



THE EFFECT OF DECEPTIVE MARKETING COMMUNICATION ON THE BRAND EQUITY OF PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (PHEIs) IN THE NORTHWEST AND SOUTHWEST REGIONS OF CAMEROON



Chofor Joyvice^{1*}

Johannes Tabi

Atemnkeng²

Molem Christopher

Sama³

MBU Sunday Agbor⁴

NEBA Noela

Buwah⁵

¹Department of Management Sciences University of Buea, Cameroon

Email: choforjoyvice@yahoo.com Tel: (+237)677064152

²Professor of Economics University of Buea, Cameroon

Email: jtabiatem@yahoo.com Tel: (+237)677783049

³Professor of Economics Department of Economics University of Buea, Cameroon

Email: sama.molem@gmail.com Tel: (+237)677456008

⁴Department of Economics Faculty of Social and Management Sciences University of Buea, Cameroon

Email: mbusa10@yahoo.com Tel: (+237)677629022

⁵Department of Management Faculty of Management Sciences University of Calabar, Nigeria

Email: burvahnoelaneba@gmail.com Tel: (+237)677997662



(+ Corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

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The problem of falling educational standards in Cameroon has been posed severally from a purely educationist perspective. This study however goes from the premise that the liberalization of the Higher Educational Sector in the early 90s ushered in questionable capitalistic business practices by promoters of PHEIs in a bid to uphold their economic bottom lines as they would in any classical sector. This paper examines an extreme unethical mercantilist practice of deceptive marketing communication and its consequences on the brand equity of PHEIs in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon. The study is cross-sectional with an exploratory approach. The study largely exploits primary data from alumni of fifteen (15) PHEIs. To mitigate for circumstantial time-bias in predictors, the researchers adopted stratified purposive and exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling. Six hundred (600) questionnaires were issued through the targeted population. For analysis, a Logit Model was applied and the simplified parameters for the various were obtained with the aid of the SPSS 16.0 software. The findings revealed a strong association between deceptive marketing communication and brand equity as it observed that, $X^2(5,600) = 139.3$ and highly significant (p -value of 0.0001). This was further confirmed by an insignificant Hosmer and Lemeshow Test statistic of 11.7 with a probability value of 0.165. The researchers recommend a review of regulations governing the Private Higher Education sector in Cameroon in terms of mentorship by state universities such that mentorship responsibilities include general operational and marketing supervision and not just pure academic supervision.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature a unique eclectic approach that tackles the problem of education from the Psychology, Marketing and Education perspectives. The paper is equally the first logical analysis of the ethical implication of the liberalization of the Higher Education sector in Cameroon in the 90s.

1. INTRODUCTION

The overwhelming influence of marketing communication on consumer choice and loyalty is undeniable in today's information age where a plethora of media constantly maintain customers at arm's length to marketers. It is this fact that makes it imperative for marketing communications to be fair and truthful. Misleading and false marketing communications are not just unethical but they distort competition and of course, consumer choice. According to the [United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation \(UNESCO\) \(2016\)](#) report, false and misleading marketing communication violates several basic rights of the population: the right to information, the right to choice, the right to be protected against unsafe goods and unfair trade practices and most importantly, the right to good education, which is the focus of this study.

According to [Njomo \(2014\)](#) Higher Education is 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.

In an earlier study of the increasing capitalistic marketing communication trend by tertiary learning institutions, [Gibbs \(2007\)](#) posited that Higher Educational Institutions pay the media (television, newspapers, magazines, billboards, radio and the Internet) for the purpose of informing, reminding and persuading potential students to enroll in their programs. In a similar view, [Kerr \(2009\)](#) 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. Branding and image building that leverage more on psychological processes tend to lend themselves to deception in communication with greater ease. This view is shared by [Khanna \(2014\)](#) who remarks that marketing communication deception has evolved into vastly complex and subtle forms, with literally thousands of different ways for Higher Educational Institutions to get a message to their target audience with total disregard to ethical considerations.

