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Epistemic Violence or Simply Good Marketing?

Why University Marketing May Not Be So Innocent

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Lex et Ratio Ltd provides research, advisory, and strategic consulting in governance reform, fiduciary accountability, and epistemic ethics, integrating legal analysis, institutional theory, and practical reform strategies across public, corporate, and academic institutions.

Abstract

University marketing is often presented as a neutral or even celebratory activity, but this paper argues that it constitutes a site of *epistemic violence*—a subtle suppression of epistemic plurality through the aesthetic and rhetorical performance of excellence. Drawing on Fricker's (2007) framework of *epistemic injustice* and Dotson's (2014) account of *epistemic oppression*, the paper situates institutional communication within structures of *testimonial* and *hermeneutical exclusion*. Integrating fiduciary theory (Frankel 2011; Kahl 2025), it advances the concept of fiduciary epistemic stewardship—a normative framework that redefines universities as *trustees of epistemic trust*, bound by duties of care, candour, loyalty, and prudence.

Through engagement with intercultural ethical traditions—Jewish *Tikkun Olam*, Islamic *Shura* and *Masʾuliyah*, Christian *Diakonia*, Hindu *Ahimsa*, and Buddhist mindfulness—the paper formulates a global ethics of *epistemic non-violence*. It proposes a *pedagogy of fiduciary dialogue*, wherein communication becomes a relational and reflexive act rather than a competitive performance. The conclusion reinterprets marketing as a moral mirror, reflecting the institution's epistemic conscience and its willingness to learn from its own representations. The study calls for universities to move from market rationality to *fiduciary rationality*: from self-promotion to stewardship of truth.

Keywords

epistemic violence, epistemic injustice, fiduciary epistemic duties, university marketing, higher education, rankings, epistemic exclusion, hermeneutical injustice, testimonial injustice, epistemic audits, institutional responsibility, knowledge governance, plural epistemologies, academic ethics

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1. Introduction: The Smile of Excellence

Scrolling through LinkedIn on a quiet morning, one is greeted by a familiar image: a university's jubilant announcement framed in saturated blues and golds. 'Ranked Number One — again!' the banner declares. Similar posts crowd the feed — tables of citation counts, employability statistics, glossy campus photographs. Their tone is celebratory, almost devotional. Yet beneath this confident language of excellence lingers an unease: why does this relentless self-affirmation feel so hollow, and why does it seem to narrow rather than expand the horizons of knowledge?

At first glance, such campaigns appear harmless, even necessary. Universities operate in competitive markets where student recruitment, funding, and reputation hinge on visibility and performance. Marketing becomes both shield and sword in the struggle for institutional survival. However, when repeated daily and internalised by staff and students alike, these rituals of self-promotion risk transmuting into mechanisms of epistemic domination. They privilege what can be counted — research outputs, grants, global rankings — while relegating unquantifiable but essential dimensions of scholarship: care, critique, reflection, and community engagement. In doing so, they participate in what Fricker (2007) terms epistemic injustice, whereby certain voices or forms of knowing are rendered less credible or less intelligible. Dotson (2014) extends this insight, describing epistemic violence as the systemic suppression of resistant or alternative epistemologies.

The argument developed here is that contemporary university marketing, though outwardly benign, may constitute precisely this kind of structural epistemic violence. The harm is not deliberate but emergent. It stems from the institutional conditions of what Barnett (2023) calls the *marketised university*, in which identity and legitimacy are refracted through managerial and performative imperatives. The violence lies in exclusion — a quiet erasure of scholarly modalities that resist quantification or commodification. As Settles et al. (2021) demonstrate, epistemic exclusion denies full participation to those whose work or identities do not fit dominant frameworks; marketing narratives risk reproducing this exclusion on an institutional scale.

This raises two interrelated questions. First, can communicative practices designed for prestige inadvertently enact epistemic harm? Second, if so, what ethical framework might re-orient universities toward epistemic care and accountability? Drawing on Kahl (2025) and Frankel (2011), this study employs the concept of *fiduciary epistemic duties* — duties of care, candour, loyalty, and stewardship owed by universities (as trustees) to their epistemic beneficiaries — students, faculty, and the wider public — with knowledge and truth serving as the trust corpus. When marketing distorts or excludes, it breaches these fiduciary obligations by misrepresenting the epistemic trust placed in the institution.

