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What makes a man: Gender and sexual boundaries on evangelical Christian sexuality websites

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What makes a man: Gender and sexual boundaries on evangelical Christian sexuality websites

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Abstract
This article examines how some evangelical Christian men create alternative meanings associated with gender-deviant sex in order to justify it within an evangelical framework. The author shows how Christian sexuality website users construct gender omniscience—a spouse and God's all-knowing certainty about one's ''true'' gender identity—to reconcile men's interests in non-normative sex with their status as Christian patriarchs. By constructing gender as relational and spiritual, they simultaneously normalize their behaviors while condemning others who participate in similar acts but fail to meet the requirements of gender omniscience. Challenging common assumptions about evangelical sexuality, this article offers insights into the intersection of heterosexuality, masculinities, and religion.

Keywords: Hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, internet, religion

Introduction

AngelBoy is a member of an online message board, BetweenTheSheets.com, created for evangelical Christians to discuss sex.[1] In one discussion thread, he solicits advice from other members:

> After my anal awakening (discovering prostate pleasure), DW [dear wife] and I have been more adventurous in our intimacy, anally speaking. I think we're going to take it to the next level and go with a strap-on. Does anyone have any experience with this? … We're both really excited but it's a LOT of information to digest.

We might imagine that most evangelicals would respond to AngelBoy with disdain since many are outspoken opponents of anal sex when it comes to gay men. On this thread, however, members congratulate him on his "awakening" and offer reviews of dildos and harnesses that they have tried and personal stories of anal play.

Although American evangelicals are well-known for their opposition to certain sexual practices, namely premarital and homosexual sex (Gardner, 2011; Gerber, 2011), the website that hosts this discussion is part of a large network of evangelicals who use books, conferences, and the internet to promote the idea that God created sex for pleasure within heterosexual Christian marriages as a sign of a couple's commitment and affirmation of God's love. To spread this message, evangelicals have published sex advice books since the 1970s that combine interpretations of Biblical scripture with scientific descriptions of sexual techniques to optimize sexual satisfaction (DeRogatis, 2005). More recently, evangelicals have created Christian sexuality websites that include message boards and blogs that discuss a wide range of topics related to marital sex and online stores that sell "marital aids," including sex toys.

This article examines how some evangelical men use the internet to combine talk of their love for Jesus with their interest in two sex practices—pegging (the anal penetration of a man by a woman) and erotic cross-dressing (wearing women's clothing, especially lingerie, during sex). Conservative Protestant men, who are typically heterosexual, white, and adherents of what Elizabeth Bernstein and Janet R. Jakobsen (2010) call America's "religious hegemony," appear to embody the forms of privilege most important to hegemonic masculinity, though religion is notably under-theorized on this topic (Connell, 1995; Kimmel et al., 2005). Yet evangelical men who engage in acts involving receptive sex or the wearing of women's clothing violate social expectations of how men should act during sex (Rubin, 1999 [1984]; Segal, 1994). Although what counts as good and normal sex includes a broader range of acts today than in decades past (Attwood, 2006; Giddens, 1992), sex acts that challenge cultural signifiers of masculinity

or femininity are consistently labeled as deviant by religious, medical, and legal authorities and may, therefore, be considered non-normative (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Meadows, 2010; Nixon, 2008). Within the hegemonic masculine culture of contemporary American evangelicalism, men must find ways to reconcile their interests in these seemingly emasculate acts with their status as Christian patriarchs.

In examining how evangelicals make sense of their interest in non-normative sex, I consider the ways in which they make their masculine identities appear normal and consistent in order to orient themselves in their social and religious worlds. I draw from a growing body of work within feminist and queer scholarship that shows how gender and sexuality are restrained *and* malleable—both are "heteronormatively ordered" (Jackson, 2006: 114; see also Butler, 1999: Ingraham, 2005) but, as social constructions, also must be continually reproduced—and therefore potentially changed (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009; West and Zimmerman, 1987). The asymmetrical relationship between men and women both reproduces and benefits from heterosexuality (Jackson, 2006; Schippers, 2007), yet expressions of masculinity are neither universal nor predictable given their complex intersections with sexuality, race, class, nationality, and religion (Kimmel et al., 2005).

As RW Connell (1995: 77) argues, hegemonic masculinity—the collective embodiment of social practices that ensure domination of men over women—operates not only by subordinating the feminine, but also by subordinating other forms of masculinity. Yet even men who do not perfectly embody hegemonic masculinity benefit from what Connell calls the "patriarchal dividend" (1995: 79). Gay men and men of color, for example, may find ways to exert masculinity through a variety of "manhood acts" even when they cannot embody hegemonic masculinity that is distinctly heterosexual and white (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). Jane Ward (2008) reveals the complex relationship between race and sexuality in her study of "str8"-identified white men who have sex with men who use archetypes of white masculinity to associate themselves with heterosexual culture. Similarly, in a study on ex-gay Christian men and their wives, Michelle Wolkimir (2009) shows how her respondents rely on norms related to heterosexual culture (love and monogamy) in order to justify their "mixed-orientation marriages" as normal and good. These men emphasize their socially acceptable traits in order to mitigate their deviant ones, revealing how

masculinities interact with other factors like sexuality, race, and religion, to ensure male privilege despite hierarchies among men.

