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Epistemic Violence or Simply Good Marketing?

Why University Marketing May Not Be So Innocent

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An inquiry into the fiduciary epistemic duties of universities
in the face of promotional narratives
and global ranking pressures

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Abstract

This essay interrogates the ethical and epistemic consequences of university marketing practices, particularly their reliance on rankings and promotional narratives. While such strategies are often presented as neutral or necessary tools for competition, they risk enacting subtle forms of epistemic violence by privileging quantifiable metrics and marginalising alternative forms of knowledge. Drawing on the concepts of epistemic injustice and fiduciary epistemic duties, the analysis highlights how institutional messaging can narrow the frameworks of what counts as valuable scholarship, thereby silencing plural epistemologies, especially those rooted in the humanities and historically marginalised groups. The essay proposes that universities, as fiduciary stewards of knowledge, should adopt practices of epistemic mindfulness and undertake regular epistemic audits to ensure inclusive and responsible knowledge governance. By situating the discussion within global ethical traditions, the piece advances a normative framework for universities to move beyond marketing imperatives towards epistemic justice.

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

As I opened LinkedIn this morning, I was immediately greeted by yet another post from XYZ University. Bright visuals proudly declared: 'Ranked Number One—again!' Another day, another top ranking: best in research, citations, employability. I paused, scrolling through similar announcements. I felt strangely uneasy, wondering if I was the only one sensing a quiet discomfort beneath this relentless celebration of excellence.

At first glance, these announcements seem harmless, perhaps even necessary. Universities compete intensely for students, funding, and prestige. Rankings and metrics are powerful tools in this landscape. But beneath their glossy surface, these daily affirmations of institutional supremacy may constitute something more troubling: a subtle form of epistemic violence.

Epistemic violence refers to the systematic marginalisation or suppression of alternative ways of knowing. When universities consistently promote only that which is quantifiable—citations, funding success, employability—they unwittingly delegitimise forms of scholarship that resist such metrics. Humanities, critical theory, community knowledge systems, and epistemologies from historically marginalised groups often find themselves edged out of the spotlight. Faculty working outside dominant norms frequently encounter testimonial injustice: their epistemic credibility eroded by institutional neglect.[1]

These institutional narratives also narrow the frameworks through which knowledge is interpreted and validated, thereby contributing to hermeneutical injustice. In my own research, I have argued that this results not merely from individual prejudice, but from structural asymmetries that prevent epistemically plural knowledge from entering mainstream institutional recognition.[2]

Yet institutions are not villains. Universities like XYZ are not acting maliciously. They are responding to market pressures, competing within an environment saturated with global rankings and algorithmically driven reputational stakes. But this makes their ethical responsibilities even more urgent. As I have argued elsewhere, institutions of higher learning bear fiduciary epistemic duties—duties of care, loyalty, and good faith stewardship—towards their epistemic constituents: students, faculty, and the broader society.[3]

So how might they better fulfil these duties?

One path lies through institutional mindfulness. Drawn from Buddhist thought, mindfulness calls for deliberate awareness of one's actions and their consequences. Translated into institutional practice, it would mean pausing before every promotional post and asking: Who might this silence? What voices are not included here? This kind of reflection aligns with what I call epistemic audits—structured processes for evaluating the inclusivity of knowledge production, hiring practices, and public communications.[4]

Moreover, universities can deepen their ethical commitments by engaging with diverse philosophical and religious traditions. Jewish teachings on *Tikkun Olam* (תיקון עולם, repairing the world) urge institutions to actively redress structural injustices.[5] Islamic ethics of *Shura* (شورى, structured consultation) and *Mas'uliyah* (مسؤولية, responsibility) prioritise inclusive and transparent decision-making processes.[6] Christianity's emphasis

[1] Settles et al 2021, 495.

[2] Kahl 2025, ch 4.

[3] Kahl 2025, ch 6; Harding 2013, 95.

[4] Kabat-Zinn 2003, 147; Kahl 2025, ch 7.

[5] Sacks 2025, 41.

[6] Ramadan 2009, 122.

on servant leadership (διακονία, *diakonia*) encourages humility and prioritising marginalised voices.[7] Hinduism's principle of *Ahimsa* (अहिंसा, non-violence) extends into epistemic spaces, highlighting that institutional messaging must avoid causing subtle epistemic harm.[8] In my own work, I explore systematically how these diverse philosophical frameworks can provide a robust foundation for a globally informed code of epistemic conduct.[9]

Taken together, these principles can be operationalised: institutions might pair rankings announcements with features on critical scholarship, amplify student and community voices that challenge orthodoxy, or publish epistemic inclusion reports alongside annual impact statements.

Yet, as I closed LinkedIn, the questions remained. Are these celebratory posts simply good marketing —or quiet acts of epistemic enclosure? Do they uplift, or obscure? Do they promote excellence, or narrate a narrow and self-reinforcing fiction?

I'll leave that for you to decide.

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[7] Greenleaf 1977, 13.

[8] Gandhi 2018, 88.

[9] Kahl 2025, ch 8.

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Revision History

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