

Why am I so drawn to these evangelical couple vloggers?

They're selling marriage as a promise and a return on investment. It's both misguided and genuinely appealing.

by [Hannah Wilson-Black](#) in the [March 2023](#) issue



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In summer 2020, I was at home between my freshman and sophomore years of college, riding out the pandemic, when I decided to paint my childhood bedroom. Alone, sweating, bored, miserable, and quite literally watching paint dry, I fell down a YouTube rabbit hole.

I don't remember how or why Nate and Sutton's video appeared in my "suggestions" or why I clicked on it. They looked like any number of White, heterosexual couples with TikTok or Instagram accounts who share funny or intimate moments online, usually with a jokey caption superimposed over the video. Here they were dancing to "Bad Guy" by Billie Eilish in the spacious living room of a spotless Georgia McMansion. The caption read: "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman

lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart, Matthew 5:28.”

My first instinct was to mock Nate and Sutton relentlessly. They’re White, but the filters they use make them look orange-pink; their Instagram account is all portraits of the two of them embracing in fields; Sutton wears boho felt hats; there are woven bowls nailed to their walls. The aesthetics of their online life layer a millennial sheen over conservative evangelical purity culture messaging that is decades old.

But Nate and Sutton also did something I had never seen on the internet before: they talked in detail about how they navigated sexual boundaries as a young couple.

It may be that such boundaries are just not a leading issue for most liberal-minded content creators. I’ve seen plenty of fairly explicit discussions of sex from coupled influencers whose brand revolves around their sexual orientations or gender identities—for example, a trans man who invites his cis woman partner onto his videos to discuss pre- and post-transition sexual intimacy. But I’d never seen a young, heterosexual, Christian couple like Nate and Sutton talk about the details of their sex lives. With YouTube videos titled “How Pornography Almost Ended Our Relationship,” “When God Writes Your Love Story,” and “How We Traveled the World Together as Virgins,” their sexual relationship is a major focus of their channel, even while they fly the flag of purity culture.

Once I clicked on that first video, the algorithm was relentless. I was fascinated. These people—this grinning, funny, almost-genuine online couple—were trying to sell me a clear line between bad desire and good: the signature line on a marriage certificate.

Nate and Sutton are just one example of what I found to be a genre. These couples know they provide an aspirational vision for young people already inclined, whether of their own volition or from community pressure, toward conservative Christianity. They seem almost countercultural at this moment. Monogamous commitment, the experience of “classic” romance, and mutual respect are at a premium for young people on the internet—young women in particular—and conservative Christian vloggers are selling marriage as a bastion of all three.

For digital natives like me and my Gen Z peers, modern romantic and sexual relationships can be especially formidable and treacherous when you have access to the whole world—and the world has access to you. On dating apps and social media platforms, we are faced with near-infinite freedom but also increased potential for

anonymity, dishonesty, and abuse. A 2015 Pew study showed that 8 percent of teens had met a romantic or sexual partner online. Thirty-five percent of teen girls had unfriended or blocked someone on social media because they were the target of unwanted or uncomfortable flirting.

From a *Psychology Today* article I learned vocabulary for practices even I hadn't heard of: *deepliking*, *beta testing*, *breadcrumbing*, and *curving*. Social media can make one feel closer to a real-life romantic partner, but it can also increase feelings of jealousy and insecurity. Social media users become anxious when their partners don't post about them, assuming (correctly or not) that this signals hesitancy or embarrassment about making the relationship public and exclusive.

Navigating sex as a teenager is just difficult. At 19, I was scared of my own increasingly insistent desire. It felt like a living thing I had to keep tied up so it could snap its teeth without getting loose. Taking sex seriously, ethically, meant asking hard questions. When do you cross the line in a sexual experience between seeing your partner as a complex human being and seeing them as a facilitator of physical pleasure? How do you make sure you never lose control, hurt someone, violate some kind of boundary, shock yourself? How could I be sure I wasn't using anyone? How could I be sure I wasn't being used?

I didn't want to "listen to my body" or "trust my instincts," as the progressive secular sources advised. I found this exhausting, anxiety-producing. No one could tell me when I would know it was time to "cross the line" and risk the physical and emotional ramifications of sex. I wanted to just let go, to lose myself, to put my full trust in someone or something else.

Nate is a videographer; Sutton raises their 2.5 children and manages their online presence. They have 48,100 Instagram followers and a YouTube fanbase of 187,000. Judging by the names, descriptions, and profile photos of commenters on Nate and Sutton's YouTube videos, many of them are earnest young Christian women and teenage girls who chat in the comments about saving themselves for marriage.

The purity movement of the 1990s and early 2000s, home of promise rings and virginity contracts, taught that God designed all of us for "biblical" marriage—one man, one woman, for life. Masturbation is a selfish act motivated by your basest instincts; it keeps you from God's presence. Women must monitor how we dress and behave, lest we cause a brother in Christ to "stumble." Sex is a door best opened

after marriage, and women, explicitly or implicitly, hold the keys in our white-knuckled grasp.

