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Marketing's Accountability Crisis in the Age of AI: Reclaiming Strategic Patience from Algorithmic Short-Termism.

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Abstract: *Marketing's legitimacy within the firm remains paradoxically fragile despite decades of investment in accountability systems (Stewart, 2025; Bendle & Butt, 2023). The rapid proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) in marketing—including algorithmic personalisation, generative content automation, and predictive targeting—has intensified this crisis (Grewal et al., 2021; Huang & Rust, 2024). While AI offers unprecedented measurement precision, its short-window attribution logics, real-time optimisation algorithms, and quarterly performance dashboards systematically embed a short-term bias that undermines long-term brand equity, capability development, and strategic flexibility (Li, Zhu & Lee, 2025; Kumar et al., 2023). This conceptual paper integrates agency theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Bhandari & Javakhadze, 2022), the managerial myopia literature (Laverty, 1996; Edmans, 2021), and real options logic (Baldwin, 2019) to develop a critique of six interlocking pathologies amplified by AI-driven marketing. We then introduce the concept of* ***strategic patience****—a deliberate governance logic that accepts short-term calculable inefficiencies to protect long-term intangible assets (Rust & Huang, 2025; Stewart, 2025). Three governance heuristics are proposed: lead brand health indicators (Keller, 2023), brand investment ratio covenants (Mizik & Hanssens, 2024), and managerial rotation policies with deferred compensation (Whitler & Morgan, 2024; French & Andersson, 2023). Unlike conventional AI-marketing papers that focus on mediation and moderation of trust, this work provides a critical, governance-oriented perspective on how AI tools exacerbate short-termism and how organisations can structurally counter this bias*

Keywords: Marketing accountability; short-termism; strategic patience; artificial intelligence marketing; brand equity; agency theory; real options; managerial myopia

I. INTRODUCTION

Marketing is at an inflection point. After two decades of intensive investment in accountability systems—multi-touch attribution, marketing mix models, customer lifetime value (CLV) frameworks, and real-time dashboards—the function's strategic standing within the firm has not improved (Lehmann, McAlister & Staelin, 2022; Mintz & Currim, 2022). Chief marketing officer (CMO) tenure continues to decline, averaging 3.3 years in the United States (Spencer Stuart, 2024), substantially shorter than that of CFOs (5.8 years) (Whitler & Morgan, 2024; Nath & Bharadwaj, 2024). When brands underperform, marketing is routinely the first department to face restructuring, budget cuts, or leadership replacement (Moorman & Day, 2016). This is not merely an occupational hazard; it signals a deeper organisational pathology that undervalues the very assets marketing is uniquely responsible for building (Homburg, Theel & Hohenberg, 2020).

The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) in marketing promised to solve these accountability problems through hyper-personalisation, predictive targeting, and generative content at scale (Davenport & Mittal, 2022; Kumar et al., 2023). Global spending on AI marketing technologies reached an estimated USD 644 billion in 2025 (Jaiswal, Nair &

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Gupta, 2023). Yet AI has paradoxically intensified short-termism: its optimisation algorithms favour immediate conversions, its attribution windows rarely exceed 30 days, and its seamless integration with quarterly business reviews makes long-term brand building even harder to justify (Li, Zhu & Lee, 2025; Belanche, Belk & Casaló, 2024).

This paper advances a distinctive thesis: conventional AI-marketing research—focused on trust, engagement, and mediator/moderator effects—misses the deeper governance crisis. The real problem is not that consumers distrust AI (though they often do), but that AI tools embed a temporal bias that systematically sacrifices long-term value for short-term calculability (Rust & Huang, 2025; Stewart, 2025). Drawing on agency theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Bhandari & Javakhadze, 2022), the managerial myopia literature (Laverty, 1996; Edmans, 2021), and recent critiques of AI in marketing (Crawford, Smith & Jones, 2023; Huang & Rust, 2024), we develop an integrated framework that diagnoses six pathologies and offers a governance alternative: **strategic patience**.

Unlike typical AI-marketing papers that propose trust as a mediator between AI practices and consumer engagement, this paper asks a more fundamental question: *What if the very metrics that make AI marketing appealing are destroying the brand assets marketing is supposed to build?* We answer by showing how AI's optimisation logic interacts with agency problems to produce systematic underinvestment in long-term intangible assets. We then propose three governance heuristics—lead brand health indicators, brand investment ratio covenants, and managerial rotation policies with deferred compensation—that organisations can implement to counter AI-induced short-termism.

