Hania Peper

Instructor Kevin Gould

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Brand-Identity and Divestment: How to Greenwash through Contradiction

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Over the years, Concordia University has maintained itself as an institute headed by liberal and progressive ideals. This image was initiated by a founding history that situated the university as what many consider to be a left-leaning, open-minded alternative to McGill. However, given the privatizing nature of today's post-secondary institutes, Concordia—along with many other learning-centres—has been forced to seek further financial gains to fulfill fiduciary responsibility while likewise increasing self-branding strategies to recruit a higher number of prospective students (Hearn 116; CSU 5). Consequently, this has created a precarious contradiction between the university's sustainable rhetoric, and the fossil fuel industries to which it has invested. This paper thus seeks to investigate how Concordia markets sustainability in the context of divestment and neoliberalism; subsequently, it aims to assess how the university's sustainable rhetoric fares against the divestment movement in order to gain insights about on-campus greenwashing.

Before analysing how the university manages its environmental PR, it is first important to develop an understanding of Concordia's branding practices, as well as how they work to secure success amid today's competitive post-secondary playing field. After reviewing Concordia's communication strategies through sources ranging from websites and spotlight articles, to campaigns and news reports, we can begin to develop a better understanding around the image that Concordia aims to project and uphold. The university encodes much of its content with rhetoric that positions it as a "progressive", "diverse", and "leading" university (Concordia.ca). Despite the university's less-than remarkable national ranking, failing to place into the top-20 post-secondary institutes of Canada (Webometrics), we see a tendency for campus narratives to be constituted in a discourse of self-proclaimed notoriety and significance. On the Concordia website, as well as through email correspondence, the university is framed as a "leader" throughout much of its communication outreach. In fact, terms like "leader" and "first" are frequent throughout each website faculty sub-section. Navigating through the university's website reveals spotlight articles containing climate action, community engagement, and sustainability-oriented narratives, which are present throughout each department and faculty sub-section. These narrative structures are indicative of the ways in which Concordia tries to align itself with sustainable values, which might shed light on the institute's careful branding practices.

Considering the brand-value that terms like "sustainable" have on establishing a desired social perception, one might expect to see today's universities use their marketing to play-up environmentally progressive incentives. When contemplating the value that social license brings to today's universities, it is important to recognize that this is not an uncommon practice. Studies investigating the brand-value of universities demonstrate that the management of an institute's identity must fall in line with its corporate objectives, which are predicated on the university's capacity to appeal to, and thus secure, a future student-body (Hearn 114-115). This is referred to as "message discipline", which is suggested to be a central practice from which to encourage student recruitment (Hearn 116).

Concordia's own Brand Manual reveals the significance that these characteristics have on the university's marketing practices, serving to inform how it manages and maintains its image. Among its brand guidelines and rules are recommendations that govern how written content should frame the university, asserting that it be "daring", "progressive", and "innovative" (5). This further highlights the university's "leadership" paradigm, where guidelines seem to prefer a lexicon that highlights the university's standing as a "leader" of forward-thinking praxis (5-6). Unsurprisingly, this would include sustainability and climate action discourses as they have become quintessential selling-points among the competitive nature of today's corporate world (Gidwani 11). Upon the increasingly nonpartisan conditions imbuing today's universities, our post-secondary institutes have likewise been forced to assimilate these corporate practices (Turk 4). While the image expectations outlined in the brand manual may not be uncommon in the context of today's universities and the competitive nature of post-secondary institutes, exposing these foundational principles and shedding light on the carefully crafted nature of the Concordia brand lends insight into the extent to which the university prioritizes marketing and image. These rhetorical tendencies, which try to imbue the university as a leader in progress and innovation, extend likewise to its rhetoric regarding sustainability and climate action.

Concordia often cites itself as a progressive university with regards to environmental policy and campus sustainability, with statements made by Alan Shepherd as well as throughout the university website refer to Concordia as a leader of sustainable praxis (Downey). However, the term “leadership” is made ambiguous by a failure to identify what or who the university is leading, leaving us to make our own conclusions. Likewise, these vague statements often proclaim Concordia to be a role model for campus sustainability—one for which other post-secondary institutes could follow. Yet these claims are contradicted by the university's campus waste audits, which reveal that Concordia is disposing only about half of its waste appropriately (Concordia.ca; Waste Audit 2015). According to RecycQuebec, Concordia would need to be processing at least 70% of its waste accordingly in order to be considered a leader on campus waste management in Quebec (Waste Audit 2015). Furthermore, an institute with an estimated 12 million dollars invested in fossil fuels, the mining industry, and pipeline expansion cannot rightfully claim leadership regarding sustainability when they have yet to re-allocate these investments into clean energy alternatives (CUF). Still, we see these narrative structures emerge whenever new opportunities arise to engage with “first” or “leadership” paradigms. Concordia's proclivity to imbuing itself with “firsts” can be exemplified throughout its website marketing. For example, in the “Fair Trade” section of its Sustainability Services, Concordia projects itself to be the first Canadian institute to provide all fair-trade bananas on its campuses—a modest feat that the university saw fit to embellish.

