“This Week in Teen Culture”

May 25, 2022

1

Beau Bots

What it is: Chatbots like the Replika app are creating avenues for romantic relationships between people and AI. Replika allows users a limitless chat experience for free, but requires a payment plan to provide a girlfriend or boyfriend experience.

Why it’s not science fiction: The transhumanism movement has been predicting for decades that sophisticated technology will inevitably merge man with machine. But thinking about actually falling in love with a non-sentient being is still hard for most people to wrap their heads around. After all, wouldn’t interactions with a bot lack the excitement of building a partnership with a warmblooded companion? Wouldn’t it just feel like talking to yourself? As hard as it may be for us to envision, it’s important to take note of. The climate of love and relationships has been changing rapidly. There’s a strong emphasis on self-love and a longing for safety over spontaneity—both factors that make a robot Romeo more (for lack of a better term) desirable. Young people are also less motivated to reproduce, which has long been one of if not the primary driver for marriage. Swiftly evolving AI-tech coupled with an emerging narcissistic streak could make these relationships more common.

2

More Than Words

What it is: The terms “algo-speak” and “Voldemorting” have been coined to refer to ways social media posters modify certain phrases to sneak past automated algorithm censorship.

Why it’s happening: Teens have always created work-arounds in their lexicon to speak in code when parents are around. “Algo-speak” is just the newest version of it; a way to talk without digital Big Brother descending to downrank or “disappear” the conversation. Examples may include using “unalive myself” to talk about suicide, a syringe emoji to discuss vaccine mandates, and “corn” for porn. Algo-speak is the latest example of how censorship on social media is complicated; making certain terms taboo doesn’t

eliminate certain types of discussion, it just takes it underground. Questions of protected speech and free expression continue to be hotly contested.

3

Swimming in Controversy

What it is: *Sports Illustrated* released their annual swimsuit issue, featuring Kim Kardashian, Maye Musk (mom to Elon), Kelly Hughes (who displays her C-section scar), and Ciara as this years' cover models. A plus-size model named Yumi Nu also appeared, which drew the ire of critics.

Why it was never about the swimsuits: The SI swimsuit issue has always attracted controversy. At some point, it was seen as a cultural flashpoint—an indicator of what and who our society was idealizing, idolizing, and imitating, and a launching pad for many supermodels. Now , the magazine aims to be more inclusive of different kinds of bodies. This is an approach that some (such as author and psychologist Jordan Peterson) find to be grating, as it would seem that *Sports Illustrated* isn't giving the people what they want, but telling them what beauty and desire should look like. Yumi Nu posted a TikTok where she claimed victory over her detractors, lip-syncing the words, "I win, you lose." Perhaps those who would die on the hill of defending "Western beauty standards" are asking the wrong questions to begin with. Is a society where a person in a bikini dictates how much everyone else values their own bodies a healthy place to grow up?

Slang of the Week

Leg booty: algo-speak for LGBT, used sometimes in comment sections. (Ex: "Commenter 1: Would love to meet your parents and take things to the next level. OP: We'd need a cover story—my parents don't know I'm leg booty.")

Translation: Beau Bots

Although developing a romantic relationship with AI is clearly not the same thing as masturbation, C.S. Lewis's insights on that topic are helpful here. He writes, "For me the real evil of masturbation would be that it takes an appetite which, in lawful use, leads the individual out of himself to complete (and correct) his own personality in that of another (and finally in children and even grandchildren) and turns it back: sends the man back into the prison of himself, there to keep a harem of imaginary brides. And this

harem, once admitted, works against his ever getting out and really uniting with a real woman. For the harem is always accessible, always subservient, calls for no sacrifices or adjustments, and can be endowed with erotic and psychological attractions which no woman can rival."

Now, maybe AI will eventually be programmed to be more relationally demanding, and thus potentially rewarding. Maybe some who have struggled to find real men or women to begin a relationship with, see something like Replika as a helpful substitute. But in an era where this "harem of imaginary brides (or husbands)" is infinitely available online—in AI, in pornography, and thousands of other services—one of the tasks for Christian parents is to represent real, human-to-human relationships as actually worthwhile for the next generation.

When God said, "It is not good for man to be alone," he did not create a simulation for Adam to converse with. He did not create a cover model for Adam to stare at. He created another human being for him to be with—another complex, confusing, wonderful human being.

For many members of Gen Z, marriage and even deep friendships may not seem worth the risk. Life's greatest pleasures and worst pains all come from our relationships. But even in the hardest times, we learn. If we allow ourselves, we grow. We become kinder, gentler, smarter, wiser, better—in a word, we become more like Christ. And though we can't know just what any human relationship will bring us, as Søren Kierkegaard once put it, "To dare is to lose one's footing momentarily—not to dare is to lose oneself."