The discussion proceeds in five parts. Section 2 surveys the theoretical foundations of epistemic injustice and fiduciary duty. Section 3 examines how ranking culture and visual branding instantiate epistemic violence. Section 4 develops a framework for fiduciary epistemic stewardship grounded in intercultural ethics — Jewish, Islamic, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist. Section 5 re-imagines the university through Barnett's ecological model and Darder's critical pedagogy, culminating in a call for a *pedagogy of fiduciary dialogue*. The conclusion returns to the question of excellence itself, asking whether institutional self-promotion reflects genuine academic flourishing or a subtler form of epistemic enclosure.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Epistemic Injustice and Structural Power

Epistemic injustice, as defined by Fricker (2007), arises when individuals or groups suffer harm in their capacity as knowers. She distinguishes *testimonial injustice*, in which prejudice undermines the credibility of a speaker, from *hermeneutical injustice*, where structural gaps in interpretive resources exclude certain experiences from shared understanding. While Fricker's model begins with interpersonal encounters, it has been widely recognised that the same injustices may be embedded in institutional architectures. Universities —purporting to be guardians of reason—are particularly susceptible to enacting epistemic injustice when their internal hierarchies, evaluative criteria, or communicative practices privilege some epistemic agents over others.

Dotson (2014) advances this critique by introducing the concept of epistemic oppression, which she defines as the persistent exclusion of marginalised groups from the production and validation of knowledge. Her notion of epistemic violence extends Spivak's post-colonial analysis into contemporary institutions: the violence is structural, enacted through the very procedures by which knowledge is recognised. Medina (2017) adds a dynamic dimension, proposing that epistemic resistance requires cultivating epistemic virtues such as humility, reflexivity, and open-mindedness—virtues that are systematically eroded when institutions equate excellence with quantifiable performance.

The cumulative implication is that epistemic injustice is not confined to acts of discrimination or bias; it may arise from the habitual operations of seemingly neutral systems. Ranking tables, citation metrics, and marketing slogans are thus not epistemically innocent. They construct hierarchies of credibility that reward conformity to dominant paradigms while silencing epistemic difference. In this way, institutional communication itself becomes an epistemic agent—one capable of both recognition and erasure.

2.2 From Epistemic Justice to Fiduciary Responsibility

To interpret these harms within an ethical-legal framework, the paper turns to fiduciary theory. Traditionally, fiduciary law concerns relationships of asymmetrical power in which one party (the fiduciary) undertakes to act for or on behalf of another (the beneficiary) in matters of trust and confidence (Frankel 2011). Core duties —loyalty, care, candour, and good-faith stewardship—are imposed precisely because the beneficiary is vulnerable to the fiduciary's discretion.

Transposed to the domain of knowledge, universities function as fiduciaries of epistemic trust. They hold authority over what counts as valid knowledge, determine access to epistemic goods, and represent those goods to the public. Students, faculty, and society constitute the beneficiaries; knowledge and truth form the trust corpus; the public good of informed judgment is the benefit in trust. When an institution distorts its epistemic representations—through selective marketing, exaggerated rankings, or omission of dissenting research—it breaches its duty of candour. When it privileges instrumental outcomes over intellectual integrity, it fails the duty of loyalty.

Kahl (2025) develops this synthesis in his theory of *fiduciary epistemic duties*, arguing that institutions of higher learning bear not only moral but fiduciary obligations to sustain the integrity of epistemic processes. These duties, he suggests, require institutions to act with epistemic care—the vigilant maintenance of conditions

under which diverse knowers can flourish. Violations of such duties amount to fiduciary negligence in the governance of knowledge.

Harding (2013) similarly emphasises that fiduciary law protects relationships founded on trust against the corrosive effects of power imbalance. Within academia, marketing departments wield a subtler form of discretionary power: the authority to shape collective perception of excellence. DeAngelis (2014) observes that academic administrators already exercise fiduciary functions in relation to faculty and students, though these responsibilities are rarely articulated in epistemic terms. The present analysis extends that insight, contending that communicative acts—press releases, visual campaigns, "impact" narratives—must be understood as fiduciary representations subject to duties of accuracy and inclusivity.

