

Analyzing the impact of deceptive advertising in private higher education on students in Cameroon

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Keywords

Private Higher Education, deception, students, advertisement, Cameroon, High School

Abstract

This quantitative research explores the impact of deceptive advertising in Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Cameroon on students. We report the results of a questionnaire survey of 201 students randomly selected from eight private institutions. The findings provide new insights into deceptive advertising specifically in the Higher Education industry where no prior study had been conducted. We find that there is a fairly significant impact of deceptive advertising by Private Higher Educational Institutions on the students. Though fair, we suggest that there is urgent need for Government and other relevant stakeholders to establish measures to eradicate deception in the education industry as it undermines the value of Higher Education and the country's educational system as a whole.

Introduction

Corporations across numerous industries have found marketing as a resource towards increased profit potential and have grown "hungry" for higher profits, thus motivating increased use of unscrupulous marketing tactics. Though perceived to have tremendous benefits for businesses, advertising also has abundant impacts on human lives. This is particularly evident in the Higher Education industry where recently, various forms of advertising techniques are urgently and increasingly adopted to enhance enrolments and to establish a strong brand image. In Cameroon, just after the 1991 Higher Education reforms, the Higher Education sector emerged as the nation's biggest advertiser. It is argued that private Higher Education marketing in Cameroon is persuasive, manipulative and exploitative to attract the widest possible audience.

Until late 1990s, the Government through the Ministry of Higher Education was the provider of tertiary education in Cameroon. By this time (late 80s) the six state owned universities could not contain the increasing number of students seeking tertiary knowledge. For instance, in 1991 there were 4500 students officially enrolled in the University of Yaounde 1. This meant immense pressure on the already ill-maintained infrastructures, administration and teaching staff.

The effects on the quality of education were unimaginable. Not only did universities lack teaching capacity, existing lecturers could not endure the appalling working conditions. This led to frequent and prolonged absences and increased resignations for better opportunities especially abroad. Students resorted to unethical methods such as plagiarism, corruption, bribery and examination malpractices to obtain pass grades. There was an incredible erosion of scholarship. Administration was overwhelmed by practices such as mismanagement, corruption, inefficiency and misdirection.

In order to avoid further destructions and to restore pride and quality standards in the country's educational system, the Government passed a number of reforms in 1991. One of the

reforms was to encourage private investment in Higher Education under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education. This has given birth to thousands of privately owned institutions in the country. Competition for higher student enrolment is fierce. Operators adopt every available strategy including unlawful and dishonest advertising techniques to attract as many students as possible (especially high school graduates).

In the current research, our intended contributions are primarily empirical. We embark on a quantitative study of 201 students to examine the impact of deceptive advertisement on students in Cameroon. The study took place in the town of Buea, one of the nation's largest concentration of Higher Education Institutions. The findings provide new insights into the nature and extent of deception in Private Higher Education in Cameroon and how it affects the students with implications for marketing theory and practice.

Significance of the study

Research on deceptive advertising in Private Higher Education is important for theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically the Higher Education market is one of the biggest markets in Cameroon. It is unique and demanding as people continue to seek Higher Education as they leave high school or move from one job to another. High school graduates make up the biggest fraction of the Higher Education market in Cameroon. Over ninety percent of high school graduates proceed to tertiary studies annually.

Advertising 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.

A decision to enroll in an institution or register for a program falsely made to believe will satisfy a need does not only hurt the student but society as a whole. Not only does it undermine the values and credibility of Higher Education, it defeats the essence of investing in human capital thereby having a great impact on a nation's growth and development.

Practically, many benefits can be derived by students, the Higher Education community and the Government when studies focus on examining the nature of deceptive advertising in the Private Higher Education industry and to seek ways of establishing and enhancing ethical advertising principles in the industry. Both Government and industry leaders in Cameroon will understand the extent of deception in the Private Higher Education sector. They will also recognize the need to avoid deception in educational advertising. The Government may establish acts to forbid unfair or deceptive practices in educational advertising. Overall, despite numerous studies conducted in deceptive advertising, very little is known about deceptive marketing in Higher Education. Therefore, this study gives a deeper insight on deceptive advertising with a special focus on Private Higher Education.

The paper is organized in the following manner. First, we present the conceptual background to the research, relying on the principles of ethical advertising. We then set out the research method and present our findings. We close the paper with a discussion, drawing attention to implications for the Government, stakeholders in Higher Education and marketing practice and theory

Conceptual background

Higher Education is a reputational and comprehensive professional service aimed at developing intellectual capacity of students over an extensive period. Educational institutions

like every organization engage in advertising, targeting potential students (Gibbs, 2007). Moogan (2011) finds that since the 1990s the concept of marketing has grown in importance for Higher Educational Institutions across the world. Moogan maintains that in addition to a large and diverse student population, there are multiple stakeholders operating within this increasing competitive environment that need to adapt to internal and external influences. According to Gibbs (2007) 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 et al., (2009) suggest that educational advertising 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. Khanna et al (2014) remark that advertising has evolved into a vastly complex form of communication with literally thousands of different ways for Higher Educational Institutions to get a message to their target audience. Ogba et al. (2012) adds that Higher Education marketing has taken a complete re-orientation where institutions now think of students as "customers" and education as a "product". According to Ogba et al., every single tactic available to the advertiser falls into one of the following buckets: Print, outdoor, broadcast, cellphone and mobile and online advertising.

