

Summary of the study "Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors of (Highly) Religious Christians" (short: the "empirica Sexuality Study")

conducted by the empirica Research Institute for Youth, Culture & Religion

Project lead: Prof. Dr. Tobias Künkler

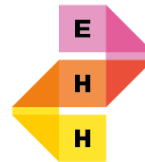
Co-leads: Prof. Dr. Daniel Wegner & Prof. Dr. Tobias Faix

Research team: Lucas B. Döbel, Celine Fischer, Amelie Knappe, Dorothé Müller, Jennifer Paulus, Tabea Peters, Leonie Preck, Ramona Wanie

The empirica Sexuality Study was conducted by the empirica Research Institute for Youth, Culture & Religion, located at YMCA University of Applied Sciences in Kassel. The multi-year project (2022-2025) was funded by Stiftung Christliche Medien (SCM), a German Christian foundation affiliated with Christian publishing and media work. The mixed methods project consisted of three sub-studies with different methodological approaches. They were conducted sequentially and complemented one another (see Deepening 1 below):

- Sub-study 1: Discourse analysis of 17 Christian sexual self-help books published by SCM (1970-2021), 125 magazine articles published between 2013 and 2021 in SCM Bundes-Verlag magazines (AUFATMEN, Family, DRAN, Teensmag, MOVO & Joyce) and current social media posts (analysis of Christian influencers on Instagram who address faith and sexuality). How is sexuality addressed – or omitted? Which themes and argumentative patterns are consistently used?
- Sub-study 2: Qualitative interview study with 14 Christians aged 25-35 years, focusing on what tensions and dilemmas Christians perceive regarding sexuality and how they cope with them.
- Sub-study 3: Quantitative online survey (N = 10,608), focusing on Christians' understandings of sexuality, sexual self-concepts, and attitudes to sexual ethics, their sexual behavior, and how these aspects relate to theological assumptions and religious beliefs.

This summary serves to contextualize and interpret key findings from all three studies. Part 1 describes the procedure, target group and aims of the study; Part 2 summarizes its main results.ⁱ



1 Aims and research design of the study

Topic and research motivation

Questions of gender and sexuality are a sensitive issue within Christian contexts and debates and, at times, the subject of intense culture wars. Many identify a polarization of sexual ethics within Christianity as the underlying cause. The empirica Sexuality Study therefore set out to examine more closely whether such polarization actually exists or whether it is primarily the loud and extreme voices on either side that gain public attention and shape this narrative. Against the backdrop of broader societal trends and church controversies, we were particularly interested in how Christians live (and experience) their sexuality, which attitudes to sexual ethics they hold, how attitudes and behavior relate to one another, and how both connect to the specific church and congregational contexts. Of further interest was how these aspects relate to different dimensions of faith, for example attachment to God and affiliation with a church or congregation.

The study aimed to build a clear, evidence-based foundation for open and constructive conversations, even when people have opposing views on sexual ethics within the Christian community. A central concern was to enable Christians to name and communicate issues related to their sexuality. Accordingly, the study seeks to foster the ability to speak about sexuality, which is not only a key factor for sexual education and sexual health, but also for the prevention of sexualized violence. In addition, the study aimed to capture the lived realities of individuals as well as congregations, in order to provide support and suggestions primarily for church and congregational practice, for example for pastors, chaplains, congregational educators, youth workers, deacons, or therapists. The findings are also relevant for various fields of social work.

To ensure both high scientific quality and practical relevance, the empirica Sexuality Study was accompanied from the outset by three advisory bodies:

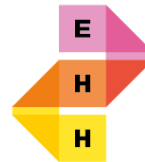
- a scientific advisory board with experts who advised on substantive, methodological, and methodological issues;
- an advisory board composed of senior leaders from different Christian denominations, associations and organizations;
- a practice advisory board with representatives from congregational practice and (sexual) counselling.

