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FRAMED BY SEXUALITY: AN EXAMINATION OF IDENTITY-MESSAGES
IN “PURITY CULTURE” REFLECTIONS

BY

ASHLEY PIKEL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Science

Major in Communication Studies & Journalism

South Dakota State University

2018

FRAMED BY SEXUALITY: AN EXAMINATION OF IDENTITY-MESSAGES
IN "PURITY CULTURE" REFLECTIONS

ASHLEY PIKEL

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the Master of Science in Communication Studies degree and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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This thesis is for those who do not understand, for those who painfully relate, and to all who do not yet realize their unique value and gifts. For those riddled with shame, soldier

on.

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ABSTRACT

FRAMED BY SEXUALITY: AN EXAMINATION OF IDENTITY-MESSAGES
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ASHLEY PIKEL

2018

Purity culture is a movement many young Evangelical Christians experienced in the 1990s and early 2000s. Purity culture espouses many values including practicing abstinence until marriage, observing strict dating and/or courtship rules, and remaining physically, emotionally, and spiritually pure. In 1997 Joshua Harris authored *I Kissed Dating Goodbye (IKDG)* which popularized purity culture principles. Over the past twenty years, Harris reflected on his writings as well as feedback from others to determine that some of what he wrote was incorrect. In 2016, Harris requested *IKDG* readers to submit their experiences with the book in the form of personal stories. Through Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), these stories are examined for identity messages. Through directed qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis, 56 stories were analyzed. Of the 56 stories, 53 included language that indicated identity gaps, or “...discrepancies between or among the four frames of identity” (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 268). The four frames of identity (personal, enacted, relational, communal) were present in all but seven stories. Implications of the study’s observations and future research directions are discussed in the final pages.

Chapter 1

Introduction

For many raised in or around Evangelical Christian traditions during the latter part of the 20th century, the word “purity” may bring about visions of pledge cards, purity balls, and silver rings (Anderson, 2015; Bearman & Brückner, 2001; Bersamin, Walker, Waiters, Fisher, & Grube, 2005; Carpenter, 2011; Freitas, 2008; Gardner, 2011; Moslener, 2015; Valenti, 2009). It may also draw images of graphic visual metaphors for those who lack sexual purity (Freitas, 2008; Gardner, 2011; Klement & Sagarin, 2017; Moon & Reger, 2014; Schermer Sellers, 2017). In Lookadoo and DiMarco’s (2003) book, *Dateable: Are You? Are They?*, sexual experiences outside of marriage are compared to the dings and dents that make a car less valuable. These symbols and images were a part of what has become known as “purity culture,” a religious movement characterized by a “complex set of beliefs” that “appears to value and idealize women for their virginity and femininity” (Klement & Sagarin, 2017, p. 207).

This cultural movement began in 1993 when the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, the Southern Baptist Convention, created “True Love Waits” at their conference in Houston (Bersamin et al., 2005; Landor & Simons, 2014; Moslener, 2015; Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008; Regnerus, 2007; Wilson Matt, 1993). “True Love Waits” encouraged participants to pledge to remain virgins until marriage and the message quickly spread to other churches and even schools (Bersamin et al., 2005; Landor & Simons, 2014; Moslener, 2015; Regnerus, 2007; Wilson Matt, 1993). Two years later the purity organization, *Silver Ring Thing*, was founded (Landor & Simons, 2014). This program focused on an outward commitment to abstinence until marriage by

wearing a silver ring on one's wedding-ring finger. By 1995, 2.2 million individuals had taken a virginity pledge (Landor & Simons, 2014). The main focus of these movements was to encourage youth to pledge to remain virgins until marriage. Purity culture practices such as signing a declaration committing to sexual purity until one's wedding night were celebrated privately and even more so publicly, reinforcing and redefining what it meant to be a "pure" young adult Christian (Fahs, 2010; Gibbs, 2008; Klement & Sagarin, 2017; Landor & Simons, 2014).

The purity movement found its way into the hands and hearts of young women and men through merchandise, media, and ministries including "Modest is Hottest" t-shirts, motivational DVDs, and youth rallies to affirm and commit to pure sexuality. One of the most powerful mediums was books: *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Joshua Harris, 1997), *Dateable* (Justin Lookadoo and Hayley DiMarco, 2003), *And the Bride Wore White* (Dannah Gresh, 1999), and other notable titles could be found on adolescents' and adult church leaders' bookshelves (Klement & Sagarin, 2017). The books included scales to measure sexual purity, anecdotal warnings to stay as far away from impurity as possible, and the consequences of not heeding both biblically and non-biblically based notions of appropriate sexuality.

What may not have been so visible was the potential risk to purity culture's participants (Ababio & Salifu, 2017; Fahs, 2010; Klement & Sagarin, 2017; Landor & Simons, 2014; No Shame Movement, 2016; Rosenbaum, 2006; Schermer Sellers, 2017). Klement and Sagarin (2017) noted that while the messages of purity in Christian dating books may be presented as innocuous, examination of the messages of purity culture has revealed that this literature contributes to shaming narratives surrounding women's

sexuality and also “include[s] messages of rape culture, which supports sexual violence and invokes consequences for women who deviate from socially proscribed gender norms” (p. 205). The analyzed messages have been almost exclusively directed at women or at gender-neutral audiences. Klement and Sagarin (2017) called for scholars to examine the messages of purity culture directed at young men to ascertain whether those messages complement the messages directed at young women.

The purpose of this study is to examine messages from women and men who have experienced purity culture and its literature, specifically *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. Joshua Harris, author of many purity culture books including the cult hit *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Graham, 2016; Klett, 2017), recently presented a TED talk. In the talk’s description Harris shared, “Twenty years ago I wrote a best-selling book about dating that I’m now realizing misguided and even hurt some people” (Klett, 2017). Earlier in 2016, Harris began requesting stories of his reader’s experiences with *IKDG* (Graham, 2016). As of August 23, 2016, Harris had received over 300 unique submissions (Graham, 2016). Submitters who gave Harris permission to share their experiences now have their stories available to read on his website, of which the stories take up 38 pages (Grace at Work, n.d.). Harris, along with another student from the university he is currently attending for his master’s degree, is developing a documentary, *I Survived I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, exploring his readers’ stories and his own rethinking of his tome (Grace at Work, n.d.). With a release set for 2018, this documentary aims to explore the responses to purity culture, including dating ideals (Grace at Work, n.d.; I Survived I Kissed Dating Goodbye, n.d.). This study will use directed qualitative content analysis

and directed questions from the communication theory of identity (CTI) to examine the stories Harris received.

For this reason, the current study will employ CTI (Hecht, 1993) to examine these stories for identity-related content. Utilizing Hecht's theory as a framework will allow for content analysis of identity-based messages from both young women and men. Stories include experiences from both genders, though each story does not always identify the gender of the author. Analysis will also include examination of the submitters' expressions of possible identity gaps. This chapter will include a statement of the problem, a background of the problem, and definitions of key terms, and will conclude with a discussion about the value of the study.

Statement of the Problem

There are four main problems with the messages in purity culture. The first problem includes negative teachings about sex. Secondly, these teachings have potential negative impacts on young recipients' identity development as it relates to sex and sexuality. Thirdly, these teachings have been assessed as encouraging blame and inappropriate expectations. Finally, some of these teachings fail to provide full and accurate information about sex, potentially leading to negative physical consequences for the receivers of these teachings.

First, purity culture contains negative and ambiguous teachings about sex. Specifically, women are told that sexuality is "...dirty, sinful, and potentially polluting" (Fahs, 2010, p 134). Fahs (2010) also found that women learn that sex outside the context of marriage not only corrupts them, but takes away their value and leaves them with diseases. While the latter is sometimes true, it illustrates a focus on the negatives of sex.

Many scholars have found illustrations used to demonstrate the negative effect of sex on unmarried women and men. Gardner (2011) discussed the potential harms of these purity culture anecdotes in which women and men were shamed for their sexual activity or compared to damaged inanimate objects.

Freitas (2008) learned of an illustration where a piece of fruit represented a young woman and every time she did “something” with a guy, a piece of the fruit’s flesh was torn away, ending with the piece of fruit in ruins (p. 83). Freitas (2008) also noted a puzzle piece analogy—every time someone went too far sexually, a piece was lost until the puzzle was depleted. Ehrlich (2006) found an example relating sex to spoiled food and Klement and Sagarin (2017) shared an example where a woman who engaged in premarital sex was compared to a beaten-up car. Roses are a commonly used example: Valenti (2009) learned that gold rose pins were handed out with the message, “Don’t leave your future husband holding a bare stem. Abstain” (Valenti, 2009, p. 32) and Ehrlich (2006) found a comparison of a normal rose versus a rose with petals removed (one for each sexual sin) and asking teens which flower they would rather have—untouched or tattered. Beyond analogies, Paul (2014) stated that “...advocates of the purity movement teach women that they do not express or feel sexual feelings but rather romantic tendencies” (p. 7). Paul (2014) also posited the standards of purity are so heavily focused on young women that they are not able to even understand the changes happening in their bodies during puberty. Other teachings of the purity culture movement, while not necessarily negative, present ambiguous messages. When Baumgardner (2011) found a theme among young girls who were interviewed at a purity

ball—they showed a lack of knowledge regarding the actual purity pledge (as cited in Paul, 2014).

Second, as a result of these negative and ambiguous teachings about sex, women can experience negative impacts on their identity development as it relates to sex and sexuality. Past studies have discussed impacts including sexually-based and gender-based self-worth; negative labeling; and gender inequity with regard to autonomy development. Gibbs (2008) discussed an example of the negative impacts of sexually-based self-worth. The author recounted an incident that reinforced how purity culture can impact young women's feelings regarding their value with regard to sex. Gibbs (2008) described a situation in which a young woman who, as a result of a sexual assault, took off her purity ring and avoided a purity ball she'd planned to attend with her father. Her father stated, "That was part of a healing process, with the message that you're valuable no matter what someone did to you" (Gibbs, 2008, p. 38). However, even with therapy and her parents' purchase of a larger ring, it took months before she could wear it because she reported feeling that the damage to her value as a person was too great due to the sexual nature of the assault (Gibbs, 2008).

Additional hindrances to identity development as a result of purity culture were analyzed by Klement and Sagarin (2017). These authors conducted a thematic analysis of eight of the most popular texts that have been read by teens and parents involved in the purity culture movement. Their analysis revealed themes of gender-based self-worth, negative labeling of people, a theme among purity culture texts—this theme repeatedly asserted or assumed that women and men were created with psychological differences to serve different purposes and, therefore, they should be viewed and treated differently and

fulfill prescribed gender roles (Fahs, 2010; Klement & Sagarin, 2017). In addition to gender roles, sexual roles are given to women and men (Driscoll & Driscoll, 2012; Feldhahn & Rice, 2006). Feldhahn and Rice (2006) told girls they are “gatekeepers” who must keep boys from “storming the gates” of their purity. Driscoll and Driscoll (2012) called out men specifically as “‘No Sissy Stuff’ Sam” and “Give ‘Em Hell Hank” to illustrate how they could be viewed based on their actions. Women are labeled “emotional” and therefore likely cannot differentiate between sex and emotion. According to Klement and Sagarin (2017), if women do enjoy sex they are disconnected from their emotional identity and considered “broken” (p. 215).

An additional negative consequence to identity that can result from purity culture literature stems from the perpetuation of purity balls. Created by Randy Wilson as a reaction to a year saturated with sex, from President Bill Clinton’s lying about sexual relations to Viagra earning the title of fastest-selling drugs (Paul, 2014), Fahs (2010) described these events as an evening of dinner, dancing, and daughters watching their fathers sign a pledge vowing to protect their daughter’s virginity. These balls are a common practice within purity culture and illustrate a woman’s lack of autonomy in their sexuality and relationships (Fahs, 2010; Gibbs, 2008). Fahs (2010) criticized purity balls for their purpose of leading women to recognize their worth as virgins as well as the value of their virginity. Such a strong focus on virginity can imply that young women are unaware or unconvinced of their value until they have a ceremony officially recognizing their purity and marking it with male approval (Ehrlich, 2006; Fahs, 2010). The idea of male approval relates to the next tenet that relates to a lack of sexual autonomy and identity development. Fahs (2010) shares that “...repression, silence, distorted

information, and the construction of women as sexual property negatively affects children as they become adults” (p. 139). Women are explicitly identified as the sexual property of their husbands, both before and after marriage: “Women should remain virgins until marriage, because their virginity belongs to their husbands” (Feldhahn & Rice, 2006, p. 213). However, both men and women are considered property of one another, removing autonomy. Driscoll and Driscoll (2012) quoted 1 Corinthians 7 “The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body but the wife does” (p. 161) and Harris asserted (2003) “A husband and wife may enjoy each other’s bodies because in essence they belong to one another” (p. 94).

The third general harm scholars see from purity culture literature is its tendency to encourage negative framing of others they are in relationship with, including blaming them and carrying unrealistic expectations. Klement and Sagarin’s (2017) study found that women were blamed for men’s sexual actions in almost all of the books. They cite texts such as Lookadoo & DiMarco (2003) who claim that women are “asking for it” (to be assaulted or pushed into sexual situations) based on how they dress (Lookadoo & DiMarco, 2003, as cited in Klement & Sagarin, 2017). Feldhahn and Rice (2006) stated that young men believe young women know the effect they have when wearing certain outfits. They go on to share, “...if you dress in a tight or revealing outfit, they think you *want* them to picture you naked” (Feldhahn & Rice, 2006, p. 109). As a result, a focus on female modesty to protect males from sexual temptation is common (Lookadoo & DiMarco, 2003; No Shame Movement, 2016). When modesty standards are not followed by women, Klement and Sagarin (2017) shared that Christian dating books utilize

anecdotes that illustrate what a woman could have done to prevent sexual overtures from men. There are also inappropriate expectations for men from purity culture, especially regarding how much control they do or don't have over their own sex drive (Feldhahn & Rice, 2006; Lookadoo & DiMarco, 2003). Regarding blame, a serious movement has been found within purity culture: rape culture. Picazo (2017) stated "Rape culture and purity culture are two sides of the same coin, where women lose no matter the outcome of the toss." Klement and Sagarin (2017) titled their research study paper, "Nobody wants to date a whore: Rape-supportive messages in women-directed Christian dating books." Rape culture is a serious problem to solve and learning that rape-supportive messages are found in women-directed Christian dating books may illustrate just how difficult it will be to eradicate this problem.

Paul (2014) posited that women within the purity movement are unaware of signs that a relationship is unhealthy. Additionally, Paul (2014) noted that abstinence-only education encourages marriage and that LifeWay (the organization that sponsors "True Love Waits") students believe marriage is the only way to guarantee that they are loved. In the same vein, the protection purity balls offer young women comes in the form of their father's pledge, not their mother or parents together as a team. If a father is unable to attend the event, an uncle, grandfather, close family friend, anyone who is a male is suggested as a replacement. This could signal that male relationships are stronger than female relationships when it comes to protecting and guiding one's purity (Paul, 2014).

A final problem scholars have discussed regarding purity culture include the presentation of ambiguous sexual standards and, at times, inaccurate information about sex. Price (2011) reported that one billion dollars were allocated for sexual education

during the presidencies of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. However, misinformation regarding sexual health stayed in schools as over 80 percent of abstinence-only education programs funded by the government taught incorrect or distorted information (Valenti, 2009). Paul (2014) believed the abstinence-only education hurt more than helped young men and women as real-world situations were not addressed and sexual protection was not discussed. The lack of accurate sexual education makes it difficult for young women and men to grow up understanding the functions of their body, along with how to properly take ownership of their sexuality (Fahs, 2010; Klement & Sagarin, 2017; Schermer Sellers, 2017). Ambiguity permeates purity culture, as Carpenter (2001) noted that individuals have different definitions for the word sex, Freitas (2008) noted that “staying pure” means different things to different people, and Paul (2014) pointed out that virginity pledges can be confusing as there’s not a standard definition for “purity.” Virginity pledge language also differs from one organization, school, and church to the next (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, 2005). Additionally, Fahs (2010) noted that medical information shared on “True Love Waits” website in the “Q and A” section was incorrect, such as Wayne Grant, M.D.’s statement that if no sex of any kind is engaged in, “All partners who are faithful in this way will never become contaminated with the AIDS virus” (Fahs, 2010). Paul (2014) disputed Dr. Grant’s statement, noting that people can contract AIDS from their parents, if their parents were infected prior to their birth. Ironically, increased sexual risk-taking is also common in those who have taken virginity pledges or joined chastity clubs (Fahs, 2010). Bersamin et al. (2007) and Hans and Kimberly (2011) noted that if these organizations restrict the definition of sex to penile penetration of the vagina, participation in

unprotected anal and oral sex may greatly increase among those who have taken purity pledges (as cited in Paul, 2014) and in general participate in more risky behaviors than those who were taught comprehensive sexual education (Fahs, 2010; Fishcer, 2006).

Background of the Problem

The problems inherent in purity culture are strongly related to education. There are several different sources that influence what young women and men believe about their sexuality: the early teachings of the church and how they affect young men and women today, the changes in sexual education throughout the past 60 years, and the changing relationship between the federal government and women's autonomy.

First, early church teachings influenced how young men and women viewed their sexuality. Family therapist/sex therapist Tina Schermer Sellers, founder of the Northwest Institute on Intimacy, is an authority on the historical roots of the above-cited problematic teachings about sexuality. In her text *Sex, God, and the Conservative Church: Erasing Shame from Sexual Intimacy*, Schermer Sellers (2017) asserted that Christianity did not come with a specific set of sexual ethics—the New Testament was written over the course of 1,000 years, leaving time and room for social and cultural influence on biblical norms. She noted that "...throughout history, the gift of our bodies and the gift of sexuality have generally been seen as evil, sinful, and not of God" (p. 35). Schermer Sellers (2017) asserted that these historical teachings can be problematic because they can lead people to consider the body an obstacle and, therefore, religious teachings can possibly take focus away from God. In regards to beliefs about the body and God, Schermer Sellers (2017) reports that her research into the church teachings regarding sexuality was motivated by a trend she noticed among her twenty- and thirty-something

clients with conservative Christian backgrounds. During the early 2000s, she noted the sexual educational experiences of her clients were harsher than those who had learned about sex between the 1960s-1980s. However, Schermer Sellers (2006; Schermer Sellers 2017) reported that her own sex-positive Hebrew heritage and examples of Jesus treating the lowest of society with love and mercy led her to question why sexuality was now regarded with shame in her conservative Christian clients. Further research led her to the 4th century where the church's initial teachings regarding appreciation of the body were replaced by the belief that the body was sinful.

Schermer Sellers (2006) reported that, in preparation for a graduate course in human sexuality that she taught for over 10 years at a Christian university, she had read over 300 sexual autobiographies. The majority of sexual autobiographies generally reflected normal physical sexual development in terms of desire, regardless of religion or culture. However, the participants' feelings about what they did, who they did it with, and what God thought of it reflected a sense of shame associated with these desires. Schermer Sellers (2006) noted:

Over 80% of the sexual autobiographies I have read over the last 10 years told of sexual development involving normative developmental desires and experiences in sexual touch, arousal, orgasm, and intimacy independent of the cultural or religious discourse surrounding them. The difference was not so much in what they did, but how they felt about themselves, their God, and the other. When their sexual story involved sexual touch or sexual intercourse prior to marriage it often produced a confusing dichotomy of meaning. On one hand was a tender gratefulness

for the experience of loving touch inside a devoted relationship, and on the other hand, shame and self-loathing – a place that felt far from the God they loved. In fact many were taught that sexual desire and expression would keep them from knowing God’s love and blessing. (para. 18)

The sexual shame and a desire to stunt sexual desire or a lack of education about sex in general that turned up in sexual autobiographies was paralleled in Christian couples she had counseled (Schermer Sellers, 2017). Sexual shame and gratefulness for sexual touch resulted in dissonance in the participants. According to Schermer Sellers (2017), the messages shared by those from purity culture echoed the most extreme sexual standards from when serving God meant cutting off all sexual thoughts, feelings, and desires. Many of her clients and those whose autobiographies she read had been taught that these thoughts and related behaviors separated them from God’s love. Referencing back to those teachings, Schermer Sellers (2017) found that, although religion influences sexual attitudes, these attitudes are more often reflected in guilt and shame associated with sexual behaviors than in altering behavioral choices, themselves. She quoted Perel (2006) who stated:

A society that sees sex as soiled does not make sex go away. Instead this kind of anxious atmosphere breeds guilt and shame in its extreme version, or a generalized discomfort in its more ubiquitous expression. Sex is divorced from emotional and social continuity. (p. 92, as cited in Schermer Sellers, 2017, p. 27)

While the historical roots of the purity culture are centuries old, modern day influences such as sexual education have exacerbated the problems associated with these

teachings. The second influence on young people's sexual beliefs was the curricula used in their schools. Janice M. Irvine, Director of the Five College Women's Studies Research Center and author of *Talk About Sex: The Battles over Sex Education in the United States* (2005), states that the current controversy that surrounds sexual education in school systems has roots back to the 1960's. *The Handbook of New Sexuality Studies* (Seidman, Fischer, & Meeks, 2006) published an interview with Irvine in which she specifically cited the 1964 founding of the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS, n.d.). SIECUS first created a comprehensive sexual education program that was sex-positive and accepting of gender equality, discussed sexual values openly, shared about contraceptives and abortion, and even stressed abstinence for youth while still providing education on birth control and abortions (Seidman et al., 2006). Irvine (2005) noted that some success, notably in preventing teen pregnancy, was a result of comprehensive sexual education. Ehrlich (2006) cited research that showed success in the comprehensive sexual education curricula as well, in regards to when youth started having sex and the reduction of risky sexual behavior. Luker (1996) wrote that while adults would rather young women and men not engage in sexuality activity, they preferred pregnancy prevention (including schools giving out contraceptives) over unwanted pregnancy. The American Medical Association and the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, along with other organizations, support comprehensive sexual education (Seidman et al., 2006). However, there remained a minority of adults who would prefer parental consent as a requirement for accessing birth control (Luker, 1996). While this is only one part of comprehensive sexual education (access to contraceptives),

there are other aspects of the curricula that have led others to support abstinence-only sexual education.

Urban sociology and sexuality scholar Nancy Fischer (2006) stated that abstinence-only sexual education “avoids discussion of birth control options or ways for teens to have safe sex, and instead recommends that the only way to prevent unwanted pregnancies and sexually-transmitted infections is to avoid all sexual contact” (p. 57). These narratives exclude dialogues regarding birth control and strategies for safe sex. Instead, abstinence-only programs teach that avoiding all sexual contact is the only way to avoid unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Fischer, 2006). Fischer (2006) states that those who support abstinence-only education believe that the teachings of comprehensive sexual education will encourage young men and women to engage in sexual activity and potentially result in teen pregnancy. However, abstinence-only education has been linked to negative consequences such as increased sexual violence, risky sexual behavior, pressure from a partner, STIs, and teenage pregnancies (Bersamin, Fisher, Grube, Hill, & Walker, 2007, as cited in Paul, 2014; Hans and Kimberly, 2011, as cited in Paul, 2014; Fischer, 2006; Paul, 2014). Irvine (2006) notes that while America itself has a culture of fear and shame, several sources have also found themes of fear- and shame-based teaching *methods* in abstinence-only curricula (Ehrlich, 2006; Paul, 2014; Valenti, 2009).

Inextricably woven into the problems related to purity culture discussed above, the third influence regarding human sexuality comes from the relationship between women’s autonomy and the federal government’s actions. President Johnson started the “War on Poverty” to help those who were struggling (Ehrlich, 2006; Kelly, 2014)—one

of the ways to fix their struggles began in 1964 when the federal government provided birth control to low-income women because poverty had been linked to giving birth at a young age (Ehrlich, 2006). However, government's role in sexual matters remained a point of controversy, leading to fluctuations in public policy.

...with the legalization of abortion and the rise of the Religious Right, attention soon shifted away from the consequences of sexual activity to the underlying conduct itself, thus unleashing a crusade to restore traditional 'American' family values. The sexually active young woman is at the heart of this storm. (Ehrlich, 2006, p. 151)

Ehrlich (2006) shares that the courts focused on adding both chastity and parental involvement back into young women's lives, which they believed would restore America. Six years later, Title X was created to insure poverty was not an obstacle when it came to procuring birth control, regardless of income level (Ehrlich, 2006). Two years after this, family planning was added to Medicaid services as "mandated services" (if a provider did not supply the service, they would not receive Medicare funds) (Ehrlich, 2006). These services were not provided without debate, "Since birth control was considered immoral and obscene (immoral because it permitted people to have sex without consequences, and obscene because it related to sexuality), enormous controversy arose whenever birth control supporters tried to change the status quo" (Luker, 1996, p. 49).

The status quo was challenged again in 1978 when Title X was amended to insure adolescents had access to contraceptives (Ehrlich, 2006). Three years later the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) was passed which provided federal funding for abstinence-only education programs, the first federal program to do so (Ehrlich, 2006). However,

according to Ehrlich (2006), a “sweeping reform” came in 1996 when Congress revamped the United States’ welfare law (Haskins & Bevan, 1997). Haskins and Bevan (1997) note that the legislation was purposeful in its promotion of programs that utilize the strong message that sex outside of marriage is wrong. Haskins and Bevan (1997) also noted the message that if one had sex outside of marriage the harms would be both physical and mental. These beliefs contributed to the development and funding of abstinence-only programs.

Focusing on providing funds so that abstinence-only education could be funded on a local and state level, the Community Based Abstinence Education program (CBAE) was created in 2001 (Ehrlich, 2006). From 2001-2005, programs saw funding increase from \$20 million to over \$100 million (Ehrlich, 2006). Despite Congress allocating over one-and-half billion dollars toward abstinence-only programs between 1996 and 2010, the fiscal year of 2010 saw changes to funding (SIECUS, n.d.). CBAE and part of the Adolescent Family Life Act (regarding abstinence) were eliminated by Congress and the Obama Administration (SIECUS, n.d.). Regardless of where one stood on the abstinence spectrum, funding and politically-driven agendas affected both sides. The large reach of this issue leads into the value of this study.

Definitions

This section defines key terms in purity culture, including purity culture itself, purity culture literature, man and male, and woman and female. For the purposes of this study, the definition of “purity culture” is a religious movement characterized by a “complex set of beliefs” that “appears to value and idealize women for their virginity and femininity” (Klement & Sagarin, 2017, p. 207). Mentions of purity culture literature will

be limited to religious books written in or after 1993 that were created as teaching tools for educators and religious leaders to frame sex and sexuality through an abstinence-driven lens for those approximately college-aged or younger.

Additionally, while the definitions of man and woman are subjects of hotly-contested debate, this study, by necessity, since it discusses these terms within the context of the purity culture literature, adopts that movement's dichotomous, heteronormative definitions of man as biological, cisgender, male and woman as biological, cisgender, female.

Value of the Study

The above sections discussed the problems associated with purity culture's shame-based, inaccurate, and ambiguous teachings regarding sex; the background that ushered in the purity culture movement; and some important definitions to frame the current study. Throughout these sections, the preponderance of literature shows that much of purity culture teachings and their analysis has been focused on women. The messages directed toward young men through this literature has yet to be examined, especially as scholars note there is a possibility of similar negative identity messages (Klement & Sagarin, 2017; Moon & Reger, 2014). While Klement and Sagarin (2017) found that following God's will was the main theme across Christian dating books, they assert that "Based on the language used for male audiences in the mixed-gender books, it is reasonable to hypothesize that boys receive messages that complement those found in [their] study" (p. 221). Therefore, this study will examine responses from women and men regarding purity culture messages.

Schermer Sellers (2017) advocates for both young men and young women to stop hating themselves for healthy sexual development and feelings. She also wants young men and women to be able to develop healthy relationships where communication regarding taboo topics is not avoided, but open and safe (Schermer Sellers, 2017). Examining the obstacles in the way of these goals can serve as a foundational aid for young women and men in making these changes.

The value of this study goes beyond the realm of Communication Studies. Breanne Fahs (2010), clinical psychologist, professor of Women and Gender Studies, and founder and director of the Feminist Research on Gender and Sexuality Group at Arizona State University, shares the following:

If we care about the contributions of social science to the practice of sexual socialization, we must acknowledge the ways in which repression, silence, distorted information, and the construction of women as sexual property negatively affect children as they become adults. Given the assaults we have seen on comprehensive sexual education, concerted efforts to disseminate accurate information about sexual health should be seen as nothing less than life-saving. (p. 139)

Young women also deserve autonomy and the knowledge to make their own decisions based on their beliefs. Ehrlich (2006) noted that placing blame on young women for male sexual behavior and the government's policing of young women's bodies obstructs a young woman's ability to live an independent life. Therefore, if the messages directed toward men are complementary to those directed toward women, it is important to find these messages and consider the impact they may have on young men.

