

Consumer Resistance to AI-Generated Social Media Ads: Legitimacy Management and Brand Safety Governance

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Abstract. AI-generated advertising can prompt criticism of both the creative work and the company responsible for it. This study compares the controversies surrounding McDonald's Netherlands' Christmas advertisement and Samsung's Galaxy S26 promotion. An exploratory qualitative reading of three public documents examines reported objections, organizational statements, and product positioning. Organizational Legitimacy Theory provides the main framework, supported by brand–technology congruence. The criticism raises questions about human labor, audience benefit, and the purpose of AI use. McDonald's withdrew its advertisement and acknowledged festive expectations. Samsung's later launch communication presents AI as routine product functionality, although the sources do not establish a deliberate response to the advertising controversy. Campaign withdrawal is therefore distinguished from normalization of AI in product positioning. The comparison distinguishes AI's fit with a brand from its suitability for a specific advertising task. It proposes task suitability review as the main practical response, supported by role-specific disclosure and action on particular complaints. The practical contribution is to connect those production decisions with the specific expectations an advertisement creates.

Keywords: AI Advertising Governance, Consumer Legitimacy, Brand Safety, Strategic Withdrawal, Task-technology Fit

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

Brands can use generative AI to produce advertising content, extending their use of AI beyond data analysis. In their review, Ford et al. identify automated content creation, advertising delivery, engagement, and trust as major topics in AI advertising research [1]. The appeal to advertisers includes potential gains in production efficiency and the quality of the images produced. Hartmann et al. examined 10,320 marketing images produced by seven text-to-image models, drawing on 254,400 human evaluations. Images from the strongest models received ratings that matched or exceeded those of human-made images on several measures. In an online campaign with more than 173,000 impressions, the best-performing AI image also achieved a higher click-through rate than the human-made comparison image [2]. Such results give advertisers a reason to consider AI for creative work.

Whether audiences welcome that work also depends on what they expect from the brand. Viewers may like an advertisement's appearance while objecting to its message or the way it was made. Organizational legitimacy describes the public perception that an organization's actions are appropriate within accepted social norms and values [3]. It helps explain why criticism of an advertisement can become criticism of the company behind it. An unnatural character, for example, may prompt questions about the replacement of creative workers or the care taken before publication. Comments, reposts, and edited videos allow these judgments to circulate on social media. The brand then has to decide how to respond. Removing the advertisement offers a visible acknowledgment of the dispute. Continued AI use requires a credible explanation of the technology's place in its advertising.

1.2. Literature review

Research on AI disclosure shows that making the technology visible can affect how people judge an advertisement, although the effects depend on the audience and context. Wortel et al. found that AI labels lowered attitudes toward Instagram advertisements; the effect on brand attitudes depended on users' aversion to AI [4]. Greater visibility can also attract engagement without securing approval. Hanson et al. reported increased engagement alongside negative emotions and psychological reactance [5]. Koning and Voorveld linked disclosure to persuasion, knowledge, and lower trust [6]. Concerns about authorship add another explanation: Kirk and Givi associated AI-written emotional messages with reduced authenticity and moral disgust [7]. The task assigned to AI matters as well. Wu et al. found different consumer responses when AI placed an advertisement and when it created one [8]. In luxury advertising, AI production can conflict with expectations of effort and craftsmanship [9]. Together, these studies suggest that audiences judge what AI is doing and whether that use fits the brand, as well as whether AI is present.

The studies reviewed above focus mainly on how consumers respond to AI advertising. They leave open how brands respond when objections become a public dispute. Decisions about removing, defending, or continuing a campaign arise alongside calls for transparency and accountability [10]. McDonald's Netherlands and Samsung offer a useful comparison because AI occupied different places in their campaigns and product offers. This study examines withdrawal and normalization through their public actions and communication, asking how each approach relates to the expectations placed on the brand.

1.3. Research framework

The study asks how the public actions and communication of McDonald's Netherlands and Samsung reflect withdrawal and normalization in the context of AI-advertising criticism. It considers three sub-questions: what users object to, how the brands address those concerns, and how the fit between AI and the brand helps explain the comparison. Organizational Legitimacy Theory provides the main framework, distinguishing moral, pragmatic, and cognitive legitimacy; brand–technology congruence supports the comparison [3]. The material consists of early public reporting and brand communication, including descriptions of the advertisements and quoted user comments. The analysis does not assess sales or changes in brand equity.