In this article, I show how evangelical men justify pegging and erotic crossdressing by basing gender on their relationships with their wives and God. This construction of gender, what I call *gender omniscience*, relies on a spouse and God's all-knowing certainty about one's ''true'' gender to ensure that even non-normative sexual practices are quintessentially heterosexual and gender normal. Instead of basing gender on the individual, biological body, these website users consider gender as relational and spiritual, thereby extending their beliefs to encompass the sex acts in which they engage. Online discussions about these practices create alternative meanings beyond the dominant reading that they are marginal, extreme, and inappropriate. While participating in the sex they desire, these evangelicals do not admit to participating in ''bad'' sex; instead, they discursively restore standards of masculinity that privilege men and exclude non-heterosexuals from ''good'' and Godly sex.

Evangelicals, the internet, and sex

The sexuality websites I discuss label themselves as ''Christian'' but are part of the American religious tradition that scholars call conservative Protestant evangelicals: mostly white believers who emphasize repentance, salvation through Jesus Christ alone, and Biblical inerrancy (Noll, 2001).[2] Within evangelical faith groups, religious authority is diffuse. Like Protestantism generally, individual believers believe Burke 5 that they communicate directly with the Holy Spirit. Evangelicals' relationships with God may be assisted by, but are not dependent upon, a church body or preacher (Luhrmann, 2012; Noll, 2001). Churches, which are typical landmarks of religious authority, take multiple forms for evangelicals: some resemble traditional congregational churches, while others are found in strip malls, people's homes, or online (Flory and Miller, 2008; Howard, 2011). Relationship to clergy is also varied; many evangelicals have limited relationships with actual clerics but are authoritatively shaped by a range of lay leaders in charge of Bible studies and other small groups (Luhrmann, 2012). These aspects of evangelicalism give ordinary believers a sense that they have enough authority to talk about sex in public spaces.

Additionally, evangelicals' willingness to engage with new forms of technology, like the internet, makes possible new forms of religious expression (Flory and Miller, 2008). Online, individuals can learn about religion, but they can also *create* religion through virtual interaction (Campbell, 2010). Sociologists Jeffrey Hadden and Douglas Cowan (2000) call this distinction the difference between "religion online" and "online religion," where the latter signals a community that collectively constructs religious faith through online practices. Although online religion exists beyond the physical structures of religious institutions, website users often reflect the values of their "real" life, creating online environments that perpetuate inequality and intolerance (Howard, 2011). This means that religious websites, like Christian sexuality sites, have the potential to construct new versions of contemporary evangelicalism while also promoting longstanding values.

Evangelicals, online and offline, do not shy away from talk about sex. On the contrary, they have adjusted expectations for how and when to discuss it as a wider range of sexual practices are talked about and receive social approval (DeRogatis, 2005). Instructions on sexual morality have typified the American evangelical movement since the 19th century (Griffith, 2004), and more recently, evangelicals have drawn on the cultural popularity of self-help and sex advice to talk about sexuality in a number of settings, from Bible studies to Christian rock concerts (Burke and McDowell, 2012). While the evangelical sex manuals of the 1970s present a fairly narrow depiction of intimate life, evangelicals in the 21st century provide one that is much more complex. For example, whereas authors of the popular sex advice book, *The Act of Marriage* (LaHaye and LaHaye, 1976), explicitly discourage oral sex and the use of sex toys, authors of the recent bestseller, *Real Marriage* (Driscoll and Driscoll, 2012), encourage sexual exploration and are open to anal sex, oral sex, masturbation, role-playing, and the use of sex toys. Even evangelical programs focused on negative aspects of sexuality reflect changing social attitudes about sex. Contemporary evangelical abstinence campaigns emphasize the sexual pleasure that awaits teens after marriage (Gardner, 2011), and the ex-gay movement recognizes sexuality as fluid and more complicated than the narrow identity categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality (Erzen, 2006; Gerber, 2011). As these examples show, evangelicals' talk about sex evolves in order to remain relevant within the secular (and sexualized) world.

For men in particular, shifts in evangelical masculinity have made possible new conversations about intimate issues, including sex (Messner, 1993). The evangelical men's movement, the Promise Keepers, for example, emphasizes traits like compassion, expressing emotions, and developing close friendships with other men (Bartkowski, 2004; Heath, 2003). This movement, as well as evangelical self-help literature and other organizations such as the ex-gay group Exodus International, encourage men to share their sexual struggles with each other, whether they be related to promiscuity, pornography, or same-sex attraction (Gerber, 2011). Yet the saliency of what W Bradford Wilcox (2004) calls ''soft patriarchy'' within contemporary evangelicalism reveals that evangelicals remain committed to heterosexuality and gender distinctions between men and women (Bartkowski, 2001).

Evangelicals naturalize gender and heterosexuality but rely on multiple, and sometimes contradictory, sources to do so. Those who claim that homosexuals are both biologically flawed and inherently sinful make gender and sexuality a matter of science and the divine. Popular science, according to Amy DeRogatis (2009: 279) provides ''a new vocabulary'' by which evangelicals can make claims about the pathology of homosexuality. But as Lynne Gerber (2008) points out, evangelicals must rely on more than science in order to insist that sexual change is possible (that people can transform from homosexual to heterosexual). By relying on God's authority when it comes to gender and sexuality, evangelicals can ''mediate tension, if and when it occurs, between scientific, natural, and other authoritative claims about homosexuality'' (Gerber, 2008: 16). Since evangelicals believe that God provides the ultimate ''truth'' over human life, they may use their religious faith to counter (but remain in dialogue with) popular discourse about sexuality.