The following chapter examines pertinent literature regarding purity culture, virginity (as a concept, pledge, and in relation to one's identity), CTI (especially identity gaps), computer-mediated communication (CMC), and how CTI may be helpful while studying purity culture. The third chapter will discuss the study created to identify identity-based messages in purity culture and its relation to CTI.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this literature review, purity culture, virginity (as a concept, pledge, and in relation to one's identity), CTI (especially identity gaps), CMC, and how CTI may be helpful while studying purity culture, are covered. The origins of purity culture are also discussed. This study aims to use CTI to potentially provide a better understanding of sexuality and purity culture, which is aided by the following research.

Purity Culture

Pledge cards, silver rings, and purity balls —these are the hallmarks of an ongoing cultural movement Klement and Sagarin (2017) have dubbed “purity culture.” Under various names and through various channels, this movement has impacted millions of young people (Anderson, 2015; Bearman & Brückner, 2001; Gardner, 2011; Landor & Simons, 2014; Moslener, 2015; Valenti, 2009;). Valenti (2009) states that she prefers the moniker “virginity movement” but adds that “abstinence movement” and “chastity movement” are also common phrases, used interchangeably at times.

This movement began in 1993 when the Southern Baptist Church birthed “True Love Waits,” a program encouraging participants to pledge to remain virgins until they are married, and quickly spread to other churches and even schools (Bersamin et al., 2005; Landor & Simons, 2014; Moslener, 2015). Two years later, “Silver Ring Thing” was founded (Landor & Simons, 2014). This program focused on an outward commitment to abstinence until marriage by wearing a silver ring on one's wedding-ring finger. By 1995, 2.2 million individuals had taken a virginity pledge (Landor & Simons,

2014). The main focus of these movements was to encourage youth to pledge to remain virgins until marriage.

Activists and authors of purity culture subscribe to several basic ideals regarding sexual purity including the following: sexual activities outside of a heterosexual marriage are not permitted; limitations should be placed on physical contact within relationships; thinking about people other than one's spouse in a sexual manner should be avoided; and females should be modest so as to protect males from sexual temptation (No Shame Movement, n.d.). No Shame Movement (n.d.), an organization and opportunity for people to share their experiences regarding leaving behind conservative Christian beliefs on sexuality, criticizes these ideals, asserting that they instill fear of failure to adhere to sexual purity resulting in negative spiritual consequences.

The movement is not, however, entirely monolithic in its beliefs. Ambiguity surrounds the phrase "sexual purity," in that activists and authors within the movement espouse different definitions of words such as "virginity" and "abstinent," and even different ideas of what constitutes virginity loss (Bersamin et al., 2005; Carpenter, 2011). Virginity pledge language also differs from one organization, school, and church to the next (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, 2005).

Virginity. The English word "virgin" originated with the Greek and Latin "virgo," which described positive attributes of goddesses such as their ability to resist temptations from Dionysus, the god of wine and seduction (Ababio & Salifu Yendork, 2017). During the medieval era, Christianity was one of the driving forces behind a change in the definition of virginity so that it became gendered as a title for a woman who had never engaged in intercourse with a man (Ababio & Salifu Yendork, 2017). The

19th and a good part of the 20th century saw virginity as something to be treasured and kept safe until marriage for a woman, but if applied to a male it was deemed emasculating or a non-issue (Ababio & Salifu Yendork, 2017; Carpenter, 2002).

Scholars and lay people alike agreed that the loss of virginity signaled a male or female's entry into adulthood (Ababio & Salifu Yendork, 2017; Carpenter, 2002). Beyond acting as a marker for admittance into the adult world, Carpenter (2002) claims that virginity was even used by patriarchal structures and religious leaders to control and claim values on behalf of individuals. Lipman and Moore (2016) discovered that after entering into adulthood through virginity loss, females often felt guilt and shame and remained quiet about their experience, whereas males felt accomplished and shared their sexual activity (as cited in Ababio & Salifu Yendork, 2017). It follows that Lipman and Moore (2016) found that men generally wanted to lose their virginity while women's virginity was viewed as a gift to be given, not lost (as cited in Ababio & Salifu Yendork, 2017).

The idea that virginity is perceived differently for a woman than a man was furthered in a qualitative study by Ababio and Salifu Yendork (2017). Participants included 15 women and 15 men between the ages of 18 and 30 from the University of Ghana. Ababio and Salifu Yendork (2017) stated that the concept of virginity was slowly being pushed aside as Western and individualistic cultural norms were adopted by the youth. Ababio and Salifu Yendork (2017) conducted one-on-one interviews due to the sensitive topic matter and found that most of their participants believed virginity to be associated more with females than males. A factor in this association was the idea of "measuring" virginity. While inaccurate, it was felt that a women's hymen was an indicator of virginity whereas there was nothing that could be measured on a male to

indicate virginity (Ababio & Salifu Yendork, 2017; Burge, 2016). A “virginity test” could be utilized to see if the hymen was intact because if it was broken, it was believed the women had engaged in intercourse (Burge, 2016). It is important to note that virginity tests are also unreliable, as the test could be tampered with by artificial means in order to receive the desired test result (Burge, 2016). Some study participants felt virginity protected women from unplanned pregnancy and shame, whereas men could impregnate women, leave them, and continue to lead their lives unaffected by their sexual actions (Ababio & Salifu Yendork, 2017).

Virginity pledges and pledgers. In addition to inconsistent definitions of key terms among purity movement leaders, data show that virginity pledges have yielded mixed results that may have sometimes been falsely inflated due to measurement differences (Landor & Simons, 2014; Rosenbaum, 2006). Religion has been a common variable when studying virginity pledges and pledgers (Carpenter, 2011; Halpern, Waller, Spriggs, & Hallfors, 2006; Landor & Simons, 2014; Rasberry & Goodson, 2009; Rosenbaum, 2006). When looking at adolescent predictors of adult sexual behavior, Halpern et al. (2006) found that religion was a distinguishing factor between virgins and those who postponed having sex until marriage, from those who had sex before marriage. Ababio and Salifu Yendork’s (2017) qualitative study in Ghana “...found that without religious obligations, the necessity to remain a virgin reduces especially for males, thus showing the role of religion as a control measure in managing early sexual activities in Ghana” (p. 566). They give the example of one female participant who identified as Christian saying that she believed saving sex until marriage was important religiously because she would be rewarded by God.

Landor and Simons (2014) posited that, while studies tend to show that religion discourages or reduces sexual activity in adolescents and college students, past measurements may be inaccurate due to their reliance on externally quantifiable measures like attending church and participating in church events (Landor & Simons, 2014). An individual could attend a church event where there was an opportunity to sign a virginity pledge and do so because they perceived that as the expected action. However a lack of internalized religion, how closely the individual held their religious beliefs, may have affected whether or not he or she would live out that pledge, accounting for the mixed results in past studies regarding the effectiveness of virginity pledges (Landor & Simons, 2014). Therefore, Landor and Simons (2014) conducted a study with almost 1400 participants between the ages of 18 and 24 to test whether religious commitment, as a separate variable from mere participation, influenced virginity pledge effectiveness. A Southeastern state university provided recruits from family studies, consumer economics and sociology classes. Findings revealed that, while 27 percent of participants had signed virginity pledges, two-thirds of those pledgers shared they were not virgins. However, for those participants who indicated high levels of religious commitment, these statistics were much lower (Landor & Simons, 2014). Overall, Landor and Simons (2014) discovered that high religious commitment was likely to delay sexual activity, especially risky sexual activity, but did not provide an absolute commitment to abstinence.

A two-wave study by Rosenbaum (2006) looking at the retraction of both virginity pledges and sexual histories by adolescents found that if a participant renounced their religious affiliation as “born-again,” they were twice as likely than those who did not report a religious change to recant a virginity pledge. Additionally, of the participants

who reported having intercourse during the first of the study's two phases, ten percent denied this action during the second phase. Reasons for this denial included not answering honestly, becoming a born-again Christian, or taking a virginity pledge (Rosenbaum, 2006).

Virginity and identity. Rosenbaum (2006) conjectured that his participants' recanting both virginity pledge and sexual activity answers implied that virginity pledges lacked salience to them in terms of their identities. Those most likely to retract their pledges were those who have recently become sexually active and changed their born-again Christian status. Rosenbaum (2006) also asserted that participants often answer surveys with their current beliefs and the two-wave nature of this study revealed beliefs from two different times in their lives. An alternative interpretation of these findings, however, may view them through a framework of CTI (Jung & Hecht, 2004) as an example of an "identity gap." An identity gap is "...when elements of identity are inconsistent with each other" (Jung & Hecht, 2008, p. 313). Therefore, these findings could, potentially, be viewed as illuminating an identity gap because participants were experiencing the inconsistency of their beliefs.

Identity gaps are merely one aspect of the broader theory of CTI. As the above-cited literature suggests, purity culture has been criticized for its potential or perceived impacts on its receiver's identities. Therefore, in order to discuss the potential application of CTI as a lens through which to analyze further the literature of the purity movement, the following section will review the literature that underpinned the creation of CTI, delineate the specifics of the theory, and discuss its utility in previous research.

Communication Theory of Identity

Hecht (1993) recognized that other disciplines such as psychology and sociology had many theories for identity. While Hecht (1993; Hecht et al., 2002; Jung & Hecht, 2004) believed that identity included aspects of psychology, sociology, and anthropology, the development of CTI was vital because people develop their identities through communication--the messages they give and receive. As a result, CTI theorizes that a person's identity is communication, not simply a byproduct of communication (Jung & Hecht, 2004; Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008). This message interaction between one or more persons can be fluid and identity can be changed through communication (Jung & Hecht, 2004; Orbe, 2004). The idea behind messages and transactions includes an important distinction of CTI: interactions can and do create who people are (Hecht, 1993; Orbe, 2004). Hecht (1993) also expressed the hope that leadership, acculturation, and intimacy, among other variables, could be studied with CTI.

Hecht's eight assumptions. After reviewing various theories and models regarding identity, Hecht (1993) proposed eight assumptions for CTI, noting that, while some may view these assumptions as value-based, all eight were observable and therefore shared the mostly dialectical beliefs. These assumptions are as follows: First, identities have several properties, including individual, social, and communal facets (Hecht, 1993; Slater, 2007). Second, identities are also enduring and changing, and include the affective, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004). Third, Hecht (1993) also recognized that within identities there are both content and relational levels. Fourth, Hecht (1993) believed the meanings given to identity were both subjective and ascribed, which allowed for personal feelings and common characteristics associated

with an identity to play a part. Fifth, in conversation, identity can be considered a code expressing a characteristic of the person communicating (Hecht, 1993). Sixth, having a greater impact than codes, identity can define or reject membership within communities (Hecht, 1993; Hecht et al., 2002; Slater, 2007). Seventh, identity also includes symbols, meanings, and labels unique in meaning to the identity holder (Hecht, 1993; Hecht et al., 2002). Finally, identities dictate ideologies regarding how to appropriately and effectively communicate (Hecht, 1993).

Four frames of identity. CTI posits that identity is composed of four frames: personal, enacted, relational, and communal (Hecht, 1993; Jung, 2011; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth, 2007; Orbe, 2004; Wadsworth et al., 2008). Beginning with the personal frame, identity can be roughly equated as one's self-concept (Hecht, 1993; Jung, 2011; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Wadsworth et al., 2008). An individual decides where they stand among others hierarchically, which implies that others also influence our personal identity (Hecht, 1993). Finally, an individual's expectations and motivations are found within his or her personal identity (Hecht, 1993).

Enactment, the next identity frame, comprises the messages and communication one receives about who he or she is (Hecht, 1993; Jung, 2011; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Orbe, 2004; Wadsworth et al., 2008) and the performed expression of that self (Nuru, 2014). Hecht (1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004) noted that not all messages are about one's identity, but part of one's identity is present in each message shared. Social situations may provide enactment. This idea supports Hecht's (1993) assumptions that identity is emergent. Thus, identity is seen through the frame of relationships. Looking back to messages

included in social interactions for the enactment frame, these disclosures then become a part of the relationship (Hecht, 1993; Wadsworth et al., 2008).

Therefore the relationship frame, while including one's relationships (romantic, occupational, friendship, etc.), extends beyond the idea that relationships are only contained between two people (Hecht, 1993; Jung, 2011; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Wadsworth et al., 2008). Three stages express the relationship frame, the first of which is the type of relationship just discussed (Hecht, 1993). The second is concerned with how people define and craft themselves based on the people around them (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Wadsworth et al., 2008). Finally, the third occurs when a relationship takes on an identity of its own, similar to when two people dating become a "couple" (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004).

Lastly, the communal frame of identity focuses on something that all members of a community have in common which bonds them together (Hecht, 1993; Hecht et al., 2002; Jung, 2011; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Orbe, 2004; Wadsworth et al., 2008). Within the communal frame, one's identity is found in the group, not in one's self (Hecht, 1993). When new members join the community, the communal identity is presented and is expected to be followed (Hecht, 1993). Hierarchies also may exist within communities, echoing the hierarchies individuals place themselves in when looking at their identity as personal (Hecht, 1993).

These four frames may mix and match to form the collective confusion that is a human being (Hecht, 1993; Orbe, 2004; Wadsworth et al., 2008). The interactions between the four frames can reveal both helpful observations and disconcerting tensions, such as when frames simultaneously work together to form identity even while

experiencing dissonance (Hecht, 1993; Hecht et al., 2002; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Wadsworth et al., 2008). Hecht et al. (2002) stated "...identity is a negotiation..." (p. 853) and the interaction between the four frames reflects the many ways one identity frame can influence another (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004).

Identity gaps. Jung and Hecht (2004) define identity gaps as "...discrepancies between or among the four frames of identity" (p. 268). In 2004, Jung and Hecht began to expand aspects of CTI. They identified the friction and tension between different identity frames as identity gaps (Jung, 2011; Jung et al., 2007; Wadsworth et al., 2008). Specifically, Jung and Hecht (2004) focused on the interpenetration of the four frames of CTI, which had been mentioned in prior works but not studied in depth (Hecht, 1993; Hecht et al., 2002). They believed one frame of identity did not comprise a person's entire identity (Hecht et al., 2002; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Wadsworth et al., 2008). Instead, all four frames together allow identity to be seen in different ways in different situations (Jung & Hecht, 2004; Wadsworth et al., 2008). Harkening back to Hecht's (1993) seminal work, this juxtaposition is a large factor in identity and how the four frames do or don't work together. However, until Jung and Hecht's 2004 study, only individual frames were studied (Jung & Hecht, 2004).

Jung and Hecht (2004) argued in their first article on CTI and identity gaps that at least two frames need to be studied at one time as the interpenetration between the frames affects the individual's identity. Contradiction between different frames of identity helped substantiate the claim that all four frames existed. Jung and Hecht (2004) understood that every human being experiences events differently, leading to the inevitability of gaps in communication and therefore, identity. Therefore, the question

became which kind of identity gap and how deep of a gap would appear out of the eleven possible gaps (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Jung and Hecht (2004) sought to show that if identity was communication, then identity would be linked to communication outcomes. The personal-relational (how someone views themselves versus how someone else views them) and personal-enacted (if the way we express our identity is consistent with our actual identity) identity gaps were chosen for their first study and communication satisfaction, feeling understood, and conversational appropriateness and effectiveness were picked as communication outcomes (Jung & Hecht, 2004; Wadsworth et al., 2008). Jung and Hecht's (2004) 61-item questionnaire taken by 135 college students showed that their hypotheses of both the personal-relational identity gap and personal-enacted identity gap negatively correlating with all three communication outcomes was true. As identity gaps increased, positive communication outcomes decreased.

Jung and Hecht (2004) suggested further research in comparing gaps between two people communicating and if their identity gaps related, along with research on shrinking identity gaps as their study suggested smaller gaps lead to smaller dissatisfactions. They also posited that work with identity gaps could contribute to help with psychological issues (Jung & Hecht, 2004).

Identity gaps were indeed used in research regarding psychological issues and others. Looking at Jung, Hecht, and Wadsworth's 2007 study, over 200 international students completed a questionnaire with 75 items to find that identity gaps (specifically personal-enacted and personal-relational) have an association with depression in international students. Cultural differences and difficulties in communication can affect how an international student sees themselves, which in turn affects their identity and

potential depression. The more acculturation and discrimination (perceived or real) felt, the greater the identity gap (Jung et al., 2007). Jung et al. (2007) offered that coping mechanisms may mitigate some negative outcomes from these identity gaps, along with social support. They also felt that the more the students interacted with their new culture, the better chance of decreasing the rate of depression among international students (Jung et al., 2007). Cultural awareness programs, role playing, and sharing examples regarding sensitive issues were all suggested as a means to reduce the personal-enacted identity gap and therefore, potentially reduce depression (Jung et al., 2007).

The following year, Wadsworth, Hecht, and Jung (2008) studied the same personal-enacted and personal-relational identity gaps from Jung and Hecht's 2004 study in relation to international students' satisfaction with the American school system. Wadsworth et al. (2008) hypothesized that acculturation and discrimination (perceived or real) affected identity gaps and reiterated that previous research showed identity gaps affected interpersonal relationships and intercultural communication (Jung et al., 2007). As acculturation and discrimination were tied to educational satisfaction, 218 international students took a survey based on Jung and Hecht's previously mentioned 2004 study (Wadsworth et al., 2008). The findings partially supported identity gaps and their relation to educational satisfaction. Personal-enacted identity gaps affected educational satisfaction in regards to classroom expectations versus classroom realities (Wadsworth et al., 2008). For example, a student could be used to learning in a lecture format and in a different country be expected to learn through discussion or small-group learning (Wadsworth et al., 2008). However, the personal-relational identity gap was not significantly related to educational satisfaction (Wadsworth et al., 2008). Wadsworth et

al. (2008) proposed that international students could be expecting stereotypes within their relationships and therefore were less affected.

CTI in research. CTI has been employed in studies in several different areas.

CTI has been used to examine culture (Brooks & Pitts, 2015; Hecht et al., 2002; Jung & Hecht, 2008; Maeda & Hecht, 2012; Urban & Orbe, 2010), family relationships (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014; Kam & Hecht, 2009), romantic relationships (Kennedy-Lightsey, Martin, Labelle, & Weber, 2015; Merrill & Afifi, 2017) education (Brooks & Pitts, 2015; Haugh, 2008; Murray & Kennedy-Lightsey, 2013; Orbe, 2004; Scarduzio & Geist-Martin, 2008; Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008), mental health (Jung, 2013; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Jung & Hecht, 2008; Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth, 2007) race (Warren, Hecht, Jung, Kvasny, & Henderson, 2010), and sexuality (Faulkner & Hecht, 2011; Nuru, 2014; Scarduzio & Geist-Martin, 2008). Orbe (2004) noted, "...the theory's utility for studying other types of cultural identification (age, gender, class, disability, and sexual orientation)...is clear." Hecht et al. (2002) conducted a study questioning whether Jewish American identities were accurately represented in the television show *Northern Exposure*. Researchers observed several themes throughout six episodes of *Northern Exposure* and presented them to Jewish Americans to determine whether the themes embodied their identities (which were not limited to communal identity alone) truthfully (Hecht et al., 2002). This study was ideal to examine how identity frames intersect because, as Hecht asserted, Jewish Americans hold many juxtapositions within their identities, including secularity or religiosity (Hecht et al., 2002). Findings revealed that Jewish Americans' individual, enacted, and relational identities were all affected by the themes presented in *Northern Exposure* (Hecht et al., 2002). The value of this study was

the interplay between the different identity frames. *Northern Exposure* reflects a communal perspective on Jewish Americans, yet the other three frames were salient in the interviews and findings of the study (Hecht et al., 2002). CTI allowed for the discovery that people who share identities can enact differently, while people who do not share identities can enact similarly (Hecht et al., 2002).

Qualitative studies utilizing CTI and identity gaps have also found new discoveries regarding identity and communication. Jung (2011) noted that while identity gaps can be influenced by aspects of communication, identity gaps may also affect communication. For example, an individual who feels their personal identity and enacted identity reflect two different identities may feel dissatisfied with communication (Jung, 2011). Jung (2011) hypothesized that an individual's communication apprehension positively predicted three gaps: personal-enacted, personal-relational, and enacted-relational. Additionally, Jung hypothesized that assertiveness as a communication variable would reduce the size of identity gaps (Jung, 2011).

Jung (2011) called for clarification regarding identity gaps, including ways to mitigate them: when an individual reduces a gap, they form a new personal identity, which in turn forms another identity gap. This process needs further clarification as to what is happening with one's communication and identity as one decreases their identity gap, as well as what happens when they are in the midst of one (Jung, 2011).

Pragmatically, Jung (2011) postulates that specific communication variables may be put in place that may mitigate identity gaps, resulting in the prevention of communication dissatisfaction or other negative effects. If individuals can recognize a serious life change

and then surround themselves with the appropriate communication variables, perhaps potential negative effects could be avoided (Jung, 2011).

Nuru (2014) studied how identity gaps manifested themselves in transgender individuals who were affirming their gender identity. In this case, Nuru (2014) reviewed 37 videos on YouTube where transgender individuals explained their experiences “coming out,” and Nuru noted all instances of identity gaps. With the base understanding that the four frames of identity are inseparable, identity gaps are a matter of when, not if. Layers of identity will grind against one another until they either break or become smoothly polished and compatible. Nuru (2014) stated that while gender identity and sexuality may overlap in some areas, each held its own set of distinct issues, perhaps each holding an identity gap.

Through research questions and a repeated process of open, axial, and selective coding, Nuru (2014) recorded tensions shared in each individual’s stories and identified identity gaps. One individual shared that there was a time in their life where they felt they could only be their true self away from people—in school, they had to change their gender identity and mannerisms to fit in (Nuru, 2014). As a result, Nuru (2014) identified a personal-enacted gap: this person’s personal self and expressed self were different from one another. Personal-relational gaps were also found, such as the individual who refused to wear a dress to a family wedding, which resulted in him not attending the event (Nuru, 2014). While the individual knew he was a male, his family did not accept him as male, therefore causing an identity gap which affected the person’s ability to successfully communicate and interact with their family (Nuru, 2014). Nuru (2014) found that relationships with one’s family seemed to be the most prominent regarding transgender

individuals and the effects of the affirmation of their gender identity. As a result, Nuru (2014) suggested implementing survival tips to keep these relationships civil and maintained. Other studies also found that identity gaps cause negative outcomes and researchers also suggested strategies for mitigating the gap's adverse effects (Jung & Hecht, 2004; Jung et al., 2007). Nuru (2014) noted that the full potential of CTI had not yet been utilized in research. While individuals in specific circumstances have been examined, Nuru (2014) suggested entire groupings such as race, gender, and sexuality undergo observation through the lens of CTI. Nuru (2014) also postulated that the results of the study could result in better understanding and tolerance of groups considered "different," and encourage conversation where they had not been before.

Maeda and Hecht (2012) examined the interpersonal relationships of "always-single" women in Japan. This specific study was a four-year follow up, allowing for participants' growth and reflection (Maeda & Hecht, 2012). Language was important to this study, as Maeda and Hecht (2012) noted that the common use of "never-married" to describe single women reflected an assumed ideology of marriage and family, and therefore chose a more appropriate label, "always-single." Labels were also found in Japanese culture regarding "always-single" women. *Urenokori*, which loosely translates to "left unsold," describes a Japanese Christmas cake not sold by Christmas. However, this term is also applied to women who are not married after twenty-five years of age, expressing that like a Christmas cake after Christmas, no woman would be wanted (Maeda & Hecht, 2012). Women's identities were also defined as a journey from daughter to wife to mother. If a woman was single, she was not considered a part of an identity group; she was in transition (Maeda & Hecht, 2012). However, women are still

developing an identity at this time and Maeda and Hecht (2012) asked participants how they related to others and grew personally during these transition times. Maeda and Hecht (2012) hypothesized that as a nontraditional identity in Japanese culture, “always-single” women would experience identity gaps, if only because they were already at odds with what societal constructs dictated. In addition, the time it took for a woman to potentially accept their singleness was also a gap they experienced.

Of the thirty women originally interviewed, twenty-one were able to participate in the follow-up (Maeda & Hecht, 2012). One-on-one semi-structured interviews partly based on the themes found in the previous study included ten questions given in Japanese (the lead author’s first language). According to Maeda and Hecht (2012), open coding was utilized so every possible meaning of the data could be captured. Patterns and similar thoughts generated new themes. Theoretical coding was also utilized to look for any possible underlying themes. The second author served as a peer debriefer, providing feedback on the findings (Maeda & Hecht, 2012). The three themes of family dependency and responsibility, along with social support and relationship issues that prevent marriage, presented again (Maeda & Hecht, 2012). While identity gaps were not included in the research questions, interpersonal relationship changes throughout the time of the study were examined. Some women found that each relationship they have with someone is different and acceptance of a relationship is better than trying to change it (Maeda & Hecht, 2012). This could demonstrate a mitigation of an identity gap—acceptance instead of change. Self-acceptance in particular was vital to the women’s identities (Maeda & Hecht, 2012). While understanding that society was not as progressive regarding accepting singleness, they still held value in who they were as

people and value in who they were to other people (Maeda & Hecht, 2012). Maeda and Hecht (2012) found that accepting their interpersonal relationships reinforced their “alternative” identity—seemingly the opposite of an identity gap. At the four-year interview, some women expressed feeling more free and comfortable with themselves (Maeda & Hecht, 2012). This is a new finding in CTI identity gaps, as previous studies had found identity gaps led to negative outcomes (Jung, 2011; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Jung et al., 2007). Maeda and Hecht (2012) looked to the future as they considered that the way marriage is viewed and valued in Japanese culture may change as a result of studying “always-single” women’s identities and growth through CTI.

CTI application to purity culture. As previously discussed, many of the young people who took part in the two-wave Rosenbaum (2006) study reported different answers regarding their religious affiliation and sexual activity in wave one of the study than they did in wave two. If a participant renounced their “born-again” identity, they were twice as likely to recant a virginity pledge versus those whose religious affiliation had not changed. Additionally, of the participants who reported having intercourse during the first of the study’s two phases, ten percent denied this action during the second phase. While Rosenbaum’s explanation was that his participants’ recanting both virginity pledge and sexual activity answers implied that virginity pledges lacked salience to them in terms of their identities, an alternative explanation for these changes is plausible. Perhaps the pledge was so central to their identity that it caused feelings of discomfort when it clashed with life decisions that did not align with purity culture, resulting in their providing a different answer during the second wave of the study. This explanation falls in line with the uncomfortable feeling identity gaps provide (Jung and Hecht, 2004; Jung

et al., 2007; Wadsworth et al., 2008). Rosenbaum (2006) alludes to this identity gap inadvertently when he states, “Retraction may represent a real phenomenon: a perceived identity change arising from joining or leaving a social movement” (p. 1103).

Bearman and Brückner (2001) also mention the idea that pledging could be considered part of an identity movement, “...a movement that provides a frame for self-understanding (and consequently action in pursuit of that understanding) effective only in the context of, and interaction with, similar others who constitute a self-conscious community differentiated from others” (p. 870). While their article appeared in a sociology journal and does not specifically reference CTI, Bearman and Brückner (2001) refer to all four frames of identity within this statement and provide another connection to CTI. They also note that pledge identity can be showcased in paraphernalia like rings, books, or music, items that make clear one’s association with a pledge community (Bearman & Brückner, 2001). As noted earlier, purity culture is often associated with events, examples, and objects, but scholarly articles have not sufficiently researched these parts of purity culture and their effect on identity or even the successfulness of the movement in general (Anderson, 2015; Bearman & Brückner, 2001; Moslener, 2015; Valenti, 2009). Lastly, Bearman and Brückner (2001) note that the moral community that arises from making a pledge provides a cognitive and structural foundation for identity: identity is formed through a new commitment and this commitment binds a group of individuals together to provide communal identity. Here, both personal and communal identities are found within purity culture.

Simply looking at how health affects identity, Sabia and Rees (2008) found that depression, low self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts were more likely found in adolescents

engaging in sexual activity than those who delayed sexual intercourse. Family relationships were also more likely to be strained and the possibility of an unplanned pregnancy or sexually transmitted infection (STI) adversely affected the wellbeing of sexually active teenagers (Sabia & Rees, 2008). Sabia and Rees' (2008) extension of previous research on depression among sexually-active teenagers included using three sound instruments to measure psychological well-being. Their research showed that for females an increase in depressive symptoms and the possibility of symptoms of major depression were caused by engaging in sex. However, males and the relationship between sex and psychological well-being showed little causality (Sabia & Rees, 2008). As Jung et al. (2007) discovered, identity gaps have an association with depression.

