

DECEPTIVE MARKETING COMMUNICATION AND STUDENT ENROLLMENT DECISIONS IN PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (PHEIS) IN CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT: *The University Reforms in the early 90s in Cameroon set the stage for private interests, driven by economic gains to invest in the Higher Education Sector. One of the outcomes of this move is the prevalence of misleading marketing communications that seek to attract and influence university enrollees. Focusing exclusively on alumni these private university institutions, this paper employs snowball sampling of six hundred subjects and a logistics regression technique to gauge the true influence of deceptive marketing communication on students' decisions to enroll in PHEIs. The findings reveal that, although 93.5 percent of alumni admit to have been deceived to enroll in their respective alma maters (PHEIs), there is no inferential evidence that student enrollment decisions are induced by deceptive marketing communication.*

KEYWORDS: *Deception, Marketing, Communication, Asymmetry, University Enrollment.*

INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly capitalist global economic environment, the balance of power in marketing transactions is presumably in favour of customers who are expected to judge and sanction businesses through their purchase preferences. This globally accepted powerful position of the consumer leverages on the famous 21st century Marketing philosophy that "the customer is the king". By extension, this modern marketing ideology urges every institution to develop product and service offers based on the exigencies of the revenue-driving stakeholders(customers). Though widely acclaimed, this marketing ideology seems to lose every steam and even produces counter results within the educational environment, especially in the university system.

Higher Education is however a reputational and comprehensive professional service aimed at developing the intellectual capacity of students over an extensive period. By implication, the

assumption of an informed consumer who appreciates a market offer and sanctions poor marketing offers through a rational purchase decision is violated given that the core offer, *education* is the product. This logically places education as a unique type of service whose marketing, from a societal perspective must be carefully controlled. This contemporary challenge comes up in an era where educational institutions, who were supposed to provide a knowledge base for the operation of marketing systems, like every organization engage in diverse informative and persuasive communication, targeting potential students (Gibbs, 2007). Gibbs argues that, this reality which is observable in sectors that are otherwise the pillars of humanity as religion, health and education does not only put to question the latent appreciation of marketing communication messages by customers as a premise to purchase decision but equally questions in a fundamental way the value added by marketing communication from an ethical perspective.

Kerr et al., (2009) suggest that educational marketing communication is not just about the commercial promotion of an institution's programs but can also encompass the idea of texts whose intention is to enhance the image of the school. This apparently supportive positions point to the core of the dilemma as it emphasis not just the awareness creation aspects that one will ordinarily consider acceptable by the sheer character of the underlying missions of educational institutions but equally the controversial persuasive communication and branding aspects.

There is thus a very fine line between what is considered ethically as *competitive marketing communication strategy* and *deceptive marketing communication* as an unethical marketing concept. This premise is tenable since every ethical competitive communication strategy feeds on the absence or insufficiency of some form of information to the other party. Obviously, what is called 'deception' in marketing communication could pass for 'strategy' legally or illegally, based on some information gaps at one level or another, totally contrary to the idealistic premise of perfectly competitive markets.

In the context of Cameroon's higher education sector for example, the United Nation Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation - UNESCO (2014) reports holds the higher education participation rate at five (5) per cent of the national population. A purely marketing interpretation of this value in the context of access to valuable market information susceptible to supporting rational patronage from potential university students as customers reveals a very high probability (approximately 0.95) of not getting the right information. This creates a huge educational marketing information gap that can be exploited by many businessmen who have seen education as any classical profitable venture and not the sacred social entrepreneurial venture that it is supposed to be.

In Cameroon, the Educational Reforms of the early 90s gave birth to hundreds of privately owned higher institutions in the country. Competition for higher student enrolment consequently took fiercer trend with typical marketing imperatives that justify persuasive marketing communication. As Njomo (2013), puts it, just after the 1991 Higher Education reforms in Cameroon, the Higher Education sector emerged as one of the nation's biggest advertisers.