This study goes with the premise that education is a unique type of market offer where the essential core product; knowledge, in all its forms is presented for exchange to learners and/or sponsors whose openness for a marketing exchange reveals in itself a prior acknowledgment of the lack of knowledge in one form or another. This places the educational institution as the producer of knowledge on a uniquely powerful position which is not common in any other marketing transaction where the buyer, either as the customer or a consumer is prior educated to make informed and rational purchase decisions that minimize the cost they incur. This reality invites another logical level of analysis into the perception of a university student as a rational customer of knowledge, as contemporary marketing communication practices by tertiary learning institution seem to portray today.

In Cameroon, education is provided by public and private sectors. The private sector includes religious and lay private institutions. Before the massive reforms of the tertiary education system in Cameroon that occurred between 1991 and 1993, focusing on expansion and liberalization of university education, the country's only university, the University of Yaoundé I, was experiencing an exponential increase in student numbers (over 40,000 students on a campus originally intended for 5,000), poor teacher-student ratios (1:132 in the Faculty of Law and Economics, 1:58 in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, and 1:58 in the Faculty of Science), and attendant negative effects on educational quality and success rates. The university's budget was spent largely on students' welfare (over 43%) to the detriment of its primary missions of teaching and research, to which less than 1.5% of the recurrent budget was allocated ([Njeuma et al., 1999](#)).

The reforms gave birth to hundreds of privately owned higher institutions in the country. Competition for higher student enrolment consequently took a fiercer trend with typical marketing imperatives that justify persuasive marketing communication. As Njomo (2014) puts it, just after the 1991 Higher Education reforms in Cameroon, the Higher Education sector emerged as one of the nation's biggest advertisers. He argued that private Higher Education marketing in Cameroon is persuasive, manipulative and exploitative to attract the widest possible audience. Operators adopt every available strategy including unlawful and dishonest advertising techniques to attract as many students as possible (especially high school graduates).

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

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. According to Njomo (2014) more than 53% of the students and sponsors in Cameroon are affected by deceptive advertising in Private Higher Education Institutions.

From a legal perspective in Cameroon, the problem of consumer deception appears to be well-thought and mitigated by various pieces of legislation 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 to make appropriate and rational choices before concluding a commercial 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 seller.

The misplaced expectations of lesser deceptive marketing communications by Higher Education Institutions in Cameroon were even further reinforced by law N° 2006/018 of 29 December 2006, governing advertising in Cameroon. This law in its article 40 sub 3 out rightly restricts educational institutions from undertaking to advertise as a marketing communication activity.

The practice on the field is definitely far away from all these safeguards. In fact, most customers (students) and university enrollees seem not to be aware of the deception or enjoy the skimming attention they get from marketers of these Higher Education Institutions who lure the unsuspecting and uninformed potential students into a highly consequential marketing transaction. 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 the 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.

These lapses provide inspiration for the following fundamental question:

How does Deceptive Marketing Communication affect the Brand Equity of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Cameroon?

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study is 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 evaluate the consequences of Deceptive Marketing Communication on the Brand Equity of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Cameroon.

4. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

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

H0: The Brand Equity of private tertiary learning institutions in Cameroon is independent of Deceptive Communication to university students.

H1: The Brand Equity of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Cameroon is significantly influenced by Deceptive Communication to university students.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study integrates the concepts of deception, marketing communication and performance in education, a sector that traditionally does not easily accommodate pure business practices due to consumer protection and other fundamental ethical considerations. The scope of literature for this study is thus eclectic as it transcends 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 base and above all, relevant empirical studies.

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 fallouts in business transactions is a very challenging task due to perceptual and situational contingencies.

Manipulative deceptions in business transactions occur when one party hides, omits, distorts, and exaggerates information to control the other party's choices and decisions. Historically, such deceptions were perceived as "acceptable" tools of con artists, politicians, and propagandists. Today unscrupulous marketers have carefully enshrined these manipulative deceptions into their communication, raising deception to par with ethically crafted strategy in business. The decision for a marketing agent to engage in manipulative deception depends largely on the marketer's personal marketplace knowledge and skills. This implies that these knowledge and competences on the marketer's part may become the primary cognitive inputs for passing personal judgments on the manipulative nature of their marketing communication. On this account, what is seen objectively as manipulative deception in marketing communication may at the onset not be the intention of the marketing agents whose frames of references as molded by their knowledge and skills.

