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PICTURE PERFECT: THE IMPACT OF SPIRITUALITY AND MEDIA  
ON WOMEN'S SEXUALITY

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

---

by

Diana Kim

May 2014

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**Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Diana Kim

entitled

Picture Perfect: The Impact of Spirituality and Media on Women's Sexuality  
has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree  
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### Abstract

Media plays a large role in the sexualization of women. The increase in sexual socialization of media has brought the hookup culture to college campuses. Moreover, it has led to several negative consequences in healthy sexual and identity development in females. Understanding that sexual well-being is vital in one's development, higher education professionals have begun to take note of this increasingly important issue affecting the larger student body. Although sexuality is difficult to navigate for any emerging adult, it seems particularly complex for women who follow a specific religion. More specifically, Christian women from faith-based institutions face cultural pressures from both the hookup culture and the pervasive purity culture. In order to examine the influence of spirituality and media on female college students' sexuality, a qualitative phenomenological study was conducted at a small, liberal arts, faith-based university in the Midwestern United States. The question used to guide the research was as follows: How do spirituality and media impact female college students' perceptions of sexuality at a faith-based institution? The study consisted of 31 female participants within four focus group interviews. The results of the study found strong emerging themes including social incongruence, silence within the church, and increase in sexual and spiritual development. Suggestions for further research are included, along with the implications of these findings on the work of those within institutions of higher education.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*“Although the sexual sell, overt and subliminal, is at a fever pitch throughout all forms of the media, depictions of sex as an important and potentially profound human activity are notably absent. Couples in ads rarely look at each other. Men and women in music videos use each other. It is a cold and oddly passionless sex that surrounds us. A sense of joy is also absent; the people involved often look either hostile or bored. The real obscenity is the reduction of people to objects... Of course, all these sexual images aren’t intended to sell our children or us on sex—they are intended to sell us on shopping. This is the intent of the marketers—but an unintended consequence is the effect these images have on real sexual desire and real lives. When sex is a commodity, there is always a better deal” (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008, p. 151).*

More than 50 percent of college students participate in casual sex, and some participate in sexual conduct with two or more partners over time (Eyal & Kunkel, 2008). As college students continue to engage in risky sexual behaviors that pose public health concerns, it is important to examine the factors that play a role in sexual socialization. In particular, the growing trend of media influence on the sexual propensities of college students seems to indicate that media may influence social attitudes and moral judgments as well.

According to Ward, Epstein, Caruthers, & Merriwether (2011), “sexual images and situations have become a staple of American media” (p. 592). Media saturates the current generation, and nearly all mediums are filled with highly sexual content (Ward et al., 2011). Young adults spend more time immersed in media, and it is reported that both children and adults regard media as a vital source of information on sex and sexuality for

young people (Werner-Wilson, Fitzharris, & Morrissey, 2004). Researchers believe that emerging adults are engaging in a number of harmful behaviors that result in societal costs, including the sexualization and objectification of women and the normalization of hookups on college campuses (Aubrey, 2006; Eyal & Kunkel, 2008), all of which have become a public health concern in the United States (Heldman & Wade, 2010).

While research shows highly sexual content exists in the media, its perceived influence on the sexuality of students warrants further examination. Sexual messages are present through almost every media-related venue and are seen as an essential socializing agent. Mass media is an agent of socialization, which means that it impresses social norms and self-concepts upon individuals (Eyal and Kunkel, 2008). A limited number of studies have been conducted on media's influence on sexual outcomes, thus illustrating a lack of understanding regarding the effects of media on college students and their sexual behaviors (Eyal & Kunkel, 2008). In spite of the fact that there is a considerable amount of knowledge on the effects of media on other adolescent behaviors—from eating to smoking to drinking—Brody (2006) found a scarcity of information on the effects of mass media on adolescent sexual behaviors. Similarly, the effects of exposure to sexual objectification in the media on students' perceptions of sex and women are largely unexplored (Aubrey, 2006).

### **Influences of Media**

Establishing a healthy understanding of female sexuality helps to shape students' attitudes toward sexual behavior. However, developing a healthy sense of sexuality is difficult as sexualized media such as pornography negatively influence college students (Heldman & Wade, 2010). Pornography and sexual content within media has created a

paradigm shift toward sexualization (Heldman & Wade, 2010). Unfortunately, being exposed to these pictures of sexual behaviors free of emotions, attachment, and consequences teaches adolescents damaging ideas (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008). Kilbourne (n.d.) stated, “media messages about sex and sexuality often exploit women’s bodies and glamorize sexual violence. Girls are encouraged to objectify themselves and to obsess about their sex appeal and appearance at absurdly young ages” (para. 6). Sexualized messages eroticize rape; sexualize women; encourage women to have negative sexual attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions; and portray women as objects for the use of gratification. The representation of women in the media is exploitative, sexist, and objectifying—creating an ideal that is not reality (Berberick, 2010).

Sexualized media transforms women into objects, conveying the message that women are to be used at will. Much media tells women that being sexual is the only way of gaining self-worth. Such messaging often leads to low self-esteem, depression, eating disorders, sexual assault and/or harassment, and a feeling of discontent (Berberick, 2010; Rape Myth, 2003). As prevalent as this issue is, few have conducted research on how sexualized media affects and influences perceptions of women and how that relates to spirituality.

### **Spirituality**

The impact of sexualized media becomes more complex for students at faith-based colleges who wrestle with interpreting media in light of their own religiosity. Religion directly influences one’s attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors (Regnerus, 2007). However, it is difficult to know to what extent religion and/or spirituality contribute to the formation of adolescents’ sexual attitudes and actions. Regnerus (2007) found that

religious ideals were overwhelmed by compelling sexual scripts, therefore establishing the idea that only a handful of emerging adults have taken the time to internalize or communicate the sexual ethic espoused by their faith traditions and how their sexual activities correspond with their religious identities.

College students desire for their institutions to play a role in helping them develop spiritually (Higher Education Research Institute, 2003). Freitas (2008) found that a remarkable number of students from different institutions desired to converse on the topic of “sex in relation to the soul” (p. 12). When it comes to the sex-soul relationship, studies show that colleges are divided into two main categories—the “spiritual” and the “evangelical,” of which the former emulates the hookup culture while the latter practices the purity culture (Beckwith & Morrow, 2005; Murray-Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2005). In other words, the union of sex and the soul is not defined between religiously-affiliated and secular campuses, but instead between evangelical campuses and everywhere else (Freitas, 2008).

Evangelical Christianity places a significant emphasis on the purity culture. However, the purity culture does not embrace conversations about sex, and most youth are more sexual than the quest for purity allows them to acknowledge. This scenario creates feelings of angst, shame, and disappointment for college students who prize their spirituality and religion (Keener, 2007; Townsend, 2001). The shame and guilt that evangelical college students associate with sexual acts motivates educators to ask how they can help students understand their sexuality in a healthier way.

The excessive consumption of sexualized media by college students should also be of concern among professionals within higher education, especially as research shows

that media is a paramount source of information concerning sex and a vital instrument in human socialization on matters linked to sexuality (Samson & Grabe, 2012). Ward (2002) stated, “despite the vibrancy of this media research area, human sexuality has not been treated with the level of nuance and complexity that colleagues from related disciplines suggest it deserves” (p. 6). Therefore, research on the impact of how women’s sexuality correlates to media and spirituality is pertinent for higher education professionals to study.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of the current study was to assess the role of spirituality in the internalization of media and sexuality in college students. The study explored the experience of students who were immersed in mainstream media and women’s attitudes toward their sexuality as a result of high media intake. As such, the study was guided by the following research question:

How do spirituality and media impact female college students’ perceptions of sexuality at a faith-based institution?