When composing these bodies, attention was paid to diversity and heterogeneity of members, especially with regard to theological positions and confessional affiliation.ⁱⁱ

Research questions and focal areas

Overall, the empirica Sexuality Study was guided by six core research foci and questions:

1. Understandings of sexuality among Christians: What fundamental understandings of sexuality do Christians hold?



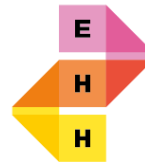
2. Sexual self-concept: What sexual self-concepts do Christians hold? Key elements often include how they relate to their own bodies and how satisfied they feel with their sexual lives.
3. Attitudes to sexual ethics: – What are Christians’ sexual-ethical attitudes? Key aspects are attitudes toward solo sexuality, the legitimacy of sexual intercourse outside of marriage, attitudes toward gender issues, and attitudes toward homosexuality and sexual diversity.
4. Sexual behavior: What forms of sexual behaviors do Christians practice? Key aspects include sexual fantasies, practices of solo sexuality, consumption of pornography, couple sexuality, communication about sexuality and gender differences.
5. Interrelations between understandings of sexuality, sexual self-concept, attitudes to sexual ethics and sexual behavior with theological assumptions: What relationships exist between these constructs and theological assumptions? Key aspects include the attachment to God, views of Scripture, understandings of sin, anthropology, and assumptions about creation order and purity/holiness.
6. Dilemma/tension between theological assumptions, societal context conditions and biographical experiences: What tensions and dilemmas related to sexuality do (highly) religious Christians perceive and how do they navigate them?

A key question running through all six focal areas was: What role do church and congregation play for the sexuality of (highly) religious Christians?

Deepening 1: Religious and highly religious Christians

The study focused on attitudes and behaviors of (highly) religious Christians in German-speaking contexts. The distinction between religious and highly religious Christians refers to the intensity or centrality of a person's religiosity. This can be measured - independent of religious, confessional, or denominational affiliation - using quantitative assessment across six dimensions: ideology (belief content); private practice; public practice; religious experience; intellect; consequences in everyday life. Based on the measured intensity, people can be distinguished as highly religious, religious, or non-religious. A person is considered highly religious if religiosity (or faith) is central in their life and strongly shapes other life domains, life conduct, and values - for example, political attitudes or the way sexuality is approached. Religious people also consider faith important, but more as a sub-domain of life and therefore not necessarily as something that shapes all other domains. The measure used to capture centrality of religiosity is well established, having been applied in more than a hundred studies across 25 countries and has also been used in the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Religion Monitor.

As described, the study focused on Christian religious people in German-speaking contexts. Non-religious people and religious people from other religious communities and traditions were not part of the target group. The study sought to cover the full confessional and denominational breadth of Christianity in German-speaking contexts. Accordingly, the study included members of the Protestant Church (specifically, a member church of the EKD), the Catholic Church, Protestant



Free Churches, Orthodox Churches and Christian religious people who do not belong to a church or congregation. Not all sub-studies attained this breadth to the same degree. In addition, there was a focus on churches of the Reformation. Due to the specialization of the empirica institute and the context of the funding body, the study also had a particular (though not exclusive) focus on highly religious Christians. The interview study and parts of the discourse analysis examined a specific segment of the highly religious sector within Reformation churches in German-speaking contexts more closely: Christians shaped by pietist and/or evangelical traditions, who may or may not be affiliated with a (free) church or congregation.

Deepening 2: The mixed methods research design

In Phase 1, we conducted a systematic review of the existing research. At the same time, the discourse analysis of books and magazines started. This analysis was based on the assumption that basic understandings of sexuality and attitudes to sexual ethics - and, to a lesser extent, sexual behaviors - are partly shaped by relevant discourses. Accordingly, the analysis aimed to identify which Christian understandings of sexuality appear in the examined discourses and how sexuality is addressed. We examined what is addressed, how it is addressed (e.g., based on which theological premises and through which argumentative patterns or metaphors), and also what is hardly addressed or not addressed at all. Both the books and magazines came from publishers that today belong to the SCM publishing group. A key result of Phase 1 was the identification of two different Christian basic understandings of sexuality. These results also provided the basis for further specifying research questions and designing the subsequent sub-studies.

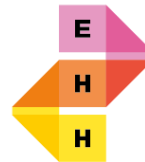
Because the first two discourse analyses focused on SCM media and therefore on discourses within a specific pietist and/or evangelical segment, Phase 2 added a third discourse analysis of Instagram posts by Christian influencers. It built on the findings of the first two analyses and contrasted them by focusing on more liberal forms of highly religious discourse.

The interview study was prepared and conducted alongside the survey. It drew on the previously identified basic understandings by examining how tensions and dilemmas in dealing with sexuality are reflected in the subjective perceptions of 14 Christians aged 25-35.

