

Unequally Yoked: How Patriarchy Uses Fear to Restrict Sexual Communication
and Connection

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Abstract

This study explores how societal and cultural norms shape communication about sex and intimacy, focusing on the role of fear, particularly fear of negative evaluation, as a central barrier to open dialogue. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative survey data with qualitative open-ended responses, this study investigates how internalized shame and rigid gender expectations perpetuate silence and limit authentic self-expression in intimate contexts.

The findings confirm the initial thesis that patriarchal systems strategically use fear to control sexual communication, reinforcing power dynamics and maintaining heteronormative ideals. Participants described fears of social rejection, moral condemnation, personal failure, and loss of identity as key reasons they avoid discussing sexual needs and desires openly. These fears not only discourage vulnerability but also constrain opportunities for growth and deeper connection.

The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by highlighting how fear functions as a social mechanism of control rather than just a personal psychological obstacle. The narratives highlight the need for safe, judgment-free spaces in which people can explore and express their intimate experiences.

Future research should further examine intersectional factors, including race, sexuality, and religion, that converge with fear to shape sexual communication. Additionally, interventions aimed at dismantling shame-based frameworks and promoting emotional literacy could create pathways toward healthier, equitable intimate relationships.

The significance of these findings is in the potential to inform educational, therapeutic, and public health initiatives designed to promote open, affirming conversations about sex and

intimacy. By challenging embedded social norms, this work (supports) a cultural shift toward greater honesty, empathy, and connection.

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Dedication

To my family (blood and chosen) for allowing me to see the best in myself and for the support to allow me to grow into who I am today.

To my stubborn younger self who's curiosity and fascination with the "why" never went away as I got older.

To the ones who not only believed in my light, but also pushed me until I believed in it myself.

To the ones wanting to find the answers, but afraid to ask the questions.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Communication about intimacy and sex is crucial for expressing desires, needs, and boundaries, yet these topics have historically been viewed as taboo (Dreweke, 2019; Popat et al., 2023). The shame and stigma surrounding them have been passed down for centuries, creating significant barriers to open, honest conversations. This persistent shame and stigma affects adults in romantic relationships, parents having the “sex talk” with their children, the double standard in how boys and girls receive messages about sexuality (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002), children’s use of anatomically correct words for their bodies, medical professionals discussing sex and pleasure with patients (Annerstedt & Glasdam, 2019; Popat et al., 2023), and even the censorship of sexual health ads (Popat et al., 2023). These societal norms shape how people can, or cannot, communicate about intimacy in both public and private spheres.

This study aims to examine why fear and discomfort arise when discussing intimacy, sex, and pleasure. Throughout history, the regulation and policing of sexuality has played a central role in shaping racial categories, social hierarchies and the overall dynamics of colonial rule (Stoler, 2010). This patriarchal “language” is not just the vocabulary of sex, but a network of sanctioned words, euphemisms, and moral judgments designed to determine who may speak, how, and about what. Just as powerful is the language that is not spoken. The silences, the missing words for women’s pleasure, the refusal to name bodily experiences without shame. These absences are not neutral; they strip people of even the means to articulate their own needs, reinforcing dependency on patriarchal definitions of propriety and morality. In this way, silence itself becomes a language of control, carrying the weight of humiliation, ostracization, and even

violence for those who deviate. This historical framework extends into modern relationships, limiting people's ability to openly discuss their sexual needs, desires, and boundaries.

Starting in the 19th century, the rise of mass media, particularly newspapers, not only provided access to a wealth of information but also caused a cultural shift that impacted both public and private lives (Chase & Levenson, 2000). Gender roles became more rigidly defined, placing men and women in "respected" roles to protect morality and the sanctity of the home, giving men more privilege while repressing women and their sexuality (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). Men's control over public life allowed them to dominate discussions of family, sexuality, and morality, while women were idealized as "angels in the house" and tasked with protecting home and family values (Chase & Levenson, 2000).

The Battle of the Sexes (or Genders)

Gender norms are social norms defining acceptable and appropriate actions for women and men in a given group or society. They are embedded in formal and informal institutions, nested in the mind, and produced and reproduced through social interaction. They play a role in shaping women and men's (often unequal) access to resources and freedom, thus affecting their voice and power and sense of self (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020, pp. 415-416).

These norms are not experienced equally; race, class, and sexual orientation intersect with gender to produce very different patterns of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2004). For example, white middle-class women in the 19th century were framed as moral guardians of the home, while women of color, working-class women, and queer women were

frequently excluded from that ideal, subjected instead to stereotypes that justified their exploitation (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2004).

Sex refers to physical attributes and is biologically determined, while gender is the psychological and behavioral expression of being male or female. Gender identity refers to a person's deeply felt internal sense of being male, female, both, neither, or somewhere along the spectrum (Lindqvist et al., 2021). Gender expression, in contrast, is the external presentation of that identity, through clothing, behavior, voice, and other forms of self-presentation, which may or may not align with societal expectations for a given gender (Lindqvist et al., 2021). This distinction matters because patriarchal systems often police not only bodies and identities but also how those identities are expressed in public life; controls have historically privileged white, heterosexual, middle- and upper-class norms while marginalizing people of color, working-class people, and queer or gender-nonconforming people.

Gender has never existed outside of power; it has been shaped by historical, scientific, and social forces that regulate and enforce distinctions between men and women. In Western Europe's intellectual history, whose influence would later shape the United States, roles assigned to men and women, particularly to white, socially privileged men and women, have long been framed through an ideological lens that positioned men as active agents and women as passive vessels (Laquer, 1992). Enslaved and colonized women, by contrast, were cast as hypersexual, immoral, and in need of control (Collins, 2000; Schuller, 2017). Aristotle's reproduction model formed this hierarchy by establishing the male as the "efficient cause," the active creative force who provides form and motion, while the female was reduced to the "material cause," reinforcing a hierarchy that has persisted not only through European colonial expansion but also in the cultural foundations of the U.S. (Foucault, 1978; Laquer, 1992). This was not just a

scientific observation of biology; it was a way of reinforcing the idea that men were the real driving force behind creation, whether in reproduction, knowledge, or leadership.

By aligning masculinity with action, and femininity with passivity and reception, this framework helped justify male dominance, especially dominance of white, heterosexual men over women in their own class as well as over men and women of other races and lower classes, in political, intellectual, and moral spheres (Foucault, 1978; Laquer, 1992; Schuller, 2017). Even today, in the U.S. and other Western societies, these ideas shape the way we talk about leadership, creativity, and agency, often with the presumption that men are the ones naturally suited for action and authority while women are expected to follow or support (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020; Nagel, 1998).

Intersex people challenge the traditional ideas of “active” men and “passive” women, something that is not new. Many pre-modern societies had more fluid understandings of sex and gender. In ancient Greece, masculinity and femininity were tied to more social roles rather than biology, and ancient Jewish and Roman traditions acknowledged that not everyone fit neatly into “man” or “woman” (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). These categories were not just about anatomy; they were shaped by power and status, and interpretation.

As biology became more structured as a discipline, 19th century scientists pushed for rigid definitions, classifying intersex people as deviations that needed to be “corrected” (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Instead of recognizing sex as fluid, they reinforced the idea of “normal” male and female bodies, often making decisions about sex assignment based on reproductive potential, where factors like penis size mattered. These “normal” standards were defined in relation to whiteness, heterosexuality, and middle-class reproductive ideals. Today, laws and political

debates still rely on binary definitions, often reducing man and woman to chromosomes or reproductive capacity, forcing intersex people into categories that do not reflect their realities.

Early research, shaped by Victorian gender ideals, also contributed to this rigid framework. Scientists believed male and female hormones worked in opposition: testosterone meant maleness; estrogen meant femaleness (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). This reinforced the idea that men were naturally aggressive and dominant, while women were passive and nurturing. These assumptions did not just shape science, they provided a supposed biological justification for patriarchal norms, making male dominance in public life and female domesticity seem “natural.” 19th century men were expected to have authority in public matters, managing economics, politics, and intellectual debates, while women were relegated to the domestic sphere, embodying purity, sacrifice and moral guardianship (Chase & Levenson, 2000). This domestic sphere primarily applied to white middle- and upper-class women, while women of color and working class women were often excluded from this role and instead exploited for labor. Guidebooks like those by Sarah Stickney Ellis reinforced the notion that men worked to protect women from the harsh world, justifying male dominance and women’s exclusion from public power (Tosh, 1999).

Cultural scripts have long acted as an unofficial guide for how men and women are supposed to behave, especially in sexual and romantic contexts (Sanchez, et al., 2012). These scripts dictate who should initiate sex, how partners should act and what roles each gender should play. Reinforcing societal norms and gender roles often limiting sexual agency and expression. Historically, women’s sexuality was controlled tightly to “preserve” family honor, especially for white, middle-class women, while women of color were often subject to stereotypes of hypersexuality used to justify exploitation. While men were expected (even

encouraged) to gain experience before marriage. Men were also positioned as protectors, which reinforced the idea that showing emotion or vulnerability outside the home was a sign of weakness (Stoler, 2010; Tosh, 1999).

The family creates the foundation for a person's emotional and social development (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). That person's experiences in love, care, and stability as a child help develop the confidence in one's own self and in relationships with others. This security plays a crucial role in how they navigate intimacy and trust later in life. Children learn by observing behaviors, attitudes, and interactions of family members. Parents, being the primary role models for gender roles, shape expectations for how men and women "should" behave in relationships, caregiving, and emotional expressions (Klein & Shulman, 1981).

Parsons and Bales (1955) argued that traditional gender roles within families shape children's understanding of masculinity, femininity, and relationships (Klein & Shulman, 1981). In white, middle-class families, the mother was typically cast as the emotional core, responsible for nurturing and caregiving, while the father is seen as the provider, disciplinarian, and decision-maker. These ideals excluded and stigmatized single parents, same-sex parents, and non-white families, who were often pathologized in social policy and research. This 1950s-era model reinforced the idea that men and women have distinct, complementary roles. It also fed into heteronormative and patriarchal structures, in which emotional labor was feminized, and men were expected to be distant authority figures. Because of this, many people raised in these environments struggle to break free from rigid gender expectations in their own relationships.

Klein and Shulman (1981) further suggested that children develop a "more appropriate" sense of masculinity and femininity when their parents maintain a stable marriage and conform

to traditional gender roles. This framing assumes that masculinity and femininity are fixed, rather than fluid or socially constructed. It implies that a child's well-being depends on adhering to these roles, which can be harmful. Boys raised with these expectations may struggle with emotional expression, while girls may feel responsible for maintaining emotional closeness in relationships.

The idea that children thrive only when parents take on distinct gender roles is misleading and outdated. A healthy family environment, one built on love, respect, and emotional support can exist regardless of gender roles. Children can develop just as well (or better) in homes in which parents share responsibilities equally or in families that do not follow traditional norms, such as single-parent families, same-sex parents, or non-binary caregivers. Tying love, respect, stability solely to households that uphold rigid gender roles can not only limit a child's self-expression and reinforce outdated relationships expectations, but also unfairly paints nontraditional families as dysfunctional, unhealthy, and broken. In reality, they are just as capable of raising emotionally healthy children.

While gender roles may seem one-sided, they were constructed through a restrictive two-gender binary that enforces rules for all genders. This framework limits individual expression and reinforces multiple forms of oppression, including sexism, homophobia, and racism, with classism and xenophobia further shaping whose gender expressions are deemed acceptable (Rushton et al., 2019). It also marginalizes queer and feminist scholars and activists who push for more inclusive understandings of gender. This continuous reinforcement of the binary also marginalizes queer and feminist scholars activists who push back against these rigid ideas to advocate for more inclusive understanding of gender.

The gender binary is not just a system of classification, but it is a tool for reinforcing inequality. Lorber (2018) argues that gender itself becomes paradoxical in a system that constantly upholds these inequalities, while Johnston (2005) points to Western cultural norms as the driving force behind rigid gender roles, making them feel “natural.” This “naturalness” was modeled on white, heterosexual, middle-class ideals exported through colonialism (Rushton et al., 2019). This binary system does not just sort people into categories; it has historically upheld male privilege and power. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1991) concept of intersectionality makes it clear that gender does not exist in isolation. Race, class, sexuality, and other factors all shape how people experience oppression. The gender binary, especially as it was enforced through colonialism, erased the more fluid understandings of gender that existed in many cultures. By recognizing gender as a social construct rather than a biological fact, the door opens to more inclusive perspectives, ones that challenge the very inequalities this system was built to maintain.

The societal pressures that shape these roles create a cycle of expectation and enforcement, where people of all genders are both subjected to and complicit in upholding these norms. As victims of these cultural systems, people often internalize gendered expectations unconsciously, perpetuating the very standards that limit their emotional and sexual freedom (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002; Stoler, 2010; Sanchez et al., 2012). For example, women, especially white, middle-class women, may feel pressured to conform to ideals of femininity that emphasize passivity and emotional caretaking, waiting for a partner to initiate or lead sexual encounters (Sanchez et al., 2012), while women of color, queer women, and working-class women may face different but equally restrictive pressures. Men, on the other hand, may feel pressured to suppress their emotions in order to embody dominant masculine ideals. Those who do not align with binary gender roles may face pressure to adopt one in order to navigate social

spaces safely or be easy to others. These dynamics can keep people trapped in outdated scripts, preventing exploration of more authentic, flexible, and fulfilling ways of relating.

When women, particularly those whose race or class positions limit their social autonomy, take on more submissive roles, it often correlates with reduced sexual autonomy and overall dissatisfaction, effects that can also impact their partners (Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Sanchez, 2012). In addition, men who feel obligated to perform dominant gender roles may lose touch with their emotional or physical needs, prioritizing social expectations over their own pleasure and well-being (Sanchez et al., 2005; Sanchez et al., 2012). Religious institutions further reinforce these dynamics by shaping social norms and moral discourse, often upholding ideologies of sexual restraint and gendered behavior that continue to influence public perception today (Tosh, 1999).

What comes out of this is a complex dance of power, emotional suppression, one that impacts not only individual identities but also the structure and health of relationships and communities. Desire, attraction, and intimacy are shaped by far more than hormones; they are deeply embedded in cultural narratives, psychological frameworks, and historical context. Recognizing how these forces operate is key to understanding the ongoing struggles for sexual autonomy and emotional expression that continues to unfold today.

Language of Control

This study will explore how gender norms and fear have shaped the language of intimacy and how it is experienced. By creating standards around what is considered “proper” in relationships, the dominant groups, mostly men, have controlled the language used to maintain power and enforce norms (Stoler, 2010). To understand how this control is achieved, I look at

the role of fear: fear of change, moral decay, social rejection, and fear of failure and success, and how these fears are perpetuated throughout our daily lives. These fears are not only personal but also ingrained in societal structures, influencing how people navigate the world of intimacy and relationships.

An important aspect of this control is Christianity's influence on the language surrounding gender roles and intimacy. Purity culture, rooted in Christian teachings, has been used to stigmatize and demonize non-heteronormative expressions of intimacy, using fear of sin to regulate how intimacy is sought, maintained and expressed. This framework has created a culture of shame and silence, particularly around women's sexuality and men's vulnerability. I will analyze how these dynamics have shaped the language of intimacy, creating double standards that disproportionately affect women and limit men's emotional expression.

Additionally, I will examine how intersectionality, the ways in which different identities (gender, race, class and sexuality) interact with and are affected by patriarchal structures, and how this shapes the language of sex and pleasure in various communities. This intersectional lens is crucial for understanding how marginalized groups experience and resist these systems of control, as well as how their voices and experiences are often excluded from dominant narratives.

Finally, this study will address the impact of these fears on communication within relationships, looking at how they hinder open dialogue and perpetuate inequalities. I will also explore ways toward a more equitable approach to intimacy, one that challenges patriarchal norms, dismantles the language of control, and encourages healthier, more authentic communication between people. By exploring how sexual control was not a static or monolithic

phenomenon but rather a fluid and adaptable tool used to maintain power (Stoler, 2010), this analysis aims to dismantle historical barriers, promote healthier relationships and contribute to a cultural shift toward open dialogue about these essential aspects of the human experience.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The Only Thing to Fear is The System of Fear Itself

If patriarchy were 'natural' that is, based on biological determinism, then to change it would mean to change nature. One might argue that changing nature is precisely what civilization has done, but so far most of the benefits of that domination over nature, which men call 'progress' has occurred to the male of the species (Lerner, 1986, p. 6).

Patriarchal systems, deeply rooted in historical, religious, and legal traditions, maintain dominance through the strategic use of fear. Patriarchy operates as a framework that influences everything from cultural norms to institutional practices. It is not a group of people or a collection of individual behaviors; it is an entire system (Johnson, 2004). This system organizes society around specific social relationships and deeply ingrained ideas that influence how we interact within societal institutions but also how we navigate interpersonal relationships.

At the heart of this system is fear, a mechanism that reinforces submission, conformity, control, and even silence, allowing patriarchy to continue from generation to generation. While people, regardless of gender, are involved in patriarchy, whether consciously or not, it is important to recognize that its effects are not felt equally. As foundational feminist scholars have argued, patriarchy operates as a social logic that naturalizes male dominance and upholds gender hierarchies through the internalization of gendered roles (MacKinnon, 1989; Giugni, 2024; Walby, 1989; MacKinnon, 1989). But this logic is not static. Intersectional critiques have long pushed back against the idea of a universal womanhood, highlighting how patriarchy plays out differently depending a person's race, class, and location (Crenshaw, 1990; Giugni, 2024). A

person's relationship to the system is shaped on factors like age, race, gender, ethnicity, and class (Johnson, 2004) and by the specific fears tied to those identities, such as fear of racialized violence, gender-based discrimination, or class-based marginalization. Fear acts as a force that ties together the multiple threads and influences in patriarchal systems, manifesting in different forms based on one's position within intersecting identities. For some, it manifests as fear of social rejection; for others, it may be the threat of economic, physical, or emotional harm. Either way, fear becomes the binding force pushing conformity and preserving hierarchies that serve those at the top.

While everyone's experience within a patriarchal society differs, people's daily lives and choices can inadvertently support the system itself (Johnson, 2004). From the way people interact with one another to the products they buy, these behaviors subtly reinforce patriarchal norms and structures. But patriarchy does not act alone; it works hand-in-hand with capitalism, a system that profits from and perpetuates inequality (Cruz, 2018).

From a historical materialist perspective, Friedrich Engels (1884/2001) argued that the rise of patriarchy was inseparable from the development of private property under early class societies. In the *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels (1884/2001) theorized that monogamous marriage emerged as a way to ensure the inheritance of property through the male line, requiring the control of women's sexuality and reproductive labor. This institutionalized women's economic dependence and exclusion from public power, binding gender oppression to class exploitation.

Capitalism relies on both productive and socially reproductive labor (Bryson, 2005; Cruz, 2018). Productive labor includes work that produces goods and services and is often socialized

as masculine. In contrast, socially reproductive labor includes care work, emotional labor, and domestic tasks, historically seen as feminine and often unpaid and undervalued. These forms of labor are not just economic; they are shaped by gender, race, and legal systems. Capitalism exploits and devalues social reproduction, even though it depends on it for the survival of the workforce (Cruz, 2018; Engels, 1884/2001). From a Marxist feminist perspective, people both shape and are shaped by capitalism, creating a dialectical relationship between individual experience and the structures of society (Cruz, 2018; Vogel, 2013). Labor is a basic human activity, yet capitalism transforms it into a commodity, bought and sold for profit. It operates on a spectrum of labor freedom and unfreedom, where not all work is truly “free.” This ranges from waged jobs to exploitative contracts or forced labor, such as trafficking and prison labor, with marginalized groups most affected (Cruz, 2018).

Certain actors, employers, state systems, and institutions, coerce and exploit workers to maintain the system. Historically, the meaning and structure of care work shifted. Under feudalism, women performed domestic work, farmed, and sold goods (Cruz, 2018). As capitalism emerged, women were expected to perform both waged labor and unpaid domestic work, deepening the sexual division of labor. This shift privatized and feminized care work, positioning it as natural and invisible. Emotional and household labor became devalued, not because they lack importance, but because they do not generate immediate profit (Conaghan, 2017; Cruz, 2018). Legal systems decide whose labor is recognized and protected. Gender and race shape who performs care work, who gets criminalized, and who is excluded from the labor market. One type of labor that sits at the intersection of productive and reproductive labor is sex work. It involves intimacy, care, emotional support, sexuality, core element of social reproduction, yet it is also waged labor. Many sex workers also perform unpaid reproductive

labor within their families and communities (Cruz, 2018). By monetizing sex and care, sex work challenges capitalism's arbitrary boundaries between labor categories and reveals its hidden reliance on care work.

Patriarchy and capitalism can be both understood as social systems and as institutional logics: symbolic and material frameworks that shape how people make sense of the world and move through it (Giugni, 2024; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008; Thornton et al., 2012). Together, they promote dominance, consumption, and control, often at the expense of empathy, collaboration, and vulnerability. These intertwined systems make sex work become hyper-visible as scandal and invisible as labor. Sex workers are often seen as morally deviant, legally vulnerable, and socially disposable, even while performing emotional and sexual labor that society depends on (Cruz, 2018). They are denied rights, protections, and legitimacy. Sex work is criminalized under both patriarchy and capitalism, but for different reasons (Cruz, 2018).

Under patriarchy:

- Sex is framed as a duty, not a commodity.
- Selling sex challenges the notion that women's sexuality exists solely for men or the family.
- Sex work represents autonomy, and that threatens patriarchal control.

Under capitalism:

- Only professionalized care (e.g. therapists, nurses) is considered valuable.
- Sex work reveals that care has value even without middle-class respectability.
- It declares: "You've always used this labor, now I'm charging for it."

The real threat lies in the autonomy sex work represents. Sex workers, especially if female or femme, who sets their own prices, controls their body, and rejects traditional roles disrupts the norms of both systems (Cruz, 2018). Sex work exposes the contradictions: that sex is sacred yet expected, that care is valuable yet unpaid, and that labor is essential yet criminalized when owned by the worker. Sex work is not outside of capitalism or patriarchy, it is central to how they function (Cruz, 2018). It exposes the hypocrisy of a system that profits from feminized labor while criminalizing and degrading those who perform it. As such, sex work becomes a powerful lens for understanding how intimacy is not just devalued, but actively controlled and policed by dominant social forces. For example, when sex workers are portrayed in the media as tragic victims or immoral deviants, the narrative erases their autonomy and reinforces the idea that sexual labor is inherently shameful. These portrayals parallel the way sexual communication in everyday relationships is often silenced, through shaming language, “don’t talk about” rules in schools, or policies that treat conversations about consent and pleasure as morally suspect.

It helps reveal that sexual communication and intimacy are not just personal or private acts, they are political battlegrounds. The fear that surrounds open, honest conversations about sex, whether within relationships, in education, or in public discourse; mirrors the fear-based tactics used to suppress sex workers. In both cases, silence is framed as safety, and those who break it are marked as disruptive, deviant, or dangerous. Both are shaped by a patriarchal logic that conflates control with morality and silence with virtue (Cruz, 2018).

These intertwined logics of capitalism and patriarchy dictate what is considered legitimate, respectable, or valuable. They reward conformity and punish deviation, especially when the deviation threatens established hierarchies (Giugni, 2024). This can be seen in how “respectable” sexual expression is narrowly defined, heterosexual, monogamous, reproductive,

while other expressions are dismissed as perverse or unworthy of legal protection. Even the seemingly common or ritualistic actions of everyday life, how people talk (or do not talk) about sex, how they view labor, how they judge others, can collectively contribute to reinforcing these norms.

Cultural narratives play a major role in shaping people's roles and understanding of others. Institutions like media, education, religion and family structures can influence ideals that align with patriarchal values. For example, "abstinence-only" sex education frames sex as dangerous outside of marriage, particularly for women, and omits discussions of pleasure or LGBTQ+ relationships. Johnson (2004) describes patriarchal culture as central to a complex web of interconnected systems. It elevates traits associated with maleness like dominance, control, and emotional restraint, while devaluing traits linked to femininity, such as emotional expressiveness or vulnerability, are key to patriarchal culture. Fear becomes a powerful tool for enforcing these values, discouraging behaviors that stray from the norm. For instance, boys who cry may be labeled "weak" or "unmanly" and women who openly express sexual desire may be called "promiscuous" or "unprofessional." These social punishments reinforce conformity to dominant ideals. In this way, patriarchal culture uses fear not only to maintain its hierarchical value system but also to suppress any challenge to its dominance.

It is crucial to understand that, though patriarchy may seem like a set of rules or norms that are being imposed by external forces, it actually exists because of us, and we exist within and through it (Johnson, 2004). This cyclical interaction shows how deeply embedded systems like patriarchy are sustained: through participation and the mutual shaping of both people and the system. While it may not be possible to completely and easily opt out of this system, there is still the option of choosing how to engage with it. From the Victorian family model, where the father

held ultimate authority without question (Tosh, 1999), to modern contexts, fear has remained a critical tool for reinforcing dependency, submission, silence and conformity.

Fear plays a key role in maintaining control within patriarchal systems, influencing both social and family dynamics (Sacco, 1990). It can be used to push people to conform to societal norms through shame, while also discouraging others who step outside the lines. Family structures tend to reinforce these dynamics by relying on a fear-based discipline and strict authority hierarchies, which discourage independent thought or emotional expression that could challenge the “traditional” family roles (Sacco, 1990). Fear is then internalized in this culture and anything that shows opposition to this hierarchy is framed as a threat. For example, within this family structure, if a daughter wants to pursue an ambitious role outside of traditional expectations, fear tactics may be employed to discourage her from stepping out of her “place.” She could be made to feel guilty, selfish, or even irresponsible for wanting to reach beyond the traditional norm; thus reinforcing to her and those similar to her that her role is to stay in the preconceived gender role. However, if a son wants to pursue a career that would be traditionally seen as “feminine,” such as a nurse or a stay-at-home parent, he may be discouraged from those roles by having his masculinity questioned suggesting that he is weak or inferior, or warning him about societal judgment and even economic instability. These both could lead to internalized fear and self-doubt, and over time could limit personal growth, creativity and emotional well-being.