Jung (2011), Nuru (2014), and Maeda and Hecht (2012) bring specific parallels between research on communication and identity gaps and how identity is communicated within purity culture. Language was a common theme between these studies and purity culture. Nuru (2014) shared the harmful Japanese Christmas cake metaphor of women losing marriage value over time. Purity culture contains many metaphors regarding one's sexual value, comparing young women and men who did not adhere to purity culture ideology to damaged, inanimate objects (Ehrlich, 2006; Freitas, 2008; Klement & Sagarin, 2017; Valenti, 2009;). Maeda and Hecht (2012) recognized that a group of people were being labeled based on a dominant ideology of marriage and family. They removed this bias and instead called their group "always-single" instead of "never-married," putting the emphasis on who they are instead of who they aren't (Maeda & Hecht, 2012). Maeda and Hecht (2012) also noted the specific labels for women growing up as daughter, wife, and mother. While those labels are clear, the language does not

account for the time between each role, causing confusion for those in transition.

Definitions and inconsistent labels that can cause confusion are also present within purity culture (Carpenter, 2001; Freitas, 2008; Paul, 2014). Different definitions of the word “sex” (Carpenter, 2001) and the ambiguity surrounding “purity” (Freitas, 2008; Paul 2014) can lead to confusion when trying to understand sexual identity.

Because of the problems associated with purity culture and the potential ramifications of identity gaps, further research is needed to ascertain if purity culture stories contain identity-based messages and to explore the potential identity gaps. These stories will be analyzed to determine which, if any, identity gaps were observed and how those themes relate to the frames within CTI (Hecht, 1993).

Computer-mediated communication

Walther (1996) summarized the discussion regarding CMC when he wrote, "The early view of CMC was that it was both liberating and limiting..." (p. 33). While some scholars find positive outcomes from utilizing CMC (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998; Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 1996), ultimately most researchers spend time discussing both the pros and cons of CMC. Several scholars question whether CMC provides more benefits or more disadvantages, especially in comparison to face-to-face communication (FtF) (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998; Spears & Lea, 1994; Walther, 1996). Early CMC focused on improving teamwork, equality, and problem-solving (Liao, Bazarova, & Yuan, 2018; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998; Walther, 1996). Many of these findings come before the millennium, so it is imperative to look at more current CMC theory and research, including that regarding social support, hyperpersonal theory, and Web 2.0, in addition to selective self-presentation.

Social support. The early days of CMC showed that its accessibility and low cost (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998) provided individuals, who may not have had the chance to participate equally in FtF conversation, the possibility of a more level playing field from which to share their ideas. Currently, the idea of a level playing field is found in the support users find within CMC. Rains, Brunner, Akers, Pavlich, and Goktas (2017) conducted an experiment where 82 participants discussed a stressor and shared support responses, one group through CMC and the other FtF. Regardless of the medium, the same stressor and support messages were given. Results showed that CMC users had more uncertainty and worry than their FtF counterparts. One possible explanation for this discrepancy is the reduced social cues in CMC (Walther, 1996). Without seeing someone's smile or sympathetic eyes the user could feel the support was less heartfelt and miscommunication may occur more frequently. Additionally, reduced social cues could allow the user to focus more on the stressor with CMC than FtF (Rains et al., 2017). Despite these findings, Rains et al. (2017) stated that national surveys “suggest that various forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) are routinely used for acquiring and sharing support” (p. 1187). Regular use of CMC may still provide social support for users.

While reduced social cues seemed to diminish CMCs ability to produce feelings of support as compared with FtF communication, other areas of CMC showed promise for socially supporting users. Bond and Figueroa-Caballero (2016) found that SNS (social networking sites) could aid in the sexual well-being of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) adolescents. The LGB community were early adopters of CMC, likely due to its ability to allow users to connect without geographical boundaries (Postmes, Spears, & Lea,

1998) and potentially avoid stigma regarding their sexual identity. Bond and Figueroa-Caballero (2016) went so far as to write, "CMC might ultimately provide sexually curious adolescents with the communicative tools needed to label and embrace their LGB sexual identities" (p. 289). As a result, CMC could potentially provide well-being for those looking to understand their sexual identities (Bond & Figueroa-Caballero, 2016). These findings are based on how much time LBG adolescents spent in different areas of CMC. LBG adolescents spent four hours per day with CMC, and time spent on SNS was greater than all the time they spent with instant messaging, e-mail, or chat rooms combined (Bond & Figueroa-Caballero, 2016).

Hyperpersonal theory. In addition to social support, individuals can create identities supporting their ideal selves and potentially their ideal intimacy levels with hyperpersonal theory. CMC allows for the crafting and presentation of one's ideal self, and control over self-disclosure, potentially resulting in one's ideal communicative situation (Bond & Figueroa-Caballero, 2016; Ruppel, et al., 2017; Walther, 1996; Walther et al., 2011). Users have the ability to reshape and edit in real-time their identity and message in a more liberated environment (Bond & Figueroa-Caballero, 2016; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998; Walther, 2007; Walther et al., 2011). Within CMC's liberated environment, there is also the possibility of more positive relationships than occur via FtF. Walther (1996) explained the opportunity for more positive relationships within CMC compared to FtF with hyperpersonal theory. CMC's lack of nonverbal cues, limited information exchanged, the ability to construct and change messages, and receivers' reinforcement of the positive impression of the sender combined to form the basis of hyperpersonal theory (Ruppel, et al., 2017; Walther, 1996). Ruppel et al. (2017)

conducted a meta-analysis of several studies to see if clarification could be provided for previous findings regarding self-disclosure within CMC and FtF as they varied greatly. When the study featured text-based CMC instead of video-based CMC, self-disclosure could be affected (Ruppel et al., 2017). In this case, text-based CMC went against the intimacy usually associated with hyperpersonal theory (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998; Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 1996; Zimmerman, 1987). Bond and Figueroa (2016) stated future research was needed to identify which forms of CMC provided social support. Based on Ruppel et al's. 2017 findings, text-based support may not be the best form of support for LGB adolescents and others. While there are opportunities for individuals to create their ideal selves, they can also construct the websites people frequent.

Web 2.0. The ability to select an ideal self applies not only to individual users but individuals behind the websites as well (Walther & Jang, 2012). Web 2.0, "...or social websites...present and juxtapose messages that are generated by different authorial sources" (Walther & Jang, 2012, p. 2). With Web 2.0 almost anyone can change content within CMC, allowing for "participatory websites" (Walther & Jang, 2012). Web 2.0 capabilities allow for easy contribution of content (Sinton, 2018). For example, to submit a story to Joshua Harris an interested party fills out a short form of which the only required field is the submitter's story and their submission is sent. Sinton's 2018 study on feedback and its contribution to on-air content for broadcasters on the radio applies to online communication participation with Joshua Harris. Joshua Harris requested permission to share the stories anonymously on his website, supplying content from other's feedback.

Web 2.0 changed the online format in which users interact regarding an individual's selective self-presentation. Users can identify who other users are, which may lend greater credibility to the participatory website content (Walther & Jang, 2012). Some scholars, however, question whether proprietors (the users who control websites or profiles) and user-generated content (UGC) (content elicited by the participatory website or volunteered by visitors) results in richer online experiences or more miscommunication (Walther & Jang, 2012).

While anonymity is not an area commonly explored in the sources comprising this literature review, credibility and authenticity play a role in how people view content without a source or author (Rowley-Jolivet & Campagna, 2011; Walther & Jung, 2012). Rowley-Jolivet and Campagna (2011) noted that when "gatekeepers" or experts reviewed content before it went online it was viewed as an authoritative act. Now, some consider such vetting suspicious as the possibility of censorship lingers behind an anonymous "board" that reviews material before sharing it. Rowley-Jolivet and Campagna (2011) noted that while it may seem disingenuous for users to curate individual profiles, it is the possibility of hidden censorship that makes reviewing information questionable and individual creation less controversial.

The following research questions have been developed for this study based on findings from the literature review.

RQ1a: Do the stories written by readers of *IKDG* contain language that suggests an identity gap?

RQ1b: What language is used to describe the identity gap?

RQ2a: Do the stories written by readers of *IKDG* indicating identity gaps contain identity frames?

RQ2b: What language is used to describe the identity frame?

RQ3: What themes are prevalent throughout the *IKDG* readers' stories?

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter includes details about the methods used to answer the research questions. This study employed directed, qualitative content analysis to determine whether the frames and gaps discussed in the CTI framework were present in stories submitted online by men and women affected by purity culture. Thematic analysis was also used to draw additional themes regarding how these frames and gaps were manifested in the stories. This section outlines the study's design including directed content analysis and thematic analysis methods and their application for the current study.

Sample

The purpose of this study was to examine stories from those who have experienced purity culture and its literature. Therefore, the sample was drawn from 555 stories on a website that invites individuals to submit their experiences with the culture and, in particular, with one of its bestselling books. In recent years publications ranging from *Slate* to *The Gospel Herald* carried stories about Harris, author of purity culture books including the cult hit *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Graham, 2016; Klett, 2017). In a November 2017 TEDxHarrisburg Talk description, Harris shared, "Twenty years ago I wrote a best-selling book about dating that I'm now realizing misguided and even hurt some people" (TEDx Talks, 2017). Prior to this presentation, in 2016, through his website, <https://joshharris.com>, Harris requested *IKDG* readers to submit their experiences with the book in the form of personal stories (Graham, 2016) (See Appendix A). As of August 23, 2016, Harris had received over 300 unique submissions (Graham,

2016). Harris's website showed a count of 38 pages of submissions available to read in a section titled "Revisiting *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*" (Grace at Work, n.d.a). In order to read the submissions, the reader was instructed to click on the documentary link and was sent to the following webpage, <https://joshharris.com/documentary/>. This page included a video and the first of the 38 pages of submissions to Harris. Each of the 38 pages included the same header which explained Harris's project and expressed thanks to those who shared their stories (See Appendix B). This study used qualitative content analysis and specific questions from CTI to examine the stories Harris received. While previous studies (Klement & Sagarin, 2017; Moon & Reger, 2014) have limited the majority of their analyses to messages directed specifically toward women, this analysis studied the responses to the messages of purity culture by men and women.

Defining the unit of analysis. The unit of analysis for this study was one story in the "Revisiting *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*" section of the <https://joshharris.com> website. Graneheim and Lundman (2004) "...suggest that the most suitable unit of analysis is whole interviews or observational protocols that are large enough to be considered a whole and small enough to be possible to keep in mind as a context for the meaning unit..." (p. 106). One story allowed for analysis of an individual's whole submission and limited the length of each story to 750 words, per Harris's requirements (Grace at Work, n.d.).

Using a story as a unit of analysis may have yielded more insightful results than specific word count, paragraph limits, or other restrictions. Selltiz et al.'s (1959) proposed that quantification alone allowed for too much data loss due to the potentially restrictive collection process (as cited in Berg, 1995). Messages within the text may be

lost when confined to tight rules, such as excluding data that does not exactly follow the collection process (Selltiz et al., 1959, as cited in Berg, 1995). This study and its examination of stories as its unit of analysis allowed for observation of social constructs (identity-based messages in purity culture) (Frey et al., 2000). People who experienced purity culture received an opportunity to share how *IKDG* affected their lives and views of themselves and others. Individuals submitted their stories to the author of a book that may have greatly affected their identity development. Cutting a part of that story (the unit of analysis) could have impacted the accuracy of the study's findings.

Sampling. Sampling for this study involved a two-step process. First, I narrowed the sample of stories (assisted by two coders) on the aforementioned website with purposive sampling to include only stories appropriate for the study. Though I did not analyze all 38 pages of stories in minute detail, reading through each story allowed me and the coders to identify stories that met the criteria. I limited stories for analysis to those who listed the United States as the country of origin. I also included submitters who identified both their gender and that they have read *IKDG*. Intercoder reliability was 94.55%, 92.73%, and 87.27% for the country, if the submitter read *IKDG*, and gender, respectively. These figures were determined through each coder coding ten percent of the stories (fifty-five) and determining how many differences there were among coding answers. The number of the same coding answers was divided by the overall ten percent (fifty-five stories), which resulted in the figures above. I explain the criteria in greater detail in the following passages. Second, after the appropriate stories were identified, I began at the first story and performed systematic random sampling choosing every fifth story for analysis. Although the nature of my study does not allow for findings conducive

to generalization, a systematic random sample ensured that every story that met criteria had an equal chance of being chosen (Robson, 1993).

Sampling frame. I copied and pasted all 38 pages of stories into a Word document which reached 490 pages. I completed this process on February 23, 2018. I numbered each story throughout the Word document and looked to see if the story met criteria for the study.

I read 102 stories which brought me to page 97 of 490 total Word document pages. As I read through the stories, I realized more criteria were needed. I initially created criteria for identifying gender through a heteronormative lens, consistent with the heteronormative definitions within this paper. If a submitter wrote “my husband,” the submitter was recorded as a woman. If someone mentioned dating “guys,” a woman was also recorded as the submitter. Unless the submitter stated that they were not heterosexual, heteronormative ideology was used to identify gender. Of the 102 stories, 35 stories were found to include submitter-reported gender. Every story I read was categorized as either female, male, or unknown genders for potential future data analysis.

Criteria was then determined for location. At the end of almost every story, a country was entered by the submitter. If U.S., United States of America, or a state and U.S. were listed, it was included in the U.S. location criteria. Stories with two locations listed, such as United States and Britain, were excluded. Keeping criteria clear and consistent helped mitigate validity questions. If a story did not include a location, it did not meet criteria and was recorded as “unknown.”

The third initial criterion was reading *IKDG*. Several submitters began their stories by stating something similar to “I read this book when I was sixteen...” Such

specific statements made identifying readers of *IKDG* simple. However, Harris has penned other books and while the website is dedicated to *IKDG*, it is possible the submitter could be referring to a different book. For example, some submitters shared they read “your book,” and then added they had also read the sequel, *Boy Meets Girl*. Submitters who specifically stated they have read *IKDG* or read “the book” or “your book” were recorded as “read *IKDG*,” especially as Harris’s criteria for submitting their stories included the question “What year did you read *IKDG*?” Submitters also mentioned being given the book but never reading it, only having read half of the book, never reading the book but belonging to a church group that followed its principles, and not reading the book upon first introduction but reading it at a later time. One submitter mentioned having read half of the book. While these stories may hold value, I kept the criteria to having “read” or “reread” (also mentioned) the (whole) book. If the submitter said they read “most” of the book or were involved with a group that espoused *IKDG* principles, their stories were not included. If a submitter stated they bought the book but did not state they read it but continued to share principles from the book or how it affected their lives, I included it in the “read *IKDG*” criteria. The submitter invested money in the book which lent more credibility to the “read *IKDG*” criteria.

Joshua Harris’s website displayed 555 stories in reaction to his book, *IKDG*. The 555 stories took up 38 unique web pages. When copied and pasted into a Microsoft Word document and then saved as a PDF, the stories spanned 490 pages. Of the 555 stories, 283 met the three criteria for the study: the submitter listed the country as the United States of America, the submitter read *IKDG*, and the submitter mentioned their gender. After determination of which stories belonged in the sampling frame, I chose every fifth

story for directed qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis, resulting in 56 stories (20 percent of the sample). To ensure a complete analysis, saturation was reached.

Morse discussed what reaching saturation allows a researcher to accomplish:

Careful analysis of a saturated category enables the researcher to identify the characteristics of a concept, and continued sorting of a saturated category enables the researcher to identify the characteristics of phenomena and to develop complex taxonomies that reveal the components of phenomena...When little new is being learned, when the interviewer has heard ‘everything’...then saturation is reached. (1994, p. 30)

For example, when the last two units of analysis (stories) were examined and held no new themes, I knew saturation had been reached.

The sample included 13 men and 43 women. Names were not provided. Names were assigned to each story for identification purposes and clarity.

Directed Content Analysis

Content analysis has been used across many disciplines and media, notably health studies, politics, mass media, education, and court proceedings (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007; Krippendorff, 1989). In relation to communication studies, Krippendorff (1989) stated:

Content analysis is indigenous to communication research and is potentially one of the most important research techniques in the social sciences. It seeks to analyze data within a specific context in view of the meanings someone—a group or a culture—attributes to them. (p. 403)

Scholars of human communication can benefit from the implementation of content analysis as a tool for study of archived, found data such as videos, written documents, photographs, and audio recordings (Berg, 2007). Content analysis can be applied to written, verbal, or visual data and has long been used in the communication studies field (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007). Elo & Kyngäs (2007) noted that one of content analysis' first applications was in regards to religious text, analyzing hymns. Dovring (1954) noted an 18th century process in Sweden where symbols were counted in a hymn to determine if the song included ideas that did not align with the church's beliefs. While qualitative content analysis has been criticized as a less scientific process than quantitative analysis, "...it turns out that everyone is doing science, provided that *science* is defined as a specific and systematic way of discovering and understanding how social realities arise, operate, and impact on individuals and organizations of individuals" (Berg, 2007, p. 14).

Directed content analysis was appropriate for this study especially in regards to examining the social reality of purity culture. As seen in the literature review and statement of the problem, ideas and themes regarding purity culture already exist. With new developments such as Harris's collection of stories, further research is needed to stay current with the impact of purity culture literature on its readers. Directed content analysis acknowledges the research already performed in this area, while extending knowledge based on new developments and data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) stated:

Qualitative content analysis goes beyond merely counting words or extracting objective content from texts to examine meanings, themes and patterns that may

be manifest or latent in a particular text. It allows researchers to understand social reality in a subjective but scientific manner. (p. 308)

Content analysis was also appropriate for this study as evidenced by its use in several CTI studies (Brooks & Pitts, 2015; Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014; Faulkner & Hecht, 2011; Maeda & Hecht, 2012; Nuru, 2014; Orbe, 2004).

Thematic Analysis

Owen's (1984) three criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness were also found among CTI studies (Drummond & Orbe, 2009; Hecht et al., 2002; Nuru, 2014; Orbe, 2004). Recurrence examined repeated themes despite different wording (Owen, 1984). Repetition noted the use of the same words more than once (Owen, 1984). Forcefulness allowed for the consideration of emphasis on the written word (underlining, punctuation, etc.) (Owen, 1984). I used each criterion of Owen's (1984) and reached a deeper thematic analysis of the stories.

Potential Limitations

Limitations of this study included those inherent to content and thematic analysis methods. While internal validity relates to whether the analysis measured what it intended to measure and external validity refers to appropriately generalizing findings, both presented potential limits (Frey et al., 2000). One such limit is a lack of generalizability because the sample was chosen based on certain criteria. However, this choice mitigated potential research bias due to the systematic random sampling (Robson, 1993). Although the nature of the study did not allow for findings conducive to generalization, a systematic random sample ensured that every story that met criteria has an equal chance of being chosen (Robson, 1993) to mitigate potential researcher bias. I

mitigated research observational biases such as observer drift (inconsistency due to lengthy analysis, or to infrequent analysis) and observer bias (allowing my bias to influence how I read and interpret submitters' experiences) (Frey et al., 2000). Observer drift was mitigated by having a consistent schedule so that I did not forget what I learned prior, and allowed for time management so data could be examined in smaller chunks. I checked the consistency of my observations over time and asked for my adviser and peers to review my notes for consistency. Observer bias can be lessened by requesting people not aware of the purpose of the study to review the data. Regarding limitations, Berg (1995) noted the inability to predict or infer relationships based on the data collected. The data can show patterns and frequencies, but the cause for this cannot be inferred by using content analysis (Berg, 1995).

Ecological validity bolstered this study, even though this type of validity generally refers to research that is observed in a participant's natural setting (Frey et al., 2000). Harris clearly outlined expectations for stories and asked for permission to use one's story online or in his documentary anonymously (Grace at Work, n.d.). Therefore, participants understand what will happen with their words, while still having anonymity to protect their privacy. However, reasoning for how, when, and/or why specific stories were chosen to post on the website was not provided. Regarding replication, my study can be duplicated due to clear procedures, informative notes, and the strong definitions and themes provided by the CTI framework. However, different conclusions may be drawn by other researchers as the bias we try to avoid as researchers cannot be eliminated completely. A lack of clear methodology in many prior studies on purity culture made replication of their studies difficult (Klement & Sagarin, 2017).

Chapter 4

Results

Chapter four includes answers to the research questions and themes discovered throughout the submitters' stories. I analyzed fifty-six stories written by forty-three women and thirteen men. Directed content analysis was utilized to determine whether identity gaps were apparent in the stories as well as which frames were discussed, and Owen's (1984) methodology of recurrence (themes with different wording), repetition (same words used throughout multiple stories), and forcefulness (punctuation, profanity, poignancy, and the like) provided a lens through which to view the language used to indicate those gaps and frames, as well as additional themes in the stories. Quotations from the stories used as evidence for these findings are reported as they appeared online, which is, presumably, exactly as they appeared when the submitter wrote them. As a result, errors (grammatical, spelling, and the like) may appear. Leaving the stories unedited allowed for more valid data as I cannot judge if the submitter meant to write purposefully or accidentally regarding errors. This process also allowed for adherence to the submitters' original words. Submitters' names were not included with their stories. Names were chosen for each story to provide identification and clarity. When referencing stories, the submitter's name and story number was cited so it could be found in the appendix clearly (See Appendix C).

Gap indications

Research question 1a asked whether the stories included language that described tension, conflict, or friction, suggesting an identity gap. Jung and Hecht (2004) defined identity gaps as "...discrepancies between or among the four frames of identity" (p. 268). I employed directed content analysis to identify potential identity gaps by looking for language that described tension, conflict, and friction. For example, Jessica stated she and her boyfriend "ended up 'mainstream' dating and feeling guilty every minute" (Story 13). Not only feeling conflict, but feeling it all the time, may indicate an identity gap. Similar experiences of other submitters exemplified indications of identity gaps: "All I was taught was how bad dating was and what not to do to avoid giving up a piece of myself" (Story 30). Byron discussed the great focus on the negatives of dating, and the need to avoid "giving up a piece" of himself (Story 30). The tension and concern regarding not giving up parts of him, along with the strong focus on dating only ("all") may indicate another identity gap. I applied these principles to the sample and found that 53 of the 56 stories contained language that suggested an identity gap.

Research question 1b inquired further what language was used to describe the identity gaps in the stories in which gaps were found. Of the 53 stories that contained language indicating an identity gap, many contained similar conflicts, tension, and friction. Conflicts were found in 52 of the 53 stories that contained language indicating an identity gap. Conflict appeared different ways in different situations. Below are themes derived from the "conflicting" language that indicated an identity gap. I examined language that indicated identity gaps in the form of conflict with *IKDG* and general purity culture, conflict with decision-making, and conflict with emotions and feelings.

Conflicts with IKDG and general purity culture. Conflicts with *IKDG* and general purity culture were prevalent throughout the stories. However, not all conflict related to the book was negative. Danielle found *IKDG* when she was 25 after she left abusive relationships, including one with her Christian ex-boyfriend who was sent to jail for attempting to murder her. Danielle wrote, “I WISH I had your book when I was 20, I think making these structured, mature decisions that you provided would have saved me a lot of pain” (Story 164). Wendy also appreciated that *IKDG* “encouraged” her to examine possible conflicts in the church:

Thank you for writing what was on your heart all those years ago, I guess this book mainly encouraged me to take a good look at what was going on in youth group around me as a brand new believer, and realize the church looked suspiciously like the world's standards when it came to dating. (Story 410)

Wendy realizing that the church and the world’s standards for dating appeared similar could indicate an identity gap. Her personal frame, which may include Harris’s writings, did not seem to line up with what she thought the church (communal frame) should look like, as it “looked suspiciously like the world’s standards...” (Story 410). Wendy’s observation could qualify as “...discrepancies between or among the four frames of identity,” Jung and Hecht’s (2004) description for identity gaps (p. 268).

Others felt *IKDG* approached conflict by seeming to address all relationships as the same. Sarah did not appreciate the “once size all fits methodology,” Brandon did not think “anyone has the perfect or complete answer to relationships,” and Valerie addressed that one cannot “expect every Christian couple to have cookie cutter courtships” (Stories 98, 443, & 450). Other submitters found that not only did *IKDG* not fit everyone’s

circumstances but that the messages within the pages did not apply at all today. Joshua mentioned he tries to avoid the “practical Christianity” book genre completely, Ashleigh looked at the “weird, cultish” purity culture and decided to stay away, and Marie noted how the courtship process is not realistic in today’s world as she is 34 years old and does not need her dad’s permission to date (Stories 123, 44, & 404). Marie’s experience with courtship in today’s world may be an indication of an identity gap. Marie’s communal frame of current times clashing with parts of communal courtship ideals, and her personal frame regarding her age and autonomy could be an example of Hecht et al.’s (2002) statement, “identity is a negotiation” (p. 853). It may appear to Marie as if many ideas are not matching up, perhaps needing a “negotiation” to make progress.

Submitters also shared that their own selves conflicted with *IKDG* or purity culture standards. Samantha “knew my body was a problem for pure men,” and her boyfriend’s mother “saw me as the albatross in her son’s purity quest” (Story 202). Jung and Hecht’s (2004) work on “discrepancies” among frames seems to appear in Samantha’s experiences (p. 268). Samantha seeing her own body as a “problem” may have affected her personal, relational, and communal frames: is her physical self acceptable, will she negatively affect others, and does she ultimately conflict with purity culture? Jodi admitted to throwing a “hissy fit” initially in response to the book. While ultimately Jodi’s marriage was affected by her husband’s pornography addiction and they separated, after reading *IKDG* Jodi realized she could use its teaching to improve her relationship with God: “Focusing on God, not allowing myself to be distracted by

relationships until I was realistically old enough to pursue an intentional relationship...actually helped fuel my relationship with God to a new level” (Story 76).

Conflicts with decision-making. Making decisions could be a complicated process for some purity culture participants. Jodi, who felt a stronger relationship with God, also experienced difficulty in making decisions. After observing some male/female relationships that seemed questionable, Jodi felt “something was wrong...but what could you do? I didn’t want to disappoint my parents or God...it was just the thing to do...I didn’t want a messed up future” (Story 76).

Andrew “struggled to make any normal, age-appropriate decisions about what to do” (Story 220). Andrew explained the reason behind this struggle: “I could never be certain enough that the decision I was considering was really God's will...all of my natural inclinations were not to be trusted” (Story 220). Andrew may have encountered a personal-relational identity gap, as he did not express trust in his decisions because they may conflict with “God’s will” (Story 220). Based on how Andrew eventually made his decisions, his enacted frame may have been involved in the potential gap as well, depending on how comfortable he felt trusting himself, or God. Rebecca expressed similar feelings, “I never felt like I could trust myself” (Story 227), while Catherine wrote about how she thought her decisions regarding dating restrictions might have affected her sons negatively. Catherine shared, “My sons were so guarded and restricted... they felt emotionally immature... I feel like I handicapped them in many ways” (Story 432).

Sometimes, submitters’ decision-making ability was taken out of their own hands, either by their own decision or by others. Jennifer and Teresa experienced control at the hands of their parents. Jennifer’s parents decided she and her boyfriend should not kiss

until marriage, and Teresa's parents, while they asked for her input, did not let Teresa have any say regarding her romantic relationships (Stories 87 & 546).

Anna did not mention parents that took control of decision-making, but shared that her own decisions affected her knowledge and feelings about sex:

We agreed to wait to have sex until our wedding day. I was scared out of my mind...I really didn't know anything about sex. I never watched R rated movies or read Cosmo magazine or anything like that because it was impure. I had no clue what to expect from sex and I was scared of giving up my identity of being a virgin. (Story 331)

Anna further shared that sex was "terrible," even though she "had faith that God would bless the union" (Story 331). Dawn also felt her lack of decision-making and knowledge may have contributed to her missing "out on a chance to really figure out who I was and what I wanted in a husband because the first guy I courted-- I married. I regret that to a degree" (Story 461).

Conflict with obligations seemed to affect some submitters in staying with decisions they had made earlier in life, even if they no longer seemed to apply or seemed wrong to the submitter. Rebecca promised to God at the age of sixteen that her first kiss would be at the altar. Rebecca credits "God's grace" for her husband staying and having patience with her, despite her struggles with guilt and physical affection (Story 227). Rebecca shared that her husband waited for their first kiss until the altar, "...because even though my views were changing, I felt like I couldn't break the vow I made to God so long ago!" (Story 227)

Hannah felt an obligation as well, though hers related to her boyfriend's decisions and demands about sexual desires. Hannah and her boyfriend saved sex for their marriage, though Hannah mentioned other physical acts:

All of the inappropriate touching at his insistence when we snuck away from chaperones. After all, I owed it to him for giving him blue balls, right? Fast forward a few years. All of our sex involves him guilt tripping me or scaring me by what will happen if I don't. (Story 467)

Conflict with emotions and feelings. Submitters expressed conflicted emotions that affected their decisions (or lack thereof), negative personal feelings, and feelings of victimization. Megan, Melissa, and Samantha shared how feelings of fear affected their relationship decisions. Megan wrote how “fear guided” every relationship in her life, not just ones considered romantic:

You talked so much about how devastating it was to lose someone with whom you'd been close—how it was God's plan to save physical, emotional, and spiritual intimacy [with the opposite sex] for the unbreakable commitment of marriage, to guard your heart. You preached purity and mentor input and kindness with handling someone else's heart, of course—but really you were preaching fear. And that fear of being hurt or abandoned in a relationship is deeper than just a romantic breakup. That fear guided every single relationship I made (or didn't make, because I was afraid). (Story 138)

Megan may have avoided an identity gap as her “fear guided” her relationships. Megan “made (or didn't make, because I was afraid)” relationships based on the concept of “fear” (Story 138). In this way, Megan's personal frame accepted the fear as a concept,

her personal frame guided her enacted identity with decisions she made, and her relational frame was affected with relationships she did or did not pursue. Of the eleven possible identity gaps, it appears Megan may have avoided at least one in this scenario (Jung & Hecht, 2004).