Historically, the problem of falling education standards at the tertiary and other levels in Cameroon has been posed severally from the educationists' standpoint in total oblivion to the mercantilist character that the liberalization of tertiary education brought to this sector. With the proliferation

of higher education institutions accorded ministerial approval on the rise in Cameroon, there is every reason to believe that deceptive communication as a tool to attain higher enrollment is not at its end. In fact, with declining barriers to entry into this sector, competition is bound to be rife, providing a capitalist push for promoters to resort to unorthodox and unethical measures to guarantee their survival and growth. The fundamental problem at this level is that of consumer protection from the increasingly deceptive communication messages propagated by promoters of higher education institutions who logically seek to maximize their profits.

From a legal perspective in Cameroon, the problem of consumer deception appears to be well-thought and mitigated by various pieces of legislations that attempt to set a leveled marketing playing field for buyers and marketing agents. One of these instruments is Law No 2011/012 OF 6 May 2011 on “The Framework On Consumer Protection In Cameroon” which specifically requires that each technology, good or service supplier or provider must provide the consumer with *correct, adequate*, clear and legible information, in English and French, concerning the goods and services offered to enable customers make appropriate and rational choices before concluding a contract. The spirit behind this particular provision of the law seeks to mitigate the risk of adverse selection in marketing transactions that may leverage on information asymmetry or willful deceit in communication from

The practice on the field is definitely far away from all these safeguards. Despite the law that demands total disclosure of the *correct* information for sellers in the market, predatory tertiary learning institutions around Cameroon still produce expensive flyers and brochures bearing architectural designs of would-be campuses without clearly stating on these marketing gadgets that such infrastructures are aspirational. Misleading claims of partnerships with state and reputable international universities have constantly induced student to engage in programs that the purported state or international partner university could not deliver the certificates at the end of the training, leaving students in some cases stranded with diplomas that cannot guarantee the furtherance of their educational career.

Given the information asymmetry that characterizes the pre-university marketing transaction with the learner and the fact that learning is only a chain-derived demand for a job upon graduation or a better life, the learner as a customer never gets to ascertain the quality of the service purchased from the university even on the graduation day.

Although there is clearly a pedagogic side of this problem that educationists may give a better appreciation, it is undeniable that the liberalization of higher education in Cameroon set the stage for purely business operations that cannot be given an exhaustive view from an exclusively educationist’s standpoint.

These lapses provide the inspiration for the following fundamental question:

- ✓ To what extent does Deceptive Marketing Communication influence Student Enrollment Decisions in Higher Education Institutions in Cameroon?

The main objective of this study is thus to examine the influence of increasing Deceptive Marketing Communication practices on the performance of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Cameroon.

Specifically, the study seeks to investigate the effect of Deceptive Marketing Communication by Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Cameroon on Student Enrollment Decisions.

Based on prevailing realities as presented in the background to this study, the following premises are set as bases for investigation:

H0: Student Enrollment Decisions into Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Cameroon are independent of Deceptive Marketing Communications.

H1: Student Enrollment Decisions into Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Cameroon are significantly influenced by Deceptive Marketing Communications.

LITERATURE

The scope of literature for this study is eclectic as it defies traditional academic boundaries to integrate psychology, marketing and education. Although some of these concepts individually have witnessed extensive research, their aggregation in this work opens a relatively challenging perspective in terms of conceptualization, a unifying theoretical based and above all, relevant empirical studies. From a purely conceptual perspective, marketing communication refers to any coordinated promotional messages delivered through one or more channels such as print, radio, television, direct mail, and personal selling. Marketing typically has a marketing mix that is made of price, place, promotion, product (known as the four P's), that includes people, processes and physical evidence, when marketing services such as education (known as the seven P's).