The paper contributes to marketing theory and practice in four ways. First, it bridges the AI-marketing literature with the accountability and short-termism literature, a connection largely absent from existing work (Grewal et al., 2021; Stewart, 2025). Second, it reframes marketing accountability from a technical measurement problem to a strategic governance problem (Mintz & Currim, 2022; Lehmann et al., 2022). Third, it specifies six testable pathologies that are amplified by AI adoption. Fourth, it offers actionable governance heuristics with detailed design parameters (Nath & Bharadwaj, 2024; Whitler & Morgan, 2024).

II. METHODOLOGY: A CONCEPTUAL SYNTHESIS APPROACH

Given the paper's conceptual nature, we adopt a systematic literature review and theoretical synthesis methodology following guidelines for top-tier conceptual papers (MacInnis, 2011; Jaakkola, 2020).

2.1 Literature Search and Screening

We conducted a systematic search of Scopus and Web of Science using keyword combinations: ("AI marketing" OR "artificial intelligence" OR "algorithmic marketing") AND ("short-termism" OR "managerial myopia" OR "temporal orientation"); ("marketing accountability" OR "marketing metrics" OR "attribution"); ("brand investment" OR "brand equity") AND ("agency theory"). The search covered 1990–2025 (with a focus on 2015–2025). After screening 247 articles, 89 underwent full-text review, yielding 72 core sources from which the final 56 references were selected.

2.2 Theoretical Integration and Argument Structure

We employed **theoretical synthesis** (Jaakkola, 2020) across three literatures:

Agency theory to explain horizon misalignment between principals and agents (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Bhandari & Javakhadze, 2022).

Managerial myopia literature to identify antecedents of short-term decision bias (Laverty, 1996; Edmans, 2021; Grundy & Li, 2024).

AI-marketing literature to understand how algorithmic optimisation amplifies temporal biases (Huang & Rust, 2024; Kumar et al., 2023; Li, Zhu & Lee, 2025).

The argument proceeds in three steps: (1) diagnosis of six pathologies amplified by AI, (2) introduction of strategic patience as a counter-logic, (3) specification of three governance heuristics with testable propositions.

2.3 Quality Assurance

Following MacInnis (2011) and Jaakkola (2020), we ensure **differentiation** (novel governance perspective vs. technical accountability or trust-mediation studies), **integration** (six pathologies connected through agency-theoretic

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mechanism), **generativity** (testable propositions), and **verisimilitude** (mapping onto observable organisational practices).

III. HOW AI MARKETING AMPLIFIES SHORT-TERMISM: SIX PATHOLOGIES

AI marketing tools are not neutral instruments. Their design choices—optimisation objectives, attribution windows, feedback frequencies—embed specific temporal assumptions (Li, Zhu & Lee, 2025; Huang & Rust, 2024). Below we identify six interlocking pathologies, each exacerbated by AI adoption and supported by contemporary empirical evidence.

3.1 Pathology 1: The Last-Click Illusion Amplified by Attribution AI

Multi-touch attribution models, especially last-click or short-window models, systematically underweight upper-funnel brand activities. AI-driven attribution platforms (e.g., Google Ads, Meta Advantage) optimise for conversions within 7–30 days, giving near-zero credit to brand advertising that generated initial awareness (Van Heerde, Dinner & Neslin, 2019; Stahl, Heitmann & Lehmann, 2024). As AI systems automatically reallocate budget toward high-attributed channels, brand spending declines (Bendle & Butt, 2023).

AI-specific mechanism: Reinforcement learning algorithms exploit short-term conversion signals, creating a positive feedback loop that starves brand investment (Li, Zhu & Lee, 2025).

Proposition 1 (AI-amplified): *Firms using AI-driven last-click or 7-day attribution models allocate a higher proportion of budget to performance marketing (vs. brand building) than firms using longer-window or position-based models, controlling for industry.*

3.2 Pathology 2: Quarterly Budget Whiplash Intensified by Real-Time Dashboards

Annual budgeting processes reinforced by quarterly reviews create stop-start cycles. AI dashboards provide daily or weekly performance updates, enabling—and pressuring—managers to reallocate budgets at ever-shorter intervals (Mintz & Currim, 2022). This destroys cumulative effects: a brand campaign that would show effects in month five is cancelled in month two because the AI dashboard shows "underperformance" (Mizik, 2014; Mizik & Hanssens, 2024).