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

*“Virtually every media form studied provides ample evidence of the sexualization of women, including television, music videos, music lyrics, movies, magazines, sports media, video games, the Internet, and advertising”*  
(American Psychological Association, 2010, p. 1).

### Identity Formation

**Theories.** There are a growing number of identity development theories that confirm that media molds the beliefs and behaviors of adolescents and college students. Morgan and Shanahan (2010) discussed the cultivation research developed by Gerbner (1960s) and Gross (2003), which examined the long-term effects of media exposure and how it shaped the viewers’ perceptions of social reality, as well as beliefs and values that were emulated in behavior. According to cultivation theory, “the more time people spend ‘living’ in the television world, the more likely they are to believe social reality portrayed on television” (Cohen & Weimann, 2000, p. 99). This theory is important to note in light of the current trend of sexual socialization.

Bandura’s (2001) social cognitive theory stated that symbolic communication impacts human thought and behaviors, which members of the society embrace as socially appropriate behaviors. Cultivation theory paired with social cognitive theory proposed that mediated depictions of sex may function as prospective models of behavior. This is particularly true for impressionable adolescents and college students, who are particularly susceptible to sex-related media. Samson and Grabe (2012) confirmed these models of

behaviors when they stated, “adolescents indeed report that media are their leading source of information about sex” (p. 282). Samson and Grabe (2012) also stated that scholars agreed that media was the leading authority on sex information. Additionally, there is a correlation between media and sexual excitation and inhibition. The culmination of research from Bandura (2001), Gerber (1960s) and Gross (2003), and Samson and Grabe (2012) shows that sexual titillation is a prevalent fact in media. These studies demonstrate how media is a notable carnal socialization agent in forming human psychosexual propensities. Exposure to such sexual content moderates moral judgments related to sex, as well as social attitudes.

Forms of developmental progression occur over the entire lifespan. However, research indicates that significant developmental progressions take place very early, and that identity is largely formed by the end of emerging adulthood. Eyal and Kunkel (2008) stated:

The period of emerging adulthood...is further characterized by increased independence from, and access to, traditional socializing agents such as parents. Romantic and sexual relationships...tend to last longer and involve greater intimacy than in adolescence. There is also much sexual activity during this age period (CDC, 1997), with nearly 80% of emerging adult college students engaging in sexual intercourse. (p. 162)

Awareness of media’s responsibility in such behavior is essential due to public health risks (e.g., the rise of STDs and AIDS) linked with sex (Eyal & Kunkel, 2008). For this reason, it is crucial for researchers to continue to examine the effects of sexual media on



individuals during this important development period (Kunkel, Wilson, Donnerstein, Linz, Smith, Gray, et al., 1995).

Highly sexual content in media prompts notable effects on college students, and exposure can continue beyond immediate viewing. If certain shows display positive consequences of sex, then students perceive sex positively and are more likely to engage in premarital sex. However, if shows portray negative outcomes of sex (e.g., pregnancy), then students tend to develop negative attitudes toward premarital sexual intercourse (Eyal & Kunkel, 2008). The research demonstrates a correlation between media and social attitudes and moral judgments and that emerging adults are malleable in the areas related to sexual socialization throughout the period of emerging adulthood.

**Sexual predispositions.** The prevalence of sexual images, situations, and content featuring adolescent characters within media has led many to believe that television shapes the way young people and emerging adults approach sexual relationships. Ward et al. (2011) investigated the scope of sexual behaviors in multiple main media formats. Their analysis showed a correlation between media exposure and sexual socialization. Ward et al. (2011) concluded that exposure to certain media was a notable contributor to early sexual decisions and behavior, stating: “Because of the prevalence of this content, it is often speculated that regular TV use will likely shape how young people approach sexual relationships, perhaps encouraging earlier or broader sexual experimentation” (p. 592).

Another important theory is Fredrickson and Roberts’ (1997) objectification theory, which is based on the principle that women of all ages develop and internalize their foremost view of their physical selves from an observer’s perspective. The

development of such a view can occur either through the media or personal experiences. The theory supplements “a sociocultural analysis of the female body within the psychology of women and gender” with respect to their experiences and could conceivably be the reason why there is a “disruption in the flow of consciousness that results as many girls and women internalize the culture’s practices of objectification and habitually monitor their bodies’ appearance” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 196). Primarily, objectification theory articulates how women are affected as a result of expected social and gender roles, which plays into sexual objectification—“the experience of being treated as a body (or collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 174). Sexual objectification plays a tremendous role in the sexualization of women.

### **Spiritual and moral development.**

***Kohlberg’s moral development theory.*** Kohlberg’s (1974) moral development theory is cognitive-developmental in nature. Kohlberg (1974) examined the process of how individuals make moral judgments and found six stages of moral development that lay within the three levels of moral reasoning (preconventional, conventional, and post-conventional reasoning). These levels of moral development begin as individuals progress from seeing rules as a fixed entity as a means of avoiding punishment, and moving toward a place where individuals make choices that live up to social expectations and roles in relation to others. The final progression of moral development involves the internalization of morality in which there is a recognition and respect of alternative opinions and values, thus making the progression of moral development advance from externally rule-oriented to internally principle-oriented (Evans, 2010).

The moral progression displayed within an individual further characterizes three phases within Kohlberg's (1974) theory: structure, sequence, and hierarchy. As an individual is exposed to others in higher stages of moral reasoning and experiences situations in which he or she must confront moral issues, progressive movement is made in increased moral reasoning. Although Kohlberg's (1974) theory of moral development increases moral reasoning, the outcome does not necessarily lead to higher moral behavior.

***Fowler's faith development theory.*** Evans (2010) stated that faith or spirituality development usually comes through one's community and across the life span. It is universal but each person's faith is unique in the manner in which it is exhibited. In understanding faith development, Fowler's (1980) faith development theory offers a plausible model based on progression through a pre-stage and six subsequent stages of faith development.

The foremost stage of Fowler's (1980) theory begins with individuals possessing an inherent sense of trust and loyalty in which they are unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Individuals then move toward internalizing and organizing the world around them. From there, individuals evaluate ideas, allowing for their values and beliefs to evolve to support their identity. Then individuals are able to critically reflect on their beliefs and values to make self-aware commitments. A significant time later, individuals progress toward a time when they embrace the polarities in life and come to a place where they realize and experience oneness with the environment and universal community.

***Morality and faith.*** Research analyzing the relationship between Kohlberg and Fowler's theories discovered a positive correlation between moral and faith development (Fowler, 1980). This association validates how high levels of faith development strongly connect to high levels of moral development, thus creating a framework for moral development (Evans, 2010). The correlation between moral and faith development is crucial when examining how spirituality impacts an individual's sexuality.

### **The Impact of Media**

Media's reinforcement of sexual socialization, especially among college students, removes the moral element of sexuality and sex and leads to the manifestation of the hookup culture on college campuses. Literature defines the hookup culture as "casual sexual contact between nondating partners without an (expressed or acknowledged) expectation of forming a committed relationship" (Heldman & Wade, 2010, p. 323). The frequent use of media among the college student population causes students to consume sexual messages on a daily basis. Sexual messages are on almost every media-related venue and are seen as an essential socializing agent. However, "only a small handful of studies have experimentally examined the media's influence on sexual outcomes" (Eyal and Kunkel, 2008, p. 162). Despite the prevalence of media content, a disconnect exists between understanding the effects media has on college students and their sexual behaviors.