Why is advertising important to Higher Educational Institutions

In a market where students are recognized as customers, universities have to implement strategies to maintain and enhance their competitiveness. They need to develop a competitive advantage based on a set of unique characteristics (Berger, 1997). Gibbs (2007) suggests that universities need to communicate these characteristics in an effective and consistent way to all relevant stakeholders. It has been suggested (Ogba et al., 2012) that higher education institutions need to be managed more and more as corporate brands. This implies that (Moogan & Baron, 2011) in a university environment, *product* becomes academic programs, *price* is tuition and financial aid, *promotion* is the communications program and *place* refers to the delivery system for academic programs. Under these circumstances, Khanna et al. (2014) ascertain that universities have finally realized the role of corporate identity as a powerful source of competitive advantage. Khanna et al. further report that schools have worked hard to develop databases to help identify their strengths and weaknesses relative to competition. In the same manner McCorkle & Alexander (1991) have reported that through research, schools have been able to identify various groups of students who are varied by need and expectations and why and how they should be served. McCorkle & Alexander further suggest that new programs have been designed to appeal to the latest student interests and needs. They conclude that higher education has accepted the practice of product development as one of its marketing tools.

In their study, Bennett & Choudhury (2009) find that a number of attributes attract students to a particular institution, such as the attractiveness of the campus, recommendation of family, closeness to home, campus atmosphere and academic reputation. However research (Binney & Martin, 1997; Chapleo, 2010) suggests that prospective students really know very little about the specific characteristics of courses and universities. Karen & Harlan (1997) find that while some may suffer from information overload, due to the various marketing activities that are employed in the dissemination of information and the creation of impact, many from backgrounds where no other family member had entered university find it harder to obtain information, accurate advice and proper guidance. Studies (Binney & Martin, 1997; Marwa et al., 2013) have also pointed out that even with relatively well informed parents and teachers to help, there are a lot of variables that can go wrong for an individual. David et al. (2013) find that marketers can help to target their customers with appropriate information by differentiating

their market segments. This has the potential to increase student awareness about courses, programs, services and research potentials of an institution of learning. According to Teodoro & Luis (2013) students will not register for a course or program if they do not know the institution offering it or if they are not aware of how the institution offering the program can benefit them. A study by Baden-Fuller et al. (2000) report that the obvious positive outcome of effective advertisement is that institutions make more money and can keep up with increased demands by students. Chapleo (2010) adds that if institutions fail to increase new registration for their programs and courses there is risk of losing money due to decrease in revenue. According to Bunzel (2007) advertising enables institutions to enhance their brand image. Students and parents are attracted to a school that reflects excellence and a good brand should convey excellence in order to remain a viable choice for knowledge seekers. This is especially true as growing competition from other schools requires that an institution effectively markets its self.

In their study, Durkin & Mckenna (2011) argue that advertising programs help establish a reputation that attracts employees who would be a right fit for the school. They maintain that if advertising is ineffective, prospective candidates may not know how to determine if their skills and experience fit the needs of the institution. Moogan et al. (1999) conclude that advertising is a dominant and leading weapon in educational marketing tools due to its positive impact on the students' learning decision.

How does advertising affect the student?

Educational advertising increases student awareness about the range of programs, courses, research activities and services offered by an institution of learning. The more informed students are about the benefits and costs of different products and services, the better decisions they can make about what, where, when and how to study (Moogan et al., 1999). Lowry & Owens (2001) report that advertising Higher Educational Institutions and their programs enables students to affirm their educational values (the person they wish to become). Lowry & Owens assert that students are able to understand the values of an institution and to measure the level of congruency with his or her educational ideals.

According to Durkin & Mckenna (2011), advertising develops a sense of curiosity in the students about programs, services and activities of an Educational Institution. This happens when students learn about new programs or courses offered by an institution. Also it enables students to have a rational response to advertising when they look at the features of a program or course offered by a school. Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana (2007) have suggested that when students weigh the benefits of a program or studying in a particular institution, they become emotionally involved with the advert and promotion. They identify ways that the program, course or the institution can make them happier, improve their lives or give them pleasure. More so, Soutar & Turner (2002) argue that repeat advertising messages serves as a reminder to potential students. Behaviour that stems from reminders includes suddenly thinking of a program, course or institution while making a decision to study

In spite of all these gains which have been made in adopting marketing in Higher Education, little has been written about deceptive advertising in Higher Education and its effects on students. We argue that by being deceptive rather than informative, Higher Education advertising is potentially exploitative and this exploitation can harm the goal of education for a common good. Should it do this, then it becomes morally problematic. Therefore, we argue that, it should be avoided on the grounds of moral duplicity.