Deception as a concept in business is queer and leverages on ethics and strategy, with mixed outcomes worth examining. Generally, conceptualizing deception and placing an outright negative tag on it and its fall outs in business transactions is a very challenging task due to perceptual and situational contingencies. Deceptive communication as captured in this paper integrates any covert marketing tactics that are designed by PHEIs to induce a purchase and patronage decision from an unsuspecting customer (student) that the latter would not have engaged in with full information disclosure. This generally involves exaggerating benefits from patronage and downplaying undesirable attributes of the institution of her marketing offer

Theoretical underpinning (Admission Funnel Model)

This is one of the most widely adopted student attraction models with latent assumptions that display high tendencies for deception. This model exists on the premise that the most important performance indicator for any educational institution is the *number of enrolled students*. This dictates all budgeting considerations and the very survival of the institution. It goes further to assert

that, in order to get the maximum number of students enrolled, there is need to take great care to market the institution effectively. In this regards, the first step to better marketing requires an understanding of the potential buyer/ students' journey. Selecting a university is one of the most important decisions in the minds of future students and their parents. Winning their hearts and minds is the key to convincing them that an institution is the best fit.

Regardless of the reputation, the whole family is going to research that institution online and they are likely going to find both good and bad things. While the marketing team of the institution cannot control everything the potential students see, they *can* and *must strategically plan* the content they provide them. Strategically planning the contents here as implied by the model may entail willful omissions, angel-dusting manipulation etc, which are all deceptive mechanisms.

At each step of the decision-making journey, future students have different questions and worries. To win all of these potential students over, the institution must speak their language and give them the right content at the right time. Each student's journey can be mapped into a buyer sales funnel, which will help the PHEI in this context to better plan their marketing efforts. This model suggests seven (7) logical progression phases viz: prospective students; inquiries; application; admissions; confirmation; enrollment and retention. By asserting the need the need for students and their sponsors to constantly verify the veracity of the information propagated by the educational institutions before taking enrollment decisions, this model latently implies the existence of deceptive tendencies by these institutions

Empirical review

Although numerous applied studies such as; Erdem & Swait (2008), Westberg (2014), Muathe & Kerre (2014), Sreenivas, Srinivasarao & Srinivasa (2013), Buil, de Chernatony, & Martínez (2010), Bravo, Fraj & Martínez (2007), Valette-Florence, et al., (2011) etc have been conducted in Africa and beyond on enrollment decision, brand equity and its core determinants as driven by the marketing mix elements, the role of deceptive communication as a component of promotion has not received any significant investigations. In fact, the few studies such as; Beneke (2011) and Javed & Nadeem (2014) that attempted to investigate this relationship limited the scope of promotional mix on advertising deception, thus leaving out all other marketing communication deceptions that are not advertisement-based.

A study by Beneke (2011) explored the brand perception of potential university students vis-a-vis promotional messages transmitted by universities. The study considered an overview of brand (reputation) management in higher education, with a focus on South Africa. The literature painted a picture necessitating a proactive stance on maximizing the appeal of the institutional brand so as to recruit desirable students and ensure that the institution's strategic goals are achieved. Inherent in the approach is embracing the competitive challenge, effecting internal remedies and thereafter ensuring that all branding elements are cohesively aligned. Findings suggested that just like any other brand, an institutional brand has the effect of reducing perceived risk for consumers (the students) and allowing the institution a degree of stability in the market place. However, marketers of institutional brands are cautioned against the multiplicity effect, whereby the multifaceted brand can prove challenging to manage.

In a Malaysian study, out of the 20 characteristics of Private Higher Education Institutions which influenced the decisions of students, four items were found to be significant, namely, facilities, procedures and policies, entry requirements and extra curricula activities (Samsinar et al., 2003). A major difference between the current research and previous research is special emphasis on perceived and real marketing offers as induced by the marketing communication conducted by the company. This leads the current study to capture enrollment in terms of the determinant of the decision and not in absolute numbers. This alone is innovative as it does not assume that absolute enrollment numbers are indicators of good performance for PHEIs.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a cross-sectional design with an exploratory approach. The major benefit of a cross-sectional study design in this study that integrates more than 18 major and 6 minor variables is that it allows the researcher to compare many different variables at the same time. However, cross-sectional studies may not provide definite information about cause-and-effect relationships. This is because such studies offer a snapshot of a single moment in time; they do not consider what happens before or after the snapshot is taken. To mitigate for this limitation that is basically a time-bias problem, the researcher adopted a stratified purposive and exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling. In this type of sampling, the first subject is recruited and then he/she provides multiple referrals. Each new referral then provides more data for referral until there are enough subjects for the sample.