Proposition 2: *The frequency of AI dashboard-driven budget reallocations (daily/weekly vs. monthly/quarterly) is positively associated with marketing spend variance and negatively associated with 3-year brand equity growth.*

3.3 Pathology 3: The Brand Investment Death Spiral Accelerated by Predictive Algorithms

When short-term pressure leads to brand budget cuts, equity erodes gradually, often invisibly for several quarters (Mizik & Jacobson, 2008; Allayannis, Brown & Peterson, 2023). AI-based predictive models that forecast sales based on recent spend can exacerbate this: the model learns that brand spending "doesn't work" (because its effects are not yet visible), further reducing recommended brand allocations (Keller, 2023; Stahl et al., 2024). This creates an algorithmic death spiral.

Proposition 3: *Use of AI models trained on <12 months of data leads to systematically lower brand investment recommendations than human judgement or models trained on 3+ years of data.*

3.4 Pathology 4: Capability Atrophy from Outsourcing to AI Vendors

Marketing effectiveness depends on organisational capabilities: data analysis, creative development, customer insight, channel management (Day, 2011; Teece, 2022). AI vendors (e.g., programmatic platforms, generative content tools) offer "black-box" solutions that reduce internal capability development (Davenport & Mittal, 2022). Over time, firms become dependent on external AI vendors, losing strategic marketing skills (Teece, 2022; Narver, Slater & Hult, 2023).

Proposition 4: *Firms that outsource core marketing AI functions (e.g., bidding, content generation, segmentation) to external vendors exhibit lower marketing capability composite scores after three years than firms that develop internal AI capabilities.*

3.5 Pathology 5: Innovation Aversion from A/B Testing Culture

AI enables rapid A/B testing, optimising toward known metrics. While efficient for incremental improvements, this discourages radical innovation because novel strategies have no historical data and initially underperform (March,

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1991; Sorescu & Spanjol, 2024). Risk-averse managers rationally avoid experimentation, relying on proven tactics with predictable returns (Narver et al., 2023).

Proposition 5: *Higher frequency of automated A/B testing is associated with lower proportion of marketing budget allocated to pilot programmes and new channel experiments.*

3.6 Pathology 6: The CMO Tenure Trap Reinforced by AI Metrics

Short CMO tenure (3.3 years) is both cause and consequence (Whitler & Morgan, 2024; French & Andersson, 2023). New CMOs face immediate pressure to show results within 12–18 months. AI dashboards provide "objective" proof of short-term performance (or lack thereof) (Moorman & McCabe, 2023). The rational strategy: cut brand spending (showing immediate profit improvement), launch short-term promotions, and move on before brand erosion shows up in metrics (Nath & Bharadwaj, 2024).

Proposition 6: *CMOs with AI dashboards that report weekly performance metrics make significantly larger brand investment cuts in their first 12 months than CMOs with less frequent reporting.*

IV. STRATEGIC PATIENCE: A GOVERNANCE ALTERNATIVE

If AI-amplified pathologies arise from systematic short-term biases embedded in accountability regimes, the remedy requires changing governance structures—not just improving AI algorithms (Stewart, 2025; Rust & Huang, 2025). We introduce **strategic patience**—deliberately redesigning marketing governance to protect long-term investments from AI-driven optimisation pressures (Mizik & Hanssens, 2024; Edmans, 2021).

Figure 1: From AI-Amplified Pathologies to Strategic Patience Heuristics.

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V. GOVERNANCE HEURISTICS WITH AI-SPECIFIC ADAPTATIONS

5.1 Heuristic 1: Lead Brand Health Indicators (LBHI)

Most organisations track lagging brand metrics (awareness, consideration)—but these change slowly. Lead indicators predict future equity erosion (Keller, 2023; Stahl et al., 2024). AI can help compute them at scale.

Table 1: Lead Brand Health Indicators – Operational Definitions

Indicator	Operational Definition	Lead Time	AI Enhancement
Share of search	Brand search volume ÷ category search volume (rolling 28 days)	2–3 quarters	NLP sentiment integration
NPS trend for non-buyers	NPS among respondents who have NOT purchased in last 12 months	3–4 quarters	Automated survey + AI text analysis
Brand funnel velocity	(Consideration ÷ Awareness) × (Preference ÷ Consideration) monthly change	2 quarters	Real-time panel data integration
Social brand mentions (unprompted)	Volume of unprompted brand mentions (indexed to category)	1–2 quarters	AI topic modelling + competitive normalisation

AI-specific recommendation: Configure AI dashboards to display LBHI *alongside* short-term conversion metrics, with a rule that a decline in any LBHI triggers a mandatory review of brand investment levels—even if short-term revenue is strong (Homburg et al., 2020; Keller, 2023).

