

The Unblemished Children of God: Links Between Purity Culture, Autonomy, and Shame

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science

Auburn, Alabama
August 8, 2026

Keywords: purity culture, shame, autonomy, sexuality, religion, relationships

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Abstract

This study sought to identify links between purity culture, shame, and autonomy utilizing the framework of the social belongingness theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). To assess these links, participants between the ages of 18-25 (N=62) completed an online survey measuring endorsement of purity culture narratives across their lifetime, current endorsement of purity culture narratives, external shame, internal shame, and autonomy. As hypothesized, regression analyses revealed associations between lifetime endorsement of purity culture narratives and increased internal shame. Additionally, regression analyses indicated associations between increased autonomy and decreased internal shame, aligning with this study's hypothesis. No additional associations were found. Results suggest that internal shame may arise from dissonance between one's personal beliefs and one's schema for maintaining connection and community. Further, developing a person's sense of autonomy may effectively reduce this internal shame by increasing a person's ability to act in accordance with values that reflect their true self. Suggestions are offered for clinicians engaging in therapeutic work with clients experiencing internal shame relating to lifetime purity culture adherence, including the utilization of techniques aimed at bolstering client autonomy.

Artificial Intelligence Use Disclosure

In the preparation of this thesis, the following Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used: Consensus. This tool was used primarily to gather research for the purpose of creating the literature review. The author acknowledges full responsibility for the intellectual content of this work and has ensured that all AI-assisted sections have been reviewed and revised for accuracy and appropriate academic style. All AI-generated content was reviewed and validated for relevance, appropriateness, and accuracy before incorporation into the final document to maintain scholarly integrity of this research.

Digital Accessibility Use Disclosure Statement

In the preparation of this thesis, the following digital accessibility tools were used to ensure this document complies with federal requirements: N/A. The author acknowledges full responsibility for the intellectual content of this work and has made a good faith effort to comply with digital accessibility requirements in publishing, wherein the nature of the content does not significantly change in order to do so. Furthermore, all content has been reviewed and revised to meet these requirements prior to final publication.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank Dr. Brian Gillis for his incredible mentorship and guidance throughout the creation of this study. His consistent support, patience, and encouragement to pursue my passions was instrumental in the formation and completion of this project. I am so honored to have been mentored by someone who cares about this research topic as much as I do. I would also like to extend my gratitude to my committee members, Dr. Scott Ketring and Dr. Caroline Payne-Purvis. Their guidance and feedback were truly invaluable, and I am so grateful for their willingness to contribute to the completion of this study. I would also like to thank each of the wonderful professors who allowed me to recruit from their courses, as the completion of this project would not have been possible without their help. Additionally, I am incredibly grateful for the support of my colleagues in the MFT and HDFS graduate programs who offered both moral support and aided in the recruitment process. And of course, to each and every one of the students who participated in this research study, I extend my deepest thanks. I am honored to have been trusted with their experiences, and I am so grateful for their willingness to help me explore a topic of such deep personal significance.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the many friends and community members who inspired this project. I cannot thank them enough for allowing me to bear witness to their experiences within purity culture. This thesis is my love letter to them, aimed at honoring their stories and providing insight to further their growth, healing, and flourishing.

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List of Abbreviations

EISS	External and Internal Shame Scale
IAF	Index of Autonomous Functioning
PCBS	Purity Culture Beliefs Scale
LPCE	Lifetime Purity Culture Endorsement
CPCE	Current Purity Culture Endorsement

Chapter 1: Introduction

Though widely known, discussed, and debated across many Evangelical Christian spheres, the concept of purity culture remains empirically underexplored. Purity culture refers to a teaching of the American Evangelical Christian church emphasizing the importance of maintaining abstinence before marriage, sexual modesty, and the importance of maintaining sexual purity (Campbell, 2025; Natarajan et al., 2022). Though the topic is gaining traction in research settings, much of the existing discourse around purity culture occurs through blogs, autobiographies, podcasts, or discussion groups. The topic has proved to be incredibly polarizing, even among Evangelical Christians. However, among those who no longer adhere to its tenets, purity culture is largely criticized, with some crediting it as the reason for their departure from Christianity or faith altogether.

Among many personal narratives, purity culture narratives have been criticized as a perpetuator of shame, emotional distress, and diminished sexual freedom (Cross, 2020; Gish, 2018; Hurd, 2021). Many report that the message of purity culture emphasizes the denial of one's own sexual desires and instincts, linking exposure to such narratives with a diminished sense of bodily autonomy (Cross, 2020; Gish, 2018; Hurd, 2021). Often, the sense of shame is attributed to an overarching message that the human body is driven by lust and sin, and thus cannot be trusted (Cross, 2020; Gish, 2018; Hurd, 2021).

Empirically, purity culture has earned criticism regarding its impact on adolescent girls and women specifically. For many adolescents, exposure to purity culture messages regarding modesty and sexual inhibition correlated with lower self-esteem and increased experiences of sexual harassment (Gallego et al., 2026). For many women, the internalization of purity culture messages has been associated with significant physical and relational consequences, such as

lower sexual satisfaction, lower marital satisfaction, and higher rates of sexual pain disorders (Coates et al., 2025; Estrada, 2021; Sawatsky et al., 2025). Some research has even highlighted links between endorsement of purity narratives and acceptance of violent relational dynamics (McKinzie & Richards, 2022; Moon & Reger, 2014; Ortiz et al., 2023).

Despite this, purity culture remains a relatively underexamined topic. Further, very few studies explore ways in which possible detrimental effects of purity culture may be mitigated or reduced. Thus, the aim of this study was to further understand how a person's previous and current endorsement of purity culture narratives related to a sense of shame with the goal of contributing empirical insight to a widely discussed topic of conversation within the American Evangelical church. Additionally, this study sought to further explore affiliations between these variables via the pathway of autonomy, examining correlations as a possible means of reducing distress related to shame and purity culture narrative endorsement.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Purity Culture

In past literature, there have been many definitions of purity culture. Each definition carries its own tone, nuance, and perspective, often shifting in a way that reflects and honors the author's personal experiences. As previously noted, researchers most often define purity culture as a teaching of the American Evangelical Christian church emphasizing the importance of chastity and sexual abstinence (Campbell, 2025; Natarajan et al., 2022). While not inaccurate, this definition offers little separation between purity culture and simply viewing sexuality through a Biblical or religious lens. A more specific definition is needed to both distinguish this difference and fully encapsulate the reported experiences of real people. Thus, to describe the movement's overarching components while acknowledging its significant impact, this study has developed the following definition: purity culture is a phenomenon commonly perpetuated by the Evangelical Christian church teaching that a person's measure of overall virtue and goodness is directly related to their virginity, modesty, and sexual inhibition.