At the same time, the online survey was prepared; its fielding and data analysis took place in Phase 3. Building on the discourse analyses, it aimed to quantitatively test the qualitative findings more broadly and to systematically analyze associations between understandings of sexuality, sexual self-concepts, attitudes to sexual ethics, sexual behavior, and theological assumptions and convictions.

Qualitative data analysis in the discourse analyses and the interview study followed Kuckartz and Rädiker's (2022) structured qualitative content analysis; in the interview study, data were additionally coded axially.

In the analysis of the online survey, frequency distributions, measures of central tendency and dispersion, sum and mean scores, as well as a differentiation into eight groups (based on religiosity/high religiosity and church affiliation) were conducted, among other analyses. In



addition, cross-sectional analyses by gender, age, sexual orientation, relationship status, church/congregational affiliation, education and other variables were performed, along with intercorrelation tables, hypothesis testing (bivariate and multivariate), theory-driven typology construction, and further multivariate analyses (e.g., regression analyses).

2 Main results

In the following, we present a small selection of findings that emerged across all sub-studies. We organize these results in line with the sub-questions outlined above. For the comprehensive and more in-depth findings and their discussion, we refer readers to the two volumes resulting from the study, *Unsere Geschichte mit Sex: Einblicke in laute Debatten und leise Lebensgeschichten. Qualitative Ergebnisse der empirica Sexualitätsstudie (Our History with Sex: Insights into Loud Debates and Quiet Life Stories. Qualitative Findings of the empirica Sexuality Study)* and *Sexualität und Glaube: Prägungen, Einstellungen und Lebensweisen. Quantitative Ergebnisse der empirica Sexualitätsstudie (Sexuality and Faith: Socialization, Attitudes and Lived Practices. Quantitative Findings of the empirica Sexuality Study)*, as well as to the research report.ⁱⁱⁱ

Understandings of sexuality: What basic understandings of sexuality do Christians hold?

Thesis 1: *There are two nearly opposing Christian fundamental understandings of sexuality, with a broad continuum between them.*

Christian understandings of sexuality describe a fundamental orientation toward an interpretation of sexuality that is grounded in (lay) theological reasoning. The discourse analysis showed that, across the books, journals and social media posts examined, two nearly contradictory fundamental understandings of sexuality can be identified, with numerous gradations in between. At one end of the continuum, a fundamental understanding emerged that views sexuality primarily as dangerous and therefore evaluates it in largely negative terms. Marriage is regarded as the only healthy framework capable of containing and regulating this force. Consequently, sexuality is considered legitimate only within this framework. Solo sexuality is viewed very critically and is deemed legitimate only in exceptional cases. Sexual pleasure is not to be pursued as an end in itself and is quickly associated with addiction, particularly in connection with pornography. This fundamental understanding is also accompanied by a clearly binary, essentialist conception of gender and a pronounced moral double standard: men are portrayed as strong sexual beings who are constantly at risk of being overwhelmed by their sexuality. Women, by contrast, are assigned the role of passive recipients and are implicitly attributed a (shared) responsibility for men's sexual purity and sexual satisfaction.

At the opposite end of the continuum, sexuality is not viewed as ambivalent—with its many gradations between extremes—but as an entirely positive force. From this perspective, sexuality appears almost idealised, even bordering on the kitschy, in the sense that it is presented without

internal tension or contradiction. All negative aspects are located at the structural level and are thus not primarily attributed to sexuality itself. Rather than a divinely ordained order, the God-given freedom and capacity to love constitute the central ethical criteria for the expression of sexuality. The key boundary between legitimate and illegitimate sexuality is not the marital bond, but consent. Accordingly, any form of sexuality to which two (or more) individuals agree in a given situation is considered legitimate. Solo sexuality is understood as an expression of self-love and is therefore also associated with the love of God. Essentialist conceptions of gender are questioned and sexual diversity is celebrated.

However, most of the discourses examined—and many respondents as well—do not situate themselves at the extremes but rather within a broad, ambivalent middle ground: sexuality is viewed simultaneously as a gift and a risk; sexual pleasure is evaluated positively but is tied to marriage or to responsibility. This duality is also evident in the quantitative data, where the spectrum between the two poles plays a particularly significant role.^{iv}

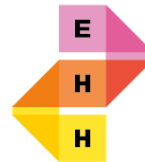
Attitudes to sexual ethics: What attitudes to sexual ethics do Christians hold?

