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Visual Rhetoric and Symbolic Capital in Cameroonian Private Higher Education: "Staging Quality as Postcolonial Legitimacy"

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ABSTRACT
Private higher education in Cameroon is increasingly promoted through visual and performative claims of legitimacy rather than effective pedagogical practices. In a sector marked by informational opacity, competitive enrollment pressures, and uneven regulatory oversight, quality is experienced less as a verifiable practice than as a culturally mediated appearance. This article examines how institutions mobilize architecture, branding, accreditation artifacts, ceremonial rituals, and digital imagery to make quality visible, credible, and socially recognizable. Drawing on an eight-month ethnographically informed critical visual analysis of sixteen institutions in Yaoundé and Buea, the study introduces the concept of a visual economy of quality, showing how legitimacy is assembled, circulated, and converted into material resources. Analysis demonstrates that visual performance functions as a rational response to structural constraints while creating a bias toward auditable representations, producing a tension between staged credibility and pedagogical substance. The article contributes to African higher education studies by foregrounding the visual as a site for negotiating power, recognition, and knowledge.

Keywords: Visual culture; institutional performance; postcolonial legitimacy; higher education; symbolic capital.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Visibility, Opacity, and the Visual Economy of Quality

Private higher education in Cameroon operates within a landscape marked by persistent tension between visibility and opacity. In a sector where verifiable public data on pedagogical quality is scarce, institutions are encountered first not as centers of learning, but as orchestrated visual propositions. Prospective students and their families navigate a curated terrain, comprising glass-fronted buildings along urban

corridors, monumental gates, framed ministerial authorizations, and staged digital galleries of graduation ceremonies. Together, these elements form a coherent field of institutional signs that function as proxies for legitimacy; communicating permanence and authority long before curricula or graduate outcomes can be meaningfully assessed (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018; Couldry et al., 2017). At the critical juncture of enrollment, this visual encounter often serves as a substitute for direct evaluation.

Prospective students encounter a curated institutional environment where quality is visually staged, reflecting the 'experience good' problem theorized by Nelson (1970) and further shaped by audit culture and market uncertainty in contemporary contexts (Maroy et al., 2021; Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Fongwa & Luescher, 2022). Classical performance theory from Goffman (1959) and Schechner (2017) provides a foundation for understanding this impression management, now operationalized through digital visibility and neo-institutional pressures (Baym, 2018; Couldry et al., 2017).

The substitution of visual signs for pedagogical data responds to structural conditions shaping the sector, including profound informational asymmetry, uneven institutional longevity, and intense competition for enrollment. Within this environment, private higher education institutions (PHEIs) operate in what this study conceptualizes as a '*visual economy of quality'*, a system in which legitimacy is not presumed but actively produced. Architecture, branding, accreditation artifacts**,** ceremonial displays, and online imagery are assembled into a recognizable grammar that converts visual presence into legible credibility and, ultimately, into economic and social capital.

This dynamic, exceeding mere marketing, aligns with what Nelson (1970) describes as the problem of the experience good, a service whose quality becomes knowable only after commitment and consumption. In the

absence of transparent data, visual presentation functions as a pragmatic surrogate for knowledge, shaping how institutional quality is recognized and acted upon. The curated facade, framed certificate, and ceremonial gallery are not decorative supplements but evidentiary proxies through which trust is assembled. As a result, the evaluative question confronting families shifts from the pedagogical, '*Is this education good?*' to the institutional, '*Does this institution appear real, stable, and officially recognized?*' In this context, staged appearances structure trust and channel choice, rendering the institutional front stage a central site for negotiating legitimacy (Goffman, 1959).

1.2 Historical Grammars and the Performance of Legitimacy

The persuasive force of visual performance in Cameroonian private higher education is deeply rooted in historical and cultural conditions of recognition. In postcolonial systems, academic authority has long been anchored in inherited scripts of legitimacy, including bureaucratic documentation, architectural form, and ceremonial display associated with the modern state**.** As Nyamnjoh (2012) argues, colonial education functioned not simply as a pedagogical project but as a regime of recognition, embedding cultural hierarchies of what counts as legitimate knowledge, procedure, and institutional appearance. These hierarchies persist as active grammars through which institutional credibility continues to be interpreted and assessed (Mbembe, 2015; Mamdani, 2020).