The roots of purity culture stretch back as early as the 16th century, when the Protestant Reformation emphasized the importance of sexual purity, specifically by defining godly marriage as the union between one cisgender man and one cisgender woman (Schultz, 2021). However, modern day purity culture followed the rise of Evangelical Christianity and "family values" in the 1970s and 1980s. This movement emerged as a direct response to the free love movement in the 1960s, challenging the morality of sexual liberation with an alternate message: sex was intended to be experienced only in the context of a heterosexual marital relationship (Hurd, 2021; Lang, 2024; Moles, 2017; Schultz, 2021). Framed as a bold reclamation of God's original design for relationships, purity culture quickly gained traction (Hurd, 2021; Moles,

2017; Schultz, 2021). The movement reached its peak in the 1990s, inspiring countless anti-dating books, virginity pledges, and purity balls along the way (Hurd, 2021; Moles, 2017; Schultz, 2021).

Shame

Shame is an intense feeling of inferiority, brokenness, and rejection that leaves a person feeling isolated and self-conscious (Gilbert, 1997; Ferreira et al., 2020; Tangney et al., 1996; Leeming & Boyle, 2004). Shame is highly correlated with poor mental and emotional health, with research indicating links between shame and depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, and personality disorders (Azevedo et al., 2022; Callow et al., 2021; Kenny et al., 2024; Lopez-Castro et al., 2020). Though often used interchangeably with similar emotions like embarrassment or guilt, shame is its own distinct emotion (Tangney et al., 1996). When surveyed, subjects report experiences of shame as more intense, painful, and isolating when compared to embarrassment or guilt. Subjects also report feeling exposed, leading them to try and hide away from others (Tangney et al., 1996). Cited as “one of the most powerful, painful, and potentially destructive experiences known to humans,” shame causes people to retreat inwards and separate from their community (Gilbert, 1997, p. 113).

Though shame is often discussed as a singular concept, shame is better understood as two experiences: external shame and internal shame (Gilbert, 2003; Ferreira et al., 2020). External shame revolves around the perceived beliefs of others. At the core of external shame is the belief that an outside party, like a member of one’s community or a community they wish to join, has deemed them to be inadequate, inappropriate, or flawed (Gilbert, 2003). External shame consists of two primary social fears. First, there is the fear that an outside party may perceive that a person is lacking a certain quality (such as attractiveness, intelligence, or physical ability) and

thus exclude them from the group. Second, there is the fear that an outside party may discover a quality about a person that was never meant to be seen (such as a taboo interest or display of an unfavorable emotion), ultimately intruding on their innermost self and exposing a trait that is perceived as *bad*. In other words, external shame hinges on the fear that one will be deemed not enough or too much to be accepted into a community (Gilbert, 2003).

By contrast, internal shame revolves around a person's beliefs about themselves. Ultimately, internal shame is the experience of being an undesirable version of oneself: a flawed, broken, unattractive version of oneself by one's own internal standards (Gilbert, 2003). Some research indicates that humans are not born with internal shame, but rather that it develops as a coping mechanism to manage external shame or make sense of traumatic experiences, especially those that are relational in nature, such as neglect or abuse (Ferreira et al., 2020; Gilbert, 2003; Schimmenti, 2012; Shaw, 2024). After partaking in a shameful action, either voluntarily or by force, a person may cope with the experience by developing a belief that there is something wrong with them as a person. One concludes that they are not worthy of community, acceptance, or belonging because of an internal aspect of themselves (Shaw, 2024).

Purity Culture and Shame

Though the church framed purity culture as a restorative movement, a quick dive into personal accounts of those who grew up in purity culture reveals that for some, the movement instilled a significant sense of shame. For these individuals, the main message of purity culture was not just to remain abstinent, but rather that their inherent value was tied to their sexual behavior (Cross, 2020; Gish, 2018; Hurd, 2021). When discussing their personal experiences with purity culture narratives, some people report learning about sexuality through methods that are rooted in embarrassment, humiliation, and objectification, further deepening the connection

between their personhood and their sexuality (Cross, 2020; Gish, 2018; Hurd, 2021). For example, many people report that the importance of abstinence until marriage was taught through methods intended to invoke disgust, comparing sexual acts with a non-virgin to eating a licked cupcake or chewing a piece of spat-out gum (Gish, 2018; Hurd, 2021; Ortiz et al., 2023). These displays painted premarital sexual activity as an irreversible, permanent stain on a person's reputation and value; one cannot "un-chew" a piece of gum. For many, the lasting impression of purity culture is summed up in one woman's takeaway: "God would love [me] less if [I] had sex before marriage" (Cross, 2020, p. 21).

Gendered Narratives and Shame

In many cases, purity culture teachings are specifically geared towards women, painting them as gatekeepers of pre-marital sexuality. These narratives emphasize that maintaining sexual and physical boundaries within dating relationships is the responsibility of the woman, generally citing that men are designed to pursue sex in a way that makes it difficult for them to control their desires (Hurd, 2021; Morgante, 2019; Moon & Reger, 2014; Natarajan et al., 2022). Simultaneously, purity culture emphasizes a woman's duty to fully submit to the sexual desires of her husband, creating a distressing double standard for many women navigating romantic relationships (Moon & Reager, 2014; Morgante, 2019). For many, the promotion of highly gendered sexual scripts coupled with the double standard can lead to an internalized belief that a woman's pleasure and sexual preferences are unimportant or shameful (Estrada, 2021; Hurd, 2021; Ortiz et al., 2023).

The Social Belongingness Theory and Shame

Cited as "the premier social emotion," shame arises based on the contexts of one's social group (Leeming & Boyle, 2004; Scheff, 2000, p. 98). The social component of shame greatly

contributes to its intensity and painfulness, which Gilbert (1997; 2003) explored using the social belongingness theory. The social belongingness theory, developed by Baumeister & Leary (1995), states that belonging to a group is core human need, so building and maintaining positive, consistent relationships with others is the driving force behind an extensive number of interpersonal interactions. In the past, securing one's social standing was often accomplished through displays of aggression and dominance, but Gilbert (1997) argues that this tactic alone is rarely sufficient for building relationships now. To be accepted into a community, one must present as "socially attractive," meaning that they display adherence to the rules, values, and beliefs of the community in which they wish to belong (Gilbert, 1997). When one shows characteristics that are outside of the group's norms, they lose their social attractiveness, and their role in the group becomes threatened. This sudden threat to one's relationships, group acceptance, and perceived social value directly contributes to feelings of shame (Gilbert, 1997; Gilbert, 2003). Gilbert (1997; 2000; 2003) goes on to argue that this sense of shame, and the subsequent display of shame, serves as an acknowledgement of the loss of social acceptance and acts as damage control to manage the impact of one's actions on their social standing.