Method and data: Christian sexuality websites

In order to understand how some evangelicals justify their participation in nonnormative sex, this article draws from a larger project on how evangelicals promote sex for pleasure within marriage. The study includes interview and survey data and content analysis from 36 websites (blogs, message boards, and online stores), which, informants tell me, is an exhaustive list of Christian sites whose primary purpose is to promote marital intimacy. Beyond online data, I collected data

from other sources that discuss evangelical sexuality, including a sample of nine evangelical sex manuals (see the Primary References list at the end of this article) and three Christian sexuality conferences I observed in 2010 and 2011. The conferences and books were selected based on online discussions I analyzed.

Although most evangelical sources that discuss sex for pleasure do not explicitly talk about sex other than penile-vaginal intercourse, oral sex, masturbation, and manual stimulation, some do. Most print manuals do not, and the ones that do, mention only anal sex or broadly labeled "fetishes." For the 18 Christian-owned online sex-toy stores in my study, 10 sell products explicitly intended for anal play. For the 18 online message boards or blogs, 12 discuss (though do not necessarily endorse) anal sex. Obviously, content about vanilla sex acts or non-specified sex where the act is assumed to be penile-vaginal intercourse is far more common than content related to other practices. Online content that does discuss what I label as non-normative sex, however, is not insignificant. For example, threads created explicitly to discuss non-normative acts on BetweenTheSheets.com (on boards called "All Things Anal" and "Not-the-norm") make up about 12% of overall threads that discuss sex practices.

For this article, I rely heavily on content analysis and online interviews from two websites in my study: BetweenTheSheets.com and LustyChristianLadies.com. I use data from these sites because they are the only online Christian resources to discuss pegging and cross-dressing and they are the most active websites among the study's sample. BetweenTheSheets.com hosts an active message board with nearly 30,000 members who discuss a plethora of topics related to marital sex, from troubleshooting incompatible sex drives to tips on perfecting different sexual positions. LustyChristianLadies.com is a blog created by five women who write articles about sex and also encourage reader interaction by posting polls and virtual studies of Christian books about sex and marriage. The site reports over 400,000 visits per month, and although it is geared towards women, they contribute to discourse about pegging and cross-dressing and publish some comments from male readers.

I conducted 44 semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with members and administrators of BetweenTheSheets.com and LustyChristianLadies.com. These interviews lasted about two hours and took place on a private and secure online chatroom. I interviewed 20 men and 24 women, most of whom were married (two were divorced).

Almost all were affiliated with evangelical denominations (three were affiliated with mainline Protestant denominations). Most actively followed the message board or blog for at least the past year and found the sites through online searches for Christian advice about sex. I asked respondents questions related to how they use Christian sexuality websites and about the relationship between their religious faith and sexuality. I did not ask them explicitly about non-normative sex, though topics of sex toys, sexual norms, and sexual "adventurousness" came up frequently. All interview respondents also completed an online survey asking questions about demographics, religious practices, internet use, and sexual behaviors and attitudes. This survey was advertised on seven Christian sexuality websites and was completed by 768 website users.

I conducted content analysis of online data both inductively and deductively. For inductive analysis, I observed BetweenTheSheets.com for three months in 2010. During this time, there were 61,176 unique visitors, most of whom were returning visitors. During my observation period, there were 49,511 comments posted (on average, 538 comments per day). Because of the high number of posts, I observed about half of the total board topics (N=23), selected deductively based on their relevance to my study. I estimate that I read and analyzed approximately 12,000 comments in total. Additionally, I performed a basic deductive keyword search on BetweenTheSheets.com and LustyChristianLadies.com for discussions related to non-normative sex. I analyzed nine blog posts or threads that mention cross-dressing (all in reference to male participants); 13 that mention pegging; and 30 that mention male anal play but do not explicitly use the word pegging. Although authenticity poses a challenge for all internet-based research (Buchanan, 2004), the websites analyzed in this article take great measures to moderate their sites, making it less likely that I analyzed content posted by trolls. LustyChristianLadies.com contributors must approve all comments before they are posted, and BetweenTheSheets.com requires membership in order to post content that is then closely monitored by administrators and fellow members. I am also confident that interview respondents were evangelical believers and regular website users—interviews were lengthy and I likely would have suspected deception in the responses to detailed questions related to their website use, religious faith, and sexuality.

Still, it is difficult to gauge who participates in Christian sexuality websites and even more difficult to know how many endorse

or participate in discussions about non-normative sex. For the 768 website users who completed my survey, most indicate that anal sex within marriage is "not at all wrong" (57%). Although pegging and cross-dressing would be condemned by most evangelicals who write about sex, 38% of married men in my sample (127 of 335) report that they are at least "somewhat interested" in passive anal sex. Further, online discussions about these acts take place among well-respected and frequent users of both BetweenTheSheets.com and LustyChristianLadies.com. For example, those who actively participate in the "All Things Anal" board on BetweenTheSheets.com, many of whom engage in male anal play, are active elsewhere on the site and are well received. The member introduced in the beginning of this article, AngelBoy, has posted over 1000 comments on a variety of threads. One of the administrators of BetweenTheSheets.com writes sympathetically of men's cross-dressing in certain circumstances, and one LustyChristianLadies.com blogger writes supportively of pegging. Although these are minority views among evangelicals, my data reveal that those who hold these beliefs are not made to feel marginal on the sites, nor are they simply provocateurs.

