuality was not considered an option (as briefly discussed in chapter 9, §9.2.3). These could be drawn together in an insightful piece on heteronormativity within evangelical purity culture as experienced in Britain.

The vast amount of data generated for this study means that there are a variety of opportunities for development. For example, the results of the Purity Culture Belief Scale could be analysed in further detail, particularly its subscales (and the revised PCBS may prove useful for further studies too) (cf. Appendix C). In particular, one area to explore would be the use of purity rings and pledges in Britain. As a negligible amount of participants wore rings and signed pledges, this did not warrant attention in this thesis – but those who *did* provided qualitative data in the survey on their decisions to do so, and multiple interview participants also signed a pledge (Wendy; Dani; Lucy) or wore a ring (Lucy). This data could provide an interesting point of comparison to pledges and rings in the US when they *do* appear in Great Britain (even if scarcely).

The notion of 'soul ties' appears in a survey question (Q26.24), but also in some qualitative survey and interview data too. This does receive substantial attention in the thesis during discussion of the impact of sexual sin to a future marriage relationship (§6.2.2), but is a relatively under-explored concept. This data could therefore be utilised further as part of a focused study on the idea of soul ties, specifically in the British context.

Another area of data that could be utilised is the use of the Bible in evangelical purity culture in Britain. The survey asked respondents about biblical phrases, passages, verses, people and stories in relation to their experience of purity culture (Q32-34), and there is significant qualitative data in these answers, and substantial detail regarding the specifics of these biblical texts. As part of the analysis process, I analysed frequency of certain biblical books and passages (anything attributed to Paul tended to rank particularly highly, as did the Genesis

creation story of Adam and Eve). This was not ultimately included in the thesis in detail, however, as there was no space for what would have been an interesting discussion but nonetheless a digression from the ultimate aims and focus of the thesis. Overall, the research presented in this thesis has multiple opportunities for development – particularly due to restrictions of word limit and scope here – and could facilitate a multitude of publications which contribute to the growing field of purity culture scholarship by further illustrating its presence and impact in Britain.

End Matter

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Appendices

Appendix A: List of interview questions

Interview guides were specific to each interview (based on the participant's survey responses, if relevant). All followed a three-part structure, but the second and third of these parts were different for each interviewee. The below is an example of one interview guide for this study, for the interview with Katy.

1. Introduction & narrating their story with purity culture

- Re-introduction to the research project & my situatedness as a researcher
- Opening question: could you give me a narrative of your own encounters with purity culture? Let's start at the beginning – share with me your story.

2. British Christian youth subculture circa 1990s and early 2000s

- In your survey you mentioned the conservative evangelical church you went to. Tell me more about this – was this for all of your youth? What was it like?
- You also talked about youth provision at this church, and that you did the Pure course. Are you able to tell me more about this course? What were the main values? How did you find it?
- In your survey you also mentioned youth bibles studies. Tell me more about those.
- You also mentioned that you owned a teen girl bible. Can you remember what it was like?
- Are there any other things relating to purity culture that come to mind from your youth? Such as books, festivals, preachers, stories?

3. Current state

- How far/do you think your views have changed at all?
- You said in the survey that things changed a lot when you went to university – could you tell me more about this?
- You mentioned that you are still friends with some of the youth group and now married to one. What impact do you think this has had on your experience, going through it together and being in that community?
- What advice would you give now to someone who has had a similar experience to you?
- Do you have any other comments or thoughts you haven't had a chance to share?

Appendix B: List of survey questions

Thank you very much for participating in this survey. ✱ *Required*

○ I have read and understand the conditions outlined above and I agree to participate in this study

○ No, I do not wish to participate in this study

Page 2: Basic Information

What is your age group?

○ 18-21
○ 22-25
○ 26-29
○ 30-33
○ 34-37
○ 38-41
○ 42-45
○ 45 or above

Page 3: Basic Information

What is your gender?

○ Man
○ Woman
○ Non-binary
○ Prefer to self-describe:

Please specify here:

[   ]

What sex were you assigned at birth?

○ Male
○ Female

What is your sexual orientation?

Terminology to describe sexual orientation can vary, and not everyone within the LGBTQ+ community identifies in the same way. Please select the option that you feel provides the best description, or use the 'prefer not to say' or 'prefer to self-describe' options.

○ Heterosexual/straight
○ Gay
○ Bisexual
○ Prefer not to say
○ Prefer to self-describe:

Please specify here:

[   ]

Page 4: Basic Information

What is your ethnic group?

(Please note each option expands below)

- ○ White
- ○ Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups
- ○ Asian/Asian British
- ○ Black/African/Caribbean/Black British
- ○ Other ethnic group

Choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background:

- ○ White - English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British
- ○ White - Irish
- ○ White - Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- ○ Any other White background, please describe

Please describe:

[   ]

Choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background:

- ○ White and Black Caribbean
- ○ White and Black African
- ○ White and Asian
- ○ Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background, please describe

Please describe:

[   ]

Choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background:

- ○ Indian
- ○ Pakistani
- ○ Bangladeshi
- ○ Chinese
- ○ Any other Asian background, please describe

Please describe:

[   ]

Choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background:

○ African
○ Caribbean
○ Any other Black/African/Caribbean background, please describe

Please describe:

[   ]

Choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background:

○ Arab
○ Any other ethnic group, please describe

Please describe:

[   ]

Which of the following options best describes your national identity?

○ English
○ Welsh
○ Scottish
○ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

What is your current place of residence?

○ England
○ Wales
○ Scotland
○ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

What region of England do you live in?

- ○ North East
- ○ Yorkshire and the Humber
- ○ North West
- ○ West Midlands
- ○ East Midlands
- ○ East of England
- ○ London
- ○ South East
- ○ South West

If you selected Other for your current place of residence, have you previously lived in Great Britain?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Not applicable

Where did you live?

- ○ England
- ○ Scotland
- ○ Wales

What region of England did you live in?