Because the experience of shame is rooted in the ability to appear socially attractive to one's community, the behaviors and characteristics that spark shame are culturally dependent. Something considered shameful in one community may be considered normal or even favorable in another (Gilbert, 1997; Gilbert, 2003). In the context of purity culture, the dominant values are modesty, abstinence until marriage, and overall sexual inhibition. Applying a social belongingness framework, the shame from purity culture may come not only from failing to adhere to these dominant values, but also from being pushed out of the community for doing so. Narratives emphasizing premarital sexual activity as irreparable damage frames those who are

unmarried and sexually active as subpar spouses, community members, and Christians (Gish, 2018; Hurd, 2021; Ortiz et al., 2023). Because community acceptance is dependent on a person's sexual behavior, the loss of one's modesty or sexual innocence may effectively serve as the loss of one's social status, possibly intensifying feelings of shame in the context of Baumeister & Leary's (1995) social belongingness theory (Gilbert 1997; Gilbert, 2003).

Autonomy

Throughout literature, autonomy is repeatedly cited as a key component of wellbeing, contributing to increased cognitive flexibility, creativity, motivation, and psychological functioning (Bergamin et al., 2022; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Dickinson, 1995; Ryan, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2006; Ryan et al., 2016). Despite this, there is no single agreed upon definition of autonomy. Part of this challenge lies in the fact that autonomy is not merely a psychological phenomenon, but an ethical, legal, and philosophical one as well. This study developed its definition of autonomy from core components of the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), in which autonomy is defined primarily as self-governance. Autonomous behaviors are volitional, self-directed, and aligned with the person's integrated sense of self (Christman, 2020; Deci & Ryan, 1987; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2006; Ryan et al., 2006).

One way to assess a person's level of autonomous decision-making is to examine their motivation. According to Ryan & Deci (2000), truly autonomous choices are motivated intrinsically, meaning that the person gets a sense of fulfillment by behaving in a way that aligns with their internalized values. A person operating out of intrinsic motivation will fully embrace their actions, as their choices reflect their authentic sense of self (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 2006). Contrarily, decisions made to navigate consequences, earn rewards, or avoid

punishment are extrinsically motivated, indicating a lower level of autonomy (Ryan & Deci; 2000; Ryan et al., 2006). This does not mean that autonomous choices are always made without any regard for external factors, as there are certainly instances in which a person may be both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to behave in a particular way. The defining trait of an autonomous choice is that it will be made with the primary motivation of reflecting the “true self” rather than navigating external consequences (Ryan & Deci; 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2006; Ryan et al., 2006; Weinstein et al., 2012).

It is important to highlight that autonomy is a distinctly different concept from independence or individualism, despite literature commonly using the terms interchangeably (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Unlike independence or individualism, autonomy is not defined by one’s ability to operate without outside support. An autonomous person is free to make choices that align with their core self, which may include the choice to be “autonomously dependent” on their community (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2006; Ryan et al., 2006). In fact, literature shows that autonomy facilitates stronger interpersonal connections, as relationships developed out of a person’s own volition are more likely to be characterized by deep trust and contentment (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Ryan, 1995). The link between autonomy and connectedness is reciprocal, as developmental psychology has long supported the idea that secure, nurturing relationships are essential to the formation of identity and autonomy (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan et al., 2006; Ryan, 1995). Relationships not only bolster a person’s confidence to make choices for themselves, but they also shape the values on which a person operates when acting autonomously. Christman (2020) highlights this by arguing that a person’s core beliefs are shaped by a wide variety of factors, including life experiences, culture, upbringing, and community. Connectedness is complimentary to autonomy, not antithetical.

Autonomy, Purity Culture, and Shame

An often-critiqued aspect of purity culture is its association with reduced bodily autonomy. Within purity culture narratives, there is a pervasive message that the desires of the human body cannot be trusted, as they lead to lustful sexual activity (Cross, 2020; Muskrat et al., 2025; Natarajan, 2022; Hurd, 2021; Ortiz et al., 2023). Thus, purity culture narratives reframe bodies as belonging to God or another person, such as a past, present, or future spouse (Cross, 2020; McKinzie & Richards, 2022; Moon & Reger, 2014; Ortiz et al., 2023). This narrative is further emphasized through the double standard of sexuality for women, who are taught that maintaining sexual purity within a premarital relationship falls to them, as men are inherently more sexually motivated than women (Natarajan, 2022; Hurd, 2021; Moon & Reger, 2014). Once married, this portrayal of female sexuality reduces autonomous behavior, as sex becomes an activity performed out of duty to one's husband rather than an act of intimacy and mutual pleasure. Female sexual pleasure, if prioritized at all, is secondary to male pleasure (Estrada, 2021; Muskrat et al., 2025; Natarajan, 2022). Purity culture has been highly criticized for this messaging, with some research even highlighting links between endorsement of such narratives and acceptance of sexual assault (McKinzie & Richards, 2022; Moon & Reger, 2014; Ortiz et al., 2023).

Across literature, autonomy and shame are often linked together. A lack of autonomy contributes to a sense of shame across multiple domains (Alix et al., 2019; Bergamin et al., 2022; MacGinley et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2016). For example, research indicates that a reduction in autonomy due to psychiatric conditions causes significant suffering in patients with conditions such as Borderline Personality Disorder, Schizophrenia, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Substance-use Disorders, and Major Depressive Disorder (Bergamin et al., 2022; Ryan et al.,

2016). Further, in traumatic experiences where one's autonomy was stripped away, such as in cases of sexual assault, victims often experience a significant sense of shame (Alix et al., 2019; MacGinley et al., 2019). These experiences may also contribute to the development of internal shame, supporting the claim that internal shame may not be inherent, but rather a developed mechanism to cope with uncontrollable outside experiences (Ferreira et al., 2020; Gilbert, 2003; Schimmenti, 2012).

Conversely, research indicates that encouraging autonomy can combat feelings of shame and improve overall wellbeing across multiple domains. Research indicates that increasing autonomy is a common goal of therapeutic intervention, contributing to effective recovery from mental health disorders that contribute a sense of shame (Bergamin et al., 2022; Ryan et al., 2016). Further, among LGBTQ+ populations, the encouragement of autonomous expression by a supportive community was linked with reduced internalized homophobia and increased overall wellbeing (Legate et al., 2017; Legate et al., 2019). Overall, autonomy is repeatedly highlighted as a core component of mental wellbeing that contributes to strong relational success (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan et al., 2006; Deci & Ryan, 1987; Ryan, 1995). Thus, by applying Gilbert's (1997) framework of shame using the social belongingness theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), autonomy may play a core role in strengthening interpersonal relationships by building connections based on authentic understanding and connection. Intentionally crafting a community that aligns with one's true self may reduce the likelihood of a disconnect between one's values and group values, possibly buffering the likelihood of expulsion from the group and providing a protective factor against the development of shame.