Proposition 7: *Firms that implement LBHI in AI dashboards exhibit lower variance in brand investment over the business cycle than firms with conversion-only dashboards.*

5.2 Heuristic 2: Brand Investment Ratio Covenants

Financial covenants (debt-to-equity, current ratio) are standard in finance. A brand investment ratio covenant commits the organisation to maintain brand spending above a floor, overriding AI optimisation recommendations (Mizik & Hanssens, 2024; Allayannis, Brown & Peterson, 2023).

Table 2: Design Parameters for Brand Investment Ratio Covenants

Parameter	Low-restriction	Medium-restriction	High-restriction
Covenant floor	Brand spend ≥20% of total marketing budget	≥30%	≥40%
Measurement	Annual	Semi-annual	Quarterly
Enforcement	Board disclosure	Executive bonus modifier	Bonus forfeiture
AI override	AI bids can be adjusted up, not down	AI must respect floor	Separate human-managed brand budget

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Parameter	Low-restriction	Medium-restriction	High-restriction
Example context	Mid-cap B2B	Large CPG (e.g., P&G)	Luxury / heritage brands

AI-specific recommendation: Program AI bidding algorithms with a constraint that brand investment cannot fall below the covenant floor, even if short-term ROI models suggest reallocation (Li, Zhu & Lee, 2025; Stewart, 2025).

Proposition 8: *Brand investment ratio covenants are associated with higher 5-year brand equity growth and no significant difference in short-term profitability after 2 years, compared to firms without covenants.*

5.3 Heuristic 3: Managerial Rotation Policies with Deferred Compensation

Align CMO incentives with long-term brand health by deferring compensation and exposing managers to cross-functional consequences (Whitler & Morgan, 2024; French & Andersson, 2023; Grundy & Li, 2024).

Table 3: Deferred Compensation Design for CMOs in AI-Intensive Firms

Component	Typical practice (no patience)	Strategic patience design
Performance period	1 year	3–5 years
Bonus payout timing	100% annually	50% annually, 50% after 3 years (clawback)
Metrics for deferred portion	Short-term revenue, ROI	LBHI, 3-year CLV growth
Post-employment	None	Clawback if LBHI decline >10% within 2 years of departure
AI dashboard access	Full real-time	Deferred portion linked to lagged LBHI, not daily AI metrics

Proposition 9: *CMOs subject to deferred compensation provisions allocate a higher proportion of budget to brand building in their first 18 months than CMOs without such provisions, even when AI dashboards recommend otherwise.*

VI. SUMMARY OF TESTABLE PROPOSITIONS

Table 4: Complete Proposition Set with AI Specificity

Prop.	Independent Variable (AI-related)	Dependent Variable	Expected direction
P1	AI attribution window (≤7 days vs. ≥30 days)	% budget to brand building	Negative (−)
P2	Frequency of AI dashboard reallocations (daily vs. monthly)	3-yr brand equity growth	Negative (−)

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Prop.	Independent Variable (AI-related)	Dependent Variable	Expected direction
P3	AI training data window (<12 months vs. >36 months)	Brand investment recommendation (model output)	Negative (−)
P4	Reliance on external AI vendors (high vs. low)	Marketing capability composite	Negative (−)
P5	Automated A/B test frequency (weekly vs. monthly)	% budget to pilot programmes	Negative (−)
P6	AI dashboard reporting frequency (weekly vs. monthly)	Brand investment cut in first 12 months of CMO	Positive (+)
P7	LBHI inclusion in AI dashboards (binary)	Business-cycle variance in brand investment	Negative (−)
P8	Brand investment covenant (binary)	5-yr brand equity growth	Positive (+)
P9	Deferred compensation provision (binary)	Brand allocation in first 18 months of CMO tenure	Positive (+)

VII. BOUNDARY CONDITIONS AND CONTINGENCIES

Table 5: When Strategic Patience Is (and Is Not) Appropriate

Condition	High appropriateness	Low appropriateness
Ownership structure	Family-owned, long-horizon PE, foundation-owned	Activist hedge fund, quarterly-driven public
Industry life cycle	Mature, stable, growing	Declining, hyper-commoditised
Brand age / equity	Established with significant equity	New brand (different logic required)
Customer relationship	Repeat purchase, high CLV	One-off, transactional, low switching costs
Financial health	Positive cash flow, low leverage	Distressed, liquidity-constrained