- ○ North East
- ○ Yorkshire and the Humber
- ○ North West
- ○ West Midlands
- ○ East Midlands
- ○ East of England
- ○ London
- ○ South East
- ○ South West

Page 5: Religion

Eligibility Question

Do you currently, or did you previously, identify as Christian or attend a Christian church?

- ○ Yes - Currently identify as Christian and/or attend a church
- ○ Yes - Previously identified as a Christian and attended a church
- ○ Yes - Previously attended a church
- ○ No - none of the above

Religious affiliation and church attendance

What is your religion?

- ○ Christian (including Church of England, Catholic, Protestant and all other Christian denominations)
- ○ No religion
- ○ Other

If you selected 'no religion', please feel free to further describe this (optional):

- ○ Agnostic
- ○ Atheist
- ○ Deconstructing
- ○ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

Do you currently attend a Christian church?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

How frequently do you attend your church?

(including online or in-person services, community events, and church activities)

○ Once a week or more
○ A few times a month
○ Once a month
○ A few times a year
○ Once a year
○ Less than once a year

How long have you been attending?

○ Less than a year
○ 1-2 years
○ 3-4 years
○ 5-10 years
○ 10+ years
○ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

What size is the congregation of your church?

(Numbers may vary across services or locations. Please select the option which best reflects the approximate number of church members i.e. people who attend the church on a regular basis)

☐ 1-30
☐ 30-100
☐ 100-300
☐ 300-700
☐ 700-1000
☐ 1000+

Have you previously attended a (different) Christian church?

○ Yes
○ No

You may have previously attended multiple churches. Please have in mind the church that was that most significant to you (e.g. you attended for the longest period of time, or had the biggest impact on your life/personal experiences):

For how long did you attend?

○ Less than a year
○ 1-2 years
○ 3-4 years
○ 5-10 years
○ 10+ years
○ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

What size was the congregation of this church?

(Numbers may vary across services or locations. Please select the option which best reflects the approximate number of church members i.e. people who attended the church on a regular basis)

○ 1-30
○ 30-100
○ 100-300
○ 300-700
○ 700-1000
○ 1000+

Would you describe yourself/your church/your previous church(es) as...

(You can tick multiple options for each. Please select all that apply)

	Myself	My church	My previous church(es)
Anglican/Episcopalian	☐	☐	☐
Baptist	☐	☐	☐
Catholic (not Roman Catholic)	☐	☐	☐
Charismatic	☐	☐	☐
Conservative evangelical	☐	☐	☐
Deconstructing	☐	☐	☐
Evangelical	☐	☐	☐
Methodist	☐	☐	☐
Non-denominational	☐	☐	☐
Pentecostal	☐	☐	☐
Post-evangelical or ex-evangelical	☐	☐	☐
Presbyterian (including Church of Scotland)	☐	☐	☐
Progressive	☐	☐	☐
Roman Catholic	☐	☐	☐
Quaker	☐	☐	☐
United Reformed Church	☐	☐	☐
Other	☐	☐	☐

If you have selected 'Other', please feel free to give further information at the bottom of this page.

Evangelicalism

Do you *currently* identify as evangelical or attend an evangelical church?

○ Yes (both)
○ Yes (I identify as evangelical but do not attend an evangelical church)
○ Yes (I do not identify as evangelical but attend an evangelical church)
○ No

Have you *previously* identified as evangelical or attended an evangelical church?

○ Yes (both)
○ Yes (previously identified as evangelical but never attended an evangelical church)
○ Yes (never identified as evangelical but previously attended an evangelical church)
○ No

Additional information

If you would like to, please use this space to give any more information about your current or previous religious affiliation, belief, denomination, and/or church attendance that you feel is relevant.

[ ]

Page 6: Purity Culture

Are you familiar with the term 'purity culture'?

○ Yes   ○ Somewhat   ○ No

How would you define the term 'purity culture'?

[ ]

Would you say you have experienced purity culture?

○ Yes   ○ No   ○ Not sure

Do these experiences relate to your current church/Christian community, or a previous one?

○ Current   ○ Previous   ○ Both
○ Neither/other

If you selected Neither/Other, please specify:

[ ]

If you would like to describe your experience(s), please do so here (optional):

[ ]

Have you ever worn a purity/virginity ring?

○ Yes   ○ No

What informed your decision to wear a purity ring? (optional)

[ ]

Have you ever signed a purity/virginity pledge?

○ Yes   ○ No

What informed your decision to sign a purity pledge? (optional)

[   ]

Have you ever attended a Christian abstinence- or purity-themed event?

(For example: a training course, discipleship course, Christian service, event or series of events)

○ Yes   ○ No   ○ Not sure/other (please
                                              describe)

What kind of event(s) was this?

[   ]

Please describe:

[   ]

Have you ever encountered virginity metaphors or symbols in a Christian setting, such as a flower, bone china teacup, gum, used bike or vehicle?

○ Yes   ○ No

Have you ever engaged in the following practices?

(Please select all that apply)

☐ Abstinence until marriage
☐ Abstinence plus (additional abstinence practices e.g. not kissing until engagement or wedding day)
☐ Lower-level abstinence (boundaries with partner e.g. limits on some sexual activity before engagement/marriage)
☐ Courting or other alternative to dating
☐ Dressing modestly (at church/in Christian settings)
☐ Dressing modestly (in all public settings)
☐ Physical boundaries with the opposite sex (e.g. side-hugging)
☐ Avoiding one-on-one time with anyone of the opposite sex
☐ Avoiding or limiting friendships with the opposite sex
☐ Prefer not to say
☐ None of the above

Page 7: Teachings and Beliefs

Please indicate whether you have encountered these teachings in a Christian setting, and how much you agree/disagree with each statement:

	Have you ever encountered this teaching in a Christian setting?		Please indicate how much you agree with the statement:				
	Yes	No	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. Women should dress modestly to avoid sexually tempting men	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
2. Virginity is a gift to give your spouse on your wedding night	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
3. God's will is for sex to happen within a marriage relationship	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
4. It is more acceptable for a man to not be a virgin on his wedding night than a woman	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
5. Waiting to have sex until marriage will make the wedding night and future sex life that much better	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
6. Women should cover themselves up; men can wear whatever clothing they choose	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
7. Sexual thoughts and feelings outside of marriage should cause guilt	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
8. It is normal to experience sexual thoughts and feelings throughout one's life	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
9. You lose a piece of yourself every time you have sex with someone new	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
10. A woman who dresses immodestly causes her brothers to stumble	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
11. Women should not have sexual desire	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
12. Purity is primarily about virginity	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
13. Having premarital sex will make you unattractive to your future spouse	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
14. Men and women should be equally responsible for maintaining sexual purity	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
15. If you remain a virgin until marriage, God will bless you and your spouse with a great sex life	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

16. It is normal for a man to struggle with pornography, but not normal for a woman	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
17. Sex outside of marriage will make you damaged goods	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
18. It will be difficult for your future spouse to forgive you if you have sex with someone else before marriage	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
19. If you are patient and sexually pure, God will bring you the perfect spouse	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
20. Women are, by nature, more sexually pure than men	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
21. You should feel ashamed if you have sex outside of marriage	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
22. It is normal for women to struggle with lust	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
23. Women should be cherished as pure creatures	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
24. It is the woman's fault if sexual boundaries are crossed in a dating relationship	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
25. Men are visual	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
26. Men are unable to control their sexual desire	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
27. When you have sex with someone you form a 'soul tie'	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
28. Pre-marital sex is a sin	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
29. Pre-marital sex is the foremost/worst sin	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
30. Pre-marital sex impacts your relationship with God	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Page 8: Books, Media, and the Bible

Have you heard of, or read, any of the following books?

(Please select all that apply)

	Heard of	Read
I Kissed Dating Goodbye (Joshua Harris)	☐	☐
Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Courtship (Joshua Harris)	☐	☐
Not Even a Hint (Joshua Harris)	☐	☐
And the Bride Wore White (Dannah Gresh)	☐	☐
Lady in Waiting: Becoming God's Best While Waiting for Mr. Right (Debby Jones and Jackie Kendall)	☐	☐
When God Writes Your Love Story (Eric Ludy and Leslie Ludy)	☐	☐
Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem)	☐	☐
Why True Love Waits (Josh McDowell)	☐	☐
Why Wait? (Josh McDowell)	☐	☐
Passion and Purity (Elisabeth Elliot)	☐	☐
None of the above	☐	☐

Have you heard of any of the following organisations?

(Please select all that apply)

☐ True Love Waits	☐ LifeWay	☐ Silver Ring Thing
☐ Unaltered Ministries	☐ Pure Freedom	☐ None of the above

Have you ever owned a teen girl or teen boy Bible?

○ Yes   ○ No

Have you ever owned an abstinence-themed Bible (e.g. the Abstinence Study Bible)?

○ Yes   ○ No

Christian teaching resources

Are there resources that you go to for Bible exposition and/or and information on Christian living? (if applicable)

(For example: podcasts, apps, blogs, YouTube channels, Christian writers, organisations or networks that you find useful on any aspect of Christian living)

[   ]

Reflect on your experiences of Christian teaching about purity, sexual abstinence, relationships and marriage.

Are there any Biblical narratives or people that comes to mind?

(For example: Ruth, who is sometimes used as an example of Biblical womanhood and purity).

```
[                              ]
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*Please note this question was excluded from analysis due to potential bias from prompts

Are there any Biblical verses, phrases or passages that come to mind?

```
[                              ]
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How were these Biblical examples used?

```
[                              ]
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Page 9: (Final Page) Responses to Purity Culture

Do you think purity culture is, or has been in recent years, present in British Christianity?

○ Yes	○ No	○ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

```
[                              ]
```

Based on your experiences, was purity culture in this context ever identified as such?

(E.g. as part of a wider Christian sexual purity movement? Informed by developments in US Christianity?)

○ Yes
○ No
○ Not sure

Do you think purity culture can be separated from Christian teaching on sexuality and gender?

○ Yes	○ Partially	○ No

Please feel free to expand on your answer here (optional):