In Cameroon, these legacies intersect with a bilingual educational order shaped by German colonization and subsequent French and British administration. The result is a complex politics of recognition in which visibility and representation carry enduring weight (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003). The visual grammar of institutional seriousness thus operates as a palimpsest, merging German colonial monumentalism, French administrative formalism, and Anglophone ceremonial tradition. Heraldic

seals, bilingual mottos, academic regalia, framed authorizations, monumental gates, and scripted ceremonies are not neutral global aesthetics; they function as culturally specific cues that resonate locally as tangible proof of belonging to the domain of state-sanctioned education. For newer and more competitive private providers, this inherited grammar operates as a strategic resource. The adoption of recognizable visual forms becomes a pragmatic maneuver to borrow state-adjacent authority, rendering nascent legitimacy immediately intelligible within a historically structured field where a convincing appearance functions as a prerequisite for recognition and survival.

1.3 Regulatory Visibility and the Ritualization of Legitimacy

This visual logic is further reinforced through the ritualized display of regulatory approval. State authorization is transformed from an administrative process into a public performance. Framed certificates, inspection photographs, and ministerial endorsements materialize the regulatory gaze as readable visual cues. For audiences lacking specialist knowledge of accreditation procedures, compliance becomes credible through spectacle, a rational adaptation to contexts of informational opacity, in which the visibility of a stamp or signature often outweighs its technical meaning. Within this environment, regulatory recognition functions less as a background condition and more as a performative resource. Public displays of authorization anchor institutional claims to legitimacy, aligning private providers with the symbolic authority of the state while remaining legible within the market logics of competition and choice. Visibility thus bridges governance and marketization, translating bureaucratic approval into social trust.

1.4 Symbolic Capital and the Conversion of Visibility

These practices are best understood through Bourdieu's (1986) concept of symbolic capital as a conversion strategy. Socially recognized signs of academic 'seriousness' within the institutional grammar, generate authority that can be exchanged for enrollment**,** revenue, partnerships,

and institutional survival. A sleek facade signals permanence, while a grand graduation ceremony consecrates success and continuity. Under conditions of uncertainty, such visible signs enable institutions to convert appearance into advantage. This logic is intensified within contemporary market and audit regimes, where prestige has become increasingly entangled with market logics, branding practices, and competitive visibility (Naidoo & Williams, 2015; Fongwa & Luescher, 2022). This dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle: institutions that appear legitimate attract students, and enrollment generates resources that enable further visible investment, thereby consolidating perceptions of quality and stability. This dynamic is amplified by audit cultures that privilege auditable representations over less visible pedagogical processes (Ball, 2003; Maroy et al., 2021) and by digital platforms, where visibility has become a primary site for negotiating legitimacy.

1.5 Visuality as Constitutive Institutional Practice

This study argues that in Cameroonian private higher education, visuality is not merely decorative, but constitutive of institutional legitimacy. While scholarship has extensively documented regulation, governance, and political economy, it has largely overlooked the everyday material and visual practices through which legitimacy is staged, interpreted, and traded. This article addresses that gap by advancing a framework of the visual economy of quality. It reframes visual presentation as a central analytical problem in explaining how institutions generate trust, authority, and competitive advantage.

To investigate this phenomenon, the study is guided by three interrelated research questions: (1) How do Cameroonian PHEIs mobilize visual and material resources to stage institutional quality? (2) What symbolic work do specific artifacts perform in converting market uncertainty into social trust? (3) How does this visual economy shape patterns of resource

allocation and contribute to potential decoupling between institutional performance and pedagogical substance?

To address these questions, the study employs critical visual analysis across sixteen institutions in Yaoundé and Buea, treating their material and digital self-presentation as primary data. By combining systematic observation of physical and digital spaces with conversational encounters, the study treats artifacts, performances, and spatial arrangements as both data and analytical lenses, attending to sites of production, the visual artifact itself, and practices of audiencing (Rose, 2022).