Thesis 2: Fundamental understandings of sexuality, specific sexual-ethical positions, and how individuals' belief are closely interrelated.

The online survey demonstrates that fundamental understandings of sexuality and attitudes to sexual ethics are strongly associated; this also applies to the various dimensions of sexual ethics. For example, respondents who assume that there are more than two genders are highly likely to regard masturbation as an appropriate expression of healthy self-love. Conversely, participants holding a binary-essentialist conception of gender almost universally evaluate solo sexuality as problematic or sinful. The data also reveal an association between fundamental understandings of sexuality and sexual ethics on the one hand and the intensity of religiosity or attachment to God on the other. However, this relationship is markedly stronger with respect to how individuals believe. Thus, respondents who locate themselves theologically as conservative or who endorse fundamentalist convictions almost invariably agree with sexually restrictive statements (e.g., “Sexuality is legitimate only within marriage”). By contrast, the data also include highly religious individuals with more liberal theological orientations who, for instance, view same-sex partnerships or diverse relationship forms as legitimate expressions of God's love.

Thesis 3: Although there are sexual-ethical trigger issues (premarital abstinence, gender and sexual diversity), not all dimensions of sexual ethics are characterized by polarization.

Nearly a quarter of respondents exhibited a clearly conservative sexual ethic, while slightly more than a quarter held a liberal orientation. Approximately one third showed a moderately conservative orientation and just under one fifth positioned themselves somewhere in between. Regarding attitudes toward masturbation and sexual fantasies, there were clear majorities in favor and, in most cases, only a minority expressing rejection. For example, almost two thirds of respondents stated that masturbation represents an appropriate way for them to engage with their sexual needs. By contrast, polarizing tendencies were observed with respect to premarital abstinence, the question of the number of genders and positions on homosexuality. For instance,



for nearly half of respondents, the marital bond constituted the legitimate framework for sexuality, whereas this was not the case for almost all the other half.

Sexual self-concept: What sexual self-concepts do Christians report? Key aspects are the relationship to one's own body and sexual satisfaction.

Thesis 4: Sexual agency, more positive experiences of sexuality in intimate relationships and a more positive stance toward solo sexuality go together.

In the study, sexual self-concept was measured as sexual agency. This includes (a) the ability to communicate sexual needs, (b) individual sexual satisfaction, (c) the ability to experience sexuality as a reciprocal relational event, as well as (d) sexual self-responsibility - the ability to shape one's sexual life in a self-determined and responsible way. Sexual agency was measurably associated with more positive sexual experiences in relationships: higher sexual satisfaction in marriage, better communication about sexuality in relationships and greater closeness to one's partner. With regard to solo sexuality, people with higher sexual agency tended to report a more relaxed approach: both attitudes and feelings toward masturbation were less negative on average.

Thesis 5: Christians' sexual agency is only weakly related to their religiosity.

About three quarters of respondents showed high sexual agency. Beyond the associations mentioned above, people with higher sexual agency reported having sexual intercourse more often, experiencing stronger sexual desire and being more satisfied overall with their sex life. Notably, sexual agency showed no substantial associations with centrality of religiosity, theological self-assessment, attachment to God, or fundamentalist attitudes. This contradicts the frequently voiced assumption that a more intense or more conservative faith is automatically associated with reduced sexual agency.

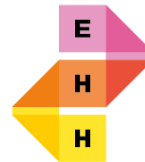
Sexual behavior: What sexual behaviors do Christians practice?

Thesis 6: Christians report both more (when married) and less (when without a partner) intercourse than the population average.

A differentiated comparison by age, gender, and relationship status between the survey data and a representative study of the German general population shows that respondents in committed relationships or marriages reported engaging in intercourse more frequently than the population average. For example, the proportion of respondents who reported having sexual intercourse more than ten times in the last four weeks was higher among partnered participants in the empirica sample than among partnered individuals in the general population (women: 26% vs. 20%; men: 29% vs. 18%). The reverse pattern held for singles, defined as those not currently in a relationship. The Proportion reporting no sexual activity in the last four weeks was substantially higher among singles in the empirica sample, especially among male singles (89% vs. 68%).

Thesis 7: Christians are not (much) more prudish.

Unusual sexual practices were tried only slightly less often by respondents than by the general population. For example, 2% in the empirica sample (vs. 3% in the general population) reported



having had sex in a swingers' club and/or partner swapping; 42% in the general population and 35% in the empirica sample reported having tried a dildo or vibrator at least once. The only clear exception was watching pornography together as a couple: about half of the general population reported having tried this, compared to roughly one sixth in the empirica sample.