As Klausner (2013) puts it, any marketer who does not recognize that the ultimate aim of contemporary marketing is "branding" may engage in myopic strategies that drive the organization over the cliff in the long-term. Branding is typically defined as the exchange process of creating added value in the minds of consumers by building perceived values beyond the observable physical value of the product and thus differentiating the product.

5.1. Theoretical Foundation of Marketing Deception and Brand Equity

Deception as a concept lends itself more to psychological analysis but with fundamental communication and consumer behaviour implications that must be examined in a study of this nature. The mere fact that information asymmetry is the rational justification for business profits in any normal market situation is a big incentive for market players to manipulate information and create even greater asymmetry in order to enhance their economic bottom lines.

5.1.1. The Value Chain Model

According to Porter, the activities of any organisation can best be described as a *value chain*, in which total revenues minus total costs of all activities undertaken to develop and market a product or service yields value. All firms in a given industry have a similar value chain, which includes activities such as obtaining raw materials, designing products, building manufacturing facilities, developing cooperative agreements, and providing customer

service. In the context of the current study on PHEIs in Cameroon, these activities include marketing, teaching, enrollment management, etc.

A firm will be profitable as long as total revenues exceed the total costs incurred in creating and delivering the product or service. Going by this model, institutions should strive to understand not only their value chain operations but also their competitors', suppliers', and distributors' value chains.

Value chain analysis (VCA) refers to the process whereby a firm determines the costs associated with organizational activities from purchasing raw materials to manufacturing product(s) to marketing those products.

Going by this model, a firm's Value Chain Analysis needs to consider two types of activities; Primary and Support value chain activities as shown in Figure 1 below.

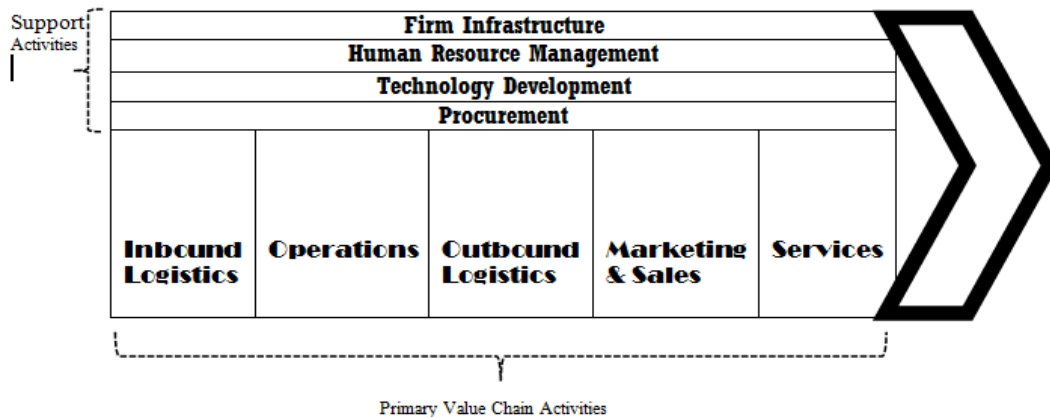


Figure-1. The Value Chain Model.

Source: Adapted from Dess et al. (2003).

According to this model, Primary activities have an immediate effect on the production, maintenance, sales and support of the products or services to be supplied. These activities consist of the following elements:

Inbound Logistics are all processes that are involved in the receiving, storing, and internal distribution of the raw materials or basic ingredients of a product or service. The relationship with the suppliers is essential to the creation of value in this matter. In the context of this study, this includes all marketing activities associated with attracting and admitting students from various high schools in the country.

Operations are all the activities (for example production floor or production line) that convert inputs of products or services into semi-finished or finished products. Operational systems are the guiding principle for the creation of value. Within the context of the current study includes all teaching and student development of PHEIs.

Outbound logistics, on the other hand, are all activities that are related to delivering the products and services to the customer. These include, for instance, storage, distribution (systems) and transport.

Marketing and Sales are all processes related to putting the products and services in the markets including managing and generating customer relationships. The guiding principles are setting oneself apart from the competition and creating advantages for the customer.