These dynamics can also stifle meaningful communication and relationships, as fear makes vulnerability and open conversations, especially about intimacy and personal autonomy, feel risky or off-limits (Sacco, 1990). The suppression of emotional expression and authentic connection not only harms people’s mental health but also contributes to a broader culture of

emotional disconnection, reinforcing cycles of control and limiting the potential for genuine relationships.

In the early 19th century, the rapid growth of media and advancements in communication transformed society, contributing to significant societal changes. This period saw the emergence of what Chase and Levenson (2000) describe as an “enlarged zone of publicity,” in which people and events were exposed to broader public attention. This shift shocked Victorians, because it started to reveal the cracks in the idealized image of domestic life for the middle class. This picture-perfect notion of middle-class life, carefully created and portrayed for the public eye, was presented as the epitome of control, order, and moral virtue. By keeping this ideal embodiment, the middle-class families were able to distinguish themselves from those in the upper and lower class (Tosh, 1999). Families were expected to embody these ideals in their private and public lives, and many people aspired to be at this status. However, private issues such as adultery, divorce, bigamy, and spousal abuse were revealed, shattering the illusion of a universally harmonious domestic life (Chase & Levenson, 2000). These revelations exposed the lived realities of domestic struggles, highlighting that the ideal norms of family life were not always practiced and hiding the inequalities and dysfunction behind closed doors. It became clear that this projected model of control and stability masked deep-rooted issues and oppressive practices within the family unit.

Rather than weakening the set societal standards placed by the middle class, the exposure of these domestic scandals and failures actually reinforced them. These stories were used as cautionary tales, a fear-induced strategy carefully crafted to demonstrate the consequences of going against the societal standard. The fear of a person or family’s regrets, failures, and grief being exposed was used as a dominant tool in ensuring compliance with rigid gender roles and

moral expectations. The consequences of deviating from the norms were made visible for all to see, a powerful message projected to discourage those who may also consider stepping outside the lines. By framing these moral lapses and negative consequences as catastrophic failures, the dominant groups in society used fear as a mechanism to reassert control; not only to reinforce gendered expectations but also to justify the continuation of traditional roles as essential for preserving social order and moral integrity. Fear became a crucial part of maintaining the status quo, with consequences framed as inevitable and necessary for the health of the family and society at large.

The rise in publicity during this era also led to a bigger emphasis on the boundaries of privacy and personal secrets. This shift pushed for a more distinguished divide between public and private spheres, with set rules meant to protect domestic life and punish those who violated its boundaries (Chase & Levenson, 2000). While working-class households did not have clearly separated domestic spaces, middle-class homes increasingly emphasized gendered division of space and labor. Women were responsible for managing the household, caring for children, and maintaining emotional and moral harmony. The parlor, for instance, symbolized comfort and virtue and was considered the woman's domain, an extension of her role as the moral and emotional center of the home. Men were positioned as the breadwinners and public representatives of the family. Rooms, like studies or libraries, which reflected intellectual and professional life, were seen as masculine spaces, mirroring men's societal roles in the public sphere (Chase & Levenson, 2000). This spatial and ideological division reinforced the belief that men and women were inherently suited for different roles: men for the public, women for the private. As a result, women were confined to the domestic sphere and excluded from public and political influence, while men maintained dominance across both, further entrenching patriarchal

power. When private matters were exposed to the public eye, the consequences were often severe. Reputations could be destroyed, and the resulting scandals became a source of public fascination. This gave rise to what Chase and Levenson (2000) call the “spectacle of intimacy,” a cultural phenomenon in which the exposure of private struggles both captivated and disturbed Victorian society, blurring the boundaries the era tried so hard to enforce.

The historical division between public and private life laid the groundwork for modern dynamics of control in intimate relationships. The same societal logic that determined domestic roles continues to shape expectations around power, privacy, and emotional labor. Fear and manipulation continue to be powerful tools used to strip people of their autonomy, creating dynamics where one partner can exercise dominance over the other. These tactics, ranging from subtle emotional manipulation to overt threats or financial control, deeply impact decision making around important influences such as contraception, pregnancy, or reproductive health (Tarzia & Hegarty, 2021). In these intimate spaces, fear-based control can have devastating effects on personal agency, making it difficult for someone to advocate for their own needs, desires, or personal boundaries. Over time, this dynamic breaks trust and communication, undermining the foundation of equitable relationships. This type of control does not exist in a vacuum; it reflects deeper cultural norms that prioritize dominance and submission over mutual respect, consent, and shared decision-making. Just as Victorian ideals confined women to domestic virtue, modern power imbalances within relationships reflect and reinforce patriarchal ideologies that are passed down, internalized, and reproduced across generations.

Fear operates through two primary ways: fear control and danger control, each shaping behavior and decision-making in distinct but powerful ways (Kim & Kim, 2010). Fear control relies on conservative tactics that amplify insecurities: fear of change, fear of the unknown, fear

of instability, to reinforce traditional norms and discourage change or deviation. This is a common tactic in patriarchal systems, where the fear of stepping outside of traditional roles is framed as dangerous or destabilizing. Nonconformity is positioned as a threat to societal cohesion, making it harder for people and communities to embrace new ideas or imagine different futures. As a result, people are more likely to cling to what feels familiar, even if it limits autonomy or growth. Danger control, on the other hand, responds to perceived threats with proactive or innovative strategies (Kim & Kim, 2010). But even here, fear can be co-opted and redirected in ways that still serve dominant systems. For example, fear may be manipulated not to inspire genuine change, but to justify resistance to progress, portraying new ideas as dangerous or immoral to the social order. The power of fear is in its ability to operate on multiple levels: it shapes individual behavior while also mobilizing collective action (Kim & Kim, 2010). It can inspire people to “defend” traditional values, putting them on a pedestal and framing them as the foundation of civilization, while at the same time portraying change as a moral decline or social threat (Kim & Kim, 2010). In intimate relationships, this dynamic becomes deeply personal. Fear of judgment, rejection, or failure can hinder open communication and authentic emotional expression, making vulnerability feel unsafe. This hesitance can keep people in unhealthy patterns, in which partners default to emotional withdrawal or controlling behavior to avoid discomfort. Over time, these fear-driven interactions reinforce power imbalances, breaking down trust and hindering mutual growth. Just as fear upholds the larger structure of patriarchy, it can also control the emotional dynamics between people, keeping them from expression, connecting, or evolving fully within their relationships.

Fear is also a powerful psychological tool, one that leaders and institutions have long used to their advantage. It can be used to twist realities, exploit tragedies, and override rational

decision-making (Gore, 2004). Tactics like sensationalized media coverage and emotional manipulation are commonly used to justify controversial policies, restrict civil liberties, and create division among people. The media plays a significant role in amplifying fear, turning complex issues into dramatic, emotion-driven narratives (Altheide, 2013). These stories can oversimplify problems, focusing on danger and worst-case scenarios to grab attention. Once they take hold, they spread quickly, shaping societal norms and influencing what people view as urgent or important. These fear-based narratives blend real threats with hypothetical ones, blurring the lines between fact and fiction, gaining legitimacy by deepening their psychological grip on the public. Surveillance, both physical and digital, further intensifies this effect, creating a culture where people feel constantly watched (Altheide, 2013). This not only reinforces conformity but also discourages dissent, as the threat of exposure is overwhelmingly present. This connects to the “spectacle of intimacy” and the “enlarged zone of publicity,” where private matters are thrown into the public eye to provoke emotion, be a distraction, or reinforce dominant norms. The public exposure of personal struggles can spark collective outrage or moral panic, which then serves as justification for further social control.

Throughout history, fear has been a reliable tactic for suppressing resistance and maintaining power, even at the expense of trust and unity. Its use is not limited to any one area: politics, healthcare, and environmental issues all use fear to rally support, often framing policies as urgent, do-or-die responses. Theories like Deictic Space Theory (DST) and Proximation Theory (PT) explain how language can position threats as immediate and personal, heightening urgency and directing attention toward authority-endorsed solutions (Cap, 2017). To make these fear-based messages stick, the media relies on repetition, perceived credibility, and shared ideals of what is “right.” At the same time, it casts outsiders or opposing voices as “Others,” deepening

societal divisions (Cap, 2017). In the end, these fear-based tactics do not just shape public opinion, they normalize surveillance, control, and polarization. What makes fear so effective is it easily taps into human's most primal instincts, especially the fight-or-flight response, bypassing critical thought and pushing people to seek comfort in the familiar (Lupia & Menning, 2009). This can result in resistance to change, clinging to tradition, or accepting authoritarian responses as necessary "protections." Leaders and institutions exploit this vulnerability by creating narratives that amplify the perception of threats, whether real, exaggerated, or fake. These fear-driven stories can push an "us versus them" mindset, where supposed enemies are cast as villains to justify extreme actions, like mass surveillance, censorship, or cutting rights. The result creates a cycle where fear-based leadership sustains its power by continuously creating new threats, making people too anxious, or too loyal, to question the system.

This strategic use of fear goes beyond political manipulation or media narratives, it is also embedded in how institutions try to influence individual behavior. One of the most common psychological strategies is the use of fear appeals: messages designed to scare people by highlighting the severe consequences of not taking specific actions (Boss et al., 2015). Fear appeals are often used in public health campaigns or political advertisements toward desired actions. They work by creating a sense of urgency, emphasizing the need for people to act fast, while also offering clear solutions or calls to action. This combination of fear with an escape route makes fear appeals especially effective. According to Protection Motivation Theory (PMT), their effectiveness depends on how people evaluate the severity of the threat and their belief in their ability to respond to it (Boss et al., 2015). However, fear appeals do not always work as intended. If the message focuses too much on intentions or overlooks how people may deny or avoid the threat entirely, it can backfire. Instead of inspiring action, it may lead to

heightened anxiety or unhelpful behaviors that fail to address the issue altogether (Boss et al., 2015).

While fear itself is not inherently harmful, it can, at times, motivate people to take necessary precautions, its misuse can have significant consequences. When fear is manipulated, it breaks trust, weakens democratic values, and blocks progress, leaving people divided and vulnerable to control. However, fear-based control is not all-powerful. It relies on limited transparency and weak systems of accountability (Lupia & Menning, 2009). When information is accessible and leaders are held responsible, the influence of fear goes away. Challenging fear-based systems requires transparency, public education, and critical engagement (Lupia & Menning, 2009). By creating habits of staying informed, strong fact-checking, and media literacy, people can be better equipped to make more thoughtful decisions and resist fear narratives rooted in manipulation. Understanding how systems like patriarchy exploit fear is a vital step toward recognizing its impact, challenging harmful systems, and working toward a more equitable and inclusive society.

In *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, bell hooks draws on the work of psychotherapist John Bradshaw, who explains that patriarchy relies on “blind obedience” and the “repression of all emotions except fear” (hooks, 2004, p. 23). This insight speaks on how patriarchal systems suppress emotional expression, particularly vulnerability and openness, reinforcing silence around topics like sex and intimacy. By discouraging emotional honesty and critical reflection, patriarchy creates a culture where shame thrives, especially around desires or identities that fall outside traditional expectations. As a result, many people feel unable to express their needs, set boundaries, or communicate authentically in relationships, which gets in the way of the kind of connection and mutual understanding that intimacy requires.

Patriarchy uses fear as a means of control, reinforcing its power through the fear of change, social rejection, moral decay, and even failure and success. These fears are not random, they are strategically cultivated to elicit loyalty and discourage dissent, creating a self-sustaining cycle of compliance and conformity. Within this system, emotional suppression becomes a norm, leaving people ill-equipped to engage in open, meaningful conversations about intimacy. This not only leads to imbalances in relationships but also blocks the development of mutual understanding and emotional safety.

Additionally, patriarchal systems repress independent thinking by socializing people into rigid, narrowly defined roles, roles that prioritize preserving the status quo over cultivating authentic connection. This dynamic not only prevents personal growth but also limits relational depth and reinforces barriers to healthy communication. By positioning traditional norms as the moral absolutes and stigmatizing any deviation, patriarchy secures its continued dominance while restricting opportunities for genuine, equitable relationships. Dismantling such systems requires exposing and resisting the fear-based tactics that sustain them. Encouraging open dialogue, emotional vulnerability, and critical thinking becomes not just an act of personal liberation, but a collective strategy for cultural and systematic change. This resistance is not limited to the world of intimacy. In the context of labor and daily life, people can also challenge the system that exploits and constrains them. Workers are not merely passive victims of capitalism; they are active participants with the power to resist, organize, and imagine new possibilities. The goal is not just to reclaim fair wages, but to regain control over the broader terms of life: time, care, relationships, and self-determination. These practices, whether in personal relationships or collective action, challenge restrictive norms and help build a society rooted in equity, care, and authenticity.

Fear of Change

"Nature does not create these categories of human traits or identities. People created these categories to simplify the complexities of multiple identities and multiple realities." (Black & Stone, 2005; Reynolds & Pope, 1991, p. 175).

Change can be unsettling. Humans are naturally apprehensive to it, as it disrupts the comfort of familiarity and brings the uncertainty of the unknown (Sverdlik & Oreg, 2015). Patriarchy exploits this fear by framing change as inherently dangerous, warning that the shifts in societal norms will lead to chaos. This fear-based messaging is especially pronounced in how patriarchy addresses change for men. It often presents challenges to traditional masculinity as existential threats, implying that stepping outside prescribed roles means losing one's identity or value as a man (Mühlemann et al., 2022). This narrative plays on deep-seated fears of losing respect, power, or social acceptance, pressuring men to cling to outdated norms to "prove" their masculinity. By tying masculinity to resistance and dominance, patriarchy discourages emotional growth and vulnerability, traits essential for healthy relationships, mental well-being, and adaptability. Over time, this rigid model of manhood not only harms men but reinforces a broader culture of fear and stagnation. Historically, the negative framing of change becomes even more visible when examining the "ideal" gender roles imposed by patriarchal norms. The ideal man is positioned as dominant, stoic, and the provider, unchanging and immovable, while the ideal woman is nurturing, submissive, and confined to the private sphere. In this framework, masculinity becomes equated with inflexibility, while femininity is expected to bend, adapt, and evolve, typically in service to others, especially men. Change, then, is acceptable only when it

aligns with patriarchal goals, when women change for men, not when men grow beyond rigid definitions of power.

This model of masculinity, framed as dominant, stoic, and resistant to change, is not only shaped by patriarchy but also deeply rooted in the legacy of white supremacy. As Black and Stone (2005) describe, whiteness has historically been positioned as the cultural norm against which all other identities are measured. Male Euro-Americans became the benchmark for this standard, presenting their values, beliefs, and behaviors as universal, neutral and inherently correct (Black & Stone, 2005). Patriarchal and white supremacist systems are intertwined, both working to preserve power through resistance to change and suppression of difference. They reinforce dominance through overt policies and subtle cultural norms, embedding white male standards into institutions and daily life (Halperin-Kaddari & Freeman, 2016). As a result, deviation from these norms, whether emotional expression, reimagined gender roles, or racial and cultural difference, is framed as a threat. Privilege within this system becomes so normalized that those who benefit from it rarely recognize its impact. This invisibility makes these norms even harder to challenge, as they are presented not as ideologies, but as the natural order of things.

The masking whiteness perspective represents one of the most insidious ways white privilege is preserved, ensuring the racial status quo remains intact (Grimes, 2002). This strategy relies on denial, invisibility, and the suppression of conversations deemed uncomfortable or inappropriate by the dominant group. By avoiding explicit acknowledgment of privilege, white, heteronormative experiences are framed as a universal norm, remaining hidden and unchallenged (Grimes, 2002). This perspective sustains inequality not only through intentional actions but also through unexamined, everyday practices. Even well-intentioned efforts to promote diversity can

unintentionally re-center white heteronormative privilege if they fail to confront the deeper structures of power. Discussions about diversity often superficially acknowledge difference, while still prioritizing the comfort and concerns of the dominant group. This dynamic minimizes the experiences of people of color and other marginalized groups, reinforcing rather than dismantling the very systems that uphold privilege (Grimes, 2002).

Privileged people often become used to its advantages that those benefits feel normal, even deserved. This normalization can create a sense of entitlement, making it difficult for them to recognize the unearned nature of their advantages. When their privilege is challenged or brought into question, it can feel like a personal attack, leading to shock, defensiveness, or anger (Flood et al., 2021; Pease, 2010). For those who benefit from the status quo, even small shifts in power dynamics can feel threatening. That fear of losing one's place in society, one's identity, or long-held benefits can drive resistance to change. Rather than face discomfort, many cling to the systems that maintain their dominance.

According to Black and Stone (2005), privilege is built on five defining features that outline its structure and boundaries:

- Special advantage: It offers access to resources or opportunities that are not available to everyone.
- Granted, not earned: It is given, not achieved through effort, merit, or talent.
- Tied to status: It is linked to a preferred social position or identity.
- Exclusionary: Its benefits often come at the expense of those without it.
- Largely invisible: Those who possess privilege are frequently unaware of it (Black & Stone, 2005; McIntosh, 1992; Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000).

These qualities make privilege hard to recognize and even harder to let go, especially for those taught to view their experience as the universal standard. This resistance to change is not just about protecting comfort, it is about preserving power. Privilege does not just shape access to resources, it also determines which topics are considered appropriate for public discourse and how they are framed. Subjects like sex, pleasure, and emotional vulnerability are often labeled as taboo, inappropriate, too personal for open discussion. This silencing is not neutral. By suppressing these conversations, privileged groups reinforce their cultural and moral authority, maintaining control over societal norms and what is considered acceptable or respectable (Black & Stone, 2005).

Hegemonic masculinity, the dominant cultural ideal of what it means to “be a man,” is a key pillar of patriarchy, reinforcing male power and female subordination (Hammarén & Johansson, 2014). Traditional traits such as being the breadwinner and maintaining a stable job are central to this identity. When these roles are disrupted, by economic instability, shifting gender norms, or increasing calls for equality, some men may respond with feelings of humiliation and emasculation. In reaction, many double down on patriarchal ideas of manhood to reassert a sense of control and dominance (Adams & Coltrane, 2005; Flood et al., 2021).

However, masculinity is not a one-size-fits-all identity. It exists within a hierarchy that privileges certain forms of masculinity over others (Phillips & Rogers, 2021). At the top sits hegemonic masculinity, typically associated with whiteness, heterosexuality, middle-to-upper class status, and ideals of strength, authority, and emotional restraint. Men who embody this standard enjoy social privilege and cultural validation. Below this are complicit masculinities, men who benefit from patriarchal systems but do not actively enforce them. Subordinate masculinity refers to men who reject or are excluded from traditional gender roles, such as queer

men or feminist-aligned men, who are often stigmatized for not conforming. Marginalized masculinities, particularly those of men of color, are shaped by the intersection of gender and racial oppression, leading to damaging stereotypes, casting them as either hyper-aggressive threats or emasculated figures lacking control. For trans men and nonbinary people, navigating this hierarchy is especially complex. Some may adopt dominant masculine traits for safety or acceptance, while others intentionally resist and redefine what masculinity can be.

As Kimmel (2013) points out, even men who lack structural or institutional power can still feel entitled to feel powerful, highlighting a deep emotional and psychological investment in maintaining traditional gender roles (Flood et al., 2021). This sense of entitlement fuels resistance to change, showing how deeply ingrained hegemonic masculinity is in both personal identity and societal expectation. Any shift in gender dynamics or power structures is often perceived as a threat to the established order. For example, when women entered the workforce and advocated for voting rights, it disrupted the belief that a woman's rightful place was solely in the home, provoking backlash from those who saw those changes as destabilizing (Flood et al., 2021).

Hegemonic masculinity also combines broader cultural ideologies like nationalism. Traits such as strength, stoicism, and courage are projected onto the image of the nation itself, aligning masculinity with patriotism and control (Heath, 2003). Brotherhood further reinforces these ideals. Institutions like fraternities, military units, and sports teams foster male solidarity through shared rituals, competitions, and a celebration of physical dominance. These spaces often bond men through the exclusion of perceived weakness or femininity, reinforcing a narrow and often aggressive model of manhood (Phillips & Rogers, 2021). In these environments, hegemonic masculinity is not only normalized but celebrated, passed down through rituals that frame power

and emotional suppression as virtues. These ideals are often used to justify military aggression and advance nationalist agendas, while framing traditional gender roles as the only “authentic” way to belong (Nagel, 1998). Perry (2005) explores an extreme form of patriotism known as superpatriotism, which is closely linked to white-dominant Christianity in the United States. This ideology encourages followers to defend against what they perceive as the “American” way of life, often through exclusionary or violent means, further reinforcing the connection between masculinity, nationalism, and the preservation of traditional gender roles.

There is also an emphasis on individualism which further hides the systemic nature of privilege by zeroing in on personal achievement while ignoring how gender, race and sexual orientation affect opportunities and outcomes. A clear example of masking this is how whiteness is often treated as the default American identity. By making whiteness seem “normal,” systemic racism gets ignored, and the roles of marginalized groups are downplayed. As a result, white heterosexual Americans enjoy the privilege of belonging without being questioned, while people of color and the LGBTQ+ community are often viewed as outsiders, regardless of status or deep-rooted history in the country (Grimes, 2002). Whiteness, as a social construct, has historically been defined not just by a singular trait but by exclusion, specifically, through the exclusion of those deemed “not white” (Harris, 1993). Whiteness functioned as an exclusive club that granted privileges to its members while systematically denying those privileges to others. The legal right to exclude was a foundational part of this system, reinforcing racial hierarchies and maintaining power structure. With nationalism, hypermasculinity is often used to describe the ideal American national identity, reinforcing the image of men as warriors or protectors of the nation who truly defend the nation’s interest. The message is clear: real patriots are strong, aggressive and unrelenting (Nagel, 1998). These roles however are deeply sexualized; nationalism does not just

promote men as defenders. It associates their worth with their ability to dominate, both politically and sexually. For example, Theodore Roosevelt, known for promoting “strenuous masculinity,” actively built a persona as a rugged outdoorsman and fearless leader. His image reflected idealized masculinity at the time and helped shape America's identity as a bold, expansionist power (Nagel, 1998). Another example, the United States' long history of linking masculinity to military power and portraying soldiers as the ultimate national heroes, reinforces that only certain people are seen as worthy of leading or protecting the country, those who are willing to dominate.

While nationalist movements are overwhelmingly male-dominated, women are still included in these narratives, though their roles are usually framed in ways that reinforce traditional gender norms. Women are often portrayed as the “mothers of the nation,” responsible for nurturing the next generation of citizens (Nagel, 1998). Their roles are closely tied to domesticity, positioning them in symbolic but secondary roles within the national hierarchy. As caretakers of the nation’s moral fabric, their value is rooted in maintaining continuity rather than shaping political or public discourse. Within these movements, women’s participation is often limited. When women do take on leadership positions, it is typically to reinforce, rather than challenge, traditional gender expectations. However, women have not always accepted these limitations. As Nagel (1998) notes, history shows that many have strategically used their involvement in nationalist movements to push back against gendered boundaries. In some cases, they have used their positions to advocate for gender equality and challenge patriarchal structures from within, complicating the idea that nationalism is solely a space of male dominance.

For those who are accustomed to the comfort that privilege affords, the fear of change is often not just about losing material or social advantages, it is about the disruption of deeply ingrained identities, roles and power dynamics. When privilege goes unchecked, it can lead to a strong and often oppressive resistance to change, particularly when there are shifts in gender and sexual norms that challenge the existing hierarchies. Watt (1999) pointed out that this resistance stems from an irrational sense of entitlement held by the privileged group or person, resulting in an inflated self-perception and a lack of empathy for those facing systemic barriers (Black & Stone, 2005). This entitlement can manifest in the control of public narratives: who is allowed to speak, whose experiences are validated, and what forms of sexuality or identity are considered legitimate. Elites, particularly those in positions of religious, political, or cultural influence, play a central role in shaping these conversations. By defining what is “normal” or “moral,” they uphold rigid sexual and gender norms that discourage open dialogue about intimacy, consent, and desire (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017). This control not only silences marginalized voices but also reinforces the fear that any deviation from traditional norms represents chaos rather than progress.

The psychological dimensions of privilege, such as denial, defensiveness, and resistance, further complicate efforts toward equity (Black & Stone, 2005). Privileged people may struggle to recognize their unearned advantages because doing so requires confronting uncomfortable truths about systemic inequality and their own role in sustaining it. To avoid this discomfort, they often adopt strategies that allow them to downplay the structural nature of inequality and frame their success as solely the result of hard work and personal achievement (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017). By shifting the narrative toward personal responsibility, those in power can preserve their position without ever addressing the systems that uphold it.

Backlash and resistance to change can take many forms, from overt criticism and hostility to more subtle tactics such as undermining, stalling, or co-opting progressive initiatives. Privileged groups often use these strategies to protect their power while appearing to support fairness and inclusivity (Flood et al., 2021). In the context of gender and sexuality, traditional gender roles have long determined how men and women are expected to behave, communicate and relate to one another. Open, honest, and equitable communication about desires, boundaries, and consent directly challenges traditional dynamics. It requires moving away from rigid gender roles and toward a foundation of mutual respect and understanding. As a result, efforts to address systemic inequities, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality are often met with both visible and hidden forms of resistance. Public backlash may take the form of political rhetoric that dismisses gender or racial justice movements as unnecessary or divisive. At the same time, more covert resistance can happen at structural and institutional levels, where organizations claim to support inclusion but fail to provide adequate resources, training, or accountability (Davidson & Proudford, 2008; Flood et al., 2021; Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014). Some may even frame progressive movements as radical or extremist in order to delegitimize their goals and justify resisting change.

While patriarchal backlash can be understood as a reaction to feminist progress, Edström et al. (2024) argue that it cannot be fully explained as a response to gains in gender equality alone. Their research shows that backlash frequently arises even in contexts where feminist advancements have been limited or uneven, suggesting that its roots are more complex and multifaceted. Rather than being solely a defensive response to social change, backlash often functions as a form of crisis management, used during times of social, economic, and political instability to reassert power structures perceived to be under threat (Edström et al., 2024). In this

light, backlash is not simply about restoring the past; it is also a forward-looking strategy aimed at establishing new, explicitly misogynistic, and supremacist social orders. The rise of online misogynist movements, such as those found in the manosphere, show how backlash adapts to new technologies and cultural environments. These digital movements use platforms to spread ideologies that promote male supremacy, reject gender equality, and actively advocate for the subjugation of women.