What are the associations between understandings of sexuality, sexual self-concept, attitudes to sexual ethics, sexual behavior and theological assumptions?

Thesis 8: For most people, faith and sexual behavior belong to two different worlds.

In most cases, sexuality-related variables (with the exception of attitudes to sexual ethics) and faith-related variables appeared to stem from two different worlds with little direct connection. There were many correlations within each world (sexuality or faith), but fewer - and mostly very weak - correlations between the two. One of the few points of connection between these worlds appears to be dualistic assumptions. Here, dualism refers to patterns of thought that treat body and soul as separate, often accompanied by a devaluation of the bodily dimension. The more conservative and the more fundamentalist respondents were, the more dualistic their assumptions tended to be. Stronger dualistic assumptions, in turn, were associated with higher hypersexuality. Hypersexuality here refers to compulsive sexual thoughts and behaviors experienced as distressing and characterized by the feeling of being driven by sexual fantasies and thoughts.

Thesis 9: Christians with conservative sexual ethics often live in contradiction to their own convictions.

Among three out of ten Christians with a more conservative sexual ethic, lived sexual practices deviated from their ethical attitudes. This applied to positions on sexual ethics regarding sexuality outside of marriage, solo sexuality, pornography use, and sexual fantasies. For example, approximately one third of those who did not regard masturbation as an appropriate way to engage with their sexual needs reported masturbating at least several times per month, indicating a lack of alignment between attitudes and behavior. Men (compared to women) and singles (compared to individuals in a relationship) were more likely to exhibit such incongruences.

Thesis 10: Incongruences are measurably associated with negative feelings and outcomes, stress, and lower sexual satisfaction.

These incongruences should be understood not primarily in terms of implicit moral judgment, but rather from a health perspective. The data clearly demonstrate that the greater the incongruence, the less satisfied individuals are with their own sexuality and—with married respondents—with sexual activity within their marriage. Moreover, higher incongruence is associated with higher levels of hypersexuality. Another finding aligns with this pattern: approximately one quarter of respondents agreed with the statement that they feel guilty when they masturbate, and nearly one fifth reported feeling humiliated. It appears—and was also vividly confirmed in the interview study—that these masturbation-related scruples stem from incongruence with current attitudes or represent residual effects of prior religious socialization.

Thesis 11: Findings regarding (religious) socialization, current attitudes, and continuities/discontinuities between them are contradictory.

In the online survey, religious socialization played a surprisingly minor role in respondents' current sexual lives. Their current theological positions, attitudes toward sexual ethics and fundamental orientations proved far more decisive. This contrasts with the results of the interview study, in which (religious) socialization was perceived by most participants as highly significant. The tensions experienced today were largely attributed by interviewees to their sexual socialization. Respondents also often experienced their own sexual behavior in a tension-laden relationship with their socialization: on the one hand, because it was shaped by it, and on the other hand, because it sometimes consciously diverged from it. This raises the question: Is the role of socialization in shaping one's sexuality overemphasized in the biographical interviews, or was religious socialisation measured with insufficient validity in the quantitative survey? It should be noted that the process itself was not directly measured in either study. At the same time, the typology analysis showed that individuals who experience biographical continuity between their family upbringing and their current attitudes—both in matters of faith and sexuality—report higher sexual satisfaction and better sexual health than the two types characterised by discontinuities between socialisation and present orientations. Put more succinctly: the apple that rolls far from the tree finds the ground less forgiving.

Dilemma/Tension between theological assumptions, societal context conditions, and biographical experiences: What tensions and dilemmas regarding sexuality do (highly) religious Christians perceive and how do they cope with them?

Thesis 12: There are multiple tensions between faith and sexuality, with women experiencing these tensions more acutely.

In the interview study, participants described a variety of tensions, most of which were evaluated negatively and sometimes accompanied by emotional distress. These included tensions within their own sexuality, tensions regarding societal attitudes toward sexuality and tensions relating to experiences at the intersection of faith and sexuality. Regarding tensions within their own sexuality, participants most frequently mentioned issues in partnered sexual relationships, but also tensions arising from a Christian-influenced conscience, when their actual sexual behavior was perceived as inconsistent with the (supposedly) Christian ideal. In addition, women in particular reported tensions related to their gender—for example, frustration stemming from the perception that female sexuality is more complex or that different sexual expectations are placed on men and women. Other tensions arose from differences between societal norms and the normative expectations of the Christian environment, for example on issues such as sexual diversity, sex education and feminism. Again, it was primarily women who reported tensions

arising from personal sexual experiences. The most frequently cited experiences involved sexualized violence and sexism.