The excess of sexual content within media is saturating the Millennial Generation and creating a sexual paradigm shift. Statistics show that 82% of popular television programs among adolescents include sexual content, and 90% of television shows feature adolescent characters (Ward et al., 2011). In part, the emergence of a sexual culture is

due to media. The images and messages are so pervasive that sexuality has moved from a largely private matter to a public matter. One avenue in which sexuality has publicly advanced is through the use of pornography. Over 90% of teens have access to Internet pornography (Heldman & Wade, 2010); this has heavily formed the attitudes of both men and women with regard to sex and their own sexuality. Pornography alone revises the sexual script, and studies show that those who engross themselves in pornography engage in sexual intercourse at a younger age (Heldman & Wade, 2010).

Traditional pornography is an enormous cultural issue; furthermore, Heldman and Wade (2010) argued for the existence of “pornification” of media—the hypersexualization of media. Media of all types use and glorify sexually explicit images and themes. It was found that “90.5% of [television] episodes contained some sexual reference with an average of 7.9 sexual references per hour of programming” (Heldman & Wade, 2010, p. 7).

Research shows that the pornification of media correlates with the involvement and approval of the hookup culture. The media unrealistically portrays sexuality in a way that does not depict the actual negative consequences accompanying the hookup culture. Analyzing sexuality in media, it is clear to see that there are ample depictions of sexual behaviors without any regard to STDs, emotional pain, the demoralization of women, or pregnancy. This is dangerous because college students may not be able to differentiate reality from the fantasy presented by the media. Thus, it is important to dispel myths concerning sexual behavior in the media to safeguard students from negative physical and emotional effects in the future.

## Understanding Sexuality

**Sexualization.** Media plays a large role in the sexualization of women. According to the American Psychological Association (2010), sexualization is evident when one of four main premises occurs:

A person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; a person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person. (p. 1)

The glorified depiction of sexuality in media leads to negative consequences for female sexual development. Several domains can be affected, including cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, and healthy sexual development (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008).

Sexual well-being is vital in development and cultivating a healthy understanding of one's identity and sexual formation. However, the sexualization of females has negatively affected a female's ability to develop healthy sexuality. Self-objectification is directly linked to a decrease in sexual health, particularly amid adolescent girls (APA, 2010). The exposure to such narrow ideals of attractiveness through media images that sexualize females is linked with unrealistic and/or harmful expectations with regard to sexuality and women's value. These negative effects present problems during emerging adulthood because adolescents and emerging adults are strongly impacted as "their sense of self is still being formed" (APA, 2010). Additionally, such exposure influences how females conceptualize femininity and sexuality; "Girls and young women who more

frequently consume or engage with mainstream media content offer stronger endorsement of sexual stereotypes that depict women as sexual objects” (Ward, 2002; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006).

**Sexuality.** Sexuality is complex and varies by person, yet it is integral to an individual’s identity formation (Harding, 2001). Although sexuality can be understood through biological factors, Freud argued that sexual identity is primarily formed through cultural and historical influences (Harding, 2001), thus inferring that sexuality is shaped by the culture in which one lives. Since the messages in media are so pervasive in American culture, sexuality has moved from a private to a public matter where women define their sexuality through the media and culture around them.

The underlying idea behind sexuality involves the attraction of persons and the desire to be sexual and/or engage in sexually stimulating situations (APA, 2010; McClintock, 2001). Whitehead and Whitehead (1994) expounded on this idea of sexuality:

Our sexuality includes the realm of sex—that is, our reproductive organs and our genital behaviors—but encompasses much more of who we are. What our body means to us, how we understand ourselves as a woman or as a man, the ways we feel comfortable in expressing affection—these are a part of sexuality. (p. 45)

Although sexuality is key in identity development, women face challenges in grasping and acting on their sexuality due to media and sexual objectification. A majority of the time, women’s attitudes and perceptions of sexuality can be related to themes of shame, fear, anxiety, and ambivalence (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Keener, 2007). This tendency is especially true for female college students who place spirituality as a priority

(Freitas, 2008). As women seek to understand their sexuality in the context of their spirituality, it is helpful to explore the relationship between these two areas. This relationship is particularly important as women attempt to express their sexuality in a healthy way without compromising their morals and beliefs.

### **Competing Cultures**

College student dating has recently captured media scholars' attention as hooking up has become pervasive on college campuses (Burdette, Ellison, Hill, & Glenn, 2009; England, Shafer, & Fogarty, 2007; Paul & Hayes, 2002). In these types of liaisons, instead of pursuing a long-term, monogamous relationship, college students seek out purely sexual partners. While some may realize the potential negative effects of the hookup culture, a committed romantic relationship is not seen as attainable or socioculturally acceptable. Thus, romance has become a fantasy for many (Freitas, 2008).

Freitas (2008) stated "girls have to be willing to hook up because that's the only way to get a guy, but every time they do, they risk social ruin by imperiling their reputations" (p. 6). In a study conducted on the relationship between sex and the soul, Freitas (2008) discovered that the overwhelming majority of students said they preferred romance and relationships, but were stuck within the confines of the hookup culture. Students desire romance, yet they perpetuate the hookup culture to the point where "the first hookup seems to have replaced the first date" (Freitas, 2008, p. 140). The prevalence of the hookup culture plays a role in women's perception of their sexuality. Women desire intimacy within a relationship yet feel that they must comply with the demands of the hookup culture, thus engaging in more promiscuous behavior than they truly desire.



**Purity culture.** Faith-based institutions are primarily populated with students who share a common faith and predominantly view sex and religion as inseparable from one another; “you can’t even begin to think about sex without grounding that reflection in God and your Christianity” (Freitas, 2008, p. 79). However, there are those who feel they cannot live up to the pervasive purity culture, which leads them to feel shame in their inability to be as pure as their culture requires. The purity culture also leads many to feel uncomfortable engaging in conversations about sex. Such mentality produces unhealthy and often damaging sexual views and practices. Keener (2007) found several themes such as fear, ambivalence, and lack of sexual subjectivity pertaining to female sexuality among college women at faith-based institutions. Research supports that students at evangelical institutions experience “the depth and intensity of... stress and anxiety around sex, sin, and shame” (Freitas, 2008, p. 86).

Within the evangelical realm, the purity culture is pervasive. The culture largely spurns conversations about sex and does not seek to understand the role sexuality plays in students’ development (Regnerus, 2007). In the purity culture, “the operative classification is marriage, understood as a kind of ‘purifying container’ for the messiness that is human sexuality. To engage in sex outside of marriage is to contravene a cherished classification” (Freitas, 2008, p. 79). The purity culture promotes the mentality that abstaining from sex is easy and perfect; this highly romanticized view is perpetuated by the lack of conversation about sex within the purity culture. Freitas (2008) stated:

Living up to this version of the romantic ideal is very difficult. Most youth are more sexual than the quest for purity allows them to feel and acknowledge, much less actually act out. Because of its extreme restrictions, the chances of realizing

romantic hopes within the purity paradigm are slim. This can create terrible angst and disappointment for young adults, who are often shattered by their failure to live the fairy tale. (p. 80)

The purity culture is powerful, especially to those who hold their spirituality highly. Sex becomes a black-and-white issue. Individuals engaged in this culture do not have the opportunity to explore or understand their sexuality, as students are supposed to wait until marriage to engage in understanding sex and sexuality (Regenerus, 2007).

**Living in dichotomy.** Evangelical college students experience tension as they are not only shaped by Christian culture, but also by the secular culture. Humans are sexual beings and have a desire to be known through their sexuality, yet the purity culture questions this need and often brings confusion about sexuality, which can bring unnecessary guilt and shame.