The study contributes in three interrelated ways: (1) conceptually, by advancing the 'visual economy of quality' framework; (2) empirically, through a sustained analysis of legitimacy strategies; and (3) theoretically, by demonstrating how postcolonial grammars reshape neo-institutional theories of isomorphism and decoupling. Through this argument, the article traces how a credible appearance is produced, recognized**,** and converted into institutional legitimacy within the postcolonial knowledge economy of Cameroon.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article treats private higher education institutions in Cameroon as a cultural field in which legitimacy is produced, circulated, and contested through visual and material means. Four conceptual strands anchor the analysis: (1) visual rhetoric and semiotics, (2) performance and impression management, (3) symbolic capital, and (4) decoupling as a patterned organizational outcome.

2.1 Visual Semiotics and the Politics of Looking

To navigate the "experience good" problem (Nelson, 1970), where pedagogical quality cannot be directly observed, institutions construct visual proxies to signal legitimacy. Glass facades, heraldic seals, and

framed certificates function not as transparent reflections of reality but as semiotic signs deliberately designed to convey meaning. Drawing on Barthes (1977), these are "full signs." Their denotative features, such as architectural aesthetics, are encoded to carry connotations of modernity, tradition, and stability. Through this encoding, unobservable value becomes legible as symbolic propositions, interpreted by audiences as credible evidence of institutional quality (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018).

The significance of these signs, however, depends on how they are perceived. Critical visual studies emphasize that looking is never neutral but always shaped by social expectations and power relations, making perception itself a site of meaning-making. From this perspective, analysis must trace how signs are produced, composed, and interpreted within the socio-historical context of Cameroon (Rose, 2022), where digital platforms both mediate and amplify institutional recognition (Couldry et al., 2017). By coding facade imagery and branding materials for semiotic density, the study demonstrates that legitimacy is not inherent but actively constructed, staged through visual signals that render abstract claims of quality publicly legible and persuasive.

2.2 Front Stage-Back Stage Performance Ritual

Institutions manage visibility by separating front and backstage spaces. The dramaturgical perspective shows that legitimacy is staged by controlling access and managing impressions across these spaces. Campus gateways, graduation stages, and websites function as controlled arenas where legitimacy is performed, while internal practices remain hidden. Ceremonies gain authority because they unfold where attention is directed, uncertainty is minimized**,** and meaning is managed. Drawing on Schechner (2017), these repeated enactments bring institutional promises into being. Digital platforms extend this performative labor, producing an "intimate work of connection" (Baym, 2018) and embedding institutions in a surveillance-performance nexus in

which credibility must be continually performed, monitored, and reaffirmed (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

2.3 Symbolic Capital and Postcolonial Aesthetics

The social authority generated through visual and performative work constitutes symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), a form of prestige that is socially recognized and convertible into material resources such as enrollment, revenue, and institutional stability. For institutions without inherited prestige, this capital is accumulated through strategic aesthetic borrowing. In the postcolonial context of Cameroon, this borrowing draws upon a colonial visual archive (Mbembe, 2015; Nyamnjoh, 2012). Elements such as academic regalia, heraldic seals, and neoclassical architecture function as contemporary citations of historically legitimized forms. This practice enables institutions to signal access to transnational academic capital (Hong & Horta, 2025), appealing to global aspirations while simultaneously negotiating local expectations of legitimacy. Consequently, a credible appearance operates as a convertible resource, translating perception into institutional outcomes amid the persistent tension between globally recognizable and locally resonant authority (Teferra, 2025).

2.4 Isomorphism and Decoupling

The resulting visual homogeneity across the sector is explained by neo-institutional theory, which posits that organizations secure legitimacy by adopting externally sanctioned structures, or "myths" (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This conformity emerges from coercive (state), mimetic (peer competition), and normative (professional) pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In the postcolonial context of Cameroon, these isomorphic pressures are intensified by what Teferra (2020) terms a "coercive global hierarchy," privileging and compelling globally legible forms of academic presentation. Scott's (2013) framework clarifies how this legitimacy is enacted visually: through regulative compliance (framed authorizations),

normative scripts (graduation rituals), and cultural-cognitive templates (corporate architecture).