Contextualizing deceptive advertising in Private Higher Education

Deception in advertising is far from a new concern. In the last several years, a number of authors (Arnold & Oakley 2013; Shabbir & Thwaites, 2007, Xie & Boush, 2014) have focused on specific problems involving false advertising. However, few have attempted to define deception in advertising; still, they have not been able to develop a well-accepted definition. Of those who have, their attempts fall into two categories: the act of deceiving by the advertiser and the consumer's perception of the advertisement rather than the effect of the message on the consumer. It is not the scope of this paper to examine the different definitions of deceptive advertising. However, our approach explores the impact on the consumer (student). Based on this, we argue that deception occurs if an advertisement (or advertising campaign) leaves the consumer with an impression(s) and/or belief(s) different from what would normally be expected if the consumer had reasonable knowledge, and that impression(s) and/or belief(s) is factually untrue or potentially misleading, then deception is said to exist (Gardner, 1975).

Research (Gao, 2008) has shown that measuring deception by asking subjects whether certain advertisements or advertising claims are deceptive is inappropriate. Consumers who perceive an ad to be deceptive are not deceived by it. The most promising avenue seems to be measurement of brand attribute beliefs of respondents. According to La Tour Kathryn & Micheal (2009) individuals prefer their beliefs to be true. When a consumer believes an advertisement to be true whereas in actual fact it is false and the consumer makes a decision to buy the product the consumer is being deceived. In reference to Higher Education, when a student is made to believe through advertising that an institution or program will meet his/her expectations and he/she ends up not being satisfied the student is being deceived. This rational seems to suggest (Hastak & Mazis, 2011) that institutions of higher learning that deceive the public are purposely designing and posting unclear misleading ads about the school, its programs and services and students enrol or register in this institutions believing the claims made by the institutions. This is further illustrated in Xie & Boush's (2011) study where they suggest that Educational advertisements contain informational cues which may be present in various forms including explicit verbal claim of programs and institutional performance or non-verbal features such as pictures, illustrations, and symbols. When a student looks at an advert, he or she may acquire and comprehend some of these cues. During comprehension the cues contained in the ad are encoded, that is, converted to an internal symbolic or cognitive code, i.e. information. Then if appropriate cognitive effort is exerted, i.e. the student believes the information to be true or the institution is believed to be associated with an attribute it does not have, the student may 'transfer' this coded information to long-term memory storage. It is this possible false information held in long-term storage that may have harmful or dysfunctional effects on the student's decision to enrol or register in a course of institution.

Most educational institutions emphasize fair, honest and ethical treatment of its students and other stakeholders with regards to services delivered but the goal of convincing students to enrol in programs can raise a variety of ethical issues.

H1- Causes of deceptive advertising in Educational Institutions have a significant effect on the students.

Research (Durkin & Mckenna, 2011; Lowry & Owens, 2001) suggests that education advertising should conform to moral principles appropriate for business. According to Ducoffe Robert & Sandra (1990) educational institutions need to decide what course of action needs to be done and evaluate the outcomes of each action. By focusing on the outcome of each action, Adam & Rosetti (2013) maintain that the decision on the course of action should be based on the benefits or harm of the actions without regard to the cost of the action. Moogan (2011) assumes that correct conduct generates the greatest happiness and that an educational institution should

be responsible for, and concerned with, the well-being and happiness of its stakeholders. In his *What defines successful university brands?* Chapleo (2010) reports that Higher Educational Institutions should adopt the most ethical advertising principles for the benefit of the institution and the public at large. Drawing from literature reviewed, we argue that in the context of Higher Education, advertising should be free from false or misleading statements, inaccurate testimonials, misleading fee claims, and exaggerated claims

False or Misleading Statements. This implies that advertisements must not contain any type of claim that is false or misleading to students and the general public. This includes lies, partial truths and purposefully withholding information. It is important to note that false and misleading content is not limited to verbal and written claims made in an ad by an educational institution. It also implies images and demonstrations about the institution and its services (Stuart, 2001).

H2- False or misleading statements in educational advertising have a significant impact on the students

Inaccurate Testimonials. This is when a person gives their opinion or talks about their experience about a product or service (Attas, 1999). In the context of our study, a testimonial about an educational institution or its services is inaccurate if it does not reflect the true opinion of the person giving the testimonial.

H3- There is a positively significant impact on students by inaccurate testimonials in educational advertising.

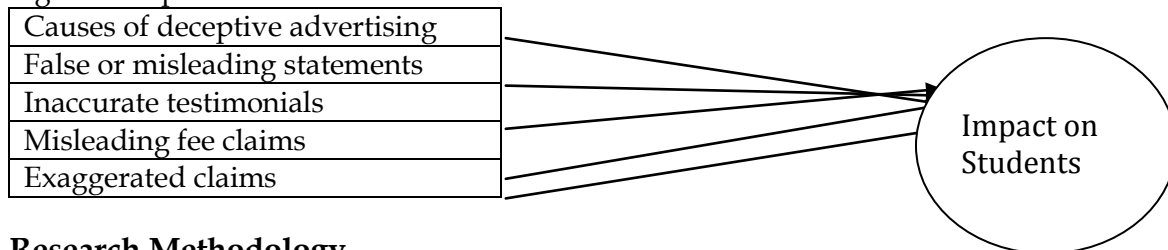
Misleading fee Claims. All fee claims relating to the products or services offered by an educational institution must be completely accurate. We argue that institutions should not misrepresent their fees in order to make the fees appear more desirable (Peter & Robbin, 2007).