The Present Study

Though the association between purity culture and shame is a commonly reported phenomenon, few empirical studies have explored possible variables which could disrupt, mitigate, or mediate this association. Thus, this study sought to explore the ways in which autonomy may interact with both purity culture and shame with the aim of providing insight into effective interventions against shame. Further, few clinical studies have measured the effects of purity culture endorsement across various points within a person's life, offering little insight into the effects of simply being exposed to purity culture narratives versus personally aligning with them. Thus, this study specifically sought to measure purity culture endorsement rather than just exposure. Further, purity culture endorsement was measured in two ways: lifetime purity culture endorsement (LPCE), which assessed the extent to which subjects had ever endorsed purity culture narratives, and current purity culture endorsement (CPCE), which assessed the extent to which subjects currently endorsed purity culture narratives.

Additionally, this study sought to explore connections between these variables in the context of emerging adulthood, due to the significant development of autonomy perpetuated by this developmental phase (Dutra-Thomé, et al., 2019). Spanning from the late teens through the mid-twenties, emerging adulthood is characterized by significant life transitions, often resulting in developmentally appropriate independence from one's family of origin (Arnett, 2000; Wood et al., 2018). This separation from one's role in adolescence creates space for emerging adults to assess their personal values outside of their upbringing, creating space for the development of greater autonomy (Arnett, 2000; Wood et al., 2018).

Thus, the present study will examine links between purity culture, shame, and autonomy in the context of emerging adulthood, as exploring identity, assessing values, and developing greater autonomy are all key pieces of this developmental phase (Arnett, 2000; Arnett et al.,

2001; Wood et al., 2018). In the context of this study, emerging adulthood is likely the developmental phase in which people begin to explore the ways in which they wish to continue incorporating the narratives and beliefs with which they were raised, such as purity culture, making this population an ideal demographic with which to assess connections.

Hypotheses

Based on the aforementioned literature, this study developed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: (a) Current Purity Culture Endorsement (CPCE) would be positively correlated with external shame, (b) CPCE would be negatively correlated with autonomy, and (c) autonomy would be negatively correlated with external shame.

Hypothesis 2: (a) Lifetime Purity Culture Endorsement (LPCE) would be positively correlated with external shame, (b) LPCE would be negatively correlated with autonomy, and (c) autonomy would be negatively correlated with external shame.

Hypothesis 3: (a) Current Purity Culture Endorsement (CPCE) would be positively correlated with internal shame, (b) CPCE would be negatively correlated with autonomy, and (c) autonomy would be negatively correlated with internal shame.

Hypothesis 4: (a) Lifetime Purity Culture Endorsement (LPCE) would be positively correlated with internal shame, (b) LPCE would be negatively correlated with autonomy, and (c) autonomy would be negatively correlated with internal shame.

Chapter 3: Method

Participants

All participants in this study were undergraduate and graduate students at a large, public university in the southeastern United States. Participants were recruited via convenience sampling. A total of 62 students were surveyed including 48 female participants, 9 male participants, and 5 non-binary participants. All participants were between the ages of 18-25 with an average age of 20.68 and a standard deviation of 1.91. In addition to their age and gender, participants were asked to report the religion in which they were raised and the religion with which they currently identified. Participants selected from the following options: Evangelical Protestant, non-Evangelical Protestant, Catholic, Latter-Day Saint, Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Other, non-religious/no faith tradition, or prefer not to say. Participants were not given the option to write anything additional.

Procedures

After obtaining institutional review board approval (protocol STUDY00000721), participants were recruited from flyers placed around the university and local businesses, social media posts, tabling events on campus, and in-person in class visits. Participants were informed that they would be participating in a 15–30-minute study researching faith's influence on intimate relationships. All participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that their answers would be confidential and anonymous. After completing the survey, participants were given the option to enter their email and enroll in a drawing for one of five \$25 Amazon gift cards. This drawing was conducted using a separate survey to ensure that any identifying information would not be linked to participant survey responses. Data were collected via an online Qualtrics survey using the following instruments.

Measures

Purity Culture

The Purity Culture Beliefs Scale (PCBS) was developed by Ortiz et al. (2023) to measure a person's endorsement of purity culture beliefs. The PCBS is a unidimensional, self-report assessment rated on a 5-point Likert scale with anchors of "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree." The measure includes 14 items, four of which serve as control questions and are not included in the scale total. Of the remaining ten items, five measure guilt and shame affiliated with purity culture ("It will be difficult for your future spouse to forgive you if you have sex with someone else before marriage"), and five measure gender roles affiliated with purity culture ("Men cannot be expected to control their sexual desire; women must help them out"). A higher total score indicates a higher endorsement of purity culture beliefs. The PCBS demonstrates high internal consistency ($\alpha = .87$) and good convergent validity when compared with scales measuring heterosexual script adherence, shame, and sexual-spiritual integration (Ortiz et al., 2023). In this study, the PCBS was administered twice: once measuring a person's endorsement of purity culture at the time of the study (Current Purity Culture Endorsement; CPCE) and once measuring a person's endorsement of purity culture at any point in their life (Lifetime Purity Culture Endorsement; LPCE).

Autonomy

Developed by Weinstein et al. (2012), the Index of Autonomous Functioning (IAF) is a self-report assessment measuring a person's dispositional autonomy across three subscales: authorship/congruence, interest-taking, and susceptibility to control. The IAF contains 15 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale with anchors of "not at all true" and "completely true." Five items gauge levels of authorship/self-congruence ("I strongly identify with the things that I do"), five

items gauge levels of interest-taking (“I am interested in why I act the way I do”), and five items gauge levels of susceptibility to control (“I often pressure myself”). A total score was obtained by averaging scores across all three domains, reversing the score on the scale measuring susceptibility to control. A higher total score indicated higher dispositional autonomy. The IAF demonstrates strong reliability ($\alpha = .89$ for authorship/ self-congruence; $\alpha = .83$ for interest-taking; $\alpha = .84$ for susceptibility of control) and good validity when compared against scales measuring personality and wellbeing (Weinstein et al., 2012).

Shame

The External and Internal Shame Scale (EISS) is a self-report assessment that measures a person’s sense of both external and internal shame, which could be combined into a global shame score or scored separately. To best assess links between variables, this study examined internal and external shame scores separately. Developed by Ferreira et al. (2020), the EISS contains eight items rated on a 5-point Likert scale with anchors of “never” and “always.” Four items gauge levels of external shame (“Other people see me as not being up to their standards”), and four items gauge levels of internal shame (“I am unworthy as a person”). A higher score in either subscale represents a higher sense of internal or external shame respectively. Strong reliability is demonstrated by both the external shame subscale ($\alpha = .80$) and internal shame subscale ($\alpha = .82$). Additionally, both subscales demonstrate adequate concurrent validity when compared against validated measures of shame (Ferreira et al., 2020).