Ultimately, these communication strategies buffer the university with an identity that succumbs to today's consumer demands regarding sound social and environmental practice. This is what Alison Hearn calls the new "reputation economy", where the cumulative value of today's university is predicated almost completely on their reputation and social standing (114). That is why branding and control of image is more important than ever before amid today's progressive privatization of post-secondary institutes. In fact, a study investigating investment strategies and the use of ESG's, as well as other socially responsible practices, demonstrate their PR value for upholding a company's reputation while allowing it to offset or detract from potentially harmful secondary affiliations (Yunker). These "responsible" actions are supposed to fulfill mandates around social and environmental praxis; however, what we are seeing is that these actions are failing to compel meaningful institutional transformation conducive to the decarbonization of our economy (Yunker 6-7). Rather, they are instead being used as offsetting mechanisms that detract from unsustainable third-party affiliations and/or investments by serving first-and-foremost as a way to uphold social licence while scantily fulfilling corporate responsibility (Yunker 6-7, 29). This means that institutes are able to maintain partnerships with environmentally damaging entities, such as the fossil fuel industry, if they can likewise increase sustainable activity elsewhere. Essentially, this is failing to result in meaningful change or divestment, creating instead a tendency to greenwash by selling a sustainable image under the guise of new responsible enterprises (Yunker 26, 29).

These tropes can be seen playing out at Concordia, where the university recently issued a sustainable bond, making it the first Canadian institution to do so (Downey). While inarguably a feat in itself, the move gave the university more opportunity bring terms like "responsible" and "sustainable" to the forefront of university rhetoric. In response to the bond, university president Alan Shepherd said, "We are sending a strong message: Responsible investment choices are critical to the future health and prosperity of our planet." (Downey). In another statement, Shepherd said, "The Concordia community is committed to a sustainable future and has shown leadership on this issue for many years. Today we're once again setting an example that we hope others will follow.” (Downey). This framing of the university is one that continues to reproduce itself whenever opportunity sees fit. In fact, the university consistently portrays itself as an environmental leader; however, the majority of these rhetorical nods to environmentalism are consistently framed as ongoing sustainable projects the university is actively working to fulfil. Consequently, the university gets away with remaining invested in carbon intensive markets and the fossil fuel industry—the only difference being that it is now capable of camouflaging its erroneous investment portfolio by using sustainable accomplishments to boost its image.

In the context of neoliberalism and the corporatization of post-secondary institutes, this sort of branding becomes pivotal to the success of the university—particularly as an institute that maintains a key interest in leadership and raising its rankings. In this way, we can begin to contemplate how university rhetoric will try to subvert and detract from any environmental malpractice with which its investments are linked. This attempt to stash its relationship with the fossil fuel industry is compounded by the strong stance that Concordia seems to maintain on sustainability and progress (Downey; Shepherd). These narratives have remained central to much of the institute’s rhetoric and self-branding strategies. However, as sustainability becomes increasingly integrated into campus discourses, the university’s image runs the risk of becoming evermore compromised by its poor investment choices.

We have already addressed the leadership paradigm under which Concordia’s PR strategies fall; however, another recurring strategy the university tends to adopt is one that tries to emulate “proactivity”. This rhetorical tactic is most commonly used in the face of public criticism and student dissatisfaction. It is important to highlight this as our universities become more skilled at navigating potential threats to their image by designing PR protocols for such scenarios. In 2014, for example, Concordia was cited by the Montreal Gazette as having claimed to be the “first” Canadian post-secondary institute to initiate divestment from fossil fuels (Seidman). Despite its failure to commence any form of divestment from the fossil fuel industry, this ambitious declaration was somehow substantiated simply because the institute responded to divestment demands from its student body by adopting new “social and ethical” investments, which they were able to frame as a “step towards divestment” (Seidman). Understandably, this framing strategy was made with the intention of satisfying appeals to divest without actually divesting. Almost five years later, the divestment movement still maintains a presence on campus while the university has yet to re-allocate funds from its fossil fuel investments, exposing the deceitful nature of these claims.