Harvey's (2001) concept of the spatial fix offers a better understanding of how backlash operates. In capitalist systems, crises are often "fixed" by reasserting control over key sites of power, such as the body, family, and the nation (Edström et al., 2024). In the context of patriarchal backlash, this involves reinforcing traditional hierarchies and exclusionary identities to stabilize gendered boundaries. Strategies include the policing of women's bodies and sexuality, the idealization of the nuclear family, and the promotion of narrowly defined national identities. These tactics are not just reactive, they are strategic efforts to reshape power in line with evolving systems of control and domination (Edström et al., 2024). A clear example is the growing regulation of women's bodies and reproductive rights. In many countries, conservative movements have sought to restrict access to abortion, contraception, and other reproductive healthcare, framing these policies as defending "traditional values" or "the sanctity of life." Yet these policies are not only about moral conviction, they are tools for maintaining patriarchal control over gender roles, sexuality and family structures (Stoler, 2010). Through them, backlash reasserts dominance under the guise of cultural protection and stability.

The fear of change, especially when tied to gender and power, has a significant impact on how people are able to relate to one another, particularly in intimate and communicative contexts. When societal structures equate stability with traditional gender roles and hierarchies,

anything that challenges those norms, whether it is related to gender expression, sexual norms or relationship dynamics, is seen as a threat. Understanding this dynamic is essential when examining sexual communication. Many people are socialized to avoid open discussions about sex, intimacy, and pleasure because these conversations are outside of what is considered acceptable. If sexuality is framed as something that must align with predefined norms, such as being heteronormative, monogamous, and male-centered, then any deviation is seen not just as personal choice, but as a threat to the moral fabric of society.

The fear of change, particularly when tied to masculine identity, often drives behaviors that reinforce power, dominance, and traditional gender norms. When men perceive their masculinity questioned or threatened, they may engage in compensatory manhood acts: exaggerated displays of dominance, aggression, or control intended to reassert their masculine status (Phillips & Roger, 2021). These reactions can take many forms, including homophobia, victim-blaming, harassment, or resistance to progressive policies that challenge traditional roles. For example, a man who loses his job might attempt to regain a sense of control by asserting dominance in his personal relationships or by embracing hyper masculine ideals like excessive toughness or emotional detachment. These compensatory behaviors are also shaped by race and class. Working-class men may emphasize physical strength, while upper-class men might express masculinity through wealth or social influence. For Black and Latino men, these performances are further complicated by the intersection of racialized stereotypes and systemic barriers, adding additional layers of pressure to conform to dominant ideals of manhood. (Phillips & Roger, 2021). It is also important to acknowledge that women, too, may resist efforts toward gender equality for social, cultural, or personal reasons (Flood et al., 2021). Some women may internalize patriarchal norms and view gender equity initiatives as threats to their sense of

identity, relationships, or social status. Others may fear losing certain privileges associated with traditional gender roles, such as being perceived as morally superior or deserving of protection. In these cases, resistance to change reflects not just personal discomfort, but a broader investment in the existing social order.

Fear of Moral Decay

The fear of moral decay is deeply rooted in the belief that society's stability depends on preserving traditional family structures. Within this framework, any deviation from established gender roles, sexual norms, or relationship models is seen as a direct threat to the moral fabric of society. Patriarchal systems exploit this fear by using social consequences, such as ostracism, ridicule, or judgment, to enforce conformity. This fear-driven strategy discourages change and reinforces a narrow set of ideals, keeping people aligned with prescribed roles and behaviors.

Historically, this moral anxiety has been shaped by influential works like Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), which traced shifts in public morality across different stages of civilization. Krafft-Ebing emphasized Christianity's role in advancing moral standards but warned that the sensory stimulation of urban life could provoke sexual excess and contribute to the downfall of modern societies (Downham Moore, 2021). His writings reflect a broader tension that continues today, the idea that sexual liberation signals cultural decline, and that strict moral control is necessary to preserve societal order.

This fear was particularly pronounced during the Victorian era, when religion, especially Christianity, held significant power over cultural values and everyday life. Religious doctrine strongly influenced views on morality, sexuality, and marriage (Tosh, 1999). Teachings that emphasized chastity before marriage and fidelity within it reinforced the ideal of the

"passionless" woman and the expectation of male self-restraint (Tosh, 1999). Religious authorities linked behaviors like sexual indulgence, masturbation, and extramarital affairs to sin, framing them not just as personal failings but existential threats to social harmony (Hunt, 1998). By casting sexuality as something inherently dangerous or shameful, religious institutions helped construct a power system of control, one that framed strict sexual discipline as essential to moral citizenship. Fear of divine punishment and cultural condemnation worked hand in hand to uphold these ideals, creating a moral order where deviation was not just socially risky, but spiritually dangerous.

In Victorian society, the strict division between public and private spheres created a culture where privacy was highly valued, and the fear of exposure was prominent. The possibility of personal secrets being revealed to the public, brought intense anxiety, and anxiety that continues today. In the 19th century, the stakes were especially high: crossing that boundary between public and private could lead to social shame, public gossip, or even personal ruin. This fear created a climate of caution, discouraging open dialogue about private matters and reinforcing conformity to societal expectations. The risk of exposure acted as a powerful form of social control, pushing people to suppress controversial behaviors or ideas to avoid scandal and judgment (Chase & Levenson, 2000).

Victorian culture also relied on what Chase and Levenson (2000) describe as the paradox that "the norm needed and cultivated the disturbance." In other words, idealized social standards were not only upheld by acceptable behavior but also reinforced by the public failure of those who deviated. Scandals and domestic breakdowns did not just threaten the social order, they reinforced its importance highlighting the cost of nonconformity. While families worked hard to maintain an image of perfection, there was an undeniable cultural appetite for stories that

exposed their imperfections (Chase & Levenson, 2000). These narratives were sensationalized, feeding curiosity in public discourse, while implicitly reminding society of what happens when norms are broken.

As the internal tensions grew under the watchful eye of public scrutiny, Victorian society became even more rigid in its gender expectations. Men were expected to embody public authority and financial provision, while women were confined to the domestic sphere, cast as wives, mothers and moral guardians (Chase & Levenson, 2000). The home was idealized as a haven of stability, love, and moral purity, contrasting with the competitive, morally questionable world of capitalism (Tosh, 1999). Domesticity was framed as a remedy for the perceived moral decay of public life, especially for the middle-class. As men became associated with the corruption and ambition of the public sphere, women were elevated as the moral anchors of domestic life. This reinforced the strict divide between public and private spheres, cementing gendered expectations that continue to influence family life and sexual norms today.

Within this cultural framework, manliness was deeply tied to the ideal of "independence," defined by self-reliance in thought and action, as well as financial self-sufficiency. Boys were taught from an early age that achieving this independence was essential to becoming a man (Tosh, 1999). Traditional markers of masculinity also included physical strength and virility, toughness and emotional resilience. Men were also expected to embody rationality, stoicism, and self-control, while displays of emotion were often dismissed as weak or feminine. Failing to meet these standards could damage one's reputation and social standing, highlighting the rigid boundaries of acceptable male behavior (Tosh, 1999). The rise of the "breadwinner" ideal further reinforced this model of manhood, positioning the father's role as the primary provider, a role

that justified his authority in the home and solidified patriarchal structures in both public and private spheres.

Central to this authority was the control over female sexuality. Women's desires were reframed as passive, restrained, and morally governed, rooted in ideals of purity and emotional modesty. The "passionless" woman became the Victorian ideal, constructed in contrast to men, who were seen as active agents of sexual desire. Yet this construction also created its own anxieties about male sexuality, including masturbation, nocturnal emissions, or even marital intercourse could result in physical or mental decline (Tosh, 1999). This fear reinforced the importance of self-control, linking male sexual behavior to personal health and moral responsibility.

In turn, men were expected to monitor their wives' behavior to ensure both their fidelity and the legitimacy of their heirs. Failure to do so could result in public humiliation and economic ruin, revealing the high stakes of maintaining control over women's bodies and actions (Tosh, 1999). Medical texts and advice literature further reinforced these roles, often depicting women as lacking sexual desire altogether. Female orgasm was considered unnecessary for conception, reducing women's sexuality to a purely reproductive function and denying them agency over their own bodies (Tosh, 1999). These narratives not only justified male dominance but also perpetuated a culture of silence and repression around female sexuality. At every level, social, medical, and moral, sexuality was framed as something to be disciplined, concealed, and controlled.

People may have felt personally responsible for upholding moral decency while also pressuring others to conform to those same standards. This dynamic stems in part from the

influence of neoliberal ideologies, which originated in the 1930s but gained prominence in the 1980s (Rodriguez & Van Ruyskensvelde, 2023). Neoliberalism emphasizes individual responsibility, personal empowerment, and self-sufficiency, often at the expense of collective action or systemic critique. These narratives can lead people to internalize the pressure to maintain social norms, positioning themselves as both the enforcer and the example of "moral" behavior. By framing morality as a personal obligation, neoliberalism shifts responsibility for social order away from institutions and toward individuals. This undermines collective resistance to oppressive systems like patriarchy and fosters a culture of moral policing, in which people monitor one another's behaviors in the name of tradition and respectability (Rodriguez & Van Ruyskensvelde, 2023).

The meritocratic logic applied to moral decency parallels how neoliberalism frames educational and economic success. (Rodriguez & Van Ruyskensvelde, 2023). Just as educational disparities are often blamed on individual effort rather than systematic inequality, deviations from dominant moral and social norms are treated as personal flaws. Poverty, for instance, is frequently attributed to laziness or bad decisions rather than to structural barriers. The conservative claim that "the poor want to be poor" reflects this belief, absolving institutions of accountability and placing blame solely on the individual (Perry, 2005). This logic is especially damaging when applied to sex, intimacy, and identity. It creates a sense of personal inadequacy, leading people to view their struggles as moral or emotional instead of experiences shaped by broader social conditions. Freud's theory of repression offers insight on this process; societal norms are internalized and unwanted desires or feelings are pushed out of conscious awareness, only to reemerge as anxiety, guilt, or self-censorship (Freud, 1915/1957). Needing help, expressing vulnerability, or deviating from heteronormative ideals becomes stigmatized. Instead

of turning to community or shared knowledge, individuals may isolate themselves, further reinforcing the shame and silence that surround sexual communication.

This is particularly harmful for those who deviate from heterosexual norms. As Herek (2004) notes, sexual minorities face layered devaluation and marginalization. This can manifest in multiple ways:

- **Invisibility:** Queer and non-normative experiences are often erased from mainstream narratives, reinforcing heterosexual dominance.
- **Overt Hostility:** When marginalized groups do gain visibility, they are frequently met with backlash, discrimination, and violence, ranging from verbal harassment to physical violence.

By framing education, moral, and sexual challenges, as individual shortcomings, society avoids confronting the structural conditions that perpetuate inequality. This individualistic framing makes it harder to build solidarity or imagine systemic alternatives, ultimately reinforcing the very norms and institutions that cause harm.

Moral regulation, as explored by Hunt (1998), refers to how societies influence and control behaviors and beliefs deemed morally significant. This regulation operates through legal mechanisms, social norms, and self-governance:

- **Legal Mechanisms:** Laws targeting activities like obscenity or prostitution impose specific moral values onto society.
- **Social Norms:** Informal expectations within communities drive people to conform, seeking acceptance and avoiding stigma.

- **Self-Governance:** People internalize moral codes, use self-discipline to align with societal expectations. For example, anti-masturbation campaigns tied sexuality to national strength, urging strict self-control (Hunt, 1998).

Moral regulation shapes collective understanding of right and wrong by blending law, social expectation, and personal discipline. Exploring its dynamics reveals how moral frameworks evolve and how they impact individual autonomy and collective well-being (Hunt, 1998). In the context of neoliberalism, moral regulation becomes an even sharper tool for maintaining the status quo. As Foucault (1978) argues, modern power operates not merely by repressing behavior but by producing norms that people internalize and enforce upon themselves. Through the fear of moral decay, people become both subjects and agents of surveillance, regulating their sexuality, desires, and relationships according to societal expectations. This self-policing reinforces systems of exclusion and marginalization, particularly for those who deviate from traditional gender and sexual norms.

The fear of moral decay, deeply rooted in societal anxieties about change and the erosion of traditional values, has profound implications for sexual communication and relationships. By framing deviations from traditional norms as threats to stability and morality, patriarchal and neoliberal systems reinforce rigid gender roles, stigmatize non-conformity, and discourage open dialogue about sexuality. Efforts to promote comprehensive sex education, LGBTQ+ inclusivity, or reproductive rights are met with fierce resistance. These initiatives are framed as threats to “family values” or “moral integrity,” limiting not only access to vital information and resources but also perpetuating harmful stereotypes and stigmas.

Today, the family is still idealized as a private, protected space, one that symbolizes traditional values and serves as a safeguard against perceived social and moral decline (Edström et al., 2024). This framing positions the family at the center of cultural and political debates. Backlash politics often capitalize on these sentiments by weaponizing anxieties around shifting family structures and gender roles. Rising divorce rates, increased participation of women in the workforce, and evolving child custody norms are portrayed as threats to the sanctity of the family (Edström et al., 2024). These changes challenge longstanding patriarchal ideals that cast men as primary breadwinners and women as caregivers, intensifying fears about the erosion of traditional values and social order. Political rhetoric amplifies these fears by framing movements for LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive freedom, and gender equality as attacks on the “natural order” of the family. This strategy creates a moral panic and resistance to progress, solidifying the family as a symbol of continuity and control. In this context, any deviation from the norm is a step toward chaos. These narratives have significant implications for sexual communication; reinforce restrictive norms and discourage open dialogue about sexuality, consent, and diverse identities. When family is idealized as the pinnacle of traditional values, conversations about sexual autonomy and alternative forms of intimacy are often stigmatized or silenced altogether. This fear frequently manifests through the policing of sexual behavior, particularly for women and marginalized groups. Tactics like slut-shaming, victim-blaming and the enforcement of rigid gender roles are used to suppress sexual expression and maintain a culture of silence and shame.

To move forward, it is crucial to recognize that these anxieties are not organic, they are weaponized. Critically examining how societal changes are framed, and understanding how they intersect with larger systems of power and control, is essential. It is also crucial to challenge the narratives that equate moral decay with social progress and reframe conversations about

sexuality and relationships in ways that center diversity, consent, and mutual respect. By confronting the fear of moral decay, there can be a future where sexual communication is rooted in trust, understanding, and the freedom to express one's identity without fear of judgment or repression.

Fear of Social Rejection

Social rejection occurs when a person denies a request or refuses to engage with another in a social interaction (Freedman et al., 2017; Leary et al., 1998; Wang & Li, 2022). At its core, this form of social denial plays a critical role in how relationships are formed, negotiated, and maintained. While rejection is often perceived as unpleasant or even painful, it continues to be a common and purposeful part of human interaction, particularly in contexts tied to status, power dynamics, or social hierarchies (Chung et al., 2021; Landini, 2022; Norman et al., 2021; Saco, 2022; Wang & Li, 2022).

Rejection and exclusion also have deep evolutionary roots. In early human societies, social rejection likely served adaptive purposes; maintaining order, enforcing group norms, and protecting scarce resources. These behaviors became evolutionarily ingrained, shaped by pressure to preserve group cohesion and ensure survival (Cosmides and Tooby, 1994; Kurzban and Leary, 2001; Terrizzi et al., 2023; Williams, 1966). In modern contexts, these evolutionary bases continue to influence how people perceive and respond to rejection, especially in intimate or vulnerable settings, such as sexual communication.

In contemporary society, rejection and exclusion can have profound psychological and behavioral consequences. The fear of being judged, humiliated, or left out can drive people to conform to dominant social norms, even when those norms conflict with personal values or

desires. This dynamic is especially present in the context of sexual communication, where vulnerability is already high and the stakes of rejection feel deeply personal. As a result, people may hesitate to express their sexual preferences, assert their boundaries, or communicate their needs for fear of being shamed or ostracized. This fear-based silence can lead to a lack of authenticity in relationships, as people prioritize social acceptance over honest expression.

The fear of social rejection is intensified by rigid societal norms around sexuality. Sexual expression is tightly regulated, with cultural scripts prescribing what is considered morally acceptable, desirable, or normal. Any deviation from these scripts is often met with stigma, discrimination, or exclusion, creating a climate of fear and self-censorship. For instance, LGBTQ+ people may hide their identities, suppress their desires, or avoid conversations about intimacy out of fear of familial rejection or social condemnation.

The fear of social rejection plays a critical role in shaping sexual communication, often silencing discussion about intimacy, desire, and boundaries. Because humans are inherently social creatures, the need for acceptance is deeply ingrained, shaping how people navigate conversations about sex and relationships (Legate et al., 2013; Wang & Li, 2022). The paradox is that while social bonds are essential for emotional well-being, they can also serve as mechanisms for exclusion, reinforcing norms that determine what is appropriate sexual behavior. These norms are maintained through the implicit, and sometimes explicit, threat of rejection. Those who go against traditional expectations by expressing non-normative desires, advocating for sexual openness or challenging purity-based ideals can risk social ostracization. As a response, many people self-censor, avoid sexual topics, or conform to expectations that conflict with their personal values or needs.

Social rejection also functions as a powerful form of control, especially when applied through gendered expectations of sexuality. Women for instance, are subjected to contradictory standards; they may be shamed for being too sexually open, yet also judged for being too reserved. These double binds reinforce a narrow script and restrictive script for female sexual expression, leaving little space for authentic open dialogue. Research shows that experiences of rejection can lead to internalized shame and anxiety, and long-term difficulties in sexual expression and communication (DeWall & Bushman, 2011; Pond et al., 2023). The connection between rejection and disgust (Terrizzi et al., 2023) adds another layer of complexity. In societies where certain sexual identities, behaviors, or desires are framed as deviant or impure, rejection becomes not just social but moralized. This moral disgust intensifies stigma, making it even more difficult for marginalized groups, including LGBTQ+ people and survivors of sexual trauma, to speak openly about their experiences or seek support.

While rejection is sometimes framed as a way of preserving social harmony, it often comes at a significant emotional and psychological cost. The pressure to conform to collective expectations can suppress personal expressions, especially in areas as deeply personal as sexuality and intimacy (Terrizzi et al., 2023). Rejection tied to sexual norms is frequently used to enforce societal expectations, marginalizing those who deviate from accepted standards. In this way, it becomes a disciplinary tool, ensuring that certain identities and behaviors remain stigmatized. These acts of exclusion help preserve traditional power structures and reinforce dominant narratives (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Pond et al., 2023). People who challenge these norms risk not only criticism, but exclusion, ridicule, and punishment. As a result, social rejection becomes a powerful form of control, discouraging people from disrupting or redefining dominant narratives surrounding sex and intimacy.

The psychological toll of rejection is well-documented. It can increase aggression, heighten vulnerability to depression, and diminish overall well-being (Chung et al., 2021; Malamut et al., 2022; Rajchert et al., 2022; Wang & Li, 2022). These effects are particularly significant when it comes to sexual communication, where fear of rejection can make it difficult to express needs, negotiate consent, or advocate for one's own pleasure and boundaries. When open discussion about sexuality is suppressed out of fear of exclusion, the result is often misunderstanding, emotional disconnect, and dissatisfaction in relationships.

Rejection can also be contagious. People may distance themselves from those who are already ostracized, fearing that their own social standing could be at risk if they associate with them (Legate et al., 2013; Wang & Li, 2022). This fear-based rejection creates a ripple effect, reinforcing stigma and deepening social divides. This environment where people may experience this fear can compel them to conform to dominant social norms and values to avoid marginalization and exclusion (Harris, 1993). This fear drives many to downplay or deny parts of their identity, leading to an internal conflict between their authentic selves and the desire for acceptance. When it comes to sexuality, this means that those who engage in or advocate for open conversations about taboo topics may face intensified exclusion, not just from people but from entire communities. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle where rejecting others becomes a defensive strategy, ensuring conformity at the expense of meaningful, honest dialogue (Wang & Li, 2022).

Just as disgust and disease-threat encourage behavioral avoidance (Terrizzi et al., 2023; Faulkner et al., 2004; Navarrete and Fessler, 2006), shame resulting from perceived moral transgressions can lead to the avoidance of social interaction (Schmader & Lickel, 2006; Terrizzi et al., 2023; Orth et al., 2006). Both shame and disgust play a crucial role in maintaining social

norms, acting as mechanisms for reinforcing boundaries and controlling behavior. Disgust, an emotion rooted in evolutionary defenses against harm, plays a significant role in shaping stigmatization and social exclusion. It drives people to avoid or reject those perceived as threats, whether through association with disease, moral impurity, or cultural deviance; leading to the othering of marginalized groups (Terrizzi et al., 2023). This process devalues and isolates these groups of people, reinforcing systemic inequalities by diminishing their social standing and, ultimately, their humanity (Conley et al., 2023).

Disgust also fosters in-group/out-group bias, reinforcing prejudices and social divisions (Terrizzi et al., 2023). Those within the dominant group, may unconsciously reinforce their in-group's superiority by devaluing others. In addition, the sense of belonging that comes from following the in-group norms can enhance self-esteem for those who conform, while at the same time deepening the feeling of alienation felt by others who are not part of the group. In the context of sexual relationships, this bias can lead to the stigmatization and exclusion of people who challenge dominant norms. For instance, people with non-normative sexual orientations, gender identities, or relationship structures may be viewed with disgust by those who hold rigid, traditionalist views, resulting in their social exclusion. Disgust can act as a deterrent against conversations about sexuality, pleasure and intimacy. When sexual topics evoke disgust, whether due to cultural taboos, misinformation, or personal biases, this reaction creates psychological barriers to open discussion, limiting understanding and acceptance of diverse sexual practices (Terrizzi et al., 2023; Terrizzi & Shook, 2020).

The fear of disgust and social rejection can lead to profound shame, silencing important conversations before they even begin. This cycle of avoidance and stigma not only restricts sexual self-expression but also contributes to the policing of gendered sexual norms. Social

shaming, particularly tied to disgust, is commonly used as a means of social control, especially to regulate women's sexuality (Harrower, 2019). Women who resist the traditional norm of sexual behavior often face heightened scrutiny, experience social punishment through reputational damage, exclusion, or even institutional consequences. These consequences of this silencing effect can be severe, particularly for young women and girls. Fear of rejection through shame, discourages them from seeking help in cases of coercion, harassment, or the non-consensual sharing of intimate images (Harrower, 2019). When open discussion is discouraged through disgust-driven stigma, those in need of the support may remain isolated, lacking the proper resources or social backing to protect themselves.

What makes rejection so impactful is its ability to target a person's core identity and sense of belonging. Whether brief or prolonged, the sting of rejection can leave lasting emotional scars, shaping how people perceive themselves and interact with others. Understanding this, how our social nature fosters both connection and exclusion, is key to addressing the broader implications of rejection in human life. Beyond its emotional and psychological significance, social connection also offers practical survival advantages. Working together to build shelter, ensure safety, and provide mutual defense are essential aspects of human life that highlight the importance of belonging. However, this same need for connection also fuels social rejection. People may withhold acceptance to enforce norms, maintain group cohesion, or exercise control over those who deviate expectations.

To promote open communication about sex, pleasure, and intimacy, it is crucial to dismantle the biases and social stigmas that inhibit communication. Creating safe spaces in which people feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and experiences without fear of judgment is essential. Education and awareness campaigns can play a vital role in reducing the

association between disgust and certain sexual practices or identities, encouraging more inclusive attitudes. Encouraging empathy and understanding can help break down the psychological barriers created by in-group/out-group biases, allowing for more open, respectful, and constructive conversations about sex, pleasure, and intimacy.

The fear of social rejection is a powerful force that shapes not only interpersonal relationships but also the broader conversation surrounding sexuality. Rooted in evolutionary and societal dynamics, this fear drives conformity, stifles authenticity, and perpetuates exclusionary systems. The suppression of open sexual communication due to rejection-based fears reinforces stigma and limits personal agency. By addressing these underlying fears and fostering environments of acceptance and support, people can be empowered to communicate honestly about their needs, desires, and boundaries. This shift is essential for building healthier relationships and creating a more inclusive society where sexual expression is met with understanding rather than shame.

The Fear of Failure, The Fear of Success: Two Sides of the Same Coin

"Failure can be defined only in relation to success." (Stanley, 1981, p. 1281)

The fear of failure often prevents people from engaging with topics they do not fully understand. Instead of acknowledging their lack of knowledge, many react defensively, masking their embarrassment behind anger or deflection. This pattern is especially prevalent among men, who are often socialized from a young age to present an image of sexual expertise and dominance. However, true sexual connection, along with pleasure and intimacy, is not just about the physical act. It thrives on open communication, emotional connection, and a willingness to understand and meet each partner's unique needs.

Patriarchal expectations place a lot of pressure on men to be leaders and experts in all areas, discouraging vulnerability and the willingness to admit gaps in knowledge. This deeply ingrained belief, reinforced through generations, makes it difficult for me to seek help or engage in open discussions about challenges related to sex or intimacy. Yet, many of these issues could be addressed through honest communication and mental health support.

For women, patriarchal norms impose a difference by equally damaging double bind. They are expected to embody perfection while remaining submissively imperfect, walking a fine line between being “good enough” but never too assertive. Admitting failure or ignorance can expose them to ridicule, dismissal, or even abusive repercussions, creating an environment of fear that silences their voices. This enforced silence deepens their subjugation while perpetuating societal norms that restrict dialogue and hinder personal growth.

The concept of adulthood is also shaped by rigid societal expectations, particularly the belief that there is a “right” time to achieve success through five major life milestones: getting a degree, getting married, establishing a stable long-term career, and having children (Jaffe, 2018; Silva, 2012). Society presents an ideal timeline: A person must graduate by their early 20s, secure a career by their mid-20s, settle down and start a family by their 30s. However, this framework is rooted in historical norms that are tied to middle-class, heterosexual, and gendered expectations, especially the idea that men should be breadwinners and women should transition into marriage and motherhood (Jaffe, 2018).

