

AI Adoption in UK B2B Marketing

Key findings from 15 interviews with senior B2B marketers — MSc Dissertation, Aston University (Merit, CIM-accredited)

The Question

AI adoption is widely reported as near-universal in marketing. But survey-based adoption rates often conflate automation with AI, and academic research suggests most firms remain at the pilot stage. This research asked a simpler question: when senior B2B marketers talk about AI adoption, what do they actually mean — and is it consistent with what's happening inside their organisations?

The Approach

Fifteen semi-structured interviews (45-70 minutes each) with senior B2B marketing professionals across technology, finance, healthcare, logistics, retail, consumer goods, and professional services in the UK. Data was coded thematically in NVivo 15, using an abductive approach — combining established adoption theories (Technology Acceptance Model, Technology-Organisation-Environment, Resource-Based View, Institutional Theory, Responsible AI Governance) with open coding for emergent themes.

What Emerged

Adoption isn't binary, and it isn't simply a matter of resources or willingness. Across sectors, a consistent pattern appeared: organisations described AI very differently depending on whether the conversation was about internal workflows or external positioning. Some firms had embedded AI into measurable, routine processes — lead scoring, fraud detection, compliance — to the point where it was no longer discussed as 'AI' at all. Others had extensive public-facing AI narratives — annual report mentions, ethics pledges, pilot announcements — with comparatively little operational substance behind them.

Two themes emerged that weren't part of the original research design: a recurring anxiety among marketers about whether their organisations actually had the in-house skills to use AI tools effectively (regardless of whether the tools themselves were available), and a pattern of governance commitments — ethics pledges, responsible AI statements — that existed on paper without enforcement processes behind them.

The Diagnostic Question

The research suggests that 'are you using AI?' is the wrong question for organisations trying to assess their own adoption honestly. A more useful question is where on a spectrum — from pure signalling to fully embedded operational use — a given AI initiative actually sits, and whether that position matches how it's being described internally and externally.

This research underpins a framework I call the Strategic-Symbolic Continuum, which I'm sharing in more depth across a short series — follow for the next instalment.

Aayushi Agratha — MSc Strategic Marketing Management, Aston University
aayushi.agratha@gmail.com • [linkedin.com/in/aayushiagratha](https://www.linkedin.com/in/aayushiagratha) • positionpilot.lovable.app