The preceding two activities of the standard value chain are totally incongruent with the PHEIs context by virtue of the point of their intervention. While marketing is adopted by PHEIs as an upstream value chain activity, it is essentially a downstream value chain activity in Porter's model.

Services include all activities that maintain the value of the products or service to customers as soon as a relationship has developed based on the procurement of services and products.

Support activities within the Porter's Value Chain Analysis assist the primary activities and they form the basis of any organization. In the figure dotted lines represent linkages between a support activity and a primary activity.

A support activity such as human resource management for example is of importance within the primary activity operation but also supports other activities such as service and outbound logistics.

Firm infrastructure concerns the support activities within the organization that enable the organization to maintain its daily operations. Line management, administrative handling, financial management are examples of activities that create value for the organization.

Human resource management includes the support activities in which the development of the workforce within an organization is the key element. Examples of activities are recruiting staff, training and coaching of staff and compensating and retaining staff.

Technology development activities relate to the development of the products and services of the organization, both internally and externally. Examples are IT, technological innovations and improvements and the development of new products based on new technologies. These activities create value using innovation and optimization.

Procurement includes all the support activities related to procurement to service the customer from the organization. Examples of activities are entering into and managing relationships with suppliers, negotiating to arrive at the best prices, making product purchase agreements with suppliers and outsourcing agreements. Organizations use primary and support activities as building blocks to create valuable products, services and distinctiveness.

Although the upstream reversal application of marketing activities by PHEIs in contradiction of this model is a common practice in all service companies, its usage in educational establishments is a highly controversial and debatable approach as it appears to suggest that the marketing efforts of the PHEI should be focused on enrollees who are only intermediate customers and not the final consumers of the PHEIs market offers (educational programs). Adopting the value chain model as originally proposed by Porters suggests that PHEIs should move their marketing communication efforts downstream to focus on the industries and other employers who actually use their finished products (graduates).

5.2. Empirical Framework

Although numerous applied studies such as; Erdem and Swait (1998); Westberg (2014); Muathe *et al.* (2014); Sreenivas *et al.* (2013); Buil *et al.* (2010); Bravo *et al.* (2007); Valette-Florence *et al.* (2011) etc have been conducted in Africa and beyond on 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); Javed and Nadeem (2014); Javed (2014) that attempted to investigate this relationship limited the scope of the promotional mix on advertising deception, thus leaving out all other marketing communication deceptions that are not advertisement-based.

A more recent study by Taboli and Pariz (2018) focused on assessing the Impact of Marketing Mix on Brand Equity. The study went with the premise that one of the most valuable assets of any company is brand equity. Companies that in terms of brand equity have a high position in the minds of consumers can be easily considered more profitable among other companies in their respective industry. The research was carried out with the aim of studying the impact of the marketing mix on brand equity in producing car floor-covering of Pishro Plastic Khazar Company. The study, in terms of purpose, and regarding data collection was a descriptive case study, pooling a sample size of 214 Customers out of a total population of 480 customers of Pishro Plastic Khazar Company. Using LISREL software and structural equation modeling technique, the relationships between research variables was examined. Research results indicated that there is a significant and positive relationship between perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand equity, and also, distribution channels and prices affect brand equity through effecting perceived quality. By treating product mix elements from a perceived perspective rather than the real offers the researchers were indeed focusing on the induced effect of marketing communication on brand equity, which is the

core of the current study. However, the current study adopts a downstream and more definitive approach that captures brand equity in terms of the ultimate end of all customer retention efforts.

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. It is this gap that induces what is captured in this study as communication deception. Most previous research mainly focuses on improving the conceptualization of brand equity or exploring different kinds of marketing-mix elements. Findings on potential effect moderators are scarce. Thus, this study substantiates and extends existing findings by emphasizing the importance of distinguishing different brand types when investigating the effect of marketing-mix elements on brand equity. Further, the understanding that products are made in the factory while brands are conceptually made in the market as affirmed by [Kotler and Keller \(2012\)](#) has been largely ignored by most of the applied researches reviewed so far. This alone leads to the unstated erroneous assumption that good product automatically lead to superior market performance. This implied assumption is in line with the Perfect Market scenario which has been challenged by Akerlof and definitely not characteristic of the Cameroonian Private Higher Education Sector.

6. METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this study is to examine the effect of deceptive marketing communication on the brand equity of PHEIs in Cameroon. This study adopts a cross-sectional design with an exploratory approach. These observational study approaches are most appropriate in this study since they offer the researcher the opportunity to obtain data about /and from the various subjects (alumni of PHEIs) targeted in the study without manipulating the study environment, a process that would have been very expensive. 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. To mitigate for circumstantial time-bias in predictors, the researcher adopted a stratified purposive and exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling. 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. In this light, only Private Higher Educational Institutions that have graduated more than five continuous batches of students were included. This criterion for selection is very important since Brand Equity and the communication response time-lapse as captured in this study leverage on post-consumption customer behaviour that can only be measured with students that have passed through a higher institution and successfully graduated. In this light, newly approved higher institutions that have not graduated any students or graduated just one or two batches may not provide a significant pool of subjects to measure Brand Equity.

While targeting 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 subitems 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 and Mangold \(1992\)](#) a five-point scale increases response rate and response quality along with reducing respondents' ambiguity stress.

As a recap, this study is aimed at evaluating the *brand equity* consequences of *deceptive marketing communication* to university students as ultimate customers of tertiary learning institutions in Cameroon. Mathematically, this objective is expressed as follows:

Brand Equity becomes a function of Deceptive Marketing Communication or,

Brand Equity: $f(\text{Deceptive Marketing Communication})$

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.*

The model is thus expanded as follows:

Brand Equity = Deceptive Marketing Communication + Tuition + Quality of Service + Location + Brand Recognition + U

(1)

Symbolically, this model is expressed as

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

Where;

BE = Brand Equity, 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.

Brand Equity (BE) was captured as a proxy of the long term indicator of institutional performance in terms of customers' perception. Specifically, any post-graduation patronage/loyalty by alumni of a higher institution is considered as an indicator of high Brand Equity and vice versa. Brand Equity is thus a binary variable since alumni may choose to patronize their former higher institution or not. *Deceptive Marketing Communication(DMC)* was captured as a composite variable that measures the extent to which *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 Principal Component Analysis of the various claims made by the institution, a single continuous value was obtained for DMC. DMC in this context is 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 respondent agreed to the influence of each of these variables as determinants of their post-graduation patronage. These three variables are thus discrete in character. Given that a single item for essentially qualitative variables as deception with this scoring is ordinal, and thus a poor choice for the kind of statistical analyses that require a numerical or interval level variable, multiple sub variables were adopted and means and Principal Component Analysis were performed to arrive at numerical values for the main variable.

For analysis, the study was captured through a Logit Model and the simplified parameters for the various variables as defined above were obtained with the aid of the SPSS 16.0 software.

The application of the Logit model in this study is informed by the binary nature of the principal dependent variable(Brand Equity) as captured through the dichotomous decision of alumni to continue patronizing his/her alma mater or not. This remote loyalty approach as a proxy for brand equity is in tandem with the study of [Javed \(2014\)](#).

In the context of this study, the researcher defined the outcome variable (Y) as:

$$y_i = \begin{cases} 1, & \text{if the } i\text{-th university graduate will continue to patronize their alma mater} \\ 0, & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

The generic form of a logistic regression model is given as:

$\Pr(Y=1 | X_1, X_2, \dots, X_n) = F(\beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_n X_n)$

$$\Pr(Y = 1 | X_1, X_2, \dots, X_n) = F(\alpha_0 + \alpha_1 X_1 + \alpha_2 X_2 + \dots + \alpha_n X_n) \quad (2)$$

$$\Pr(Y = 1|X_1, X_2, \dots, X_n) = \frac{1}{\alpha_0 + \alpha_1 X_1 + \alpha_2 X_2 + \dots + \alpha_n X_n} \tag{3}$$

$$\Pr(Y = 1|X_1, X_2, \dots, X_n) = \frac{1}{1 + (\alpha_0 + \alpha_1 X_1 + \alpha_2 X_2 + \dots + \alpha_n X_n)} \tag{4}$$