Cross-sectional Dimensions and Miscellaneous Findings

Thesis 13: Communication about sexuality in church and congregation: quantity over quality.

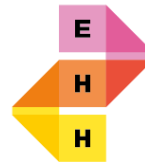
The findings indicate that sexuality is discussed more frequently in conservative congregations, likely because in more liberal circles sexuality is regarded primarily as a private matter. However, in conservative congregations, the focus was predominantly on sexual norms and morality, with the aim of providing theological guidance. All interviewees reported formative experiences in church and congregational settings related to their sexual socialization. Yet these experiences were mostly evaluated negatively. Criticisms included the strong dualism between “being abstinent” and “being sexually active,” as well as the use of identity markers that equate proper sexual behavior with being a “true” Christian. At the same time, many participants felt insufficiently supported by church and congregation, as topics relevant to their personal sexual lives were rarely addressed. Respondents expressed a desire for less emphasis on ethics and morality and more practical guidance, behavioral advice and authentic personal accounts concerning sexuality across different life situations.

Thesis 14: Communication about sexuality in the family: encouragement of abstinence rather than exploration.

The books examined in the discourse analysis assign a very high significance to the family of origin. Similarly, in the interview study, participants emphasized the central role of their family background in their sexual socialization. The vast majority of interviewees evaluated their familial upbringing negatively (regardless of whether it was Christian or not), with sexuality being a taboo subject in most families. In the online survey, a small majority of respondents indicated that the Christian faith played at least a significant role in their upbringing. Just over one in ten reported being encouraged by their parents to explore their own sexuality, whereas a slim majority stated that they were encouraged to remain abstinent. While there were differences between denominations, no differences were found with respect to age. Socialization toward abstinence therefore remains a persistent issue.

Thesis 15: A decoupling of gender and sexuality, as well as convergence in the behavior of men and women, is also evident among Christians.

The respondents’ gender played a surprisingly minor role in many aspects of the online survey. Some findings therefore contradicted common gender stereotypes—for example, Christian women were not sexually less satisfied than men, and intimacy in relationships well as honest conversations about sex and sexuality were highly important to men as well. Other results, however, aligned with gendered expectations: on average, men reported stronger sexual desire and indicated that they masturbate more frequently, as well as experiencing loss of control due to sexual desire more often and more intensely (hypersexuality).



Thesis 16: Non-binary and queer Christians tend to have a more relaxed relationship with their sexuality, despite risks and partly internalized homophobia.

Non-binary and queer respondents reported more liberal theological and attitudes to sexual ethics. Similar to men, both groups showed slightly higher sexual activity, but without comparable negative effects (such as strong self-rejection after masturbation) - presumably because of lower incongruence between attitudes and behavior. At the same time, non-binary and queer Christians are exposed to risks in church/congregational environments, such as sexualized violence and homophobia; this was evident in both the survey and the interviews.

Thesis 17: Couple sexuality: the importance of communication for sexual satisfaction in intimate relationships cannot be overestimated.

In the discourse analyses, both more and better communication was repeatedly presented as the number one solution to problems in couple sexuality. In the online survey, the quality of communication about sexuality in a relationship was indeed strongly correlated with satisfaction with marital sexuality. Communication quality was also associated with intimacy in relationships, sexual desire for one's partner and intercourse frequency. Strictly faith-related aspects played only a minor role in relation to the couple sexuality variables examined; only a more secure attachment to God was associated with greater marital sexual satisfaction.

Thesis 18: Religious socialization can also be a resource.

Interview and survey findings show that Christians experience their religious socialization in the area of sexuality not only as a restriction, but also as a resource. Commitment, high relationship orientation and shared values are often experienced as supportive for stable partnerships. For example, Tom emphasized the importance of communication and willingness to compromise in his marriage as essential for cultivating a sustainable sexual relationship. Others, such as Juliano, experience their congregation as a resource because respect and equality are central values that also shape the way sexuality is enacted. At the same time, Christians develop a variety of strategies to cope with tensions between norms and practice in everyday life - ranging from selectively adopting norms and reinterpretations to pragmatic ways of dealing with contradictions. These negotiations can make sexuality livable individually, even if not always conflict-free.