```
[                              ]
```

Do you think purity culture can be separated from Christian culture?

○ Yes   ○ Partially   ○ No

Please feel free to expand on your answer here (optional):

Do you think abstinence until marriage is an essential part of Christian belief and practice?

○ Yes   ○ No

Please feel free to expand on your answer here (optional):

Overall, do you think the teachings of purity culture are...

○ Helpful   ○ Neither helpful nor   ○ Unhelpful
                        unhelpful/neutral

Overall, do you think the impact of purity culture on those who experienced it has been...

○ Positive   ○ Mixed/neutral   ○ Negative

If you could describe purity culture in three words, what three words would you use?

(For example: personal, unfamiliar, Bible-based, controlling, empowering, well-intentioned, problematic, etc.).

*Please note this question was excluded from analysis due to potential bias from prompts

Page 10: Further Information

Survey follow-up

Would you be willing to participate in an interview to discuss your experiences further?

○ Yes
○ Maybe - I would like more information
○ No

Please provide your contact details (email address) here:

Final comments

Do you have any additional comments? (optional)

Please feel free to use this space to share anything else you would like to before completing the survey.

Page 11: End of survey

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey!

If you would like further information about this research please contact Chrissie Thwaites from the University of Leeds at prct@leeds.ac.uk.

Appendix C: Purity Culture Belief Scale

