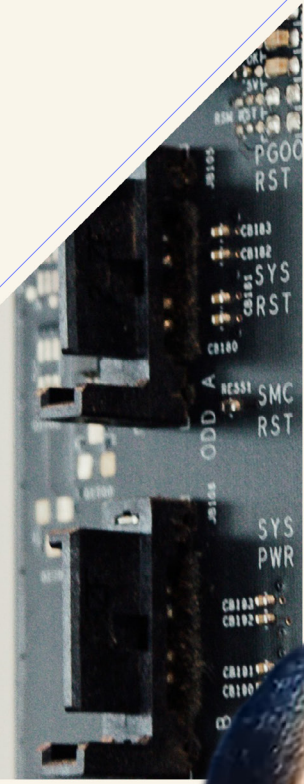


The Uncanny Valley of Trust

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Technology Can Mimic Creativity, But Not Care

A new species of corporate failure has emerged. The culprit? The misapplication of AI. It's the consequence of mistaking efficiency for progress—and failing to see the quiet resistance forming in culture's shadows.

Coca-Cola's 2025 holiday campaign is the latest exhibit in a growing gallery of brands finding themselves on the wrong side of culture. They've discovered that the future they're selling so confidently isn't necessarily one their customers want to buy. What follows is a cautionary tale that extends well beyond advertising.

The Coke spot, released this week and titled "[Holidays Are Coming](#)," is entirely AI-generated, a "refreshed

and optimized" remake of the brand's classic convoy of glowing red trucks. This time, the cast of polar bears, pandas, penguins, puppies, and rabbits glows not with holiday warmth, but with what's been called a "generative AI shine."

The backlash has been instant—an emerging case study in AI resistance across [Google](#), [Reddit](#), and [X](#).

Jason Zada, founder and chief creative officer of AI studio Secret Level, brushed off the criticism as mere fear of change.

"The haters on the Internet are the loudest. A lot of the people complaining last year were from the creative industry who were just afraid – afraid for their jobs, afraid for what it did. But I think the spot tested really well, and average people really enjoyed it."

Yet, the fear of AI is real—but what's more pressing is the erosion of judgment and perspective.

For all the technical sophistication—for all the outputs that look real enough to fool the eye—it's instinct, taste, and care that still matter. In other words, the sense that someone demanded the work be right. As AI seeps deeper into the creative process, human ethos becomes not obsolete, but priceless in wielding it.



An Illusion of Progress

The Coca-Cola case is no outlier. The pattern repeats company by company, campaign by campaign. No brand, no matter how iconic, seems immune.

Signs of misuse and backlash emerged in 2023, when [Levi's](#) unveiled AI-generated fashion models to showcase diverse body types and skin tones. What sounded progressive in theory quickly rang hollow. Critics called it “lazy, problematic, and racist”—a reminder that real diversity begins with hiring actual people.

By 2024, unease went mainstream. [Apple's](#) “Crush” ad showed a hydraulic press flattening music instruments and art supplies before revealing a gleaming iPad beneath. The metaphor was unintentional but painfully clear: technology crushing art. Within days, Apple pulled the ad and apologized, proof that even the most design-literate company can miss the public’s emotional register.

Around the same time, Google’s Olympic-themed Gemini spot featured AI writing a child’s letter to Olympian

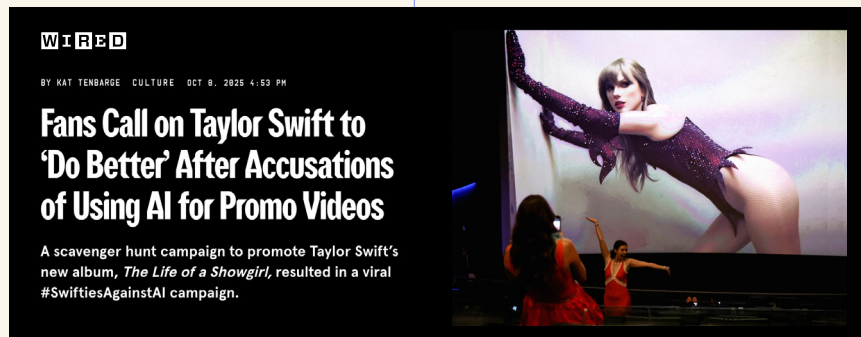
Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone. It carried an unspoken suggestion: that even childhood wonder could be automated. Alexandra Petri captured [public sentiment](#) in the *Washington Post*: “This ad makes me want to throw a sledgehammer into the television every time I see it.” The ad was pulled from the rotation.