Justifying non-normative sex in evangelical marriages

Since evangelicals treat secular information about sex and sexuality with harsh skepticism, many have few standards by which to judge their own sexual interests. Therefore, the website users I interviewed and observed took evangelical advice about sex (found both online and in books) very seriously. At the same time, though, they applied the messages presented in books and on websites to their own unique sexual desires and experiences. As one reader of LustyChristianLadies.com, HiddenTreasure, told me, "I wasn't sure what was OK Biblically, but now I know."[3] She goes on to say: "Some things are not Biblically defined and are left to us for prayer and figuring out what God would see as best in our own marriage beds." In other words, evangelical messages about sex are made meaningful in different ways for different couples. In this section, I outline the beliefs about sex presented in popular evangelical literature and then show how some evangelical men stay within the "rules" presented in this literature by constructing what I call *gender omniscience* to justify their participation in nonnormative sex.

The "rules"

Most contemporary American evangelicals agree that God created sex to be enjoyed within heterosexual marriages.[4] Authors of popular sex advice books and creators of Christian sexuality websites also agree that God created sex for men and women's pleasure in addition to procreation (Driscoll and Driscoll, 2012; Leman, 2003; Wheat and Wheat, 1977).[5] These evangelicals, even those who explicitly support men's headship and women's submission, emphasize women's pleasure at least as often as they do men's. Authors of popular books discuss at length ways for women to experience arousal, often including specific instructions for clitoral stimulation. According to authors Ed and Gaye Wheat (1977: 111), sexual pleasure that involves orgasm is what "God designed for every wife." Online message boards and blogs also spend considerable time discussing women's pleasure, since many women struggle with arousal and climax. On the surface, evangelical discussions of sexual pleasure are gender-equal, yet as I will point out, there are implicit gender imbalances when it comes to discussions of nonnormative sex.

Evangelicals who write about sex in print and online agree that sexual acts beyond penile-vaginal intercourse are fair game within evangelical marriages. Popular authors usually discuss a few specific sex acts: oral sex, anal sex, manual stimulation, and masturbation, in addition to penile-vaginal intercourse. Most believe that oral sex does not violate any Biblical principles, though some recommend avoiding the practice (LaHaye and LaHaye, 1976; Wheat and Wheat, 1977), while others suggest that the Bible may actually encourage it (see Dillow et al., 2004). There is general consensus that anal sex should not be practiced (for exceptions, see Driscoll and Driscoll, 2012; and Ethridge, 2008), and authors tend to caution against its health risks rather than linking the practice with homosexual desire (Leman, 2003; Rosenau, 2002; Penner and Penner, 1973).[6] There is debate over whether or not the Bible permits masturbation inside and outside of marriage, but all authors agree that manual stimulation of a partner is permitted, and most do not oppose sex toys like vibrators.

Although popular authors discuss many sexual activities, they cannot discuss the wide range of sex acts available to married couples. To compensate for this shortcoming, they often present a set of brief,

Biblically-based criteria for couples to use to make decisions about sex acts that the authors fail to address (see Driscoll and Driscoll, 2012; Ethridge, 2008; Rosenau, 2002). For example, at their *Intimate Issues* conference, authors Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus (1999) instruct an audience of women that they should ask three questions in order to determine what sexual activities are permissible within their marriages. First, *does scripture prohibit it?* Dillow and Pintus, like all other evangelicals in this study, believe that the Bible clearly condemns homosexual and extramarital sex. Second, *is it beneficial?* The authors emphasize that even if a particular sex act is not forbidden within scripture, it is important that sex strengthens a marriage and brings husband and wife closer to God. This means that what is appropriate for some couples will not be for others. And third, *does it involve anyone else?* Evangelicals emphasize monogamy and insist that even lustful thoughts that result from watching pornography violate Biblical principles.

Dillow and Pintus's questions, like the guidelines presented by most evangelicals who write or talk about sex, leave open a vast space of permissible sex within Christian marriages. As popular author, Kevin Leman (2003: 165) writes, ''The Bible is amazingly free in what it allows and even encourages a married couple to do in bed.'' Put another way, one LustyChristianLadies.com reader comments, ''there are far more things that you *can* enjoy together, than those you cannot.'' That evangelicals can make decisions about their sexual lives that may differ from other couples draws upon the often-quoted Bible verse: ''Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled'' (Hebrews 13: 4, King James Version). This logic allows couples to establish their own sexual interests as morally acceptable. Popular author, Shannon Ethridge (2008: 185) for example, explains, ''as long as no harm is done and all is kept solely between consenting spouses, just about anything and everything in the bedroom can be considered perfectly normal.'' Reflecting this attitude that sexual ''normalness'' is subjective, one LustyChristianLadies.com reader comments on a blog post about pegging, ''I know for me, God has put a red flag on it'' but then later says, ''what is a 'sin' for one may not be a 'sin' for all.'' In other words, it is the responsibility of a married couple to choose appropriate sex acts for them.