In a study of the merging of sexuality and spirituality, Keener (2007) cited Ellison's (1996) understanding of sexuality:

Human sexuality is being shaped and reshaped according to sociological and cultural factors, constantly being redesigned in accordance with social values and purposes...Christian tradition has tended to function within a cultural framework that suggested that good sexual relations require that men are dominant and women are passive, and those who fail to challenge this assertion fail to promote justice and transformation in the church. Ellison punctuated his thoughts with a question from James Neleson, "How can we live lives less fearfully and more securely in the grace of God? (Ellison, 1996, p. 225). (p. 15)

With respect to spirituality, culturally the body is seen as harmful and the spirit is virtuous (Townsend, 2001). However, in relation to evangelical sexual ethics, some scholars emphasize that “sexuality must be understood beyond the realm of the genital and include other aspects of human expression, in particular, emotional bonding between humans” (Grenz, 1997; Townsend, 2001). The narrow view of sexuality often held by college students at faith-based institutions is damaging to one’s understanding of his or her sexual identity development.

### **Conclusion**

Adolescents and emerging adults are a vulnerable population and are susceptible to the effects of media, particularly where the matter of sexuality is concerned (Tong, 2009).

“Despite this great concern, there is actually little scientific proof in support of the assumed causal effect of media on sexual behavior or attitudes in teenagers” (Tong, 2009, p. 2). Moreover, the connections between media, sexuality, and spirituality have been largely unstudied (Burdette et al., 2009; Freitas, 2008). Spirituality serves as a crucial piece in the discussion on media and sexuality, and with the growing prevalence of media and the idea of sexual identity, it would be of great benefit to engage in research on this topic.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Methodology**

In order to explore and understand how female college students perceive the impact of media on their sexual and spiritual development, the current study followed a qualitative method with a phenomenological design. The phenomenological research approach was used to identify and explore the lived experiences of college females (Creswell, 2009). Creswell (2009) defined phenomenological research as a “qualitative strategy in which the researcher identifies the essence of the human experience about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study” (p. 231). The primary questions behind a phenomenological study are: “What are the meaning, structures, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon or group of people?” and “How can we then accurately tell their story?” (Patton, 2002, p. 104).

The objective of the study was to understand the experiences of female college students’ perceptions on how media impacted their sexuality in relation to their spirituality; hence, the phenomenological design was the most effective strategy for capturing the lived experiences of college students (Patton, 2002). Van Manen (1990) expanded on the idea of a “lived experience” in stating that the phenomenological reflection is retrospective, not introspective (as cited in Patton, 2002). Furthermore, Husserl’s (1913) philosophical assumption was that “we can only know what we

experience by attending to perceptions and meaning that awaken our conscious awareness” (as cited in Patton, 2002, p. 105).

Accordingly, through the phenomenological interview approach, focus groups were asked open-ended questions, at which point the researcher collected information that was coded and analyzed for emerging themes. The use of a focus group allowed for multiple perspectives to contribute, at once giving breadth and depth to the subject. The method was therefore suitable and useful in researching the sexuality of women within the context of females at faith-based institutions—a topic about which there is little research. Consequently, the focus group method encouraged conversations on sensitive topics in a setting where conversation would naturally manifest itself. The method was essential to the study as it was based on underlying and implicit social assumptions (Creswell, 2008). This process allowed for the voices of students to be heard more clearly while gaining insight into this area of study.

### **Participants**

The participants for the study were sampled from a private, residential Christian liberal arts institution accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. Located in the Midwest, the institution had 1,910 undergraduate students, of which 56% were female. The core of the university revolved around its mission and values. Therefore, the institution’s academics and programs were biblically anchored with a focus on the integration of faith and learning.

Participants were homogenous in nature, yet participants were segmented into two separate sets, creating relative differentiation between stages of maturation; hence, these groups respectively represented the increasing sexual and spiritual development of

college women. Participants were segmented into four different focus group interviews, in which each class was represented. Within each group, participants shared the following characteristics: female gender; eighteen or older; class grouping (freshman/sophomore or junior/senior); heterosexual orientation; campus resident; and professed believer in the Christian faith.

### **Procedure**

Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the institution's IRB and permission attained for data to be collected at the institution. Participants for the study developed through the assistance of resident directors and other student development professionals who worked with female students. Student development professionals were asked for names of potential participants who fit the criteria of the study. Participants who fit the research requirements were contacted about the purpose and method of the study and their potential involvement in the study. The researcher sent an electronic consent form to interested participants and coordinated a time for the focus groups. Additionally, there was communication between student development professionals and the researcher about available resources, such as counseling, for students who might want to seek additional help in discussing their sexuality.

The focus group interviews were 90 minutes in length and took place in a private conference room on the institution's campus. The researcher used a funnel approach. The interview began with a pre-viewing question. Then participants watched a thirty-minute documentary entitled, *Killing Us Softly 4*, which exposed how women were portrayed in the media. The documentary challenged students to see the effect of advertising on women and was used as a launching point to illustrate the effect and impact of the media

on women. The interview moved to standardized questioning and evolved into open-ended conversation. Participants were asked to discuss their experiences openly and honestly. An interview guide with specific questions and general topics was used to steer the conversation (See Appendix A). With the permission of the interviewees, the researcher audio-recorded the focus group interviews. After interviews were completed, the researcher transcribed each interview, changing names to pseudonyms and each focus group to a series of letters, including FroshSoph Group 1 (FoSo1), FroshSoph Group 2 (FoSo2), JuniorSenior Group 1 (JrSr1), and JuniorSenior Group 2 (JrSr2).

All of the interviews and names were password protected and saved in a database that was accessible only by the primary researcher. The primary researcher transcribed the interviews. Throughout this process, the researcher found a number of themes.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

After each focus group was conducted and recorded, the data was analyzed. The researcher transcribed each interview and analyzed and divided the data into relevant categories of information—ultimately compiling a final list of recurring and overarching themes related to the research question (Creswell, 2009). The analysis and results of the study captured the essence of the influence of media on women's sexuality and spirituality.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

This chapter presents the prominent themes that emerged in the interviews. Themes were organized into three categories and connecting subthemes provided meaning and depth to the overall research. These were categorized based on the primary research question of the study: How do spirituality and media impact female college students' perceptions of sexuality at a faith-based institution? Amy (JrSr2) expressed a general feeling for all participants:

When I think about what media says about being a woman as a Christian, well media says, "Be sexual, show your sexuality, you're a woman, be proud," but like when you're a Christian, you're taught, "No, guard your heart." So it's like when you're asked to talk about that, it's like, "What? Why would you want us to do that? That's very intimate." So I think [...] you don't really know what to do as a Christian and media is telling you a different thing.

#### **Social Incongruence**

The first overarching theme present in the interviews was social incongruence. All four focus groups expressed that being an evangelical immersed in media was similar to living in between "two ends of the spectrum." Lisa (FrSo2) said, "I think a lot of times it's also hard just because you're stuck between two different sides telling you these really intense stipulations of what you should be." Lily (FrSo1) remarked how the two



cultures had “radically different perspectives on sex and sexuality.” Several participants agreed that the dichotomy was the result of two different extremes idolizing sexuality—the purity culture versus the hookup culture.

Purity is highly emphasized in evangelical Christian culture. Lily (FrSo2) commented on how the Christian community “holds [sexuality] as a beautiful thing [...] and it’s supposed to be held in this place of honor.” Conversely, participants agreed that media portrayed the hookup culture. Participants stated that expressing sexuality was highly regarded among their secular friends. Abby (FrSo2) explained how her secular friends also believed “sex [was] a great thing” but that it was something that individuals should “strive for and be proud of [...] while [they’re] young.” Participants felt the tension between the cultures and believed that there was “a really fine line of what you can and cannot do,” thus making sexuality difficult to comprehend.

