“This Week in Teen Culture”

May 11, 2022

1

Courting Toxicity

What it is: Johnny Depp’s defamation suit against ex-wife Amber Heard continues to dominate TikTok FYP pages, with #justiceforjohnnydepp at 7.6 billion views.

Why it’s something teens are talking about: It wouldn’t seem like younger viewers would be all that interested in an aging Gen X star who they probably only know from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise. And many don’t care—in fact, some internet observers have openly wondered why and how content related to this trial continues to make its way into their news feeds. But for others, the trial is a goldmine of memeable moments. Up to this point, Depp has put on a mostly charming performance for the court, even if really listening to his and others’ testimony puts his drug abuse and narcissistic behaviors on show. Heard, on the other hand, has presented as less than sympathetic and the majority of onlookers seem to see her as a histrionic villain intent on ruining Depp’s life (although her most recent allegation that he violently sexually assaulted her may change that perception). Sadly, it would appear that both Heard and Depp experienced deep childhood trauma, and neither knew what a healthy relationship should look like during their marriage. We can resist the urge to root for one broken person over another and instead talk about what a cycle of toxicity is, how to recognize it, and how to get out.

2

A World Without Roe

What it is: A leaked draft decision from the Supreme Court indicates that the days of *Roe v. Wade* are numbered.

Why it matters: It’s been just about 50 years since the landmark *Roe v. Wade* case, and many Americans don’t seem to understand what the decision’s reversal would actually do. That’s understandable, because it would be uncharted, and complicated, legislative territory. A viral tweet making the rounds implied that “forced birth” was just around the corner, and celebrities and influencers have been vocal in their demands for action, with a large group of TikTokers organizing an economic strike. The decision to return

abortion rights back to the state level would be monumental—26 states have so-called "trigger laws" that would immediately place restrictions on pregnancy-ending procedures performed in clinics and hospitals. It's also worth noting that rates of abortion have been dropping nationwide for several years, including among teenagers. We aren't living in 1973 anymore, and the abortion landscape has changed. Clinics forced to close might not mean an end to abortion as we currently know it—after all, more than half of abortions today aren't done in clinics, they happen at home with mifepristone and misoprostol, which can currently be mail-ordered in quite a few states. In other words, expect the end of Roe to mark the beginning of a conversation about abortion in your home, not the end of one.

3

In the Darkroom

What it is: A new short form video series called "Dark Room Faith" brings some of teens' more difficult questions about Christianity to light.

Why it's something new: "Dark Room Faith" brings professional production quality to scripts from today's leading apologists as the videos tackle sexuality, doubt, and church culture. Back in the 1980s, leading evangelicals in the youth movement were reason-forward, spotlighting historical evidence for Christ's life and Lordship. This made sense for Gen X, a generation grappling with nihilism. But Gen Z and Gen Alpha are different; they're flooded with a constant barrage of information, and they can find out anything they'd like to know in an instant. That's why this new series (as well as the He Gets Us marketing campaign) is well-suited to their interests; it takes a philosophical, no-holds-barred approach to conversations about faith, amping up how Jesus and the Bible affect teens on an individual level while also acknowledging how difficult it can be to hold and follow through on a conviction.

Slang of the Week

Mary Sue: An overly idealized fictional character, the phrase has been borrowed from comic books and fanfiction communities but may now be used to describe any person who presents as a sort of Pollyanna-esque figure. (Ex: "I've never seen that girl look anything less than perfect, she gets straight As, and everyone she meets adores her. She's such a Mary Sue.")

Translation: A World Without Roe

In January we mentioned an article in *The Atlantic* which said that many of the most fervent pro-life activists at the March for Life rally were 21 and under. Gen Z is often generalized as being "more liberal" on the whole than previous generations, which might make people assume that they would be unanimously pro-choice. But the reality is that Gen Z is as heterogeneous as any other generation. Conversations with your teen about their unique viewpoints are always better than assuming what they will think.

With that said, some of your teens may see overturning *Roe v. Wade* as a colossal failure. They may see it as a victory of regressive patriarchy over women's civil rights. If conversations like these arise, ask your teens to define what they mean. See if these are viewpoints they've come to through careful investigation, or if they are political postures thrown on in order not to seem like "the other guys."

As Drs. Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen point out in their book *Difficult Conversations,* "Changes in attitudes and behavior rarely come about because of arguments, facts, and attempts to persuade. How often do *you* change your values and beliefs—or whom you love or what you want in life—based on something someone tells you? And how likely are you to do so when the person who is trying to change you doesn't seem to be aware of the reasons you see things differently in the first place?" For whatever reason, when we believe others are trying to understand *our* point of view, our defenses usually go down, and we're more willing to listen to *their* point of view. The rising generation is no exception.

Whether or not *Roe v. Wade* is finally, officially overturned, the Christian worldview will still insist that every human being—no matter their size, level of development, environment, degree of dependency, race, gender, or whatever other qualification we want to throw in—is made in the image of God, and is therefore deserving of honor, dignity, and protection. Being pro-life means more than just being pro-birth, but it by definition includes it. As the Psalmist puts it beautifully in Psalm 139:13-14, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well."