For data, this study largely exploits primary data from alumni of fifteen (15) selected (out of the total 60) Private Higher Education Institutions from the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon. The inclusion of an institution into the sample of fifteen (15) considered the continuous operational lifespan of the institution.

While targeting a six hundred (600) questionnaires for effective analysis, seven hundred and fifty (750) questionnaires were issued, through the targeted population. Each institution's alumni got 50 questionnaires that were strategically aimed at five different graduated batches of graduated students. Each identified batch of alumni thus received ten (10) questionnaires that were snowballed through their personal and/or alumni networks. Each questionnaire consisted of 28 main questions with 67 sub items that were structured with closed and open-ended options, with regards to the dual constraints of minimizing respondents' filling time and maximizing the scope of data obtained.

A five point Likert Scale was adopted in capturing qualitative variables to permit a more in-depth analysis. Following the trend from Babakus & Mangold (1992), a five-point scale increases response rate and response quality along with reducing respondents' ambiguity stress.

As a recap, this study started off with the objective:

- ✓ To investigate the effect of Deceptive Marketing Communication by Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Cameroon on Student Enrollment Decisions.

Mathematically, this objective is expressed as follows.

Enrollment Decision: $f(\text{Deceptive Marketing Communication})$

For a more in-depth analysis, the following variables were included as controls: *the amount of tuition, the quality of teaching, brand recognition (awareness and popularity) and location of the institution*. Unlike the first objective, all the independent variables in this case seek to capture the pre-enrollment perception of the alumni and not the post-graduation view of these same variables.

The model is thus expanded as follows:

Enrollment Decision = Deceptive Marketing Communication + Tuition + Quality of Service + Location + Brand Recognition + U -----Equation 1

Symbolically, this model is expressed as

$$ED = DMC + T + QS + L + BR + U$$

Where;

ED = Enrollment Decision, DMC = Deceptive Marketing Communication, T = Tuition, QS = Quality of Service (Education), L = Location of the institution, BR = Brand Recognition, U = Stochastic term

In terms of Variable Measurement, the following approaches were adopted.

Enrollment Decision (ED) was captured as a proxy for short term institutional performance in terms of customers' perception. Specifically, any candidate had the option to enroll or not to enroll based on the marketing communications and other associated enrollment determinants. Just like *Brand Equity* in the first objective above, *Enrollment Decision* is equally a binary variable since the candidate could have chosen to enroll in their former higher institution or not.

Deceptive Marketing Communication (DMC) was captured as a composite variable that rates the extent to which the *Promised Service Level (PSL)* by the higher institution (before admission) differed from the *Actual Service Level (ASL)* in terms of the different marketing claims that were made. Here, higher gaps in PSL and ASL as captured through a five-point rating scale implied higher DMC and vice versa. Through simple means of the various claims made by the institution, a single continuous value was obtained for DMC. DMC in this context is thus a continuous variable.

Tuition (T), *Location (L)* and *Brand Recognition (BR)* were captured through a five-point rating scale indicating the extent to which the respondents agreed to the influence of each of these variables as determinants of their primary-enrollment decision. These three variables are thus discrete in character.

Considering the binary nature of Enrollment Decision (ED), the dependent variable for this study, the following Logistic transformation of the model was established. Thus the logistic regression equation for enrollment decision is given as:

$$\Pr(Y = 1|DMC, T, QS, L, BR) = \frac{1}{1+(\beta_0+\beta_1DMC+\beta_2T+\beta_3QS+\beta_4L+\beta_5BR)} \dots \text{Equation 2}$$

Where: Y (*Enrolment Decision*) =
 $\begin{cases} 1 & \text{if respondent enrolled based on deceptive communication messages} \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$

And DMC, T, Q S, L and BR are as defined earlier

These independent variables follow the famous Marketing Mix Model (The Four Ps-Product, Price, promotion and Place) that are supposed to shape marketing strategy and hence the resulting marketing performance of the higher institution as propounded by (McCarthy,1960).