This systemic convergence on ceremonial conformity creates a rational incentive for decoupling, a strategic divergence between polished external representations and internal pedagogical practices (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Decoupling functions as an organizational adaptation to audit cultures that reward the management of visible, verifiable evidence of compliance over investments in less easily measured substantive outcomes (Ball, 2003; Maroy et al., 2021). Consequently, the visual economy accounts for both the field-level convergence on specific aesthetic strategies and the structural gap that can emerge between institutional appearance and educational substance.

2.5 The Visual Economy of Quality Lens

Together, these perspectives form an integrated framework (Table 1) that analyzes Cameroonian private higher education as a field where visuality constructs credibility under constraint, directly addressing the core questions of the study.

Table 1

Analytical Framework of the Visual Economy of Quality

Theoretical Dimension	Core Concept	Function in the Visual Economy	Observable Manifestation in PHEIs
Visual Semiotics	Signification & Encoding	Transforms abstract quality into legible visual propositions.	Glass facades, heraldic seals, framed certificates.
Performance & Ritual	Enactment & Staging	Publicly performs legitimacy through controlled ceremonies and digital presence.	Graduation rituals, accreditation visits, curated social media feeds.

Symbolic Capital	Conversion & Accumulation	Converts successful visual performance into prestige, which is then traded for material resources and student enrollment.	Institutional credibility attracting enrollment; investment in ceremonial spectacles.
Field Logic (Neo-institutionalism)	Isomorphism & Decoupling	Explains sector-wide visual conformity and the gap between appearance and substance.	Homogeneous corporate architecture; under-resourced labs behind glossy fronts.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Context and Rationale

Since the liberalization of higher education in the 1990s, the private higher education (PHEI) sector in Cameroon has expanded rapidly. This reflects a broader African pattern in which urban private institutions absorb unmet demand amid constrained public capacity (Varghese, 2006; Teferra, 2013). These institutions operate within a state-centered recognition regime anchored by public universities, with legal frameworks guiding authorizations and inspections (Republic of Cameroon, 2001, 2023). Enforcement, however, remains uneven, and no centralized system tracks performance, producing profound informational asymmetries (Nelson, 1970). In this context, legitimacy cannot rely solely on pedagogy; it must be staged visibly through architecture, ceremonies, documents, and digital media to signal competence and credibility (Maroy et al., 2021; Fongwa & Luescher, 2022). The bilingual, postcolonial context of Cameroon amplifies these pressures, leading institutions to curate front stage visibility through Eurocentric gowns, neoclassical architecture, ceremonial rituals, and seals, thereby performing legitimacy for state authorities and publics shaped by colonial epistemic hierarchies (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003; Nyamnjoh, 2012). These strategies generate

prestige locally and transnationally (Bourdieu, 1986; Teferra, 2020) while revealing decoupling between visible compliance and substantive pedagogy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Vuban, 2019).

Guided by this context, the study pursues three interlinked objectives: to identify and analyze patterned visual and performative strategies; to interpret these strategies within Cameroon's socio-political and postcolonial framework; and to examine the structural implications of this "visibility bias," including potential decoupling between staged credibility and pedagogical substance.

3.2. Research Design

Adopting a constructivist lens, this study treats institutional legitimacy as a dynamic social accomplishment, continually negotiated through discursive and material practices (Bourdieu, 1986). Within PHEI sector in Cameroon, this accomplishment occurs in a highly visual, competitive, and postcolonial landscape. To investigate this process, the research employs a qualitative design centered on an ethnographically informed critical visual analysis (Rose, 2022). This methodology considers institutional visuals, from campus architecture to digital media, not as transparent reflections of quality but as socially situated performances embedded in relations of power, postcolonial ideology, and market competition (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018; Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015).

These visual practices circulate within mediated infrastructures that shape who and what becomes recognizable as legitimate (Couldry et al., 2017). The analysis is multi-sited and multi-modal, examining visuals across three interconnected dimensions: their production (strategic intent), their compositional content (aesthetic and symbolic elements), and their audiencing (stakeholder interpretation) (Rose, 2022). This framework positions visual presentation itself as a critical resource for

manufacturing authority within a context characterized by informational opacity and competitive pressure.