This year, we’ve become fluent in the new visual language of AI—and quick to call it out when we see it. OSINT-inspired sleuths at [Blackbird Spyplane](#) spotted digital fingerprints in J.Crew’s retro campaign, accusing the brand of using “A.I. to counterfeit their own vibes.” Backlash seeped into social media and culture sources like [The Cut](#).

That same crowd-sourced scrutiny turned toward pop culture’s most trusted figure. Taylor Swift—long synonymous with authenticity—was called out by her own fans for the uncanny sheen of promoting *The Life of a Showgirl*. As a *Wired* feature captured it:

“The first sign that it was AI was that it didn’t look great,” said Marcela Lobo, a designer and longtime Swift fan. “The shadows didn’t match, the windows and the painted piano—it looked like shit, basically.”

The call from her fans was curt and straight: Do better.



MAJOR AI AD MISFIRES AND BRAND BACKLASH

 <p>AI holiday ads (2024-5)</p> <p>Soulless, technical glitches, artist displacement</p>	 <p>“Crush” iPad ad</p> <p>Ad crushed creative tools, artists found it tone-deaf</p>	 <p>AI model diversity</p> <p>Accused of “digital blackface,” denied human model jobs</p>	 <p>Olympic “Dear Sydney” ad</p> <p>AI wrote child’s letter, viewers found it depressing and inauthentic</p>	 <p>“Life of a Showgirl” promo video</p> <p>Generative AI lyric video, hypocrisy accusations, poor quality</p>	 <p>AI model fashion ad</p> <p>Erasure of real models, authenticity, unrealistic ideals</p>	 <p>Retro Instagram AI campaign</p> <p>Glitches, undisclosed AI, “AI slop” mocked by fans</p>	 <p>AI ambassadors</p> <p>Use of AI “brand reps” seen as creepy or inauthentic</p>
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More Care. Less Slop.

Somewhere in the rush to innovate, perspective—and care—fell out of view.

AI slop is now part of the cultural vernacular, a shorthand for dissonance: work that looks fine on the surface but feels hollow underneath.

AI campaigns confuse what people expect from brands—not efficiency or novelty, but genuine connection. The genie may be out of the bottle, as they say, but that doesn't settle the issue at hand. Every action invites a reaction. The cultural recoil we're seeing now is proof.

AI in capable hands is powerful—but human sensibilities endure. Beyond Fortune 500 firms, a small start-up lit up the paradox beneath it all. This summer, billboards from [Artisan](#) blared “*Stop Hiring Humans*.” The company framed it as provocation, boasting of its earned media reach—but in doing so, it exposed how casually we've begun to market the end of ourselves. They said:

“We didn't expect people to get so mad. The goal of the campaign was always to rage bait, but we never expected the level of backlash we ended up seeing.”



✦ Don't Blame the Luddites

Those working on the front lines of AI should be careful not to confuse healthy skepticism with Luddism. What some call resistance may be conscience. The efficiencies we celebrate come with costs that no spreadsheet can measure, losses no digital twin can mirror.

Some brands, more attuned to culture than code, have sensed the current turning. [Polaroid](#) and [Heineken](#) pushed back against the algorithmic tide, running human-centered campaigns to reach people weary of AI. There's an irony that speaks to the age: *protecting our humanity now requires advertising.*

Enduring brands are hard to build and impossible to fake. What sustains them isn't optimization but care—the patient work of noticing, refining, and feeling what belongs in the world. AI can help us do all of this, but only if we're willing to get our hands dirty in the making—to use it not as a substitute for imagination and refinement, but as a means of sharpening it.

Because if something is worth creating, it's worth having people own the creation—not just in the legal sense, but in the deeper sense of authorship, responsibility, and care.

In the end, perspective may prove the most irreplaceable human skill of all—the one thing no model can simulate, no brand can fake, and every leader must nurture.

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