C.1 Revised Purity Culture Belief Scale

These statements build on Oritz' original Purity Culture Belief Scale (2018: 106-107). Survey participants were asked two questions about each statement: 'have you ever encountered this teaching in a Christian setting?' (Yes/No) and 'please indicate how much you agree with the statement' (Strongly disagree/Disagree/Neither agree nor disagree/Agree/Strongly agree) (Q26).

1. Women should dress modestly to avoid sexually tempting men
2. Virginity is a gift to give your spouse on your wedding night
3. God's will is for sex to happen within a marriage relationship
4. It is more acceptable for a man to not be a virgin on his wedding night than a woman
5. Waiting to have sex until marriage will make the wedding night and future sex life that much better
6. Women should cover themselves up; men can wear whatever clothing they choose
7. Sexual thoughts and feelings outside of marriage should cause guilt
8. You lose a piece of yourself every time you have sex with someone new
9. A woman who dresses immodestly causes her brothers to stumble
10. Women should not have sexual desire
11. Purity is primarily about virginity
12. Having premarital sex will make you unattractive to your future spouse
13. If you remain a virgin until marriage, God will bless you and your spouse with a great sex life
14. It is normal for a man to struggle with pornography, but not normal for a woman
15. Sex outside of marriage will make you damaged goods
16. It will be difficult for your future spouse to forgive you if you have sex with someone else before marriage
17. If you are patient and sexually pure, God will bring you the perfect spouse