H4- Misleading fee claims in Higher Education advertising have a significant impact on students

Exaggerated Claims. These are inappropriately excessive claims used by institutions of higher learning to create interest in their programs and institution as a whole. We maintain that before a school runs an ad, it needs to have a reasonable basis for the claims it makes, such as objective evidence gathered from surveys, agreement with experts in the field or results from scientific tests and studies. If there is not sufficient scientific or professional evidence to support a claim then it cannot be used in advertising.

H5- Exaggerated claims in educational advertising have a significant impact on the students

Fig 1. Conceptual framework



Research Methodology

This study is exploratory and quantitative in nature. It aimed at exploring the impact of deceptive advertisement in Private Higher Education Institutions on students. The study took place in Buea, the capital of the South West region of Cameroon. Since the creation of the University of Buea in 1994, Buea has metamorphosed to the educational hub of the province. It harbors over 50 institutions of higher learning, majority of which are privately owned.

Scale and measurement

As discussed in the conceptual background, we have identified deceptive advertisement to be a multidimensional construct consisting of five components: causes of deceptive

advertising, false or misleading statements, inaccurate testimonials, misleading price claims and exaggerated claims. To measure the impact of deceptive advertising on students we used a five point likert scale (1 = strongly disagree" and 5 = strongly agree") for the 28 items of the five dimensions of the scale. Items were pre tested for relevance, face validity, interpretation and readability with marketing academics and education authorities in the region and some students. Therefore some modifications and slight changes in wording were required to fit the context of the study.

Measure of reliability

A reliability analysis was conducted on the summated scale of these constructs using reliability coefficients. The internal consistency was assessed by means of Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Tables 1 below reports the reliability of the multi-item scale using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The overall coefficient alpha for the scale is 0.94 which is greater than the recommended cut-off level of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1994). With regard to individual sub-scales, there liability coefficient of all the five components: cause of deceptive advertising (0.95), false or misleading claims (0.95) inaccurate testimonials (0.95) exaggerated claims (0.94) and misleading fee claims (0.94) met the standard. Therefore, these indicated high reliability estimates since reliability figures less than 0.60 are generally considered to be poor, those in the range of 0.70 to be acceptable, while those above 0.80 to be good, suggesting that the scale is reliable for the instrument used for measuring the impact of deceptive advertising on students.

Table 1. Test of reliability using Cronbach Alpha Coefficient

	Cronbach alpha
Causes of deceptive advertisement	0.95
Misleading claims	0.95
Inaccurate testimonials	0.95
Exaggerated claims	0.94
Fee claims	0.94

Statistical analysis

The statistical package SPSS version 18.0 was used for data analysis. Frequency percentage was used to describe the data. The results presented in table 2 show that most (60%) respondents were males, the respondents were within the age bracket of 20-24 years old. The results also show that the highest academic qualification of most (50%) of the respondents was a certificate.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 demographic distribution of respondents

Variable	Item	Percentage
Age	20	40%
	21	30%
	23	20%
	24	10%
Gender	Males	60%
	Females	40%
Qualifications	Master	10%
	Bachelor	20%
	Diploma	20%
	Certificate	50%

Table 3. Analysis of variables

Variable and items	A	N	D	M	SD
Causes of deceptive advertising					
The Ministry of Higher Education does not enforce ethical advertising by schools	61	19	20	3.7	1.4
There is absence of an association of private institutions to enforce standards in private higher education	60	20	20	3.7	1.4
Institutions are not punished for misleading the public	50	20	30	3.3	1.3
Competition by schools for more students	60	20	20	3.7	1.4
The need by institutions to portray a good image	60	10	30	3.7	1.4
	58	18	24	3.5	1.4
TYPES OF DECEPTIVE ADVERTISING					
False/misleading claims					
We are authorized by the Ministry of Higher Education	40	30	30	3.2	1.5
We have a well-equipped computer laboratory with free internet facilities	50	20	30	3.3	1.2
We offer full tuition bursaries	50	20	30	3.3	1.17
We have a very high annual enrolment of students	60	10	30	3.5	1.41
Our campus looks as beautiful as designed on our flyer and website	40	10	50	2.8	1.58
	44	20	36	3.14	1.37
False testimonials					
People are hired to falsely testify about successes and facilities offered by the institution	50	30	20	3.4	1.23
Exaggerated Claims					
Our staff always ensures that students' problems are resolved in a timely manner	50	30	20	3.1	1.23
Our teaching staff is highly qualified to meet your learning needs	60	10	30	3.4	1.31
We offer very attractive and well managed programs that satisfy your needs	60	20	20	3.6	1.31
Our graduates always find employment in good companies	60	20	20	3.6	1.31
Our well equipped language center will make you proficient in English language	40	30	30	2.9	1.55
	54	22	24	2.6	1.34
Misleading Fee Claims					
We have the lowest fees	50	10	40	3.2	1.58
We offer a fee reduction upon early registration	30	30	40	2.8	1.28
	40	20	40	3	1.43
Impact of false advertisement					
I experienced financial loss	60	10	30	3.3	1.5
I was forced to change my program	70	10	20	3.6	1.3
My parents my parents experienced financial strain	60	20	20	3.6	1.3
I was forced to move to another institution	40	10	50	2.9	1.5
I experienced difficulties in learning	60	20	20	3.5	1.6
My qualification may not be recognized since the institution is not yet accredited	30	20	50	2.9	1.1