Plan of Analysis

This study examined measures of central tendency and distribution to ensure normality of data. This was done through examination of means and medians and visual inspection of histograms in IBM SPSS 29. If necessary, outlier observations were trimmed using techniques

such as winsorization or Mahalanobis distance (Kline, 2011). As a preliminary analysis, this study examined Pearson correlations among main study variables (i.e., purity culture, autonomy, and shame). To investigate primary study aims, in IBM SPSS Amos 29, autonomy was regressed onto purity culture, and shame onto purity culture and autonomy.

Chapter 4: Results

Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 contains demographic information for participants. The majority of participants reported that they were raised in a faith tradition (85.5%), with few answering that they were not (3.2%), and some neglecting to answer the question (11.3%). The most common faith tradition in which participants were raised was Evangelical Protestant (43.3%), followed by non-Evangelical Protestant (23.3%), Catholic (11.7%), Other (11.7%), non-religious/ no faith tradition (6.7%), Jewish (1.7%), and prefer not to say (1.7%). Additionally, many participants reported that they still identified as religious or a person of faith (69.4%), with few answering that they were not (3.2%), and some neglecting to answer the question (27.4%). Evangelical protestant was the most common current faith tradition as well (34.5%), followed by non-Evangelical protestant (20.7%), non-religious/no faith tradition (19.0%), Catholic (10.3%), Other (10.3%), prefer not to say (3.4%), and Jewish (1.7%).

Participants had relatively high autonomy and relatively low external and internal shame (Table 1). LPCE ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 0.94$) was higher than CPCE ($M = 1.63$, $SD = 0.59$), $t(60) = 5.05$, $p < .001$. LPCE, autonomy, and external and internal shame did not vary by participants' gender. CPCE did vary by gender, $F(2) = 6.72$, $p = .002$. Results of a post-hoc Tukey Honestly Significant Differences test showed that male participants currently endorsed greater purity culture beliefs ($M = 2.12$, $SD = 0.70$) than female ($M = 1.59$, $SD = 0.54$) and nonbinary ($M = 1.04$, $SD = 0.09$) participants; female and nonbinary participants did not vary from one another on CPCE.

Older participant age was moderately correlated with greater autonomy (Table 1). Greater LPCE was moderately correlated with more internal shame, and lower autonomy was moderately

associated with greater internal shame (Table 1). External shame and internal shame were moderately correlated (Table 1).

Main Analyses

External Shame

LPCE was not associated with either autonomy or external shame (Figure 1a). Similarly, CPCE was unassociated with autonomy and external shame (Figure 1b). Autonomy was unrelated to external shame in either LPCE or CPCE model.

Internal Shame

LPCE was unassociated with autonomy; however, both greater LPCE and lower autonomy were associated with more internal shame (Figure 2a). Each one-unit increase in LPCE was related to 0.19 higher internal shame, while each one-unit decrease in autonomy was associated with 0.56 units of higher internal shame. CPCE was unassociated with autonomy and internal shame (Figure 2b). As in the model for LPCE, lower autonomy was associated with more internal shame in the model reflecting CPCE.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Purity Culture and Shame

Throughout the literature, purity culture has been often criticized as contributing to the development of shame and the reduction of bodily autonomy (Cross, 2020; Gish, 2018; Hurd, 2021; Ortiz et al., 2023). In line with both previous literature and this study's hypotheses, results indicate a positive correlation between LPCE and one's sense of internal shame. These findings add additional empirical support to claims that purity culture narratives are linked to a sense of internal shame. This was the only significant correlation found between purity culture endorsement (both LPCE and CPCE) and shame scores.

This study found no significant correlations between CPCE and internal, external, or total shame scores. However, the results of *t*-tests indicate that within the surveyed population, purity culture beliefs decreased over time as they reported higher lifetime exposure to purity culture beliefs than they currently endorse. In other words, the data indicate that a significant number of surveyed subjects have experienced a shift in their beliefs around sexuality and relationships. Utilizing Gilbert's (1997; 2003) exploration of shame through the lens of social belongingness theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), the correlated experience of internal shame may be attributed to the discomfort of shifting away from the values of one's community. As Gilbert's (1997; 2003) theory states, going against the moral code outlined by one's community produces a sense of shame to mitigate social consequences and salvage one's social standing. Therefore, those who previously endorsed the dominant cultural values affiliated with purity culture but no longer do so may be at higher risk for developing shame, as they may experience a higher risk of losing their place in the community.

Interestingly, LPCE was correlated only with internal shame, showing no significant connections to external shame. Utilizing the conceptualization of external shame described by Gilbert (2003) and Ferreira et al. (2020), these results suggest that purity culture endorsement across the lifetime does not correlate with a sense of shame perpetuated by perceived judgement from outside parties. However, the data do suggest that LPCE is associated with internal shame, which Gilbert (2003) and Ferreira et al. (2020) describe as viewing oneself as broken, bad, or wrong by internal standards. This aligns with previous research indicating for many, the cultural values affiliated with purity culture are deeply intertwined with one's personhood, and adherence to those standards becomes a way to ensure that one is living as a virtuous, godly person (Cross, 2020; Hurd, 2021, Moles, 2017). Thus, the link between internal shame and LPCE could possibly be attributed to dissonance between a previously endorsed, internalized framework for living virtuously and the values by which one currently lives their life.

This may also offer a possible explanation for the lack of a significant correlation between CPCE and shame of any kind. Examined through Gilbert's (1997; 2003) exploration of shame via Baumeister & Leary's (1997) social belongingness theory, the results of this study may indicate that CPCE does not correlate with a person perceiving a threat to their stance within their community. One possible explanation for this is that those who have high CPCE scores may be existing within communities where purity culture narratives reflect the dominant social values. Future research centering on the relationship between community dynamics and CPCE may yield more insight.

Purity Culture and Autonomy

Inconsistent with this study's hypotheses, the data indicate insignificant correlations between autonomy and LPCE or CPCE. When interpreted through the lens of self-determination

theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), these results may indicate that neither LPCE nor CPCE are directly associated with a person's ability to make volitional, self-directed decisions reflective of their true self. Initially, a lack of association between purity culture endorsement and autonomy appears to contradict previous literature, as many studies have critiqued purity culture's underlying insinuation that a person's body belongs to their spouse or to God, reducing their ability to freely act on their sexual desires (Moon & Reger, 2014; Cross, 2020; Hurd, 2021; Muskrat et al., 2025). Some articles have even highlighted connections between purity culture narratives and acceptance of violent relational and sexual behaviors, further critiquing the inhibition of bodily autonomy (Moon & Reger, 2014; Ortiz et al., 2023).