2.3 Integrating Epistemic and Fiduciary Ethics

Bringing these strands together yields a hybrid framework: epistemic injustice identifies the types of harm (testimonial, hermeneutical, structural), while fiduciary duty prescribes the normative response (care, candour, loyalty, stewardship). The convergence establishes a new interpretive lens—fiduciary epistemic responsibility—through which institutional behaviour can be evaluated. Under this model:

- **The fiduciary subject** is the university, entrusted with epistemic authority.
- **The beneficiaries** are its epistemic constituents—students, staff, and the broader community of knowers.
- **The trust corpus** comprises knowledge, truth claims, and the conditions sustaining inquiry.
- **The fiduciary obligations** are to preserve epistemic plurality, prevent distortion, and disclose truth candidly.

When universities craft public narratives that obscure uncertainty or inflate achievement, they manipulate the epistemic environment upon which public trust depends. The resulting harm is dual: it injures marginalised knowers (epistemic injustice) and breaches institutional trust (fiduciary failure).

This theoretical synthesis also provides the conceptual scaffolding for later sections. Section 3 examines how ranking culture operationalises these harms through quantification; Section 4 articulates how intercultural ethics and mindfulness might restore fiduciary equilibrium. Together, they move the analysis from diagnosis to prescription—from identifying epistemic violence to constructing a framework of *fiduciary epistemic stewardship* capable of redressing it.

3. The Marketisation of Knowing

3.1 The Logic of Metrics

The rise of the marketised university (Barnett 2023) has transformed academic life into a semi-commercial enterprise governed by quantifiable indicators. League tables, citation indices, and student-satisfaction scores now function as currencies of legitimacy. Their apparent objectivity conceals deep epistemic assumptions: that knowledge is measurable, that value correlates with visibility, and that excellence is commensurable across

contexts. These assumptions narrow the epistemic field by privileging forms of inquiry that produce data convertible into rankings and revenue.

The ensuing "metrics culture" operates as a regime of truth in the Foucauldian sense—one that disciplines what may be known and who may speak with authority. Researchers internalise these metrics, re-orienting their labour toward what will count rather than what may matter. The humanities, community-engaged research, and local epistemologies are disadvantaged precisely because their contributions resist quantification. As Medina (2017) argues, epistemic resistance depends on cultivating virtues of humility and plural listening, yet such virtues carry little exchange value in a competitive marketplace.

Within this system, marketing departments become the semiotic front line. They translate numerical hierarchies into narratives of moral triumph: "Top 1% in citations," "Number one for employability." The rhetoric of ranking masquerades as evidence of virtue. What was once a university—a space for universal inquiry—morphs into a brand, a managed signifier designed for external consumption. The epistemic harm is subtle but pervasive: knowledge becomes spectacle, and visibility replaces truth as the dominant criterion of worth.

3.2 Epistemic Violence in the Aesthetic of Excellence

Dotson's (2014) concept of *epistemic violence* provides a lens through which to interpret these aesthetic performances. Violence here does not entail overt coercion but a structural silencing enacted through representational regimes. When marketing campaigns showcase only those disciplines or demographics that reinforce a polished image of success, they enact testimonial injustice on excluded communities of knowers. The omission of critical scholarship, minoritised faculty, or politically uncomfortable research constitutes a hermeneutical gap: the institution renders certain forms of truth unintelligible within its own communicative universe.

Settles et al. (2021) describe this as *epistemic exclusion*—a condition in which scholars' identities or methodologies place them outside dominant evaluative schemas. University marketing reproduces this exclusion by valorising conformity and suppressing dissent. Each poster or social-media banner thus performs a micro-act of epistemic enclosure, converting plural knowledges into a homogenised narrative of global competitiveness.

My own concept of *optocratic drift* (Kahl 2025) captures this phenomenon with precision. As institutional attention migrates toward optics—visual metrics, rankings, branding—the locus of epistemic authority shifts from knowledge production to knowledge display. *Optocracy*, governance by appearance, replaces epistemic democracy. *Substitutive visibility* follows: the image of excellence substitutes for its substance, while the Vice-Chancellor's portrait or the ranking badge becomes the token through which legitimacy circulates. The institution's fiduciary duty of candour (Frankel 2011; Kahl 2025) is thus displaced by a duty of optics—an inversion that corrodes trust both internally and publicly.