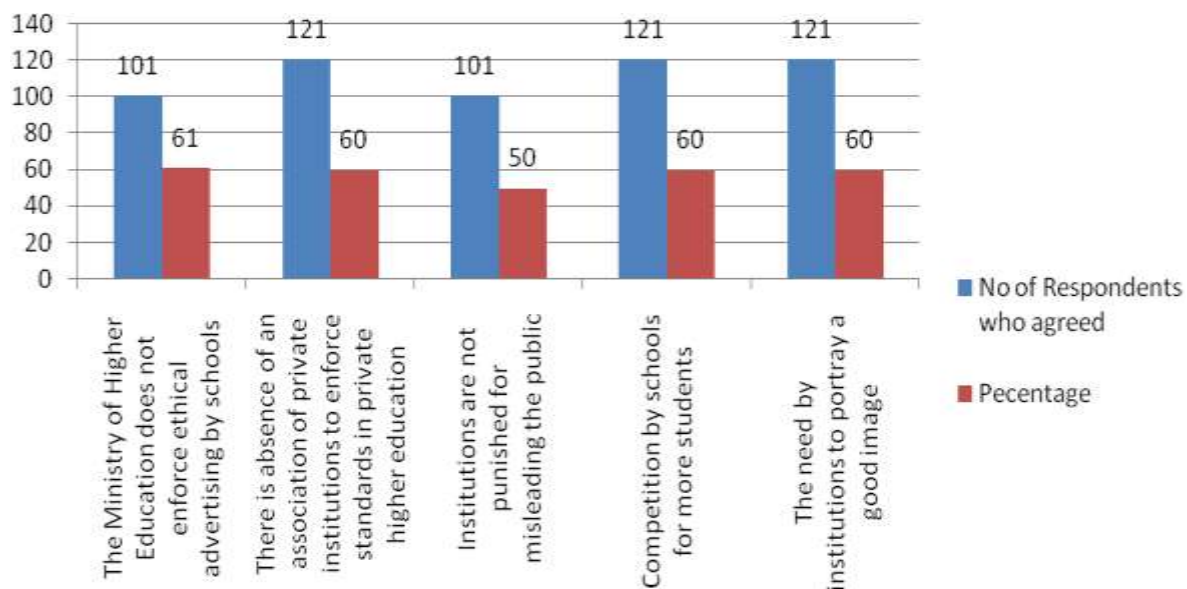
	53	15	32	3.3	1.4
Solutions					
Government should close unauthorized schools	60	10	30	3.5	1.61
Government should enact laws to forbid false advertising	50	10	40	3.1	1.48
The media should always report about institutions that mislead the public	60	10	30	3.1	1.62
Private institutions should form a body to establish and enforce standards in Private Higher Education	50	10	40	3.2	1.58
	55	10	35	3.2	1.6

The table above presents a breakdown of the frequency distribution, means and standard deviations for causes of deceptive advertising, the nature of deceptive advertising (false or misleading statements, inaccurate testimonials, exaggerated claims, and misleading fee claims) the impacts of deceptive advertising on students and measures to eradicate deceptive advertising in the Private Higher Education sector in Cameroon.

Causes of deceptive advertising

Overall, the table shows that 58% of the respondents supported the causes of deceptive advertisement in Private Higher Education Institutions in Cameroon. However, majority of the respondents remarked that, *absence of an association of private institutions to enforce standards in private higher education (60%), inability of the Ministry of Higher Education to enforce ethical advertising by schools (61); competition by schools for more students (60%) and the need by institutions to portray a good image (60%)* are the main causes of deceptive advertising by Private Higher Education Institutions in Cameroon. Collectively, the mean for the causes was $M=3.5$ but the means (3.7 each) of the top causes were significantly higher than the other causes of deception in the category. In the illustration below, the author presents the percentage and number of respondents who agreed to the causes of deceptive advertising.