While these traditional milestones were once considered natural progressions, they have become increasingly unattainable for working-class youth due to economic shifts, social inequality, and changing cultural expectations (Silva, 2012). Maturity is often framed as a transition into predetermined roles, reinforcing chrononormativity, the idea that life should

progress through predictable stages like childhood, adolescence, marriage, reproduction, and career advancement (Jaffe, 2018). This narrative suggests that growing up means “growing out of” certain behaviors and identities, equating maturity with letting go of joy, exploration, and fluid identity development. Those who do not conform to this timeline may feel as though they are falling behind to meet the standard definition of a successful adult, leading to pressure to conform to traditional success markers.

These traditional markers of adulthood were never universally accessible, particularly for queer people and other marginalized groups. Queer children may feel disconnected from the standard narrative of growing up, experiencing pauses, repression, secrecy, or alternative forms of development due to delayed self-recognition, societal pressures, or lack of representation (Jaffe, 2018). In adulthood, traditional milestones have historically been structured around heteronormativity, legal recognition, and economic privileges that excluded many queer people. Marriage equality is a recent development in many countries, and even where it exists, social stigma, family rejection, and economic barriers continue to limit access to traditional markers of adulthood.

The fear of failure, deeply rooted in patriarchal pressures and societal expectations, creates significant barriers to building healthy, equitable relationships. For men, failure is often perceived as a part of their identity, driven by societal norms that equate masculinity with success and dominance. As noted by Levine et al. (1976), this defensive attributional bias aligns with evidence showing that failure is particularly distressing to men. Striving, when it does not lead to success, intensifies this fear, prompting some men to adopt extreme coping mechanisms, either setting unrealistically low goals to ensure success or choosing unattainably high goals that give them more excuses rather than admitting responsibility for failure (Fried-Buchalter, 1997).

For women, fear of failure manifests differently, shaped by gender role socialization. While women and men may not differ significantly in their fear of failure, studies show that women often set lower expectations that discourage ambition in women (Crandall, 1969; Feather, 1969; Fried-Buchalter, 1997; Jackaway, 1974; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Unlike men, who can use their fear of failure through extreme goal-setting, women's ambitions are often restricted by the perception that overly ambitious goals do not mix with traditional ideals of femininity (Fried-Buchalter, 1997).

These standards are increasingly out of reach, especially for working-class people (Silva, 2012). Many people still aspire to reach these markers, even as they recognize them as unattainable, outdated, or undesirable, and this can create a sense of failure and anxiety about not measuring up to societal expectations. This disconnect between aspiration and reality creates a profound sense of failure and anxiety, leading many to internalize structural barriers as personal shortcomings. As a result, self-doubt, insecurity, and avoidance of long-term commitments manifest not only in career aspirations but also in intimate relationships (Silva, 2012).

These anxieties do not just affect personal ambition; they also suppress emotional intimacy and communication. When people fear they are not "good enough" to meet societal expectations, they may withdraw emotionally, avoid deep connection, or suppress their needs and desires in relationships. Research suggests that for many women, fears of interpersonal failure, such as rejection, relationship instability, or emotional disappointment, can be more intense than fears of academic or professional failure (Golden, 1987). The pressure to conform to gendered expectations of success and emotional labor means that women may hesitate to express their needs, while men may struggle with vulnerability, fearing it will be perceived as weakness.

Research on athletes has shown that perfectionistic concerns, such as fear of making mistakes and external pressure from important figures like coaches or parents, are strongly linked to fear of failure, which in turn leads to negative emotional experiences after perceived failure (Sagar & Stoeber, 2009). Central to this process is the fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment, which explains how perfectionism transforms high standards into self-defeating anxiety and avoidance. Although this research focused on sports, the dynamics mirror societal expectations around sex, intimacy, and adulthood milestones: People internalize external pressures, equating personal worth with perfect “performance” and fearing shame if they fall short. This fear can silence authentic communication and breakdown intimacy, just as it disrupts performance and emotional well-being in athletes.

Just as athletes may focus more on avoiding mistakes than on enjoying the process, people in intimate relationships can become trapped in performing correctness rather than experiencing connection. The dual fears of failure and success breed a competitive, evaluative mindset, one that prioritizes “winning” approval or maintaining a flawless image rather than co-creating a safe space for exploration and vulnerability.

Overcoming these barriers requires rejecting harmful gender norms and reframing vulnerability as a strength. When people view openness and self-expression as crucial to success, rather than as risks, they can communicate more honestly and build deeper, more fulfilling relationships. By educating partners, giving them “permission” to release societal expectations, and prioritizing emotional connection over rigid success metrics, people can disrupt this cycle of fear. Embracing alternative ways of relating, such as those seen in many queer communities, emphasizes co-creation and emotional authenticity rather than perfection, laying the groundwork for healthier, more satisfying relationships.

Fear of success might seem counterintuitive, but it is a very real issue shaped by societal expectations and patriarchal norms. As traditional identity structures loosen, people have more freedom to define success for themselves, but with that freedom comes uncertainty and anxiety (Silva, 2012). For women, this can manifest in a fear of making the wrong choice, especially when traditional relationships and monogamy feel limiting. Success carries an unspoken cost, the risk of being seen as unfeminine or too assertive, as ambition and leadership qualities are often at odds with expectations that women should be nurturing, modest, and supportive. This double bind can make women downplay their achievements or hesitate to take risks, fearing rejection, criticism, or labels like “too ambitious” (Fried-Buchalter, 1997). When success feels like a trade-off, between personal growth and societal acceptance, it can create an internal conflict that affects self-expression and communication in relationships. If women are conditioned to second-guess their choices, it can make open, confident communication about their desires, ambitions, and boundaries more difficult.

For men, patriarchal ideals create their own set of burdens. Success is deeply tied to traditional masculinity, where men are expected to excel as providers, leaders, and achievers. In this framework, failure is not just a setback, it is seen as a threat to identity and masculinity. At the same time, success comes with its own anxieties: men may fear the vulnerability that comes with achievement, worry about surpassing their peers and damaging relationships, or feel pressured to maintain the image of competence. These expectations restrict emotional expression, making it harder for men to admit when they are struggling or to communicate openly about their fears. The result is a cycle: Men feel compelled to appear confident and in control, even when they are grappling with doubt. Research shows that men tend to overestimate their abilities, likely as a way to protect their self-esteem or project confidence (Levine et al.,

1976). This dynamic can create barriers to genuine connection, as it discourages emotional honesty in both personal and professional relationships.

Queer people rejecting heteronormative timelines face a different but related challenge. Without a clear roadmap for what success “should” look like, they must navigate uncharted territory, balancing a sense of liberation with anxiety about whether they are on the right path (Jaffe, 2018). The absence of traditional adulthood as an option forces many to redefine intimacy, success, and commitment on their own terms, sometimes in ways that do not align with mainstream expectations. While this can be freeing, it can also be isolating. Communicating desires and aspirations can become more challenging when there is no widely accepted framework for them, requiring people to navigate uncertainty while defining success and fulfillment on their own terms.

Ultimately, the fear of success is deeply tied to communication and intimacy. If success is framed as a risk of rejection, alienation, or failure; it can make people hesitate to be fully seen and heard. For women, that might mean holding back in professional or romantic settings to avoid being perceived as “too much.” For men, it might mean suppressing emotions to maintain a particular image of strength. And for queer people, it might mean struggling with how to express their experiences in a world that not only lacks a clear blueprint but often silences those who strive to create one. Breaking free from these constraints is not just about personal success, it is also about creating a culture where people feel safe expressing their ambitions, emotions, and fears without judgment. As Levine et al. (1976) noted, challenging the pressures placed on men is just as crucial as dismantling those placed on women. Liberation from these rigid norms allows for deeper, more authentic connections, both with oneself and with others.

In intimate relationships, redefining success is just as important as it is in broader societal contexts. Intimacy does not need to conform to a specific timeline or life stage; relationships can exist and thrive outside of conventional adulthood markers (Jaffe, 2018). If growth is nonlinear, then relationships, intimacy, and selfhood should also be understood as fluid and evolving. Stanley (1981) emphasizes that success in sexual intimacy should not be measured by performance or the achievement of specific goals, but by shared pleasure, emotional connection, and open communication. For couples struggling with fear of failure, shifting the focus toward mutual understanding and support can encourage a healthier dynamic, allowing both partners to explore and express their needs without pressure or shame.

Queer experiences further challenge the notion that one must “mature into traditional roles.” Instead, they highlight alternative models of love, chosen family, and identity formation. Many LGBTQ+ people have built support networks outside of traditional family structures, forming chosen families based on friendship, mentorships, and mutual care. These relationships challenge the idea that family is strictly defined by blood ties, instead emphasizing care, loyalty, and shared experience. Historically excluded from traditional marriage and monogamous norms, queer communities have explored relationship structures that challenge ownership-based, hierarchical, and gendered ideas of romance (Stanley, 1981). Polyamory and ethical non-monogamy, for example, have gained visibility in queer communities as relationship models that prioritize consent, communication, and autonomy over societal expectations of exclusivity and rigidity. This does not mean that all queer people reject monogamy, but rather that historical marginalization has encouraged innovation in relationship models that move beyond the nuclear family ideal (Jaffe, 2018). By challenging rigid norms, queer relationships offer insight into how intimacy can be shaped by individual needs rather than external pressures.

Educating partners, giving them "permission" to let go of societal expectations, and fostering communication can help break the cycle of fear. By embracing alternative ways of relating and prioritizing emotional connection over rigid success measurements, people and couples can build healthier, more fulfilling relationships

Language as a Tool of Control

“Universal human nature is not a very human thing. By acquiring it, the person becomes a kind of construct, built up not from inner psychic propensities but from moral rules that are impressed upon him from without” (Goffman, 1955, p. 231)

Historically, language has been a powerful tool for both explicit and implicit control. In Victorian England, for example, language was used to regulate sexual discourse through euphemisms, coded language, and the power of silence surrounding sexual matters (Tosh, 1999). The linguistic suppression, a key aspect of Muted Group Theory (MGT), made it difficult for marginalized groups, especially women, to effectively articulate their experiences or challenge dominant norms (Syawal et al., 2024). MGT developed by Edwin and Shirley Ardener and later expanded by Cheris Kramarae, states that marginalized communities are not given the privilege to shape the language used to talk about their own experiences, instead the dominant group, decided what counts as “acceptable” speech (Ardner, 1978; Syawal et al., 2024; Kramarae, 1981). Poapst and Harper (2017) highlight how language, as structured by white, middle-class, heterosexual men, acts as a gatekeeping tool that limits how marginalized groups articulate their realities (Syawal et al., 2024). This dominant group also controls the guidelines of sexual discourse, creating a linguistic framework that fails to capture the desires, autonomy, and realities of anyone who does not fit that mold. These limitations are not always enforced through

blatant censorship but are instead upheld through social norms, unspoken expectations, and consequences for stepping outside the lines. As a result, marginalized communities, including women, the LGBTQ+ communities, and people of color, are often left without the linguistic tools needed to fully articulate their experiences, forcing them to navigate sexuality in ways that conform to dominant, patriarchal expectations.

Similarly, elites often use euphemisms and coded language to hide the hard realities of inequality and exploitation, continuing to use language as a tool to preserve social hierarchies and maintain the status quo (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017). According to MGT, this linguistic control forces subdominant groups to adopt the dominant group's language to gain social legitimacy (Ardener, 2005; Syawal et al., 2024). For example, women throughout history have been expected to discuss their sexuality in passive terms, using words like “virtue” or “purity,” while male sexuality is framed around agency and conquest. This difference silences alternative narratives and ensures that dominant structures remain unchallenged. Traits associated with femininity, such as emotional expression, sensuality, receptivity, and vulnerability, have historically been framed as dangerous or disruptive, reinforcing the idea that they must be controlled, silenced, or hidden from public discourse (Griffin, 2003; Syawal et al., 2024).

This aligns with broader cultural narratives in which femininity, regardless of who expresses it, has been seen as something to be contained. The language of sexual purity, emotional restraint, and self-sacrifice has long positioned femininity as something that must be policed to maintain social order (Briggs, 2017). Whether in the form of modesty expectations, the policing of emotional expression, or the restriction of sexual autonomy, the suppression of femininity has functioned as a means of reinforcing patriarchal structures that privilege control, dominance, and rationality over fluidity, care, and embodied knowledge. This is evident in sexual

discourse, where expressions of feminine-coded intimacy, such as desire, affection, or emotional vulnerability, are perceived as excessive, irrational, or even manipulative. The dominant language of sexuality is geared toward detachment, conquest, and self-interest, framing these as neutral or even aspirational while dismissing or silencing alternative ways of engaging with intimacy.

Livingston and Vik (2021) argue that people in positions of power can use their status to exert control over sexual discourse. This power dynamic allows them to shape the parameters of sexual communication, influencing how sexual experiences are discussed, interpreted, and even understood. This aligns with MGT's assertion that language marginalization is not due to a lack of knowledge but to the structural limitations placed on how subdominant groups can express themselves (Syawal et al., 2024; West et al., 2010). Women for example, may understand their own desires and boundaries, but lack culturally accepted linguistic tools to articulate them without being stigmatized. This suppression is further reinforced through language that frames intimacy in transactional, adversarial, or fear-based terms, diminishing the more fluid, receptive, and emotionally driven expressions of sexuality.

Cap (2017) highlights how media and public discourse frame intimacy through a "self vs. other" dichotomy. When fear infiltrates public discourse on intimacy, it distorts perceptions of relationships, bodies, and desires, ingraining shame, distrust, and control in the very fabric of intimate connections. In this context, intimacy becomes less about vulnerability, connection, and mutual understanding, and more about compliance, avoidance, and self-policing. Partners can be framed as potential threats to one's autonomy, purity, or emotional well-being, encouraging suspicion over mutual trust and understanding. Phrases like "guard your heart," "don't let them take advantage of you," or "protect your purity" frame intimacy as a battleground that no one can

win and where one must constantly be on guard against exploitation or loss. This framing shifts intimacy from a space of growth and connection into a space of fear to preserve the self. This use of language transforms physical touch, sexual expression, and emotional closeness into a moral battleground, where people need to prove their worth through restraint and purity. Words such as “temptation” or “sin” portray intimacy in a negative light, framing it as risky unless strictly regulated (Owens et al., 2021).

The consequences of these linguistic limitations are profound. Jeffery and Barata (2020) highlight how dominant discourses perpetuate inequality and normalize coercion, and place the burden of preventing harm on women:

1. Perpetuation of Inequality: Discourses reinforce power imbalances between men and women, putting men as dominant and women as a subordinate. This is prominent in language that frames men as pursuers and women as gatekeepers.
2. Normalization of Coercion: These discourses contribute to a culture of sexual coercion and violence are normalized or excused as part of typical heterosexual behavior. Phrases like “boys will be boys” or “she was asking for it” encourage harmful actions and shift the blame away from perpetrators.
3. Blaming Women: Discourses surrounding miscommunication often blame women for sexual violence, placing the responsibility on them to avoid misunderstanding. This absolves men of accountability but also reinforces the idea that women must constantly police their behavior for fear of retaliation.

This mirrors MGT’s claims that muted groups must conform to dominant linguistic norms to be heard, often at the cost of their own perspectives (Barkman, 2018, Syawal et al.,

2024). The widespread framing of women as gatekeepers of sex, for example, forces them to police their behavior while absolving men of responsibility.

In a broader sense, the suppression of femininity in sexual discourse reflects a deep-seated cultural discomfort with expressions of emotionality, sensuality, and fluidity, traits that are linked to femininity which exist across all genders. MGT highlights that when a dominant group constructs a language of power, it does not just silence specific identities but entire ways of being (Syawal, 2024). The repression of these traits not only limits how people express themselves but also reinforces a broader cultural framework in which power and control are valued over connection and vulnerability.

The way language is used to frame gendered interactions plays a crucial role in reinforcing power dynamics, particularly in how men generalize their experiences as universal while positioning women's communication as unclear or misleading. Jeffery and Barata (2020) point out that phrases like "all men" or "most women" create a false sense of consensus, shaping cultural narratives that blur nuances and silence marginalized voices. This framing not only dictates how people perceive gendered behaviors but also assigns responsibility in ways that disproportionately burden women. However, this does not impact all women equally and is dependent on race, class, and cultural background which shape whose voices are most scrutinized and whose experiences are erased (Crenshaw, 1991). The idea that women's communication is cryptic or unclear disproportionately impacts women of color, who are already subject to stereotypes that frame them as either too aggressive (e.g. the "angry Black woman" trope) or too submissive (e.g., the "silent Asian woman" stereotype). These narratives further complicate how women of color navigate social and professional spaces, often forcing them to over-explain, soften their language, or avoid confrontation to escape these labels.

Additionally, the way men are framed in dominant gender discourse is also racialized. Jeffery and Barata (2020) highlight how exaggerated portrayals of male behavior, such as men always being aggressive in asking for sex, amplify fear and reinforce rigid norms. However, white masculinity is often given room for complexity, while men of color are disproportionately associated with aggression and danger (Crenshaw, 1991). Black and brown men, in particular, are often hypersexualized and criminalized in ways that white men are not, making it harder for them to escape narratives that automatically frame their actions as predatory. This imbalance is how gendered language is racialized and plays directly into broader power structures that dictate who is seen credible, who is given grace, and who is treated as a threat. If men of color are socially constructed as always aggressive while women of color are positioned as either too strong to be victims or too submissive to be taken seriously, then the intersections of race and gender ensure that their experiences with violence, misunderstanding, and power are rarely acknowledged in dominant conversations (Crenshaw, 1991).

Cultural norms significantly shape how intimacy is understood and enacted within relationships (Pritzker et al., 2024). In their research Pritzker et al. (2024) emphasizes that couples' orientations toward different cultural and relational norms influence their relational patterns and physiological responses. These norms are not just abstract ideas but are actively negotiated and embodied in daily interactions. Intimacy is not a universal concept; it is culturally and contextually defined (Pritzker et al., 2024). Different couples may have different ideals of intimacy, which are reflected in how they interact, communicate, and express affection. In other words, intimacy is not a static concept but an emergent process that is constantly being made and remade in specific contexts. Couples negotiate and navigate these norms, adapting them to their individual needs and preferences. Intimacy is not a one-size-fits-all experience, and enforcing a

universal approach on something that is made to be diverse can lead to negative reactions or consequences.

Fear-based control is deeply embedded within the communication ecology, where information technologies, media, and societal activities interact to reinforce fear narratives and influence public behavior (Altheide, 2013). These systems do not only share information, they also actively shape perceptions, creating a culture where fear becomes a pervasive and normalized lens through which people and groups interpret relationships, morality, and identity. Technology serves as a powerful “carrier” of these institutional logics. It does not passively reflect societal norms and values, it reinforces and disseminates them at scale (Giugni, 2024). Digital technologies, such as social media platforms, algorithms, and surveillance systems, are not neutral tools; they are built within and shaped by patriarchal and capitalist frameworks. They are designed within patriarchal and capitalist frameworks that prioritize control, productivity, and hierarchy, while privileging certain bodies, voices, and forms of labor. In this communication ecology, fear is not only sustained, it is amplified, producing a self-reinforcing cycle of control, internalized regulation, and compliance. This dynamic is especially evident in the ways intimacy is framed and policed. When intimacy is constructed as morally risky or a potential failure, fear becomes the dominant emotional filter through which people are taught to approach vulnerability, desire, and connection.

Erving Goffman’s principle of face provides a useful lens for understanding this. Goffman (1955) argued that people present a carefully managed image of themselves to others, shaped by social rituals, expectations, and moral codes. The “self” is not something fixed or discovered, but something performed in interaction with others, a product of family, culture, profession, religion, and more. In this framework, there is no one “authentic” self hidden behind

a mask; rather, each mask represents a real context-specific version of the self (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013).

In the context of intimacy, there is often a cultural ideal of closeness as total exposure, of being “seen” without the mask. But true intimacy may not require removing the mask at all. Instead, it might involve inviting someone into the performance, offering mutual understanding and trust in the creation and witnessing of self. Vulnerability, then, is not about discarding identity performances, but about sharing how they are formed, maintained, and negotiated. Still, the fear of being misread, of “losing face,” can be a powerful deterrent to intimacy (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). Being misunderstood is not just a social misstep but a threat to one’s sense of self. Yet, it is in this uncomfortable space, between fear and expression, that intimacy has the potential to grow.

Language plays a central role in regulating these dynamics. It defines what is sayable, thinkable, and permissible. Rather than supporting autonomy, emotional expression, or mutual consent, communication about intimacy is often saturated with shame, silence, and moral judgment. These linguistic norms, shaped by broader power structures, restrict how people communicate about closeness, desire, and selfhood. Dismantling these fear-based narratives requires critical attention to the discourses that govern intimacy. Analyzing the power embedded in these communicative norms reveal how they limit self-expression, reinforce gendered expectations, and legitimize control under the guise of morality or order.

Christianity’s Influence

Christianity's influence in the 19th century played a significant role in shaping societal standards, particularly regarding topics of sex and pleasure. Teachings during this time framed sexual desire and pleasure as indulgent and morally questionable, advocating for strict control and restraint. Traditional Christian views on sex assume equality, intimacy, and safety within relationships; conditions that are frequently absent in a society shaped by male dominance and the eroticization of power imbalances (Lebacqz, 1990). These approaches tend to emphasize romanticized ideals of love, marriage, and family while failing to address the widespread realities of sexual violence and unequal power dynamics that impact individual's lives. As a result, they struggle to tackle the complex and systemic challenges that shape people's sexual experiences.

Religious fundamentalism reinforces these issues by focusing on preserving traditional values and moral codes, framing anything that opposes these values as a threat to the social and religious order (Vincent et al., 2011). In their study, Vincent et al. (2011) revealed a strong link between religious fundamentalism and sexual prejudice. Those who scored high in fundamentalism were more likely to adopt and endorse religious teachings that condemn homosexuality and display a cognitive style resistant to change or new information. This makes it difficult for them to adjust their views, even when presented with evidence that challenges their beliefs, including those related to sexuality. This inflexible mindset not only hinders personal growth but also creates a closed feedback loop where opposing perspectives are completely dismissed. In turn, this cognitive rigidity influences broader social attitudes and behaviors, potentially leading to harmful stereotypes and discriminatory practices, both at the individual and institutional levels.

The institution of marriage has long been promoted as the only acceptable context for sexual expression, reinforcing the idea that women's value is tied to their chastity and honor to religious norms. The Judeo-Christian tradition, with its focus on procreation within marriage and restrictions on non-procreative sexual acts, has long influenced societal attitudes (DeLamater, 1981). This emphasis on purity, particularly for women, supported the belief that any deviation from these prescribed standards would invite divine punishment. Along with the emphasis on marriage fidelity, any sexual behavior outside of these norms was considered morally wrong, further ingraining restrictive views on sex and intimacy (DeLamater, 1981).

These ideals have trickled down through generations, influencing modern perceptions of sex and intimacy (DeLamater, 1981). The impact of these religious teachings continues to resonate today, shaping societal attitudes toward sexuality, especially in contexts involving gender and moral judgment. An important step in recognizing the dangers of this is identifying how the Church itself has helped shape these ideas about sex and morality (Brittain, 2014). By failing to critically examine its own role, the Church continues to reinforce the belief that straying from traditional norms is morally wrong and harmful to society.

Religious ideologies and practices can deeply impact a person's mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Unlike guilt, which is tied to specific actions, this form of shame is pervasive, embedding a deep sense of unworthiness and moral failing as a person's core. Downie (2022) discusses how Christian shame can manifest as religious trauma, which includes the psychological harm caused by harmful religious teachings, practices and experiences. This trauma can manifest in many ways including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms.

Constant exposure to shaming messages during childhood and adolescence can negatively influence a person's sense of self, instilling the belief that they are inherently unworthy, sinful, or flawed (Downie, 2022). These internalized messages influence psychological and emotional development, laying the foundation for distress that can continue into adulthood. Shame, particularly surrounding sexuality, is often reinforced by religious authorities who present restrictive or shaming messages about sex as expressions of love, moral guidance, and divine truth (Downie, 2022). By presenting these messages as spiritually beneficial, people may struggle to identify them as harmful, failing to recognize the lasting impact on their emotional and relational well-being.

For those who have deeply internalized shame, religious beliefs and practices can serve as a means of emotional suppression (Downie, 2022). In the context of sexual communication, this suppression can come up as avoidance or discomfort when discussing topics related to intimacy or pleasure. This cycle of denial and self-censorship not only prevents personal healing but also hinders the development of healthy and equitable relationships. In addition, shame is a powerful tool for enforcing conformity within religious communities (Downie, 2022). By discouraging open conversations about sexuality or opposing ideals from the established norms, people who deviate from or challenge these beliefs may be silenced or ostracized.

Traditional structures, such as heterosexual marriage and biological determinism, have been argued to serve as safeguards to protect against the perceived dangers of unrestrained choice (Brittain, 2014). This perspective frames autonomy as a threat to societal morality, but it is crucial to recognize that religious institutions prioritizing accepting and actively promoting tolerance have the potential to challenge societal biases. By encouraging more inclusive attitudes, these institutions can help reduce discriminatory behaviors (Vincent et al., 2011).

Religious beliefs and practices vary, even within fundamentalist traditions. Factors, such as individual experiences, cultural influences, and personal interpretations of religious teachings, play a significant role in shaping attitudes and behaviors (Vincent et al., 2011). Recognizing these is important in understanding how religious ideologies influence societal attitudes toward sex and intimacy, and how they can evolve to create more compassionate perspectives.

Promoting Divinely Ordained Gender Roles

Religious teachings rooted in traditional gender roles often take their authority from holy texts, framing these roles as divinely ordained and unchangeable. Following these roles is presented as a moral duty, with any deviation being framed as sinful or rebellious, opposing divine will. This perspective not only reinforces the sanctity of religious teachings and societal harmony, while using gender roles as sacred rules that determine not only behavior but also sexual ethics and communication about intimacy and pleasure.

