

# Christian College Students and Purity Culture: Acceptance and Lived Experience

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## Introduction

Purity culture is a movement predominantly seen in the evangelical branch of Christianity that focuses on the purity status of young, unmarried women (Latour, 2020). This purity is maintained through sexual abstinence before heterosexual, monogamous, married relationships. The harmful nature of purity culture has been uncovered in recent years through extended research on the topic. This has brought the question of how prominent this idea of purity culture is. This study aims to investigate how women on a Christian campus view and contribute to purity culture.

Rape myth acceptance is also a large feature in purity culture (Barnett, Sligar, & Wang, 2018). "Rape myths are a specific set of attitudes and beliefs that may contribute to ongoing sexual violence by shifting blame for sexual assault from perpetrators to victims" (Iconis, 2008).

## Research Questions

1. Where do women on a Christian campus score on the purity culture belief scale?
2. Does religiosity correlate with purity culture belief and experience?
3. How do women on a Christian campus interact with purity culture?

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 12 female Northwestern college students ranging from ages 19 to 22. Participants ranged in previous schooling experience with 9 attending public schools, 3 attending private religious schools, 1 attending charter schools. Religious beliefs also ranged from 8 different denominations.

### Materials

**Measures of Religiosity:** Within the demographics survey, a short measure of religiosity was also given. This included questions about frequency of church attendance, involvement in church community, and importance of religion in personal life.

**Abbreviated Purity Culture Belief Scale:** Ortiz (2018) created a version of the purity culture belief scale. This scale is measured in three different ways, sexual shame and guilt, gender roles, and idealization.

- **Sexual Shame and Guilt:** Extreme modesty, "all or nothing" mentality as it relates to sexuality
- **Gender Roles:** Sexual double standards, women as gatekeepers, men as unable to control sexual desire, benevolent sexism
- **Idealization:** Virginity as a gift, benevolent sexism, "all or nothing" mentality as it relates to sexuality

## Results

**Research Question 1:** Where do women on a Christian campus score on the purity culture belief scale?

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Total
Sexual Shame and Guilt	M: 4.00 Sd: 1.63	M: 3.75 Sd: 2.87	M: 3.50 Sd: 1.73	M: 3.75 Sd: 1.96
Gender Roles	M: 3.75 Sd: 1.71	M: 4.75 Sd: 3.10	M: 3.75 Sd: 1.26	M: 4.08 Sd: 2.02
Idealization	M: 4.75 Sd: 1.50	M: 2.75 Sd: 1.50	M: 4.00 Sd: 1.41	M: 3.83 Sd: 1.59
Total	M: 21.75 Sd: 3.86	M: 20.75 Sd: 7.68	M: 20.50 Sd: 2.38	M: 21.00 Sd: 4.69

**Research Question 2:** Does religiosity correlate with purity culture belief and experience?

To test if religiosity would be correlated to purity belief a Pearson product moment correlation was performed. There was no significant correlation found,  $r(12) = .103$ ,  $p = .749$ .

**Research Question 3:** How do women on a Christian campus interact with purity culture?

### Main theme: Analogies

"I was so used to this abstinence until marriage culture ... there's always like that picture, crumple a paper and see if you can put it back into it's original form, you can't, that's what happens when you lose your virginity and that's what I was taught and that's what I believed."

"I heard something really similar growing up, that every time that you do something with someone, you are giving away a piece of your heart. And I was like, so what happens, I mean, how many pieces of your heart do you have? And what if you don't have a heart? ... I was like 'Oh no, I don't wanna like, not have a heart anymore. And if you don't have a heart can you know Jesus?'"

"I've heard a thousand metaphors comparing you to like, a crumpled rose ... or you're like a wrinkly dollar bill, or like a car that's been in an accident. I've heard so many, like you still are who you are, but less valuable type of thing. And no man is going to want something like that, when they could have something that is clean."

### Main theme: Undefined Language

"Growing up in the church, I think it wasn't talked about, sex wasn't talked about and very much like sheltered in that sense not knowing much of like, even the anatomy or biological process of it until I was like a junior in high school and taking an anatomy class."

"When I was younger, I didn't understand any of it or like know anything. I was very innocent in that area for a while, and I don't know if prepared me well to be in a relationship with other people, because not only was it don't do this, but we don't talk about it. I think there is a difference between 'Hey, this is something that is meant between marriage' and having no education."

"I remember my dad sitting down with me, saying, 'Hey are you guys, like, staying pure?' ... I'm talking like, not even like touching.' ... And I remember leaving the room so ashamed ... thinking he knows, he knows I let this guy touch me."

### Main theme: Rape Myth Acceptance

"You catch what you bait with...well if you're dressing that way, you're gonna catch like guys like looking at you and sexualizing you because of what you are baiting them with."

Talking about renegotiating sexual boundaries:  
"I think it'd be tough at first. Especially if you are taking something away that you let them do beforehand ... you would constantly have to remind them 'No I didn't like that, remember that' or 'No I don't want that.'"

"I feel like in my experience too it's more, the importance of [purity] is more pushed upon women and like we need to dress a certain way ... we [women] have to do that but they [men] don't ... we have to carry more of the burden."

## Conclusion

Research questions one and two both yielded similar results, showing that there was not much difference in thinking. The scores on the purity culture belief scale showed similar results across groups. Many women in these groups interacted with purity culture aspects in a similar way. Along with that there was no significant correlation between religiosity and purity culture belief. This could be due to the small sample size or the similarity of beliefs.

The third research question was answered through the conversations with focus groups. Women expressed their experiences which were then divided into main themes. Many main themes were present across focus groups, though the ideas of analogies, undefined language, and rape myth acceptance were very prevalent in these focus group conversations. These main ideas help to uncover the harmful messages that are seen within purity culture.

These results also suggest an interaction on how young people are educated and their experience with purity culture. Many of the main points stemmed from educational issues with purity,

The results further support the idea that purity culture and rape myth acceptance are connected. Future research could seek more information on this connection. Certain constructs that are present in purity culture (i.e., sexual shame and guilt, sexism, sexual double standards) could further this understanding.

## References

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