Figure 2. Causes of deceptive advertising

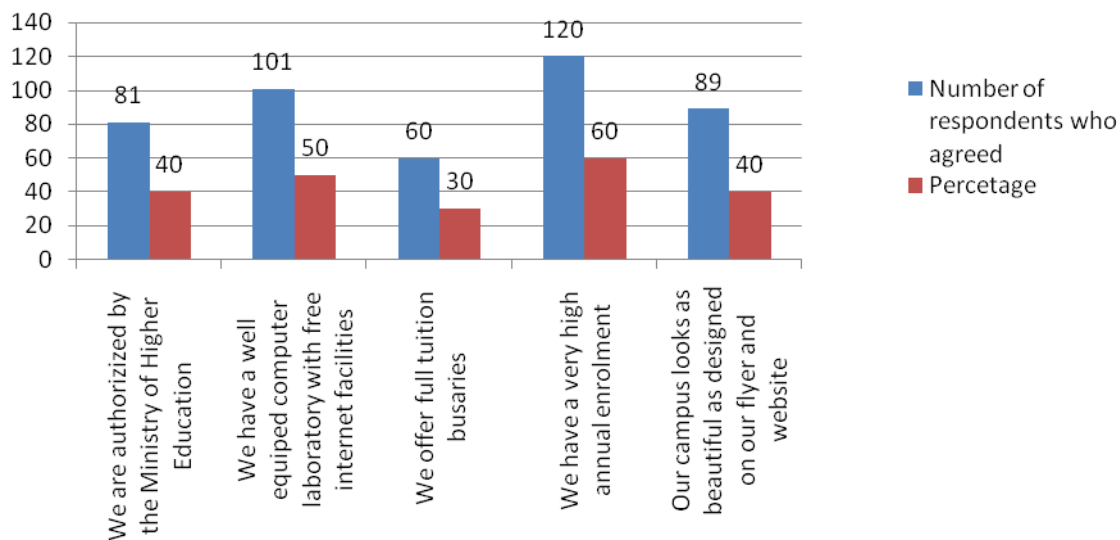


Nature of deceptive advertising

a) False or Misleading Statements

Generally, 47% of the respondents agreed to the nature of deceptive advertising in Private Higher Education Institutions in Cameroon. However, the top misleading claims considered by the majority of the respondents were *We have a very high annual enrolment of students* (60%), *We offer full tuition bursaries* (60%) and *“We have a well equipped computer laboratory with free internet facilities* (50%). The study also shows that the means ($M=3.5$, $M=3.3$ and $M=3.5$) of these items were significantly higher than the means of the other claims in the category. The graphical illustration below presents the numbers and percentages of respondents who agreed to false or misleading statements made by Private Higher Education Institutions in Cameroon.

Figure 3. False or Misleading Statements



b) Inaccurate Testimonials

We also find that half (50%, $M=2.9$) of the respondents remarked that Private Higher Education Institutions advertise by inaccurate testimonials. That is, people (mostly students) are hired to falsely testify to the public (especially high school students) about successes and facilities of an institution. The illustration below reflects the number and percentage of students who accepted that false testimonials are done by Private Higher Education Institutions in Cameroon.

Figure 4. Inaccurate Testimonials

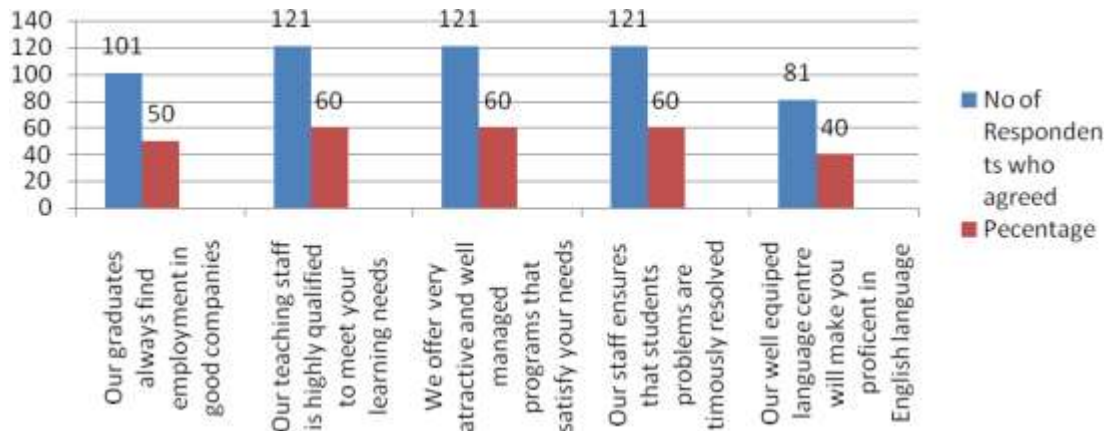


c) Exaggerated Claims

Generally 54% ($M=2.6$) of the respondents agreed that Private Higher Education Institutions in Cameroon also make exaggerated claims in their advertisements. The most remarkable are *“our teaching staff is highly qualified to meet your learning needs* (60%); *we offer very attractive and well*

managed program that satisfy your needs (60%) and our graduates always find employment in good companies (60%). Equally these claims recorded the highest means ($M=3.4$, $M=3.6$ and $M=3.6$ respectively) than other claims made in this category. The illustration below presents the nature of exaggerated claims and the numbers and percentages of respondents who agreed that such claims are made by Private Higher Education Institutions in Cameroon

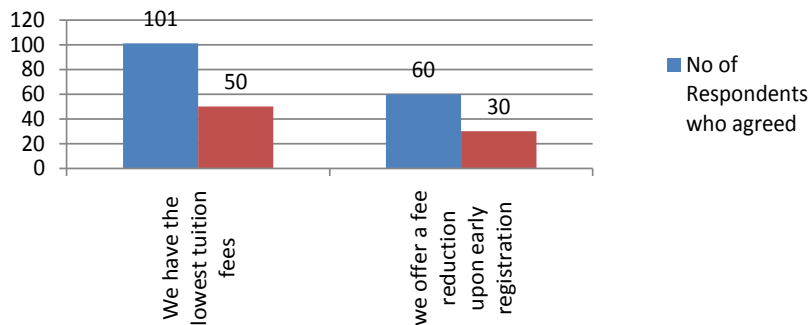
Figure 4. Exaggerated Claims



d) Misleading fee claims

The study also examined misleading fee claims made by Private Institutions of Higher Learning. The top fee claim reported by most (50% $M=3.2$) respondents is "We have the lowest fees". The illustration below shows the types of fee claims and the numbers and percentages of respondents who agreed that such claims are made by private institutions of higher learning.