2. Case studies: withdrawal vs. normalization

The comparison draws on three public documents covering the advertisements, reported criticism, and brand communication. User comments appear as quotations selected by journalists. They help identify the objections raised, but cannot show how widely those views were shared.

2.1. McDonald's Netherlands: strategic withdrawal

In December 2025, McDonald's Netherlands released a 45-second AI-generated Christmas advertisement, *The Most Terrible Time of the Year*. It presented holiday stress as a reason to take a break at McDonald's [11]. Reported criticism concerned the unsettling images, described as "AI slop," the bleak festive tone, and the possible replacement of actors and other creative workers [11]. The company withdrew the advertisement and acknowledged that its portrayal did not match customers' positive expectations of Christmas [11]. Removal ended the brand's use of the film, but could not prevent copies and discussion from circulating elsewhere.

2.2. Samsung: strategic normalization

Samsung faced criticism in February 2026 over AI-generated social videos associated with the Galaxy S26 series. One video, *Brighten Your After Hours*, used a generated night scene with skateboarders to promote Nightography. Viewers questioned the figures' synthetic appearance and inconsistencies in the surroundings. The use of generated footage also raised a question about the camera claim: what did these images show about the phone's actual performance? A small AI notice identified the production method, but did not resolve this objection [12]. Samsung subsequently continued the S26 launch, describing the product as its third-generation AI phone [13]. The available sources document AI's continued place in the product message, rather than whether Samsung removed or revised the disputed videos. This distinction is the basis for examining normalization in the comparison (Table 1).

Table 1. Legitimacy challenges and brand responses

Dimension	McDonald's Netherlands	Samsung
Advertising content	AI-generated Christmas film	AI-generated social videos associated with Galaxy S26
Reported objections	Unsettling images, replacement of creative workers, and conflict with Christmas expectations	Synthetic images and the use of generated footage to promote camera performance
Documented action or communication	Advertisement withdrawn; statement acknowledging audience expectations	AI notice in the reported advertisement; subsequent launch communication continued to emphasize AI
Interpretation	Withdrawal of the disputed advertisement	Normalization through the broader AI product message
Central question	Does AI production align with the campaign's emotional expectations?	Does the generated footage support the advertised product claim?

The comparison turns on the role AI played in each offer. Removing the Christmas film did not require McDonald's to change its food or service. Samsung, by contrast, was launching a product with AI functions. This difference helps explain why distancing the brand from a disputed advertisement and continuing to promote AI were not equivalent decisions.

3. Analysis: legitimacy dynamics and strategic variations

3.1. Dimensions of legitimacy challenges

3.1.1. Moral legitimacy: ethical concerns and content appropriateness

Moral legitimacy concerns judgments about whether an organization acts appropriately in accordance with shared values [3]. Criticism of visual quality in these cases also raised questions about corporate responsibility. Calling the advertisements "AI slop" expressed dissatisfaction with the standards of established brands [11, 12]. In the McDonald's debate, objections to replacing actors and creative workers extended that criticism to the company's treatment of human work [11]. The production method, therefore, became part of the judgment of the brand. A well-resourced company could be questioned about what it chose to commission and whether the result had received enough care before publication.

For McDonald's, the Christmas setting made the tone of the advertisement particularly important. The company's statement acknowledged positive expectations of the holiday that did not fit its portrayal of Christmas as an ordeal [11]. Some viewers, therefore, rejected the premise on which the humor depended. Samsung's case concerned what a camera advertisement should show. Because the disputed scene promoted a camera feature, viewers had reason to ask whether the images demonstrated anything about the phone [12]. The AI label identified how the scene was made without clarifying its relationship to the advertised capability. The moral concern in both cases was whether the presentation respected the expectations the advertisement itself created.

3.1.2. Pragmatic legitimacy: utility and information deficits

Pragmatic legitimacy depends on whether stakeholders believe an organization's actions serve their interests [3]. Faster production benefits advertisers, but its value to viewers depends on what the finished advertisement offers. Koning and Voorveld suggest that disclosure can prompt consumers to question persuasive intent and reduce trust [6]. Kirk and Givi connect AI authorship of emotional messages with weaker authenticity [7]. These findings help explain why production efficiency alone may offer audiences little reason to accept AI content. In the McDonald's case, the reported objections suggest that some viewers found little value in the generated holiday experience [11]. Samsung's use of AI was closer to its product offer, yet the footage gave viewers little basis for judging the camera's actual performance [12]. For those questioning the claim, the missing benefit was useful information about the product.