3.3 The Fiduciary Breach of Truthfulness

In fiduciary terms, the university's marketing apparatus exercises discretionary power over the representation of epistemic assets held in trust for society. That power carries obligations of loyalty (to truth), candour (to disclose limitations), and prudence (to avoid misleading beneficiaries). When communications exaggerate impact, omit context, or conceal uncertainty, they breach these duties. The harm is dual: epistemic—silencing

heterodox knowledge—and fiduciary—betraying the reliance of students, scholars, and the public upon the institution's integrity.

Harding (2013) reminds us that fiduciary duty arises precisely where the beneficiary cannot verify the fiduciary's claims without trust. Prospective students or donors cannot independently assess research quality; they must rely on institutional self-representation. Misrepresentation here is not merely reputational puffery but a violation of epistemic stewardship. The university, as trustee of knowledge, owes an affirmative duty to prevent distortion of the epistemic environment it inhabits.

3.4 From Metrics to Meaning: The Epistemic Costs

The pursuit of rankings carries significant epistemic externalities. It redirects funding toward fields with measurable outputs, thereby shrinking the epistemic ecosystem. Barnett (2023) describes this as a transition from the ecological to the instrumental university, where relational, moral, and aesthetic dimensions of scholarship are subordinated to managerial efficiency. In this sense, metrics culture functions analogously to monoculture in agriculture: it maximises yield in the short term but impoverishes diversity and resilience.

Antonia Darder's (2017) work in critical pedagogy underscores the human consequence of such reductionism. When educational institutions prioritise performance over dialogue, they reproduce domination rather than liberation. Marketing, though outwardly celebratory, thus participates in a pedagogy of compliance: it teaches students what to desire, what to value, and whose knowledge counts. The epistemic subject becomes a consumer rather than a participant in the collective pursuit of truth.

3.5 Summary

The marketisation of knowing transforms the university from fiduciary trustee of truth into brand manager of prestige. Its communications apparatus, structured around visibility and quantification, enacts epistemic violence by marginalising non-metricised forms of knowledge and by breaching duties of candour and care. What emerges is an institution governed by optics rather than understanding—a condition of optocratic drift in which images of excellence eclipse the ethical reality of knowledge stewardship.

The next section develops a counter-model: *fiduciary epistemic stewardship*. Drawing on intercultural ethical traditions—Jewish, Islamic, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist—it explores how universities might reclaim marketing as a practice of epistemic mindfulness and non-violence, thereby restoring trust and plurality to the governance of knowledge.

4. Towards Fiduciary Epistemic Stewardship

4.1 From Fiduciary Duties to Fiduciary Epistemic Stewardship

If universities are fiduciaries of knowledge, then stewardship extends beyond compliance or branding: it encompasses an ethical responsibility for the conditions under which truth is cultivated and communicated. Fiduciary epistemic stewardship requires four cardinal virtues—*care*, *candour*, *loyalty*, and *prudence*—applied

not only to research integrity but to every representational act. In an environment of optocratic drift, these virtues must be re-centred as the moral architecture of institutional communication.

Following Frankel (2011), fiduciary relationships are defined by asymmetry of knowledge and power. In higher education, the public, students, and early-career scholars rely on the institution's representations to orient their epistemic choices. Kahl (2025) argues that this reliance imposes *fiduciary epistemic duties*: obligations of openness, interpretive inclusion, and testimonial fairness. When these duties are neglected, the institution's communications become acts of epistemic negligence.

Thus, fiduciary epistemic stewardship demands institutional *reflexivity*—a conscious recognition that every message about excellence constructs an epistemic hierarchy. Stewardship begins with an acknowledgment of the institution's representational power and proceeds through structured practices designed to prevent epistemic harm.