Melissa shared that she had an overall positive experience with *IKDG* but noticed the fear surrounding her peers. Between the ages of 14-20 years, she observed the following:

Some adults in my circles used your book as a jumping off point to impose a climate of fear and confusion about relationships and sexuality. While I sincerely agreed with many principles you taught, I found myself frustrated with the way my church in particular applied those principles to young people in the church.

(Story 144)

Melissa may not have let fear guide her specific decisions, but it appears the people she was in relationships with may have been affected.

Samantha, while losing a relationship with a young man and the relationship between their two families due to purity culture standards, read *IKDG* and focused on this message: “Feelings-before-marriage are not only bad, they are an explosive bomb that will break your heart” (Story 202). During Samantha’s college years, which she wrote about immediately after discussing the “bomb that will break your heart,” she kept very strict boundaries, perhaps precipitated by the break-ups of the two relationships (Story 202). Jodi “felt incredibly betrayed by the purity culture, *IKDG* and even God,” (Story 76) and Erica experienced negative feelings as well:

I felt intense guilt for leaving him since he was my first love and now if I dated anyone else, I would be guilty of being emotionally impure even though I hadn't had sex. I felt like I was cheating on my ex, since we had been emotionally committed to each other for years, even though we hadn't had the ceremony.

(Story 234)

Alicia explained that no one had told her that "I could feel so much regret" from previous relationships (Story 324). Shannon experienced shame throughout her marriage for the first nine years and shared she "had internalized so much purity message guilt." Shannon's had dated other men before marriage, but her spouse had not dated other women (Story 314). Shannon explains, "I was his first girlfriend, his first everything" (Story 314).

Melanie also experienced shame through her friends who also agreed with *IKDG*. Melanie, for almost two years, "felt a sense of failure that I did not end up marrying the first person I ever dated" (Story 539). Melanie wrote that it took "years to feel comfortable putting myself out there again" (Story 539).

Emily and Erica both experienced conflict that may have been associated with feelings of deception and a loss of identity. Emily shared about a relationship in which she "loved this guy who led me into this fantasy land," who did not have the label of "boyfriend," nor were they "officially dating" (Story 214). Emily described her experience as "emotional rape" (Story 214). She wrote that she was in "fantasy land," until the guy told her that "God 'told him' to marry this other chick he was also courting. Cheating but not cheating because we lacked the label dating" (Story 214).

Erica's story discussed her self-concept after reading *IKDG*:

I read *IKDG* when I was about 15. I remember reading it and feeling very confused and powerless about my role as a woman...Reading and being convicted by your book (and others like it) convinced me to give away my agency as a woman. (Story 234)

Erica's story mentioned feeling "powerless" and giving away her "agency as a woman" (Story 234). Conflicted emotions and feelings appeared throughout the submitters' stories.

Frames Involved

Research question 2a asked if the stories written by people who read *IKDG* and indicated identity gaps, contained identity frame(s) and if so, which frame(s). All 53 stories had at least 3 frames present, 46 stories contained all 4 frames, and the rest of the sample contained the 7 stories with 3 frames which included personal, enacted, and relational (Stories 234, 270, 355, 378, 432, 496, and 532). In answer to research question 2b, the following paragraphs describe what language was used to describe the identity frame(s).

Personal frame. Present in all 53 stories indicating identity gaps, the personal frame is prominent. I found three main themes prevalent throughout the personal frames: *IKDG* and other rules, negative view of self, and not having control regarding identity. 17 personal frames related to *IKDG* and other rules, 11 personal frames referenced control over identity, and 10 personal frames included a negative self-view.

IKDG and rules. From positive to negative experiences, *IKDG* and rules regarding purity behavior were present in the personal frame. Jessica "was so focused on the rules...it was legalism at it's finest" (Story 13). Based on her personal beliefs and

rules, she “allowed” herself “myself to be groped by a boy whom I “wasn't dating,” but would never EVER let him kiss me” (Story 13). Jessica mentioned she thought she was “doing okay” but found a better balance for her personal self later in life (Story 13). Jodi also focused on the rules as she “read and re-read the book taking the message to heart” (Story 76). Though Jodi experienced difficult times during her marriage later in life, she is thankful to *IKDG* for bringing her relationship with God to a new place: Jodi felt she could trust God in a way she never could before *IKDG*.

Control and identity. Many submitters felt they lacked control over their identity and actions. A lack of control could mean choices were taken away from submitters, or submitters allowed other influences to take charge. Chris shared that he walked “away from faith because of how damaging Christianity has been” (Story 57). However, he stated it was not Joshua Harris’s fault. Instead, Chris shared “I let myself be controlled by evangelical Christian culture” (Story 57). Chris concluded by expressing that he felt able to love others and himself for the first time. There was a wide range of experiences regarding identity and control: Teresa’s parents “controlled everything” and did not let Teresa have autonomy over her romantic life (Story 546), James recognized that “we *already* have God’s blessing” and controlling our identity would not change this (Story 173), and Anna was “was scared of giving up my identity of being a virgin” when it came to her wedding night (Story 331).

Negative self-view. Brittany and Shannon both labeled themselves “damaged goods” based on previous sexual activity, even if it was not done with consent (Stories 114 & 314). Brittany was molested in elementary school, and after reading *IKDG* determined that she was “damaged goods. There is no going back and I have to take what

I can get when it comes to dating and relationships” (Story 114). Shannon also referred to herself as “damaged goods,” though she noted she followed the no sex rule (Story 314). However, Shannon said she “had given away pieces of my heart. I dated boys” (Story 314). Shannon shared she did not know until *IKDG* came out that standards had changed and dating alone was enough to damage her: “In high school in the early 90's no one had told me not to...then your book came about...the goal posts had moved, the rules changed. I was now dirty, used up” (Story 314).

Enacted frame. The enacted frame is present in all 53 stories indicating identity gaps. Enactment showed in many ways. As a result, quotations that contained a strong theme of an expressed identity will be listed below.

Samantha begins the list of enacted identity expression examples, which seems appropriate as Samantha starts her story with this expression of her identity: “I was an ‘IKDG’ rockstar: a virgin who had only ever kissed the virgin I married after an intentional, marriage-focused relationship” (Story 202). Whitney expressed how she did or did not deserve certain things based on her past—potentially an attempt at matching her personal frame with her enacted frame. Whitney thought “that whatever I would eventually get would be exactly what I deserved” and that her abuse disqualified her from a “satisfying sex life or marriage” (Story 240). Whitney met an older man whom she would later marry and divorce. They had sex and Whitney experienced flashbacks to her abuse and felt so “further sullied by having sex” that she married the forty-year-old man (Story 240). Whitney made outward expressions (enactment frame) that may be an attempt to match what she thought of herself as a person (personal frame).

Brad also took actions that matched his personal beliefs instead of the trends around him. Brad shared, “I remember it being a fad for Christians to get really caught up in all the definitions... I decided to do away with all the definitions. I made it my goal to...learn as much as I could through friendship” (Story 474). Brad made his own decisions and acted on them, even if it was not the current trend.

Chris acted similarly, his involvement with the church not wavering even though his friends were partying. Even without growing up in a Christian home, Chris followed the church’s “cues” and felt that at that time it saved him from some heartache (Story 57). On the other hand, Kyle followed the trend and wrote, “like many conservative Christian homeschool families we read your book and quickly became ‘anti-dating’” (Story 506). Enacted expressions of identity varied from person to person.

Relational frame. Appearing in all 53 stories indicating identity gaps, the relational frame is prevalent. I found three main themes throughout the relational frames: someone or something else was in control of the submitters’ relationships, obstacles in relationships, and expectations regarding relationships. 15 relational frames included obstacles in relationships, 11 relational frames mentioned the lack of control, and 10 relational frames discussed expectations.

Relationship obstacles. Purity culture principles created obstacles in relationships for the submitters. Stephanie and Megan both faced the obstacle of fear: Stephanie wondered if her conservative beliefs (including purity culture) scared off potential suitors (Story 104) and Megan’s fear of potentially damaging relationships guided whether she even initiated relationships, romantic or not (Story 138). Emily’s story seems to start in a place of perfection, a “fantasy land” created for her by a guy who seemed destined to be

her Prince Charming (Story 214). However, Emily believed the young man took advantage of purity culture by utilizing “courtship” to date many young women without expectations of a future (Story 214).

Lack of control. Control appeared as a theme within the personal frame and does so again within the relational frame. Parents were most commonly mentioned as having some or all control over romantic relationships: Jennifer, Rebecca, Angela, Catherine, Mallory, Bethany, and Teresa all shared experiences as parents, with their parents, or with others’ parents that contributed to a lack of control over their own relationships (Stories 87, 227, 263, 432, 486, 521, & 546). From Bethany’s parents ultimately kicking her out of the house to (Story 521) to Mallory’s parents’ punishments for her having feelings and overall emotional abuse (Story 486), several parents had control over submitters’ relationships.

Abuse as a form of control went beyond Mallory’s parents. Danielle experienced abuse in several relationships and shares details of one relationship in particular:

I just exited a series of damaging, and abusive relationships. I was abused so terribly by my first (Christian boyfriend) that I was sent to a battered women's shelter, and he is now in jail for a very long time (Attempted murder on me).

(Story 164)

Danielle called herself “a huge advocate of the chastity movement, mainly for women because it underscores the dignity of the woman that I never knew existed” (Story 164).

Danielle appeared to utilize *IKDG* as a tool to find her vocation and shared that *IKDG* “may have saved my life” (Story 164).

One last submitter, Melanie, believes she may speak for several of the purity culture community regarding relationship control:

The takeaway I'd like for you to have from my story is, you don't even know me, you have never met me in my life nor are you likely to, and yet you have had near-complete control over my (non)sex life for almost ten years. I am sure I am not the only person who has gone through this. (Story 539)

While other submitters may not have claimed Joshua Harris as the sole controller over their relationships, Melanie touched on the idea that many submitters expressed regarding the book's principles affecting their relationships. Melanie identifies as "the most feminist, progressive Christian you may know," and shares she is still a virgin despite these seemingly conflicting beliefs (Story 539). However, Melanie is unsure if this outcome of control is something of which to be proud.

Expectations. A variety of expectations appeared throughout the stories. Some instances were positive, such as when Matthew experienced healing and greater respect for the women in his life:

God used your book to bring healing to me after many broken dating relationships. One of many take-aways for me was a shift in attitude toward treating others with love and respect--seeing women as sisters in the Lord, and treating them accordingly--even as cultural norms and the loneliness of singlehood made it tempting to do otherwise. (Story 68)

With the help of *IKDG*, Matthew was able to adjust his beliefs to include higher expectations of how he treated women. Others took on expectations to improve the lives of those around them, like James who "will be teaching my daughter...that it isn't about

what she needs to remove from her life (or not do), it will be about focusing so much on Jesus and what He's done for her" (Story 173).

Hannah expressed that expectations within purity culture were viewed as unrealistic by others. Hannah's boyfriend insisted on "inappropriate touching" because "After all, I owed it to him for giving him blue balls, right?" (Story 467). Sexual expectations continued in Hannah's relationship until she decided to divorce her husband (the same boyfriend as above).

Others personally felt expectations were inappropriate or too strong for relationships. Anna felt "robbed of the promise your book and others said I would get" when she experienced problems with sex and her husband was unwilling to talk about them (Story 331). They ultimately divorced. Despite wanting to marry and have children, Tara shared that "God does not write everyone a love story" as she is currently single (Story 339). However, Tara shared that her singleness has allowed many blessings in her life.

Expectations and hesitations appeared throughout readers' stories, especially for Marie and Cassandra. Both shared the difficulty of getting to know someone well enough to know if you would marry them, before you date them. Marie knew it "put so much pressure on guys" because they needed to get close to know about the possibility of marriage without dating them (Story 404). Cassandra shared the young woman's side of the story, feeling "extremely awkward around guys for years not even knowing how to be their friend. I was so afraid to get to know them because I thought I had to want to marry them first" (Story 355).

Communal frame. Only absent from 7 of 53 stories indicating an identity gap(s), the communal frame is established within submitters' stories. I found three main themes throughout the communal frames: church, homeschooling, and general purity culture. 15 communal frames mentioned church, 10 communal frames included homeschooling, and 8 communal frames discussed general purity culture.

Church. Church was mentioned in 15 of the communal frames. If a passing reference was made to church ("My friends from a similar culture were also on board, again strongly encouraged by their parents and church leaders," Story 76), it was not counted. Some submitters, like Ashleigh, described how their church interacted with *IKDG*:

I used to say your book ruined my life. It got passed around my church, when I was 15, and everyone began taking it super seriously...One of the girls, a couple years younger than me, decided to declare she was going to wait until marriage to the world...The other parents all decided this was a good idea and about five or six kids in our church were then basically forced into getting purity rings and having this ceremony. (Story 44)

Sarah also shared a story of church and *IKDG*, though this time included a lack of action by the church: "The truth is your book was successful because the church, parents and pastors weren't saying anything" (Story 98). Sarah explained that this left a hole in the church, which was then filled by *IKDG*. She wrapped up her explanation by stating any faults caused by *IKDG* should be attributed to the church and not Joshua Harris.

Holly and Angela both considered church to be a part of the family, or perhaps a place to go when missing family. At the age of four years, Holly lost her mother to a car

crash. Holly described the church as “really the only place of solace my family experienced and I took very seriously whatever teaching I received. This book was taught as a guide for how to be a good Christian” (Story 348). Similarly, Angela wrote, “A church often acts in place of parents” (Story 263). Angela’s parents were not involved in her life nor were they available to her, so church provided “a feeling of security and acceptance. My siblings and I attended...our parents having little idea of what we were exposed to there” (Story 263). For some readers of *IKDG*, church appeared to hold a prominent place in their lives.

Homeschooling. Submitters like Byron, Kyle, and Bethany experienced homeschooling with the influence of *IKDG* (Stories 30, 506, & 521). For Byron, *IKDG* was a “rulebook;” for Kyle (Story 506), his Christian family read *IKDG* like many other conservative homeschooled families; and Bethany and her future spouse both “came from the purity culture of homeschooling” (Story 521). Samantha shared that she was homeschooled and “owned a shelf full of purity culture literature” (Story 202).

Several submitters identified as mothers who homeschooled, like Sarah, Kristen (who was also a leader in the homeschool movement) and Valerie (Stories 98, 293, & 450). Hannah met her future husband, who she later divorced due to abuse, in a “homeschool AP English class” (Story 467). Megan introduced herself as a “recent homeschool debate alumna,” going on to share she was not writing to debate *IKDG* but to express her pain (Story 138). Amber was homeschooled and told she would be participating in courtship. Amber spent time with people who carried more conservative standards than hers. Amber said she read *IKDG* out of curiosity more than anything else,

and to find out, “hey, what's another homeschool grad doing?” (Story 155).

Homeschooling experiences and roles varied throughout the stories.

Purity Culture. Purity culture is described in many ways in the stories. Bethany referenced “concept of courtship and purity doctrine” and attended retreats and conferences (Story 521). Stephanie also attended conferences and retreats that “promoted ‘waiting faithfully’” (Story 104). Submitters viewed purity culture across a wide spectrum, as Jodi wrote that she “felt incredibly betrayed by the purity culture” (Story 76), and Danielle stated she was “a huge advocate of the chastity movement” (Story 164). Different verbiage was also utilized throughout the stories. Bridget wrote about “purity culture” (Story 391), Rebecca utilized the terms “purity culture” and “courtship culture” (Story 227), Whitney cited “purity movement” (Story 240), and Shannon mentioned the “pressure of purity” and “purity message guilt” (Story 314).

Additional Prevalent Themes

Research question 3 inquired as to what themes were prevalent throughout the *IKDG* readers’ stories. Several submitters mentioned similar experiences, sometimes even using the same words or phrases. Others shared circumstances unique to them, while some submitters shared their story for the very first time.

Addressing Joshua Harris. Twenty-one of fifty-six submitters addressed Joshua Harris directly, either by using part or all of his name or the pronoun “you” or possessive pronoun “your” (Stories 30, 57, 76, 114, 155, 214, 227, 240, 258, 270, 293, 324, 355, 367, 461, 486, 496, 521, 532, 539, & 546). Some messages to the author of *IKDG* were positive, thanking, commending, and defending him for his work: “...thanks for your bravery in wanting honest feedback... Blessings on your journey Josh and thanks for

your willingness to listen” (Story 57), and “I really believe your book brought much more good than bad, and I admire your openness to talk about it with folks” (Story 155).

Robert addressed Joshua Harris cordially, even while disagreeing with some of Joshua Harris’s views:

I want to encourage you not to fall into snares of those who blame you for abuses of which you are not culpable. I probably underestimated how God used your book positively to guard me from impurity, even if i disagreed with your view of courtship. (Story 258)

Some of the messages to Joshua Harris had similar phrasing and purpose. “Your fault” appeared more than once. For Chris, Sarah, James, and Kristen, “your fault” is included in a statement releasing Joshua Harris from blame (Stories 57, 98, 173, & 293).

Other messages included negative themes such as anger, blame, and hate, like Emily’s:

For a long time I hated you. Blamed you... I believed God hated me for the longest time...I don't hate you anymore. You were a kid when you wrote that book. You meant well but lacked the experience and wisdom to do it right. The consequences are great though and you can't undo it. (Story 214)

Positive or negative, 73.3 percent of the sample included messages addressed directly to Joshua Harris, going beyond a response to his book’s content. These messages appeared to suggest a relationship beyond reacting to the book. Even though these stories are submitted through CMC, readers seem to feel a closeness to an author they have likely never met. Joshua Harris’s goal with feedback was to listen to his readers (Grace at Work, n.d.b). The closeness demonstrated by directly addressing him may suggest this was an effective way to gather feedback and listen.

Formulas and promises. Submitters used language to suggest they were promised a particular result if they followed a specific formula (Stories 76, 98, 138, 173, 214, 227, & 293). If an individual followed God and remained pure, their Christian spouse and happy marriage were guaranteed. Others included family in the formula, with the parents or specifically the father leading their dating life. While one unique formula for achieving purity was not stated, many were similar.

Still, not all submitters felt there was one right way to live out *IKDG*'s ideology. Sarah shared that she "...still prefer the courtship model but guided by our family and not a once size fits all methodology" (Story 98). Throughout most stories, these promises revolved around finding a good spouse and enjoying a happy marriage. However, some, like Rebecca, noted the formula did not provide the promised solution:

It was promised to us that having our parent involved almost guaranteed God's will and a perfect relationship. But what I saw happening was parents micromanaging relationships to the point that the guy and girl never were able to develop their own decision making or communication skills as a couple. (Story 227)

Kristen shared that outcomes were different for everyone:

For some, it worked well. For others, it brought disaster...Honestly and integrity in relationships were backburner, as long as you "did" it right in public. Cover-ups have become rampant in sex-abuse scandals in the church and domestic violence in the home. (Story 293)

Other submitters were concerned their future might be jeopardized if they did not follow their version of the promise: "I didn't want to disappoint my parents or God...But it was just the thing to do....And I didn't want a messed up future" (Story 76).

Submitters, like James below, also shared frustration if the completed promise did not produce the desired results:

All the books I'd read promised that if I lived a "holy" life, things would automatically fall into place. After waiting for the "pure" woman who wasn't trying to date—and failing to find one--I eventually became disenfranchised with not only your book, but the Christian faith as well...after seeing no hope in the near future, eventually gave up completely and lived in the flesh. (Story 173)

While submitters shared formulas that were supposed to guarantee the optimal outcome, the submitters' experiences produced different results. The sometimes drastic differences left some submitters' discouraged and upset. They did not mention knowing what to do when the *IKDG* math failed to compute. Unfortunately, stories mentioned another unexpected response, sexual abuse and tragedy.

Sexual abuse and violence. Submitters' showed that a person does not have to personally go through sexual abuse to write about it in their personal story. Six stories mention sexual abuse and its relation to *IKDG* or purity culture in general (Stories 114, 138, 240, 258, 270, & 293). Submitters addressed their individual experience with sexual abuse, and one story ended in murder.

Sexual abuse concerns were included in stories due to some submitters' secondhand knowledge of the issue, like Megan (Story 138) and Robert (Story 258):

I think the emphasis in IKDG on “spend time in groups, not just off alone” stigmatized alone time with the opposite sex. I find this to be very dangerous...I know secondhand that abusers often treat their victims horribly while alone and become charming and lovely in groups. (Story 138)

I do see how your rhetoric would have been in line with that of groups who have systemic issues already and could probably be accused of emotional, spiritual, and even sexual abuse. So in the end I think IKDG just falls into being unhelpful. (Story 258)

Some stories contain first-hand experience with sexual abuse. Brittany (Story 114) and Whitney (Story 240) shared their experiences:

So, I've never told anyone any of this so here goes... I was molested by another classmate in elementary school and when I read IKDG, I realized one thing that has stayed with me my whole entire dating life. I am damaged goods. (Story 114) Joshua, The book and the concepts behind it were deeply damaging to me in my formative years, and the damage followed me into adulthood. As a teenager, I was already a survivor of childhood sexual abuse--and experience steeped in shame and selfcontempt. Your book solidified in my mind that I was damaged, disgusting, deeply impure, and that my abuse would preclude me from having a satisfying sex life or marriage. (Story 240)

Finally, Kristen recounted an affecting experience. Kristen's thoughts also referenced the theme of following a formula and not getting the expected answer. Kristen explained:

Their pastor's daughter was held up as a role model for all - she followed the IKDG teachings to a tee and ended up marrying a boy in the church who had also followed all the rules, within the confines of the church...It was a celebrated moment when they married, but just a few months later, he shot and killed her in the early morning hours - leaving a family and church devastated. (Story 293)

Stories covered several different experiences with sexual abuse and tragedy.

Many submitters expressed concern, pain, and negative perceptions of themselves. Even Robert, a reader who stated he “didn’t agree with your view of courtship at the time and it had little impact on me,” upon reflection saw how people could associate sexual abuse with *IKDG* and called the book “unhelpful” (Story 258). When confronted with negative experiences, several readers discussed who or what was to blame for the consequences.

Blame. The word "blame" surfaced twelve times throughout the fifteen stories (Stories 76, 155, 214, 240, & 258). Of note, one story contains the word "blame" five times (Story 76). "I needed to blame something..." suggests a link to the formulaic theme discussed above (Story 76).

Jodi expressed frustration for her husband's sin of pornography addiction, and it appears she concludes that blame was "misplaced" (Story 76). Instead of placing blame on people who had shared or taught purity culture principles, her husband's omission of his sin was to blame. Amber shared her thoughts on other people placing blame on Joshua Harris: "...when people suffer they want to blame everyone but themselves" (Story 155). Amber first noted that people who suffer want to place blame anywhere but on their own self. Then she goes on to list people or concepts she could blame. Amber

shared how she could blame the purity movement but instead puts the ultimate blame on "broken culture" (Story 155).

Submitters discussed blame in many ways (Stories 57, 76, 98, 155, 240, 258, 270, & 293). Joshua Harris, the church, parents, even the submitter, all received blame. One theme remained true throughout all the stories that mentioned blame: someone or something was responsible. Within the sample, there were no stories that made a statement about not needing to find a target for blame.

Some placed blame on Joshua Harris's book while others recognized *IKDG* was only one factor that affected their experiences. Chris (Story 57) and Whitney (Story 240) shared:

I did not grow up in a Christian household so I took my cues from the church which was *IKDG* driven...What I did not realize was that this was an important time in my life and instead of taking responsibility for my actions and actually living, your book made me isolate myself and create an unreachable standard. (Story 57)

I do not blame all the things that happened to me on your writing--not at all, as both the childhood sexual abuse and spousal abuse were inflicted by some extremely ill people--but your book was part of what blinded me to what was actually occurring. All I could see was my filth and the danger of my sexuality. I couldn't see others' illnesses because I thought it was me who was sick. (Story 240)

Other submitters placed blame on the church, such as Sarah's story, "This should be more of an indictment of the church than you" (Story 98). Culture and familial relationships

were also mentioned. Amber shared, “I could blame the conservative courtship movement...but what's really to blame is my broken culture...people viewing romance as a right they deserve...and mostly that I didn't/don't have a close relationship with my dad” (Story 155). Kristen wrote, “This was not your fault. It was the timing of it all” (Story 293). Whether a place, person, or abstract concept, it appeared that blame still needed to land somewhere.

Blame was appointed to other people as well, including the submitter. There is no mention of blame not being necessary. In fact, Jodi discussed the idea of “misplaced blame” (Story 76):

I had waited, my spouse had "waited" (it turned out he was a closet porn addict and the effects from his addiction were not known until the first time we tried to have sex), but here I was newly married, confused and miserable. I needed to blame something...I was hurting. I felt I had been lied to by everyone who wrote or spoke about God honoring relationship principles. It was definitely a case of misplaced blame. Life was a mess because of sin that my husband withheld from me. (Story 76)

Katie shared how her husband discusses her past and mentioned the regret she places on herself, “My husband (never read IKDG) did not live the life I lived, and he has mentioned many times of my past. It DOES affect my marriage. I WISH I would have done things differently” (Story 270).

Blame is a prevalent theme throughout the stories. Blame is closely related to the next theme, regret.

Regret(s). Three stories contain the word "regret(s)" (Stories 57, 98, & 270). Two submitters stated a lack of regret but in very different ways. Chris shared how he "...lost my virginity at 21. But look, I don't regret these things....yeah it's shitty and not the picture perfect outline of a life but reading these stories the picture perfect seems just as shitty!" (Story 57) The other two stories contain negative regrets, with one story (270) using the word "regret" three times (Stories 98 & 270).

Mistake(s). Following blame and regret is "mistake(s)." Mistake(s) appears once in five separate stories, each with a unique meaning (Stories 57, 76, 138, 270, & 293). Chris shared that doing drugs, drinking, and losing his virginity were "mistakes," but not mistakes that he regrets (Story 57).

The next story used "mistakes" to refer to the choices people made when they equated *IKDG* with Scripture (Story 76). Megan wrote that she no longer needed to fear mistakes as "...there is grace and wisdom that abounds in failure" (Story 138). Katie seemed to express that she found the "mistakes" she had made in her youth were included in *IKDG* (Story 270). The final story references "mistakes" that some parents may admit they made "...in demanding this standard..." (Story 293).

Analogies, labels, and metaphors. Five submitters mentioned hurtful language as a part of their experience. However, one submitter can share several illustrations within their story. But first, the use of absolute words and all-or-nothing words in stories is examined.

Perfect. Appearing in four stories, forms of the word "perfect" are found within an analogy comparing a person who has sinned sexually to a chocolate cake with a bite taken out of it (Story 138), the description of one's future husband (Story 227), and a

desire for the "perfect" dating process and the "perfect" relationship (Story 293). The final story sarcastically uses "perfect," claiming that a "perfect life" based on the other stories on Joshua Harris's website, is just as bad as a life with mistakes (Story 57).

All-or-nothing words and phrases. All-or-nothing words and phrases included "never, only, ever, exclusively, unreachable, don't, can't, no going back, unbreakable, absolute, nothing, all, sure" (Stories 30, 57, 114, 138, 240, & 270). "All," "don't," and "never" claimed the most appearances, with "all" as the most-used all-or-nothing word. Nearly all of the all-or-nothing words appeared at least more than once.