Strict gender roles within many religious teachings reinforce the idea that women are primarily responsible for maintaining male sexual purity. Women are expected to dress modestly, behave appropriately, and avoid any actions that could be perceived as “tempting” men (Schultz, 2021). This narrative casts men’s sexual urges as uncontrollable and natural, while framing women as the moral gatekeepers who must do anything to prevent male sin. By doing so, these teachings foster gender inequality and reinforce harmful stereotypes; women are either virtuous protectors of morality or threats to it. At the same time, men are excused from accountability, reinforcing the idea that they are powerless against temptation. This strips men of their capacity for self-regulation, making them unable to manage their own sexual behavior, while limiting women’s autonomy and self-expression (Engels, 1884/2001). The emphasis on

controlling women's appearance and behavior as primary examples of what influences male morality creates a notion that men's actions are excused and women's bodies need to be controlled. An example of this in society is victim blaming.

The persistence of these traditional gender roles is deeply rooted in fear. Within religious communities, the fear of social rejection serves as a powerful force against challenging these roles, as deviation can lead to ostracism or judgment. In addition, the fear of moral decay heightens the belief that abandoning traditional roles will result in the breakdown of family structures, societal values, and divine punishment. This fear contributes to a broader moral panic, further entrenching these gendered expectations and reinforcing compliance with traditional norms.

The Promise Keepers (PK) movement offers an example of how traditional gender roles are reimagined yet still upheld. The movement promotes a concept of "soft-boiled masculinity," which encourages emotional vulnerability and greater involvement in family life (Heath, 2015). While this approach challenges stoic masculinity that is sometimes associated with patriarchal values, it at the same time reinforces traditional male leadership. Men are encouraged to embrace emotional intimacy but remain the ultimate decision-makers, responsible for their families' well-being and answerable only to God. This "servant leadership" model continues to subordinate women within the family structure, positioning men as the dominant force in both family and religious life (Heath, 2003). Further, the PK movement's emphasis on individual morality and personal transformation also neglects to address broader societal inequalities such as racism and gender inequality, perpetuating existing power structures under the guise of reform (Heath, 2015). Within this framework, white men are offered redemption through introspection and faith, while men of color are pathologized, depicted as inherently violent or as products of broken

communities (Crenshaw, 1991). Rather than being offered support or opportunities for transformation, men of color are positioned as problems to be managed, not as people capable of healing. This disparity reinforces racialized narratives about masculinity, denying men of color the emotional complexity and space for growth that white men afforded.

In the United States, traditional gender roles depict women as sexually passive and men as sexually active and assertive (Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007). These roles are deeply ingrained in societal expectations, reinforced by cultural narratives and media, and continue to shape how sexuality and intimacy are communicated.

Lebacqz (1990) critically analyzes the dynamics of male power within Christian sexual ethics, arguing that traditional frameworks fail to address the pervasive power imbalances between men and women in a patriarchal society. Male dominance was embedded in societal structures, including social, legal, financial, and educational institutions, and it continues to shape sexual experiences for both genders. This systemic power imbalance is not confined solely in isolated acts of dominance but is deeply woven in the fabric of culture and institutions, reinforcing the social order that privileges male authority.

For those in positions of privilege, such as men in patriarchal systems, the fear of losing status and control further reinforces the emphasis on traditional gender roles. These roles are safeguarded because they protect existing power dynamics, ensuring that privilege and authority remain unchallenged. This fear is often masked as concern for the preservation of societal order, family values, or religious integrity, but it ultimately works to maintain the hierarchical status quo and limit the agency of women.

Controlling Sexuality Through Sin

Religious teachings and doctrines significantly influence the perceptions of sexuality and contribute to the development of sex guilt (Emmers-Sommer et al., 2017). Many religions establish strict guidelines around sexual behavior, delegating what is considered acceptable and prohibiting actions considered immoral or impure. These ideals emphasize chastity, abstinence before marriage, and modesty. Religious doctrines serve as a moral compass, shaping attitudes towards sexuality from an early age. Teachings mostly present sexuality as sacred but confined to specific contexts, such as heterosexual marriage. Actions outside of that, including premarital sex, masturbation or same-sex relationships, are labeled sinful. These strict religious cultures heighten the internalization of these moral codes (Emmers-Sommer et al., 2017). When people perceive their actions as transgressions against the divine, they may experience emotional distress, which can manifest as sex guilt.

The push for purity and chastity often places the burden of moral responsibility on women, positioning them as the moral guardians of the household. Women are tasked with maintaining the integrity of family values, while men are frequently left with little guidance or accountability regarding their own sexual journeys. This unequal distribution of responsibility reinforces a patriarchal structure where women's virtue is tied to their ability to uphold strict moral standards, while men's desires and actions are often viewed as uncontrollable or natural.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, anxieties about sexuality contributed to the rise of the social purity movement (Hunt, 1998). These fears were closely tied to concerns about national strength, racial purity, and social order, revealing the ways in which personal fears about sexuality were leveraged to justify broader moral regulation efforts. The concept of "social purity" emerged as a significant moral reform movement in Britain, which worked to regulate sexuality and enforce stricter societal norms (Hunt, 1998). The movement relied on the concept

of sin as a central part of controlling and regulating sexuality. Through the lens of religious and moral ideologies, sexual behavior was framed as a matter of purity with the emphasis on being used for procreation solely. Deviations from the set norms were not only seen as immoral but as sinful.

At the heart of the social purity movement was the double standard of sexual morality. Women were expected to remain chaste and morally pure, while men were allowed greater sexual freedom. This gendered injustice was framed as a societal sin, as preserving purity was linked to divine will and moral order. Activists within the social purity movement, many of whom were women, campaigned for a unified moral standard that would hold both men and women to the same expectations of sexual purity (Hunt, 1998). One particular aspect of the social purity movement was “anti-sexual feminism,” which focused on promoting female chastity while imposing sexual restraint on men. However, this approach did not work to give women more sexual freedom but it was aimed to elevate men to the same moral purity as what was prescribed to women (Hunt, 1998).

Another prominent focus of the social purity movement was the campaign against masturbation. Masturbation was seen as a form of self-indulgence and violation of both personal and religious purity, becoming a symbol of moral corruption (Hunt, 1998). It was framed not only as a sin, but as a harmful act that had severe physical, mental, moral consequences. Medical discussions played a central role in heightening the fears surrounding masturbation, labeling it as a “disease” that could lead to debilitating conditions (Hunt, 1998). Masturbation was perceived as an act that could be detected through changes in behavior or physical symptoms. The social purity movement emphasized surveillance and self-control to regulate this behavior. Parents, teachers, and even children were encouraged to watch out for signs of masturbation (Hunt,

1998), creating a culture of self-policing where people were taught to not only control their own actions, but also those around them. Through this, people were socialized to view their sexual desires and behaviors as inherently sinful and requiring constant determination to avoid moral failure.

Sexual purity, particularly male chastity and control, was framed as a foundation of national health and strength. Anxieties about male sexuality were deeply connected to broader imperialist narratives that tied sexual purity to the empire's moral and political dominance (Hunt, 1998). This put emphasis on the idea that without moral purity, the nation itself would succumb to moral decay and decline. The anti-masturbation campaign within the social purity movement was particularly focused on middle and upper-class males, especially those attending boarding schools; these social groups were seen as more vulnerable to moral corruption (Hunt, 1998). These young men were considered to be the future leaders of the nation and their sexual purity was seen as the key to preserving the strength of the empire. Although the movement did challenge the double standard of sexual morality and then contributed to early efforts in sex education, its anti-sexual stance on control contributed to societal attitudes towards sexuality (Hunt, 1998). The movement's emphasis on shame, guilt, and self control created a culture of silence and anxiety surrounding sexuality that continued for generations.

Purity culture is often framed as a moral and religious framework promoting sexual abstinence and modesty, though it is shown to have roots in the racialized history of the United States. The metaphor of purity and contamination was a way for white people to claim they were "untainted" by Black ancestry (Harris, 1993). Purity was not just a personal characteristic, but it was a social status that further granted or denied access to privilege and belonging. The infamous one-drop rule dictated that even the slightest trace of Black ancestry disqualified a person from

being considered white and, by extension, from accessing the privileges associated with whiteness (Harris, 1993). Gaining traction in the 1990s, purity culture centered on the idea of abstinence until marriage as a moral imperative, often using fear tactics and strict gender roles to force compliance (Dinse et al., 2023). Purity culture operates on an “all-or-nothing” mentality where one sexual experience, desire, or transgression can be seen as permanently “tainting” a person. This fosters an environment of constant policing, surveillance, and judgment, especially toward adolescents, by church leaders, peers and family members, based on their ability to maintain and conform to strict gender roles (Schultz, 2021). The expectation extends to clothing choices and social interactions, contributing to a culture of fear, shame, and social control that limits individuality and self-expression. Remaining sexually pure is tied to promises of a happy, God-blessed marriage and lifelong fulfillment (Schultz, 2021). Sexuality outside of marriage is equated with sinfulness, moral failure, and a loss of spiritual worth.

For women in particular, chastity is linked to their value, continuing their role as gatekeepers of morality and sexual purity within society. These restrictions extend across a woman’s lifetime, shaping her experiences and expectations around sexuality and intimacy from a young age. Cultural narratives surrounding purity and chastity policed women’s behavior, reinforcing the idea that their value is tied to their sexual restraint and adherence to societal norms. This policing of intimacy not only limits women’s autonomy but also fosters a culture of fear, where the potential for moral decay is framed as a direct consequence of deviating from these standard roles. The fear of social rejection, divine punishment, and the erosion of traditional values becomes a powerful motivator for conformity, maintaining the status quo and perpetuating gendered expectations around sexuality. Virginity is placed on a moral pedestal, metaphors like “chewed gum” or “used tape” equate sexually active unmarried women as objects

to be thrown away, creating a strong association between sexual activity and moral failure (Owens et al., 2021). This regulation does not stop at sexual intercourse; it also includes physical affection, in some cases banning hugging, kissing or holding hands. Sexual activity, or even knowledge of something that would “corrupt” the body and soul, is treated as a form of contamination or sin. A woman’s body is framed as belonging not to herself but to her future husband, reinforcing the idea that her worth is tied to an untouched, “unspoiled” status. This erases women’s autonomy, reducing their bodies to commodities that must be “given” to a spouse rather than something they own and control themselves (Lebacqz, 1990).

Because the system of slavery was dependent on and conflated with racial identity, whiteness was not just a descriptor but a form of property, an attribute that granted freedom, personhood, and social superiority (Harris, 1993). Whiteness became the defining characteristic of those considered fully human, while Blackness was constructed as the opposite: inferior, subjugated, and outside the confines of moral and social purity. In her analysis, Schultz (2021) highlights the deep-seated racial foundation of purity culture, uncovering the connection to White body supremacy and the legacy of American evangelicalism. Purity culture reflects ideologies of white Christian slaveholders who worked to justify racial hierarchies through theological constructs (Schultz, 2021). It elevates white femininity as the standard of purity and morality, emphasizing traits like modesty, docility, and sexual restraint, traits historically associated with white, middle-class women, are emphasized (Natarajan et al., 2022). During slavery, white Christian slaveholders used religious teachings to justify the subjugation of Black people, portraying Black bodies as inherently sinful and deviant. Purity culture emerged from this ideological framework, sowing the seeds of racial superiority and moral purity into its teachings (Schultz, 2021). Within this framework, Black women’s bodies have been policed and

controlled through cultural narratives and institutional practices. At the same time, Black women are denied access to the traditional idea of purity, instead being subjected to systemic objectification and exploitation. This system of inequality shows the policing of women's bodies serving to maintain existing hierarchies of race and gender.

With men portrayed as having uncontrollable sexual urges and women being held responsible for managing these urges through modesty and sexual restraint, this control of sexual autonomy is not placed on the person it should, leading to burdens and challenges for both genders. Purity culture's reliance on fear, shame, and rigid gender roles has lasting impacts for people especially if they engage in sexual activity outside of marriage (Dinse et al., 2023).

In the United States, particularly within white evangelical Protestant communities in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, purity culture took a more permanent form through abstinence-only sex education programs, public purity pledges, "True Love Waits" rallies, and father-daughter purity balls (Diefendorf, 2015; Gardner, 2011). These rituals and events framed abstinence as both a moral imperative and a form of social capital, reinforcing a narrow sexual script in which men's sexual pleasure and initiative were prioritized while women's pleasure, desire, and bodily autonomy were ignored or stigmatized. Research on the "orgasm gap," the consistent disparity in orgasm frequency between men and women in heterosexual relationships, has linked these gendered sexual scripts to reduce sexual satisfaction for women, as purity culture's emphasis on female chastity often leaves women with limited sexual self-knowledge and communication skills (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2012). In this way, purity culture's ideological roots in racialized and patriarchal control of sexuality extend into the most intimate spaces, shaping not only who is seen as "pure" but also whose pleasure matters.

The Creation of Demons/Deviants

Purity culture operates on a foundation of creating and enforcing boundaries that define who belongs and who does not. These boundaries are established through processes of othering and scapegoating, which maintain power dynamics, reinforce group identity, and marginalize those deemed “impure” or “sinful.”

By equating purity with moral integrity, religious teachings created a binary framework where people are categorized as either “pure” or “tainted.” Social norms around sexuality often favor white people, positioning them as the standard of acceptable sexual behavior. White virtue positioned white women as the beacons of chastity and moral guardianship, while women of other races were seen as the opposite, criminalizing or stigmatizing the sexual autonomy of people of color, particularly those in marginalized communities. This contributed to the role of purity culture in perpetuating harmful racial stereotypes, particularly the “Jezebel” trope (Schultz, 2021). This stereotype portrays Black women as hypersexual, immoral, and inherently dangerous in contrast to the pure and virtuous White woman. The “Jezebel” trope not only sexualizes Black women; it also denies them sexual autonomy or agency, framing their sexuality as biologically deviant. Women of color are often excluded from the ideals of purity and morality, with their bodies framed as impure or hypersexual. Black women are portrayed as lacking the innocence and purity, Latina women are stereotyped as fiery and sexually deviant, and Asian women are exoticized and objectified while also being held to restrictive standards of submissive purity (Natarajan et al., 2022). For men, white masculinity is framed as protective and virtuous in the American standard, while men of color, particularly Black and Latino men, are often depicted as threats to social order either through criminalization or racialized fears

about their hypersexuality and Asian men are marginalized through racialized critiques of “feminine” masculinity. These racialized constructions of purity and danger reinforce intersecting systems of patriarchy and white supremacy, shaping who is afforded protection, credibility, and agency.

“Whiteness as the embodiment of white privilege transcended mere belief or preference; it became usable property, the subject of the law's regard and protection” (Harris, 1993, p. 1734). The idea of whiteness as “usable property” suggests that it can be used for personal gain. Similarly, the narrative of purity culture functions as a form of social capital, where white people are positioned as the moral standard, upholding values such as Christianity and family stability, while others are cast as “sinful” or “impure,” therefore, less human. This dehumanization reinforces the divide between “us” (the pure and righteous”) and “them” (the impure and corrupt), where purity is linked not only to personal behavior but to racial and national identity. Americans have long been encouraged to see threats from within, whether immigrants, leftists, and anyone who challenged the dominant white, Christian, capitalist order (Perry, 2005). Though the specific “threats” changed over time, the pattern remains the same. By framing ideological battles as a struggle between good and evil, political and religious leaders maintain control, reinforce nationalism, and justify exclusionary policies. Leaders within purity culture further reinforce this sense of exclusivity, portraying compliance as the path of a chosen elite, separate from the sinful and corrupt world (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017).

In this context, the protection of purity went hand in hand with safeguarding whiteness; both requiring justifications for the exclusion of those deemed inferior. This protection can manifest through social norms, legal structures, cultural narratives, and control over sexual autonomy. By framing compliance with purity culture as essential to maintaining moral

superiority, these groups justify exclusion, judgment, and, at times, harm toward those who do not conform to its values. This aligns with messianic exceptionalism, the belief that a powerful nation or leader is divinely chosen to lead, civilize, or dominate others (Perry, 2005). This ideology reinforces the notion that certain groups, particularly those who follow specific religious values, are inherently superior. The same logic upholds broader societal patterns of marginalization, where systems of power and control are maintained through exclusion of those deemed “other.” Problems like gender inequality or violence against women are often blamed on external cultures or marginalized groups, a tactic used to absolve the dominant group from taking responsibility while reinforcing its own moral authority (Flood et al., 2021). In both racial and gendered contexts, the protection of an ideal, whether through the lens of racial privilege or the restrictions of purity culture, functions to preserve a status quo that privileges one group over another.

Within purity culture, people who deviate from the prescribed moral or sexual norms are labeled as sinful and seen as threats to the faithful. This perpetuates the belief that their actions can lead others away from the divine path. This logic extends beyond religious communities and into legal and social institutions, where women who fail to conform to rigid standards of sexual virtue are frequently dismissed as unworthy of protection. In rape trials, a woman’s past sexual conduct is often weaponized against her, framing her as morally suspect and thus less credible as a victim (Crenshaw, 1991). This dynamic reflects a broader pattern in which those who defy dominant sexual norms, whether in religious, legal, or cultural contexts, are not only marginalized but treated as responsible for their own mistreatment. In doing so, systems of control are reinforced, sustaining both purity culture and patriarchal power through mechanisms of fear, blame and exclusion.

Conforming to these ideals, people reinforce their sense of belonging, while distancing themselves from non-conformers, further solidifying the group's identity (Berthold, 2010). The identity is defined not only by what it includes but also by what it excludes. This ingroup bias creates favorability toward a group over others and can be linked to outgroup hostility. Brewer (1999) highlights that ingroup favoritism and outgroup hate are not necessarily two sides of the same coin. The preferential treatment of ingroup members can drive discrimination even in the absence of direct hostility towards outgroups. While ingroup love does not inherently lead to outgroup hate, outgroup hostility can emerge when an outgroup is seen as threatening the ingroup's interests or survival. In this instance, fear and distrust increase, ingroup norms are seen as morally correct and can lead to the denigration of outgroups (Brewer, 1999). Political leaders often exploit ingroup-outgroup distinctions to gather support, emphasizing perceived threats from outgroups and creating fear and hostility.

This process of othering and scapegoating within purity culture serves to maintain control, enforce compliance, and marginalize those perceived as threats to the determined group's values. Practices like this encourage shame, inequality, and systemic oppression, while justifying the exclusion or harm of those deemed the "other."

Intimacy Drenched in Fear

Social connections are essential to emotional and physical health, with intimate relationships serving as a cornerstone of human well-being (Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016). Humans are wired for connection, and intimacy works as a form of psychosocial support. More than just sexual relationships, intimacy encompasses deep emotional bonds, trust, and mutual vulnerability. It is a dyadic exchange, involving at least two people, and includes emotional,

cognitive, physical, and behavioral components (Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016). A key mechanism in building and strengthening intimacy is self-disclosure, the act of sharing personal information, which fosters trust and connection. Moreover, intimacy is actively created through both verbal and non-verbal communication. It is not merely about proximity or the duration of a relationship but about how people engage with one another, through openness, responsiveness, and shared experiences.

Love, attachment, and sexuality are not distinct categories but rather interconnected aspects of human relationships (Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016). This challenges the Western frameworks that rigidly classify relationships as romantic, platonic, or familial, often overlooking the inherent fluidity and complexity of intimacy. Digital spaces further complicate this landscape. Parsakia and Rostami (2023) highlight how digital intimacy is shaped by gender norms, social structures, and ethics considerations, revealing the ways technology mediates contemporary relational life.

Within patriarchal systems, intimacy is categorized by gender: men are often socialized to suppress vulnerability, while women are expected to prioritize emotional labor and caregiving. Capitalism, in turn, commodifies intimacy, turning connection into performance, desire into productivity, and self-worth into a metric of desirability or market value (Syawal et al., 2024). This is particularly visible with dating apps, influencer culture, and paid intimacy services like OnlyFans, where the boundaries between genuine and transactional connection become increasingly blurred. Yet, digital intimacy also opens up alternative possibilities. For LGBTQ+ people, dating apps can often be used not only as platforms for romance or sex but as spaces for identity explorations and community-building (Byron et al., 2020; Parsakia & Rostami, 2023). These platforms allow for more fluid forms of connection, even as they remain sites of

algorithmic bias, restrictive platform policies, and harassment that constrain access and inclusion. As such, digital intimacy reveals both the potential and precarity of connection under intersecting systems of power.

Beyond social connection, the digital world also holds the potential to educate people on sex education and relationship negotiation (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023; Scott et al., 2020)., it can help enhance self-esteem, provide social support, and reduce loneliness and depression. However, online interactions can foster unrealistic expectations, encourage excessive self-disclosure, and expose people to deception, exploitation, and emotional harm (Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016). For example, online platforms enable women and marginalized groups to access sex-positive education beyond restrictive cultural norms, however algorithmic biases often limit this access, reinforcing gendered restrictions on discussion sexuality. This tension between empowerment and constraint mirrors broader societal struggles over control, censorship, and the policing of intimacy.

In addition, recent conversations have highlighted how digital technologies carry and amplify capitalist and patriarchal structures in how communication is shaped. As Zuboff (2019) points out, algorithms are not built with users' well-being in mind, they are designed to keep people engaged for as long as possible, because more attention means more profit (Giugni, 2024). That attention economy thrives on emotional intensity, which means content that sparks outrage, fear, or moral panic tends to rise to the top. Sexist, misogynistic, and gendered content often gets the most traction and, instead of being filtered out, it is rewarded by the system. This is how the system is meant to work (Giugni, 2024; Haugen, 2021). Content that objectifies or targets women, LGBTQ+ people, and people of color is what tends to drive the most clicks and shares, making it valuable to platforms. In this way, algorithms end up functioning like digital

gatekeepers, reinforcing dominant cultural norms about who gets seen, heard, or supported, and who gets pushed aside or punished.

When people feel a sense of control over their sexual experiences, they are more likely to assert their boundaries, communicate desires, and engage in consensual and mutually satisfying encounters (Sanchez et al., 2012). This sense of control empowers people to navigate their sexual relationships confidently, free from the pressures of conforming to societal expectations or fearing judgment. This self-efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to influence outcomes in sexual situations, plays a critical role in sexual decision-making (Sanchez et al., 2012). When people believe they can manage sexual experiences effectively, they are more likely to engage in behaviors that promote their well-being, such as initiating safe-sex practices, seeking sexual pleasure, or negotiating sexual consent. Without self-efficacy, people may struggle with feelings of inadequacy or powerlessness, leading to a lack of agency in sexual encounters. People who feel empowered in their sexual relationships are more likely to communicate openly about contraceptive use, STI prevention, and other factors related to sexual health (Sanchez et al., 2012). In contrast, those who feel less control may struggle to advocate for themselves in these situations, increasing the risk of engaging in unsafe sexual practices.

However, given the vulnerability that comes with being open about sexual issues, it is not surprising that many people find it difficult to communicate with their partners about the sexual aspects of their relationship (Metts & Cupach, 1989; Montesi et al., 2010; Wheelless, Wheelless, & Baus, 1984)

Despite the fundamental role of intimacy and the importance of self efficacy in relationships, purity culture imposes restrictive narratives that shape how people understand and

experience them. With its singular focus on abstinence until marriage, purity culture often excludes comprehensive discussions of consent and sexual health (Owens et al., 2021). This omission can leave people unprepared to navigate healthy, consensual sexual relationships, with fear being a central factor of their understanding of intimacy. By framing sex as inherently dangerous and sinful, to be feared and avoided until marriage, purity culture weaponizes fear to control behavior. This fear-based approach can lead to long-lasting anxieties about sexuality, even relationships within the confines of marriage, where sex is seen as appropriate. A sense of guilt, discomfort, and difficulty embracing sexual intimacy, can result as people struggle to confront the fear induced narratives they have internalized.

Beyond shaping personal experiences of intimacy, purity culture also significantly influences perceptions of sexual violence and victim experiences. Owens et al. (2021) demonstrates a strong correlation between endorsing purity culture and the acceptance of rape myths, such as blaming victims for their assault or dismissing their experiences as exaggerated. These myths perpetuate a culture of fear and silence, where victims are discouraged from seeking justice or support, further pushing the power dynamics that purity culture upholds.

Hackathorn et al. (2016) explore the “sacred bed phenomenon,” which highlights the complex relationship between religiosity, sexual guilt, and sexual satisfaction. Their research shows that unmarried people with strong religious beliefs can internalize the idea that sex is inherently sinful, which could negatively impact their sexual satisfaction (Hackathorn et al., 2016). Guilt acts as a psychological barrier, preventing full enjoyment of sexual experiences and creating a conflict between personal desires and religious moral standards. For married couples, religious teachings sanctify sex within marriage, framing it as morally acceptable and virtuous. While it reduces the intensity of sexual guilt (Hackathorn et al., 2016), it does not resolve the

deeper issue, the harmful narrative created by purity culture that sex is at its core dangerous or dirty. Instead, it reinforces the idea that only marital sex is good sex, leaving little room for exploration of intimacy as a multifaceted, emotionally rich experience.

Even within marriage, people may struggle with deeply ingrained feelings of shame or discomfort about sexuality, particularly if they were to view sex as being sinful, dirty, or dangerous. Transitioning from “sex is sinful” to “sex is sacred” is not an easy process; these internalized messages do not go away overnight. Women, in particular, face significant challenges in this transition as they feel the most pressure from purity culture’s demands. They are expected to preserve their purity before marriage and then meet their husbands’ sexual needs afterward, with little room to acknowledge or embrace their own sexual empowerment, autonomy, and comfort within their bodies. This dynamic can lead to internalized shame, anxiety, low self-esteem, and difficulties with sexual intimacy, ultimately impacting both partners’ emotional connection and overall satisfaction (Dinse et al., 2023).

For some married people raised in the purity culture mindset, the lasting guilt and shame about sexuality can manifest in various ways, such as anxiety, fear of judgment, or difficulty fully embracing their desires. These emotional barriers often hinder open communication and create tension, making it challenging to foster healthy sexual intimacy. Purity culture promotes the unrealistic belief that abstaining from sex until marriage will automatically create a deeply fulfilling and well-balanced sexual relationship (Dinse et al., 2023). This oversimplified view sets couples up for disappointment when they encounter challenges such as incompatible libidos, emotional disconnection, or difficulty exploring desires. These issues can be perceived as failures to live up to the ideal perfect marital sex, further heightening feelings of inadequacy and fear.