3.1.3. Cognitive legitimacy: the struggle for AI normalization

Cognitive legitimacy develops when an activity becomes understandable and eventually accepted as routine [3]. An AI label can make the production method easier to understand, but it also draws attention to that choice. Hanson et al. found that greater AI visibility could increase engagement alongside negative emotion and reactance [5]. Knowing that AI was used does not necessarily make its use seem appropriate. A brand relying on disclosure still needs to explain why the technology

suits the advertisement. Responsible advertising principles call for human oversight and accountability as well as transparency [10]. These campaigns would involve explaining the purpose of AI production, the work people performed, and the checks made before publication.

3.2. Strategic responses to legitimacy crises

3.2.1. Withdrawal as concession and damage control

McDonald's withdrew the advertisement and acknowledged customers' positive expectations of Christmas. The removal gave the statement a concrete consequence: the brand stopped using the disputed film. Together, the action and statement can be read as a concession to the audience's judgment. Withdrawal moved the company away from defending the film's humor, visual quality, or suitability for Christmas. In legitimacy terms, it attempted to repair by changing its conduct.

Removing the film did not settle every concern. Copies and commentary could still circulate, and the reported statement said little about how future advertisements would be produced or reviewed [11]. The clearest change was to the individual campaign. Withdrawal acknowledged the problem with that advertisement, but left audiences with limited information about what would change in the company's approach to AI. Explaining how future work would be approved would address a question that removal alone could not answer.

3.2.2. Normalization as persistence and strategic framing

Samsung's continued discussion of AI makes sense within the S26 launch. Galaxy AI was central to the product's official positioning, giving the company a reason to present AI as part of the phone's value [13]. The disputed advertisement also carried an AI notice [12]. Taken together, the notice and the wider product message support a reading of normalization: AI appeared as part of the brand's ordinary work. This reading concerns how Samsung presented the technology; the material does not establish that the launch communication was a deliberate response to the controversy.

The camera claim remained a separate problem. In the Nightography video, the notice did not explain whether the generated scene showed anything the camera had recorded [12]. Wu et al.'s finding that consumer responses vary with the task assigned to AI is relevant here [8]. Creating an imaginative scene and demonstrating hardware performance ask different things of an image. A generated scene may fit a technology brand's visual style while offering little evidence for a camera claim. Making AI familiar, therefore, leaves the brand with the task of explaining what the particular image is meant to show.

3.3. Brand–technology congruence: the boundary of strategic choice

Brand–technology congruence helps explain why the companies had different options. McDonald's sells food and service, which this campaign placed in a familiar holiday setting. Criticism of both the generated images and the bleak tone connected the creative choices to expectations of the brand [11]. Service-advertising research offers a useful parallel: disclosed AI content can weaken brand trust, particularly when human elements are generated rather than physical settings [14]. Withdrawing the film allowed McDonald's to distance itself from this creative decision without changing its main offer.

Samsung's product identity gave AI a more direct role. Continuing to discuss AI fitted the S26 launch, whereas a broad retreat from the technology would have sat uneasily with the product

message [13]. This helps explain AI's continued place in Samsung's communication, but says little about whether the disputed advertisement was effective. Research on luxury brands likewise links unfavorable responses to a mismatch between AI production and expectations of effort and authenticity [9]. The comparison, therefore, separates AI's fit with the brand from its suitability for the claim being made. Samsung's positioning supported the former; the generated footage in the camera advertisement left the latter open to question.

Withdrawal may be a viable option when a disputed advertisement can be separated from the brand's main product or service. Normalization has a clearer basis when AI is part of the product, and its use can be explained. Neither option removes the need to examine the advertising itself. Clear disclosure, human review, and checks on product claims address the concerns behind the criticism. For McDonald's, the remaining question is how the experience will inform future creative decisions. For Samsung, it is how to communicate AI-related benefits while keeping the generated illustrations distinct from evidence of product performance.

4. Strategic governance and brand safety management

4.1. Transparent AI disclosure: clarifying production roles and value

Disclosure should explain how advertising material was made and what it represents. For a product demonstration, a short notice could distinguish actual footage from generated backgrounds, with fuller production details in the caption. Viewers need to know whether they are seeing an illustration or evidence of a product result. Disclosure itself does not guarantee trust: research identifies both distrust and judgments that being open about AI is appropriate [6]. The notice should answer the question raised by the image.

The details worth explaining depend on the campaign. In advertising built around emotion or craftsmanship, brands should describe the work performed by people, including creative decisions and final review. Authenticity concerns in emotional messages and expectations of effort in luxury advertising make these roles relevant [7, 9]. Human oversight matters only if people exercise meaningful control; the description must match the process. Disclosure should make those responsibilities visible, consistent with responsible advertising principles [10].