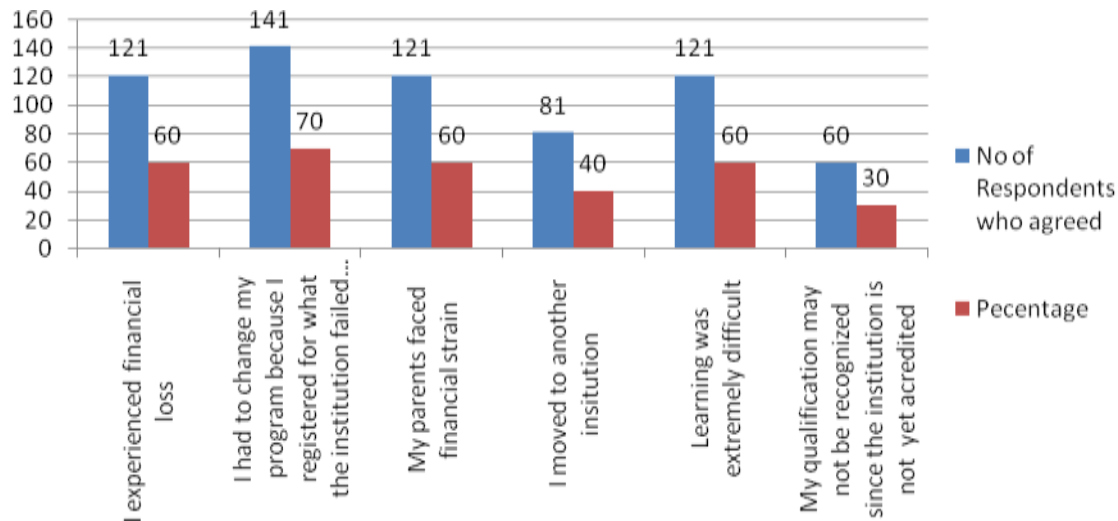
Figure 5. Fee Claims



How does deceptive advertising impact on the students

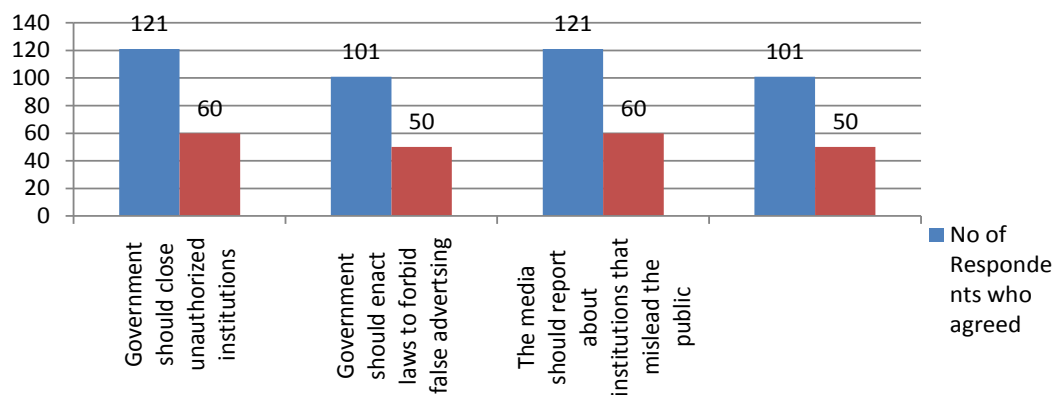
The results show that overall 53% of the respondents were affected by deceptive advertising in Private Higher Education Institutions. Top effects reported include *change of study program* (70%) *financial loss* (60%), *difficulties in learning* (60%) and *financial strain on parents* (60%). The means recorded by these effects were also higher than those of other effects in the category. They were $M=3.6$; $M=3.3$; $M=3.5$ and 3.6 respectively. In the graphical illustration below the study presents the effects of deception on the students and the numbers and percentages of respondents who agreed to the effects. The graph below indicates suggested measures to prevent deceptive advertising in Private Higher Education Institutions and the numbers and percentages of respondents who agreed to them.

Figure 6 Impacts of deceptive advertising on the students



How can deceptive advertising in Private Higher Education Institutions in Cameroon be prevented?

Overall, 55% (M=3.2) of the respondents agreed that measures should be taken to prevent deceptive advertising in Private Higher Institutions in Cameroon. Top suggestions made by the respondents include: "Government should close unauthorized schools (60%, M=3.5), the media should report about institutions that mislead the public (60% M=3.1); Government should enact laws to forbid false advertising in schools (50% M=3.1) and private institutions should form a body to establish and enforce standards in private higher education (50% M=3.2).