While reading the three quotations regarding analogies, labels, and metaphors, observing how many of the absolute or all-or-nothing words are included is much more noticeable than before these words were discussed and add depth to the submitters' story. Brittany recalled two significant uses of hurtful language in her life. Brittany was molested in elementary school, and she later read *IKDG* and concluded she was "damaged" as a result (Story 114). Brittany's second experience with harmful language occurred when a guest pastor visited her youth group:

I remember the youth group session when we talked about this book. A guest pastor had come in from out of town to speak with us and we were so excited. He said he had a box of chocolates to share with us, but we had to listen to his story first. I can't remember the story, it was something about dating and relationships, anyway while he telling the story he was holding the box of chocolates. He was testing out a piece of chocolate by either licking it or biting into it and while he was chewing he was basically spitting all over the box. It was disgusting and he when he was finished not a single piece of chocolate was edible. He asked us if

anyone wanted any and of course we all said no! Then he said the moral of the story is that if you have given yourself away to another man or woman you are the chocolates in this box. Chewed, licking, and spit on and no one wants to marry someone who has been used up. So, I walked away from that meeting not only believing what he said, but also thinking that well that's it for me. (Story 114)

The next story includes several examples of language use. Megan remembered two experiences regarding language: (1) Joshua Harris's language that still negatively affects her, and (2) growing up with examples where Megan was compared to objects and fragility:

I remember you talking about “the bars of a woman’s soul” in the context of men needing to be careful in approaching women, lest they cause harm. I feel like I am just now prying my way out of those bars...I think my biggest point of growth has been viewing my heart not as a fragile piece of glass to be broken (or made unbreakable), but rather as a clump of mud on a riverbank. Sometimes it gets flooded and thrown into chaos, but it always settles again (albeit maybe somewhere else). That mental image gives me more emotional resilience than the imagery I grew up with—I’m not like glass, where one crack ruins me; or like paper or wood, where ripping or sawing me apart irrevocably destroys me; or like chocolate cake that’s been bitten, where I could never again be whole and perfect. (Story 138)

A metaphor lingered for Emily who experienced pain after rejection. Emily also remembered how the lack of a label contributed to confusion and heartbreak:

I loved this guy who led me into this fantasy land. Made me believe that God had given me this prince charming to marry. Nope. God "told him" to marry this other chick he was also courting. Cheating but not cheating because we lacked the label dating. My heart was broken and I blamed God. (Story 214)

It makes sense that language devices hold a place in peoples' perceptions of themselves. *IKDG* is a compilation of language devices that all worked together to share a message to which people are now responding. Whether or not these metaphors, examples, and analogies were found among the pages of *IKDG* or in the broader purity culture, the stories above illustrate their impact.

Purity culture. As discussed in earlier chapters, a solid definition of purity culture is not easy to find. Finding the phrase "purity culture" six times throughout the sample is helpful in establishing "purity culture" as a recognized term (Stories 76, 227, & 293). A variation of the phrase, "purity movement," is found three times in one story (Story 240).

Poignant and decorative language. Sweeping sentences such as, "This book has been the single biggest influence prompting me to adopt mindsets that crippled my ability to relate with anyone—especially guys my own age but also people like my sister, female friends, and mentor figures," illustrate Megan's forcefulness in sharing her story as words and phrases like "single biggest influence," and "crippled" can display powerful emotions (Story 138). Words that infer authenticity can be effective:

I was never asked to be in a relationship during...my teen years or most of college...I really struggled with feeling ugly and undesirable because no one expressed interest in me but now I realize I was unapproachable and nervous

around men and all my fear and prudishness were enough to scare anyone away.

(Story 227)

Rebecca's raw confession may be enough for readers to "feel" the emotions within a submitter's story. The strong violent and active tones in the following story may also catch a reader's attention, "I want to encourage you not to fall into snares of those who blame you for abuses of which you are not culpable. I probably underestimated how God used your book positively to guard me from impurity" (Story 258).

Chapter four answered the research questions and reviewed themes found within submitter's stories. Chapter five discusses the results, limitations, recommendations for future research, and conclusions. References and appendices follow chapter five.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine stories submitted to Joshua Harris, author of *IKDG*, and find whether the submitters' language indicated identity gaps and, if so, which identity frames were involved. Chapters one and two discussed the history of the purity movement, several potential harms that could result from participating in it, and the theoretical lens of CTI through which this thesis explores responses to the movement. Chapter three laid out methods including directed content analysis inspired by CTI, and broader thematic analysis employing Owens' (1984) method. Chapter four reported the findings of this study, which revealed that consumers of purity culture, specifically the book *IKDG*, appeared to experience identity gaps that involved every possible identity frame. Chapter four also reported the themes drawn from using Owens' method. The current chapter synthesizes those findings through the lens of the literature discussed in the first two chapters. This chapter includes sections on discussion, limitations, recommendations for future research, and conclusions. The research questions below guided the study.

RQ1a: Do the stories written by readers of *IKDG* contain language that suggests an identity gap?

RQ1b: What language is used to describe the identity gap?

RQ2a: Do the stories written by readers of *IKDG* contain identity frames?

RQ2b: What language is used to describe the identity frame?

RQ3: What themes are prevalent throughout the *IKDG* readers' stories?

Discussion

Research question 1a asked if the stories written by people who read *IKDG* contained language that suggested possible identity gaps. Directed content analysis revealed that 53 of the 56 stories analyzed contained identity gaps. This finding resonates with the words of *IKDG* author, Joshua Harris, upon reflecting on the potential impacts of his book. In a November 2017 TEDxHarrisburg Talk description, Harris shared, “Twenty years ago I wrote a best-selling book about dating that I’m now realizing misguided and even hurt some people” (TEDx Talks, 2017). Harris’s announcement came after he requested stories of how *IKDG* had affected his readers (Graham, 2016).

Harris did not put any limitations on readers’ submissions as far as their response being positive or negative. Without specific censorship, stories had the potential to contain identity gaps, since submitters could share their stories freely. Rowley-Jolivet and Campagna’s (2011) mentioned that with Web 2.0 editing capabilities, some people realized that there might have been a vetting process behind the selection of material. Harris encouraged freedom of expression by asking for stories of all experiences. Harris then shared stories that did not always display him in the best light, which may have earned him trust in the accuracy and fairness of the postings. The discussion of question 1a below describes in detail how identity gaps seemed to manifest themselves in the stories.

Question 1a inquired, in those stories in which language indicated possible identity gaps, what language was used to describe the possible identity gap? Several scholars discussed the graphic visual metaphors utilized in purity culture (Freitas, 2008; Gardner, 2011; Klement & Sagarin, 2017; Moon & Reger, 2014; Schermer Sellers,

2017), and submitters discussed them as well. Megan shared being compared to glass, paper, wood, and chocolate cake (Story 138).

These submitters' language appeared to resonate with the first potential harm mentioned in the literature reviewed for this study, the harmful teachings or negative focus on sex. Byron mentioned how "all I was taught was how bad dating was" and "what not to do to avoid giving up a piece of myself" (Story 30). The potential harms of negative teachings like this were discussed by Gardner (2011) and referenced how the teachings of purity culture, as referenced in analogies like Megan shared (Story 138), could be used to shame individuals for their sexual activity.

Identity gaps found in these stories were not always negative, however. Some language used to describe potential identity gaps illustrated possible growth. Megan mentioned how a point of growth for her was realizing her heart was not "a fragile piece of glass to be broken...sometimes it gets flooded and thrown into chaos, but it always settles again. That mental image gives me more emotional resilience than the imagery I grew up with" (Story 138).

Danielle shared that following *IKDG* principles helped her become "stronger. I am a huge advocate of the chastity movement, mainly for women because it underscores the dignity of the woman that I never knew existed. Yes, *IKDG* is hard. But, we are anointed for hard, and challenge" (Story 164). Descriptions like these can be illuminated by the findings of Maeda and Hecht (2012), who studied "always-single" Japanese women. Maeda and Hecht (2012) found that over their four-year study, some women expressed feeling more comfortable with an identity that was not always considered positive within their culture.

Beyond merely indicating an identity gap, such findings could also be indicative of the mitigation of an identity gap. Previous studies found identity gaps led to negative outcomes (Jung & Hecht, 2004; Jung et al., 2007; Jung, 2011), so Maeda and Hecht (2012) contributed a new finding regarding identity gaps. Language that may indicate friction may be the friction that can occur during challenges and positive change.

Of the 53 stories that contained language indicating an identity gap, many contained similar conflicts, tension, and friction. Each submitter used their distinct “voice” to share their story, and yet, common themes were found throughout those affected by purity culture. I examined language that indicated identity gaps in the form of conflict with *IKDG* and general purity culture, conflict with decision-making, and conflict with emotions and feelings.

Frames involved.

Research question 2a asked which frames presented within stories that included language that indicated identity gaps. The four frames included personal (one’s self-concept), enacted (one’s expressed identity/messages they receive), relational (how others view you/connections you have), and communal (connection through similar beliefs as a group). All but 7 stories contained all four frames of identity. All 53 stories in which identity gaps were indicated had at least three frames present. 46 stories contained all four frames: personal, enacted, relational, and communal. The rest of the sample contains the seven stories with three frames: personal, enacted, and relational (Stories 234, 270, 355, 378, 432, 496, and 532).

Research question 2b inquired, if there was observation of identity frames, what language was used to describe the identity frames? Research on discrepancies regarding

virginity pledges was prevalent in the literature review, but pledges were not a prevalent topic in the stories. A pledge might have been mentioned, but it was not discussed to the depth that the literature review examined it, especially considering generally mixed results as to the pledge's effectiveness. Landor and Simons (2014) posited that the discrepancies between studies on the effectiveness of virginity pledges could be due to the study's measurement tools. Noting that externally quantifiable measurements had been used in the past, Landor and Simons (2014) proposed that an individual could express outward commitment, but inwardly, not internalize the commitment, affecting the effectiveness of the pledge. They specifically mentioned that how closely the individual held their religious beliefs might have affected whether he or she would live out that pledge (Landor & Simons, 2014).

Many submitters mentioned other influences in their lives, specifically from the relational and communal frames: parents, church, or friends. Each person brought their own beliefs (or lack thereof) to the pledge. This finding echoed those of Hecht et al.'s 2002 study on Jewish Americans through the show "Northern Exposure." The study utilized CTI and observed that people who shared identities (Jewish Americans) could enact their identities differently—and the different enactment may come from how strongly they adhered to their communal beliefs (Hecht et al., 2002). Additionally, people who did not share a communal identity could enact similarly (Hecht et al., 2002). So, people who made virginity pledges are still unique individuals with their own set of beliefs, their own story and their own enacted identity which may or may not follow what others in their communal group do.

Within the relational frame, parental messages were prevalent. Submitters shared how their parents had control over their relationships: Bethany was ultimately kicked out of her house for disagreeing with her parents (Story 521), and Mallory received punishments from her parents and was emotionally abused by them for having feelings (Story 486). The use of the word “parents” was prominent.

However, Fahs (2010) specifically pointed out the patriarchal control over children’s sexuality. Fahs (2010) shared that when young women attended purity balls, their fathers escorted them. If the father was not available, it was another male individual who fulfilled the role.

Looking at the language used to describe the relational frame, “parents” was far more prevalent than the father figure alone. Teresa’s parents refused to let her have any say in her romantic relationships (Story 546), and it was both of Jennifer’s parents who expected that she would not kiss anyone until marriage (Story 87). When looking at control associated with the relational frame, the language used by submitters was not limited to males. Both parents were mentioned as having control over relationships (Stories 87, 227, 263, 432, 486, 521, & 546).

Additional prevalent themes.

Research question 3 inquired, in addition to those regarding specific gaps and frames, what further themes were prevalent throughout the *IKDG* readers’ stories. Owen's (1984) thematic analysis revealed several themes in *IKDG* readers’ stories through recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. One such theme was the directness with which story submitters addressed Harris, himself, which appeared to relate to hyperpersonal theory (Walther, 1996). Hyperpersonal theory suggests that individuals may be more

comfortable disclosing certain information through CMC due to the ability to write messages at their own pace, edit them, and not have to worry about nonverbal reactions. Perhaps presenting a feeling of security, this may also have affected the submissions (Walther, 1996; Ruppel, et al., 2017).

Harris requested permission to share the stories anonymously on his website. Similar to Sinton's (2018) findings, Harris utilized feedback by turning it into content for his website in the form of reader stories. Harris's actions might have indicated to readers that Harris would not only review the stories but that he considered the stories valuable enough to turn into online content. These factors may have contributed to hyperpersonal outcomes.

Melanie addressed how the relationship between the reader and Harris may be closer than the usual author-reader relationship, "you don't even know me, you have never met me in my life nor are you likely to, and yet you have had near-complete control over my (non)sex life for almost ten years" (Story 539). While Melanie may have been expressing frustration at the control Harris has or had over her life, she illustrated that a submitter could write something very personal and deliver the message online.

In some cases, the lack of FtF conversation may have allowed submitters to share what they would not or had not shared before. Brittany shared for the first time through a submission to Harris that she was molested during elementary school (Story 114). While it is not possible to generalize CMC and its possibility of more intimate communication than FtF conversations, an observation can be made that Brittany shared something she had never shared with anyone else through CMC to Harris. Brittany did not indicate in her story if she had ever met Harris, so one might assume that she had not. If she had not,

this would be an example of a reader submitting a personal aspect of their life to someone they have not met through CMC, illustrating how hyperpersonal theory may lead to more intimate relationships than if they communicated FtF.

Identity themes.

Additional themes that related to the previous research cited in chapters one and two concern multi-faceted identity, identity as vital to inclusion or exclusion in a community, and the importance of symbols and labels to group membership identity. These three themes all related to beliefs Hecht (1993) presented about identity before writing his seminal article on CTI, which had helped to understand the submitters' stories and determine if identity gaps are present. Hecht (1993) stated that identity was not one-dimensional; while personal beliefs partly made up one's identity, so did social and communal communication. Changes in identity were expected, potentially in the areas of the affective, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual self (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004).

While analyzing submitters' stories, two other beliefs about identity became salient: (1) one's identity is a reason for exclusion from a particular community, and (2) identity utilizes symbols and labels unique to the identity holder (Hecht, 1993; Hecht et al., 2002). The stories reflected fitting into a specific culture or being kicked out, and purity culture used symbols like jewelry, along with labels and language that submitters used (Anna, Story 331; Hecht, 1993; Hecht et al., 2002). Submitters' identities influenced their ideologies, including rules for how to appropriately and effectively communicate (Hecht, 1993). Essentially, submitters' identities affected their ideology which affected how they communicate. The stories may share similar communicative properties since

they may share similar identity gaps and each submitter was affected by the purity movement.

Implications

One implication of this study is the fit of CTI as a means through which to analyze communication from and about the purity movement. While CTI had previously been used to examine many types and groups of people [e.g., culture (Brooks & Pitts, 2015; Hecht et al., 2002; Jung & Hecht, 2008; Maeda & Hecht, 2012; Urban & Orbe, 2010), family relationships (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignon, 2014; Kam & Hecht, 2009), romantic relationships (Kennedy-Lightsey, Martin, Labelle, & Weber, 2015; Merrill & Afifi, 2017) education (Brooks & Pitts, 2015; Haugh, 2008; Murray & Kennedy-Lightsey, 2013; Orbe, 2004; Scarduzio & Geist-Martin, 2008; Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008), mental health (Jung, 2013; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Jung & Hecht, 2008; Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth, 2007) race (Warren, Hecht, Jung, Kvasny, & Henderson, 2010), and sexuality (Faulkner & Hecht, 2011; Nuru, 2014; Scarduzio & Geist-Martin, 2008)] a gap in the literature revealed that religion, especially intermingled with sexuality, had not previously been studied through a CTI lens. As evidenced by the numerous ways that the findings of this study resonate with the tenets of CTI, this study provides an inroad to begin applying CTI further to this area of study, which leads to a second final implication of this study--its heuristic value.

The utility of CTI as a lens through which to view communication by those affected by purity culture may illuminate not only their identity gaps but areas in which such gaps may be mitigated. Previous studies showed that identity gaps could cause negative outcomes (Jung & Hecht, 2004; Jung et al., 2007), and Jung and Hecht (2004)

believed work with identity gaps could help with psychological issues. Submitters shared their own unique story, and Jung and Hecht (2004) noted that everyone experiences events differently, resulting in inevitable communication gaps and thus, identity gaps. Therefore, determining whether and through what frames such gaps were found in submitters' stories could lay the groundwork for future research in communication studies and related fields such as religion, education, and counseling. Future research is needed to determine whether the identification of identity gaps and their causes could lead to treatment or mitigation of the identity gaps found within consumers of purity culture messages.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the potential for exclusion of stories with valuable information. Exclusion criteria for stories included the following: the story listing the United States as the country, the submitter stated they read the book or did not explicitly state that they did not read the book, and gender. While these criteria were appropriate, exclusion of stories with valuable information about *IKDG* and identity was possible. While coding, the criterion was ambiguous for defining "gender." Several suggestions included choosing the gender opposite of their significant other due to the heteronormative culture, choosing the gender based on roles the submitter played (e.g., mother, uncle, etc.), or only recording the gender if the submitter specifically stated their gender (e.g., "as a young woman; I was the only boy in a family of six women"). There was a similar issue with determining if the submitter had read the book, though many stated that they had read the book or stated that they had not read the book but were still affected by purity culture (criteria would still exclude the latter story). A story could

exclude mention of not reading the book and still be included in the sample as a result. Even with this ambiguity for reading and gender, intercoder reliability was 94.55%, 92.73%, and 87.27% for the country, if the submitter read *IKDG*, and gender, respectively.

Reading the entire story while coding was necessary to collect accurate information. Some submitters may have begun by stating they would never read *IKDG*, then a few paragraphs later shared how their life changed, and they read the book. As a result, a close reading of the stories could allow for some confusion regarding the sample versus the sample population. Influence from the entire sample population while coding could affect results. However, I only looked at the chosen stories when analyzing, preparing the results, and writing the discussion, making sure to have quotations to back up any claims.

It is unclear how the stories displayed on Joshua Harris's website, which comprised the sample population, were chosen. The website did not state how or why the stories displayed on the website were selected, if any stories were not selected, and if Joshua Harris himself selected the stories. The coders and I noticed a few duplicate stories and one instance where it seemed a story might have been split between two separate posts, but this could not be verified. Additionally, the sample for this study came from a website that is not an SNS which may affect potential support if the submitters in the sample are looking for encouragement of some kind (Bond & Figueroa-Caballero, 2016).

Regarding verification, the United States could be the country label chosen by the submitter, but the submitter may not have been in the United States at the time of the

purity movement. Submitters also could have relocated and chosen a different country, when in fact they experienced purity culture in the United States. Some submitters did not select a country; therefore, some stories that may have met criteria did not.

The overall findings are not applicable to the general population. However, choosing stories based on stricter criteria can provide new research for the specific population studied. The data, while not generalizable, was likely richer than data that could apply to the general population, as the criteria would be less restrictive.

Content analysis itself has limitations. Content analysis does not address intent, which can be an important factor depending on study goals. Submitters' stories may not have contained all the experiences they had with *IKDG*. It is possible some people could have written about their personal experiences as more of an embellished story as this was a chance to be heard. It was also unclear whether *IKDG* was the only influence or just part of an overall influence from purity culture. Since questions were not asked specifically of the submitters, each person could have given a different amount and type of information than if they had been interviewed and asked follow-up questions if needed.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research regarding the mitigation of identity gaps would add to the understanding of CTI. The examined stories shared submitters' struggles of changing their lifestyles and beliefs while feeling uncertain about previous paradigms. Jung (2011) thought it might be possible to mitigate, through specific communication variables, painful identity gaps if people were able to anticipate or recognize severe changes in their lives.

Researchers collaborating instead of only completing separate studies could aid research in this area. As with almost any area in communication studies, studies can contradict one another. If the researchers who found conflicting results collaborated on a study to determine what, if anything, went wrong, this would not only add more accurate information to the discipline but greater validity as researchers coming together who previously published different results shows increased validity and authority.

Another recommendation for future research applying CTI to purity culture communication is to distribute a questionnaire with directed questions to people the purity movement affected. Jung and Hecht (2004) utilized a 61-item questionnaire to support their hypotheses regarding personal-relational and personal-enacted identity gaps. A 75-item questionnaire was also employed by Jung, Hecht, and Wadsworth (2007) to show that identity gaps had an association with depression in international students. Examining these surveys and modifying them for a purity culture sample could provide more insights.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to utilize directed qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis through the lens of CTI to examine identity-messages in stories submitted to author Joshua Harris about their experiences with his book “I Kissed Dating Goodbye.” CTI principles of identity gaps and the four frames of identity guided the analysis of submitters’ stories and the discovery of what messages those who read *IKDG* experienced. Of the 56 stories, 53 included language that indicated identity gaps. Of the 53 stories that included indications of identity gaps, 46 stories contained all four identity frames: personal, enacted, relational, and communal. The other seven stories included

three of the four frames: personal, enacted, and relational. Thematic analysis suggested common themes including conflict, blame, growth, and messages that affected readers' identities.

Further research may provide more comprehensive stories from readers affected by *IKDG* than the online story submissions from readers, along with greater understanding of individuals' identity messages as content analysis cannot generalize findings and can only provide implications for study participants and potentially their culture. The use of quantitative and qualitative interview methods may allow for the examination of intent and readers could be asked if other influences impacted them besides *IKDG*. More comprehensive methods than content analysis could suggest a greater understanding of why certain identity frames did or did not present, along with possible suggestions for why certain language indicated potential identity gaps. At this present time learning about ourselves through all the frames that contribute to identity may lead to personal growth and better communication with ourselves and others.

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Appendix A

What follows is the text from <https://joshharris.com/kissed-dating-goodbye/>. Joshua Harris lists his criteria to submit one's "story." Note that saying "yes" to sharing one's story is auto-checked. The link on this webpage to read responses written to Harris about *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* leads to a webpage with the words, "page not found."

"Revisiting *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*"

I'm just beginning the process of revisiting the message and impact of my book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. Over the years I've heard from people who have been helped by the book, but I've also heard a growing number of voices of people who have been hurt by it. I want to understand this better. I'm starting by listening. If you'd like to use this space to share your story and experience with my book—good, bad or a mix of both—I'd be honored to hear your story. You can use the form below to leave a post.

You don't need to share your name or any information on your post, but if you choose to leave at least your email address it will allow me to follow-up if needed and also keep you updated on this journey. The only required field below is your story.

- Share Your Story*

Please keep your story to under 750 words and please refrain from using the names of people and/or organizations in your story. If you do, I will have to edit and remove those names before posting on the 'Stories' page.

- Do I have permission to share your story (without listing your name) on my website?*

- Yes

- No

- Name

First Last

- Email

- What Year Did You Read IKDG?

Country Where You Live”

Appendix B

Documentary

For the past year, I've been inviting feedback on my book "I Kissed Dating Goodbye." The following letters are stories from people who have read the book and given me permission to share them here.

I'm grateful for the men and women who took the time to write me. Their honesty—both in the form of critique and encouragement—has helped me as I've wrestled with what is helpful and unhelpful about my book. To share the journey of my own reexamination of my book and its impact I'm partnering with a fellow student at Regent College to create a documentary entitled "I Survived I Kissed Dating Goodbye."

This crowd-funded film will be released in 2018 and will be available online for free. To learn more visit the film's website.

I share more about why I'm making this film in this article and on this podcast.

- This book has been used in my life to give me an entirely new outlook. I'm a much different reader than the typical audience you expected. I'm 35 years old, and a divorced mother of a 9 year old son. After finding out my husband was having an affair we divorced. God has worked in mighty, mighty ways throughout this whole process. Too much to fit into a 750 words or less post. But in a nutshell, God is faithful and good. But I noticed as a newly single woman, that it's "expected" to jump into the dating pool. That sex is even more of a "no big deal" because clearly I'm not a virgin. Also that most men view divorced women as being super desperate to find a man. I've been divorced for a couple years now. I haven't dated anyone. I've been on two group dates that were super awkward and just like you said in the book, because we kissed it made it even more awkward. It just felt yucky--uncomfortable and "not right" to be in the dating scene. I want to save myself for who God has for me. I want to be able to tell him that I purposefully choose to remain pure during this time while waiting for him. And using this time to develop a deeper, more intimate relationship with Jesus. As I was helping my parents clean out their house (they are downsizing to a condo in the same town), I found your book amongst piles and piles of other books. It's been a total blessing to read it. God has spoken so much truth through you, and has confirmed to me that staying out of the dating scene isn't lame or weird. Your book has been used to give me confidence. Crazy

that a dating book published in 1997 is still being used by God in my 2017 life. Thank you for writing this book.

- **USA**

Appendix C

The following stories provided the content for this study. The chapters above will reference the supplied author's name and story number for easier reading. The Microsoft Word document page numbers are included in brackets below if desired. The text remains unchanged from the submitters' original story, including spacing and possible errors. The only exception is some stories which used two spaces after a period, were changed to one space after the period.

13. Jessica

This book became my junior high romantic fantasy. I abstained from dating and judged other Christians who participated. I was so focused on the rules that I allowed myself to be groped by a boy whom I "wasn't dating," but would never EVER let him kiss me. I thought I was doing okay. It was legalism at it's finest. By the time I met and starting dating my first real boyfriend, I was in a much more balanced place and wanted to participate in a casual Christian dating experience. Turns out, he was raised on your book, so he wanted to court. The problem was, we were in our 20's, living away from family, so we ended up "mainstream" dating and feeling guilty every minute. We ended up living the ideal Christian courtship by many standards (we've only dated each other, we didn't kiss until our wedding day), but neither of us ever really felt like it served us well. Once we were married, all the rules beforehand just seemed to be silly. We don't necessarily regret doing things the way we did, but we've both recognized that the rules were extra Biblical at the least. I still have lingering guilt around all things dating and I can clearly trace these feelings back to reading IKDG. Honestly, your book changed my life for better or worse... I just can't figure out which one it was. USA

30. Byron

While I know you wrote the book with good intentions, it was used exclusively and as a rulebook in my (homeschooled) family growing up. All I was taught was how bad dating was and what not to do to avoid giving up a piece of myself. As a result at 21 I've never had a committed relationship and only been out with a girl 3 times ever (3 different girls). All the lessons guys and girls learn about dating and relationships when they're teens are mysteries to me and it's only getting tougher as girls expect me to [26] know all these things that I was kept away from. Josh I know you meant well but seriously, f*** that book. □ USA [27]

44. Ashleigh

I used to say your book ruined my life. It got passed around my church, when I was 15, and everyone began taking it super seriously. I rolled my eyes. I knew I didn't need a purity ring to stay pure and I was positive I'd be kissed that year. I was also the oldest of about six or seven of us at our small non-denominational spirit-filled church. One of the girls, a couple years younger than me, decided to declare she was going to wait until marriage to the world. She had a whole ceremony styled after a Bat Mitzvah. The other parents all decided this was a good idea and about five or six kids in our church were then basically forced into getting purity rings and having this ceremony. My mom let my sister and I choose. We decided it was weird, cultish, and we were going to have no part.

Fast forward to my senior year of college. I was still a virgin, never been kissed. Well, some of these kids were about to turn 18. Our pastor's daughter was forced to have a Bat Mitzvah, decided she'd had enough, and ran off to live with a guy she barely knew. At the same time our worship leader, who had five kids, two of whom had done a Bar/Bat Mitzvah purity ring service, had an affair. Her kids went crazy after that. Her fifteen year old daughter began having sex with basically any guy who would have her. I was distraught and disturbed. I still considered these girls like younger sisters, and I wanted the best for them. They told me things they couldn't tell their parents. They wanted nothing to do with the church or its rules. I was constantly in anguish concerned my friends were throwing their lives away and would end up in hell. I spent hours not sleeping, not eating, and praying for them. My pastor's daughter came home a couple months later pregnant. After I graduated college I went back home because I felt like these teenagers needed me. I did a lot of counseling and sharing. I was still single and none of those teens wanted to be in their 20s and never been kissed. I had to tell them stories I knew of people who God had placed together that were now married. God totally redeemed my pastor's daughter's story and she is now married, her daughter is eleven. The worship leader's kids...not so much. I don't know if any of them follow the Lord, and we've all drifted apart. Not gonna lie I did blame most of what happened on your book for a while. However, I began to realize that it's just your story. What worked for you doesn't work for everyone. None of the parents knew that. I believe everyone needs to be led by the Holy Spirit in their relationships. There's no formula. Ever.

Because I prayed and God always said "no" to relationships I was 30 years old and still single as a pringle. It completely sucked at times, but I ran a successful ministry. I was convinced I was going to meet someone, God would show me he was my spouse, we'd fall in love and get married. God would reward me for waiting.

Finally, I met a guy who liked me, and when I prayed for the first time in my life I felt God saying it was ok to date him. This guy had no clue I'd never been kissed and one of the first times we hung out he kissed me. It was never discussed or anything and to this day he has no idea I had never been kissed. We broke up after about six months. I had to work through a bit of the "Why after all those years did you finally say yes, only to have it end?" I've realized yet again, there's no formula. You trust God with relationships and sometimes you need them to end in heartbreak. Other times they end in marriage, but

God is growing you through it all. He's constantly teaching us. I'm 33 now. I'm still waiting until marriage to have sex. It's still frustrating and sometimes embarrassing. I hate when people tell me they wouldn't want to be me, or they don't know how I've been able to live overseas alone like I have. But I still believe that one day God will bring the right person into my life. ☐ United States ☐

57. Chris

Hey Josh,

First, thanks for your bravery in wanting honest feedback...an extremely rare quality in people and honestly disarming. I read your book when I was in high school. I was very involved in my church in Miami where the rest of my friends were partying. I did not grow up in a Christian household so I took my cues from the church which was IKDG driven. At the time it seemed to save me a lot of heartache. I saw my friends have a lot of difficult relationships so this just comforted me in opting out. What I did not realize was that this was an important time in my life and instead of taking responsibility for my actions and actually living, your book made me isolate myself and create an unreachable standard. I never started a relationship in college for a similar reason. I was still in this mindset of "don't date anyone you won't marry." No denying in certain situations this is wise (hey..don't date an abuser, because you should NOT marry an abuser..you did good on that one Josh)...However, people who read this book and the message I got from this book was also don't kiss anyone, don't flirt, don't dive into the mess of relationships.