18. Women are, by nature, more sexually pure than men
19. You should feel ashamed if you have sex outside of marriage
20. Women should be cherished as pure creatures
21. It is the woman's fault if sexual boundaries are crossed in a dating relationship
22. Men are visual*
23. Men are unable to control their sexual desire*
24. When you have sex with someone you form a 'soul tie'*
25. Pre-marital sex is a sin*
26. Pre-marital sex is the foremost/worst sin*
27. Pre-marital sex impacts your relationship with God*

Statements followed by * indicate those added for this study. Please note that the following statements were removed from Oritz' original PCBS:

8. It is normal to experience sexual thoughts and feelings throughout one's life
14. Men and women should be equally responsible for maintaining sexual purity
22. It is normal for women to struggle with lust

C.2 PCBS Results

The above revision of Ortiz' PCBS resulted in the following subscales, presented here separately for Q26a (exposure) and Q26b (agreement). To help aid the visual presentation of the data, results from the 5-point Likert scale have been combined into a 3-point scale.
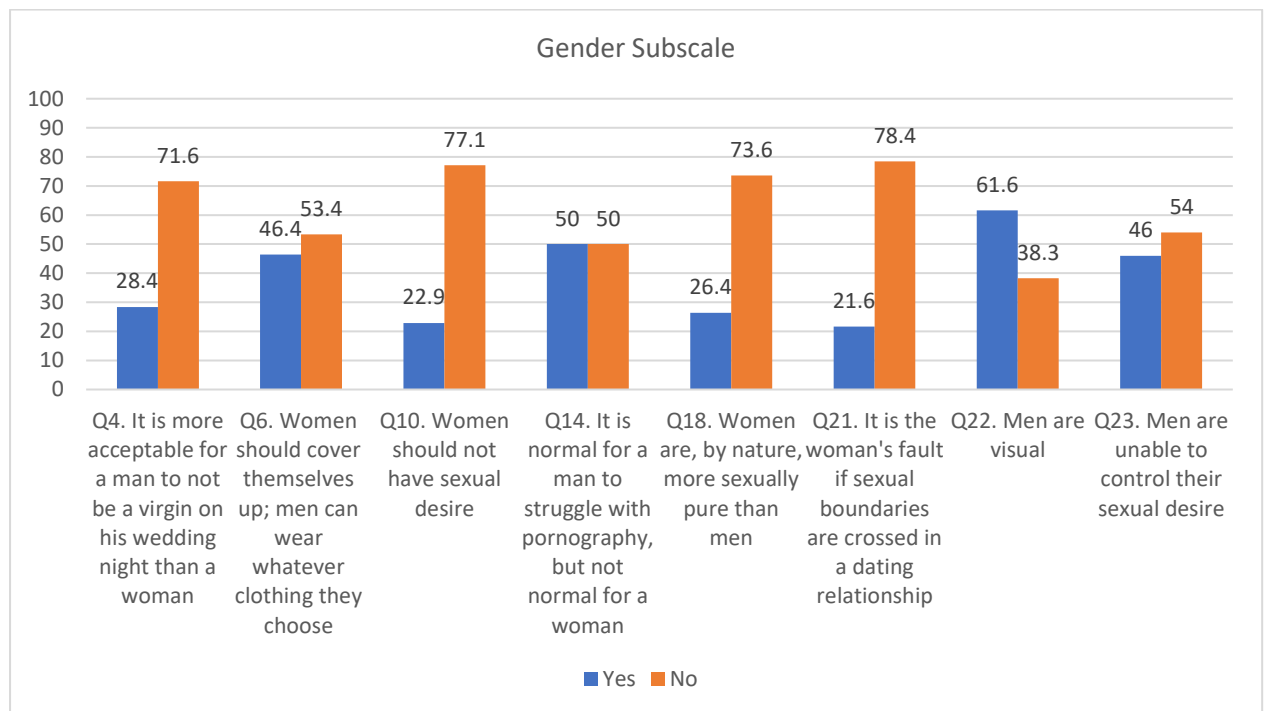
Shame and guilt subscale:
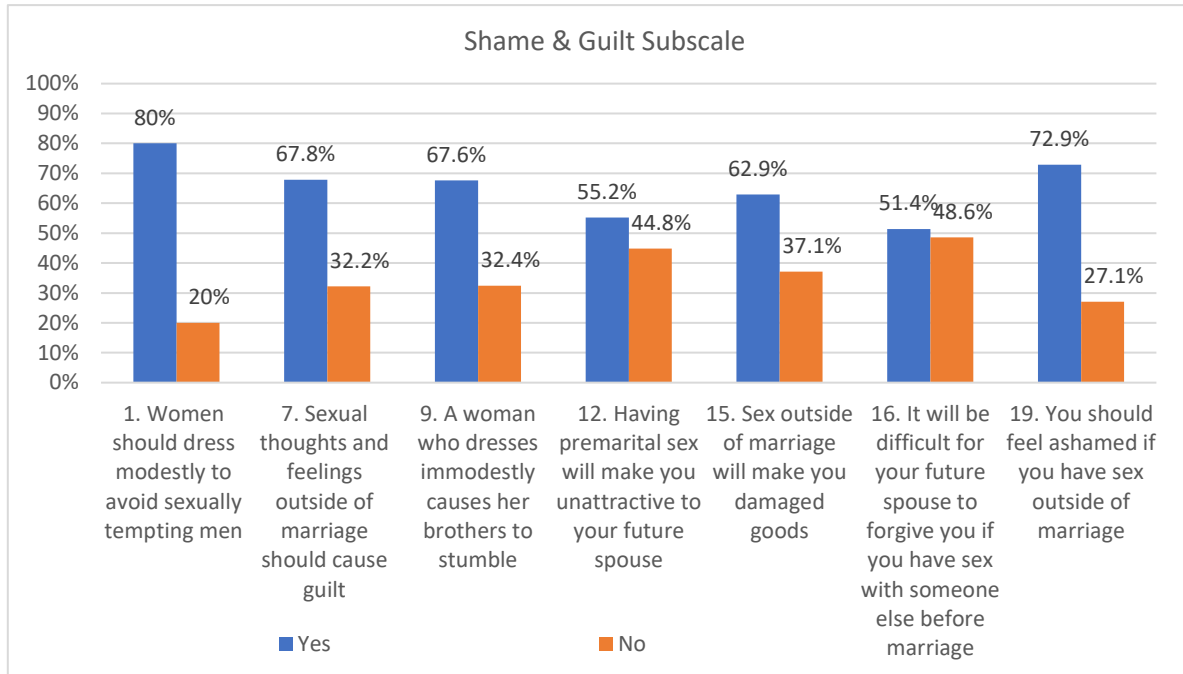
Survey Q26a: Have you ever encountered this teaching in a Christian setting?
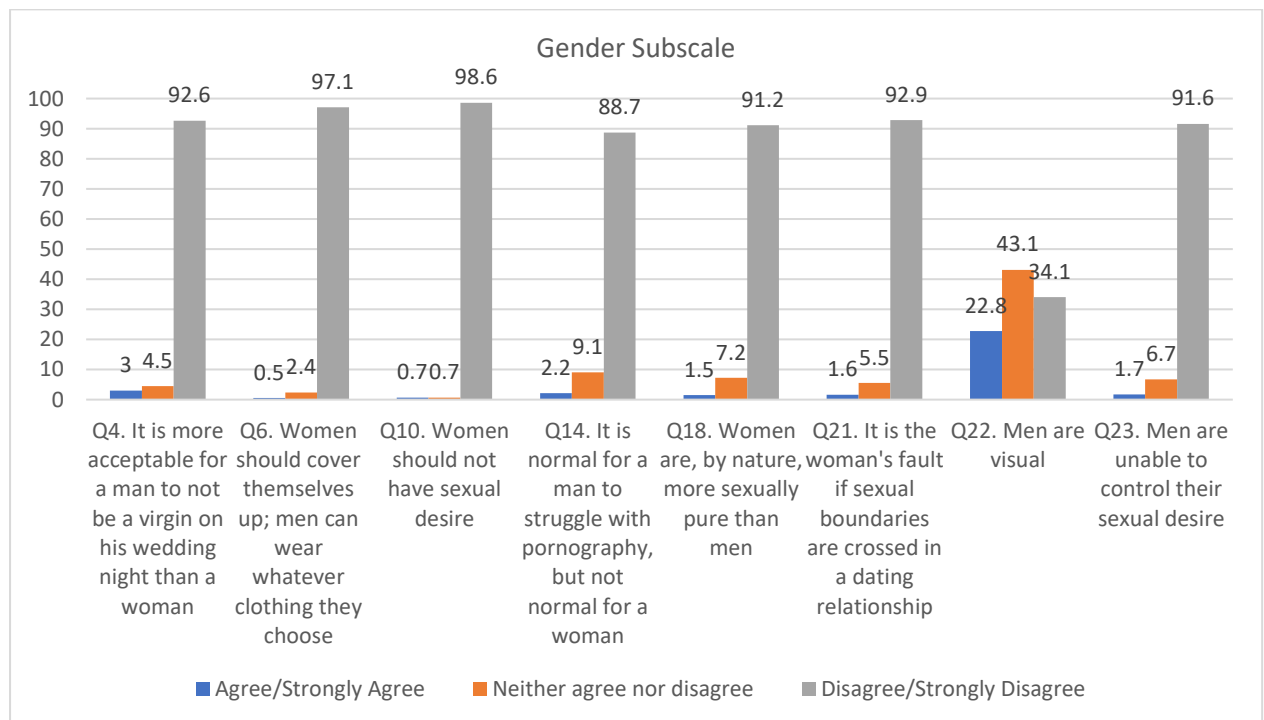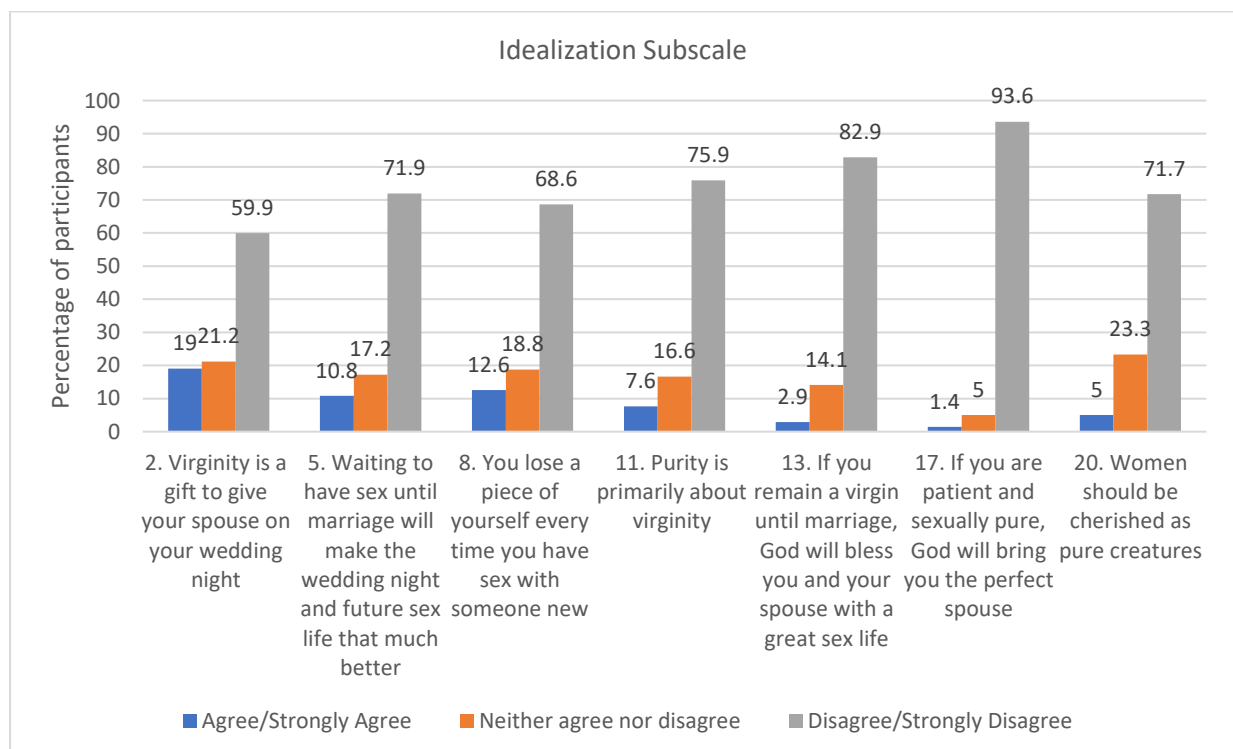(shame and guilt subscale)
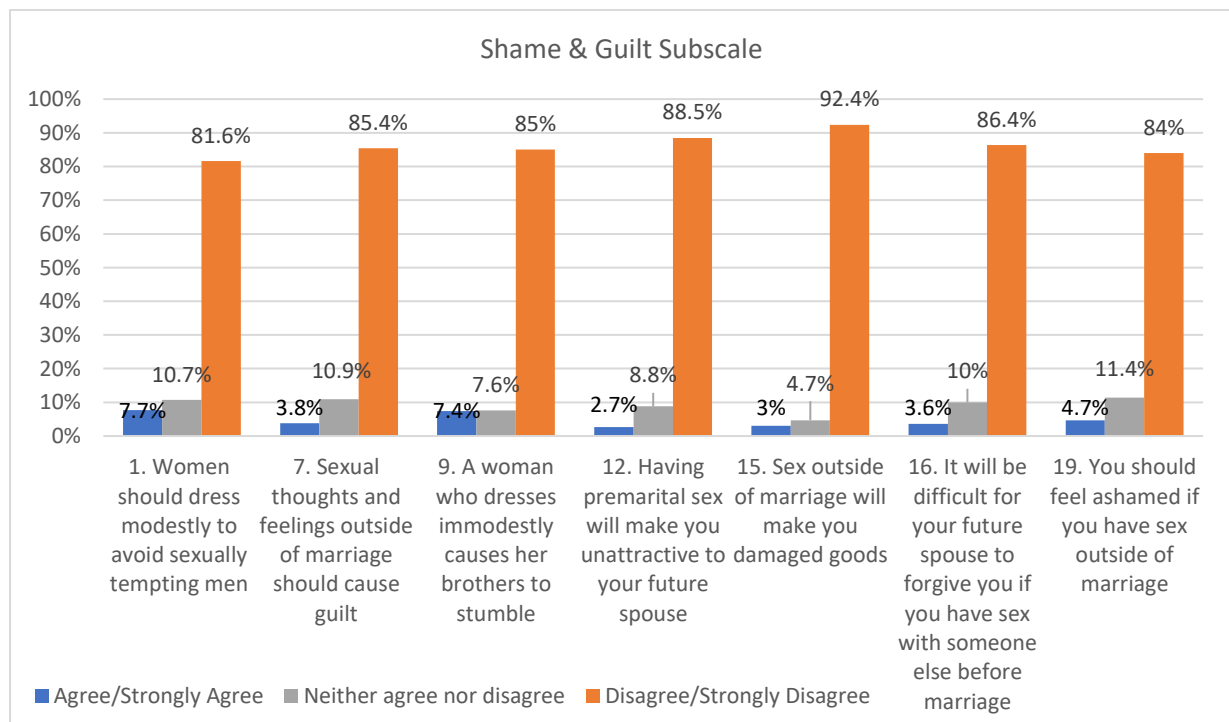
Survey Q26b: Please indicate how much you agree with the statement
(shame and guilt subscale)

267

Gender subscale:

Gender Subscale