This fear-based narrative also delegitimizes non-marital consensual, loving and deeply meaningful sexual relationships. By positioning marriage as the sole key to morally acceptable sex, purity culture stigmatizes people who choose not to marry, engage in healthy non-monogamous or premarital relationships, or face systemic barriers to marriage, such as the LGBTQ+ community. This perpetuates shame and stigmatization for anyone operating outside the narrow framework of marital sexuality, reinforcing a binary understanding of sex as either bad (premarital) or good (marital). This binary does not acknowledge the complexities and nuances of human sexuality, reducing it to a moral issue rather than recognizing its layered nature as an experience shaped by emotions, mutual consent, communication, and personal values.

Christian media that is geared toward young people further reinforce this relational framework of purity culture. Christian dating books depict men as dominant leaders and women as submissive supporters, prioritizing their husband's needs over their own. These narratives suggest that women must fulfill their husband's uncontrollable sexual desires, even if it means tolerating coercion or violence (Dinse et al., 2023). Such beliefs and practices can lead to significant harm within marriages, including marital rape, where the emphasis on male entitlement and female submission normalizes coercive or non-consensual sexual acts, framing them as marital duty rather than violations (Dinse et al., 2023). This dynamic affects both genders; women may experience feelings of shame, worthlessness, and depression, while men may struggle with emotional disconnection or the inability to recognize their partner's autonomy and needs.

The long-term effects of fear-based narratives on intimacy are profound. They perpetuate cycles of emotional disconnection and insecurity, making it difficult for people to communicate

openly or build trust. Under the combined influence of patriarchal and capitalist logics, narrow normative scripts emerge that define intimacy in restrictive terms, typically privileging heterosexual, monogamous, reproductive, and emotionally restrained relationships (Giugni, 2024). Those who deviate from these norms: queer people, people who are disabled, sex workers, or those whose needs don't align with capitalist-patriarchal ideals of productivity, efficiency, or self-sacrifice, are often stigmatized or excluded from recognition as legitimate participants in intimate life.

Intimacy, then, is not a purely a private or personal matter; it is shaped by the broader structures of power, discipline, and cultural value. Once fear is introduced into this framework, it is often internalized, producing a self-regulating form of vigilance in which intimacy is perceived as inherently risky. This dynamic is especially damaging in patriarchal societies, where fear is disproportionately projected onto women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people of color, framing their forms of intimacy as deviant, threatening, or unworthy of respect and protection.

The American attitude toward sex has been marked with contradiction. While the country celebrates individual liberty and the right to privacy, it also shows a strong need to moralize, legislate, and, at times, criminalize consensual sexual acts (Haidt & Hersh, 2001). This ambivalence reflects a deeper cultural divide between autonomy-driven liberalism, which prioritizes individual rights, personal freedom, and mutual consent; and traditional conservatism, which prioritizes ethics of divinity, purity and sanctity (Haidt & Hersh, 2021). This tension is not just a political or legal issue but a reflection of competing ideas of morality, freedom, and societal values.

Haidt and Hersh (2001) found that moral judgments, especially those concerning sexual morality, are predominantly shaped by emotional reactions, which are rationalized through moral arguments. This emotional foundation highlights the deeply personal and visceral nature of sexual morality, where feelings like disgust, shame, or sanctity often take priority over logical analysis. Psychological factors, such as self-esteem, body image, anxiety, and stress, significantly influence sexual satisfaction (Hackathorn et al., 2016). Low self-esteem can hinder confidence and comfort during sexual encounters, while negative body image can impact feelings of attractiveness and desirability. Anxiety, particularly performance anxiety, can create a cycle of worry that interferes with relaxation and enjoyment. Underlying psychological issues like depression, anxiety disorders, and trauma can also affect mood, energy levels, and overall well-being, making it difficult to engage in and enjoy sexual activity (Hackathorn et al., 2016). These negative thoughts and emotions can decrease sexual desire, impair arousal and hinder orgasm, and ultimately strain relationships, creating a cycle where the idea of intimacy becomes a source of anxiety itself.

The gendered nature of fear in relationships characterized by coercive abuse (RCA) is shaped and sustained by societal norms and patriarchal structures (Tarzia & Hegarty, 2021). Women, in particular, are socialized to internalize a pervasive fear of victimization and violence, reinforcing their vulnerability in both public and private spheres. These structures perpetuate cycles of control, making women more susceptible to coercive behaviors by normalizing fear as a baseline experience within their lives. Fear narratives often put women as inherently at risk, discouraging them from asserting boundaries or seeking autonomy within relationships. At the same time, these narratives create environments where coercion is subtly reinforced, as patriarchal norms frame women's submission or compliance as virtues. This ensures that fear not

only maintains systemic power imbalances but also acts as a barrier to women's empowerment and safety.

Feelings of powerlessness can also inhibit communication, particularly survivors of sexual assault (Livingston & Vik, 2021). Survivors may feel unable to speak up due to the fear of not being believed, especially if the perpetrator holds power or importance. Intense feelings of shame, embarrassment, and self-blame further hinder their ability to open up about their experiences. These barriers can be even more pronounced for men as societal ideals of masculinity discourage them from coming forward with their experiences of sexual assault for fear of being seen as weak (Livingston & Vik, 2021).

The intertwined history of patriarchy and Christianity, amplified by purity culture, has created a legacy of shame, guilt, and anxiety that continues from adolescence to adulthood. These influences perpetuate harmful power dynamics, stifle open communication, and overlook the potential for healthy, consensual, and fulfilling sexual relationships. To move beyond this, the narratives that equate intimacy with danger must be challenged and replaced with a more nuanced understanding of sexuality, one that is rooted in mutual respect, consent, and emotional connection. Through this, we can create space for intimacy that is liberating and affirming.

Impact on Femininity

Controlling women's sensory experiences was a central focus in 19th-century America. It was a key component of what Schuller (2017) terms the "sentimental politics of life," a mode of biopower that regulated the population's health by managing the circulation of affect, prioritizing sympathy, self-control, and domesticity as tools of governance (Schuller, 2017). One example of this was the 19th century belief, particularly within the American School of Evolution, that

women possessed a greater capacity for impressibility, meaning they were more susceptible to sensory stimulation and its influence on their physical and mental development (Schuller, 2017). This heightened sensitivity, especially associated with their vaginas, made them both crucial for racial progress and highly vulnerable to degenerating influences.

Another aspect was managing what Schuller (2017) calls the “volatility of the impressive body.” The same openness that made women vital for racial progress also posed a perceived risk of degeneration, as they could absorb and transmit harmful impressions as readily as beneficial ones. Controlling women’s sensory experiences was seen as a way to manage this volatility, ensuring that they accumulated and transmitted only the “right” kinds of impressions (Schuller, 2017).

Women are socialized from an early age to be obedient, compliant, and overall passive, behaviors instilled through cultural norms, family dynamics, and social reinforcement (Sacco, 1990). This socialization is deeply rooted in fear-based narratives that discourages women from taking risks, asserting themselves, or embracing their desires. Fear of failure, judgment, or moral condemnation is ingrained into women’s upbringing, shaping their understanding of intimacy and sexuality. As Sacco (1990) describes in the “cult of domesticity,” being passive aligns with the expectations of the traditional ideal woman, whose focus should be one of homemaking and caretaking rather than pursuing leadership roles or entrepreneurial ventures. This gendered socialization extends to women’s sexual behavior, where societal messages often lead to internalized guilt and shame. Emmers-Sommer et al. (2017) found that women consistently reported higher levels of sex guilt compared to men, a direct result of fear-based narratives that frame female sexuality as dangerous or immoral. This guilt acts as a psychological barrier,

restricting women's sexual expression and enjoyment, potentially leading to challenges in forming and maintaining fulfilling sexual relationships.

Kellie et al. (2020) illustrate how societal and familial structures reinforce these fear-based narratives. This hypothesis suggests that parents are more invested in controlling their daughter's sexual behavior due to the higher potential costs of an unwanted pregnancy for daughters compared to sons. This heightened parental control manifests in various ways, including attempts to influence partner choice, disapproval of promiscuity, and stricter monitoring of daughter's social activities (Kellie et al., 2020). By framing female sexuality as a risk to be managed, this notion perpetuates that idea that women's bodies and behaviors must be policed to protect family honor and social standing, restricting women's autonomy.

Stereotypes about women's sexuality further reinforce these fear-based narratives. Women are expected to be uninterested in sex outside committed relationships, as their honor is tied to their perceived sexual purity. Kiefer and Sanchez (2007) highlight how women who endorse traditional gender roles are more likely to engage in passive sexual behavior, often prioritizing their male partner's pleasure over their own. Women who deviate from these norms by engaging in casual or premarital sex are frequently labeled as promiscuous or slutty, reinforcing the Madonna-Whore dichotomy. This dichotomy categorizes women into one of two roles: the "Madonna," who is pure, chaste, and virtuous, or the "Whore," who is sexually permissive and morally questionable (Klein et al., 2024). Men who internalize this dichotomy often devalue women they perceive as sexually active, leading to a lack of interest in fulfilling their sexual desires and a greater likelihood of engaging in disrespectful or abusive behavior. The fear of being labeled a "whore" forces women to police their own desires, suppressing their sexual agency to avoid social stigma and moral condemnation.

The objectification of feminine sexuality begins early, with young women being socialized, both offline and online, to see their bodies through the lens of male desire rather than as extensions of their autonomy (Harrower, 2019). In the 21st century, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat amplify these pressures by rewarding images and performances that align with narrow, male-centered standards of attractiveness. This objectification not only pressures women to internalize limiting narratives about their sexuality but also forces them to navigate the consequences of being simultaneously desired and shamed. This is also deeply shaped by intersectional power structures that position women of color differently within the hierarchy of desirability, morality, and control (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, Black girls for example, are objectified at an even younger age due to the historical legacy of slavery, which positioned Black female bodies as both hypervisible and disposable. This legacy emboldened the adultification of Black girls, and the ongoing dismissal of Black women's testimonies in cases of sexual assault today (Epstein et al., 2017). When Black girls and women experience sexual violence or harassment, they are often blamed rather than believed, reinforcing a long-standing narrative that their bodies are inherently more sexual, less worthy of protection of justice. These pressures coerce young women into undermining their own sexual agency, driven by fear of judgment or rejection.

Mainstream and digital media reinforce harmful gender norms by promoting messages of sexual submissiveness and passivity to girls as traits that will attract male attention (Baker, 2005; Kilbourne 2000a, 2000b; Sanchez et al., 2012). While these narratives once circulated mostly in print magazines, they are now replicated through algorithm-driven content, influencer branding, and viral "dating advice" videos that prioritize male approval over female autonomy. These messages not only shape young women's self-perception but also limit their ability to

communicate openly about their own needs. Prioritizing male approval over female autonomy, these magazines contribute to a culture where girls are socialized to silence their own voices and prioritize the expectations of others. These representations also discourage girls from developing their language and confidence to communicate their needs and failing to provide balanced narratives that celebrate female sexual autonomy and communication, these media outlets reinforce patriarchal norms that stifle women's voices.

Harrower (2019) highlights how societal expectations can lead young women to engage in sexting, often under pressure to conform to male desires. In the digital age, the consequences of non-consensual sext sharing, also known as "revenge porn," are magnified by the speed and permanence of online distribution, creating long-lasting reputational and emotional harm (Harrower, 2019). These consequences are heavily gendered and racialized, with women, particularly women of color, facing disproportionate stigma, blame, and social sanction (Epstein et al., 2017). Girls and women are more likely to face severe repercussions, such as cyberbullying, social shaming, and reputational damage, while boys often escape the same scrutiny. This double standard reinforces that idea that women's sexuality is something to be policed and controlled, further restricting their autonomy. The fear of public shaming and social ostracization forces women to navigate their sexual lives with caution, often at the expense of their own desires and well-being.

To avoid being stigmatized as "whores," women may adopt strategies that undermine their own well-being. For instance, they may pretend to be uninformed about sex and contraceptives or take part in safe sex practices when participating in casual sex (Conley et al., 2013). These behaviors, rooted in fear of online and offline judgment, can have detrimental effects on their physical health, increasing the risk of unintended pregnancies and sexually

transmitted infections (STIs). Additionally, women may use cautionary language to describe casual sex as “emotionally dangerous,” “sad,” or “empty,” aligning with societal expectations that women are inherently emotional and should prioritize emotional connections over sexual pleasure (Dalessandro, 2019). These pressures contribute to submissive or passive sexual roles, where women may comply with unwanted sexual activities or describe their experiences as something that “just happened to them” (Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007). Digital hookup cultures, mediated through dating apps, can amplify these dynamics by encouraging performance-based sexuality rather than mutual exploration. Power imbalances in sexual expression can also pressure women to conform, leading them to fake orgasms or engage in sexual acts they do not enjoy to satisfy their partners (Lebacqz, 1990).

Even older women face societal devaluation of their sexuality, shaped by narratives that equate women’s worth with youth and reproductive capacity, a process now reinforced by beauty and wellness industries on social media that market “anti-aging” products as essential to desirability. Briggs (2017) notes that society underestimates the longevity of sexual activity for both genders, with a more pronounced underestimation for women. This reflects the pervasive belief that women’s value diminishes with age, reinforcing ageist and sexist attitudes that marginalize older women’s sexual autonomy and desires. The fear of being seen as undesirable, magnified by constant exposure to youthful beauty ideals online, becomes a powerful tool that patriarchy uses to control women, ensuring they remain compliant and dependent on external validation. By tying women’s worth to their physical appearance and sexual desirability, patriarchal systems perpetuate the idea that women must constantly strive to meet unrealistic beauty standards to remain relevant and valued (Briggs, 2017). This fear not only silences women’s sexual expression but also discourages younger women from embracing their sexuality

freely, as they internalize the message that their desirability, and by extension, their worth is fleeting and conditional. This use of this fear as a mechanism of control limits women's autonomy and reinforces their dependence on patriarchal approval.

The censorship of the female anatomy significantly impacts women's communication, creating a culture of silence and shame around discussions of their own bodies. When words like "vagina" are labeled as taboo or offensive, while terms like "penis" are widely accepted, society reinforces the harmful notion that female genitalia are inherently inappropriate or unworthy or open dialogue (Popat et al., 2023). This censorship is pervasive, from social media platforms to educational settings, effectively silencing women and pushing the narrative that their bodies should remain hidden and unspoken. This erasure not only stifles women's ability to communicate openly about their anatomy but also perpetuates the idea that topics related to female sexual health and wellness are inappropriate and not to be taken seriously (Popat et al., 2023).

These dynamics extend deeply into the digital space, where women's sexuality is more heavily policed. For example, the resurgence of "tradewife" content online romanticizes portrayals of women as subservient to men, promoting a return to traditional gender roles in which men are strong leaders and women are submissive helpmeets (Proctor, 2023). This version of "real womanhood" encourages women to embrace their femininity to become more visually appealing to men, positioning this as a patch to becoming better mothers and more in touch with the "natural" selves (Zahay, 2022). The tradewife persona promotes a lifestyle that adheres to "white, Western, heteronormative ideals of femininity and masculinity" (Matthies, 2021; Proctor, 2023), modeled after and for the white middle-class American woman of the 1950s. This ideal, celebrated by some, erases the lived experiences of many, particularly Black families and other

marginalized communities who faced racial injustices and systemic oppression during that time (Proctor, 2023).

Historically, patriarchal ideologies have further constrained women's communication about their sexuality. Faunce and Phillips-Yonas (1978) argued that if women were inherently insatiable in their sexual desires, external constraints would be necessary to prevent what they termed "sexual chaos" (Baumeister, 2002). This perspective reflects a deeply patriarchal view that frames female sexuality as dangerous and in need of control, rather than as a natural and healthy aspect of human experience. These ideologies have long discouraged women from speaking openly about their desires, needs, and experiences, framing their sexuality as a threat to societal order. This created a communication barrier, where women are often made to feel that discussing their bodies or sexual autonomy is shameful or unacceptable. As a result women struggle to articulate their needs, seek support, or challenge societal norms, further ingraining patriarchal control over their voices and agency. This silencing has profound implications for women's ability to advocate for their health, share experiences, and build solidarity around shared issues.

Despite being historically positioned as the "gatekeepers of sex" since the 19th century, a role that would be perceived as having control over sexual encounters, women often believe themselves as having less power in sexual relationships (Sanchez et al., 2012). This highlights the disconnect between societal expectations and women's lived experiences. While women are expected to regulate sexual activity, they are also discouraged from openly communicating their desires, boundaries, or preferences. This dynamic undermines their agency and reinforces a power imbalance in intimate relationships. The societal pressure to conform to passive or submissive roles, coupled with the stigma surrounding open discussions of female sexuality,

leaves many women feeling disempowered and unable to assert their needs effectively. This lack of communication not only affects individual relationships but also perpetuates broader patterns of gender inequality, as women's voices and experiences continue to be marginalized in both private and public spheres.

Impact on Masculinity

“Patriarchy requires male dominance by any means necessary, hence it supports, promotes, and condones sexist violence” (hooks, 2004, p. 24).

Men are socialized to assume the role of leaders, initiators, and drivers of sexual encounters, which can create pressure on men to accept sexual offers and conform to traditional gender roles. This socialization process can lead to the internalization of toxic masculinity ideals, equating masculinity with sexual conquest and discouraging emotional vulnerability.

Using these stereotypes not only limits men's ability to express their true feelings but also hinder open and honest communication in relationships. Following these rigid norms, men may feel pressured to prioritize sexual performance over emotional connection, further perpetuating a cycle of disconnection and miscommunication (Dalessandro, 2019). The dominant cultural narrative for men follows a path where they are expected to prioritize casual sex when they are younger, only to later recognize the value of emotional intimacy as they mature. This aligns with the societal expectation that men should explore casual sexual relationships without facing significant social consequences, while their eventual transition to committed, emotionally fulfilling relationships is seen as a sign of maturity (Dalessandro, 2019). It gives men more freedom to engage in casual sex, further pushing the idea that emotional vulnerability is incompatible with masculinity. This can create a communication gap where men are stunted or

discouraged to articulate their emotional needs or engage in meaningful dialogue about intimacy, with the fear that it would put their masculinity in question.

Heterosexual men are socialized to take on the role of initiators and directors in sexual encounters, while studies showing that they are more likely to initiate sex, direct sexual activities and even report pressuring partners into unwanted sexual acts (Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007). This behavior is rooted in traditional gender roles that equate masculinity with dominance and control, with mutual consent and emotional connection being considered unimportant. However, even when men consciously work to reject these oppressive behaviors, they can still carry the burden of representing a system that privileges male power and perpetuates gender inequalities.

Societal expectations of male sexual agency further complicate these dynamics, putting restrictions on how men express themselves in intimate settings (Lebacqz, 1990). Men who conform to traditional gender roles may feel pressured to always perpetuate that role of initiator and director of sexual encounters. This pressure can suppress their ability to communicate their true needs, which could be expressing their own desires for vulnerability or a more receptive role and preferences. This can contribute to a disconnect between their actions and their emotional experiences, all for fear of how their masculinity will be perceived.

“Patriarchal boys, like their adult counterparts, know the rule: they know they must not express feelings, with the exception of anger, that they must not do anything considered feminine or womanly” (hooks, 2004, p. 42).

Emphasizing that men consciously or unconsciously embody the potential for domination and violence inherent in patriarchal culture highlights how traditional male gender norms shape not only aggression but also communication patterns (Vincent et al., 2011). These norms, rooted

in core themes of masculine gender roles (Brannon, 1976; Vincent et al., 2011), include the belief that men must gain respect and admiration from others, project physical and emotional strength, and avoid behaviors perceived as stereotypically feminine. Such expectations shape how men interact with others, often reinforcing power dynamics and limiting emotional expression. Vincent et al. (2011) outlined four key masculine norms that illustrate their impact on communication:

- "No Sissy Stuff" (Antifemininity): Men may avoid communication styles perceived as feminine, such as expressing vulnerability, empathy, or emotional openness. This can lead to emotionally restrictive communication and hinder meaningful connections.
- "The Big Wheel" (Status): Communication may become a tool for asserting dominance, gaining admiration, or competing for social status. This can show itself in interrupting others, speaking assertively to control conversations, or dismissing others' perspectives to maintain authority.
- "The Sturdy Oak" (Toughness): Men may suppress emotions or avoid discussing personal struggles to appear strong and self-reliant. This can result in superficial communication and a reluctance to seek or offer support.
- "Give 'em Hell" (Aggression): Communication may involve confrontational language, verbal aggression, or a willingness to dominate conversations to assert oneself. This can create hostile or competitive interactions, discouraging collaboration or mutual understanding.

These norms are not only internalized but also amplified by online spaces and media content that promote male supremacy and frame vulnerability as weakness (Botto & Gottzén, 2024). Red-pilled and hypermasculine content, for example, encourages men to “wake up” from

a supposedly feminized society, demonizing emotional openness and pushing men to disassociate from vulnerability to appear more masculine.

These rigid norms perpetuate patriarchal power structures and limit men's ability to engage in open, empathetic, and equitable communication. They also shape attitudes toward homosexuality and contribute to sexual prejudice, as masculinity defined by toughness, emotional restraint, and heterosexuality is often perceived as fragile and in need of constant validation (Vincent et al., 2011). This fragility pressures men to continually prove themselves, responding with anger or aggression when they feel their masculinity is threatened, especially by behaviors or identities they perceive as feminine or nonconforming. For trans men and non binary people, entering male-dominated spaces can lead to shifts in how they are perceived. Some experience newfound male privilege, while others face barriers due to lingering perceptions of femininity, highlighting how masculinity is relational and depends on social validation rather than being an inherent quality.

Patriarchal expectation demands that men conform to rigid ideals at the expense of their emotional well-being, leaving them emotionally stunted and disconnected (hooks, 2004). Communication becomes a battleground for asserting dominance, ridiculing others, and distancing oneself from perceived threats to masculine identity, reinforcing prejudice and exclusion rather than creating connection and understanding.

The traditional sexual script of male dominance reinforces these harmful dynamics by encouraging men to engage in sex with multiple female partners to prove their masculinity. This script not only increases sexual risk but also creates situations where sexual pressure becomes normalized (Sanchez et al., 2012; Santana et al., 2006). This can be harmful for both men and

women, as they perpetuate unequal power structures dismissing mutual respect and consent in sexual relationships. This script also influences communication, with men feeling obligated to adopt assertive or dominant language to conform to masculine ideals, while women may feel pressured to downplay their own boundaries or desires. These interactions can lead to misunderstandings, coercion, and a lack of open dialogue about consent and mutual satisfaction.

While men's roles in the traditional gender norms give the illusion of more freedom, it is important to recognize that these restrictive roles can also inhibit them sexually. In their research, Sanchez et al. (2012), show that men (and women) who heavily invest in gender norms can experience impaired sexual autonomy, as they prioritize upholding traditional ideals and gaining their partner's approval over their own sexual satisfaction. This can stifle open communication and create barriers to authentic sexual expression and mutual understanding. Moreover, men who strongly cling to traditional gender norms are more likely to automatically associate sex with dominance (Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007a; Sanchez et al., 2012). This association can be problematic if dominance manifests as coercive sexual behavior, further dismissing consent and equitable dynamics in relationships. Research highlights this troubling link between traditional masculine ideology and sexual aggression. In a meta-analysis, Murnen, Wright, and Kaluzny (2002) found that men who strongly associated sex with dominance and power were more likely to report a history of sexually coercive behavior and a greater willingness to engage in rape (Sanchez et al., 2012). In addition, men who closely follow to traditional male gender roles are more accepting of rape-supporting beliefs and more likely to blame rape victims compared to those who reject these norms (Sanchez et al., 2012; Simonson & Subich, 1999; Truman, Tokar, & Fischer, 1996).

By prioritizing sexual conquest and discouraging emotional expression, pressure to adhere to traditional heterosexual gender roles can create barriers to mutual understanding and

emotional intimacy in relationships between partners. Over time, this can lead to superficial interactions and leave men feeling ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of emotional connection. Challenging these norms is essential to creating healthier relationships, allowing men to explore and express their emotional and sexual needs without fear of judgment or rejection.

Double Standard, Double Trouble

"Psychological patriarchy is the dynamic between those qualities deemed 'masculine' and 'feminine' in which half of our human traits are exalted while the other half is devalued" (hooks, 2004, pp. 32-33)

Dichotomies like the Madonna-whore perpetuate a harmful double standard in which men are praised for their sexual exploits, while women are shamed for the same behavior (Klein et al., 2024). It reinforces the notion that women's sexuality should be controlled and limited, devaluing their pleasure and agency, while men are encouraged to pursue sexual conquests without the same judgment. Such double standards create a culture where women are expected to embody emotional maturity and restraint, while men are granted greater sexual freedom, making it difficult for women to take control of their own sexual or emotional discovery without facing stigma (Dalessandro, 2019). These dynamics hinder open communication in intimate relationships, with women feeling pressured to suppress their desires, and men feeling the need to avoid expressing vulnerability for fear of appearing weak.

Historically, these double standards have been deeply ingrained in societal norms. In the 19th century, men were allowed, even expected, to have sexual experience before marriage, while women were required to remain chaste until their wedding night. This imbalance placed

the burden of sexual responsibility on men while severely restricting their options for acceptable sexual expression (Tosh, 1999). These strict expectations continue to shape modern relationships, as both men and women feel pressured to conform to traditional gender roles, even when these roles conflict with their authentic desires (Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Rudman et al., 2012; Sanchez et al., 2012), leading to miscommunication and unmet needs in intimate relationships, as people struggle to balance societal expectations with their personal feelings.

The enforcement of these norms is maintained through silence, stigma, and fear. Patriarchal culture discourages open dialogue about its impact, often denying people even the language to name and critique it (hooks, 2004, p. 24). This rule of silence prevents meaningful conversations about the damage patriarchy causes, including the suffering it created for both men and women (hook, 2004, p. 30). This silence is reinforced by fear: fear of judgment, rejection, moral decay, failure and success, and change. For men, this manifests as a reluctance to express vulnerability or emotional needs, or else they can be seen as weak or unmanly. For women, it can involve suppressing their desires or opinions to avoid being labeled as difficult or unfeminine. Together, silence and fear create a culture of repression that stunts authentic communication and emotional intimacy.