The lack of a direct correlation between purity culture and autonomy may indicate the presence of a confounding variable such as shame or fear, as literature often highlights the presence of these emotions when discussing purity culture's influence on autonomy (Hurd, 2021; Muskrat et al., 2025). It is also possible that exposure to purity culture narratives may specifically reduce bodily autonomy in the context of sexual and/ or romantic experiences rather than an overall lack of adherence to the "true self." The majority of the literature discussing the lack of autonomy does consistently focus on a person's ability to engage or not engage in sexual acts, vocalize their sexual desires, or engage in behaviors which highlight aspects of their sexuality (Moon & Reger, 2014; Cross, 2020; Hurd, 2021; Muskrat et al., 2025). Thus, it is possible that this study's definition of autonomous behavior targeted a broader, more nuanced concept than purity culture exposure has been shown to inhibit. Further exploration may yield greater insight into these results.

Autonomy and Shame

Consistent with this study's hypotheses, higher autonomy was correlated with lower internal shame. No significant correlations were found between autonomy and external or total shame scores. The link between autonomy and internal shame contributes to significant research supporting association between autonomy and experiences of shame (Alix et al., 2019; Bergamin et al., 2022; Legate et al., 2017; Legate et al., 2019; MacGinley et al., 2019 ; Ryan et al., 2016).

As described in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), highly autonomous choices are motivated intrinsically, without fear of external consequences (Ryan & Deci, 2006; Ryan et al., 2006; Weinstein et al., 2012). Viewed through this lens, higher autonomy scores indicate that a person is frequently making decisions out of a desire to align with their true self. Conversely, those with lower autonomy scores may be more easily influenced by external motivators, which includes social punishment or the loss of community (Ryan & Deci, 2006; Ryan et al., 2006; Weinstein et al., 2012). Similarly, research indicates that the formation of internal shame is also highly influenced by external consequences, emerging as a means of navigating trauma, abuse, neglect, or the loss of connection (Ferreira et al., 2020; Gilbert, 2003; Schimmenti, 2012; Shaw, 2024). Difficulty in reconciling or tolerating external messages is a hallmark of both low autonomy and internal shame (Ferreira et al., 2020; Gilbert, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 2006; Schimmenti, 2012). Thus, one possible explanation for the link between internal shame and autonomy may be that those with lower autonomy begin to internalize the external consequences of their behavior. In the context of the social belongingness theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), this may be especially true if those external consequences result in separation from one's community.

Utilizing the framework of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), another possible explanation for this association may be that internal shame is a reaction to the discovery

that one's true self does not align with the framework of how one was taught to view morality. In the context of this study, the data may indicate that after one realizes that their true self does not align with values taught in purity culture, an inability to reconcile that difference could be the catalyst for a sense of internal shame. If one believes that their true self desires to adhere to values which have historically resulted in judgment, rejection, or the loss of community, Gilbert's (1997; 2003) theory suggests that internal shame is likely to emerge. Whether it be to avoid external consequences or out of genuine belief that the true self is wicked and misguided, high internal shame may buffer autonomous decision making.

However, the results of this study indicate that the reverse may be equally as true. The negative correlation between internal shame and high autonomy offers interesting insight into possible interventions for shame. Combining self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Gilbert's (1997; 2003) interpretation of social belongingness theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), another possible explanation for this link is that having a strong sense of autonomy may empower people to seek out and establish community that honors their values (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Ryan, 1995). These positive relationships may provide corrective experiences that counteract internalized shame perpetuated by the idea that there is only one way to be "good" and accepted (Gilbert, 1997, Gilbert, 2003).

Clinical Implications

For many mental health professionals, working to reduce a client's sense of shame is a common occurrence. However, this study offers valuable insight into effective clinical work when treating clients seeking relief from internal shame stemming from their experiences with purity culture. Though some clinicians may find themselves with the desire to encourage complete disregard of past schemas for the sake of adherence to the true self, this study's data

may indicate the need for a more nuanced, integrative therapeutic intervention. Utilizing the framework of the social belongingness theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) as interpreted by Gilbert (1997; 2003), clinicians must recognize that shame emerges as a reaction to the perceived or threatened loss of connection with others, which is a hardwired biological need. The pain of losing this inherent human need should not be underestimated, and clients may find themselves wrestling with the reality that acceptance of their true self may come at the cost of the schema by which they had previously learned to ensure access to community. Due to both the innate importance of human connection and its role in the experience of internal shame, clinicians are encouraged to explore the ways in which a client's relationships are impacted by their sense of autonomy, or lack thereof (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gilbert, 1997; Gilbert, 2003; Scheff, 2000). Thus, exploration of the true self may also be framed as a means of rebuilding community, as highly autonomous individuals have been shown to develop deeper, more meaningful relationships (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Ryan, 1995). Encouraging connection with those who support the values of the true self may be a highly effective therapeutic goal, as these relationships may lower the likelihood of rejection from one's community, offer corrective experiences which challenge internalized negative self-beliefs, and help the client become even more aligned with their true self (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Christman, 2020; Deci & Ryan, 1987; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gilbert, 1997, Gilbert, 2003; Ryan, 1995).

Furthermore, clinicians should be careful not to disregard the possibility that clients wish to remain connected with aspects of religion beyond purity culture, as religious affiliation can be therapeutically beneficial (Pargament et al., 2013). This may be a challenge for some clinicians, as many clinical programs have faced criticism failing to sufficiently prepare clinicians to incorporate spirituality and faith into therapeutic interventions (Tanega et al., 2025; Williams-

Reade et al., 2019). However, in order to ensure that clients achieve and maintain the best therapeutic outcomes, interventions aimed at reducing internal shame must be navigated with nuance and intentionality, always aiming to center the experience of the client and honor their goals and desires. In this way, clinicians may perpetuate a sense of autonomy in their clients not only through hands-on interventions, but through the therapeutic relationship as well (Ryan & Deci, 2008).