Although the two cultures are deeply contradictory, participants expressed a desire to be accepted by both cultures. Abby (FrSo2) described her experience, stating:

I think that like a big problem is that once you get to that age you feel as though you need to feel accepted [by both cultures], but you ask yourself what standards of feeling are accepted. [...] You see those ads and you see those commercials and you’re just like, “Oh, that’s what I need to be accepted by.”

The majority of participants voiced that being accepted was challenging especially as they “struggled” to fit the image that societal pressures placed on them.

**Double standards.** Participants believed the juxtaposition of the two cultures and gender-role-enforced structures created a double standard, particularly for women. The majority of participants mentioned that sexuality was seen as a “man’s issue.”

Participants felt that both media and spirituality directed sexuality toward men while emphasizing that women did not “struggle” with sexuality or anything pertaining to a sexual nature—consequently creating no space for women to talk about it. In addition, women felt conflicted with the double standards present in the two cultures, feeling it was not socioculturally appropriate to express their sexuality.

**Societal pressures.** Social media places an unprecedented amount of pressure on being perfect. Kaylee (FrSo2) expressed, “I feel like the rise of social media has played a huge role in how we look [...] and I feel like that might have something to do with obsessing about how we look.” Lily (FrSo2) explained that social media was “destroying [her].” Every participant felt an intense pressure for perfection that was unattainable and difficult to cope with. For example, Lisa (FrSo1) said, “This whole group of people of society that we’re immersed in [tells] us, ‘Ok, you have to look this certain way, you have to dress a certain way if you’re like fat, or if you’re this or this, you’re wrong.’” She stated that in addition to this pressure was an opposing pressure that “if you’re not comfortable with your body, if you’re not pure, if you’re not like this [...] incredibly godly woman, you’re wrong.” This was frustrating because the church’s “good” ideals in saving sex till marriage were “telling [women] that [they] still [had] something to achieve.” The unhealthy ideals women faced can be seen through the judgmental constraints culture places on women regarding, for example, “appropriate modesty.” Lisa continued, “We’re having people [on both sides] tell us we’re wrong [...] I can’t do both at the same time, but I want to do both, and so it’s just a lot on a girl’s back.” Indeed, the majority articulated how societal pressures stressed the importance for women to achieve an impossible ideal.

Participants also described their encounters in evangelical culture with the pressure to be modest. Veronica (JrSr1) mentioned her difficulty with dealing with modesty because of “how much women are scrutinized for their bodies.” Jocelyn (FrSo1) grew up in a non-Christian home, but upon becoming a Christian “[her] eyes were opened to how important this modesty thing was [...] It was just very like, ‘Oh, this is very important if I’m going to be a Christian.’”

The majority felt that the purpose and message of modesty was warped and as a result felt overwhelmed. Selina (JrSr2) stated that modesty “caused women in the Christian community to learn to be like ashamed of their body and like cover it up” due to fear of judgment. She continued by stating that “sexuality is something that [she doesn’t] feel like is really talked about much and like modesty is, but [...] it’s more like ‘Protect boys’ and not at all about [women] and protecting [their] worth.” Marisa (JrSr1) expounded, “We can only do so much as a person, and the women have the weight of not only ourselves and what the media says about us but we also have to look out for what the boys think now, so that’s just a lot to carry for one person.”

**Difficulty expressing sexuality.** The third subtheme identified was difficulty in expressing sexuality. Jane (JrSr1) said, “We have no way to interpret the gifts that are given [...] I’m 22 years old and I really don’t understand fully what sexuality even means.” Similarly, Mallory (FrSo2) stated, “How do we live in the world without being of the world? I guess it is just something I don’t know exactly how to do.” Kristin (FrSo1), a sophomore, posited:

I think discussing how to express [sexuality] is something that’s so important that needs to be talked about, especially because we live in a culture that emphasizes

[sexuality] so much. So [...] one question [I ask myself] is how do I express my sexuality without being married because like I still think that's important but I don't know how to do that in an appropriate way.

This difficulty caused a few participants to compartmentalize their sexuality. One woman said, "There's no way to fit sexuality into my spirituality." Kelsey (FrSo1) stated, "I feel as if serving God and being sexual, they're two different things for me, unfortunately." Individuals placed sexuality in different categories, "making compartments of these different things, these different messages," as a way of coping.

While some compartmentalized their sexuality, others avoided it. Kelsey (FrSo1) explained, "I avoid sexuality at all costs and avoid thinking about myself, avoid media, [...] I always feel like I avoid [sexuality] because it's easier for me to avoid." Amanda (FrSo1) mentioned how she intentionally wore bigger clothes to hide her sexuality so that people would not "see the way that [she] really [looked]." She further stated that she wasn't sure "if this [was] something to be proud about with [her] sexuality but [she] would rather have double XL plaid shirts on all the time."

Overall, however, the majority conveyed a desire to discuss sexuality. Mallory (FrSo2) declared, "We're made in such a way that we're allowed to have sex, so I don't know, I just wish there was freedom to talk about it more, because I think through that a lot of good can happen." All participants agreed with this ideology yet wondered who would be the first person to initiate the conversation, because discussing sexuality is similar to "an awkward elephant in the corner just waiting to be talked about." As a result of such difficulty, several tensions pertaining to female sexuality emerged. The tensions

included ambiguity, shame and guilt, failure, fear, and frustration. Further examples can be found in Appendix D.

### **Silence Within the Church**

A prominent theme mentioned was “this idea that we [...] don’t talk about [sexuality], especially within the Christian community.” Amy (JrSr2) said, “I feel like whenever I hear about any type of talk about sexuality in the church it’s almost more about purity than your sexuality.” Many participants voiced similar concerns. All four focus groups believed that the “silence” within the Christian community perpetuated shame. Many participants felt hopeless because “regardless of what [anyone] does, [he or she is] shamed” and stated that “[no one] can win either way.”

### **Increase in Sexual and Spiritual Development**

The third theme present in the study was identity development and maturity between the freshmen and sophomore groups in comparison to the junior and senior groups. All participants conveyed how media played a large role in their formation and understanding of sexuality. Christine (FrSo2) said, “The media has definitely affected my viewpoint of myself as a Christian woman,” and several women discussed how the interplay between media and spirituality created ambivalence. As a result, participants’ social attitudes on sexuality were impacted in varying degrees. The two separate sets of students depicted an increase in sexual and spiritual development.

**Identity development.** Each participant brought up the importance of finding her identity in order to understand her sexuality. Some participants placed their identity in various areas such as relationships, singleness, and societal ideals. However, the majority continued to place their identity in God, especially those who felt that they had failed.

Mallory (FrSo2) said, “It’s just a lot of learning how to appreciate the fact of how you were made, and by the world’s standards we’re never going to be good enough, so it’s learning how God sees us as beautiful.” She continued, “[People] are always going to be perfect enough for [God] and worthy of His love.” Kendra (JrSr2) similarly stated,

I personally don’t want to be confined to what the world tells me my sexuality means to me [but instead] how the Lord sees me [instead of] being defined by like advertisements or how people say I should look or how people on Pinterest look [...] That’s like how I want to express my sexuality.