FINDINGS

For this study, the researcher set out to investigate the effect of deceptive marketing communication on the performance of PHEIs in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon. The researcher focused on the view of alumni as first hand respondent that have been targeted by various forms of deceptive messages. Targeting fifteen (15) PHEIs from these two regions, seven hundred (750) questionnaires were successfully sent out with a return yield rate of 82.4 % as 618 questionnaires were successfully returned. Prompted by incomplete recordings and considerations for a balanced sample, the researcher retained six hundred (600) filled questionnaires for analysis.

A very large number of the targeted alumni admitted to their vulnerability to the deceptive tactics of the PHEIs as they actually took admission decision basing their judgment on the marketing communication claims of their respective PHEIs. While this sounds like a marketing victory by the PHEIs, it shows how susceptible potential university enrollees are to preying of the deceptive PHEIs.

Specifically, 93.5 percent of the alumni after studying in their respective PHEIs actually think that, what they received was less than the promised service package that the institution used as a bait to them. While this and other elements present above are indicative of deceptive marketing communication by the respective PHEIs, it does not provide a veritable base to draw factual conclusions on the marketing deceptions and its effect on the performance of targeted PHEIs in this study. These trends further do not provide any bases for drawing valid inferences on the general marketing communication deceptions within PHEIs in general.

Based on the SPSS outputs on the logistics regression model applied in this study, it is observed that, effectively 600 alumni constituted the bases for entries though respondents failed to provide data items on two of the entries. This however constituted a negligible percentage of 0.0003%, thus incapable of influencing the outcome of analysis. Further, the coding as confirmed by the software, based on the study questionnaire was properly effected thus, lending itself for objective analysis. Based on the classification table in block one, the predictors(Deceptive Marketing Communication, Considerations for Tuition, Considerations for Quality, Location and Brand Recognition) in this study have a predictive power of 94.6% on enrollment decisions)

The significance and variance of the overall model for this study is evaluated using Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients and the Hosmer and Lemeshow Test.

The premise of the first of these tests holds that, there is no association between the predictors and enrollment decisions of potential PHEI students. Testing at a 5% level, it is observed that, X^2 (5,600) is 8.923 and highly insignificant (p-value of 0.112). This is the case even at 10% level of significance where it remains insignificant. On the basis of this we, do not reject the premise of no association between the covariates of this study and the dependent variable (Enrollment Decisions). Regarding the variance, we observe, in the model summary that just between 1.5 percent and 4.3 percent of the variance in Enrollment Decision (the dependent variable in this study is explained by the predictors in the model.

Based on the covariates included in this model, it is observed that all the variables (*Considerations for Tuition, Quality, Location and Brand recognition*) but for *Deceptive Marketing Communication* are insignificant at 5% and even at 10% level of significance as they all have P-values greater than 0.05 while *Deceptive Marketing Communication (DMC)* has a P-value of 0.013. In more specific terms, the protective factor (quality and brand recognition) variables with odd ratios less than one and consequently negative association with enrollment decision are *all insignificant*. On the other hand, the only risk factor (deceptive marketing communication) variable with odd ratios greater than one and consequently positive association with enrollment decision is highly significant.

Precisely, the odds ratios show that the odds of taking an enrollment decision based on PHEI marketing messages from an alumni's alma mater are 1.637times higher for first time enrollees when the PHEI message is high in deceptive content. In probability terms, this implies that, PHEI messages with high deceptive contents are more likely to induce first time PHEI enrollees to take enrollment decisions on the bases of marketing messages, thus boosting enrollment numbers for deceptive institutions in the short term.

DISCUSSION

The insignificant nature of the Chi (X^2) and very low variance of these results suggest that, potential PHEI enrollees typically do not consider the standard determinants of enrollment decisions in the short run (or during their first enrollment) in a PHEI. This is in sharp contrast to the studies of Broekemier & Seshadri, (1999), Bakewell & Gibson-Sweet, (1998), Moogan, & Baron (2011) and even more recent studies like Ali & Ahmed. (2018). All these studies reported a significant associations between tuition, location and quality and enrollment into higher institutions.