Until we collectively acknowledge the damage patriarchy causes and the suffering it creates, we cannot fully address the pain and limitations enforced by the rigid gender roles (hooks, 2004). This is especially true in intimate relationships, where honest communication is essential for building trust and mutual understanding. Without the ability to openly discuss intimate factors like desires, boundaries, and emotions, couples may struggle to connect on a deeper level. The overarching fear can prevent people from sharing their true selves, leaving relationships superficial and unfulfilling.

Gender roles restrict people to only a fraction of what it means to be human, creating significant psychological strain when societal expectations conflict with personal desires (Sanchez et al., 2012). This can lead to communication barriers with men who may want to avoid discussing their emotional needs or sexual preferences for fear of being judged, while women may feel more pressured to conform to a passive nurturing role. Breaking free from these scripts can be liberating, allowing people to live more fully and authentically. But doing so requires open and honest communication, which can be challenging in a culture that discourages vulnerability and emotional expression.

In addition, rejecting traditional gender roles can come with social consequences. Men and women who challenge these norms may face disapproval, leading them to hide their “deviance” and conform to expectations in the future (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Rudman & Phelan, 2008; Sanchez et al., 2012). This fear can be especially seen in romantic relationships, where people may worry that not conforming will lead to them being lonely. Surprisingly Sanchez et al. (2012) found that both men and women may respond favorably to partners who deviate from traditional scripts, an example being women who initiate sex or men expressing vulnerability.

In the end, patriarchy uses fear to maintain control and promote silence, limiting growth, exploration, and the full range of human emotions and experiences. By challenging these norms and encouraging open communication, we can create space for people to express their needs and desires without fear, paving the way for healthier, more equitable relationships. In intimate settings, this means encouraging partners to share their feelings, desires, and boundaries openly, creating a foundation of mutual respect and understanding that allows love and connection to thrive.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods approach to explore why fear and discomfort arise when discussing intimacy, sex, and pleasure. Specifically, the study examined three hypotheses to investigate how fear of negative evaluation and adherence to gender norms influence sexual communication. Participants completed quantitative measures assessing sexual communication comfort, fear of negative evaluation, gendered norms, and sexual scripts, followed by open-ended questions exploring their personal experiences and beliefs. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, this approach provided both measurable insights into these relationships and rich narrative context to deepen understanding. The following sections describe the participants, data collection procedures, measures, and analytic strategies in detail.

Measures

To address the study's research questions, the following scales were administered to participants. These instruments were selected to capture different aspects of sexual communication, gender norms, and fear of judgment, all central to understanding the barriers to open discussions about sex and intimacy.

- **Sex Scripts Scale (SSS; Sakaluk et al., 2014)**
 - The Sex Scripts Scale (SSS) was chosen to measure adherence to dominant heterosexual sexual scripts, culturally shared expectations for how men and women “should” behave in sexual contexts. Sakaluk et al. (2014) developed this scale to capture the extent to which people internalize these traditional sexual norms, arguing that scripts are central to understanding sexual attitudes and behaviors within a cultural context. Participants rated their agreement with 26 items on a 6-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). The

sexual standards subscale, consisting of nine items, was used in this study.

Example items include “A man who has a lot of casual sex partners has low self-esteem” and “I think negatively of a woman who has had a lot of sexual partners.”

Reliability estimates of this scale have ranged from α 's from .73 to .90.

- **Sexual Communication Style Scale (SCSS) (Babin, 2013)**

- The Sexual Communication Style Scale (SCSS) was included to measure participants' comfort and confidence in discussing sexual topics with a partner, both verbally and nonverbally. Babin (2013) designed the scale to capture how people navigate sexual communication, emphasizing the importance of openness and clarity for relationship satisfaction and sexual well-being. The scale aligns with this study's focus on comfort in sexual communication as a core outcome related to fear and gender norms. The adapted version used here focused specifically on participants' own communication styles and included 12 items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) capturing nervousness, openness, and ease of communication. Example items include “While talking with my partner about sex, I feel very relaxed” and “Engaging in sexual communication with my partner makes me nervous.” Reliability of this scale $\alpha = .95$. The original publication did not explicitly identify which items should be reverse-coded. Through careful examination of item content and intended scoring direction, necessary reverse-coded items were determined and applied before analysis.

- **Gender Equitable Men (GEM) Scale (Pulerwitz & Barker, 2008)**

- The Gender Equitable Men (GEM) Scale was used to evaluate participants' beliefs about traditional gender roles, specifically in intimate and sexual relationships. Pulerwitz and Barker (2008) developed this scale to explore attitudes toward gender norms and power dynamics, highlighting its relevance in studies exploring beliefs that influence behavior and relationships. This directly supports the study's examination of gender norms as a potential influence on sexual communication. The shortened version used here consisting of 13 items, was used in this study. Participants responded using a 3-point Likert scale (Agree, partially agree, do not agree), with an additional "Do not know" option. Example items include "Men are always ready to have sex" and "Women who carry condoms are easy." This scale demonstrated acceptable reliability in Cronbach's alpha is ($\alpha = .81$).
- **Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (FNE) (Leary, 1983)**
 - The Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) Scale was selected to measure participants' general concern about being judged or evaluated negatively by others. Leary (1983) developed this scale to assess social anxiety specifically related to the fear of disapproval, noting that people high in this fear are more likely to avoid situations where they might be scrutinized. This directly aligns with the study's focus on fear of judgment as a barrier to open sexual communication. The brief version used in this study included 12 items rated each item on a 5-point scale (1= Not at all characteristic of me, 5 = Extremely characteristic of me). Example items include "I am afraid that others will not approve of me" and "I am usually worried about what kind of impression I

make.” This also included reverse-coded items. It has a reliability Cronbach scale of $\alpha = .90$, which shows high internal consistency.

Qualitative Component

In addition to the quantitative survey measures, participants responded to open-ended questions designed to explore their personal experiences and beliefs regarding sexual communication, gender norms, and fear. These questions were designed to encourage rich, narrative responses and allow participants to share their perspectives in their own words, while maintaining their anonymity. The questions included:

1. How comfortable do you feel discussing sex with a partner? What factors contribute to that comfort or discomfort?
2. Have you ever hesitated to talk about sex because you were worried about how you'd be perceived? What was that experience like?
3. What are some common expectations about sex that you've noticed in society?
4. Do you think people follow certain "unspoken rules" about sex and relationships? Can you give an example?
5. What messages do you think people receive about sexual communication from their peers, family, or media?
6. If you could change one thing about how society approaches discussions about sex, what would it be and why?

Data Collection

Data was collected via Qualtrics, an online survey platform, between May 13 and June 15, 2025. The survey consisted of 68 questions including demographics, the quantitative scales,

and open-ended qualitative questions. Participants were required to be at least 18 years old and willing to respond to questions about gender norms, fear, and sexual communication.

The survey was distributed through social media platforms such as Meta (Facebook and Instagram) and Reddit; and through University of Central Oklahoma university email network. Additionally, fliers containing information about the study and a QR code linking directly to the survey were distributed. Flier distribution took place across several cities in Oklahoma (including Oklahoma City, Yukon, and Edmond), as well as in Amarillo, Texas, and the survey reached international participants.

Participants completed the Sexual Scripts Scale, Sexual Communication Style Scale, Gender Equitable Men Scale, and the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale, followed by open-ended questions exploring their experiences to provide depth and context. The survey was completely voluntary and anonymous and participants were given the option to skip any question throughout the survey.

The survey yielded a final sample size of 406 participants. One response was excluded because the individual indicated they did not want to participate. Outliers were identified and removed using z-score detection: four outliers were found in the Sexual Scripts Scale and three were found in the Gender Equitable Men Scale.

Participants ranged from age 18 to 55+, with the following distribution: 18-24 (n=156), 25-34 (n=101), 35-44 (n=64), 55+ (n=37), and 12 participants chose not to answer. Regarding gender, 229 participants identified as women, 122 as men, 20 as non-binary, 9 as genderfluid, 7 as agender, 4 as another gender; 15 preferred not to answer or did not answer. For ethnicity, 254 participants identified as White, 31 as Black or African American, 18 as Hispanic or Latino, 12 as Asian, 5 as Native American or Alaska Native, 1 as self-described, 86 preferred not to answer

or did not answer. In terms of sexual orientation, 214 participants identified as heterosexual, 72 as bisexual, 29 as pansexual, 21 as lesbian, 18 as queer, 16 as asexual, 14 as gay, 10 as another identity, 12 selected n/a or preferred not to answer. For political views, 106 participants identified as liberal, 93 as very liberal, 81 as moderate, 34 as other, 32 as conservative, 15 as very conservative, and 45 preferred not to answer or did not answer. Participants also reposted their continent residence: North America ($n = 372$), South America ($n = 4$), Europe ($n = 5$), Asia ($n = 5$), Africa ($n = 2$), Australia/Pacific Islands ($n = 2$), and the Middle East ($n = 1$).

Mean scores for each scale were then calculated for each participant. Pearson correlation coefficients and corresponding p-values were computed to test the study hypotheses. Python was used to conduct the statistical analyses.

This study tested the following hypotheses:

- **Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Higher adherence to gender norms will be positively correlated with sexual communication. The Sexual Communication Style Scale was used to measure level of comfort in sexual communication and the Gender Equitable Norm Scale to measure the beliefs in traditional gender roles. There was no significant correlation between these two scales, $r = 0.012$, $p = 0.8349$.
- **Hypothesis 2 (H2):** Fear of negative evaluation will be positively correlated with adherence to gender norms. The Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale was used to measure fear of negative evaluation of self by others and the Sex Scripts Scale to measure gendered sexual scripts. There was no significant correlation between these two scales, $r = -0.066$, $p = 0.2170$.
- **Hypothesis 3 (H3):** Fear of negative evaluation will be positively correlated with sexual communication. The Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale was used to measure the fear of

negative evaluation of self by others and the Sexual Communication Style Scale to measure the level of comfort in sexual communication. There was a strong positive correlation between the two scales, $r = 0.758$, $p < 0.0001$. This positive correlation between these two scales suggests that there is a strong relationship between people's level of fear in negative evaluation and effective sexual communication.

Chapter 4: Results

The first two hypotheses did not reveal strong patterns in the data, which might be due to the complex and personal nature of people's experiences with sexual scripts and gender beliefs. While these ideas are theoretically linked to sexual communication, they may not have as straightforward or immediate an impact as expected. It is also possible that participants interpreted script adherence and gender equity in different ways depending on their individual backgrounds and contexts.

The third hypothesis showed a clear and strong relationship between fear of negative evaluation and sexual communication style ($r = 0.758$, $p < .001$). This result suggests that participants who were more worried about being judged by others tended to feel less comfortable and more hesitant when communicating about sex. This finding supports the idea that social anxieties and fear of judgment can act as real barriers to open, honest, and healthy sexual communication.

To explore this connection further, the language used in participants' open-ended responses was examined. Analysis of these narratives aimed to better understand how fear of negative evaluation manifests in real-life experiences and to provide additional context for the quantitative results. To process the qualitative results, a Python program was written to loop through the qualitative questions and, for each answer to those questions, a GPT-4o model was prompted to extract themes from those answers. The Python function used to generate thematic codes from open-ended responses is shown in Figure 1. These qualitative responses further highlight the connection found in Hypothesis 3.

Figure 1

Python function for extracting thematic codes from qualitative survey responses.

```
def extract_themes(text):
    if not isinstance(text, str) or len(text.strip()) == 0:
        return "No response"

    try:
        response = client.chat.completions.create(
            model="gpt-4o",
            messages=[
                {
                    "role": "system",
                    "content": (
                        """You are a qualitative coding assistant. Given an open-ended response about sexual communication comfort, return a
short list of consistent, predefined thematic codes. Choose from the following list of approved themes:

                        reports feeling comfortable
                        reports feeling uncomfortable
                        expresses fear
                        expresses no fear
                        expresses shame or embarrassment
                        does not express shame or embarrassment
                        indicates trust
                        indicates lack of trust
                        describes effective communication
                        describes poor communication
                        references past trauma or negative experience
                        no reference to trauma or negative experience
                        describes positive partner reactions
                        describes negative partner reactions
                        viewed as acceptable
                        viewed as unacceptable

                        Respond with a comma-separated list using only these themes. Do not invent new themes or synonyms."""
                    )
                },
                {"role": "user", "content": text}
            ],
            temperature=0.7
        )
        return response.choices[0].message.content.strip()
    except Exception as e:
        print("Error:", e)
        return "Error"
```

Note. This function uses the GPT-4o model to systematically assign predefined codes to open-ended text responses.

To analyze the qualitative data, responses to open-ended questions were coded using a Python function that used the GPT-4o language model. GPT-4o is an advanced large language model developed by OpenAI that is skillful in understanding and generating human-like text, including summarizing and categorizing complex qualitative data. Thematic coding of the qualitative responses was a key part of this study's mixed-methods approach, providing deeper insight into participants' experiences and complementing the quantitative findings. In this study,

GPT-4o was used to systematically assign thematic codes to each individual response based on predefined categories identified during preliminary thematic review. These initial categories were developed by closely reading participant responses and noting recurring patterns and shared experiences. From seeing common themes when going through the qualitative responses. The final themes included:

- Reports feeling comfortable or uncomfortable
- Expresses fear or no fear
- Expresses shame or embarrassment or expresses no shame or embarrassment
- Indicates trust or lack of trust
- Describes effective communication or poor communication
- References past trauma or negative experience or no reference to trauma or negative experience
- Describes positive partner reactions or negative partner reactions
- Viewed as acceptable or unacceptable

To further illustrate the patterns identified in the qualitative responses, a series of visualizations were created using Power BI. Each figure summarizes the distribution and frequency of themes that emerged from participants' open-ended answers. To protect confidentiality, all participant names are pseudonyms. Age ranges and gender identities are included to provide context.

Note: This process of categorizing responses into themes also made it easier to systematically review each individual answer and identify the most frequently shared experiences. These visuals provide a clear, accessible way to understand the main narratives

participants share and highlight how fear of negative evaluation, societal expectations, and cultural messages shape sexual communication.

Fear of Negative Evaluation as a Barrier to Sexual Communication

Many participants described hesitating out of fear being perceived as too much, too needy, or immoral. Sheryl (40s, woman) stated:

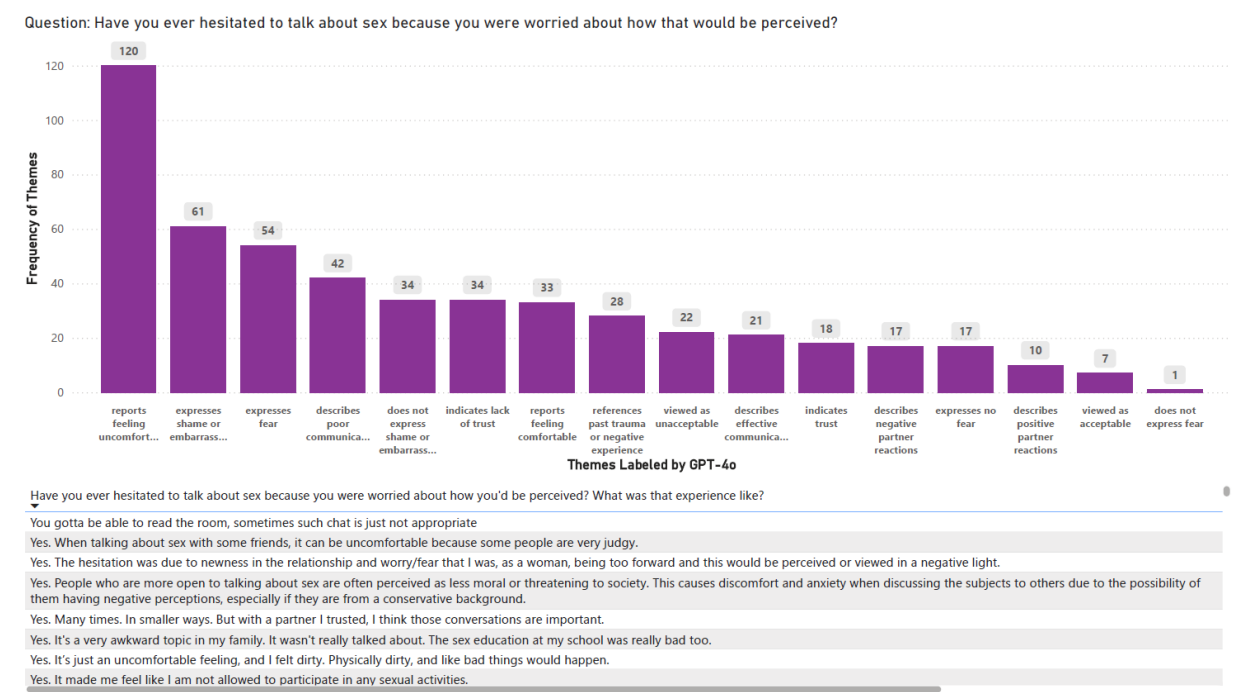
Definitely. It was nerve wracking and I felt like I should live up to this ideal that wasn't who I thought I was, but the pressure wouldn't give me a chance to talk about it to understand why I felt that way.

Ashley (30s, woman) stated, "I didn't know how to approach it at all and worried I'd be slut-shamed for my tastes. I thought I'd make my partner feel bad or make me seem excessive." These narratives clearly illustrate how fear of negative evaluation can silence people in intimate contexts and reinforce social norms that discourage open sexual communication. While a few participants mentioned they no longer hesitate due to increased trust or personal growth, the overall pattern strongly supports the quantitative finding that fear of negative evaluation is a major barrier to sexual communication. This qualitative evidence strengthens the argument that societal and interpersonal fears deeply shape how people express their needs and boundaries, supporting the core thesis of this study.

These insights align with Johnson's (2004) argument that patriarchal culture uses fear to enforce emotional restraint and discourage vulnerability, framing any deviation from traditional roles as a threat to social order. Similarly, Sacco (1990) notes that fear stifles meaningful communication, making discussions about intimacy feel risky or off-limits. This pattern also

reflects how language acts as a tool of control, shaping what is considered acceptable to say and how people perform their identities, (Bullingham Vasconcelos, 2013; Goffman, 1955). According to Muted Group Theory, marginalized groups often lack the linguistic resources to express their experiences without fear of negative judgment, forcing them to adopt dominant scripts or remain silent (Kramarae, 1981; Syawal et al., 2024).

Figure 2
Distribution of themes from participant responses about hesitating to talk about sex due to fear of negative evaluation. Visualized using Power BI.



Conditional Comfort and Lingering Fear of Negative Evaluation

While many participants reported feeling comfortable discussing sex with their partner, this comfort was often described as conditional and influenced by underlying fears of judgment or rejection. Several participants shared that they felt anxious when bringing up new desires or

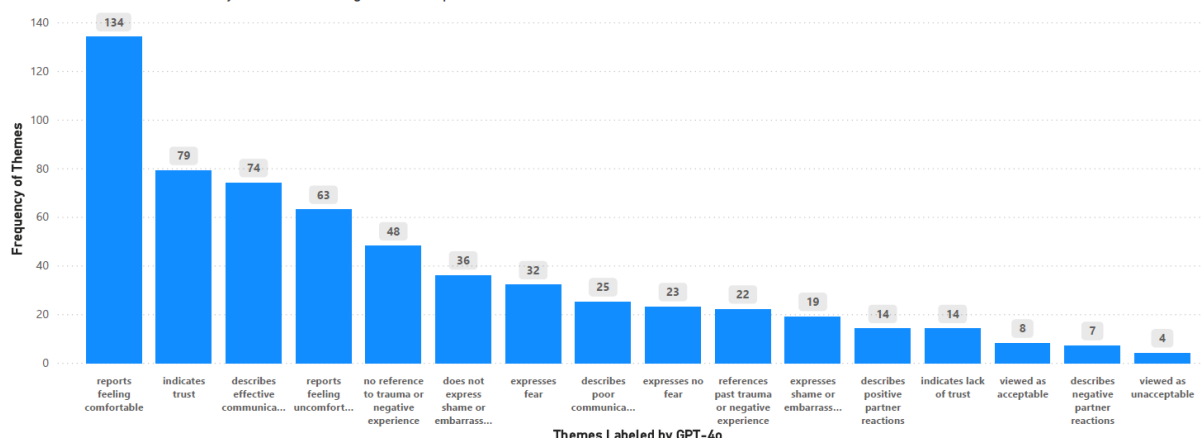
topics, worrying about being perceived as “weird” or excessive. Carol (50s, woman) noted, “Usually I’m very comfortable. Occasionally, if it’s something different, I might be a little nervous that he would think it’s weird.” Heather (20s, woman) explained, “The prospect of talking with a partner about sex is intimidating and mildly anxiety-inducing. This stems from my fear of rejection over voicing my needs and my fear of disappointing my partner to the point of abandonment.”

These narratives show that even among those who consider themselves comfortable, fear of negative evaluation remains a significant influence on how and when they communicate. Over time, many participants described feeling more at ease as trust within the relationship deepened or as they gained confidence with age. This complexity in comfort levels further supports the quantitative finding that fear of negative evaluation plays a central role in shaping sexual communication, reinforcing the core thesis of this study. These dynamics echo how fear operates on both individual and collective levels, as described by Kim and Kim (2010), and reflects how patriarchal narratives discourage authentic emotional expression to maintain conformity (Johnson, 2004). This makes expressing desires feel dangerous, even in supposedly safe and trusting relationships. These also illustrate how language constrains emotional expression and self-discourse, reinforcing expectations around what is “appropriate” to share in intimate contexts (Griffin, 2003; Syawal et al., 2024). This aligns with Goffman’s principle of face, suggesting that vulnerability is shaped by fear of losing social standing or being misunderstood (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Goffman, 1955).

Figure 3

Distribution of themes from participant responses describing comfort levels in discussing sex with a partner and factors contributing to conditional comfort. Visualized using Power BI.

Question: How comfortable do you feel discussing sex with a partner? What factors contribute to that comfort or discomfort?



How comfortable do you feel discussing sex with a partner? What factors contribute to that comfort or discomfort?

Yes I am comfortable discussing sex with a partner.

Trust, sexual compatibility

While I am very comfortable talking about sex in general, it becomes complicated with speaking with my partners about *our* sex life, especially issues, because he is less comfortable talking about sex.

When I am in a healthy relationship I enjoy connecting to my partner through conversations about mutually enjoyable sexual acts. In unhealthy relationships I had a lot of anxiety around rejection when talking about sex.

We've been together for a long time, and over time I got more and more comfortable talking about sex with my husband

Very. If my partner is open to communicate with me.

Very. Banter goes on daily

very, length of relationship

Cultural Messages That Reinforce Silence and Fear

Participants consistently described receiving messages from family, peers, and media that discouraged open discussions about sex and reinforced feelings of shame and fear of judgment. Many shared that women, in particular, are taught to stay silent and prioritize male pleasure to avoid being seen as “too much” or “undesirable.” Penelope (40s, non-binary) explained:

I was told by the women in my family, ‘make sure he has what he needs or he’ll go somewhere else for it,’ and when I would voice frustration about how my partner just always needed to have sex in order to participate in household responsibilities, I was told, ‘oh...that’s just the way it is. You have to give it to them.’ I was told that my way of thinking was the wrong way and I needed to fix it if I wanted to have a relationship with a partner.

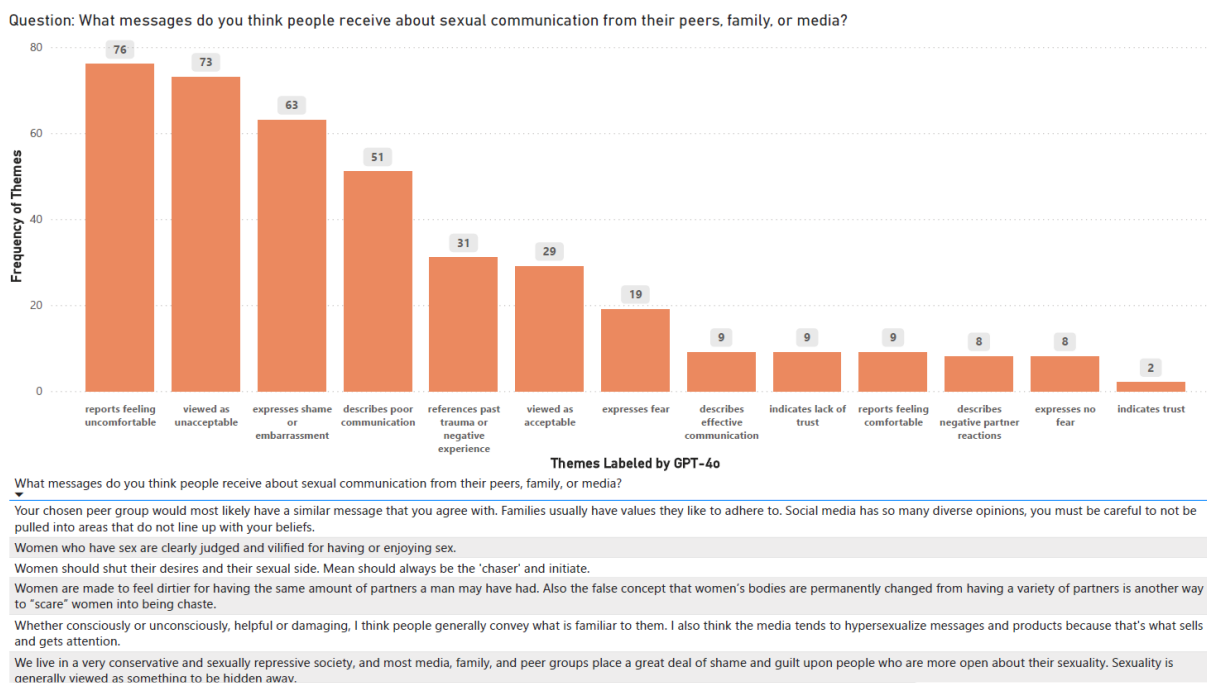
Stephanie (30s, woman) noted, “Women who have sex are clearly judged and vilified for having or enjoying sex,” while others described messages around sex communication described as “taboo” and something that “should not be discussed.” Participants also noted the unrealistic expectations of the messages surrounding sex. Kevin (30s, man) explained:

We’re not told to talk about sex, and then for those we’d be comfortable talking about it with, we don’t due to adhering to social norms or out of embarrassment. Porn is probably the only model of this, and there’s not a lot of thoughtful communication going on there.