Thesis 19: Sexualized violence in church/congregational contexts is a reality (rarely uncovered and even more rarely adequately addressed).

The discourse analyses showed that sexualized violence was addressed in the examined discourses and in the interview study, it frequently played a role in the life stories of women interviewed. In the survey, 13% of respondents reported having experienced (attempted) rape, compared to 9% of the general population. About one eighth of those who had experienced sexualized violence reported that at least one incident occurred in a church or congregational context. Around three-quarters of these incidents occurring in church or congregational contexts remained undisclosed, and even fewer were addressed in any adequate way. Notably, experiences of sexualized violence in church contexts that were not adequately dealt with were associated with a more insecure attachment to God.

Thesis 20: In some books, sexualized violence within marriage is religiously legitimized and thereby made more likely.

The idea that women and girls are responsible not only for their own sexual purity, but also for that of their partners and other men (e.g., by not dressing 'too revealingly'), appeared repeatedly in Christian books, magazines and sermons. This is particularly associated with the first basic understanding of sexuality and linked to conservative gender stereotypes. For example, wives were advised: "As I see it, you have two options: either you initiate a loving relationship with your husband, or another woman will do it."^v Women in their marriages are therefore not only responsible for the success of their couple's sexual relationship but are also held partly accountable for the fidelity of their husband and other men. This moral double standard can shape a culture in which sexualized violence against women is facilitated and trivialized.

Thesis 21: A liberalization trend can also be observed among highly religious respondents.

The online survey suggests that even highly religious free church respondents have, on average, shifted toward a more liberal theological position over the last ten years - and indirectly in their sexual ethics as well (there is a strong association between the two). Women, in particular, reported an increase in liberal views in their self-understanding over the last ten years. In addition, among those who reported deviating from their church/congregation's sexual ethics, the majority held more liberal attitudes than their congregation. A certain liberalisation is also evident in the discourse analysis, where a more moderate conservative understanding has emerged—one that does not replace traditional conservatism but rather stands alongside it as an alternative. Given that the analysis of the online survey revealed no substantial generational differences across most dimensions, this liberalisation likely reflects broader societal influences rather than changes specific to particular age cohorts.

3 Implications

Church and Congregation

The findings show that religiosity is associated with ambivalent effects. On the one hand, highly religious respondents report above-average relational stability, high relationship satisfaction, and clear value orientation. These resources can be appreciated as strengths of church socialization. On the other hand, pronounced tensions arise when individual practice and internalized norms diverge. Experiences of guilt and shame are a substantial burden for many believers in these contexts.

Church education and pastoral care are therefore challenged to take both sides equally seriously, nurturing the positive resources of religiosity while also creating space to address its ruptures and contradictions. A contemporary sexual ethic should provide orientation without moralizing, and it should develop interpretive resources that relieve burden. Taboo topics need to be integrated

more strongly into church educational work. Constructive dialogue formats are helpful, in which faith, values and lived sexuality are brought into conversation.

- In pastoral care, training should strengthen conversational skills around sexuality and develop language for ambivalent experiences. Counselling services should be professionalized and tailored to different age groups.
- In congregational youth work, dialogical formats are needed in which young people can talk about sexual-ethical questions without fear of moral condemnation. Religious traditions should not be negated but openly discussed.
- Liturgy and preaching can also convey a positive view of embodiment and sexuality - for example through gratitude for one's own body, blessings for couples as well as singles, and language that recognizes sexuality as part of lived faith.

The study also makes clear that sexualized violence in church contexts is a serious problem. Prevention and accountability must therefore address organizational and theological dimensions. Safeguarding concepts must be implemented consistently, spaces for addressing violence must be opened, and those affected must be accompanied pastorally - without religious language becoming a renewed burden.

In addition, the results suggest that queer Christians are particularly in need of recognition, safe spaces and positive interpretive resources, so that their identity does not become a battleground between faith and sexuality, but can be lived in church contexts on an equal footing.

Social work and Counselling

The findings underscore the importance of religion-sensitive approaches in professional practice. Tensions between religious convictions and sexual practice should not be ignored, but intentionally addressed. This concerns dynamics of guilt and shame as well as other fields that are central for counselling practice:

- dealing with pornography consumption and the inner conflicts associated with it;
- experiences of loss of control in the context of hypersexuality;
- gender-specific differences - greater insecurities among women, more externalized problem patterns among men.