Gender-deviant sex: Bending or breaking the "rules?"

Despite the appearance of sexual permissiveness when it comes to marital sex, gender-subversive acts, like pegging and men's cross-dressing, are highly questionable within evangelical culture. My findings suggest that website users are more likely to support pegging than erotic cross-dressing perhaps because prostate stimulation is gaining increasing visibility in mainstream culture through media that epitomize gender/(hetero)sexuality stereotypes like *Playboy* and *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. Men's erotic cross-dressing encounters more scrutiny on Christian sexuality websites than does pegging, in part, because website users can use supposed "facts" of physical pleasure to justify pegging and must describe cross-dressing more subjectively. As one BetweenTheSheets.com member asserts, "The prostate is wired into our orgasms and arousal centers." Statements like these argue that the physiology of sexual pleasure all but requires male anal play. Yet both the act of pegging and men's erotic cross-dressing violate gender expectations of sex because they remove men from their primary role as dominant penetrator (Segal, 1994).

Evangelicals are careful to maintain boundaries between themselves and any conduct that may signal homosexuality, and even though authors of popular sex manuals tend not to discuss gender-deviant sex, implicitly nearly all would condemn it. For example, one of the earliest and best-known sex manuals, Tim and Beverly LaHaye's *The Act of Marriage* (1976: 242), does not discuss non-normative sex, but firmly supports a traditional understanding of gender, listing "feminine dominance" as a possible cause of men's erectile dysfunction and instructs women to strive for "submissive grace." While website users do not uniformly support men's headship and women's submission, most believe that sex acts that violate gender norms are forbidden by God. As one of my interview respondents, a member of BetweenTheSheets.com told me, "I like to be feminine and my husband likes to be masculine. Pegging seems to reverse those roles." Another BetweenTheSheets.com member posts to the site, "I'm no prude … but the idea of a man preferring [to be] humped and penetrated … If it were me? I wouldn't cross that line." Even evangelicals who are quite permissive when it comes to marital sex are wary of acts that challenge typical notions of femininity and masculinity.

Some evangelicals, however, use the argument that the marriage bed is "undefiled" to justify a wide range of sexual activities as normal within marriage, including those that challenge typical gender roles during sex. On the surface, these evangelicals normalize certain sex acts by conflating married heterosexuality and gender normalcy. As a male reader of LustyChristianLadies.com puts it, even when it comes to pegging, "why assume a straight man having sex with his straight wife is doing something gay?" Similarly, a blogger on SatisfyingMarriage.com responds to a reader's comment that anal sex sounds "too gay" to be performed by Christians: "Well this is just silly … The fact that homosexuals may (or may not) do something does not make it 'gay.' Having sex with someone of the same sex makes it gay." In other words, any sex act that takes place between a man and woman is heterosexual by default.

Yet conflating heterosexuality and gender oversimplifies the complex strategies that website users use to justify their gender normalcy to other users. I argue that evangelicals do this gender work in order to make the sex they desire appear acceptable within an evangelical framework. Because gender must be continually reproduced in social interactions (including sex), individuals must make themselves intelligible as men or women so that the sex in which they engage is normative and heterosexual (Butler, 1999; Schilt and Westbrook, 2009).

What makes a man: God, wife, and gender omniscience

To maintain their beliefs about gender, website users interested in non-normative sex associate alternative meanings with these acts. Although pegging and men's cross-dressing are quite different, website users construct what I call *gender omniscience*, or the privileged knowledge of one's "true" gender that is based on the triangulated relationship between the self, spouse, and God, to prove their gender normalcy and justify these acts. Instead of basing gender on nature or science, as many evangelicals do (Burke and McDowell, 2012; DeRogatis, 2009), these evangelicals present the all-knowing power of spouse and God as the ultimate authority on gender. This maintains the appearance of essentialism but actually constructs gender as subjective since believers differ in their marriage and spiritual relationships (see also Gerber, 2008).

Using gender omniscience to justify non-normative sex upholds evangelical beliefs about gender and sexuality, thereby reifying heterosexuality and maintaining a power imbalance between husbands and wives. My analysis of Christian sexuality websites shows that the men who use the sites are much more likely to talk about their interests in non-normative sex than their female counterparts. While both men and women talk about pegging and cross-dressing and the online discussions make it *seem* like either a man or a woman may desire to engage in these acts, men are much more likely to disclose their personal interest in these acts. While many women engage in discussions that talk frankly and explicitly about sex, they tend not to express personal interest in pegging, crossdressing, or other gender-subversive acts. Inherent in website users' discussions of these practices is a gender imbalance that gives voice to men's, not women's, unusual sexual desires.

The Spouse's Omniscience

In discussing their interest in pegging and men's cross-dressing, website users assert a wife's gender omniscience: the extraordinary nature of a married relationship and the ability to know, with certainty, her husband's ''true'' gender identity. As one administrator of BetweenTheSheets.com writes on a thread about erotic crossdressing, ''there is a difference between sharing an odd fetish with one's spouse when it is part of their sexual relationship, and a man wearing women's clothing anywhere else.'' That is to say, a marriage is unlike other relationships. As a member of BetweenTheSheets.com writes to a woman questioning her husband's interest in pegging, ''you know him best.'' One reader of LustyChristianLadies.com asserts her special knowledge about her husband when she adamantly states, ''My DH [dear husband] is 100% man throughout, but he loves when I peg him.'' Similarly, a BetweenTheSheets.com member shares his experience with pegging using a well-rated dildo that ''looks like a penis:'' ''My DW [dear wife] knows that what I wanted was my prostate massaged and had NOTHING to do with being homosexual.'' The spouse, like God, occupies a privileged space when it comes to knowing a person's sexual and gendered identity.