Where Y is the outcome variable such that: $Y = \begin{cases} 1, & \text{if outcome occurs} \\ 0, & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$

Considering the binary nature of Brand Equity (BE), the dependent variable for the first specific objective, the following Logistics transformation of the model was established. Thus the logistic regression equation for Brand Equity is given as:

$$\Pr(Y = 1|DMC, T, QS, L, BR) = \frac{1}{1 + (\alpha_0 - \alpha_1 DMC + \alpha_2 T + \alpha_3 QS + \alpha_4 L + \alpha_5 BR)} \tag{5}$$

Where:

$$Y (BE) = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if respondent will continue to patronize their alma mater in future} \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

And DMC, T, Q S, L and B R remain 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 PHEI as propounded by McCarthy (1960). These variables are analogous to the 4Ps in the following regards:

Product = Quality of Service(Q), Price = Tuition(T), Promotion= Marketing Communication and Brand Recognition (DMC and BR), Place = Location of the Higher institution (L) Brand Equity = Long term marketing Performance Indicator (BE).

To check the reliability of responses for the various qualitative constructs captured through Likert-type scales, different question tags and approaches were used to sort for the same information.

7. RESULTS

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. 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.

As seen in Figure 2 below, there is indeed a great level of deceptive marketing communication going on in PHEIs.

Based on the figure above, 93.5% 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 bait to them. While this is 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. To arrive at this level of understanding, there is need for a deeper level of analysis as provided by the relevant inferential statistical outputs.

Based on the SPSS outputs, the predictors (Deceptive Marketing Communication, Considerations for Tuition, Considerations for Quality, Location and Brand Recognition) in this study have a predictive power of 74.5% on the

dependent variable-Brand Equity(the potential for alumni to continue patronizing their alma mater). The significance and variance of the overall model for this study are evaluated using Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients and the Hosmer and Lemeshow Test.

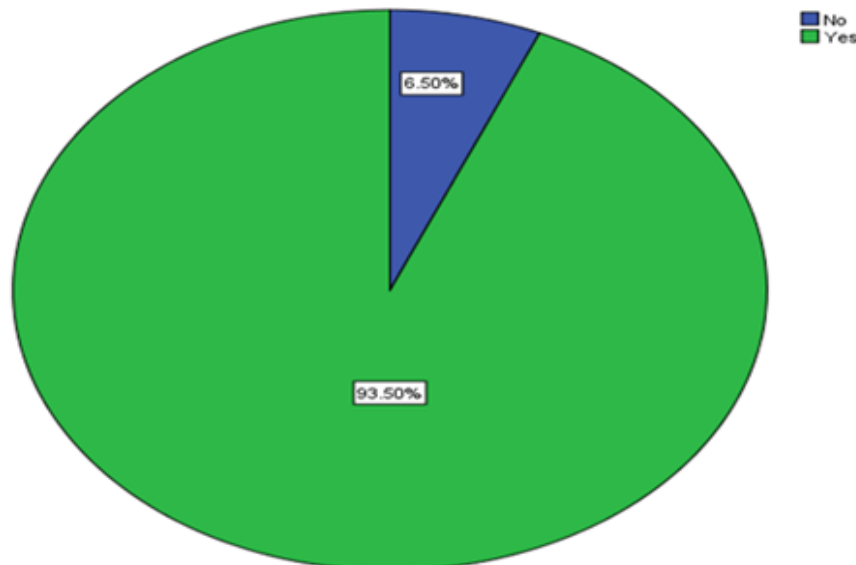


Figure-2. The Distribution of Alumni Perception of Marketing Deception by their alma maters.

Source: Researchers'(2018) Survey data

The premise of this study held that the brand equity of PHEIs is independent of any deceptive marketing communication. Testing at 5% level, it is observed that, X^2 (5,600) is 139.3 and highly significant (p-value of 0.0001). This is further confirmed by an insignificant Hosmer and Lemeshow Test statistic of 11.7 with a probability value of 0.165. On the basis of this we, reject the premise of no association between the covariates of this study and the dependent variable (Brand Equity). Regarding the variance, we observe, in the model summary that between 41percent and 48 percent of the variance in Brand Equity (the dependent variable in this study is explained by the predictors in the model.