Narrative Therapy

Clients may benefit from therapy focused on integrating their past experiences and schemas into the true self, allowing the client space to wrestle with their idea of what it means to be “good” across multiple domains of life. One such framework for accomplishing this is Narrative Therapy, developed by Michael White and David Epston (1990). Narrative Therapy centers on allowing the client to reauthor the narrative of their life, encouraging clients to explore multiple interpretations of their experiences (White & Epston, 1990). Within Narrative Therapy, the client is framed as the expert of their experiences, with the aim of the clinician being to offer insight into patterns, behaviors, or systemic injustices which inhibit the client’s growth and healing (Shannon et al., 2024). Further, this model of therapy utilizes externalization to conceptualize the client’s presenting problem, thereby reducing the connection between one’s identity and one’s struggles (White & Epston, 1990). Overall, taking a Narrative Therapy approach to treating internal shame due to past endorsement of purity culture may help build client autonomy and provide relief from internal shame.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was not without limitations. First, this study did not collect data on participants race or marital status, both of which may have offered interesting insights into

additional systemic factors which could influence a person's experience with purity culture. Additionally, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of only 62 participants. Furthermore, the sample was relatively homogeneous across gender expression, with 77% of participants identifying as female. Though greater gender diversity may contribute to more applicable findings overall, the oversaturation of females within the sample may speak to the gendered nature of purity culture narratives. As discussed, purity culture teachings commonly emphasize the woman's responsibility in maintaining pre-marital sexual boundaries, and thus it is possible that the gender difference across the sample is merely a reflection of greater exposure to purity culture narratives. However, future research centering on the experience of all gender identities within the context of purity culture may provide a greater understanding of the overall impact of the movement, especially if higher male endorsement of purity culture narratives continues to trend across large samples.

Future researchers are encouraged to explore possible connections between purity culture, shame, and autonomy using a moderation or mediation model. Further exploration of this link may add valuable insight into the therapeutic treatment of commonly presenting issues such as religious trauma, internal shame, or identity struggles.

This study adds to the existing empirical literature offering support for the detrimental effects of purity culture narratives. Consistent with previous research, this study found support for links between LPCE and internal shame. Utilizing the framework of Gilbert's (1997; 2003) interpretation of the social belongingness theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), internal shame may arise from a perceived dissonance between one's framework for maintaining connection and one's current beliefs. Additionally, this study found support for associations between internal shame and autonomy, with increased autonomy contributing to lower internal shame. In line with

previous literature, these findings support the notion that increasing one's autonomy may be an effective method for alleviating distress associated with internal shame. One possible explanation for this link is autonomy's role in developing strong relationships, which in turn may lower the likelihood of rejection from one's community (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Gilbert, 1997, Gilbert, 2003; Ryan, 1995). Clinicians wishing to work with clients who experience internal shame in the context of LPCE are encouraged to increase the client's sense of autonomy across multiple domains of life, allowing the client space to reauthor how they view morality, worthiness, and their humanity.

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Table 1*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Main Study Variables*

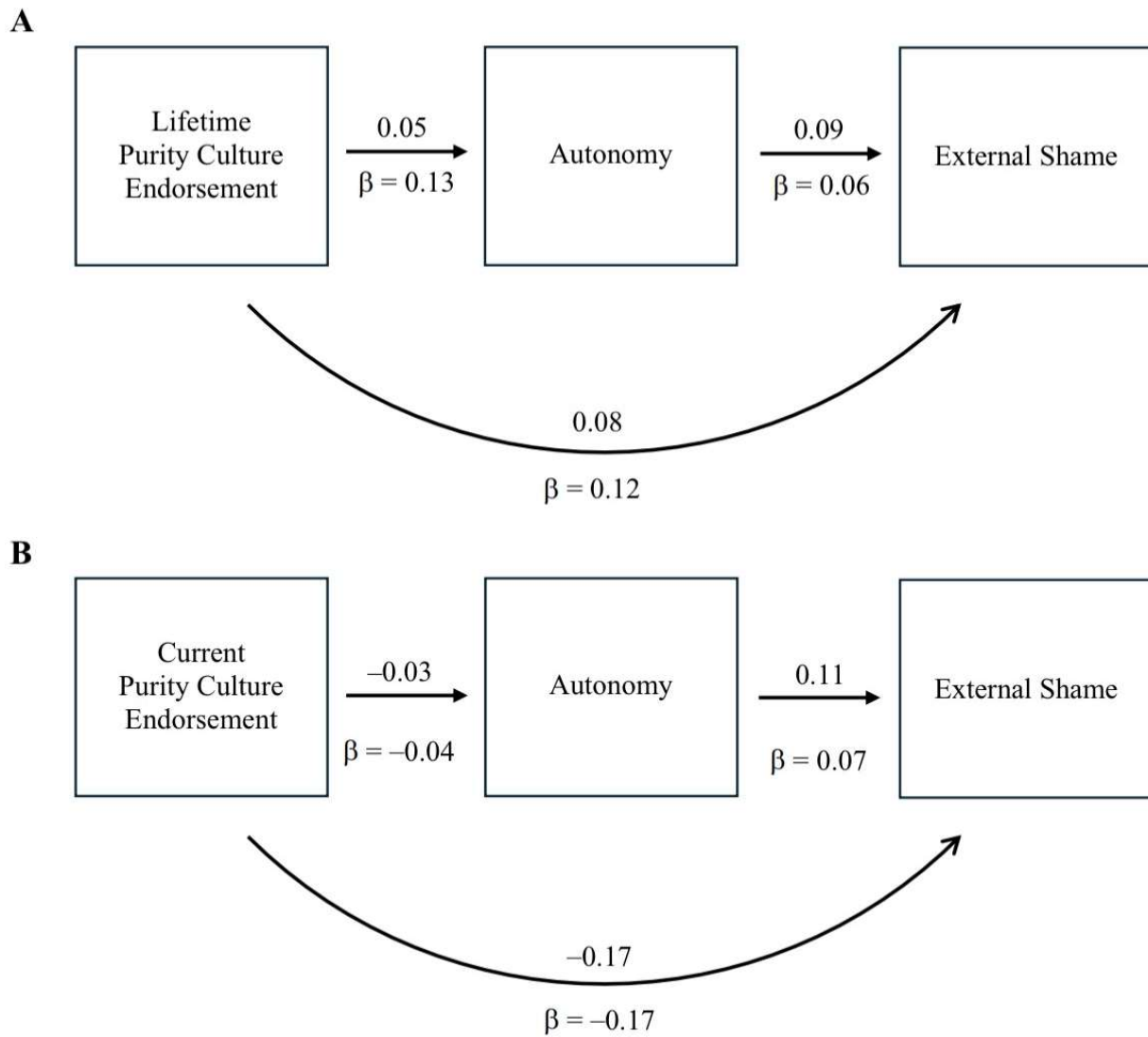
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min.	Max.	1	2	3	4	5
1. LPCE	62	2.29	0.93	1.00	4.80	—				
2. CPCE	61	1.63	0.59	1.00	2.90	.20	—			
3. Autonomy	62	3.73	0.38	3.13	4.60	.13	−.04	—		
4. External shame	62	1.32	0.59	0.25	3.25	.13	−.17	.07	—	
5. Internal shame	62	1.11	0.59	0.00	3.00	.26*	.001	−.32*	.36**	—

Notes. LPCE = lifetime purity culture endorsement. CPCE = current purity culture endorsement.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .005$.