According to popular author, Kevin Leman (2003: 45), ''A fulfilling sex life is one of the most powerful marital glues a couple can have.''

Drawing from Leman and other popular authors who insist that pleasure is an integral part of a successful marriage as God created it, website users emphasize the intimacy that results from men's pleasure when justifying non-normative sex. One BetweenTheSheets.com member responds to a thread questioning the practice of pegging: ''As for what the woman gets out of it I REALLY enjoying seeing the look on DH's [dear husband's] face and knowing I am able to give him that much pleasure.'' Women readers of LustyChristianLadies.com share similar comments: that pegging ''has brought us closer than ever;'' ''our sex life is now so much more fun;'' and ''I do not need to be ashamed of pleasing my husband the way we both desire.''

For these website users, fulfilling their husbands' deepest sexual desires is part of an extraordinary intimacy awarded to married couples. In a thread about crossdressing on BetweenTheSheets.com, one member comments: ''My dh [dear husband] enjoys wearing my underwear from time to time … I don't have a problem with it … It is an intimate act, drawing us together in another way.'' Another member, in fact, suggests that engaging in non-normative sex signals a strong marriage, not the opposite. He writes about pegging: ''This is the sort of stuff for mature, open, other-focused relationships. I'd not see this working or being a good idea in relationships where there is a lot of stress, selfishness, fear, or legalism.'' This website user implies that being able to successfully engage in nonnormative sex signals a relationship that reflects God's intent for marriage (that it be mature, open, and other-focused).

Although website users appear to emphasize consent equally for both men and women, evangelicals tend to value submissive qualities of wives and promote the belief that it is the responsibility of a spouse to sexually fulfill her partner. As popular authors, Ed and Gaye Wheat (1977: 39) write: ''the husband delights in a loving wife who is submissive and responsive.'' This means that men who want to engage in pegging or cross-dressing already have substantial leverage over their wives. Evangelical culture pressures women to accommodate their husbands' (sexual) interests but does not place similar expectations on men. Many women members of BetweenTheSheets.com who engage in active anal sex with their husbands express reservations about the practice, despite their participation. One member writes, ''I am finally at the stage where I can willingly do this for him because I know how much he enjoys it, although I still struggle

from time to time with the moral correctness of it.'' Another member expresses a similar sentiment, sharing how she eventually agreed to participate in pegging because it pleases her husband: ''It's not my cup of tea, but over [the course of] our marriage, I've slowly opened up to a lot of things to bless [my husband].'' Of course, many men who use Christian sexuality websites also make compromises and use the sites, in part, to find advice on ways to better pleasure their wives. The difference between men and women who use these sites is that women are less likely to express sexual interests that challenge normative gender roles.

Paradoxically, then, using gender omniscience to justify non-normative sex simultaneously maintains men's privileged status within Christian marriages while at the same time gives some power to women over their sexual relationships. Since a wife possesses gender omniscience, website users question the motives of nonnormative sex acts when a wife's consent is not obtained. They are especially wary of non-normative solo sex play, since lack of spousal participation could signal an unhealthy attachment to these acts. For acts that could be considered gender deviant, like pegging and cross-dressing, website users always question whether or not an individual has made his desire to participate in these acts apparent to his spouse. In discussing a man's secret fantasies to wear his wife's lingerie, BetweenTheSheets.com members respond with harsh concern: they question his heterosexuality and gender identity, advise him to avoid acting on his impulses without talking to his wife, and probe about why he has such a desire that he wants to remain hidden. One member instructs, ''either talk to her [wife] about it, or let it go. But don't indulge in secret.'' A wife's approval, therefore, is necessary to confirm gender normalcy and justify non-normative sex.

Yet because gender omniscience relies on the triangulated relationships between a man, his wife, and God, website users often encourage men to turn to God rather than dismiss certain sex acts that their partners have refused. Using one's relationship with God to influence the marriage relationship, one BetweenTheSheets.com member shares, ''one thing I've just recently started doing is praying for our sex life. I never thought it would have such an effect … We still haven't done it [pegging] but my wife has opened up a lot.'' Another member offers advice for a member whose wife refuses to peg: ''Just give your

DW [dear wife] some time and pray about it .... My DW was a little hesitant but I do believe now she enjoys pleasing me.'' These stories do not take into account a wife's feelings of responsibility to participate in sex proposed by her husband, but rather assume that God has convinced a spouse to engage in these acts, masking male privilege.