**Underclassmen understanding of sexuality.** The underclassmen participants were more vulnerable in sharing stories about their sexuality in comparison to the upperclassmen (i.e., past sexual experiences, struggles with masturbation and pornography, and definitions of sexuality). Kelsey (FrSo1) shared a story about a relationship she had with her high school boyfriend, explaining how she went “a year with controlling [herself] and controlling [her] desires, but her worldly friends would be like ‘How? Why? How do you not have sex?’” Kelsey (FrSo1) felt that the secular culture pressured her go “too far” with her boyfriend:

Like when I was pure, I was too clean for my worldly friends, but when I made the decisions to take it a step further, I was too dirty for my Christian friends, so I thought, “Where do I fit in?” And [...] feeling [that] because I made one mistake I can never be made pure again, so [...] should I still keep moving on and making the same mistakes and making the same decisions, or should I try to get better and lie? I don’t know; there’s the two pressures that just collide.

Another participant, Mallory (FrSo2), opened up about her “struggles with pornography” and how this affected her view of sexuality and what “girls [were] supposed to look like and how they were supposed to act with a guy.” The images in pornography made Mallory (FrSo2) question “how [she was] supposed to act and how [she was] supposed to be sexually.”

Furthermore, an overwhelming number of underclassmen expressed confusion on the definition of sexuality and stated that sexuality equated to the act of sex or being in an intimate relationship with a partner. Christine (FrSo2) said,

I don’t even know how I express my sexuality because I don’t even know what that is. Like, I heard the definition and it makes sense when you say it, but I’m like, I don’t know. I think about—when I hear about the word sexuality, the first thing I think about is sex. And like bodies and the male species [...] and [...] that’s literally all I can think of, because I don’t know, it’s just confusing.

Many participants expressed similar thoughts, with one participant stating that her “view of sex [was] something from God, for marriage.” Meredith (FrSo2) went as far as to say that “no one really [saw] that part of [her] sexuality unless [she was] dating them.”

**Upperclassmen acceptance of sexuality.** Participants in the junior/senior focus groups similarly mentioned expressing their sexuality through their clothing, body image, and physical intimacy with another. Likewise, there was still confusion about sexual expression. Leah (JrSr2) explained, “I think we haven’t been communicated what’s the appropriate way to express sexuality, especially in the church.” Every upperclassman agreed, and one participant posited, “I just don’t know what it means to express my sexuality in a healthy way.” She continued, “How do I as a Christian woman, who’s

living in this culture right now, how do I express my sexuality without it being shameful, without being a slut, without being wrong? [...]I think that says a lot about our culture.”

Ultimately both upperclassmen groups voiced that their sexuality went beyond the physical. Julie (JrSr1) said, “We think of sexuality being such a physical thing, but it should be [thought of] in a very spiritual way [...] by linking [the physical] to the spiritual.” Halle (JrSr1) expressed frustration in seeing the church represent sexuality as “something that we talk about in terms of physical [...] but we don’t talk about the desire to be connected [...] or the shame we feel and the silence surrounding it, and here’s maybe a way to do it.”

Both groups agreed that expressing sexuality came through the connection they had with others. Heather (JrSr1) said, “I think that part of sexuality is just that the reality that we are humans and we are created to be relational.” Kendra (JrSr2) explained that sexuality is “my desire for someone to know me [...] at my innermost core, and I think like acting out your sexuality is like allowing people to get to know you, to know you deeply and to find those friendships.” Naomi (JrSr2) similarly stated, “[Sexuality] encompasses everything and who you are as a person, [...] It’s allowing someone to know you very well, or in essence being very vulnerable with whoever that person is [...] or being really vulnerable with yourself or [...] with the Lord.”

Upperclassmen posited that sexuality was relational and vulnerable, yet many had difficulty with vulnerability. One senior remarked that she struggled to answer how she expressed her sexuality because “the first things that came to [her] mind were past things [she’d] personally struggled with.” Naomi (JrSr2) shared, “I know you guys, but I don’t know you well, and so am I willing to be vulnerable in that because sexuality is



something that is so close to your heart that you don't want to share that with everyone.”

She further stated that “sexuality means a lot to a person. So it's like almost, ‘Do these people deserve to hear about what I have to say about my own personal sexuality?’”

Also, participants stressed the importance of being “appropriately vulnerable” as it could bring healing and freedom. Kelly (JrSr2) believed that “having more discussion on the whole idea of what safe people look like and what appropriate vulnerability is” would be “more effective and more far-reaching.” Kendra (JrSr2) posited:

I think that the one thing that I learned is that being vulnerable with people is very, very important under the right circumstances. I think we all need to be in really healthy places like with the Lord, being very present [...] but that comes with time and people being aware that bringing stuff up like this is painful, and it is something that is directly connected to your heart, and to let people see that is really scary and it can affect the rest of your life, or a big portion of your life.

In this identity development progression, women also were hesitant to be vulnerable because they became more aware of their experiences and others. Amy (JrSr2) said, “I can see that as I've progressed through the years, people became more judgmental. Well, I don't think people became more judgmental; I think I became more aware of how judgmental people were.”

Every junior and senior participant understood that sexuality was complex because it is integral to one's identity formation. Pat (JrSr2) expressed that sexuality and identity are “innately tied to who we are and that it's hard” because “media might be affecting our identity.” Kendra (JrSr2), a senior, said talking about sexuality was difficult because “sexuality encompasses a lot and [she doesn't] think we fully understand the

extent to which media has affected us [...] and [doesn't] think that it's fun to admit like everything that it affects."

**Self-actualization.** In some capacity, every focus group came back to the idea of self-actualization. With the pressures of media and spirituality, women eventually came to the realization that every individual needed to go through a time of questioning and searching to understand what she believed for herself. Kendra (JrSr2) questioned why she believed certain virtues and rules to be true and went on a process to understand who she was instead of only listening to what culture or "[her] parents told [her] to do." Additionally, Pat (JrSr2) related that the divergent cultures forced her to "form [her] own opinions on things and make a stand for what [she] believed and why [she] believed it;" however, this proved to be challenging and confusing. Some related this process to "soul searching" as they made their "own formulations of what [they] thought [their] sexuality [was]." Furthermore, many agreed that the silence within the church caused women to figure out their sexuality on their own.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of the current research was to examine the impact of spirituality and media on women's sexuality. Research indicated that media plays a large role in the sexual identity development of women at faith-based institutions. The prevalence of media shows that the formation of women's sexuality in correlation to their spirituality is a topic worthy of consideration. This chapter presents a discussion of the findings in light of previous research. The implications of these themes are explored and the limitations of the study are examined. The chapter concludes with implications for future research on the impact of spirituality and media on female sexuality.

#### **Social Incongruence**

The present study determined that a prevalent theme was the tension of living in social incongruence. Participants' involvement with media and spirituality caused dissonance in their sexual development. The tension between the two divergent cultures was shown to cause college women at faith-based institutions to experience confusion and difficulty in comprehending their sexuality. Participants felt as though they lived in two separate worlds that placed polarized societal pressures upon them. However, they desired to be accepted by both cultures, thus perpetuating the feeling of social incongruence. The results of the study were significant because as women live between these two tensions, both worlds tell them they need to achieve impossible ideals. This

developmental process limits women's ability to fully develop a healthy sense of their sexuality, which is a critical component of identity formation (Harding, 2001).

Although women desire to express their sexuality, the contrasting cultures created a lack of space for women to do so, thus reinforcing gender-role-enforced structures and the sexualization and objectification of women (Frederickson & Robert, 1977; Kalish & Kimmel, 2011). The cultures negatively impacted healthy sexual development and perpetuated the objectification of women in society (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008). The double standards created an unfair societal condition in which females were unable to begin their journey of self-discovery as it related to sexuality.