I thought I was better than everyone else, turns out I was just to scared and I used your book as comfort to stay lonely. I did not kiss a girl until I was 20 and drunk in seminary (...yes, a good deal of irony). The phase had to happen...Started doing drugs and drinking in seminary...made mistakes.....lost my virginity at 21. But look, I don't regret these things....yeah it's shitty and not the picture perfect outline of a life but reading these stories the picture perfect seems just as shitty! I learned to concentrate my efforts [49] on taking responsibility for my actions, honoring myself in my choices of a partner, communication skills, self-love and compassion...these are real tools for a good relationship. I ended up walking away from faith because of how damaging Christianity has been for me. It's not your fault Josh..I let myself be controlled by evangelical Christian culture and it really really hurt me. For the first time in my life I feel capable of truly loving people and loving myself. So that is my story. Blessings on your journey Josh and thanks for your willingness to listen. ☐ USA [50]

68. Matthew

Your book was an amazing blessing from the Lord! God used your book to bring healing to me after many broken dating relationships. One of many take-aways for me was a shift in attitude toward treating others with love and respect--seeing women as sisters in the Lord, and treating them accordingly--even as cultural norms and the loneliness of singlehood made it tempting to do otherwise. The self-restraint exercised before marriage actually liberated us (me and the woman I'd eventually marry) to get to know each other on a deeper level, because we weren't focused on what we could GET from each other physically and emotionally. I believe this is a primary reason we have such a wonderful marriage after 16 years. To me it's a book about how to love others unselfishly. What better way to move people closer to the Lord and prepare them for marriage! We feel we're still reaping the rewards today of the foundation which began with God and your book. Thank you for writing it! I am forever grateful! ☐ United States

76. Jodi

I was first introduced to the concept of IKDG at the age of 13. My mom had a cassette tape that we listened to together and then discussed the principles. It was never explicitly stated, but strongly implied, that my parents expected me to follow the presented ideology. I wasn't on board at first, internally throwing a hissy fit to be honest, but then I read the book and the idea grew on me. Focusing on God, not allowing myself to be distracted by relationships until I was realistically old enough to pursue an intentional relationship.... It sounded great. I read and re-read the book taking the message to heart. It actually helped fuel my relationship with God to a new level. I was able to put trust in him in a way that had never crossed my mind before. I trusted him with my future. I began praying for my future spouse, reading the book (along with other [71] purity/intentional relationship oriented books by various authors) when I needed an encouragement boost. It was liberating actually. My friends from a similar culture were also on board, again strongly encouraged by their parents and church leaders, and it was the expected thing to do. Eventually I noticed that even guy/girl friendships were becoming questionable and I felt, and dished out, a lot of legalistic scrutiny. Something was wrong and I knew it, but what could you do? I didn't want to disappoint my parents or God, I knew it didn't have to be as legalistic everyone was making the idea of not dating/courtship to be.... But it was just the thing to do.... And I didn't want a messed up future.

I was then married at 21. I was a virgin and my husband was as well. We didn't kiss until the wedding day. From the wedding night things were wrong. I felt incredibly betrayed by the purity culture, IKDG and even God. I did things "right" and marriage was a mess from the day the vows were exchanged. I had waited, my spouse had "waited" (it turned out he was a closet porn addict and the effects from his addiction were not known until the first time we tried to have sex), but here I was newly married, confused and miserable. I needed to blame something....I was hurting. I felt I had been lied to by everyone who wrote or spoke about God honoring relationship principles. It was definitely a case of misplaced blame. Life was a mess because of sin that my husband withheld from me. As time went on my bitterness towards purity culture grew. Inwardly I was angry. My marriage wasn't getting better. I felt like God was distant and that somehow I was His personal joke. I had tried so hard to be pleasing to Him in my dating/courting relationship prior to marriage... I didn't understand how this could happen to me. We separated 6 years after being married. I continued to feel bitter and hurt. That was two years ago. Between then and now I've had time to reflect, to heal and to figure out that your book was not to blame, your ideas were not to blame. I know for whatever reason God needed me to go through that trial to mold me into the person I am today. Mistakes were made by people, myself included, who took your book and equated it on the level of scripture or as a magical guaranteed-to-work formula. You're not to blame. I cannot say that enough. I have shared ideas from your book with my husband and we want to raise our children to have convictions in the way they pursue [72] relationships and understanding that sometimes no matter what you do life can just be difficult.

I have to say that I truly am thankful for your book. I've grown in many ways, during various seasons in life, because of it. You started a necessary conversation. People just need to understand that it's NOT a guarantee of anything. Marriage might still be hard

and it might seem your efforts to be pleasing to God don't matter (even to your spouse), but something my husband has told me is that God notices. That's the important thing. □
United States [73]

87. Jennifer

I read your book many times when I was a teenager. I loved your book. It gave me some direction in a time when all my friends talked about where boys and hook ups. I met my husband when I was 17. We used your book as a guide to court with purpose. Both our families were involved... and I feel like for the most part, we had a healthy dating/courting relationship. I married him when I was 21 and we have been married for 9 years with 3 children. He is the only person I ever dated and we are happily married. I do not have any regrets about not dating other people. The only downside of courting for me was my parents expected us not to kiss until we were married. This should be a personal decision and put unrealistic pressure on our relationship. When we were engaged... I felt like we had to hide our love for each other from our families, instead of celebrate it. That's the only thing I wish we did differently. God bless you. I am so grateful to have had this book during those years. USA

98. Sarah

I read your book around age 19 and thought it held some good ideas. Did it prevent me from having sex before marriage? No but that's not your fault it's mine.

I alone sinned and bear the regrets. Now as a 37 yr old homeschooling mom of three I can say that I still prefer the courtship model but guided by our family and not a once size fits all methodology. The truth is your book was successful because the church, parents and pastors weren't saying anything. This left a vacuum and a 21 yr old stepped [91] up and filled the hole. This should be more of an indictment of the church than you. I think sex is awesome and I love having it with my husband and I want my kids to have the same ideas but when we make a God created act dirty and hush hush it only leads to trouble. We in the church need to be frank about sex, forgiveness and the gospel not shove a book in a teen's hands and expect that to do the trick. □ U.S.A. [92]

104. Stephanie

The summer after I graduated from college, I borrowed IKDG from a friend. After that, I read similar books, attended several conferences and retreats that promoted "waiting faithfully," and dove head first into saving my first kiss for my future spouse, among other ultra-conservative beliefs. Well, I'm 36 and still "waiting," technically, although I don't buy this message anymore. Thinking back, I wonder if my stance on this topic (which I now see as "extra biblical") scared off any potential suitors - good, Christian men - who may have wanted to date me more casually, not pray about whether or not we should enter a courtship. The truth of the matter? I think what went wrong was that authors, speakers, and other influential voices at the time made their own stories prescriptive, instead of descriptive. I love that you "kissed dating goodbye" and soon afterwards met your lovely wife, Joshua. But just because it's your story, doesn't mean it's how all single, young adult Christians will meet, date, and marry their spouses. The Bible gives very few instructions about romantic relationships - only three - the two people need to be single and free to marry, of the opposite sex, and equally yoked. Period. Aside from that, we're free to choose! I'm so grateful that I "woke up" and started opening myself up more. I just wonder if I'm too late to the dating game. The book isn't bad, per se. It just ended up being bad for me, as I took it far too seriously. ☐ USA ☐

114. Brittany

So, I've never told anyone any of this so here goes... I was molested by another classmate in elementary school and when I read IKDG, I realized one thing that has stayed with me my whole entire dating life. I am damaged goods. There is no going back and I have to take what I can get when it comes to dating and relationships. I will hook with guys for years, but neither one of us will commit. Sure, most of the time I would like to take the relationship more serious, but it's easier to keep it simple. Anyway, so I remember the youth group session when we talked about this book. A guest pastor had come in from out of town to speak with us and we were so excited. He said he had a box of chocolates to share with us, but we had to listen to his story first. I can't remember the story, it was something about dating and relationships, anyway while he telling the story he was holding the box of chocolates. He was testing out a piece of chocolate by either licking it or biting into it and while he was chewing he was basically spitting all over the box. It was disgusting and he when he was finished not a single piece of chocolate was edible. He asked us if anyone wanted any and of course we all said no! Then he said the moral of the story is that if you have given yourself away to another man or woman you are the chocolates in this box. Chewed, licking, and spit on and no one wants to marry someone who has been used up. So, I walked away from that meeting not only believing what he said, but also thinking that well that's it for me. So, I decided, in my juvenile mind, to just give men what they wanted. I knew they didn't me, the real me, they just wanted the sex. I "dated" guys who 10, 20, or 30 years older, married and etc. It didn't really matter to me. Meanwhile, finishing high school and college and now I am very successful in my career field. Now, I've been celibate for several years and I'm not interesting in getting into a serious relationship or getting married. The thought of a man coming near me in that way disgusts me. Besides, I have a lot of baggage and I would hate to put that on someone. Also, I've never realized I've never had a real relationship, so idk how to act or what to say or what you are supposed [107] to do. I never know when a guy interested in me and if he is, I think there must be something mentally wrong with him. Yes, I get lonely... well I'm lonely most of the time. The majority of my friends are married with children or just as career driven as me, so I spend most of time alone. But, I kind of like my life the way it is... simple. I own a home, I have a brand new car and I have a job doing what I love. A girl like me isn't supposed to want more and really can't. Thanks for letting me share!! United States [108]

123. Joshua

I read your book, as well as the sequel, my first year of college. I was a new believer and benefitted greatly from the staunch conservative perspective of dating, or lack there of, from your wife and you. The stories are wonderful, not to mention, your are talented artist. I am happily married with a son, some 7-8 years later. I never fully embraced courtship to the utmost during my wife and I's pre-marriage tenure, but I was convinced from your book as well as a variety of other sources that true relationships are far more serious than many of my Christian acquaintances were making them out to be. As "A New Attitude Toward Romance and Relationships" I think your book accomplishes, in an honorable way, what it sets out to accomplish. I do not think your book or the message of your book is in any way dangerous. The only critique of the book I will mention on this forum is that it is sub-biblical. This is characteristic of almost every 'practical christianity' text that one finds on the Barnes 'n Noble shelves, and which is why I pretty much avoid the genre all together. When I use the term "subbiblical" I am not implying that it does not reference Scripture enough, far too often in my opinion for a book of this nature. My personal opinion is that it fails to truly & critically engage the text of the Bible and what the biblical authors have to say about this sensitive subject. A critical examination, the Song of Songs as one example, reveals a very different message proposed by the authors of the biblical narrative regarding "romance and relationships" than the message you propose your book, which is fine. The opinion proposed by the author of 'Song of Songs' is just one opinion amidst many and certainly does not apply fully to everyone's experience regarding this magnanimous subject. You obviously feel like you have to quote Scripture because your primary audience is the Christian demographic and after-all, your a pastor, but your handling of Scripture in this book appears far more proof-textual than honest-to-goodness hermeneutical exegesis. This problem is genre-wide. Scripture, or better yet 'biblicism' has become a marketing tool or box on the Christian publication check-list that megapastors must check to warrant their extra-biblical ideas. What I am saying: if you remove all the Scripture references in your book the real truisms of your message do not in any way lose their validity, and your book, in my opinion, would not try to manipulate the Christian market, not to mention manipulating the biblical text by appealing to an apparent biblical reality, i.e., courtship (WHICH IS A GOOD IDEA IN THIS DAY AND AGE FOR SOME) that is not inherently biblical. □ USA

138. Megan

138. I'm a recent homeschool debate alumna, but I'm also not emotionally ready to reread IKDG, so this is more a cry of pain than a logical rebuttal. This book has been the single biggest influence prompting me to adopt mindsets that crippled my ability to relate with anyone—especially guys my own age but also people like my sister, female friends, and mentor figures. Basically, your book made me afraid to trust anyone. You talked so much about how devastating it was to lose someone with whom you'd been close—how it was God's plan to save physical, emotional, and spiritual intimacy [with the opposite sex] for the unbreakable commitment of marriage, to guard your heart. You preached purity and mentor input and kindness with handling someone else's heart, of course—but really you were preaching fear. And that fear of being hurt or abandoned in a relationship is deeper than just a romantic [127] breakup. That fear guided every single relationship I made (or didn't make, because I was afraid). From that impressionable period of 11-12 on, I always looked for that guarantee of “I will never abandon you”—and of course, I have now realized that there is no such guarantee. I've come to accept that having any relationship with other people means accepting the risk of broken trust. But for a long time, I've been really well described by that CS Lewis quote about closing off your heart so it won't be broken, and it becomes unbreakable, a cold and airless tomb. I attribute much of that to my adoption of IKDG's attitude of fear toward relationships. I used to guard my heart so well, to avoid being hurt by being intimate. I didn't befriend boys, because that was taking a risk with my heart. I didn't open up to the female friends and mentors, because that was taking a risk with my heart. And I was incredibly judgmental toward my younger sister, who for years has been struggling with our parents' and her boyfriend's parents' beliefs on dating being horrible (which they definitely got from IKDG). When I told my parents during a family dinner that I didn't believe in courtship anymore, my sister leaned over and said, “I'm so glad you're finally on my side.” That was the beginning of our friendship, despite living in the same house for our whole lives. I remember you talking about “the bars of a woman's soul” in the context of men needing to be careful in approaching women, lest they cause harm. I feel like I am just now prying my way out of those bars. My New Year's resolution for the last two years has been to stop guarding my heart. I've gone to therapy to learn how to befriend young men my age, and I reached a point a few months ago where I no longer hesitated to sit next to my male classmates or strike up a conversation with them. I think my biggest point of growth has been viewing my heart not as a fragile piece of glass to be broken (or made unbreakable), but rather as a clump of mud on a riverbank. Sometimes it gets flooded and thrown into chaos, but it always settles again (albeit maybe somewhere else). That mental image gives me more emotional resilience than the imagery I grew up with—I'm not like glass, where one crack ruins me; or like paper or wood, where ripping or sawing me apart irrevocably destroys me; or like chocolate cake that's been bitten, where I could never again be whole and perfect. I don't have to be afraid of making mistakes, because a) I'm not perfectly whole anyway so b) there is [128] grace and wisdom that abounds in failure. It is okay to be flooded and settle again. I can embrace that. I can let my guard down, I can take risks, I can prioritize intimacy over anxiety. One last point: I think the emphasis in IKDG on “spend time in groups, not just off alone” stigmatized alone time with the opposite sex. I find this to be very dangerous, because you need to see someone both in group settings and one-on-one to find out how they really treat you. Although this never

happened to me, I know secondhand that abusers often treat their victims horribly while alone and become charming and lovely in groups. I hope you address abuse and the value of one-on-one time. □ United States [129]

144. Melissa

As an early teenager, your book was recommended to me by church and school leaders. I became convinced that romantic relationships were pointless unless they were intended to lead to marriage. Overall, I would say my experience with IKDG itself has been positive. I have only had two romantic relationships in my life. One with a young man who viewed relationships less seriously than I did (this relationship ended on good terms, although not without sadness). Second was with my husband who did not grow up in a Christian home. Your book was very helpful to him in re-aligning his understanding of romance and relationships. He is a godly husband and a ruling elder in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. When I was around 14-20 years old, some adults in my circles used your book as a jumping off point to impose a climate of fear and confusion about relationships and sexuality. While I sincerely agreed with many principles you taught, I found myself frustrated with the way my church in particular applied those principles to young people in the church. As a 31 year old woman who has been married for 7 years, I look back on that time with hopefully a bit of perspective. I have heard that many people blame you for the actions of pastors and leaders who used your book as a weapon against young people. I wonder what possessed men who had years of experience in ministering the Word to cling to the words of a very young man who happened to make some valid points about what he was seeing around him. Every author is of course culpable for the words he writes, but not for people taking those words out of context or using those words outside of the intended purpose. I haven't read your book in years, but I never had the impression that your intention was to promote a philosophy of romantic relationships to be taken as equal with Scripture. Like any Christian book I have read, I appreciated the parts that seemed Biblical and rejected the parts that seemed extreme or not matching reality. If I could do that as a 16 year old girl, why couldn't 40/50/60 year old pastors be expected to approach your book in the same way? I so appreciate your humility in re-visiting this topic. I just want to encourage you not to take responsibility for the sins of others. I am sure that IKDG contains errors, so please do address those with a repentant heart. But please do not give those older men an opportunity to escape their huge culpability by taking the blame they deserve. □ United States

155. Amber

Dear Josh,

I didn't read your book until I was in my early twenties. Born in 1980, I'm a gal who grew up homeschooled, being told I was going to do courtship and not dating, and hanging out with friends whose families subscribed to some even more conservative standards. So... your book was actually less conservative than my culture and I thought, oh, I don't need that. When I did read it (more out of curiosity and hey, what's another homeschool grad doing?), I liked it and thought it did a good job getting young people to think. I thought it was silly that so many took it so extreme.

I can look back now and say my generation was/is still ripe for romantic disaster of all kinds. Even non Christian women who never heard of courting had a hard time in the dating world - reaping the effects of radical feminism and a Christ rejecting society. I really believe your book brought much more good than bad, and I admire your openness to talk about it with folks. Remember God's standards are really what is under attack, and remember that when people suffer they want to blame everyone but themselves. I could blame the conservative courtship movement (that predates your book, as I'm sure you know) for being single still today and seldom getting the interest of good men, but what's really to blame is my broken culture where people are deeply struggling to even find good friendships, much less a great spouse, people viewing romance as a right they deserve, that my parents were starting from scratch morally and [148] spiritually (they did an amazing job, considering!), and mostly that I didn't/don't have a close relationship with my dad. I think my generation's lack of good fathers and lack of parents who have good, healthy marriages is the main reason why many fell for extreme measures and other troubles in their dating ideas.

You have great potential to show the world what sincere Christ following looks like. Humility and more wisdom and holding up one's past ideas to Bible truth is good and right! I applaud this! But don't take all these comments too seriously. The world hates Christ, the world will hate you. Thank you for standing up the gospel of Jesus Christ and God's truth throughout your adult life and being one of the public faces people attack out of hatred for Christ. America [149]

164. Danielle

Dear Mr. Harris, I discovered your book at age 25 (I am 29.) I just exited a series of damaging, and abusive relationships. I was abused so terribly by my first (Christian boyfriend) that I was sent to a battered women's shelter, and he is now in jail for a very long time (Attempted murder on me). I was young, innocent, and just did not know. I WISH I had your book when I was 20, I think making these structured, mature decisions that you provided would have saved me a lot of pain. (Sex hooks women emotionally to the man through the bonding chemical oxytocin...and since it hooked me to my abuser...it WAS my almost death sentence. I just could not get out.) I was such a serial and emotional serial dater, and suffered for it. At 25, using your book, I kissed dating Goodbye, and I asked the Lord what He wanted me to do. I followed your suggestions. I became stronger. I am a huge advocate of the chastity movement, mainly for women because it underscores the dignity of the woman that I never knew existed. Yes, IKDG is hard. But, we are anointed for hard, and challenge. There is so much music and literature that is derogatory to women and men that we need to focus on removing from the world. NOT your book. P.S. I am taking a police test in the fall (Yes I found my vocation in the meantime thanks to your book!) and when I am ready, I will say hello to Courtship, and pass this book to EVERY single woman to prevent physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Because of your book, I am truly living. Please DO NOT give up on the impact of this amazing book. I think it may have saved my life. United States

173. James

The biggest thing about IKDG is that it really pointed readers (including myself) towards what we could do (not dating, living a holy/pure life, etc.), and not towards Jesus. We are not to be/act holy. Jesus is our righteousness (Romans 3:22). "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."--Ephesians 2:8-9 NASB Your book sounded great, and I read it during the "True Love Waits" and "Virginity is Holy" movement. What I quickly realized is that your book didn't apply to me; It wasn't your fault, but it was written from the perspective of the high schooler who met and married his true love in his early 20s. I was as old as you were and there was no end in sight. IKDG made it seem like "if you do this, God will lead you to your mate." Things don't work that way. There was no practical knowledge/help as to how to *do* that. It was almost as if courtship was the end unto itself...but there wasn't much in the book as to how to *find* the woman to court. I was trying to do things in my own power and failing. All the books I'd read promised that if I lived a "holy" life, things would automatically fall into place. After waiting for the "pure" woman who wasn't trying to date—and failing to find one--I eventually became disenfranchised with not only your book, but the Christian faith as well. Women I ran into either didn't have the high standards, or they had children and/or were divorced, which was not the "ideal." I passed on a couple of women who might have been good [170] matches for me had my standards not been so "high," and after seeing no hope in the near future, eventually gave up completely and lived in the flesh—a decision that I'm just now trying to work through—with God's help--at age 40.

Again, the book was focused on how to be a holy person. On how to "do" the right things. But what I realize now is the book did more harm than good for two reasons:

First, IKDG has no guidance for real, actual life. What do you do if the person you're interested in is divorced or has kids? What do you do if you're in your 30s and there is no end in sight? Again, I dumped your book when I realized that I was older than you were when you got married. There was nothing else it could show me. I remember thinking "Not dating? Easy for him to say...he found his true love in his early 20s! He didn't have to deal with half the crap—or temptation-- I'm dealing with now!"

Second, being the "best person" you can be is not the point of being a Christian. The point is being a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1) and renewing your mind so that you can know God's will (Romans 12:2). It's not about "not dating" and being holy. It's about knowing that we have the same power that raised Jesus from the dead (Ephesians 1:18-21) and knowing that we *already* have God's blessing, we don't need to do anything to "get" it. (Ephesians 1:3).

Being a Christian means taking God's word and planting it on the inside of you, so that God's word can grow and bear fruit. (Luke 8:15, Mark 4:20). God's word is what will teach us, renew our minds, and bear fruit. The rest will come. It's not about a formula—Steps 1 through 10 on how to be holy—Jesus himself is our righteousness and should be our focus. (Romans 3:22) Once we are firmly rooted in God's word, we'll be led by Him

and will find the person we're supposed to find. Or at least we'll be occupied with doing His will and won't notice that we're not dating like the world is.

I will be teaching my daughter is that it isn't about what she needs to remove from her life (or not do), it will be about focusing so much on Jesus and what He's done for her [171] that it won't matter what *she* does....God will give her power, purpose, and desire (Psalm 37:4), and He will lead her where she needs to go. God's word will grow and bear fruit in her. USA [172]

182. Kimberly

I read IKDG when I was in high school. I loved it (& still do). I dated a boy in my youth group when I was in high school. We ended up breaking up. But we didn't kiss we had strict boundaries. That is something I am so thankful for. I think it is absolutely ridiculous for people to blame you. Although it is easier to blame someone than to really figure out root issues. I believe with everything we read or hear we need to go back to the Bible what does it say? I will have talked to kids about dating and boundaries and when my 5&7 year olds get older my husband and I will be talking to them about it too. Guarding your heart is so important guarding others hearts are too. USA

189. Christina

I was positively impacted by this book, along with others that came out around this time. My husband and I met at our high school graduation in 1996 and married August [184] 2000. My husband and I are each others "firsts" for everything. We were sexually pure before marriage, only held hands and kissed after being engaged. We courted. Our first date alone was the evening he took me out and proposed to me. I have NO regrets. Our intimate life is exciting and continues to get better. We had no problem being intimate together or feelings of guilt and remorse. We are very open about our desires to and for each other and have a great balance between pleasing the other and being pleased by the other. I still have this book (along with the others) and intend for my kids (we have 3-12, 11, and 9 year olds) to read this and let it be a guide as our story will hopefully encourage, inspire, and guide them also. United States [185]

202. Samantha

I was an “IKDG” rockstar: a virgin who had only ever kissed the virgin I married after an intentional, marriage-focused relationship. But sex was a nightmare.

For the first five years of my marriage I experienced excruciating pain during sex until I was diagnosed and treated for dyspareunia. Dyspareunia is a disorder where muscle tissue has developed a pain response to sexual contact, either from physical or psychological triggers. In my case, sex was heartbreakingly terrible. I tried to fight through the pain, but every attempt only dissolved into tears and disappointment. Doctors couldn't find anything physically wrong with me and I have no history of abuse. Finally, a physical therapist asked me about my non-physical history with sex.

I was homeschooled and I owned a shelf full of purity culture literature that I had devoured with adamant devotion. The transactional equation between purity and a good marriage could not have been more clear to me, and with equal clarity I knew my body was a problem for pure men. The first boy I liked as a teenager also had strong purity convictions, but the attraction was electric. These feelings drove us to want to be around each other but although we had never acted on, or even directly spoken of them, there wasn't an appropriate category for our feelings in the Land of Purity Culture, except 'bad.' Once his parents caught wind of it, they had both of us read “I Kissed Dating Goodbye” and his mother became a kind of human-shield, complete with negative, critical remarks about me. She saw me as the albatross in her son's purity quest. Very quickly the friendship between our families disintegrated and I never saw him again. This experience and the book I read in the midst of it had one message to me: “Feelings-before-marriage are not only bad, they are an explosive bomb that will break your heart.”

In college I had no trouble keeping very strict purity boundaries, but I found myself doing absurd things like asking men to wear shirts while swimming and telling men who wanted to go on a coffee date that they would have to ask my father first. After he had gained permission from my father to spend time with me, I issued my first boyfriend a set of charts and rules; where we could touch each other and what days we could see one another. I was weird and controlling, and the relationship lasted one month. During the years that I finally met and married my husband I underwent a major theology upgrade through my more Jesus-focused church, but I was still expecting a big gold star on my wedding night. I got dyspareunia instead.

It is medically accepted that sexual disorders like dyspareunia can be caused by "strict upbringings" with negative attitudes towards sex. I believe that my dyspareunia stemmed from absorbing reoccurring themes in “I Kissed Dating Goodbye” and other purity culture literature such as: 1) physical feelings will make you disobey God, so suppress them, 2) a woman's body is the cause of most sexual sin 3) escalating the rules makes you increasingly more pure, 4) the ideal standard of purity is a child-like ignorance about sex 5) your value is intrinsically linked to how far you have gone sexually and finally, 6) your purity comes from obedience instead of from the indwelling presence of Jesus. Perhaps the most damaging aspect of these concepts was the way my homeschooling community interpreted and reinforced these messages.

All those years of harboring a negative attitude towards sex don't just disappear during the wedding ceremony, and for me it took a lot of time to work through all the physical manifestations of those issues. Through all this I have learned that while the younger brother in the story of the Prodigal Son suffers from his choices, the older brother is afflicted with equal frustration and separation from his father's heart because he believes that his actions have earned him preferred outcomes over his brother. Legalism is just as toxic as license because once we think we can earn our righteousness before God, the gospel becomes very unimportant. Knowing that I am a sinner deeply dependent on Jesus has made me more peaceful, empathetic and full of grace for others and myself. United States

214. Emily

For a long time I hated you. Blamed you for the horrible Christian guys in my life that used your book as an excuse for lack of committing to relationship. Courtship was the new word for dating. It made things worse though. Emotional rape. I loved this guy who led me into this fantasy land. Made me believe that God had given me this prince charming to marry. Nope. God "told him" to marry this other chick he was also courting. Cheating but not cheating because we lacked the label dating. My heart was broken and I blamed God. I believed God hated me for the longest time. I just wasn't good enough for God. There's a deep rooted belief that there isn't anyone for me. The problem was that guy worshiped your book. He could quote you better than the Bible. Your ideology became religion (imagine this underlined.) IKDG is an idol. That's the problem. That's the sin of it. At 35, wiser than I once was, I don't hate you anymore. You were a kid when you wrote that book. You meant well but lacked the experience and wisdom to do it right. The [212] consequences are great though and you can't undo it. God can somehow. Whatever you do now do it in the Word. Don't make your ideology theology. Stay rooted in the Word of God. Don't twist it to justify your words and actions. The consequences are eternal. You have a responsibility to God and his sheep. USA [213]

220. Andrew

Joshua,

Taking the teaching in your books seriously is among the worst decisions I've ever made.

All of the 1990's evangelical 'sexual purity' teaching, from "True Love Waits" to dcTalk's song "I Don't Want It" taught the same thing- but your book ratcheted up the stakes.

So, as a young man, I learned, not only does natural human sexuality=sin, but even engaging in normal social bonding behavior as a teenager while staying sexually 'pure' leaves me falling short of God's standard. You laid a heavier burden on the backs of your readers.