These narratives highlight how cultural and familial messages shape internal fears, directly fueling the fear of negative evaluation identified in the quantitative findings. By teaching people that talking about sex is shameful or that they must conform to rigid expectations, these messages make open and healthy sexual communication even more challenging. These cultural scripts reflect how media and family systems enforce patriarchal values through moral policing and surveillance (Altheide, 20213; Cap, 2017), and align with Emmers-Sommer et al.’s (2017) work on religious moral control framing sexual openness as immoral and dangerous. These findings also align with research showing that dominant cultural messages define what is sayable and enforce silence through shame and moral judgment (Cap, 2017; Jeffery & Barata, 2020). Muted Group Theory further explains how marginalized voices are forced to adapt to dominant narratives limiting their ability to authentically express desires or boundaries (Kramarae, 1981; Syawal et al., 2024).

Figure 4

Key themes in messages participants reported receiving from family, peers, and media about sexual communication. Visualized using Power BI.



Rigid Sexual Expectations and Double Standards

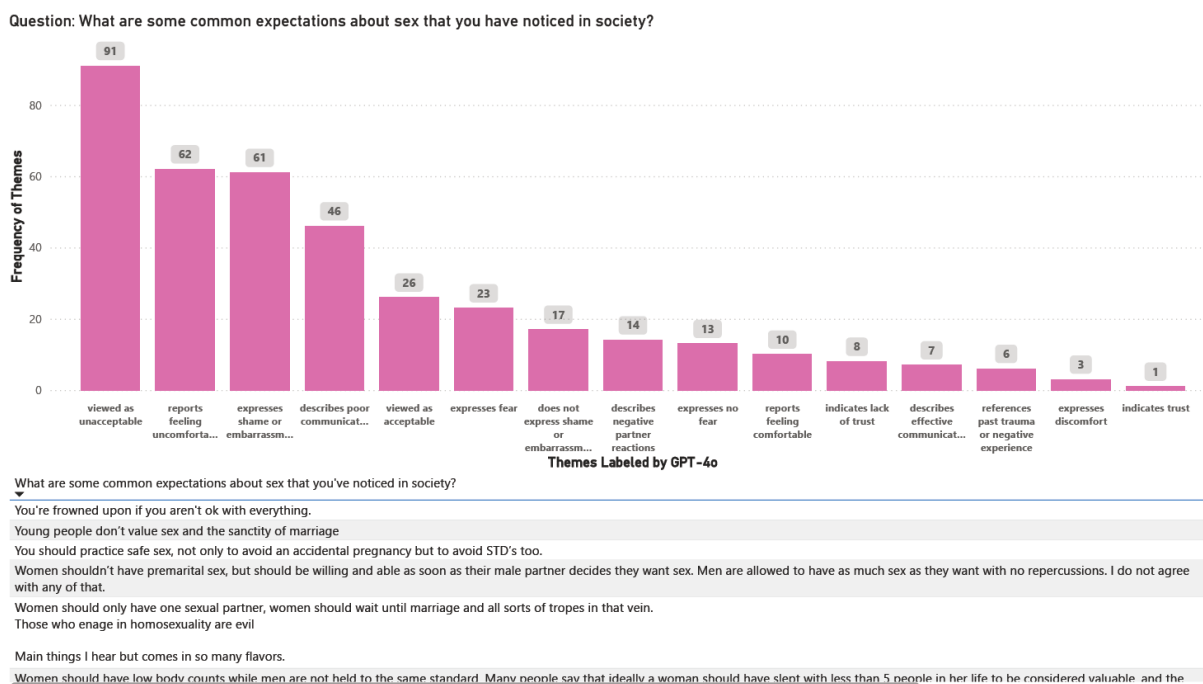
Participants overwhelmingly described societal expectations about sex as rigid, unrealistic, and deeply gendered. Many noted that women are expected to remain abstinent or “pure,” while men face pressure to always desire sex and take the lead. Tyler (20s, woman) highlighted, “Women should have low body counts while men are not held to the same standard,” and Edward (50s, man) shared, “American society views sex as a critical part of our lives, demanding significant communal attention, yet simultaneously expects us to feel deep shame about its significance.” Participants also described harmful beliefs about what “real” sex should look like, emphasizing penetration and orgasm over communication and intimacy, and discouraging non-vanilla or queer expression of sexuality.

These rigid scripts not only create double standards but also cultivate an environment where people fear being judged or rejected if they step outside these narrow roles. This

reinforces the quantitative finding that fear of negative evaluation significantly disrupts sexual communication. These insights strongly support the study's thesis that societal norms and expectations are central forces shaping intimate communication and contribute to ongoing shame and silence. This reflects Foucault's (1978) argument that power operates through internalized norms rather than overt repression and illustrates how patriarchal systems maintain control by enforcing conformity and moral policing (Rodriquez & Ruyskensvelde, 2023; Tosh, 1999). These rigid expectations highlight the ways language frames sexuality as transactional, adversarial, and morally policed (Livingston & Vik, 2021; Owens et al., 2021). By privileging certain ways of speaking and framing desires, these scripts reinforce patriarchal and heteronormative power structures (Poapst & Harper, 2017; Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017).

Figure 5

Distribution of common societal expectations about sex as described by participants. Visualized using Power BI



Unspoken Rules That Enforce Silence and Conformity

Participants widely described the presence of “unspoken rules” that shape how people approach sex and relationships, often without conscious awareness. These rules included expectations to avoid direct communication desires or discomfort, pressure to “just know” what a partner wants, and strict gender roles dictating that men be dominant and women be passive or accommodating. Leo (20s, man) explained:

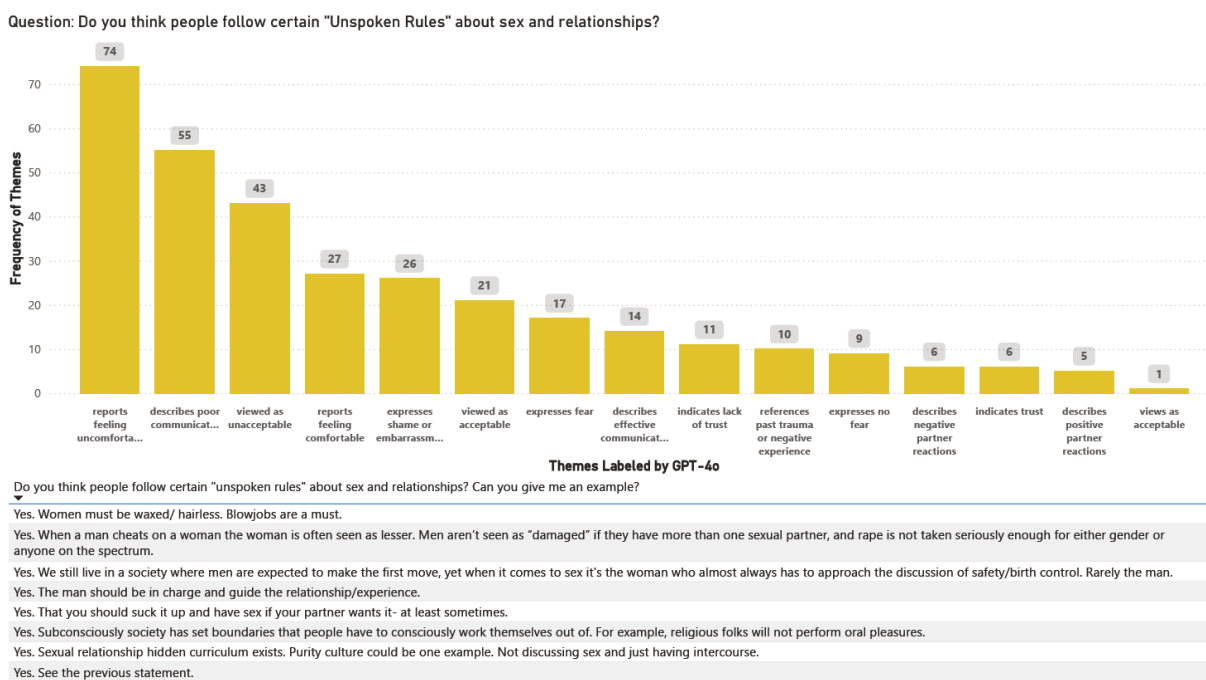
I do think a lot of men force themselves into a dominant role in relationships even if that is not what makes them or their partner happy. I have also observed a lot of women give into sex with their partners because they think it will please them, even if they aren't comfortable or don't want to for any reason.

Michael (50s, man) noted, “I think people approach it quietly and act as if they know what they are doing. Instead, people should be open and honest and ask more questions.”

These implicit rules create a culture where expressing needs or uncertainties is discouraged, reinforcing the fear of negative evaluation found in the quantitative results. This reflects Watt's (1999) discussion of entitlement and control in upholding traditional norms, and supports Adams and Coltrane's (2005) observations that patriarchal systems discourage authentic expression to maintain dominance and social compliance (Phillips & Rogers, 2021). These unspoken rules reflect the linguistic limitations described by Muted Group Theory, where marginalized groups must navigate dominant language frameworks that define what can and cannot be expressed (Kramarae, 1981; Syawal et al., 2024). The fear of social rejection or “losing face” discourages authentic communication, reinforcing compliance and conformity (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Goffman, 1955).

Figure 6

Distribution of themes related to “unspoken rules” participants believe guide sex and relationships dynamics. Visualized using Power BI.



Envisioning Open, Judgment-Free Sexual Communication

Participants overwhelmingly expressed a desire for more open, honest, and judgment-free discussions about sex in society. Many emphasized the need for better and earlier sex education that includes emotional and relational aspects, as well as the removal of harmful double standards and gender biases. Jack (30s, man) shared:

Making sex less taboo and allowing men and women to both express their desires without the added guilt and shame put forth by religious or societal beliefs. Sexual education and inclusion of emotional needs could help build better understanding at an early age.

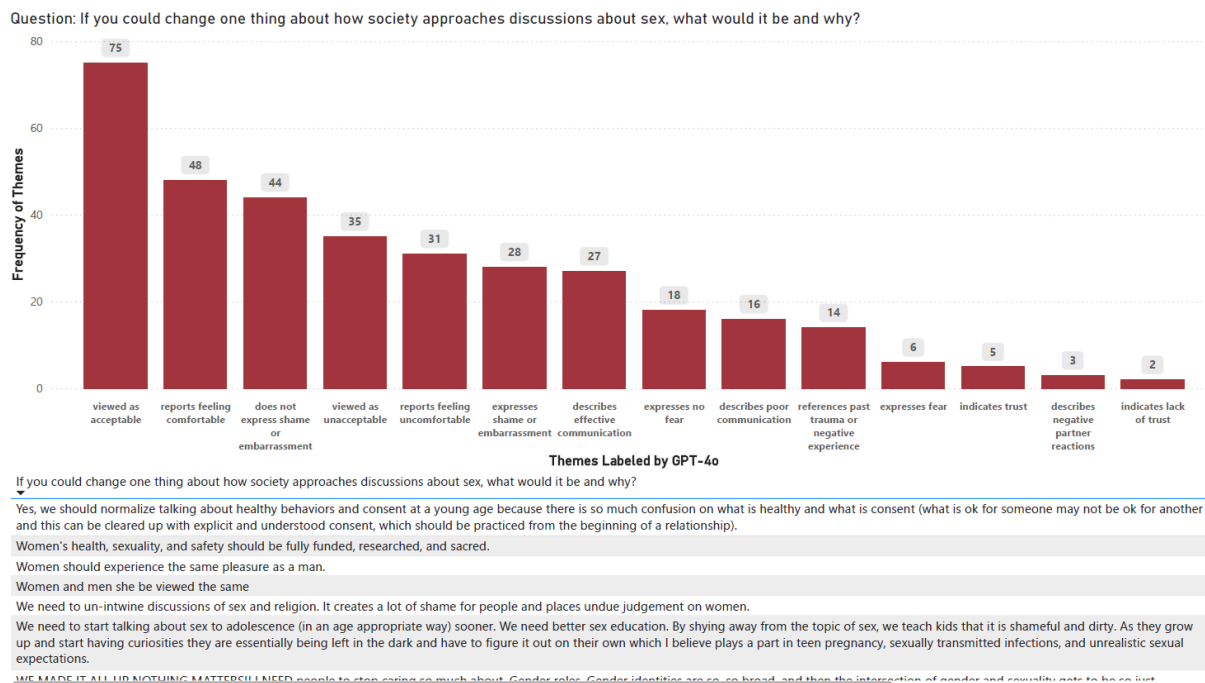
Jason (20s, man) wrote, “That it’s not a bad thing to save yourself for marriage. And if you don’t, it’s also not the end of the world,” reflecting the call for acceptance of diverse experiences. While a few participants suggest that sex is talked about too much or should be seen as more private, the overall pattern points to a strong desire for greater openness and reduced shame.

These visions for societal change directly support the study’s thesis that fear of negative evaluation acts as a major barrier to sexual communication. Participants’ calls for comprehensive, judgment-free education align with critiques of purity culture and religious moral control (Dinse et al., 2023; Emmers-Sommer et al., 2017), and reflect Foucault’s (1978) argument that resisting internalized norms through open discourse is key to developing authentic communication and personal autonomy. These also align with calls to dismantle the fear-based linguistic frameworks that restrict self-expression and perpetuate inequality (Jeffery & Barata, 2020; Syawal et al., 2024). By creating spaces for diverse narratives and resisting dominant moralistic language, participants envision intimacy as an open, dynamic, and culturally inclusive process (Pritzker et al., 2024).

Figure 7

Participants’ visions for how society could approach sexual communication differently.

Visualized using Power BI.



This visualization shows that the most frequent theme when participants discussed how they would change societal approaches to discussions on sex was a desire for sex to be viewed as acceptable and normalized. Many participants also emphasized the importance of feeling comfortable and expressing themselves without shame or embarrassment, highlighting a strong call for open judgment-free conversations.

These findings directly align with the literature review, which emphasizes how patriarchal and heteronormative cultural narratives frame sexual communication as taboo and reinforce fear-based control (Johnson, 2004; Foucault, 1978). The emphasis on acceptance and comfort mirrors critiques of purity culture and religious moral control (Dinse et al., 2023; Emmers-Sommer et al., 2017), where shame is used as a tool to enforce conformity and silence alternative expressions of sexuality. Additionally, participants' calls for better education and more inclusive discussions support arguments in Muted Group Theory (Kramarae, 1981; Syawal et al., 2024), which suggest that marginalized voices are often denied the linguistic resources

needed to express themselves authentically. By explicitly expressing a desire for more openness and inclusivity, participants reinforced the study's core thesis that dismantling fear and shame is essential to creating healthier, more autonomous approaches to sexual communication.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Discussion

Taken together, these qualitative insights vividly illustrate how deeply fear of negative evaluation shapes sexual communication, reinforcing and expanding on the quantitative findings. Participants' narratives show that this fear is not simply personal anxiety but a socially constructed and culturally reinforced mechanism of control. Through messages from family, media, and religious teachings, and broader societal norms, people learn to internalize shame and adopt rigid, and at times, contradictory expectations about sex and intimacy. This fear silences authentic expression, discourages vulnerability, and promotes conformity to patriarchal and heteronormative ideals. As participants imagined a more open and accepting approach to discussing sex, they highlighted a longing for safe spaces free of judgment, spaces in which emotional needs and diverse experiences can be expressed without fear. These narratives echo theoretical arguments that patriarchal systems strategically use fear to sustain power (Foucault, 1978; Johnson, 2004), and that resisting this internalized fear is essential for creating healthier, more equitable intimate relationships.

While Hypothesis 3 demonstrated a strong and significant correlation, the first two hypotheses did not yield meaningful patterns. The first hypothesis was exploratory and too broad to capture a clear relationship, while the second showed a small, non-significant correlation. These results suggest that different or more targeted scales might better capture the complex interactions among gender norms, sexual scripts, and communication. Future research could focus on combining the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale with other targeted measures to provide more valid and nuanced insights.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge on sexuality and communication by revealing that fear, specifically fear of negative evaluation, is a central barrier preventing people

from openly discussing sex and intimacy. Across the different thematic fears (fear of change, fear of moral decay, fear of social rejection, and fear of failure and success), participants' stories highlight how these fears are used to maintain patriarchal control, enforce social codes, and discourage authentic self-expression.

Participants' responses fit into the theme of fear of change, which, in patriarchy, frames growth and deviation from traditional roles as dangerous, arguing that stepping outside established norms threatens social cohesion and personal identity. Many participants described concerns that changing one's views or behaviors might result in losing social standing, support networks, or even personal identity. This fear discourages people from questioning harmful norms, such as rigid gender roles or restrictive sexual expectations, and keeps them invested in maintaining the status quo (Flood et al., 2021). As Shelby (20s, woman) shared, "Body standards are a huge message. Women specifically can be led to feel they are only deserving of sex if they look a certain way." Blake (20s, non-binary) added, "Society tends to prioritize heterosexual relationships as important as well as force gender roles. Being in a relationship if you are not heterosexual is often a joke media wise."

Participants' responses also align with the theme of fear of moral decay, where people are pressured to uphold collective "moral" standards as a personal duty, with any deviation framed as a threat to family, community, and society at large. Historical examples, such as the use of middle-class scandals in the 19th century, warn against moral failings (Tosh, 1999) and show how personal struggles were weaponized to maintain public order. Henrietta (40s, woman) reflected the fear when describing expectations to "save oneself" for marriage or maintain sexual purity: "Premarital sex is seen as taboo and discouraged. Men are expected to have many partners and if women have many partners it is their fault or they might be easy." Lauren (20s,

woman) echoed this fear: “Men should have a lot of sex but women should ‘stay pure.’ Sex is something that needs to stay behind closed doors and shouldn’t be talked about.” This reflects the rigid expectations participants felt about how sex should be performed and who gets to express desire.

Matthew (30s, man) described the double standards embedded in this fear:

Not my opinions, just common ideologies I’ve noticed. Men should initiate. Anything beyond vanilla sex or oral is inappropriate or weird depending on the group. Women should save themselves for their husband (key opening many locks vs. lock opened by many keys analogy BS).

Participants' responses also fit into the theme of fear of social rejection, where people described the intense anxiety around potential isolation or exclusion if they expressed their true desires or identities. This fear is especially strong for people with marginalized identities, such as those in the LGBTQ+ community or those who deviate from traditional relationships structures. The threat of being cut off from loved ones, community, or resources acts as a powerful form of social control, compelling people to perform acceptability rather than live authentically (Wang & Li, 2022). As Mandy (20s, woman) shared, “that men always want it and that if you don’t do it you are very different.” Ryan (20s, genderfluid) described this fear clearly, “Men are expected to have a ‘large body count’ before even hitting 18. If they don’t they are considered lame or a nerd.”

Participants’ responses further align with the theme of fear of failure and success, where people are caught between unattainable ideals and constant self-doubt. Patriarchal standards often define success in narrow, heteronormative, and cisgender terms; for example, equating adulthood with marriage, biological reproduction, and financial stability (Jaffe, 2018). Those

who fail to meet these milestones may feel like they have failed entirely, while those who achieve them may still struggle with feeling like imposters or inadequate. As Donna (50s, woman) described:

Yes, I think that some people use sex as a control and that power issues play out with one partner withholding intimacy as a form of punishment or manipulation. The rule would be that one person decides versus both having a collaborative relationship and decision making authority.

The use of Christianity intensifies these fears by tying them to divine judgment and eternal consequences. Historical and contemporary interpretations of Christian doctrine have been used to enforce purity standards and control sexual behavior, framing deviation as sin and subject to spiritual punishment. This narrative strengthens the fear of negative evaluation, making it not just a social risk but a moral and spiritual one as well. Such interpretations have been used to justify control over marginalized groups and reinforce patriarchal dominance, as seen in purity culture and other movements that merge religious ideology with social conformity (Emmers-Sommer et al., 2017; Harris, 1993). As Emily (40s, woman) reflected:

Religion often provides a lot of these, such as who should be leading, who should be submissive, who should be the provider, what you can do, what kind of climax is acceptable, what parts to embrace, who you are not allowed to love, etc. Most often, I think many of these expectations can be connected back to religion.

By weaving together these personal stories with broader cultural critiques, this study underscores the urgent need to address societal fear as a barrier to open, empowering sexual communication. Creating spaces that normalize vulnerability and support diverse experiences is crucial to creating greater sexual autonomy, authenticity, and relational well-being.

Yet, there is hope. As bell hooks (2004) writes, “Dismantling and changing patriarchal culture is work that men and women must do together” (p. 24). At the heart of this change is communication, open, honest, and vulnerable dialogue that challenges rigid gender roles and creates deeper connections. There are no fixed rules for what it means to be truly masculine or feminine, yet societal pressures to conform to these roles create disconnect within ourselves and in relationships. MacNeil and Byers (2005) emphasize that communication about sexuality is fundamental to the development and maintenance of satisfying sexual relationships (Montesi et al., 2011). By prioritizing such communication, we can build relationships that are not only more satisfying but also more equitable and respectful.

Open sexual communication requires vulnerability and courage, as people must be willing to risk rejection and discomfort when sharing intimate truths (Montesi et al., 2011). While this vulnerability can feel frightening, it is essential for building trust and deepening intimacy. Research shows that partners who communicate openly about sex enhance not only their sexual satisfaction but also their overall relationship satisfaction (Montesi et al., 2011). To support this, environments where vulnerability is celebrated as strength rather than weakness, normalizing discomfort as part of authentic connection (Maclaren, 2014).

The type of language used also plays a key role: Hess and Coffelt (2012) found that using a mix of everyday, slang, and erotic terms promotes intimacy and satisfaction. Encouraging partners to explore varied and playful ways of expressing themselves strengthens the foundation of trust and connection. To dismantle patriarchal systems and promote gender equality, we must also challenge harmful traditions and stereotypes that limit autonomy and perpetuate inequality (Halperin-Kaddari & Freeman, 2016). Education is crucial in this transformation, helping people recognize and reject damaging norms, and empowering them to advocate for change. The

concept of purity, historically used to reinforce social hierarchies and control sexuality (Berthold, 2010), must be critically re-examined. Opening space for dialogue about purity ideals allows people to reclaim their relationships with their bodies and desires, bringing in a more just and liberated understanding of intimacy.

Drawing from Black feminist and womanist thought, Schultz (2021) and Lorde (1978) envision models of sexual generosity and erotic justice that center marginalized voices, particularly Black women. These frameworks advocate for reclaiming sexuality as a source of power and transformation, embracing pleasure, agency, and diverse expressions of intimacy beyond traditional borders.

Experiences of powerlessness, though challenging, can inspire growth and collective transformation (Livingston & Vik, 2021). By promoting supportive spaces for reflections and self-expression, people can turn vulnerability into resilience, building stronger and more authentic connections. Through collective action, education, and a commitment to equity, we can move toward a future where relationships are grounded in mutual respect, open communication, and shared understanding. Only through this collective effort can we transform the cultural logics that have historically constrained intimacy and create a society where all people are free to thrive in their fullest expressions.

Considerations for Future Research

One important consideration for future research is the potential to use alternative or newly developed quantitative measures to capture the complexities of sexual communication, gender norms, and a fear of negative evaluation more fully. While the existing scales offered useful insights, developing a more tailored scale, or refining existing ones could provide a more

accurate reflection of the nuanced experiences described by participants in their qualitative responses. For example, a new measure that specifically assesses fear of negative evaluation within the context of intimate and sexual relationships, rather than in general social situations, could offer deeper insights into how these fears uniquely shape sexual communication.

In addition to scale refinement, future research could benefit from using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with diverse types of couples. Talking directly with couples in various relationship types (e.g. queer, polyamorous, interracial, or long-term monogamous partnerships) would allow for richer exploration of how fear and communication dynamics play out in real relational contexts. Also, interviewing counselors or therapists who specialize in sexual health and relationship counseling could provide expert perspectives on patterns they have seen in their clients, as well as practical strategies for overcoming fear-based barriers.

Another direction that could yield promising results would be to focus on groups who have been historically left out of mainstream sexual communication research, such as sex workers. Examining how sex workers navigate communication about sex, boundaries, and intimacy, professionally and personally, could bring light to strategies used to overcome fear of negative evaluation and challenge dominant cultural narratives about sexual agency.

Although the study achieved a robust sample size ($n = 407$), the majority of participants identified as heterosexual (52.6%) and White (62.4%), with a large portion identifying as women (56.3%) and men (30.0%). This demographic distribution suggests that future research would benefit from more targeted efforts to recruit a more diverse and representative sample across different racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, and gender identity groups. Incorporating intersectional approaches (e.g., considering race, sexuality, class, and religion) in both

quantitative and qualitative measures would deepen understanding of how multiple identities interact to influence sexual communication and fear.

Future studies could also follow participants over time to see how fear of negative evaluation and comfort with sexual communication evolve over time, or they could introduce specific programs or interventions to explore how fear of negative evaluation and comfort in sexual communication in response. Overall, these directions offer exciting possibilities to expand and deepen our understanding of the social and psychological forces that shape how people talk about sex, build intimacy, and navigate vulnerability in relationships.

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Appendix

To protect participants, informed consent was obtained before they began the survey. Participation was completely voluntary and anonymous, and no identifying information was collected. Participants were informed that they could skip any question or exit the survey at any time. Additionally, the survey provided mental health resources, as some of the topics covered could be sensitive for certain participants. This study was approved by the University of Central Oklahoma Institutional Review Board (IRB #2025-057) and was determined to be exempt category research. All participants were provided informed consent prior to participation.