In the previous chapter, the merging of opposing cultures caused women to feel two unique pressures: perfection and modesty. This finding relates to the idea that media is an agent to impress social norms and self-concepts upon individuals (Cohen & Wimann, 2003). Additionally, it reinforced that religion plays a strong influence in the lives of evangelical Christians as it directly influences one's attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors (Freitas, 2008; Regnerus, 2007). The fact that the participants felt a burden to be perfect and modest demonstrated the influential power of these social constructs. Not only is it critical that women learn to appropriately engage in both cultures without compromising their morals, but it is also equally as important that these pressures do not deter women from engaging with their sexuality.

The juxtaposition of media and spirituality creates more turbulence and dissonance in women's understanding and expression of their sexuality. Women in the current study indicated that ambiguity, shame, guilt, failure, fear, and frustration were thoughts commonly associated with their sexuality. Additionally, the negative mentalities

associated with the media can be damaging to a woman's self-worth (Berberick, 2010).

The magnitude of these negative mindsets is damaging to sexual views and practice and furthermore causes women to avoid beneficial discussions regarding their sexuality.

### **Silence Within the Church**

Though the themes in the present research were consistent with the literature, one predominant theme was evident—silence within the Christian community. The magnitude of silence with the Church, especially with regard to women's sexuality, was far more prevalent than revealed in previously assessed literature.

Paralleling Freitas' (2008) research, the prior results demonstrated that college students desired to discuss sexuality in relation to the soul. Similarly, Regnerus (2007) and Keener (2007) clearly depicted the extent of the correlation between the purity culture and the avoidance and lack of understanding of one's sexuality. Silence within the church not only perpetuates the shame, confusion, and ambiguity surrounding the conversation of sexuality but also demands that women disassociate from their sexual identity. As the church encourages people to suppress feelings of sexuality, women are unable to freely engage in conversations that lead to a better understanding of sexuality. However, women cannot ignore the extensiveness of media, faith, and sexuality in the opposing cultures; they must feel that they can voice their opinions about the integration of these constructs in order to fully develop a holistic view of their sexuality.

### **Increase in Sexual and Spiritual Development**

Sexuality is complex and the ways in which individuals comprehend it varies; however, sexuality is a key aspect of one's identity formation (Harding, 2011). All participants recognized the importance of finding one's identity in order to holistically

understand and express one's sexuality. Although the majority were still perplexed by sexuality, the upperclassmen exhibited growth in their moral and faith development. Upperclassmen gained a better understanding of the complexities of sexuality. The progression of the participants' sexual understanding aligns with Kohlberg's (1974) moral development theory and Fowler's (1980) faith development theory. It is important for emerging adults to realize the all-encompassing nature of sexuality as it pertains to both physical and relational components (Grenz, 1997; Townsend, 2011; Whitehead & Whitehead, 1994). The juncture of high morality and faith allows individuals to more holistically examine their sexuality in relation to their spirituality and make decisions based on their understanding.

### **Implications for Practice**

In the current study, the necessity for institutions to have substantial programming emerged as a significant need in women's pursuit of understanding their sexuality. Several participants noted how their institution's programming with regard to sexuality helped create "spaces for words that [could] be appropriately expressed." One participant discussed her institution's programming regarding sexuality by stating, "[The sexuality program was] the first time I heard someone offer a compelling story about sexuality that also intersected with spirituality" and continued on to say that the program "was completely honest about the shame we feel and the silence surrounding it and here's maybe a way to do it." Providing thoughtful programming can help students to see healthy sexuality in their day-to-day lives. Programming is one way that institutions could better serve their students, both males and females, thus allowing educators to

create venues for students to begin conversations while providing space for students to appropriately integrate media, spirituality, and sexuality.

Accordingly, students expressed a need to have discussion that extended beyond being told what not to do. Higher education professionals need to switch the trajectory of thought and discussion in order to discuss sexuality in a healthy way. Michelle (JrSr1) said:

The church as a whole is like you always hear, “Don’t be of the world.” [...] So we’re encouraged to be like, “Ignore all these things in the media and pretend like it’s not happening,” instead of trying to teach people how to interact with [sexuality] in a healthy way or how it relates to us in any way.

In discussing sexuality, naming what to avoid is insignificant in comparison to naming what should be affirmed. For example, the church often emphasizes the need for women to be modest; however, oftentimes this “places the burden of virtue almost entirely on women” (Setran & Kiesling, 2013, p. 180). Instead of leading college students toward having a healthy understanding of their own sexuality, modesty points students toward the approval of the opposite sex rather than their own. Many times, this type of mentality within the purity culture causes emerging adults to see sexuality as bad or corrupt. If educators can develop a holistic understanding of sexuality, they have the ability to address sexuality in a way that does not perpetuate shame—in effect, allowing students to have freedom in existing as sexual beings.

Lastly, there is a need for mentors to engage with evangelical women in order to model healthy sexuality. The support of mentors and educators on college students’ journey to sexual self-discovery is essential in a student’s growth, especially for women,

as they often feel that their sexuality is silenced. Mentors have a hand in cultivating students in a way that challenges them but also opens spaces that encourage significant dialogue regarding sexuality. This allows students to engage with their own stories and can help students develop healthy postures. Pat (JrSr2), a senior, expressed a desire for mentors in her life, stating:

So like taking it from like a Christian mentorship, like someone who is maybe more wise [...] or someone who has gone through it before, rather than someone who is struggling with it at the same time because they might not have that same experience and they might have different views that aren't biblical.

Furthermore, she voiced that mentorship would be incredibly beneficial in understanding her sexuality. These women's desire for mentorship shows that students are willing to go through a transformational process that may be painful but redemptive, healing, and restorative in nature, thus allowing students to process their identity and spiritual and sexual formation in healthy ways.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The implications for research on this topic are substantial for several reasons. The causal effect of media on sexual behavior in emerging adults is often assumed with little research backing the assumption (Tong, 2009). Likewise, the effect of media on sexuality with regard to spirituality is largely unexplored. Therefore, more research would further the understanding and discussions with regard to the topics of media, spirituality, and sexuality.

Future research could also focus on the specific impact of social media on sexuality. With the rise of social media it would be beneficial for researchers to study the



correlation between social media and women's ideals regarding perfectionism.

Additionally, it would be advantageous to view sexuality through the lens of Marcia's Ego Identity Status. The consideration between this theory and sexuality would allow research to develop based on how age and identity development influence individuals' thoughts on their sexuality as they move forward in their identity statuses—begging educators to focus on the role of crisis in the decision-making process.

Although cultivating a healthy sexual identity is vital for one's development, the sexualization of females has negatively affected women's ability to develop healthy sexuality. In order to gain a broader perspective, it would be beneficial to conduct more research with women on varying campuses and potentially at public institutions. Finally, it would be interesting to conduct the same study on men to compare and contrast how men and women process their sexuality and the external factors influencing them.

### **Limitations**

As with any research, limitations are important to acknowledge. While four focus groups of students of various ages were interviewed, this could have been limiting as the participants were from the same institution and had similar backgrounds. Another limitation to note was the use of focus groups. The use of focus groups was of benefit in the study, but in some ways the focus group caused students to be apprehensive in sharing on the sensitive topic of sexuality. Therefore, individual interviews would have helped increase the depth of the research. Finally, while an abundance of information was gathered through the research, much had to be left out due to indirect relevance to the research question. Additional questions would allow a broader understanding of women's sexuality.

## **Conclusion**

Media has a significant impact on the way women view their sexuality and presents unique challenges for women at faith-based institutions. College is a time of significance for emerging adults as they develop their sexual and spiritual identity. Due to this development, being knowledgeable on the influence between media and spirituality on sexuality, creating sustainable programs, having different approaches to conversation, and engaging students through mentorship are important factors in the formation of female sexuality in light of spirituality.