For years, I struggled to make any normal, age-appropriate decisions about what to do with my life, because the principles you (et. al.) taught led to a religiously-induced paralysis. It implied that exploration generally was wrong, demanding an artificial certainty and blind commitment before one could even learn much about another person.

I could never be certain enough that the decision I was considering was really God's will. Coupled with guilt-inducing teaching about sin nature from birth and the justice of damnation for the unrepentant, this made certain that nothing I chose would ever be good enough. The stakes of making right decision couldn't have been higher, and all of my natural inclinations were not to be trusted.

What you preached, along with these burdens imposed by the whole evangelical movement created a self-doubt, shame and self-loathing in me that I still can't shake, even though I've left theology, religion, and (largely) theism far behind.

Though I take responsibility for my misplaced trust, obviously I'm still angry about my experiences. But perhaps not even primarily with you- you were so young when you wrote the book. I'm more angry at your publisher. You hadn't had enough life experience to know anything about the claims you made. Your publisher legitimized your naive ideas and gave you a platform long before you'd had enough life experience to earn it.

Your book and the evangelical culture of the '90's it flowed from have been a millstone tied around my neck that nearly drowned me. I would have lived every day of the last 18 years differently if I could go back and erase their influence. Gresham, OR USA

227. Rebecca

I read IKDG and grew up in a very conservative fundamental-Baptist church that also taught similar principles of courtship and purity. I swallowed all of this hook, line, and sinker. When I was 16 I promised God my first kiss would be at the wedding alter. I had an idealized view in my mind of the kind of man I would allow myself to date/court. He would read his Bible every day, talk to my father about dating me, talk about God all the time, and be basically perfect. No such man asked to date me. In fact, I was never asked to be in a relationship during any of my teen years or most of college. At the time, I really struggled with feeling ugly and undesirable because no one expressed interest in me but now I realize I was unapproachable and nervous around men and all my fear and prudishness were enough to scare anyone away. [223] Thankfully, God did a lot of work in my life throughout college and I met my future husband when I was 26. At this age I had never even held hands with a boy. My husband, however, had lived a wild life for many years and was just getting back on track with God. We were coming from completely different ends of the spectrum and I thank God every day for the grace and humility with which my husband handled all my fear and baggage; it blows my mind that he stuck with me with all I put him through! We almost broke up at one point because I was so petrified of having any sexual desire towards him, I froze if he tried to sit close to me or put his arm around me. My baggage from my past and the way I was trained to view relationships through IKDG and other books out of the purity culture made me a terrified that one hug or warm glance would send me directly into sin. I also believed any attraction towards him was lust and a sin. It is only by God's grace that he stuck with me and patiently waited for me to work through so much. And yes, he waited till the alter for our first kiss because even though my views were changing, I felt like I couldn't break the vow I made to God so long ago! The purity culture I grew up in said that singles were too emotional to make sound decisions themselves when it came to relationships and that's why they needed their parents involved (I.e. Courtship model). The woman was especially viewed as emotionally vulnerable and needed her dad's authority in choosing a spouse, even if she was in her 20's or 30's. What resulted from this mindset is I never felt like I could trust myself. I had no confidence in my own ability to make any kind of decision when it came to choosing the right man. But what I realized later is that parents are just as emotionally blinded by their own fears and hang ups as the young people they are trying to "protect". It was promised to us that having our parent involved almost guaranteed God's will and a perfect relationship. But what I saw happening was parents micromanaging relationships to the point that the guy and girl never were able to develop their own decision making or communication skills as a couple. Sometimes they were never even allowed to be alone together. A dating relationship should be building a foundation for the many years of marriage to follow: the couple should be learning to work through conflict and make decisions together. When parents are involved - sorry, not just involved... In charge! - it totally strips the couple from growing together as independent adults. It also puts the father in charge of guiding the [224] relationship, not the young man. The dating man is not given the chance to grow into his role as a leader or a help-meet to his wife. Instead, his job is to just obey whatever her dad dictates. I saw this happen to my brother who tried to pursue a girl from a conservative family. The father of the girl basically dictated the entire relationship to my brother and stripped him of his freedom to lead and serve the girl he was interested in. My brother eventually gave

up on the relationship. These are some of my severe problems with the courtship culture that I experienced. However, the principles of having a dating relationship with direction towards marriage and abiding by God's commandments concerning sexual purity are all things I still support. Josh, my husband and I applaud your humility in listening and wanting feedback. Your upbringing was also influenced by this purity culture and glory be to God, He is at work in all of our lives, releasing us all from baggage and bringing us to living free in Christ! USA [225]

234. Erica

I read IKDG when I was about 15. I remember reading it and feeling very confused and powerless about my role as a woman. I started dating my first boyfriend when I was 17. I broke up with him after a couple of months (and after many arguments with my parents who were huge believers in the message found in your book and other purity books from the time). I felt intensely guilty for caring about this person, so I broke up with him because "we weren't heading for marriage". He insisted we were, so we got back together shortly after. I assumed, based off his words, that he was going to propose soon. He had more sense than that, but we both knew from the very get-go that we were going to get married. We got engaged 5 years later, but starting our relationship with a conversation about if we were going to get marriage prevented our relationship to progress slowly and naturally.

We broke up when I finally realized how controlling he was in our relationship. I felt intense guilt for leaving him since he was my first love and now if I dated anyone else, I would be guilty of being emotionally impure even though I hadn't had sex. I felt like I was cheating on my ex, since we had been emotionally committed to each other for years, even though we hadn't had the ceremony.

I started dating the man I want to marry about 2 years ago. I didn't tell my parents about him at first because I knew without a shadow of a doubt that they would pressure me about how he had better be someone I expected to marry if I was going to date him. There was no way I could know if I wanted to marry this new guy who I had only known for a few months. So I planned to not tell my parents about this person until I understood if our relationship was going to be something long term.

When they found out, they asked me if I was going to marry this person. When I said I didn't know and that I couldn't process that question - that I had no way of knowing yet - they insisted that it was nothing more than a sinful relationship that I needed to end. What was worse was that I was accused of tearing the family apart...because I was "casually dating" someone.

When my younger brother started dating, he did not experience the family interventions that I did.

Reading and being convicted by your book (and others like it) convinced me to give away my agency as a woman. I thought I was doing the right thing by allowing my parents and my partner to determine the nature of my relationship. I felt powerless in deciding who I should get to know. I now firmly believe it is unhealthy for someone to start a relationship with the expectation of marriage. It didn't allow me to get to know my ex-fiance before deciding I was going to marry him.

In spite of the heartbreaking arguments I had with my parents, I stood my ground and dated my current boyfriend for over a year before ever seriously considering if I would want to marry him. I believe our relationship is strong because we got to know each other

- through dating. Unfortunately, because I disagree so strongly with my parents on this issue, we have a very strained relationship.

I don't blame you or your book directly for any of my past experiences and I agree with you on many general issues regarding purity. But I do think that taking your books to heart as absolute truth, the way my parents had, has led to a huge rift in my relationship with them. Looking at IKDG through the lens of my own experience, I believe the gravity of how you date was written to sound much more extreme than what is reality.
USA

240. Whitney

Joshua, The book and the concepts behind it were deeply damaging to me in my formative years, and the damage followed me into adulthood. As a teenager, I was already a survivor of childhood sexual abuse--and experience steeped in shame and selfcontempt. Your book solidified in my mind that I was damaged, disgusting, deeply impure, and that my abuse would preclude me from having a satisfying sex life or marriage. I thought that whatever I would eventually get would be exactly what I deserved. When I was 21, I met a man who would eventually become my husband (and ex-husband). Like the quintessential damaged young woman with daddy issue, this man was 40. We had sex. It was an out of body experience for me that was frightening and full of flashbacks to the abuse I had experienced. It drove me into counseling, at which point a compassionate woman helped me unearth my shame-filled thinking, my history of abuse, and my contempt for my sexuality. However, some of my therapeutic changes didn't fully take hold until I was several years older. In the mean time, I felt so further sullied by having sex that I married the man. He was spiritually, emotionally, psychologically, and financially abusive. It was an absolute nightmare. He stole all my money and made it nearly impossible for me to leave him. I became pregnant. My counselor helped me figure out how to leave by hiding a bank account and working a second job so I could save up the money to get out. It was when I was away from him, [239] divorced, and newly able to confront my flawed thinking about sexual purity that freedom began. I feel very strongly that God held me through my healing, and that my healing included recovery from the damage inflicted by the Purity movement, of which your book served as something of a foundation. I do not blame all the things that happened to me on your writing--not at all, as both the childhood sexual abuse and spousal abuse were inflicted by some extremely ill people--but your book was part of what blinded me to what was actually occurring. All I could see was my filth and the danger of my sexuality. I couldn't see others' illnesses because I thought it was me who was sick.

Thankfully, I am engaged to a very good man who did not grow up within the Purity movement. He is shocked by some of the elements of my story--particularly the decidedly American evangelical push against human sexuality. He is good to my daughter. My life has become beautiful, despite the hardship.

I want to ask you something, too. I am now a social worker and have worked with young women who have experienced sexual violence. I am also working on my social work PhD, and have devoted myself to research on sexual violence and abuse against women, including trafficking, domestic abuse, and sexual assault and abuse. I approach some of my research as an effort to understand how Christianity in America has influenced the recovery for women who have survived these traumas. I would be absolutely fascinated to work with you on a qualitative research study about the stories that people have shared with you about the Purity movement and your book. I think it could help a lot of people who have similar histories to me, but perhaps haven't yet found their way to a therapist. Let me know if you are interested in speaking more. USA [240]

247. Richard

I want to start off by saying that I don't blame you. I made my own decisions, and I'm the one who has to answer for them someday. However, I do want to talk about the impact your book had on my life, or more specifically, the impact that the culture that sprouted around your book had on my life.

Like many other pre-teens, I was given copies of your book by parents, pastors and teachers. I was an early subscriber to, at least, the spirit of the book. While I wasn't sure I wanted to forego dating in its entirety, I was certain that love, sex and everything in between was heavy business, and that I should at the very least tread lightly.

I did. While I did ultimately end up dating, and making sexual compromises with the women I dated, I bore your manifesto in mind every time I made a choice and every time I experienced guilt. My church embraced the book. We had a nice set up, launched with the best of intentions. Based on Biblical concepts, we had small, sex-segregated accountability groups that answered to a younger married couple in the church if we ran into problems we couldn't solve between us. The idea was maximum accountability, but also privacy and transparency.

The result? Well, a lot of people gave into temptation. Probably more than came forward, but out of a freshman youth group class of over 100, we graduated under 20. My church culture warped what I believe were good intentions. We blacklisted people for confessing, and they left. Assigned Scarlet Letters and allowed gossip and judgment to corrupt what began as an honest and transparent attempt at accountability with one of the most complex temptations teenagers experience. It's one that, over time, I've come to accept that perhaps no one can truly emerge unscathed, and I hoped that the structure we had built was built by grace. It wasn't. But that's not your fault.

Me? I made compromises. I've slept with three women in my life. One of them is my wife. To occupy myself prior to marriage, I tried service. Hobbies. Work. But I got a lot of attention from women, especially in college.

I developed what would eventually become a crippling addiction to pornography. Something I still struggle with today. My wife is understanding and graceful. I owe her everything for that. Other wives are not as understanding.

Though I have slept with three women, I had many more opportunities. Your notions of respect for women and an honest self-evaluation of my own intentions kept me from consummating those relationships, and for that ... for avoiding at least some sin ... I thank you. If not for the book, I don't think I would have been so cautious, and I don't often regret that I was.

Still, my ultimate compromise was pursuing relationships that were all but impossible to consummate. Long distance relationships, of which I had three that were long term (ironically, these are also the three relationships that ended up being consummated in the

end). Still, I kept myself occupied with emotional intimacy ... keeping women at a distance, where it was safe.

To this day, I struggle with that day-to-day intimacy with my own wife, probably as a result of that strategy. I long for my wife when she is gone and keep her at arm's distance when she is near. Where it's safe. After reading the article on you in Slate, I understood why I was doing this. Everything clicked. I relayed this to my wife and have committed to solving that problem of intimacy. She couldn't be happier.

I'm writing to you because I appreciate your openness to feedback, and your honest attempt at self-evaluation. I don't think that at 22 you expected your book to have the impact that it did. You must have thought you were onto something. Everyone else did. I can't say I wouldn't have leaned into it, too. It's undeniable that it struck a chord.

I'm glad that you're around. I'm glad that you're doing this ... opening yourself up to what must be a painful process. I want to tell you that I am a part of that group of less than 20. Still. I love Jesus with all my heart. I'm incredibly flawed and broken and still struggling with my own sexuality 20+ years after reading that book you wrote. But I love Jesus. I take this stuff seriously.

I'll add you to my prayers, Josh. Please don't let this process discourage you. I believe that you're doing the right thing. A favorite quote, from Martin Luther: "What will God Almighty say about it in the end?" I think of that quote often, and it seems to apply to what you're doing now. You'll find your way through this, and I pray your faith and dedication to Jesus is strengthened through it. Don't give up. You're doing the right thing.

Thanks for listening. United States

258. Robert

Thanks for asking for feedback on your book. I think that shows the most genuine humility and desire to learn.

I remember a girl in high school breaking up with me and later that day her friend handed me your book. My whole group of friends passed around the book and we all read it and discussed it. To be honest I think we were desiring to be influenced by your ideas but truly did not understand how to work it out practically. The thing we mostly didn't want to believe was that we were really too young to date in a serious manner-- when high school dating is the most serious thing you've ever experienced!

My reflection is that I didn't agree with your view of courtship at the time and it had little impact on me. The thing I have a hard time reconciling is those who claim you have ruined their life. I personally don't see how your writing alone could have done some of the things claimed by others. However, I do see how your rhetoric would have been in line with that of groups who have systemic issues already and could probably be accused of emotional, spiritual, and even sexual abuse. So in the end I think IKDG just falls into being unhelpful. As i've grown older I think I see what you were trying to do and what you were trying to say when I can see it as a mature person, and I appreciate it for that.

I want to encourage you not to fall into snares of those who blame you for abuses of which you are not culpable. I probably underestimated how God used your book positively to guard me from impurity, even if i disagreed with your view of courtship.
USA [259]

263. Angela

A church often acts in place of parents. When I was a young teenager, my parents were not available to me or involved in my life. I struggled to navigate social relationships and puberty without much guidance or support, and often turned to church for a feeling of security and acceptance. My siblings and I attended weekly classes at a Catholic church, with our parents having little idea of what we were exposed to there. I assumed that anything I was exposed to at church must be in line with my Catholic mothers' expectations.

During this period of time, I saw you speak live twice. You were quite young, only in your early twenties. I was between 12 and 14. I accepted every word you said as the absolute truth, as did my older sister. My youth pastors supported and repeated everything you said, and I assumed you were speaking on behalf of my parents as well (I never had a single conversation about sex or sexuality with my parents as a child or teen; when I was in my mid-20s, I came to realize that they do not actually value an ideal of purity).

Your words impacted my siblings and I in different ways. My older sister became judgmental about others' clothing choices and relationships, while she was fearful of pursuing relationships of her own. She had great difficulty relating to others and developing friendships, as she was afraid of doing something wrong or becoming tainted. I shared her fears to a certain extent, although I would wear a bikini and sought out friendships. She thought of me as a slut (even as I strictly avoided doing anything you would have considered "wrong"), but at the same time she was jealous of my social life. In the meantime, I was inhibited by a great deal of shame and guilt, and I missed out on having some of the closer relationships that I craved.

My relationship with my sister remains severely and hopelessly fractured over this strange dynamic. I can't speak in detail regarding any impact on her romantic relationships.

In my case, I struggled enormously with understanding and enforcing boundaries in romantic relationships. I had no expectation that I should be respected within a relationship, only that I would be judged. Then I was raped in my early twenties and felt so confused and devalued. Soon after, I dated a man who I knew was wrong for me in many ways. We became sexually active, in part because I wanted to "undo" my rape by choosing to have sex of my own accord. Then, partly because of my own sense of guilt and shame regarding obligation to marry someone that I had sex with, I went on to marry him. My initial instincts had been right, though, and our relationship quickly began to involve emotional and physical abuse. I filed for divorce when I found out that I was pregnant, knowing that I couldn't bring a child into such a conflict-filled relationship.

Now, in a stable long-term relationship with a kind man who hasn't had any exposure to the purity gospel, I am beginning to heal. I had feared that I would never find a good man after going through divorce. I thought the world would see me as tainted or "used up". That is far from the case. For the very first time in my life, I now feel truly loved,

accepted and respected. My boyfriend and I appreciate, enjoy and respect one another's sexuality, without the judgement, shame and guilt I had been taught to expect. We are happy and at peace.

Your words likely would not have had such a big impact on siblings and I if our parents had been more present. It isn't fair, to you or to me, that you were given such a large responsibility for my mind and heart at such a young age. But that is the truth about what happened. USA

270. Katie

Joshua, I am saddened by our culture today. The push against purity is so strong. We so easily turn what is right and God honoring into selfishness. I have read your book, and while I can see that anything can be turned into legalism, I did not sense that in your book. I did see the very situations, struggles and mistakes I made in my youth. Those are the things I regret. It is difficult to be with my husband without remembering all of the men I have been with at all levels of intimacy. That was not a regret your book gave me, but rather a regret I have dealt with for decades prior to reading your book.

I did date for sport, for loneliness, for status. I wish I had had parents who cared enough to tell me that I was playing a game that would hurt me. I wish I had sought out the love of Christ and lived a life that was pleasing to him. How I wish I could run into my former romantic partners and have the history that allowed me to meet them with joy, not shame. My husband (never read IKDG) did not live the life I lived, and he has mentioned many times of my past. It DOES affect my marriage. I WISH I would have done things differently.

The mention of rape is just silly. No person who was raped ever made a choice to be so, and I see no mention in your book that suggests otherwise. Your book is about the conscious decisions we make in our dating life. Satan likes to distract us from wisdom. It is his game. No woman who has been raped should feel shame in that. Stick to the topic at hand readers. [271]

There is nothing wrong with courtship. There is nothing wrong with thinking past the pleasures of today and making decisions that you can be proud of. Promiscuity is Satan's tool for a life in the darkness.

I have now seen it come full circle in the life of my son. When he is living the life God has for him, he is full of joy, close to family, focused on a healthy future, close to God. When he slips into his old habits of sexual impurity, he is reserved, hidden, far from family. He hides his sin in the shadows. Praise God that his sexual relationships have been found out time after time, and we can lovingly help him climb out of the darkness. I love the joy on his face when there is nothing to hide. USA [272]

277. Lindsey

I read "I Kissed Dating Goodbye" when it came out as a 15-year old girl. I was the only Christian in my family and just learning what it meant to follow Christ.

I took this book very seriously. I read it as God's law. I shared with my friends that I would be no longer dating and was treated as a social pariah for this idea. No one wanted to catch the "no dating" or feel shame about dating their boyfriends or girlfriends. I was called a lesbian, which I wasn't.

This book really just screwed with me. Somewhere along the way I realized its flaws, probably about 5 years too late. Thankfully, I don't think it inflicted too much damage but I do believe it was incorrect and ungodly information. USA

293. Kristen

Thank you for opening up this door. As you address this issue, you will bring great healing to many young to middle age adults who grew up under this teaching. Even some of their parents may admit their mistakes in demanding this standard (as they are now grand parenting their children's children). As adults we were all looking for alternatives to the typical dating scene we had lived through and watched around us. This was not your fault. It was the timing of it all. Many of us had good hearts - wanted to protect our children from pain. I am not sure where we got that idea! My husband and I were in full-time ministry with young people/parents and homeschooling our own, as well as leading in the homeschool movement. People [296] looked up to us. I had several sons so I was really searching for strategies to give them, although my wise husband kept discouraging me from looking for the magic bullet for perfect relationships. Unfortunately, most of us were looking for those formulas and quick-fix answers and were not as discerning as we should have been about how to take the heart of your message and apply it to real life. Your book became "the" answer. Parents read it - forced their kids read it - read it aloud to them more than once - conducted home studies using it. It became a man-made law to many, and parents used it to figuratively "beat their kids up" if they didn't follow the "new law" of relationships - the answer - don't date! It seemed perfect. If we struggled in our dating lives, then of course, how simple, don't date - kiss it goodbye! It worked for Josh and his girl and began to work for others - it must be right. We didn't realize how much we would all have to learn in life, a teacher in and of itself - how different each of our children were - that not all people would come from our homeschool culture and read THE book. There was a great deal of false teaching in that day - steps to take for success - promises that if you did things a certain way (made by Gothard and many other home school leaders), there would be victory! Your "new attitude" became a "biblical" mandate. You had no idea when you wrote of your experiences how this would affect so many. It is funny that I have more recently read books that teach "how to have relationships." My third son once said, after he went to Kings College in NYC, "I knew how NOT to have relationships, but I didn't know how to start and HAVE relationships." He wanted to do it right but was not confident in any opportunity for relationship. That grieved me. I am sure each of my older children have a story to tell! Yet, as parents, we were trying to keep our children pure by guiding them "away from relationships" with the opposite sex, even though that was not your intention. For some, it worked well. For others, it brought disaster. Young people were afraid to think about or have relationships - longings for relationships = lust and condemnation - churches took your book and created laws to govern their youth groups (even doing away with them). "We are a courtship only church" - "Well, we are a 'No Touch' Courtship only church." One of my daughters-in-laws was in such a church that she non-affectionately refers back to as The Cult Church in Louisiana. They could not even [297] converse with the opposite sex and were not allowed to sit on the same side - boys had one side and girls the other - creating a negative reality for these young people. It has taken her years to try to renew her thinking. Their pastor's daughter was held up as a role model for all - she followed the IKDG teachings to a tee and ended up marrying a boy in the church who had also followed all the rules, within the confines of the church. They courted perfectly. It was a celebrated moment when they married, but just a few months later, he shot and killed her in the early morning hours - leaving a family and church devastated. All were focused on

the externals and no one knew he had a serious addiction to pornography and was involved in other relationships, all while "courting" the pastor's daughter. You did not cause these things to happen, but as people today discuss the damages of the demanding "purity culture," the thinking created a twisted environment of fear, male-domination, unhealthy parental involvement, lack of or destructive communication between parents and their children, and more. Honestly and integrity in relationships were backburner, as long as you "did" it right in public. Cover-ups have become rampant in sex-abuse scandals in the church and domestic violence in the home. My husband and I say often, "We have not seen it all but we have seen a lot." I am sure you feel the same way in your experiences. I know my own children have had to sort through a lot in moving into adulthood and parenting.

You are brave to re-visit and allow us to tell you of our experiences. I could go on for pages because I was one who read your book first, gave it away to many, taught it, and highly recommended the strategy to all I met. This includes the follow up book and the book on lust. I hounded my husband to go through that book with our boys. Dads and daughters signed covenants committing to this lifestyle and handing over the responsibility of finding a mate to the girl's dad. Many have gone on to expound on your original ideas, and we are only now reaping those results. For some, they can look back and laugh; for others, it impacted them profoundly. I am sure you join me in now knowing that you can do it as right as you can do it - and it may not turn out well. Thank you for hearing my thoughts. USA [298]

305. Vanessa

I read your book in my college days. I totally bought into the idea and didn't date at all. I was careful in my friendships. I ended up marrying the first guy who I felt was Godly and exhibiting the character traits I thought were important. What I didn't realize is that a part of dating lets you know what you are looking for a life partner. What can you live with and what is important to you? It is making these decisions in the process of getting to know your partner that makes you realize your priorities. I went into marriage barely knowing my partner or myself for that matter. I wish I could go back and change my approach to dating. I wish I could have met several different men and used those interactions to help me realize what I could and could not live with.

I fell away from my faith, and it's not this idea of purity that turned me off but the whole idea of 'being good enough' and 'perfect' enough. I constantly felt like I was falling short. I wanted things that I felt like God said I shouldn't want and therefore I was always deficient. I constantly felt like a failure and dating and 'purity' was a part of that. So, I am slowly trying to figure out what my faith means to me and I am having to rebuild my idea of who God is and who I am.

I don't think the book was dangerous, and my choices and beliefs were my choices and beliefs. I made the choices I did in my youth, but I hope my kids don't make those same choices. I hope they realize that they are always good enough for God and don't need to maintain certain 'purity standards' to be worthy of a good husband or wife. USA

314. Shannon

I learned that I was damaged goods because I had given away pieces of my heart. I had dated boys. In high school in the early 90's no one had told me not to. I knew not to have sex, I followed that rule. then your book came about. I read it in college. the goal posts had moved, the rules changed. I was now dirty, used up, I had given away pieces my heart without knowing what I had done. No one in their right mind would want me, I was unworthy. I felt shame through my first nine years of marriage. I was unable to enjoy relating with my husband because i had internalized so much purity message guilt that I was unable to throw the switch to physical relations aren't bad or dirty after marriage. I felt unequal to my spouse since I dated other men previous to reading this, but I was his first girlfriend, his first everything. After nine years of cracking under the strain of a Christian marriage, we kissed God goodbye and started learning about each other and our lives, rethinking our whole world view with the help of a caring, licensed therapist. We're going to need years to undo the damage and pressure of purity, of roles pushed on us. But so far i feel freer and our relationship is improving better than it was when we followed the rules on courting with a purpose, staying pure, knowing each other's heart and saying /doing all the right things. I wish I had never read this book. The damage it did was excruciating. To follow the rules and then after the fact be told you did it wrong is extremely damaging. I wish my campus pastor had never impressed this message upon out hearts, never recommended this damaging book. I wish I had never tried to live up to the impossibility of evangelicals message of rules, fear, submission, and self denial. None of it was healthy for a young woman. usa

324. Alicia

Thank you for the book IKDG. Not having any guide but my feelings to navigate the options of the 60's and 70's, I wasted a good part of myself on boys and men, (relationships that ended painfully). God spoke to me after I read a tract on "Sex and Singles," though I was unchurched and ignorant of most of the Bible. He said, word for word, "If you will live for me, I will provide the man you are looking for." That stopped my hunting, I and realized that God could do what I had failed to do. No one told me, but on my wedding day, I was shamefully aware that I was presenting my groom (who was shy and had never even had a date before me), with an emotionally damaged and used bride. No one told me when I came of age, that I could feel so much regret. My wonderful husband experienced different kind of pain...that of not being able to satisfy his wife. Sex is humiliating when there is no pleasure, and my tears in those intimate times challenged the foundation of our relationship. We were able to save our marriage by receiving Jesus Christ and accepting an invitation to join a church. After 7 years, I was finally healed of guilt and shame, and began to feel again. We have four boys and a girl. Our daughter read "I Kissed Dating Goodbye," with her dad when she was about 15. I believe you had a strong influence on her life, although she did not follow through on her commitment to stay pure. At least you set an example for young people to follow. Life happens. People do things not just because someone says, or even because they know it's the right choice. In the article I read (the one that led me to this site), the argument was made that the author felt pressure to perform, rather than grace. Well, I say, you need the whole counsel of God in the Word, and the Holy Spirit. The book is based on godly principles. Should we throw out the law because it convicts? I just wish someone would have told ME what pitfalls I could have avoided by doing things God's way! USA

331. Anna

I was in my early 20's when 2 books on purity were big in the college ministry I was involved with, one being "I Kissed Dating Goodbye." Everyone in that group embraced the ideas in those books. I wasn't someone that was asked out on dates to begin with, so at first I loved the idea. I noticed right away that the girls and boys began to be separated. We began having girls or boys only Bible study groups and retreats. At the retreats we heard speakers talk about sex before marriage and now dating could lead to lust and impurity. We were told that if you waited to have sex until your wedding night, God would bless your marriage. We were told that you would be sexually compatible with your husband because you followed His rules for dating and marriage. I completely bought into it. I bought the ring and carried the True Love Waits card in my wallet. However, because I almost never spent time around guys, I wasn't sure how to interact with them. At times groups of us would hang out, but I would keep to talking to the girls.

In 2001 I met a man who was attending Bible college to be a preacher. He asked me out and we began dating. We knew from the start that we would marry eventually. I even allowed him to kiss me (which was a VERY difficult decision and a big deal) after several months. We agreed to wait to have sex until our wedding day. Our wedding day came in 2003. I was scared out of my mind to have sex with him that night. I really didn't know anything about sex. I never watched R rated movies or read Cosmo magazine or anything like that because it was impure. I had no clue what to expect from sex and I was scared of giving up my identity of being a virgin. But I had faith that God would bless the union. However the sex was terrible. Not at all what I pictured. I was riddled with terrible guilt. How could sex be so taboo the night before, but was fine now? I felt bad because I knew our marriage license hadn't been processed yet and I was scared that God was punishing me because we weren't "officially" married yet. I went into the bathroom of the hotel and cried my eyes out because I felt so guilty. I never got over that guilt about sex. My husband was never willing to work through our sexual problems together. He was too embarrassed to talk about sex with me. This led to him dabbling in porn, prostitution and in 2008 having a full blown affair with a young woman that had 2 children. We divorced that same year and I was so disappointed that God had let me down. I had followed the books and did what He said. I was robbed of the promise your book and others said I would get.