4.2 Mindfulness as Institutional Ethic

Mindfulness, drawn from Buddhist philosophy, offers an operational ethos for fiduciary stewardship. Kabat-Zinn (2003) describes mindfulness as non-judgmental awareness of one's actions and their effects. Transposed into the institutional context, it requires deliberation before each act of communication: *Who might this silence? What forms of knowledge does this exclude or distort?*

Institutional mindfulness can be systematised through *epistemic audits* (Kahl 2025)—periodic evaluations of communication, hiring, and decision-making processes aimed at detecting patterns of epistemic exclusion. These audits extend beyond numerical diversity metrics, assessing instead the range of epistemic perspectives represented in institutional narratives. The outcome is not simply procedural correction but ethical self-awareness: a habit of pausing before amplifying.

Mindfulness transforms fiduciary duty from a static obligation into a living practice of epistemic attentiveness. It converts public relations into a form of ethical meditation—an institutional metanoia from projection to reflection.

4.3 Intercultural Ethical Foundations

Fiduciary epistemic stewardship is not a Western innovation but a synthesis of global moral traditions that converge on principles of care, responsibility, and non-violence. These traditions collectively frame a cosmopolitan ethics of knowledge governance.

- **Jewish Ethics – Tikkun Olam**
  The duty of *Tikkun Olam* (תיקון עולם, "repairing the world") emphasises restorative action in the face of structural harm (Sacks 2025). For universities, it mandates active redress of epistemic exclusion—repairing the world of knowledge by amplifying silenced perspectives.

- **Islamic Ethics – Shura and Masʾuliyah**
  Shura (شورى, consultation) and *Masʾuliyah* (مسؤولية, responsibility) together define a participatory ethic of governance (Ramadan 2009). Applied institutionally, they call for deliberative inclusion in epistemic decision-making, ensuring that knowledge policy and communication involve those affected by them.

- **Christian Ethics – Diakonia**
  The Christian notion of *Diakonia* (διακονία, service) underpins Greenleaf's (1977) model of servant leadership. It transforms authority into service and insists that leadership's legitimacy arises from care for the marginalised. In epistemic terms, diakonic communication prioritises humility over triumphalism.

- **Hindu Ethics – Ahimsa**
  Gandhi's (2018) *Ahimsa* (अहिंसा, non-violence) extends moral restraint to the epistemic realm. It forbids the symbolic violence of erasure or misrepresentation, insisting that institutional narratives cause no harm—not even by omission.

- **Buddhist Mindfulness – Smṛti**
  Returning to Buddhist ethics, *Smṛti* (स्मृति, awareness) aligns epistemic responsibility with self-discipline. The mindful institution cultivates attentiveness to the subtleties of exclusion and the impermanence of reputation.

Together, these traditions constitute a trans-civilisational ethics of epistemic non-violence. They shift fiduciary ethics from procedural compliance to moral vocation, embedding the global plurality of moral reasoning into the governance of knowledge.

4.4 Critical Pedagogy and Liberation

Antonia Darder (2017) contends that genuine education is an act of liberation, not indoctrination. Marketing that reduces learning to economic return undermines the dialogical relation between teacher and learner that defines pedagogy. By contrast, *fiduciary pedagogy* re-imagines communication itself as an educative act: each message models how institutions understand truth and value.

A *pedagogy of fiduciary dialogue* thus reframes marketing as moral instruction. Instead of proclaiming superiority, institutions engage their publics in reflective conversation about the plurality of knowledge. This approach echoes Paulo Freire's insistence that dialogue is the essence of learning, but grounds it in fiduciary ethics: dialogue becomes the fiduciary method of representing truth responsibly.

Darder's pedagogy of love complements fiduciary stewardship by restoring empathy to institutional voice. Where metrics teach comparison, dialogue teaches reciprocity; where branding cultivates envy, stewardship cultivates trust. In this way, critical pedagogy becomes the emotional intelligence of fiduciary governance.

4.5 Operationalising Fiduciary Epistemic Stewardship

To translate these principles into practice, universities could implement a series of measurable yet ethical interventions:

1. **Epistemic Audits** – regular internal reviews evaluating how institutional communications represent different disciplines, epistemologies, and communities.

2. **Balanced Communications** – pairing each ranking announcement with stories of non-metricised excellence—community research, critical scholarship, or artistic innovation.

3. **Fiduciary Disclosure Statements** – annual transparency reports detailing epistemic inclusion efforts alongside financial statements.