3.3. Data Collection

Fieldwork was conducted from March to October 2024 across 16 purposively sampled PHEIs in Yaoundé and Buea. A triangulated strategy captured the full spectrum of institutional self-presentation through four streams: (1) systematic visual documentation of facades, accreditation displays, and ceremonial spaces; (2) digital content analysis of websites and social media feeds; (3) collection of material culture (brochures, certificates, banners); and (4) ethnographically informed observation at open days, tours, and public events. These observations were contextualized through 47 informal conversational encounters with administrators, faculty, students, and parents, and through engagement with regulatory personnel from the Sub-Directorate for Private Higher Education (ESUP) within the Ministry of Higher Education.

3.4. Ethical and Sampling Framework

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. All institutions were anonymized, verbal consent was secured for conversations, and identifying details in visual materials were obscured. Data collection adhered to established anthropological guidelines (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015), balancing ethnographic depth with participant protection. The sample of 16 institutions was selected through maximum-variation sampling to achieve theoretical saturation (Miles et al., 2014) and capture the sector's core diversity. Yaoundé and Buea were selected as major urban educational hubs in the Francophone and Anglophone regions, respectively, ensuring that the key dynamics of the sector were represented. This strategy enables robust qualitative comparison of how visual legitimacy strategies manifest across different institutional contexts, directly supporting the study's objective of identifying patterned strategies.

3.5. Analytic Strategy

Data were managed and analyzed iteratively in NVivo 14 across three phases. The initial phase involved descriptive coding, inventorying visual and ceremonial elements such as facades, seals, accreditation displays, and props. The second phase focused on thematic development, identifying recurring cross-institutional "legitimacy technologies" across architectural, documentary, ritual, and digital domains. The final phase entailed theoretical interpretation, where these patterns were interpreted through an integrated lens of semiotics (Barthes, 1977), performance theory (Goffman, 1959; Schechner, 2017), symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), and neo-institutionalism (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This process, adopting a structural interpretive stance, treats visual-performance strategies as rational responses to systemic constraints (Nelson, 1970), illustrating how visibility and ritual are encoded, staged, and converted into authority within the postcolonial and competitive context of Cameroon. The sample composition is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Sample Characteristics (n = 16)

Institution Type	Ownership	Linguistic Zone	Years in Operation	Approx. Enrolment
University (n=6)	Corporate (4), Faith-based (2)	Anglophone (2), Francophone (3), Bilingual (1)	5–25	500–3000
Professional Institute (n=10)	Corporate (6), Faith-based (4)	Anglophone (4), Francophone (4), Bilingual (2)	2–15	150–1000

4. STAGING QUALITY THROUGH VISUAL PERFORMANCE

This analysis traces how legitimacy is staged across five key visual domains in Cameroonian PHEIs. Grounded in the critical visual methodology outlined above, it examines the production, compositional

content, and audiencing of institutional visuals. It reveals a recurring pattern: in a context of informational opacity and competitive pressure, institutions rationally invest in highly visible 'front stage' performances of modernity, tradition, compliance, and success to accumulate the prestige necessary for survival. While effective, this generates a powerful structural incentive to prioritize these visible signals, potentially leading to a systemic decoupling between the staged spectacle of quality and the substantive depth of pedagogical practice. Following the multi-sited, multi-modal lens established in the methodology, this analysis examines five interconnected domains of visual practice: architectural rhetoric, branding and heraldry, accreditation artifacts**,** graduation rituals, and digital imagery.