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VIII. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 Theoretical Contributions

This paper makes three contributions. First, it bridges the AI-marketing literature (which focuses on trust, personalisation, and consumer responses) with the accountability and short-termism literature (which focuses on agency theory and governance) (Grewal et al., 2021; Stewart, 2025; Bhandari & Javakhadze, 2022). This bridge reveals that AI tools are not neutral optimisers but temporal biasing devices (Li, Zhu & Lee, 2025; Rust & Huang, 2025). Second, it reframes marketing accountability from a technical measurement problem to a strategic governance problem (Mintz & Currim, 2022; Lehmann et al., 2022)—a shift with significant implications for how we study AI's organisational impact. Third, it offers a set of testable propositions that move beyond mediation/moderation frameworks toward governance mechanism design (Moorman & McCabe, 2023; Kumar et al., 2023).

8.2 Practical Implications for Boards, CEOs, and CMOs

For boards and CEOs: AI dashboards should be redesigned to include lead brand health indicators alongside conversion metrics (Keller, 2023; Homburg et al., 2020). Brand investment covenants should be considered for firms with significant brand equity (Mizik & Hanssens, 2024). CMO compensation should include 3-5 year deferred components tied to LBHI (Whitler & Morgan, 2024; Grundy & Li, 2024). For CMOs: Use the six pathologies as diagnostic tools (Nath & Bharadwaj, 2024). When pressured to cut brand budgets based on short-term AI metrics, name the pathology and demand longer-window analysis. Invest in internal AI capabilities rather than outsourcing strategic functions to vendors (Davenport & Mittal, 2022; Teece, 2022). For CFOs: Recognise that AI optimisation horizons are a design choice, not a technical necessity. Demand that AI vendors provide models with configurable time horizons (e.g., 12-month, 36-month optimisation) (Stewart, 2025; Li, Zhu & Lee, 2025).

IX. RESEARCH AGENDA: EMPIRICAL TESTING PATHWAYS

Table 6: Recommended Methods for Each Proposition

Proposition	Recommended Method	Sample / Data	Identification Strategy
P1, P2	Panel regression with firm fixed effects	Compustat + vendor data (500 firms, 10 yrs)	Instrument: attribution model vendor change
P3	Lab experiment with marketing managers	Simulated AI dashboard (conjoint)	Random assignment of training window
P4	Longitudinal survey + archival	CMO survey + Compustat	Propensity score matching
P5	Field experiment (collaboration with retailer)	200 stores, 12 months	Random assignment of A/B testing frequency
P6	Event study + DiD	CMO turnover announcements	Compare firms with/without deferred comp
P7, P8	Quasi-experiment (adopters vs. matched controls)	Public firms + Kantar BrandZ	Coarsened exact matching
P9	Panel with CMO fixed effects	Executive contract database	Within-CMO over time

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Figure 2: Proposed Moderated Mediation Model (Integrating AI and Governance.

X. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper is conceptual; the propositions require empirical testing. We did not model dynamic feedback loops (e.g., how reduced brand equity increases future acquisition costs, which further pressures budgets). We also did not address potential unintended consequences of covenants (e.g., inefficient spending lock-in). Future research should examine cross-cultural variation in strategic patience (e.g., German vs. US governance systems) and the role of AI explainability in mitigating short-term bias (Rust & Huang, 2025; Kumar et al., 2023).

XI. CONCLUSION

Marketing has spent two decades trying to prove its accountability through ever-more-sophisticated metrics. The arrival of AI promised precision but delivered something more ambivalent: a systematic bias toward short-term, measurable, attributable activities at the expense of long-term brand building, capabilities, and strategic flexibility (Stewart, 2025; Rust & Huang, 2025; Li, Zhu & Lee, 2025). The six pathologies identified here are not technical glitches; they are inherent properties of AI optimisation when deployed without governance safeguards (Mizik & Hanssens, 2024; Bhandari & Javakhadze, 2022).

Strategic patience offers a way out. By redesigning dashboards, imposing investment covenants, and aligning executive compensation with long-term brand health, organisations can harness AI's power without sacrificing their future. The question is no longer whether marketing can be measured, but what kinds of measurement systems and governance structures produce sustainable value (Lehmann et al., 2022; Mintz & Currim, 2022). The answer lies not in more sophisticated AI attribution but in more patient governance. Organisations that learn this lesson will build brands that outlast quarterly earnings calls—and the AI dashboards that now dominate them.

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