4. **Reflexive Training** – workshops for marketing and communications staff in epistemic justice and intercultural ethics.

5. **Shared Governance** – establishing Shura-style consultative committees including students, academics, and community partners to review major campaigns.

Such mechanisms operationalise the fiduciary virtues of care, candour, loyalty, and prudence. They restore a measure of epistemic humility, ensuring that visibility serves knowledge rather than displacing it.

4.6 Summary

Fiduciary epistemic stewardship redefines the moral economy of the university. Against the reduction of knowledge to metrics and the drift toward optocratic representation, it posits a relational ethics grounded in mindfulness, intercultural wisdom, and dialogical pedagogy. The university that embraces this model becomes not a corporation of self-promotion but a trustee of epistemic flourishing—a custodian of plurality.

The next section turns to re-imagining the university as an ecological and fiduciary community, drawing upon Barnett's ecological university and my own concept of a pedagogy of fiduciary dialogue to articulate the future architecture of institutional trust.

5. Re-imagining the University: Ecological and Fiduciary Futures

5.1 The University as Ecological Entity

Barnett's (2023) notion of the ecological university conceives higher education not as an autonomous market actor but as a living organism embedded in multiple ecosystems — knowledge, culture, economy, and the natural world. Its vitality depends on balance across these spheres. When one domain, such as economic performance, dominates, the entire ecology suffers epistemic atrophy.

Within this vision, epistemic health is analogous to environmental health: diversity ensures resilience. A monoculture of metrics impoverishes inquiry just as an agricultural monoculture exhausts soil. Fiduciary epistemic stewardship thus functions as ecological restoration. It re-introduces neglected epistemic species — community knowledge, the humanities, dissenting voices — into the institutional ecosystem. The fiduciary university becomes a curator of epistemic biodiversity, protecting minority knowledges from extinction under competitive pressure.

5.2 Countering Optocratic Drift

My own concept of *optocratic drift* (Kahl 2025) describes the gravitational pull of institutions toward governance by appearance, where visual performance and reputational optics substitute for genuine epistemic

substance. In ecological terms, this is a form of pollution: an accumulation of images that cloud the epistemic atmosphere.

To counter this drift, universities must engage in *epistemic detoxification*. This involves disclosing uncertainty, celebrating collaborative failures, and contextualising metrics within narratives of learning and growth. Substitutive visibility must give way to *fiduciary visibility* — representation anchored in care and candour rather than spectacle. Each public message becomes an act of stewardship, reaffirming the institution's loyalty to truth over image.

5.3 Pedagogy of Fiduciary Dialogue

The *pedagogy of fiduciary dialogue* extends the fiduciary model into the domain of teaching and institutional communication alike. Dialogue here is both method and ethos. It replaces unidirectional proclamation with reciprocal engagement, echoing Darder's (2017) call for education as liberation rather than instruction.

Through fiduciary dialogue, the university recognises that communication itself is pedagogical: every banner, post, or prospectus teaches the public something about the nature of knowledge. When messaging models humility, transparency, and inclusivity, it educates by example; when it rehearses triumphalism, it instructs in hierarchy. The fiduciary educator therefore asks not *what shall we tell the world?* but *how shall we listen to it?*

Institutionally, this pedagogy manifests in participatory design of communications, open-access dialogues on values, and reflexive audits where staff and students co-interpret the university's public voice. The goal is to transform marketing into collective self-understanding — a forum where epistemic values are negotiated, not imposed.

5.4 From Compliance to Cultivation

Re-imagining the university in fiduciary-ecological terms also entails a shift in governance philosophy. Traditional compliance frameworks treat ethics as a constraint; fiduciary stewardship treats it as cultivation. The task is not merely to avoid harm but to foster epistemic wellbeing.

This reframing aligns fiduciary ethics with Barnett's ecology: both seek sustainability through interdependence. Where compliance demands external regulation, stewardship grows from internal conscience — a culture of *institutional mindfulness* (Kabat-Zinn 2003; Kahl 2025). Universities thus become moral ecosystems, self-regulating through awareness rather than enforcement.

Operationally, this could mean integrating fiduciary impact assessments into policy cycles, evaluating not only financial but epistemic consequences of decisions. Such measures extend the concept of sustainability to include the sustainability of truth.