4.1 The Campus as Visual Argument

Cameroonian PHEIs deploy architecture as a tangible visual argument for quality before any academic work is witnessed, operating as a front stage setting designed to stabilize impressions for external audiences (Goffman, 1959). Drawing on the front stage dramaturgy, buildings function as performative stages positioning institutions as aspirational and credible (Bourdieu, 1986). Visual emphasis on front stage areas such as main entrances, administrative blocks, contrasts with backstage spaces that often reveal resource constraints. This spatial prioritization mirrors neo-institutional mimicry, where PHEIs adopt global conventions to appear legitimate while internal practices may remain uneven (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

This convergence on a corporate-modern aesthetic exemplifies mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983); illustrating a field-level pressure to adopt widely recognized visual forms. Separately, the glass facade operates as symbolic capital (prestige); accumulated, displayed, and converted into tangible rewards like enrollment; highlighting individual institutional strategies within the broader field. The facade directly confronts the ‘experience good’ problem (Nelson, 1970); its visual

language is engineered for immediate semiotic legibility. Monumental gates and glass-fronted blocks operate as Barthesian (1977) “full signs,” coded to signal modernity, hygiene, and bureaucratic competence.

Empirical observation reveals consistent patterns: prominent multi-story administrative blocks with branded signage dominate streetscapes. These elements are invariably the newest and most photogenic. In contrast, pedagogical infrastructure is often sequestered in older, less visible rear annexes. At PHEI-04, a gleaming glass-fronted lobby stood in stark contrast to a visibly outdated library; this serves to concretize the decoupling arguments of the study (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). A telling example from a private university along a major Yaoundé corridor illustrates this perfectly: the institutional frontage is a four-story glass-and-concrete administrative block with metallic lettering and a cobbled entrance, monitored by uniformed security and featured on all recruitment banners. Yet beyond this facade, teaching occurs in a narrow wing of older classrooms, where overcrowded lecture halls accommodate over eighty students, and ventilation and seating are visibly strained.

A critical reading reveals the structural consequence, wherein disproportionate resource allocation to front stage elements creates a rational incentive for decoupling. When markets reward visible surfaces, investing in pedagogical depth becomes less economically urgent.

4.2 Branding and Heraldry as the Aesthetics of Authority

Institutional branding operates as both a postcolonial inheritance and a contemporary semiotic system. Logos and crests echo colonial templates, establishing an association with recognized educational norms. As Nyamnjoh (2012) argues, colonial education instilled epistemic hierarchies where legitimacy was visually coded as European. Contemporary PHEIs' heraldic branding is a performative iteration of this

legacy, an effort to secure recognition within enduring global prestige hierarchies.

These symbols function as carriers of Scott's (2013) three pillars of legitimacy. The institutional seal, in particular, acts as anti-fraud technology, functioning as symbolic capital in concentrated form, with authority condensed into a mark that travels. Its aesthetic reassures through mimicry of a bureaucratic visual habitus (Bourdieu, 1986). This rhetoric is inflected by Cameroon's politics of recognition (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003). Near-universal bilingual (French/English) branding signals fitness to operate within the officially bicultural state. For faith-based institutions, branding layers' moral authority onto academic legitimacy. Crosses, doves, crescents, and ethical keywords integrated into crests and slogans create a layered claim: not only "we teach well" but "we form character," addressing family concerns about discipline and campus culture.

Branding converts cultural capital into prestige, mediating economic outcomes. While architecture signals stability, branding provides portable representation. This constitutes a complex postcolonial negotiation: projecting authority by adhering to a visual language forged elsewhere, simultaneously reinforcing global epistemic hierarchies that have historically marginalized African knowledge systems (Teferra, 2020). It is notable that within the sample, visual strategies that actively subverted or hybridized this colonial archive for instance, through prominent incorporation of indigenous cultural symbols or architectural motifs were virtually absent, underscoring the compulsory nature of this borrowed grammar.

4.3 Paperwork, Display, and the Material Culture of Officialness

The bureaucratic process of state authorization is transformed into a public visual spectacle. Certificates are framed and displayed as ceremonial trophies in prominent interfaces. Accreditation visits often

become moments of heightened staging, where institutions meticulously prepare spaces, organize files, and rehearse presentations, carefully managing what is made visible and what remains backstage (Goffman, 1959), curating what inspectors will see first. The visible dimension of readiness is treated as strategically central because it is what will be remembered, photographed, and later displayed as evidence of compliance. This practice manifests Meyer and Rowan's (1977) incorporation of institutional myth and ceremony. The accreditation visit itself becomes a peak performance, with institutions engaging in intense stage-setting for the surveillance gaze of the state (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

