

CUT FRONT

friend

[frend] noun
someone who
listens, responds,
and supports you.

WE DONT HAVE TO
ACCEPT THIS FUTURE

friend.com

322 039

A Debate About A.I. Plays Out on the Subway Walls

Advertisements for Friend, a wearable companion powered by artificial intelligence, have routinely been defaced in New York City. Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

An ad campaign for a wearable A.I. companion has blanketed New York City, starting conversations and inspiring vandalism.

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By [Stefano Montali](#)

Published Oct. 7, 2025 Updated Oct. 8, 2025, 10:31 a.m. ET

There is often talk of a looming takeover by artificial intelligence. But ask anyone who’s ridden the New York City subway recently, and they’ll probably tell you it’s already here. Well, kind of.

An advertisement deluge for an A.I. start-up called Friend.com has flooded subway cars and stations across the city’s five boroughs over the last six weeks. Its product is a wearable A.I. pendant that, for \$129, will listen to your conversations and become your friend.

“Only the M.T.A. allows you to buy a full takeover like that,” Avi Schiffmann, 22, the founder and chief executive of Friend, said in an interview. “It almost feels illegal.”

Mr. Schiffmann, who spent less than \$1 million to cover huge swaths of one of the world’s most-used subway systems, referred to the process as

“addicting.”

The campaign’s not-so-subtle ubiquity, mixed with the wider societal unease toward A.I.’s rapid encroachment into personal lives, has made it one of the most talked about subway marketing campaigns in recent memory.

The ads, which are simple black text on a white background — sometimes with an accompanying close-up of the pendant — poke fun at what could be seen as the inconveniences of a two-sided, human relationship. But messages like “I’ll never bail on our dinner plans” seemed to strike a nerve with many New Yorkers, and it did not take long for backlash to begin.

Across the city, the ads have been defaced with graffiti ranging from hostile (“A.I. is burning the world around you”) to pleading (“make a real friend”). The company was accused of profiting off the loneliness epidemic and of playing a part in capitalist surveillance. Some posters were ripped down altogether.



The subway advertisements were defaced so routinely that a website was built to showcase some of the more clever responses. Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

As the ads continued their rollout in New York and Los Angeles, social media users uploaded photos of the posters — clean, defaced or destroyed — to sites like X and Reddit. A website was created as an online museum of Friend ad defacement. Another allowed users to vandalize a virtual version of the infamous ad with digital spray paint.

Despite all that, it took a month after the ads first appeared for Mr. Schiffmann to address the issues online. His post on X on Sept. 25, which claimed that his subway campaign had been the largest in New York's history, now has more than 25 million views. The response to his ads — themselves an inviting canvas for an analog form of rage-bait — has not deterred Mr. Schiffmann.

“I kind of view it as a side effect of doing big things,” he said. “People don’t vandalize an irrelevant ad, right?”

He probably saw it coming. When Friend posted a somewhat eerie launch video on YouTube in 2024, the comments section was full of dystopian references and comparisons to the streaming series “Black Mirror.”

Mr. Schiffmann is no stranger to online attention, though in the past it was a bit more positive. At 18, he created a website that took early Covid-19 data from Chinese health department sources and presented it in a simple tracker. In 2022, after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, he built a website that helped refugees find hosts around the world.

Despite the recent backlash, Mr. Schiffmann considers his latest project to be in a similar humanitarian vein. Still, it can be hard to challenge a strongly held perception in such a charged discussion, even with good intentions.

“I think the name is a huge part of its problem,” said Adam Alter, a professor of marketing at New York University. “To pretend that an A.I. version of friendship is just as good as or maybe better than the real thing contradicts the sense that genuine friendship can’t be simulated by nonhuman agents.”

This line of thinking, Mr. Schiffmann said, is a common misconception. “I don’t view this as dystopian,” he said. To him, the A.I. friend is a new category of companionship, one that will coexist alongside traditional friends rather than replace them.

“We have a cat and a dog and a child and an adult in the same room,” he said. “Why not an A.I.?”

In preparation for the campaign’s Aug. 25 launch in New York, Mr. Schiffmann headed to Burning Man, without an internet connection. The overlap was intentional. “I wanted to do the coolest thing I could possibly

do and the biggest thing I could possibly do at the same time,” he said. “In the spirit of life-maxing.”

But the campaign had been brewing for a while. Mr. Schiffmann, who lives in San Francisco, said he often sat on his porch in the Lower Haight neighborhood, reading the bus-side campaigns. Some advertised pet adoption.

“They were kind of selling you a companion,” Mr. Schiffmann said. He wondered if a similar idea could work for Friend. After the A.I. pendant started shipping in July, Mr. Schiffmann began work on the campaign, which he wrote himself. (One blurb — “Your friend group isn’t diverse enough” — was rejected by the M.T.A., he said.)

Victoria Mottesheard, a vice president at Outfront Media, the company that manages advertising for the M.T.A., said the Friend campaign’s almost-instant fame, even without an online component, was partly because of “the sheer topic.” A.I., she said, “is the conversation of 2025.”

She declined to comment on the vandalism.



The campaign, which Avi Schiffmann, the company's founder, said cost less than \$1 million, has been ubiquitous in the city. Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

Marc Mueller, the creator of the virtual vandalization website, which went live less than a week ago and already has nearly 6,000 submissions, agreed. "I think we'll sit at the dinner table in five years and think of this as a moment," Mr. Mueller said. "It's a materialization of the anxiety about this transformation."

The initial responses to his site, Mr. Mueller said, came mostly from the tech crowd and was split fairly evenly between positive and negative. Once the site started to get more attention online, though, pessimism toward Friend and A.I. soon dominated.

There was also a third group, said Mr. Mueller: people who appreciated the campaign as a type of performance art. "I was thinking to myself that Andy Warhol would be in awe with this whole rollout and the graffiti," he said.

As it happens, Mr. Schiffmann, too, had some artistic inspiration: "The Gates," the project by the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude that filled Central Park with 7,500 saffron-colored gates and attracted tourists from around the world in 2005. How has his own campaign measured up? "The mayor should come and appreciate what we've done," Mr. Schiffmann said, "because it really is a modern day art exhibit."

Hype, however, does not necessarily translate into sales. As of this writing, he has sold around 3,100 pendants — though he expects that will increase rapidly once the product hits retailers like Walmart sometime next year. The ad campaign is still rolling out in Los Angeles, with Chicago up next.

Mr. Schiffmann hopes A.I. companions will “raise the average emotional intelligence significantly.” But he acknowledged that society, perhaps, was not quite ready for A.I. companionship on such a large scale.

The real gist of the campaign was to “redefine what a friend is and have you think about that,” Mr. Schiffmann said. With that, he seems to have succeeded.

Stefano Montali is a news assistant at The Times who contributes reporting across various sections.

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