5.5 Toward the Fiduciary University

The *fiduciary university* emerges as the normative ideal synthesising these strands. It is ecological in recognising its relational embeddedness; fiduciary in acknowledging its duties of care, candour, loyalty, and prudence; pedagogical in communicating through dialogue rather than display. Its legitimacy rests not on rankings but on the trust it sustains within its epistemic community.

In this model, excellence is no longer measured by visibility or market share but by the integrity of epistemic relations. The fiduciary university embodies the moral imagination to see marketing as a covenant, not a contest — a continuous act of repair (*Tikkun Olam*) within the fragile ecology of knowledge.

6. Conclusion: Marketing as Moral Mirror

Opening LinkedIn once more, the glossy banners return: 'Ranked #1 for Research Impact', 'Global Top 100', 'Excellence Recognised Worldwide'. To the casual observer, these images seem benign—celebrations of collective achievement. Yet, as this paper has argued, they also function as mirrors: moral instruments that reflect the epistemic character of the institution that produces them. What they reveal is often uncomfortable.

University marketing, when viewed through the twin lenses of epistemic injustice and fiduciary ethics, discloses an unresolved tension between representation and truth. Every institutional statement is a claim to epistemic authority, and therefore an ethical act. When that authority is exercised without reflexivity—when appearance eclipses authenticity—it transforms into what I have called *optocratic drift*: the rule of optics over understanding. The result is a subtle epistemic violence that silences plurality, commodifies knowledge, and breaches the fiduciary duty of candour owed to society.

But the same mirror that exposes harm can also reflect the possibility of redemption. To re-imagine marketing as *fiduciary epistemic stewardship* is to convert communication from performance to conscience. The institution that speaks with humility rather than self-congratulation, that pairs its rankings with reflections on the limits of measurement, begins to practise *Ahimsa*—non-violence in the epistemic realm. When it consults its communities in the spirit of *Shura* and assumes responsibility through *Mas'uliyah*, it enacts Islamic ethics of shared accountability. When it undertakes *Tikkun Olam*, it repairs epistemic fractures through inclusion and care. When it embodies *Diakonia*, it serves rather than advertises. When it cultivates mindfulness, it pauses before speaking, aware of the potential harm each message may cause.

These are not ornamental gestures but fiduciary imperatives. They recognise that universities are trustees of humanity's epistemic commons, holding in trust the credibility of knowledge itself. In this role, excellence must be redefined—not as competitive pre-eminence, but as integrity in stewardship. The fiduciary university does not seek to dominate the conversation but to deepen it; it does not measure value by visibility, but by the quality of its listening.

To adopt this posture requires courage. It demands that institutions resist the gravitational pull of market rationality and embrace the moral rationality of care. It calls for leadership that understands communication as pedagogy, and pedagogy as fiduciary trust. Such transformation will not be achieved through codes of conduct alone, but through cultural cultivation: daily acts of mindfulness, transparency, and plural recognition embedded in the institutional fabric.

As I close the screen, the colours of the promotional banner linger—a mosaic of aspiration and anxiety. Perhaps these images are not enemies but teachers. They remind us that the university, in speaking to the world, also teaches itself who it is. If marketing is a mirror, then the question is not whether we like what we see, but whether we are willing to learn from the reflection.

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1	Initial release	None	2025-06-10
2	Layout and design of front page revised for clarity and consistency. Added Abstract and Keywords. Created section Further Reading listing additional sources.	None	2025-08-18
3	Major structural and theoretical expansion. Added five-chapter architecture with refined abstract, full APA 7th bibliography, and integration of intercultural ethical frameworks (Jewish, Islamic, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist). Introduced concepts of fiduciary epistemic stewardship, pedagogy of fiduciary dialogue, and incorporated optocratic drift and substitutive visibility within the marketisation critique.	Deepened the paper's epistemic scope from diagnostic to normative: transformed the analysis of university marketing from critique of injustice to a comprehensive fiduciary-ethical framework for epistemic governance. Strengthened theoretical coherence between epistemic injustice, fiduciary law, and intercultural moral philosophy, thereby expanding the work's universality and normative precision.	2025-10-17

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