With that said, here are some questions to hopefully spark conversation about this topic:

- What do you think about the *Roe v. Wade* draft?
- What do your friends think about the *Roe v. Wade* draft?
- Does Christ command us to protect the most vulnerable? Who might that be?

8 INSIGHTS

They said it best:

"What it means to stand for Christ is not, it turns out, to rid ourselves of all fear or to humiliate our enemies with incontrovertible “winning” but instead to live out in our very lives the drama of the Cross. Courage comes not from matching the world’s power and wisdom with more of our own but by being led, like Elijah, where we do not want to go.” — Russell Moore

Pop Culture

Film/TV/Streaming

1. Dr. Strange and the Multiverse of Madness will debut in theaters this weekend. It’s too early for us to know what the content advisory should be for the newest entry into the Marvel canon, which was directed by Sam Raimi. Common Sense Media says it's pretty scary, writing, “Expect jump-scares, a resurrected dead body, violent deaths, graphic depictions of a decomposing body, and fatal fight scenes that decimate entire villages and have a high body count.” Plotlines that feature the Dr. Strange character also tend to involve darker spiritual themes and imagery. Wanda Maximoff, also known as the Scarlet Witch, will also figure heavily into the plotline.

Social media

2. Parents’ views on their kids’ screentime are continuing to shift after the pandemic. New data from the Pew Research Center showed a 14-point jump in how many parents said their child used their smartphone too much. Back in 2020, a majority of parents surveyed said that the amount of screentime their children got was “just right,” but now they are more likely to express that their kids interact with screens “too

much." Pew noted that a significant number of parents were concerned enough to cut off children's access to game consoles or tablets, according to their survey.

Music

3. Lizzo's new song, whose name we won't publish (even though it could be worse), hit #1 on TikTok this week. A short choreographed dance for the song is simple enough even for the most TikTok uninitiated—even Joe Jonas and his band, DNCE, (*language)* can do it. Some (including Lizzo) are already hailing the upbeat, disco-infused anthem as the song of the summer.

4. A themed island hosted by Spotify has debuted on Roblox.The island allows users to hop from one type of music to the next, as well as an audio workstation where players can collaborate on their own musical creations. Spotify says they will cycle out different genres of music throughout the year, with the first one being K-Park (a celebration of K-Pop). As the genres cycle out, the Spotify virtual space may attract different kinds of users—or its tween demographic will use it once and then forget about it.

Fashion/Beauty/Appearance

5. Kim Kardashian wore an iconic gown originally owned by Marilyn Monroe to the Met Gala on Monday. In commentary at the event, Kim said she dropped 16 pounds over the span of three weeks to fit into the dress, which would not be altered. Critics were quick to point out the potentially harmful messaging of Kim's crash diet plan, during which she said she cut all carbs and sugar, wore a sauna suit twice, and ran on the treadmill. Kardashian basically shrugged off the diet as no big deal—and maybe, for her, it wasn't. But for most people, teens included, shedding that much weight in a short span of time would not be a great idea for their long-term health.

Sexuality/Gender

6. ASMR, which stands for auto sensory meridian response, is content that is designed to stimulate a tingling sensation in your body and, in theory, create a feeling of calm. Most ASMR content is decidedly not sexual, with a lot of focus on crinkling, tapping, and brushing sounds. But it's worth knowing that some ASMR content can be sexual, as Mashable charts the rise of ASMR porn.

Theology

Parenting

7. An algorithm that screens for child neglect is raising concerns thanks to a story in the Associated Press. In Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, calls that flag potentially dangerous situations for children are screened and processed using an artificial intelligence tool. The tool then gives children a score indicative of how much perceived danger they are in. The tool is meant to identify kids who are at the highest risk so that social workers can prioritize who gets help. But by the county's own admission, the tool can glitch and misrepresent a child's risk—one such glitch even persisted for two years. Rather than be frightened about the potential misuse of this technology, it's important to stay aware of how and where these tools are being used.

Conversation Starter:

8. Brett McCracken has written a piece for The Gospel Coalition in praise of what he calls "the boring, uncool church." McCracken observes how when churches pursue the idea of cultural relevance with fancy bells and whistles, we often see them becoming compromised. Relevance, he notes, is no substitute for reverence. Sure, some aspects of traditional "church" may feel cheesy and embarrassing but maybe we can find that endearing instead of cringing and walking out the door. Instead of looking for a church with a charismatic pastor, he recommends, find a church where Jesus is the biggest star.

Conversation starters:

- If you were looking for a church of your own as a young adult, what would you look for? What qualities would be a strong indicator that you would feel at home?
- What are some of the red flags that could indicate that a church isn't a safe place for you? Are there ways to be sure that you won't end up in a toxic church community?
- What are some of your favorite church experiences? Why do those experiences stand out to you as being memorable?