Of course today I don't blame your book or my college ministry for how things turned out. I still love Jesus and I don't totally regret the decisions I made in life. I am in a very happy and healthy relationship with a man, but I have no desire to ever marry again. USA

339. Tara

I am a single woman, never married, never even been kissed (I was saving my first kiss for marriage). I am a 32 year old virgin, now with no prospect of marriage on the horizon. I was so inspired and truly believed the entire message of true love waits, that if I obeyed God and did everything right, and spent time serving others, in His own time He would bless me with the husband and children I have always wanted. I spent my years in high school, college and then the ten years afterward serving in the church in a variety of different ministries. Still no husband, no children. God does not write everyone a love story.

I really have no regrets though. I have come to accept that it is not God's will for me to be married. Through my singleness, I have been blessed to minister to many people. And all the people God has brought into my life have ministered to me as well.

After the death of an evangelical dream (the hope of marriage and children), I left evangelical Christendom altogether and am now very happy as a Roman Catholic. Jesus Christ is everything! And He alone, not any dream of marriage, can satisfy the human heart. I wish the evangelical church would start preaching this message. Jesus Alone, not marriage, is the answer. And it should also be taught that God does not provide marriage for everyone. That is not His plan. I know so many people who did everything the Christian dating books taught, ended up brokenhearted and are still single. I know many others who did not follow Christian dating advice and instead did whatever they wanted to do and are now happily married with children. There is not one plan or blueprint for dating and marriage. We should encourage each other to love Jesus and pursue Him regardless of what state in life we find ourselves in, whether married, single, divorced, widowed. Jesus Christ is all we need. He is the Pearl of Great Price. He is worth giving everything for. He alone can satisfy our deepest desires. We were made for Him, to know love and serve Him. Jesus Christ is everything! USA

348. Holly

My mother died when I was four years old in a car crash. It's common for people who lose mothers to either be anxious daters or avoidant daters. In addition the church was really the only place of solace my family experienced and I took very seriously whatever teaching I received. This book was taught as a guide for how to be a good Christian along with True Love Waits. What the book provided was a good framework for me to avoid stepping out and risking anything real. It was just easier to believe that God would bring me someone when God was ready than to actually deal with my fears of loss and intimacy. I'm 34 now, a pastor, a feminist, still single with different convictions than I once had. My 20's were marked by an absence of dating and meaningful romantic relationship. At 30 I started a very intentional season of grieving my mother and have begun successfully exploring romantic relationships. (Successful is a relative word What I've experienced is what I wish I could have worked out in my early 20's. That may have served to make me ready for something healthy and good in a season when there were more available men of quality in my age range. I certainly don't blame the book for my experience. But I do believe it reinforced both my own unhealthy tendency to avoid life and risk as well as a patriarchal worldview. Thanks for being open to listen. USA

355. Cassandra

I read your book in highschool and believed in it. I didn't go on my first date with a guy until I was a senior in college.

I really wish that I started dating when I was in highschool. I don't think that any of those guys were necessarily the right one, but I could have learned to interact with guys more and know what I am looking for. I felt extremely awkward around guys for years not even knowing how to be their friend. I was so afraid to get to know them because I thought I had to want to marry them first.

I am now almost 29 and still single. I think you had a pure heart when you wrote this book, but I don't think I would recommend this approach to my future children. I think there is a healthy median between the world's hookup culture and courtship. I hope you find the answer you are looking for. Blessings! United States

367. Ryan

At the time in my life, I read your book I found it very helpful. It's been well over a decade since I've read it. I was in a part of the homeschooling movement that was encouraging a much stancher form of courtship or betrothal (IBLP and Vision Forum types). Your book was refreshing and a more biblical approach. As far as my relationships were concerned, I was glad I decided not to date in high school. While I called my approach to relationships "dating" not "courtship." I took the whole thing more seriously than the average person in part because of your book, and I don't regret it.

In my case, I married the first person I dated, even though I wasn't strictly sold to the idea of TRYING to marry the first person I dated. Our marriage is very strong with three children. My wife went to public school and knew very little about the courtship debate, so she was just fine with dating seriously, she was fine with me speaking with her father when we decided to take it to the next level, she was all for being prudent in our choices, but she care to make it any more complicated than that.

That's my story. I know it isn't everyone's who took a courtship, or "intentional dating" approach. I know there is ironically a lot of broken marriages as a result of some of the pressure to court or take dating more seriously than perhaps it needs to be. Even though our approach worked very well for us, I found a lot to agree with concerning this article when it comes to some of my homeschooling friends: <http://bit.ly/VjtA55>

So what will I teach to my kids? Probably no "method," and I doubt I will put any pressure on them to try to marry the first person they date. I am certain I will simply teach scriptures as best I can and let the chips fall where they may. Along with that to teach them that they are loved and accepted in Christ in spite of their failures, but teach them wisdom, because our choices do have long lasting consequences. But even in the midst of terrible consequences we are dearly loved - by their father, mother and Christ.
USA

378. Kayla

My virginity was taken from me as a child. After years of abuse from men in authority, I learned to advocate for myself and dated to learn who was safe. If not for dating, I wouldn't have been able to do that. Not everyone comes from a safe home and I found your book hurtful in its message of the virtue of a virginity I couldn't have. I may have never been a virgin, but I am just as wonderful a wife and mother, and just as beautiful as any woman who was valued as a child. United States

391. Bridget

I am a 55 year old mother with one daughter. My former church was really into the purity culture and this book. I would not let my daughter read this because I don't believe you can protect anyone by not giving them all the correct information. I read this for her in 2000 when she was going through puberty, she already had body and self esteem issues, and it's the main reason we left that church. I was offended by this book because when I was young, I didn't have any good information about boys or health or any love to speak of. I was promiscuous because I thought that's what love was. Love is infinite, and the more you give away the more you have. US

404. Marie

This book spread through my church youth group shortly after it came out. None of us took it particularly seriously, though I do remember feeling a smug superiority at the time that of COURSE you should hold yourself to a higher standard while dating.

Now, as a 34 year old overweight Christian woman, the only men who have ever asked me out have been non-Christians.

To be fair, I reread the book two years ago. The principles still seem to be sound ("Don't waste time dating people who you couldn't marry; there's value to singleness; etc."), but the principles have been conflated with the sometimes-laughable practical steps (for example, at 34, even with a good relationship with my father, I find it laughable that a guy would ask him for permission to marry me, let alone court me). And it put so much pressure on guys that they didn't feel comfortable asking girls out until they were serious...but you have to get close to a girl to discern whether you're serious about her.

I think the other problem here is simply the timing of when your book came out. It was the 1990s, and Internet porn was starting to become a thing. So a couple of things happened:

1. Guys were told to be choosy in who they dated.
2. Guys discovered porn. And since it wasn't intercourse with a girl, clearly it's okay from a Christian perspective!
3. Guys got fulfillment from porn, which trained them to only look for the hottest women.
4. The pool of guys narrowed as more Christian guys were lost to porn, and the remaining ones could afford to be more choosy.

Now, obviously, this is from the girls' perspective. Certainly you hear the stories of girls who were "dating Jesus" as well. Really, what it came down to (at least in my own churches) is that your book just became more tinder for the fire.

If you feel like reading more on my hypotheses, I did a podcast (<http://www.covenanteyes.com/2015/06/03/more-than-single-interview-with-lisa-eldred/>) and wrote a book (<http://www.covenanteyes.com/singles-guide/>). United States

410. Wendy

After dating way too many boys, I became a Christian in high school. I struggled to be like Christ, to figure out what it meant to be holy in the midst of church camp games of spin the bottle and everyone dating everyone else in youth group like musical chairs. Your book gave me the courage to put off boys while focusing on seeking Jesus first, letting Him have all of me, allowing my worth to be solidified in Him. In college I was so content in the Lord that my future husband really had to pursue me, and we prayed our way carefully into the relationship. Thank you for writing what was on your heart all those years ago, I guess this book mainly encouraged me to take a good look at what was going on in youth group around me as a brand new believer, and realize the church looked suspiciously like the world's standards when it came to dating. And I guess it helped me kiss kissing goodbye as well, the meaningless kisses, between then and meeting my husband anyway, haha! USA

432. Catherine

As a mother who made plenty of mistakes myself, I wanted to do better for my sons, so this was one of my resources. I wanted them to be men of integrity, especially where women were concerned. I also was clearly living out of fear. I received no emotional or spiritual co-parenting from their father in this regard.

In retrospect, I believe I would give my sons more freedom to date, you know, where you actually ask a girl to go out to do something specific, while they were young enough to still be guided and influenced, instead of just perpetually hanging out. I also believe that my overly focusing on this made it monumental instead of significantly important. My sons were so guarded and restricted until they were old enough to be responsible for a family, that many of the young women that they could have matured with in the dating process had already found committed relationships. By this time, my sons were so far behind the curve that they felt emotionally immature in the face of those who had walked over the puppy love stage many years earlier. I feel like I handicapped them in many ways.

I certainly do not hold Josh Harris personally responsible for any of this. That's part of what is wrong with society today; no one is responsible for their own happiness or their own actions. I believe if I had it to do over again, I would place the focus on those premises instead. God refines all of us through fire, and it is pretty much imperative that we take risks to need a perfect Savior. Otherwise, we're just hiding out from life. USA

443. Brandon

I grew up in Josh's church, which followed this book as well as his book on courtship, "Boy Meets Girl," to the letter. When I was 19, there was a girl I wanted to date and, per protocol, I started by asking permission from her dad. When we eventually started dating, I remember one instance when I asked her dad a question out my relationship with his daughter and he responded by saying "Well, if you look at page 83 in Boy Meets Girl..." Everything about this was formulaic, like the book had all the answers. I don't think anyone has the perfect or complete answer to relationships or anything else. Whether or not that's what Josh intended, that was what came out in practice. USA

450. Valerie

First of all, I'm a 47 year old homeschool mom with 3 children, currently aged 27, 22, 14 & I grew up in a Christian home. I had a similar experience that you described in your book regarding dating & giving intimacy without commitment. My parents allowed me to date at the age of 16! To sum it up, I wished somebody could have given me a copy of your book back then to read & apply many of the ideas you wrote when I was young! I think it would've opened my eyes to see there was a better route for me that may have spared some heartache. Needless to say, I really loved the book when I read it in 2009 with my 15 yr old middle child at the time. I used it as a tool to guide my & my daughter's thinking towards purity. I shared my heart with her & exposed the brokenness I felt as I dated the way my peers around me did. I'm planning on reading it again with my 14 year old within the next few years. I think the problem with some people getting hurt or having a bad experience over the book is that they tend to be legalistic (believe me I can totally relate to this) or maybe they give any printed word with Scripture attached to it the same weight as the gospel itself. We are to be discerning with the things we take in, asking God to lead us & not expect every Christian couple to have cookie cutter courtships. The same daughter that read the book is currently in a dating for marriage relationship. Her courtship hasn't been easy or looked much like what we read in IKDG, but the important point is that they are practicing purity in their relationship. I'm proud of that! I give God glory for using His Word & books like yours to change some flawed thinking that I grew up with. May God bless you & your family as you raise them in the direction God leads you. United States

461. Dawn

First and foremost, I respect you for asking the questions and listening. I believe your view on dating helped a lot of us avoid sexual relationships outside of marriage. Your guidance saved us a lot of pain and hurt. But I feel you can date and still refrain from sex- it is just harder. I agree that dating is serious and should be entertained when one is in a season where marriage is realistic. With that said, I don't feel there was enough guidance for ending courtships when things are not ideal. If I remember correctly, your book acknowledges that courtships can be ended, but in the church culture this was not done often enough. Dating provides an opportunity for you to learn about yourself, your communication style, your priorities, your preferences, your mutual interests. Because it is not as serious as courtship, it is easier to say this is not working let's stay friends. I missed out on a chance to really figure out who I was and what I wanted in a husband because the first guy I courted-- I married. I regret that to a degree. It has been a very hard 11 years. We are committed to one another but have nothing in common. We don't enjoy the same things and that makes maintaining a friendship in marriage very difficult. Your book put such an emphasis on waiting for the right person and the right time that it was hard to know we were not with the right person. Two people that both love God does not necessarily a marriage make. I felt like I didn't have the ability or wisdom to end things because the culture was so focused on marriage. We were engaged too quickly, and there was a moment when I almost walked away, but I felt like I needed to die to myself and focus on God and being sanctified in the relationship . (I should have walked away.) As my daughter grows I have asked myself how I will guide her in this area. I think the pain of a few breakups is much less than the pain of staying in a lackluster marriage. I didn't know what I wanted or needed in a husband primarily because I did not have the opportunity to date others and figure that out! USA

467. Hannah

Your book came out when I was a teen. It sounded like such a beautiful fairytale, and made so much sense at the time. Dating is like practicing for divorce. So of course, if you pick one person and stick with them through it all, everything will be idyllic. Life has a funny way of not being that way though. I met him in a homeschool AP English class. He was the first guy to show any interest in me; we had a little in common, but not much. Soon, he was dominating every moment of my life, it was like we were obsessed with each other. I started college right after we started dating, and I had to spend every moment I wasn't in class on the phone with him, or he would panic. It was sweet...or at least I thought so. We saved ourselves for our wedding night, except for all of the inappropriate touching at his insistence when we snuck away from chaperones. After all, I owed it to him for giving him blue balls, right? Fast forward a few years. All of our sex involves him guilt tripping me or scaring me by what will happen if I don't. I leave for the first time, without adequate words to describe it as rape or abuse. I come back because he "changed" and "God wouldn't forgive me for leaving". Due to my transgressions while I was gone, the sexual shame escalated dramatically. I got pregnant to appease him that I wouldn't leave again. My pregnancy had complications, I was on doctor ordered bed rest and pelvic rest, but he couldn't go without sex that long. I cried afterward every time, because he could've killed our baby by causing preterm labor. Thankfully, our son was born healthy. He nearly died at 6 weeks old because of a circumcision I didn't want, because his dad insisted that I needed to submit to his biblical leadership. Fast forward a few more years. Things are even worse, and I start to fear for my safety, even though he hasn't physically harmed me (yet). I finally find the words to call it abuse and rape, and leave. The church tells me I'm abandoning my marriage, and ultimately excommunicates me when I follow through with the divorce; my parents still attend that church. I can't help but wonder whether any of this would've happened if I had dated a bit when I was younger. The red flags of an abusive man would've been easier to see. I wouldn't have felt like I "had" to stay with him and marry him after I started feeling more and more unsafe. I can't say your book is the only cause, obviously, but without it I truly don't know if I would've ever married him. USA

474. Brad

I read the book back in High school. I remember it being a fad for Christians to get really caught up in all the definitions. Dating, going out, courting... and everyone it seemed had a different definition for each term. The popular thing to do seemed to be to not date, but only court. I did not follow the book exactly, but I decided to do away with all the definitions. I made it my goal to become friends with as many girls as possible, and learn as much as I could through friendship. Then I figured God would show me if one should be more than a friend. I decided to date only seriously and I feel like that is what I got from the book. Not to date for just fun, but date to find a spouse and use friendship to first weed out the majority. I decided to save kissing and the rest of the bases for marriage. I figured that alone would scare off any girl that would try and not be pure.

So that is what I did. In my four years of college right after High school I had two dating relationships (by choice, I turned girls down a couple times). The first lasted about 7 months and the second lasted a little over a year. There are some things you just can't find about a person through friendship in a group. We never touched each other where a bathing suit would cover and although difficult sometimes remained pure. Once one of us figured that marriage would not be a possibility we broke up. I am friends with them both to this day.

After college I immediately got a job in my field (by God's doing) and moved to another state to start it. I found a church with a young adult group and started the process over with making friends. One girl stood out to me and I got to know her enough to start dating after 3 months. A year after that we were engaged and nine months later married.

The take-away: My system worked flawlessly for me. It was inspired by the book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* but without the book I don't think I would have been far off. My two college relationships prepared me for my wife. I learned in college how to date and those experiences gave me the skills to be the right man for my wife. Things like how spending money on flowers for her for no reason is really worth it. My wife and I did start kissing a month before marriage (she was afraid of me being bad at it in front of everyone) but we saved second, third, and home bases for marriage. I don't regret any of my relationships or how much I saved for marriage.

If you share my story, don't share this part but use it for your own knowledge. My wife told me during dating that she was not a virgin. It was difficult for me to wrap my head around that. It was one time before she knew me and the regret tore her emotions apart scarring her at a very deep level. I forgave her because the repentance was obvious and it is still a long journey getting her self worth up from the floor. We had a wonderful wedding night and I don't regret choosing her for a second. I am telling you this because the only way her past sins can hurt her now is from shame. Many churches think it is a good idea to scare and shame the idea of sex to prevent kids from having sex before marriage. All that does is bring the pain back for someone who made a mistake. We need to associate positive emotions with marital sex in our youth as to not mess them up emotionally with associating negative emotions with all sex. This is important for their

future marriages. Sex still has some negativity associated with it in my wife despite up over-writing that so many times. It still hurts our marriage.

Thanks. United States

486. Mallory

Mr. Harris,

I applaud your decision to critically examine the impact of your writing. I am one of the people who had a bad experience with it; the reasons are complicated, and I'll do my best to be concise. I am an Asexual woman, meaning that I don't (or rarely) experience physical attraction. When I first read your book as a teen, I initially felt relief, since I had no desire for sex and thought something was wrong with me. However, this also stopped me from asking myself questions about why I felt the way I did. I confused my orientation for a moral standard, and this caused a lot of issues in my personal relationships for a long time. Now, I don't think this is your fault, since there is little to no cultural understanding of Asexuality and its sub-categories. However, more significant damage was done by my parents, who used the book as a standard of behavior. To be honest, they were controlling and emotionally abusive. They used your work as a reason to police anything we felt that they didn't want my siblings and I to feel. On several occasions, they punished us for simply experiencing feelings of closeness (romantic or otherwise) with other people. With me specifically, they demanded that I abstain from any kind of relationship, but also used my lack of interest in them as proof I was childish and couldn't run my own life. They still attempt to do this, and I'm nearly 30.

I don't believe my parent's abusive behavior is your fault either; They would have done these things even if they'd never found your writing. But that's where your writings have been harmful for children trapped with abusive Caregivers. Parent's like mine used your work as justification for obsessive control, often with the backing of their church, since it was embedded with their faith. In my experience, parents in the church had a hard time separating their discomfort with the thought of their children having sexual and romantic feelings from their religious beliefs about sexuality. Your books were often used as reasons why children and teens should have no access to education regarding sexual health or good relationship dynamics. A specific example is my parents refusing to let me see a doctor for any health issues specific to my gender. They also blamed my sister when her boyfriend at the time abused her. They said she shouldn't have been dating at all, and it wouldn't have happened if she had courted instead.

Looking back, I can see how the culture both of us grew up in, and other events outside our control, shaped our beliefs about sex and sexuality. It took me a long time to figure out who I was and what I actually believed about sex in terms of my faith, and I don't blame you for the journey you've had to take. Please feel free to ask me any questions you may have; I've made my peace with the past, and I'm comfortable talking about it.
United States

496. Alissa

First, I admire your humility. This is not necessarily easy for you. My story: I was a freshman in college in 1996, introverted and trying to be brave in a new place. It took all my bravery to ask a guy to go trick-or-treating (with a group) on our Sadie Hawkins day. I was turned down because he said he'd read your book and didn't date and if he went with me he would look hypocritical. I was hurt deeply. It was just trick-or-treating, I thought. It's not like I want to marry you. This incident put a sour taste in my mouth for your book and your name as an author. I was an immature freshman and realize as an adult you can't lay all people's actions at the feet of an author. At the same time, I've never picked up another book written by you because of the hurt tied to that incident. Your name was associated with the painful memory of failure and rejection. Two years later the guy started going out on dates with a girl. That doubly hurt. Hypocrite much? I don't know his own personal journey. I assume he changed his mind. But from this experience I spoke to others about the failings of a philosophy of kissing dating goodbye as I had experienced them myself. Thank you for being open to hearing my story. United States

506. Kyle

I grew up in the western Oregon. Like many conservative Christian homeschool families we read your book and quickly became "anti-dating", even though I was the eldest and had never dated before. My parents had attended public schools and knew all too well the lack of purity in typical bf/gf relationships. It was meant well, but it backfired. I became so committed to "guarding my heart" that I shut it down altogether. Simply approaching a girl I thought was attractive felt almost sinful. Even talking about girls among male friends seemed taboo. Attraction isn't lust, yet somehow I equated the two based on the "guard your heart/no dating" mindset. It has literally taken years for me to undo this unbalanced mindset. And I'm not the only one. My brother and many friends had similar experiences. US

516. Paul

I kept an eye on those of my friends in my private Christian high school who were in relationships. The truth of the matter is that relationships were just as messy then as they were in college whether or not kids were just "dating" or "hanging out" or "seeing each other". I did find that many those who were in relationships in high school were doing so because they believed it was the cultural standard. I didn't date in high school. But I don't believe I missed out on much. Ive dated in college. If anything, the girls who haven't dated much so far have been my favorite people. However, they were the most torn up from our relationship ending. Others who were more experienced were more depressing and hopeless and wrecked before meeting me.

All this being said, I think we should date to find friends. Then we should be friends until we know whether or not we want to be in a relationship. And sex should be upheld for marriage. However, sex never used to humble someone you love. The engaged virgins who of my generation who become married in the 5-9 months really do have issues once its time to have sex. Like dating when you are desperate, these horny couples are often disappointed by how much they have built up things for this moment. And their "fight for purity" really turns out to be something of vanity. Ive had to reconcile that still being a virgin at 27. There needs to be a reckoning that virgin marriages are not the secret to happy marriages. Furthermore, our feminized church orientation needs to reconcile its "bridal" identity by bring sex education back into Sunday schools and women need to be taught how to please their men before, after, and during their marriage season.

Men need to be taught early on that they are strong enough to love someone. That they are worthy of seduction from a woman who loves them and also what they need to be ready for besides the contraception and the humping part. They need to know that they play a creative role in sex too and that women who want to have sex with them are not perverted or desperate. They need to be reminded that they hold the standard and are God-endowed natural leaders in their relationships. Lastly, the next generation of men need to realize that you cannot please a woman you respect unless you live courageously, strong, and "erect" across other areas in your life.. Lastly, Joshua Harris, stop reading Relevant mag. Those writers don't lead the culture. They are 100% lead by the culture and they are missing the natural positive aspects of life to to influence people who are waaaay out of touch. USA

521. Bethany

I was a 13 year old in the 2nd row of the crowd at your conference in Nashville in 1995 where I signed up to be notified when your first book was published. I absorbed everything you said both on stage and in your book that I thought would make me a better Christian and took it to heart for more than a decade. I berated myself for any crush believing I had given away a part of my heart I could never get back.

Not everything I learned about this concept of courtship and purity doctrine came from your writings. It was simply the beginning. From there my library expanded to include Elisabeth Elliot and literally everything the Eric and Leslie Ludy had ever written up until my early 20s. I even flew to Colorado for one of their weekend retreats.

My first date was with the man I eventually married, which sounded ideal in the past, but we both came from the purity culture of homeschooling and didn't know what we were doing. We had both just left home situations with our parents that were tearing us apart. There was no contingency plan for abuse in a "God driven", but actually parent driven model of relationships. It was painful to realize they were not the voice of God in my life.

The prospect of a relationship was held over my head as something I could not have until I had reached some vague concept of "readiness". Courtship was a weapon to control my life and decisions in a Bill Gothard-esque umbrella of authority model. When my parents and I would clash, among the other horrible things that were said to me, they would bring up the concept of being ready for my future husband. I wasn't ready until they said I was. This went on until they kicked me out of the house at the age of 24 after another disagreement with no job, no home, and barely any money.

Shortly after, I began dating. My relationship with my then boyfriend was riddled with guilt as a result. Our parents didn't approve. We couldn't possibly know what was best for ourselves. We kissed, but I couldn't enjoy our first kiss and was awake all night with the belief that we had ruined the foundation of our future marriage. We finally married as virgins to find the baggage and taboo we'd carried about any physical contact doesn't melt away when we exchanged rings.

After we had been married for more than a year, I learned something that had been kept from me my entire life: I had been sexually abused when I was 4 years old. The news tore me apart and my first reaction was to apologize to my bewildered husband. I apologized because he didn't know this going into our marriage. I wasn't what he thought I was. I wasn't pure. That had been taken from me before I could remember. My value as his wife had been presented to me my entire life as the beautiful gift of my purity I would give to him on our wedding night and now what I had given him felt like a fraud. It took a very long time to stop thinking about what had happened to me as something that impacted my worth.

My husband and I now have a beautiful 5-month-old daughter. All I want is to do better by her. I want her to know that her body is her own. Her life is her own. Her worth

doesn't changed based on who she may sleep with in the future and certainly not if someone tries to take that from her.

My parents now also have a lot of regrets. If they had it to do over again, they would have not tried to exercise this kind of control that destroyed our relationship. My parents and I have since rebuilt our relationships, but there are and may always be echoes of the past that affect how we speak to each other and threaten our mental health as we struggle with depression. United States

532. Krista

I am a 30 year old woman. I read your book when I was around 18. Because I was already possessed of certain ideas and attitudes, I accepted your words as one more piece of gospel confirmation of the way in which I was to righteously live when it came to my romantic life. I approached every guy-girl relationship with suspicion and ridiculously huge expectation. By the time I was 27, I had begun the journey toward being responsible for my own spiritual, physical, and mental life. I began to date my husband at that time and the horrific next couple of years dealing with the fall-out of a family life dedicated to their idea of protection, love and grace solidified my separation from the image of life I had swallowed for so many years. Although your book was just another pebble in the rock-pile of damaging material that I had built my life around, it carried with it the identifying ideas that ensured it belonged in that pile. I am now free of that burden that I once dedicated my life to carrying and industriously adding to; free to live and love in ways I never dreamt possible. I carry no ill-will towards any author or individual who subscribes to or expresses ideas that are now different than my own, but I do feel sorrow for those whose ideas seem to keep them from the freedom they are so lovingly capable of. United States

539. Melanie

I read your book when I was 16, shortly after being saved. At a time where I was wavering on what my stance was on dating, I held to your principles so fastidiously that I considered myself to be 'celibate'. Since I grew up in a small village - yes, village - and the dating choices were slim, this was not a difficult commitment. Not until I entered college. My first year, I briefly dated a fellow young man of G-d, but it did not work out. For almost two years, I felt a sense of failure that I did not end up marrying the first person I ever dated. Friends who also stood by your book also shamed me for going against 'G-d's will'. It took me years to feel comfortable putting myself out there again. I am 25 now, with another wonderful young man of G-d that I have been with for over three years now, but still sometimes, Joshua, your principles do still flash back to me when I am being affectionate towards my boyfriend, and it makes me freeze up. Not in a good way, either. In effect, you have paralyzed me for nearly ten years while my peers felt free to make mistakes and learn from them. Even now I am still a virgin, even though I identify as the most feminist, progressive Christian you may know, and honestly, it's getting to a point where I'm not sure if that's anything to be proud of anymore. Because you have bound my hands and feet, both you and the L-rd, from being able to be me.

The takeaway I'd like for you to have from my story is, you don't even know me, you have never met me in my life nor are you likely to, and yet you have had near-complete control over my (non)sex life for almost ten years. I am sure I am not the only person who has gone through this. As I age closer to 30, some very interesting decisions are coming up that I think my 16 year old self doesn't know how to answer. My hope is that you can try and realize that the principles you have taught may have helped many people, but on the opposite side of the coin, have hurt just as many - and I am one of them. USA

546. Teresa

Thank you for asking this question, I'm sure it's not easy. I was not allowed to make any decisions regarding my romantic life. My parents did listen to my input about what I was looking for and who I liked. But they controlled everything. They approached my now-in-laws about beginning a relationship with their son, they determined when that relationship would start, when and under what circumstances we could see each other, what physical contact we could (more like couldn't) have, what topics we could discuss, when we would get married, they decided and told my husband when to propose. Everything. I wasn't allowed to HOLD HANDS with my husband until 2 hours before we got married, and was expected to go from that to having sex a few hours later. I think that trauma still affects our sex life. My husband and I had ZERO say in our relationship until we said I do. For all intents, I was my parent's property and "courtship" wasn't really about what was healthy for me, it was about them getting a gold star in parenting because their daughter behaved. My experience did not prepare me for adult life, in fact it was crippling. It has taken me the better part of a decade to stop worrying about my parents approval and be confident in my own choices. I don't blame you, there were multiple voices saying similar things, and how these teachings are applied is a big factor as well, but I am grateful for a place to share this pain that I am very much still working through.
USA