The divide between the purity culture and hookup culture has created great confusion among evangelical women on how to embrace, engage, and comprehend their sexuality. The silence surrounding sexuality in Christian culture has left women unsure of how to navigate their sexuality. Christian higher education professionals need to act upon opportunities to prepare students to not only engage with but also enter into the process of their own sexual identity development.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol

#### 1. Introduction

- a. Welcome/Greeting
- b. Informed Consent
  - i. Nature and purpose of the study
  - ii. Short biography of interviewer
  - iii. Interview procedure (90 minutes)
  - iv. Potential risks and anticipated results
  - v. Confidentiality (notes and digital recording of the interview)
  - vi. Freedom to withdraw from the interview or decline to answer
  - vii. Questions regarding the study/researcher (signed consent form)
  - viii. Defining the term “sexuality” so that everyone is on the same page.
    1. Whitehead & Whitehead (1994) expounded on the idea of sexuality in the following excerpt: Our sexuality includes the realm of sex—that is, our reproductive organs and our genital behaviors—but encompasses much more of who we are. What our body means to us, how we understand ourselves as a woman or as a man, the ways we feel comfortable in expressing affection—these are a part of sexuality. (p. 45)

#### 2. Pre-Viewing Questions

- a. What does our culture say about female sexuality?

#### 3. Watch documentary, *Killing Us Softly 4*

- a. Before watching the documentary: A disclaimer was given that there might be some uncomfortable images. I asked the participants to have an



open mind to what is talked about and that we would be discussing some of the issues addressed.

- b. After watching the documentary: There was an announcement of how the film is important to discuss and interact with, but this focus group is to focus on how the participants see themselves as women and how it affects their sexuality.

#### 4. Interview

- a. This documentary talks a lot about how media influences sexuality.  
Keeping that in the back of your mind, what is your understanding of the interaction between the Christian community and sexuality as well as between the media and sexuality?
- b. How does the media influence your sexuality as a Christian woman?
- c. Can you describe how you act out your sexuality based on your perceptions of your own sexuality, what the Christian culture tells you about sexuality, and how the media portrays sexuality?
- d. If they mentioned the purity culture:
  - i. In your experience, what is it like to live in two divergent cultures?

#### 5. Closing

- a. Gratitude
- b. Open request—"Do you have any questions for me or comments?"

## **Appendix B**

### **Informed Consent**

#### **TAYLOR UNIVERSITY**

##### **Informed Consent Form**

The purpose of this research is to better understand the experiences of female college students' perceptions on how media impacts their sexuality in relation to their spirituality. You will be asked to answer a series of questions about your experiences with media, sexuality, and spirituality and how this has influenced you. Interviews will last approximately ninety minutes and will be recorded using a digital recorder.

The data collected will be transcribed and analyzed for corresponding themes. I will transcribe all of the interviews. All data will be maintained as confidential; any direct quotes used in the presentation will utilize pseudonyms and no identifying information will be used in order to preserve anonymity. All data will be stored in a lock box in the researcher's home. Aside from the researcher's faculty advisor, Scott Moeschberger, and the transcriber, no one will have access to the raw data or identifying information. All audio files will be erased upon completion of the study.

The potential risks of this study are that you may recall stressful or emotional situations from your past. If this is the case, the university counseling center is available to meet with you and information on how to contact them will be provided. Additionally, if you sign this consent form, you are stating that you will keep all information confidential. However, I cannot control you or the other participants from talking about the interview with other people.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at

any time for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the investigator. Please feel free to ask any questions of the investigator before signing the Informed Consent form and beginning the study and at any time during the study.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in this research project entitled, “Media’s Influence on Women’s Sexuality and Spirituality.” I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this Informed Consent form to keep for future reference.

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Participant’s Signature

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Date

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Principal Investigator’s Signature

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## **Appendix C**

### **Research Participant Consent Form**

#### **TAYLOR UNIVERSITY**

#### **RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Diana Kim, Masters of Arts in Higher Education graduate student from Taylor University. I understand that the project is designed to understand media's effect on female student's sexuality and spirituality. I will be one of 32 people being interviewed for this research.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If I decline to participate or withdraw from the study, no one on Taylor University's campus will be told.
2. I understand that most interviewees in this study will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. If, however, I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.
3. Participation involves watching a short documentary and being interviewed by Diana Kim. The interview will last approximately ninety minutes. Notes will be written during the interview. An audiotape of the interview and subsequent dialogue will be made. If I don't want to be taped, I will not be able to participate in the study.
4. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies, which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.
5. I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional

Review Board (IRB). For research problems and questions regarding the subjects, the IRB may be contacted through [IRB@taylor.edu](mailto:IRB@taylor.edu).

6. I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
7. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

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My Signature

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Date

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My Printed Name

---

Signature of the Investigator

## **Appendix D**

### **Further Descriptions of Tension**

**Ambiguity.** Living in two conflicting cultures created ambiguity among all participants in knowing what was proper and deemed appropriate in expressing sexuality. Lily (FrSo2) exclaimed that she “pretty much [lived] in a state of confusion,” whereas Christine (FrSo2) was unsure of “how to express [her] sexuality because [she didn’t] even know what that [was].”

**Shame and guilt.** Shame emerged in various narratives with regard to female sexuality. Whitney (FrSo1) discussed how media and spirituality made others feel as if they “should be ashamed if [anyone felt] sexual, or if they had a sexual desire.” Each participant mentioned having shame of their bodies and shame in dressing in a way that caused men to “lust.” Some participants shared personal stories of shame related to their past experiences, whether it dealt with their use of pornography, sexual desires, masturbation, or being intimate within a relationship. Other participants discussed the difficulties of dating within a Christian culture. Pat (JrSr2) explained how shame of being in relationships made couples feel “scared and feel guilty if they [did] anything,” and how this led couples to feel “physically uncomfortable with one another [...] and guilty.”

**Failure.** Everyone mentioned failure with regard to sexuality. Julie (JrSr1) proclaimed, “You express [sexuality] but it’s being received in the wrong way [...] So sexuality is equivalent to failure in one regard or another.” Jane (JrSr1) agreed stating,

“Regardless of what we do, we just fail. You know, even if we aren’t sexually active our culture says we’re failing, and if we are making out with our boyfriend than our Christian faith says we’re failing.”

**Fear.** The participants indicated fear in engaging with sexuality. Some participants were fearful because sexuality made people “feel” and “people are afraid to feel,” while some were afraid “to broach the subject of sexuality because nobody else wants to talk about it.” Others were terrified because they were “intimidated with these messages about modesty and purity,” because it created “a fear of any showing of sexuality [...] I think it’s just this intense fear of who are we if we’re not sexual beings.”

**Frustration.** Frustration was frequently mentioned in their interviews—frustration in not understanding sexuality, not discussing sexuality, and not knowing the answers. Christine (FrSo2) said, “I want to talk about it, but I’m like oh my gosh I can’t that’s inappropriate, and that’s frustrating.” Marisa (JrSr1) noted that everything is “intertwined and [...] so connected,” yet the problem was that “literally nobody knows what to do with [sexuality] because there’s no right answer right now and everyone’s so confused and that’s so frustration.” Many participants agreed and believed that people did not want to “take the time to wrestle with [sexuality][...] and [...] really work through these issues.” This caused frustration for the majority of participants and one person noticed how this “[played] into more shame and more guilt and more not talking about it and more silence because no one knows what to say because no one has the right answers or the right thoughts.”