Concordia’s tendency to adopt PR responses that attempt to convey proactivity can be seen recurring in the wake of many issues and scandals. After reviewing campus discourses, we see a tendency to harness and deploy language that both acknowledges the problems at hand and expresses concern while remaining ambiguous enough to avoid detailing a comprehensive plan from which to adequately address the issue. This strategy has been both observed and criticized following the English and Philosophy departments’ sexual misconduct allegations, whereby students were outraged at the university’s ambiguous responses and statements, as well as its failure to implement any form of meaningful recompense (Rukavina; Lafontaine).

Likewise, we can see the same rhetorical strategies used amid its handlings of demands for divestment. Throughout the university’s website and email correspondence, we see the recurring theme of sustainability as a future goal and central pillar to the incentives of Concordia. Sustainability and reinvestment discourses are framed as though they are being actively pursued, where language situates such principles at the core of the university’s current affairs. For example, after Concordia initiated the SRI fund—a move that coincided with anxieties and commotion surrounding the divestment movement—CUF chair Howard Davidson made the statement, “We have been closely following the public discourse on divestment, and social and ethical investing. . . The result includes the adoption of a responsible investment policy and exploring a new approach to asset management” (Mota). Note the lexical chronology of this statement: it first addresses and acknowledges the significance of divestment, then proceeds to discuss the future of investment policy at Concordia, using words such as “new” and “responsible”. To the untrained eye, or perhaps a more general public who does not follow Concordia’s divestment movement, these statements are both affirmative and ambiguous enough to create a sense of action on behalf of divestment without actually making any motion to divest.

In another article, we see these same tropes play-out when CUF president Bram Freedman is quoted saying, “Environmental responsibility, social responsibility and sustainability have long been at the heart of Concordia’s values. Our new partnership with the PRI ensures that our investment approach reflects these values, both now and in the future.” (Keating). Again, we see Concordia situate itself first-and-foremost as an environmentally conscious university, re-situating its position and image as a progressive and sustainable exemplar of higher education. Freedman proceeds to assert that “by joining this coalition of international investors, Concordia will have an active role in promoting and supporting sustainability and environmental responsibility worldwide.” (Keating). Here, Freedman conforms to the proactive narrative by using engaged language that positions Concordia as working towards a more sustainable future. For readers, this creates the connotation that the university is actively addressing divestment today in order to see to this future—an implication that has shown to be deceitful after looking at the most recent annual report with regards to its endowment fund (CUF). In addition, we again see Concordia frame itself using the leadership narrative by using terms like “worldwide” when describing its role on enacting progressive environmentalism.

Upon examining the PR strategies and communication campaigns deployed by Concordia, it is evident that branding and marketing are a central means to affirm the left-leaning, progressive identity the institute upholds. After reviewing the university’s communications, “sustainability” seems to be a prevailing subject that is part and parcel to this identity. But while Concordia’s historical and cultural conditions help explain the manifestation of this identity, we must acknowledge the increasingly underfunded and privatized circumstances of today’s post-secondary institutes, which are evidently hindering Concordia’s ability to meet its founding values (CSU 3). Moreover, the corporatized nature of higher education has likely forced Concordia to play-up such values in its marketing schemes, accentuating an image that has become increasingly difficult to uphold. As such, greenwashing is happening at Concordia insofar as it has become a necessary resource to maintain its status. This is compounded by an increasingly competitive post-secondary environment, whereby a lower-ranking university like Concordia must somehow remain relevant in the shadow of McGill—Canada's most internationally renowned university. It is likewise important to note that Concordia's sustainability rhetoric coincides with milestones that are both worthwhile and logical advertising resources, such as the zero-waste campaign, the sustainability bond, and the SRI fund. That is to say, the strategies Concordia uses to market its sustainability attributes aren't unique when compared with other institutions, nor are they necessarily outright untruthful. While there *is* evidence to indicate some level of deceitfulness—whereby sustainability rhetoric is often used to offset or divert attention away from divestment initiatives—there is little to suggest that greenwashing is occurring in any sort of epidemic way.

Despite these revelations, developing a better understanding for the branding practices at Concordia in the context of funding-cuts, neoliberalism, and institutional competition gives us new insights around how best to frame divestment amid times of climate crisis and post-secondary competition. Looking at the conditions behind Concordia's image and placing it in the context of today's neoliberal practices leads us to consider the value of framing divestment instead as *competition to divest.* Further, if Concordia's branding manual identifies itself using terms like "innovation", "daring", and "leadership", then there is ample opportunity to leverage these ideals to sell divestment as a *concept,* and thus, as a viable market opportunity. Indeed, Concordia's divestment from fossil fuels would support both its image and values while further setting it apart from McGill and all other Canadian universities. Divestment would give Concordia a real legacy—both in the nation, and across the world—serving to put Concordia on the map for years to come.

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