These artifacts then enter a second life as marketing tools. The framed certificate compresses bureaucratic time into spatial immediacy, continuously communicating state approval. Field data revealed that families often interpret any framed document as a positive signal. This was evident in the reception area of a professional institute in Buea, where six framed authorization letters issued over successive years were arranged symmetrically behind the front desk. Visitors encountered these documents before any interaction with staff. During observation, parents photographed the display with mobile phones, while staff gestured toward the frames when questions of recognition arose. In these settings, documents do not simply store information; they stage recognition. The wall performs a narrative, where the institution is legible to the state and therefore safe to trust. However, this creates a powerful systemic incentive. When displayed artifacts become primary signals for risk-averse families, institutions face rational pressure to allocate disproportionate attention to securing and showcasing them. This risks fostering a sector-wide prioritization of bureaucratic compliance over transformative improvement, where the performance of compliance masks uneven pedagogical conditions.

4.4 Graduation as Ritual Theatre

The graduation ceremony represents the apex of the institutional performance calendar, where diffuse visual strategies coalesce into a singular, photogenic ritual. These events exemplify Schechner's (2017) "restored behavior": carefully scripted sequences that transform social reality. At the institutional level, graduation functions as a neo-institutional ritual (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), a standardized ceremonial form through which organizations publicly enact conformity to legitimate academic scripts. At the relational level, the same ceremony operates as a mechanism for the production and transfer of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), converting the successful performance of institutional credibility into prestige attached to both graduates and the institution.

A critical observation is the frequent dislocation of the ritual to rented prestige venues. Several institutions staged graduation ceremonies in rented event halls rather than on campus. These venues provided elevated stages, draped seating, professional lighting, and audiovisual infrastructure unavailable within institutional premises. This spatial relocation is a performative masterstroke, allowing institutions to stage a spectacle of abundance that contrasts with modest everyday campus conditions. While everyday teaching occurred in modest classrooms with limited equipment, graduation provided abundance, continuity, and recognition.

For families, the ceremony resolves the uncertainty of a long investment by transforming incremental learning into an immediate, photographable endpoint. It performs not just success but continuity, ritually confirming the institution's ability to carry its promises to completion. In Bourdieusian terms, the event facilitates a crucial transfer of prestige.

Institutional legitimacy is ritually conferred upon graduates, who in return become walking testaments to institutional efficacy. The digital afterlife is indispensable; professional photographs become the

cornerstone of subsequent marketing. The critical structural implication echoes decoupling themes: the significant financial outlay for these events directly competes with potential investments in faculty development or learning resources. The ritual perfectly encapsulates the visibility bias, generating vital symbolic capital while potentially diverting resources from the pedagogical quality it certifies.

4.5 Digital Imagery and the Global Gaze

Digital platforms constitute the most continuous arena for staging legitimacy, reflecting neo-institutional pressures to appear globally legible within a competitive field, while also functioning as symbolic capital convertible into student enrolment and reputational advantage (Bourdieu, 1986). For prospective students, institutional websites and social media profiles constitute the 'first campus,' shaping expectations and filtering doubt. This digital space becomes a curated substitute for first-hand institutional knowledge in a market shaped by informational constraint. Following Rose's (2022) critical visual methodology, these are dynamic interfaces where meaning is constructed through production, content, and audiencing.

This performance operates within what Couldry et al. (2017) term infrastructures of recognition, media systems through which institutions become socially legible and legitimate. Digital presentation consistently targets what Nyamnjoh (2012) calls the global gaze. Websites feature signifiers of transnational connection such as partner university logos, foreign guest lecturers, and "International" program names, appealing to aspirations for transnational academic capital (Hong & Horta, 2025). This convergence reflects field-level isomorphism rather than shared pedagogical capacity (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). As Teferra (2025) notes, such collaborations are often pursued more for prestige than substantive capacity building.