Based on the variables included in this model, it is observed that all the variables (*Deceptive Marketing Communication, Considerations for Tuition, Location and Brand recognition*) but *Quality* are significant as they all have P-values less than 0.05 while *Quality* has a P-value of 0.57. In more specific terms, the significant protective factor variables (with odds ratios less than one and consequently negative association with Brand Equity) are *Deceptive Marketing Communication* (0.299) and considerations for *Tuition* (0.634). For these two protective factors, *Tuition* with an odd ration of 0.634 has a greater influence on *Brand Equity* than *Deceptive Marketing Communication* with an odd ration of 0.299 On the other hand, risk factor variables (with odds ratios greater than one and consequently positive association with Brand Equity are enrollees' considerations for *Location* (1.261) and *Brand Recognition* (1.256) of PHEIs. Of the two risk factors, consideration for the location of a PHEI has a lightly higher influence on Brand Equity than *Brand Recognition*.

Precisely, the odds ratios show that the odds of deciding to continue patronizing an alumni's alma mater are 1.261 times higher for alumni consideration PHEI location and 1.256 brand recognition respectively. In probability terms, this implies that, considerations for Location and Brand Recognition are more likely to induce alumni to continue patronizing their alma maters, thus boosting brand equity, on the on the other hand the odds of deciding to continue patronizing their alma maters are only 0.299 times for deceptive marketing communication and 0.634 times for tuition In terms of probability, this implies that considerations for deceptive marketing and tuition are far less likely to induce alumni to continue patronizing their alma maters, thus reducing brand equity for the alumni.

8. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

This study set off with the specific objective of examining the effect of deceptive marketing communication on brand equity. This approach is informed by the relationship marketing concept which advocates for customer delight at post-consumption to minimize chances of dissonance, thus building on customer lifetime value for the brand by increasing the probability of continuous patronage from satisfied customers.

Based on the statistical understanding presented in the preceding section, we observe that deception in communication within PHEIs and the considerations for tuition can significantly erode the brand equity of these PHEIs by limiting the tendency for alumni to stick to their alma maters. This outcome is supported by the marketing mix (4Ps), relationship marketing and Truth Default Theory. From the marketing mix (4Ps) foundation and demand theory, it is expected that satisfaction from consuming a product or service will reduce the manifestation of post-purchase dissonance and even induce the customer (alumni in this context) to act as brand ambassadors for their PHEIs. Satisfaction in this context largely depends on the capacity of the product or service to meet up to the pre-purchase expectations that the customer formulated based on the benefits communicated by the PHEIs. Any exaggeration of product or service qualities in a pre-purchase situation becomes the bases for a psychological contract that the PHEI must deliver upon or risk future patronage that reduces not just customer lifetime value but the brand power of the PHEI. Based on the descriptive frequencies presented earlier, these inferential results are not surprising as more than 90% of alumni admit to having been victims of misleading marketing communication and more than 63% decided not to continue patronizing their alma maters based on the deception they encountered.

From an empirical perspective, these results are similar to the findings of [Ali and Ahmed \(2018\)](#) which revealed a significant impact of student satisfaction and perceived university image on student continuous patronage of their universities. A contrary finding was that of [Mojaveri and Rahmani \(2012\)](#) which though argued for developing a brand preference in a way to retain customers suggested that promotional and service quality determinants of brands need to be implemented in any organization. This emphasis on quality by Mojaveri & Rahmani as a significant determinant of brand equity is not in line with the logit output of this study which showed quality as an insignificant predictor. This difference is justified by the fact that deception as a core predictor could integrate perception of quality. This implies that, where deception is high and significant, the alumni considerations for quality are neutralized by deceptive claims on quality by the institution.

9. 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 above, the study establishes the following conclusions.

The first major conclusion in this study is that majority of PHEIs actually engage in 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.

Secondly, while marketing communication deception may seem like a rewarding strategy in the short run (favourable enrollment decisions), it erodes the brand equity of these institutions in the long run as the market adjusts with alumni having relatively more information upon graduation that shapes their future options for patronage.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the foregoing findings and conclusions, this study invites a good number of stakeholders in the PHEIs' sector to review particular consequential actions.

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.

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