Here are some questions to spark conversation with your teens:

- What do you think it would take for someone to feel like starting a relationship with Replika?
- What would you say is the general attitude among your friends toward romantic relationships?
- What would make a relationship (or a deep friendship) worth pursuing?

8 PREMIUM INSIGHTS

A broader look at the world that teens inhabit.
Skim our summary or click the links to read more.
Engage your teens in conversation about their world.

They said it best:

“There’s an unquenchable thirst, an insatiable longing, at the heart of great theology—a desire for union with God. Perhaps this is one reason that one of today’s oft-neglected books (Song of Songs) was commonly seen as the capstone of the Old Testament by many of our forebears—not because of its picture of human marriage but because of its pointing to something divine.” – Trevin Wax

Technology

Apps/Websites

1. The NYC attorney general has announced that she will be investigating Twitch, 4Chan, and Discord in connection with the mass shooting at a Buffalo supermarket. AG Letitia James says that these platforms were used by the suspect to “plan, promote, and stream” the shooting, which killed ten people. Twitch moved quickly to remove footage of the shooting, which was streamed live for two minutes. The suspect also published a manifesto in which he claimed the 4Chan message board is where he became familiar with radical ideologies.

Pop Culture

Film/TV/Streaming

2. Disney is not turning off the firehose of Star Wars content any time soon. The Obi Wan Kenobi series, starring Ewan McGregor, will debut at the end of this month with two episodes and a new episode each week after that. Andor, a live-action prequel to

Rogue One, will follow this summer before The Mandalorian begins its season 3 streaming in late 2022 or early 2023. They also announced that the animated Clone Wars spinoff, The Bad Batch, will launch its second season on August 5.

Social Media

3. TikTok Live may be drawing in child predators, according to reporting in *Forbes*. Adults on the app offer virtual and tangible gifts to streamers who respond to their commands during these streams, often using coded language for poses or acts they are asking for. TikTok claims that they act quickly to remove any accounts with sexually suggestive content that features minors, but even a robust response isn't enough to safeguard kids completely. This type of streaming can also help predators identify potential targets for sextortion.

4. Content creators don't own data sets of their own followers, but the platforms they are on do. That's why a person who has 165k followers on Twitter could devote all of their time and energy to getting those same people to follow them on TikTok and never break a couple thousand. A new coalition called My Friends My Data aims to enable creators to take their followers with them no matter what platform they are on. An industry-wide standard that allowed cross-platform following would give creators more leverage over the tech giants that host them.

5. Are we ever our authentic selves on the internet—or anywhere? In the wake of apps like BeReal and GlanceBack that aim to portray people's real, uncurated existence, Vox points out that the modern idea of what's "authentic" can be actually difficult to nail down, especially for teens who have an amorphous definition of self to begin with. But maybe struggling so hard to find what's real about us and put it online is a faulty errand, anyway. Writer Terry Nguyen puts it this way: "Rather than fret over our perceived authenticity, perhaps a better question is: Why are we so willing to document ourselves to prove what we already know?"

Music

6. On May 13, Kendrick Lamar released his fifth studio album, *Mr. Morale and the Big Steppers*. The double-album features 18 songs, many of which ruminate on the idea of cancel culture. Prominent religious themes also figure into the songs as the Pulitzer-

prize winning rapper apologizes for not being the world's savior. Fans of Lamar will recognize his trademark poetic reflections and emotional crescendos in these long-awaited tracks, but there is explicit language in the lyrics.

Global Awareness

7. Some young people are giving up on saving money, according to a feature in the *New York Times.* As the state of the globe feels increasingly grim to the activist generation, it would appear to make more sense to spend on passion projects, hobbies, entertainment, and travel than to invest in a future that feels uncertain. One economist quoted in the piece pointed out that if you have an apocalyptic view of the future, saving doesn't make sense. Rising inflation and housing costs may be contributing to these apocalyptic feelings.

Conversation Starter:

8. Taylor Swift picked up an honorary doctorate and gave a speech at NYU's commencement this week. Swift offered wisdom to the graduates that included being willing to make mistakes and not to hide their enthusiasm for things. She also made it a point to remind grads to thank their family members and people close to them who have helped them reach their goals. In this season of celebrating goals and achievements, it's worth thinking about the mentors and spiritual leaders who have helped support and pour into us.

Conversation starters:

- If you were to give a graduation speech, what type of "wisdom" would you want to share? What would you want others to take away from the speech?
- Is there a quotation or piece of wisdom that you heard in a speech or in a sermon that has stuck with you?
- If you were to thank a friend or mentor, who would you thank and why? Is there an action you can take to thank them for their impact on your life?