Inferential statistics

Table 4. Summary of regression analysis

Variable	R ²	Additional R ²	Significance
Causes of deception	0.86	0.80	0.004
False or Misleading claims	0.77	0.69	0.006
Inaccurate testimonies	0.12	0.46	0.351
Exaggerated claims	0.76	0.68	0.017
Misleading fee claims	0.72	0.59	0.004

*Mean R² 0.65 *mean Additional R²= 0.64 * level of significance P< 0.05

The researcher used multiple regression analysis to identify the dependent relationships between the independent variables - causes of deception, misleading claims, inaccurate testimonies, inaccurate claims and financial claims and the independent variable (impact on students). The results of the regression are shown in the table 4 above. Examination of the output shows the model explains 65 percent variance associated with the dependent variable ($R^2 = 0.65$, adjusted $R^2=0.64$). The results reveal that four of the five independent variables are significant in the multiple regression equation. These include causes of deception ($r=0.86$, $P<0.05$), false or misleading claims ($r=0.77$, $P<0.05$), Exaggerated claims ($r=0.76$, $P<0.05$) and Misleading fee claims ($r=0.72$, $P<0.05$).

General discussion and conclusions

In the current exploratory research, we study the impact of deceptive advertising in Private Higher Institutions in Cameroon. The intended contributions are primarily empirical, adding to our understanding of deceptive advertising in marketing. We designed our conceptual framework from the wealth of literature reviewed in the study. We find that there is a fair degree of deception in Private Higher Institutions in Cameroon; hence a fairly significant positive impact on the students. Most of the respondents in the study were between the age bracket 21-24 a reflection of the age range of students in tertiary institutions in Cameroon. The study also finds that the highest qualification of the majority of the students was certificate (most probably Advanced Level Certificate) this confirms Bunzel's (2007) finding that the market pool of institutions of higher learning is high school graduates. It also indicates that high school graduates are more vulnerable to deceptive advertising practices of Private Institutions of Higher Learning.

The findings also suggest a positive relationship between the causes of deception and the impact on the students. Though deception in Private Higher Institutions in Cameroon is influenced by many factors, we find that the most prominent factors are the inability of the Ministry of Higher Education to check unethical marketing activities by Private Higher Education Institutions, competition for higher enrolment, the absence of an association of Private Higher Institutions to establish and enforce standards in the industry and the desire by institutions to portray a positive image.

In terms of the nature of deceptive advertising in Private Higher Education Institutions in Cameroon, we find that with the exception of false testimonials, the other three (false or misleading, exaggerated and financial claims) have a significant impact on the students. In the category of false/misleading statements, we find common statements such as *we have a well-equipped computer laboratory with free internet facilities*; and *we have a very high annual enrollment of students*. Though half of the respondents indicated that institutions of higher learning advertise by inaccurate testimonials (hiring students to inaccurately testify about successes and facilities offered by the institution), we find that it does not have any impact on the students decision to enroll in an institution.

In the category of exaggerated claims the study suggests that claims such as *our graduates always find work in good companies*; *our teaching staff is highly qualified to meet your learning needs*; and *we offer very attractive and well managed programs that satisfy your needs* are very common. These claims have a significant impact on the students. We also find that misleading fee claims equally have a significant impact on the students especially *we offer the lowest fees* reported as the top claim in the category.

Overall, the study finds a relatively average impact of deceptive advertising on the students. Typical effects include *involuntary change of program*, *financial loss*, *financial strain on parents' income* and *learning challenges*. Despite a relatively average impact on the students,

respondents suggested measures to ensure that the practice is eradicated from the Higher Education system in Cameroon. Measures such as *Government should close unauthorized schools; the media should always report cases of deceptive advertising and Private Higher Institutions of Learning should create a body to establish and enforce standards in Private Higher education* were suggested.

Managerial implications of the study

Our study makes a contribution to existing scholarship on deceptive advertising. Despite numerous studies done in deceptive advertising, no study has looked at deception in the Private Higher Education sector. Thus, there is need to improve our understanding of the dynamics of deception in educational marketing. Our study suggests there is a fairly significant impact of deceptive advertising by Private Higher Institutions in Cameroon on the students. We argue that despite the relatively average impact on students by deceptive advertising practices of Private Higher Institutions of Learning, effective measures should be taken by Government and other relevant stakeholders to erode the practice from the country's educational system. This is because it devalues the credibility of the country's higher education system. We suggest that the Government of Cameroon through the Ministry of Higher Education should devote special attention to understand the causes, types and impacts of deceptive advertising on the students and the country's Higher Education. By so doing, appropriate measures may be put in place to prevent institutions from unethically advertising their programs.

In the same vein, we argue that Private Higher Education operators can also significantly contribute to preventing unethical practices in the sector through forming an association that may establish and enforce standards in Private Higher Education.

We maintain that the results of this study are particularly meaningful. This is because they suggest scales that are reliable and valid and could be used to measure deceptive advertising in Private Higher Education. Thus, the availability of these instruments should encourage continued research directed toward deceptive advertising in Private Higher Education and its impact on students. Realistically this study asserts that there is deceptive advertising in private higher education in Cameroon. Though the impact on the students may be fairly significant, there is urgent need for the Government and the private higher education community to eradicate the practice in the educational system of Cameroon.

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