God's Omniscience

Men who use Christian sexuality websites draw upon God's approval of sexual intimacy and pleasure to make decisions about the appropriateness of non-normative sex. As popular authors, Clifford and Joyce Penner (1973: 327) write: ''God is in the bedroom—whether you invite him there are not.'' They instruct their readers to acknowledge God's role in their sexual lives: ''offer a quiet inner prayer, thanking God for those pleasant, exciting, satisfying feelings. Recognize that God approves of these feelings.'' Website users assume that, as devout believers, God will tell them whether or not a sex act is sinful. As Xena, an owner of an online Christian sex-toy store, told me in response to a question about whether or not sex toys are appropriate for all couples, ''it is not my job to be the Holy Spirit and convict people. I let God do the work to convict them.'' Xena and other website users rely on God (or more specifically, the Holy Spirit) to act as a ''guilty conscience''— if pious men or women have sex outside of God's design, they'll be able to sense it. Using feelings associated with their prayer life, website users make claims about God's gender omniscience in order to justify the sex they desire as being normal and good.

In threads about cross-dressing, posters set the tone by describing their relationships with God. On one BetweenTheSheets.com thread, for example, a member discloses his urge to wear women's lingerie and writes, ''I have prayed over this a lot and I feel like God is working on me, showing me the ugly parts of my heart.'' Other members respond with encouragement in resisting his urges; none suggest that his desires may be acceptable. Even website users who may condone crossdressing in some circumstances will not validate the practice if presented as disrupting the relationship between a believer and God. As one longtime BetweenTheSheets.com member writes in another thread about cross-dressing, ''I have no clear Biblical stance that irrefutably tells you that wearing your bride's underwear is considered

[sin], but I will also not talk you out of feeling guilty if God is the one poking at your spirit.'' As this user puts it, evangelicals should pay attention to anything ''poking at the spirit,'' or making one question the sexual acts in which he engages.

On the other hand, website users are much more likely to approve of nonnormative sex if a poster articulates his belief that God approves of this type of sex for him. A member of BetweenTheSheets.com puts it this way, writing to another member who is interested in but cautious about pursuing pegging, ''God knows your heart and the real reasons that you want this.'' Similarly, one male reader of LustyChristianLadies.com writes of the way he senses God's approval of pegging through his prayer life: ''I was talking [to] God about it AGAIN and I really felt the Lord say to me 'I love what you and [your] wife have together.''' In another thread, a member defends his interest in cross-dressing by showing that he has read the Bible for guidance: ''while it may be a bit naughty, I don't think I am violating any OT [Old Testament] passages … I am not rejecting my role as a man … and [I am] not wanting to be a woman … My conscience is clear here.'' Website users rely on their intimate relationships with God to make decisions about appropriate or inappropriate sexual conduct.

Because they believe in a deeply personal relationship with God, some website users refrain from passing judgment about others' marginal sexual practices. In response to one reader's negative comment about pegging on LustyChristianLadies.com—''That is a complete role reversal and I can't imagine that God would be pleased with that!''—a site contributor responds, ''I would caution any of you who presumes to know what God is thinking. Just because you are uncomfortable with a particular act, doesn't mean it's inherently wrong or sinful.'' When it comes to gender normalcy especially, evangelicals rely on God's omniscience in order to determine whether or not a couple may engage in pegging or cross-dressing and maintain their maleness or femaleness. As one member of BetweenTheSheets.com writes, ''the Bible says that man looks to outward appearance; while God looks to the heart.'' Online discussions that discuss cross-dressing and pegging reveal that at stake in gender normalcy is not proving an objective truth related to gender appearances, but rather proving a piety aligned with God's authority.

Conclusion

While there is much research on how evangelicals talk about the sexuality of others—teens, gays, or secular society at large (Gardner, 2011; Gerber, 2011; Herzog 2008)—little is known about the limits or possibilities of (hetero)sexuality within evangelical marriages. This article shows how evangelicals use the internet to shape, interpret and make meaning of sex in ways different than what is presented in popular evangelical literature. Men who are interested in non-normative sex take their religious beliefs about sexuality to a logical extreme—extending the advice of popular authors who emphasize mutual pleasure and sexual permissiveness within marriage in order to justify sex acts that seem inappropriate within an evangelical context. My findings show how men who are interested in pegging and cross-dressing justify their interest by relying on the gender omniscience of their spouse and God. In proving that both God and their spouse *know* that they are gender normal, these website users uphold standards of their faith related to gender and (hetero) sexuality and ensure their masculine status.

For religious persons, beliefs about gender and sexuality rely on more than nature and biology. Faith in the divine requires individual and collective interpretations about God's will. To describe religions like conservative Protestantism, Catholicism, Mormonism, and some sects of Islam as supporting gender essentialism fails to capture the *super*natural dimension of religious beliefs. As anthropologist TM Luhrmann (2012: 66) writes: "People learn to recognize God's voice through rules that are socially taught and collectively shared, but also in ways that are private, individual, and unique." She compares recognizing God's voice to learning to taste wine—there are guidelines for how to do it but individual experience and understanding matter greatly. This article shows that the dynamic and personal ways in which evangelicals relate to God influences how they make sense of their gender and sexual identities. Gender omniscience, like essentialism, perpetuates the belief that gender is natural and fixed (and by extension, so too is heterosexuality), but importantly, it reveals how this belief comes into being through the lived experiences of individuals' sexual lives.