The popularity of the movement has waned in recent years. (Even Joshua Harris, author of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, has apologized for the harm the influential 1997 book caused.) But in private Christian school classrooms and conservative youth groups, it lives on. Impressionable young people are told that a person who sleeps around is like a piece of tape covered in glitter, an apple already bitten, a lollipop already licked, or a pile of logs set on fire. Who wants something already damaged, a piece of it missing and irreplaceable? You wouldn't want to ruin yourself, would you?

If the logic of the twisted metaphor is to be believed, you will still be ruined (licked, bitten, burned) eventually, but by the “right guy,” in which case it no longer counts as destruction. For those who hold fast to purity culture's teachings, marriage is the ultimate magic trick: it makes sex go from bad to good, with little nuance in between. Through some mysterious alchemy, what once counted as *using* your partner in dating becomes taking what you *deserve* in marriage—the boundaries dissolve.

Another vlogging couple, Kian (pronounced “Cayenne”) and Kyle, converted to evangelical Christianity in their 20s and call themselves born-again virgins.

“We can't wait to have sex,” Kian says in one video, giving a jaunty thumbs-up.

“Yeah, it's gonna be amazing, but that's for marriage,” Kyle adds.

“He doesn't touch me in certain areas, like my boobs or my butt, really,” Kian explains, with a straightforwardness that I find admirable and almost shocking.

“Saving that for the wedding,” Kyle says, as the camera zooms in on him winking at the viewer. Kian appears totally oblivious; that's part of the joke. The channel is in her name, so presumably she's in control of her own content, and yet she chooses to present herself as an example of feminine naïveté. On the other hand, Kian and Kyle are talking about religion and sex at a time when secular content creators aren't—and most liberal Protestants aren't, either.

Christian writer Katelyn Beaty, in an opinion piece for the *New York Times*, writes that she has found herself “mourning the loss of the coherent sexual ethic that

purity culture tried to offer.” She goes on:

Consent crucially protects against sexual assault and other forms of coercion. But it doesn’t necessarily protect against people using one another in quieter ways. I long for more robust categories of right and wrong besides consent—a baseline, but only that—and more than a general reminder not to be a jerk. I can get that from Dan Savage, but I also want to know what Jesus thinks.

Debra Haffner, an author, minister, and creator of the Sexually Safer Best Practice Initiative of the Unitarian Universalist Association, posits that progressive Christian leaders avoid all topics related to sex out of fear—of alienating congregants, of spurning other Christian groups they wish to collaborate with, of getting political. But, Haffner writes for the Center for American Progress, “the organized religious right has no such reluctance to address sexuality.”

For young, progressive Christians like me, the void yawns. Progressive church youth group lessons often omit any mention of sex; relatively few books or articles exist on the subject that don’t turn out to be subtly homophobic or shame-filled. If you’re a young person on the internet and you want to know what Jesus thinks, you’re much more likely to encounter videos by Nate and Sutton or Kian and Kyle than more progressive books on the topic by Bromleigh McCleneghan, Nadia Bolz-Weber, or Matthias Roberts.

Conservative Christian women influencers tend to support purity culture, whether they use that term or not. Many of them describe a childhood practice of journaling or creating a wish list about their future husbands. They’ve been waiting. For 18, 21, 25, 30 years, they’ve been waiting.

This may seem cringeworthy to the average observer on social media, and perhaps it is, but these influencers are selling one of life’s most valuable products, one they promise is worth the wait. They’re selling a promise and a return on investment. They’re selling safety from abuse by the “wrong guy.” They’re selling sexual satisfaction with real, lifelong commitment. And many teenage girls are buying. In a follow-up video after their wedding, Kian and Kyle gush over what they love most about marriage. “There are no boundaries anymore,” Kian says. The camera cuts to a close-up of Kyle, still asleep in bed.

Later in the summer of 2020, after the paint on my bedroom walls was dry, I took a walk with my then boyfriend through his suburban neighborhood. I started to tell him about the couple vloggers and their most absurd and contradictory statements, the way they seemed to get so close to some truth about respecting each other and their own physical boundaries but then nose-dived into shame and bigotry.

Yes, I disagreed with the internet-savvy White American evangelicals, and yes, my boyfriend and I reveled in our mockery of them. But I found it impossible to say what I had set out to say to him: that in some small corner of my heart, I wanted their promise, too. Not because of the theology, but because of the simple clarity. These couples have rules for understanding what they want. They have formulas for fulfilling intimacy. They have conviction, not teenage insecurity. I wanted to dwell in their online fantasy realm just a little longer before the real, complicated world swallowed me and my body again.

The most dangerous ideas, after all, contain just enough truth.

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[Jon Mathieu](#), the *Century's* community engagement editor, engages [Hannah Wilson-Black](#) in discussion about her article.