4.2. Task suitability audit: aligning AI functions with brand promises

The central recommendation is to decide where AI adds value before deciding how to explain its use. A generated background, a person, and an apparent product demonstration perform different jobs in an advertisement. Research distinguishing AI placement from AI creation provides a reason to assess AI by its assigned task, while also considering viewers' beliefs about its capabilities [8].

Brands could use a brief suitability record at the planning stage. It should identify the intended audience, the task assigned to AI, the extent of generated material, and the evidence needed for any product claim. Each entry should lead to a review decision. Routine format adaptation may require an accuracy check, whereas a generated character or performance demonstration may need audience testing and closer examination. Even one generated image deserves scrutiny if viewers could mistake it for a real product result. The record should retain the reasons for approving or rejecting the proposed use.

Audience expectations should be investigated through small pretests rather than inferred from the brand alone. Someone who welcomes AI features in a phone may still object to their use in an advertisement. For McDonald's, testing should examine whether the festive tone and generated

characters convey the intended experience. Pretests should also ask what the production method suggests about the brand's effort. Viewers might interpret a synthetic production as cost-cutting, regardless of its actual budget. Service-advertising research supports considering selective generation of settings while retaining real human elements [14].

Samsung presents a different task problem. Its disputed footage was used to promote a camera feature [12]. Such claims should be supported by material captured with the advertised device under stated conditions. Any AI enhancement should be identified as either a device function or additional post-production. Generated scenes remain an option for imaginative storytelling, but should be clearly separated from performance evidence. The relevant question is whether AI helps communicate the promise being made.

4.3. Responsive governance: addressing the root cause of backlash

When criticism appears, the first task is to identify what viewers are challenging. An existing marketing or governance lead could coordinate review with the creative and product teams. Complaints about style require a different response from claims that an advertisement misrepresents a product or dismisses human work.

If the disagreement concerns style and the product information is accurate, explanation or revision may be sufficient. If the advertisement relies on questionable performance evidence, the relevant promotion should be paused while that evidence is checked. Withdrawal may be necessary when the disputed idea cannot be repaired through limited changes. McDonald's withdrawal illustrates a campaign-level response [11]. A company could take such action without abandoning AI elsewhere in its advertising or products.

The response should also address the concern left behind. Removing a film does not explain why it was approved or how future work will be assessed. A useful statement would identify the problem and any changes to production or review. Brands continuing to use AI should explain that choice with the same care. Assigning responsibility and checking whether the original complaint has been addressed would put accountability into practice [10].

5. Conclusion

5.1. Key findings

This comparison examined legitimacy challenges surrounding AI advertising by McDonald's Netherlands and Samsung. Reported objections concerned human creative work, the value of the advertising experience, and the basis for product claims. Organizational Legitimacy Theory helps distinguish these issues without treating every unfavorable comment as evidence of the same psychological reaction.

McDonald's withdrew its Christmas advertisement and acknowledged festive expectations. Samsung's later product communication presented AI as part of everyday phone use, supporting an interpretation of normalization in product positioning. These findings concern different levels of activity. One records a change to the disputed campaign; the other locates AI within the product offer. A brand could combine both approaches, withdrawing a specific advertisement while retaining AI elsewhere. The comparison thus separates the handling of a particular campaign from the technology's broader place in the brand.

5.2. Research significance

The analysis separates AI's fit with a brand from its suitability for an advertising task. A technology brand's association with AI does not make generated footage evidence of camera performance. An emotional campaign may invite scrutiny of the production method as well as the story. These distinctions give brands specific questions to ask before publication, without presuming that their customers share one attitude toward AI.

For practitioners, task suitability is the main recommendation. Role-specific disclosure should explain the resulting production choices, while any later response should address the particular objection. Together, these proposals connect advertising review with responsibility for the work published.

5.3. Limitations and future research

The study uses three public documents concerning two cases. Media quotations reflect editorial selection, and the material is uneven: it documents McDonald's withdrawal more directly than Samsung's handling of its advertisements. It offers snapshots of public communication, with gaps in chronology and internal decision-making. The comparison cannot determine differences in customers' prior AI attitudes or whether either brand restored trust.

Future research could combine audience interviews with experiments comparing generated backgrounds, characters, and product demonstrations. Measuring prior AI attitudes would help separate general views of the technology from objections to a particular use. Longer observation could examine reactions to explanations, revisions, and withdrawal.

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