The difference in the predictors for all these studies is the introduction of deception as a predictor of enrollment decision. Surprisingly, while this particular predictor that is unique to this study is significant, all the other determinants that have been researched in previous studies and reported to be significant are all insignificant. This alone implies that, the search for determinants of enrollment decision in PHEI is a subject for further exploratory research. The insignificance of most of the classical determinants of university enrollment decisions in this study equally lends itself to logical theoretical interpretations. The most relevant of these theories is Akerlof (1970) information asymmetry analysis of market situations both in the short-run and in the long-run. By taking enrollment decisions in total oblivion to the traditional determinants of enrollment, potential

university enrollees are simply acting according to the predictions of consumer behaviour by Akerlof for imperfect market situations like the PHEI sector in Cameroon.

This study thus fails to establish any association between deceptive marketing communication and enrollment decisions of PHEIs as most enrollees take enrollment decisions without systematic investigations into the marketing claims of their prospective PHEIs. Given that enrollment in this context is an indicator of PHEI performance in the short term, this explains why some of the deceptive PHEIs may appear to be successful in the short run.

IMPLICATION TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The findings of this paper, viewed alongside other similar studies point to the need for researchers to reconsider the standard determinants of consumer purchase and patronage in broad terms and specifically, the determinants of university student enrollment. The consumer's perception of authenticity and veracity of marketing communication as this particular variable renders the standard model insignificant. From a purely business point of view, the study suggests that, promoters of PHEIs in Cameroon need to review their communication priorities and spend less on psychologically manipulative communication as this appears not to yield any results in terms of influencing enrollment decisions of potential university students.

This study equally invites a good number of stakeholders in the PHEIs' sector to review particular consequential actions. The first of these groups (potential university students and their sponsors) are the most vulnerable in the outcome of deceptive communication. Marketing communication provides the necessary information to students and parents so that they know what is available and where to get it. A typical challenge in the transition process is the ability to choose a suitable learning institution. Many students especially those coming from rural areas lack the necessary knowledge to establish a set of criteria with which to evaluate the numerous available options. Consequently, many students end up enrolling in institutions or registering for programs against their expectations. This study suggests that, apart from the glossy posters and claims by the PHEIs, prospective PHEI enrollees must invest their time to personally investigate and visit not just the admissions offices but the actual campuses before taking any enrollment decisions. All measures that help to minimize knowledge gaps must be employed before enrollment decisions are taken.

The government and state mentor universities to these PHEIs should not only limit their supervisory activities to the academics but equally to the entire operations and marketing claims of the mentee PHEIs as unethical acts by the PHEIs have repercussions to the brand image of the mentors for delivering the certificate and the entire higher education sector in Cameroon. The Government especially must establish regulatory frameworks that limit unfair or deceptive practices in educational communication. There is thus an urgent need to establish more proactive quality systems to drive more rational student loyalty programs based on acquired satisfaction and not promised satisfaction as a means of enforcing natural selection to eliminate "lemons" in the higher educational landscape at every step of the value-chain. This too is the domain of the government but with benefits that PHEI promoters have an interest to uphold

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the effect of deceptive marketing communication on the performance of PHEIs in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon. On the bases of the findings the study establishes the following conclusions.

The major conclusion in this study is that fact some PHEIs actually in engage marketing communication deception in an effort to attract enrollees and this actually pays off in the short-run as most enrollees take enrollment decisions believing the claims propagated by their prospective PHEIs. By this process, the sector is vulnerable to predatory institutions that capitalize on the asymmetry of information.

Future Research

Secondly, although this study has explored deceptive marketing communication as a determinant of PHEI performance, capturing the performance in terms of other perspectives like financial and actual enrollment numbers would have given an extra view. This approach could not be explored as most promoters and managements of PHEIs consider this information to sensitive to trust even an academic researcher with. This skepticism and fear by the top managements of majority of these institutions was a fundamental obstacle to the in-depth exploration of this study. By this, there is thus an avenue opened for further inquiry into the exact interplay of deceptive marketing communication and the economic bottom lines of PHEIs as reported in their periodic financial records.

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