Figure 1

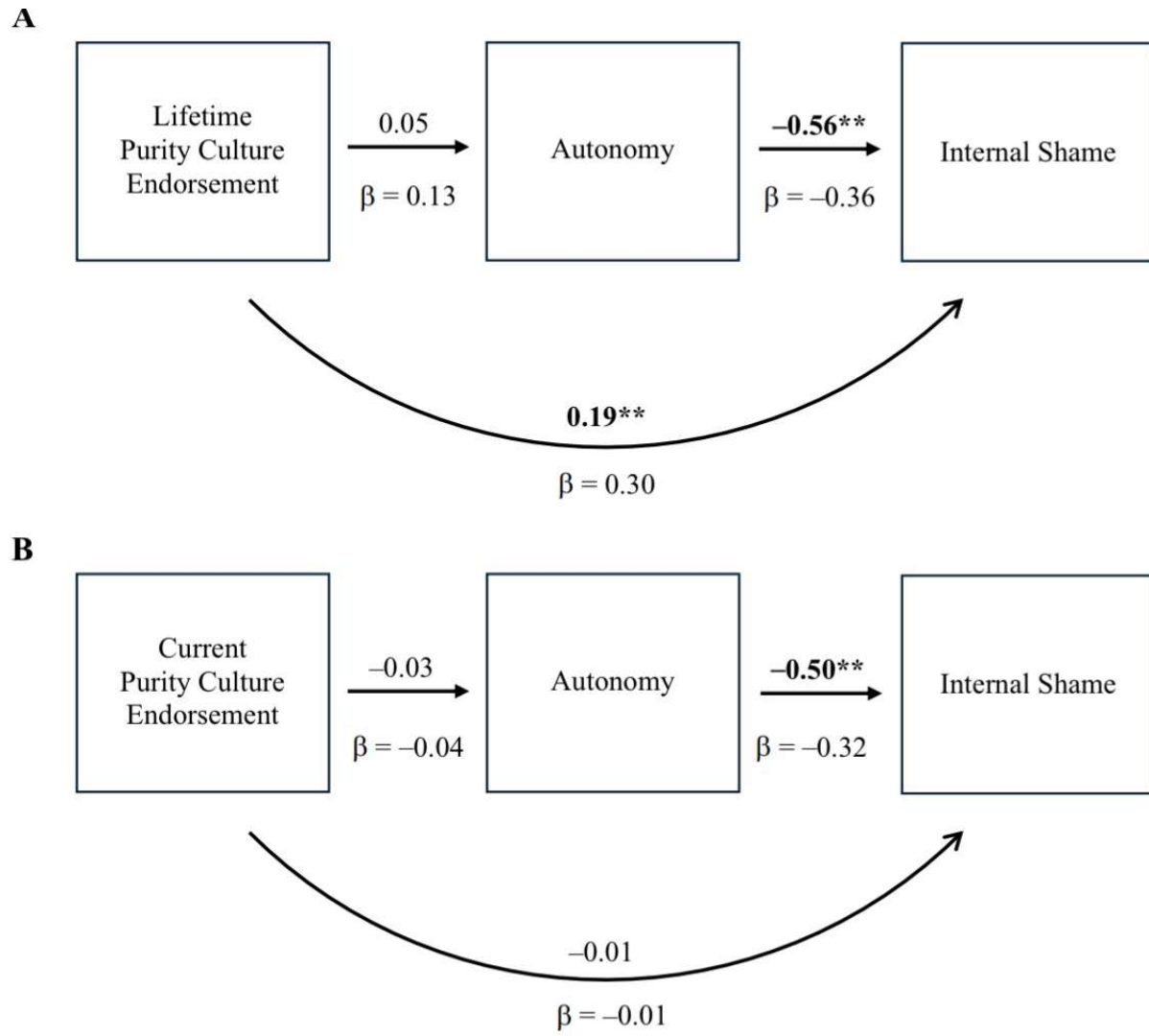
Path Analyses Connecting Purity Culture Endorsement, Autonomy, and External Shame



Note. Panel A: lifetime purity culture endorsement. Panel B: current purity culture endorsement.

Figure 2

Path Analyses Connecting Purity Culture Endorsement, Autonomy, and Internal Shame



Note. Panel A: lifetime purity culture endorsement. Panel B: current purity culture endorsement.
** $p < .01$.

Appendix: Measures

Purity Culture Beliefs Scale (Ortiz et al., 2023)

14 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale with anchors of “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree.”

1. It is normal for women to struggle with lust
2. Having premarital sex will make you unattractive to your future spouse.
3. God's will is for sex to happen within a marriage relationship.
4. A woman who flaunts her body is hard to respect.
5. It is normal for a man to struggle with pornography, but not normal for a woman.
6. Men and women should be equally responsible for maintaining sexual purity.
7. Men cannot be expected to control their sexual desire; women must help them out.
8. It will be difficult for your future spouse to forgive you if you have sex with someone else before marriage.
9. You should try to avoid being sexually aroused, as it can lead to sinful behavior.
10. Women must be responsible for guarding purity, because men cannot help themselves.
11. Women are, by nature, more sexually pure than men.
12. You should feel ashamed if you have sex outside of marriage.
13. It is the woman's fault if sexual boundaries are crossed in a dating relationship.
14. It is normal to experience sexual thoughts and feelings throughout one's life.

External and Internal Shame Scale (Ferreira et al., 2020)

Eight items rated on a 5-point Likert scale with anchors of “never” and “always.”

External Shame Subscale

1. Other people see me as not being up to their standards
2. Other people don't understand me
3. Others are judgmental and critical of me
4. Other people see me as uninteresting

Internal Shame Subscale

5. I am isolated
6. I am different and inferior to others
7. I am unworthy as a person
8. I am judgmental and critical of myself

Index of Autonomous Functioning (Weinstein et al., 2012)

15 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale with anchors of “not at all true” and “completely true.”

1. My decisions represent my most important values and feelings.
2. I do things in order to avoid feeling badly about myself.
3. I often reflect on why I react the way I do.
4. I strongly identify with the things that I do.
5. I am deeply curious when I react with fear or anxiety to events in my life.
6. I do a lot of things to avoid feeling ashamed.
7. I try to manipulate myself into doing certain things.
8. My actions are congruent with who I really am.
9. I am interested in understanding the reasons for my actions.
10. My whole self stands behind the important decisions I make.
11. I believe certain things so that others will like me.
12. I am interested in why I act the way I do.
13. I like to investigate my feelings.
14. I often pressure myself.
15. My decisions are steadily informed by things I want or care about.