Survey Q26a: Have you ever encountered this teaching in a Christian setting?
(gender subscale)

Gender Subscale

Survey Q26b: Please indicate how much you agree with the statement
(shame and guilt subscale)
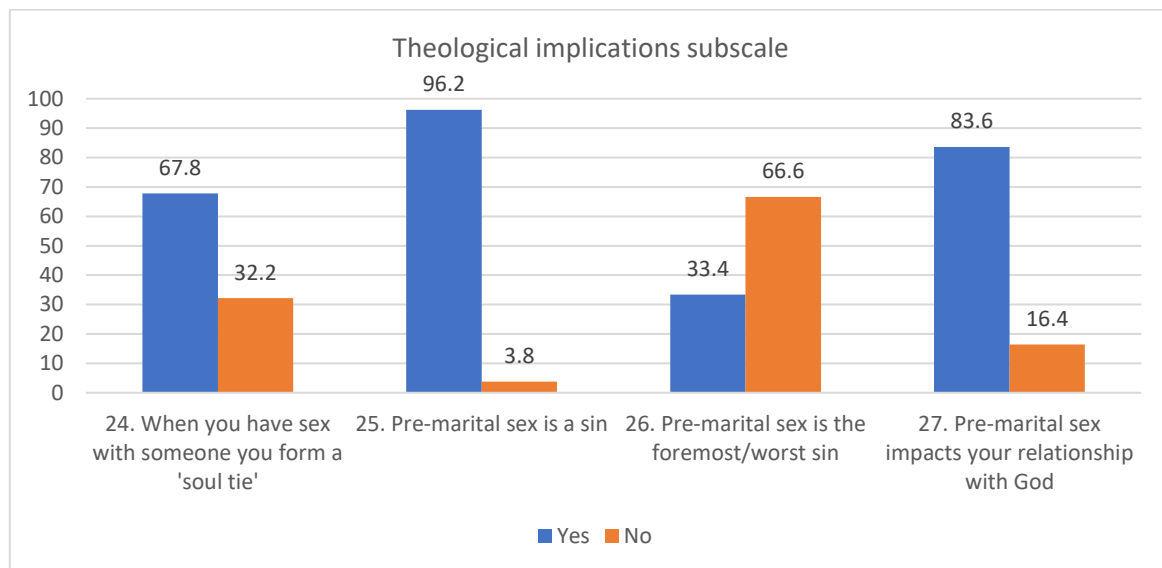
Idealization subscale:
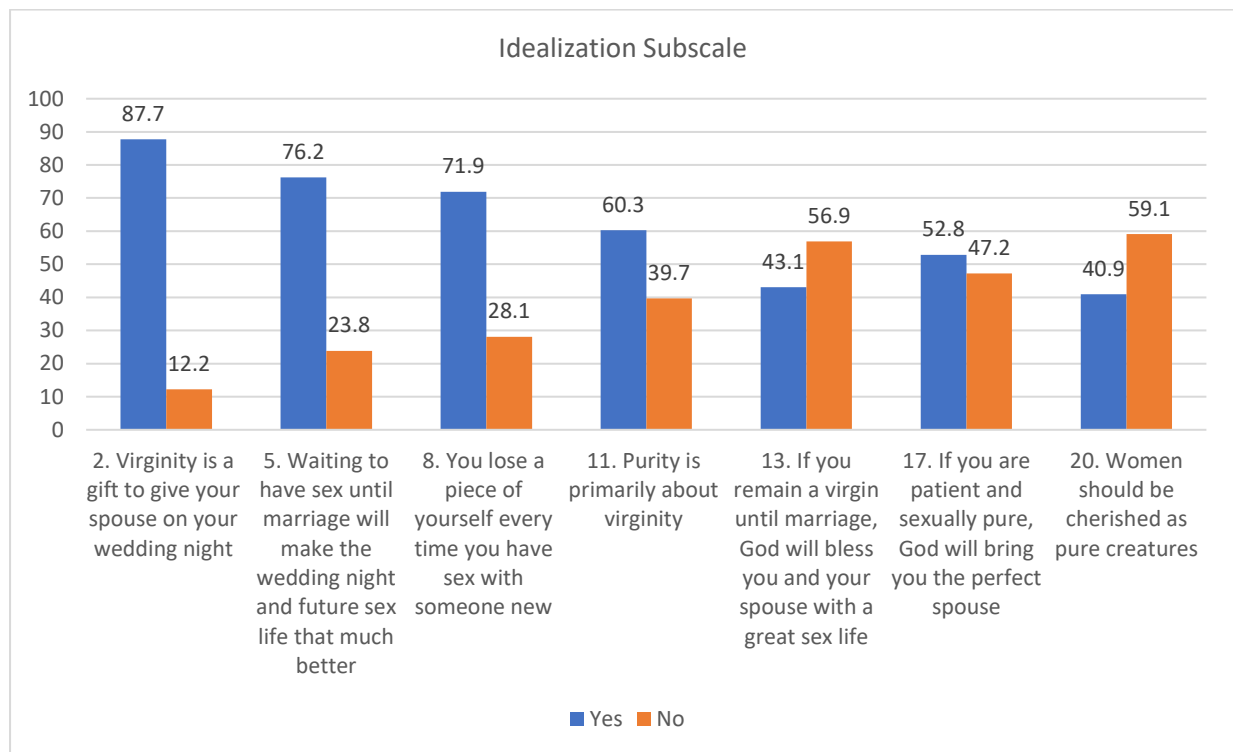
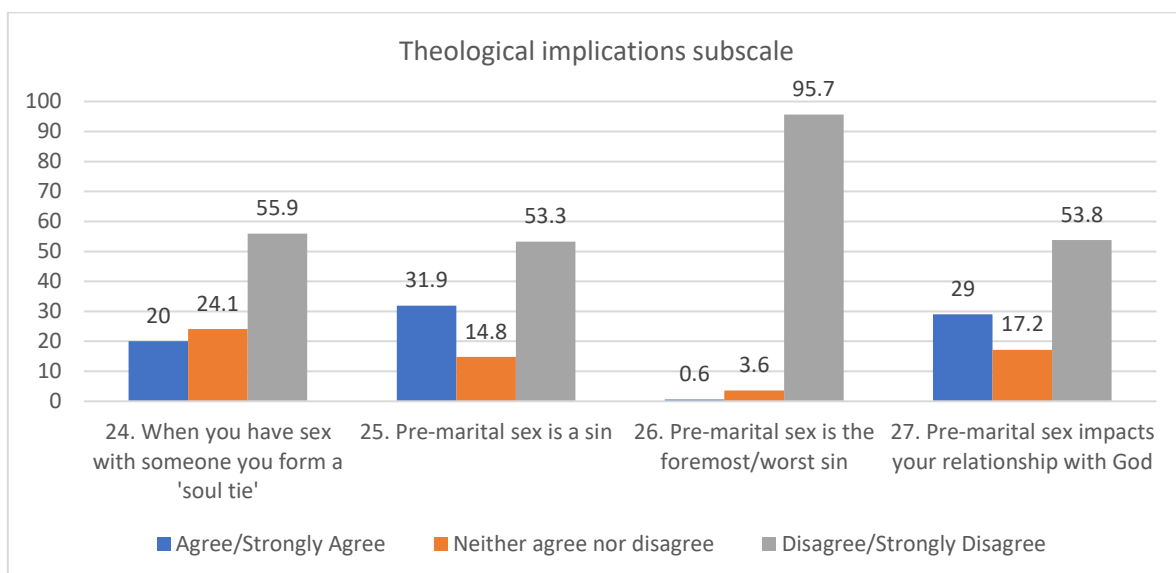Survey Q26b: Please indicate how much you agree with the statement
(idealization subscale)

Survey Q26b: Please indicate how much you agree with the statement
(idealization subscale)
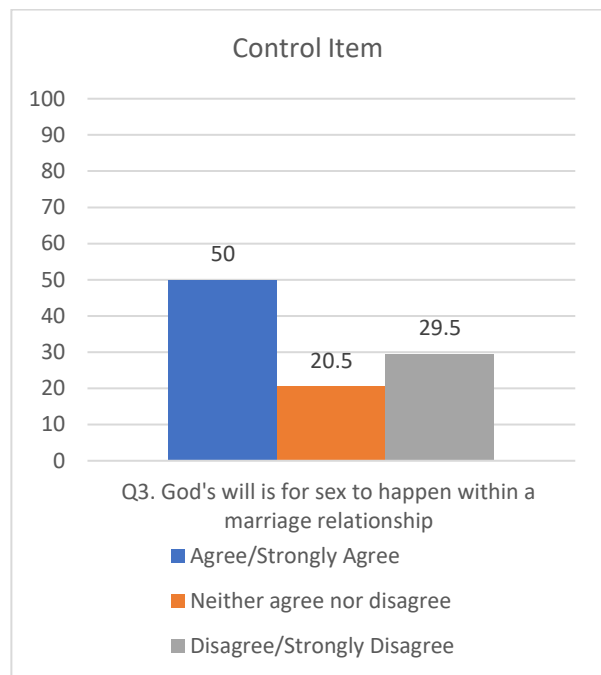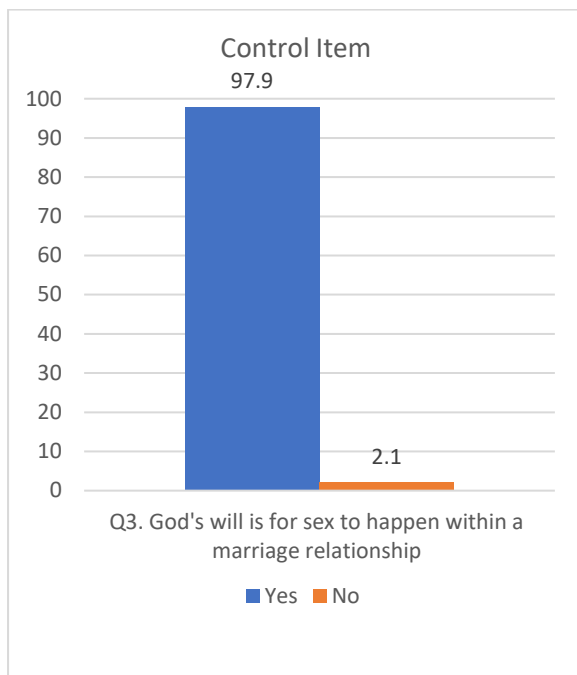
Theological implications subscale:

Survey Q26a: Have you ever encountered this teaching in a Christian setting?
(theological implications subscale)

Survey Q26b: Please indicate how much you agree with the statement
(theological implications subscale)

Control item:

FAHC 20-096 - Approval

From AHC Research Ethics <AHCResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk>

Date Tue 21/09/2021 15:48

To Christabelle Thwaites <prct@leeds.ac.uk>

Cc Rachel Muers <R.E.Muers@leeds.ac.uk>; AHC Research Ethics <AHCResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk>

Dear Christabelle

FAHC 20-096 – The legacy of purity culture in contemporary UK Christianity

I am pleased to inform you that the above research ethics application has been reviewed by AHC Committee and I can confirm a favourable ethical opinion based on the documentation received at date of this email.

Please retain this email as evidence of approval in your study file.

Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the original research as submitted and approved to date. This includes recruitment methodology; all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. Please see http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/downloads/download/179/amendment_form or contact the Research Ethics & Governance Administrator for further information (ahcresearchethics@leeds.ac.uk) if required.

Ethics approval does not infer you have the right of access to any member of staff or student or documents and the premises of the University of Leeds. Nor does it imply any right of access to the premises of any other organisation, including clinical areas. The committee takes no responsibility for you gaining access to staff, students and/or premises prior to, during or following your research activities.

Please note: You are expected to keep a record of all your approved documentation, as well as documents such as sample consent forms, risk assessments and other documents relating to the study. This should be kept in your study file, which should be readily available for audit purposes. You will be given a two week notice period if your project is to be audited.

If you require this confirmation in letter form, for example to show to external funders, then please do email me. I am happy to provide this if required.

It is our policy to remind everyone that it is your responsibility to comply with Health and Safety, Data Protection and any other legal and/or professional guidelines there may be.

I hope the study goes well.

Very best wishes,

George

~~~~~~

Georgina Hough, Administrative Assistant, The Secretariat, University of Leeds, LS2 9NL, g.hough1@leeds.ac.uk