I speculate that men discuss their interest in non-normative sex on Christian sexuality websites more frequently than women because

there is more at stake for men to express interest in these acts. The validation of their sexual interests from other believers helps these men maintain their privileged status as straight and Godly men. Online discussions about non-normative sex reflect what Foucault, (1990 [1978]) calls "the speaker's benefit," where those who are able to talk about sex within a repressed culture appear free from that repression. The very act of talking about subjects that are marginalized and taboo within broader evangelical culture (like male anal play, for example) is a way to gain hold over those subjects and imbue them with alternate meanings. The internet allows its users to interactively reconstruct what it means to be an evangelical man—to collectively offer feedback and credibility for beliefs about gender and sexuality that accommodate both their religious framework and their unique sexual interests.

The logic presented in online evangelical discussions—that justification beyond heterosexuality is required for certain gender subversive acts—shows that gender, and specifically hegemonic masculinity, are not *inevitable* products of heterosexuality. Evangelical men who are interested in non-normative sex must actively work to achieve their gender status separate from, though closely related to, their heterosexuality in order to make the sex in which they engage "normal" and "masculine." This supports what many theorists have already argued: that gender and sexuality are distinct categories of analysis (Jackson, 2006; Rubin, 1999 [1984]), and it pushes feminist and queer thinking further by urging us to examine the multiple ways in which gender and sexuality interact to both normalize and subvert identities. For the evangelicals in this study, asymmetrical and binary gender categories are used to justify sex play that may appear to confuse these categories and level gender imbalances.

My findings reveal that normalizing gender-deviant sex does not challenge male dominance within contemporary evangelical culture. Research shows how many evangelicals are symbolically traditional but pragmatically egalitarian (Smith, 2000)—that is, their everyday lives appear gender-equal even when they support men's headship and women's submission. Influenced by feminist rhetoric and the practical demands of modern life like the need for a two-person income, many evangelicals adjust their expectations for gender so that women can work outside of the home and men can be loving caretakers (Stacey, 1990; Wilcox, 2004). My study, on the other hand, offers an example of beliefs that appear progressive but perpetuate gender hierarchies.

Even though evangelicals use gender-equal language to discuss sexual pleasure, evangelical men are uniquely privileged to talk about, gain support for, and fulfill their sexual interests. Messages that suggest that women are as much in control of their sexual lives as men mask the ways in which male privilege is reinforced (Burkett and Hamilton, 2012; Messner, 1993).

Evangelicals who insist that non-normative sex can be normal *for them* illuminate the ways in which heteronormativity and male privilege are wrought with tensions and contradictions (O'Brien, 2008). While participating in the sexual play they desire, these evangelicals do not admit to any deviance, queerness, or effeminacy; instead, they discursively restore standards of masculinity and femininity that privilege men and exclude non-heterosexuals from "good" and Godly sex. Yet, evangelicals who engage in discursive normalizing of nonnormative acts inadvertently reveal the unstable ground on which an evangelical sexual logic supposedly stands. Turning to online communities to gain religious traction for their sexual interests, website users rely on subjective and collective experiences to make sense of their sexual lives. In this way, they undermine an anti-queer position based on supposedly objective "truth." Future research would benefit from exploring the ways in which religious beliefs and practices may reproduce *and undermine* heteronormativity, masculinities, and other forms of "normal."

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Notes

1. The names of websites and their users are pseudonyms. Even though website users cannot assume complete privacy when posting comments online, I attempt to ethically navigate internet research by respecting users' general expectations that their comments will not be used for purposes other than to

contribute to the online forums in which they participate (Buchanan, 2004). I quote and describe online content as anonymously as possible.

2. All of the websites in my study reveal evangelical tenets, and 72% of the 768 website users I surveyed are affiliated with evangelical denominations or are self-identified evangelicals. Some evangelical denominations include Assemblies of God, Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Pentecostal Church of God, Seventh Day Adventist, Southern Baptist Convention, Vineyard Churches, and those labeled ''nondenominational.''
3. Quotations from interviews are specified as such; all other quotations are drawn from website posts.
4. For the website users I surveyed (n=768), 92% report that it is almost always wrong or always wrong for two consenting adults of the same-sex to have sex, compared to 75% of evangelicals nationally who disagree or strongly disagree that sexual relations between two consenting adults of the same-sex is all right (National Survey of Family Growth, 2006–2010).
5. While the readership of these books is difficult to determine, most authors are well integrated into mainstream evangelicalism. Co-authors Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus (1999) have appeared on the *Focus on the Family* radio show. Author Shannon Ethridge (2008) is a spokesperson for TeenMania, one of America's largest evangelical youth organizations. Tim LaHaye, co-author of one of the earliest evangelical sex advice books that has reportedly sold over 2 million copies (LaHaye and LaHaye, 1976), is also the author of the best-selling Christian fiction series, *Left Behind*. Pastor Mark Driscoll's recent book (Driscoll and Driscoll, 2012) was listed by the *New York Times* as the number one bestseller in its category upon its release (*New York Times*, 2012).
6. My findings suggest that anal sex, regardless of who penetrates, is discouraged by most evangelicals who write about sexual pleasure. Discussions online and by evangelical authors usually assume a male penetrator and scrutinize the act despite the fact that men are dominant and women are passive. Yet, because the social stigma associated with men who are sexually receptive (as Guy Hocquenghem, 1993: 101 quips, ''Seen from behind we are all women''), the penetration of a man's anus is likely treated more severely by most evangelicals than other forms of anal play.

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