At the same time, religious individuals bring particular strengths—among them a relational outlook, a deep sense of commitment, and firm value orientation. Professional support should work in a resource-oriented way and help people develop constructive coping strategies.

- In prevention work, programs should be developed that acknowledge ambivalence and avoid moralizing. Dynamics of guilt and shame should be addressed explicitly.

- Information materials should be sensitive to religious contexts while remaining scientifically grounded. Professionals must be enabled to accompany young people without shaming them. Different religious contexts need to be taken into account.
- Stronger cooperation between social work and churches/congregations can prevent contradictory messages and foster holistic support. Social work can take on a bridging function here.

Science and Society

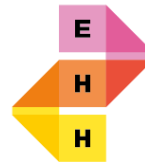
The study shows that religiosity does not lead to a homogeneous "sexual culture" but to diverse patterns differentiated by gender, confession/denomination, age group and centrality of religiosity. This implies, scientifically, that we should speak of a plurality of religious sexual cultures. Particularly relevant is how religious socialization affects sexual well-being, mental health and relationship quality over the long term.

Religiosity can generate both protective factors - such as relationship orientation and stability - and risks, especially when normative demands and lived practice diverge. The findings contribute to a more differentiated and evidence-based debate about sexuality and religion: religious spaces are not only associated with restrictions, but also with specific resources.

- In education, teachers and sexuality educators should learn to engage religious arguments constructively and integrate them into value discourse; professional development could provide important impetus.
- Media and politics should portray religious voices in a differentiated way rather than categorizing them as uniformly backward. At the same time, greater emphasis should be placed on the positive resources within religious narratives.
- In extremism prevention, it is important to recognize that a fundamentalist sexual ethic can create points of convergence with right-wing populist worldviews. Educational initiatives can counteract this by conveying differentiated images of religion and sexuality.

At the societal level, the question arises of how differing moral orientations can coexist within a pluralistic society. This calls for new dialogue and educational formats that acknowledge diversity and create spaces for negotiation, rather than reinforcing expectations of assimilation or devaluation.

ⁱ This provides only a very brief outline; for more detailed methodological background and elaborations, we recommend the study's research report, which can also be downloaded at www.sexualitätsstudie.de. This translation of the German summary was prepared with the assistance of artificial intelligence. The authors



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ⁱⁱ The scientific advisory board included Prof. Dr. Lämmlin (SI of the EKD), Prof. Dr. Ulrich Riegel (University of Siegen), Prof. Dr. Sabrina Müller (University of Bonn), Prof. Dr. Hempelmann (Theologische Hochschule Liebenzell), and Hans-Werner Durau (representative of the SCM Foundation). The practice advisory board included Mattias Bischofsberger, Dr. Ute Buth, Dr. Dorothea Greiner, Andrea Hansen, Dr. Andreas Heek, Dr. Ruth Hess, Sven Homann, Carsten Korinth, Martin Leupold, Birgit Mattausch, Veronika Schmidt, Tina Tschage, Mira Ungewitter, Bettina Wendland, and another person from a more conservative background who wished to remain anonymous. As we did not receive permission from all board members to publish their names, the composition of this board is not publicly disclosed.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wegner, D., Paulus, J., Preck, L., & Künkler, T. (2025). *Unsere Geschichte mit Sex: Einblicke in laute Debatten und leise Lebensgeschichten. Qualitative Ergebnisse der empirica Sexualitätsstudie*. R. Brockhaus. & Künkler, T., Peters, T., Wanie, R., & Faix, T. (2025). *Sexualität und Glaube: Prägungen, Einstellungen und Lebensweisen. Qualitative Ergebnisse der empirica Sexualitätsstudie*. R. Brockhaus. The research report is freely accessible and can be downloaded at www.sexualitätsstudie.de

^{iv} In the discourse analysis, we identified three fundamental understandings; in addition to the two extremes described above, there was also a modernized conservative understanding. In the quantitative analysis, the two extreme positions were found to reflect the breadth well; however, there is likely a fourth fundamental understanding that is more liberal than the modernized conservative understanding but more conservative than the fully liberal one.

^v Leman (2009). *Licht an, Socken aus!*, op. cit., p. 157.