Social media platforms intensify visibility into continuous performance, producing what Baym (2018) calls the "intimate work of connection." This curated stream generates a sense of community and vitality. However, it also creates a systematic representational asymmetry. Feeds are dominated by showcase moments, while everyday challenges remain absent. This operationalizes what Maroy et al. (2021) identify as the ascendancy of the performative construct of quality, where auditable representations can become substitutes for complex educational processes. The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a powerful accelerant, normalizing sophisticated digital self-presentation as a non-negotiable component of legitimacy and likely deepening the visual economy's hold on organizational behavior (Czerniewicz et al., 2020).

5. WHEN IMAGES CROWD OUT SUBSTANCE: STRUCTURAL DECOUPLING

This analysis demonstrates that within the competitive private higher education (PHEI) sector in Cameroon, institutional quality is increasingly equated with visible credibility. Where pedagogical substance cannot be pre-evaluated, legitimacy is performed through a curated visual economy comprising architecture, branding, accreditation artifacts**,** ceremony, and digital media. This reliance on visual proxies generates a systemic 'visibility bias,' a structural incentive to allocate resources toward spectacles that yield immediate perceptual returns. The resulting decoupling, a gap between institutional presentation and pedagogical substance, emerges not as an anomaly but as a rational equilibrium under prevailing market and postcolonial constraints.

5.1 The Logic of Visibility Bias and Decoupling

When trust is secured through staged performances, resources flow toward front stage spectacles. A new campus facade or a lavishly staged graduation delivers immediate, legible reassurance; investments in curriculum depth or faculty development do not. Under profound informational asymmetry (Nelson, 1970) and competitive isomorphism

(DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), prioritizing visible legitimacy is a rational, low-risk survival strategy. Consequently, as Meyer and Rowan (1977) theorized, the ceremonial adoption of externally validated visual structures becomes routine, often loosely coupled from core educational activities. Decoupling is thus a stable organizational pattern, an equilibrium, not an exception**;** produced by scarcity, competition, and the high social value placed on visible legitimacy.

Data from 16 PHEIs studied from March to October 2024 confirm this pattern. High teaching loads constrained curriculum development, while libraries and laboratories were under-resourced relative to marketing imagery. Conversational encounters revealed the practical effects: a faculty member at PHEI-11 noted that *"we use the same lecture notes for five years because there is no budget for new materials,"* while a student at PHEI-07 contrasted the *"modern computers on the website"* with the *"overcrowded and broken PCs*" in the actual lab. At PHEI-04, the gleaming administrative lobby contrasted sharply with a visibly outdated library in a rear annex, concretizing the front stage/back stage divide.

Institutions often translate uncertainty into reassuring promises: laboratories, internships, industry links, small classes, personalized mentoring. These promises may be realized unevenly, partly delivered, or supported through informal arrangements. Analytically, what matters is how promises function in a market where people must decide before they can verify (Nelson, 1970). Promises do not only describe plans; they organize expectations and stabilize trust long enough for enrollment to occur. These observations reflect a broader pattern in which the prioritization of visible legitimacy has tangible organizational consequences. Across institutions, teaching loads often exceeded 40 contact hours per week, limiting time for curriculum development. Libraries, where present, were frequently single rooms with outdated holdings. Laboratory access was rotational and constrained by

equipment shortages, despite featuring prominently in promotional imagery. Internship placements relied on informal networks rather than institutional partnerships. These outcomes reflect structural imperatives, not individual deception. In a market that rewards surfaces, investing in pedagogical depth becomes an elective rather than a requirement.

5.2 Compulsory Symbolic Investment

These market dynamics are amplified and given specific form by postcolonial recognition politics. To be legible as legitimate within enduring global epistemic hierarchies (Nyamnjoh, 2012; Teferra, 2020) and the bicultural bureaucracy in Cameroon, institutions must perform a "borrowed visual grammar". This involves a compulsory symbolic investment: mimicking colonial heraldry in seals, performing bilingual (Francophone/Anglophone) legitimacy on signage, and digitally staging transnational partnerships. This labor channels finite resources toward mastering externally validated forms of visibility, structurally reinforcing the bias that privileges prestige over locally grounded pedagogical development.

5.3 Homogeneous Surfaces, Variable Substance

The aggregate outcome is a sector characterized by increasing visual and ceremonial homogeneity alongside significant pedagogical variability. Institutions converge on similar glass-and-steel facades, framed certificates, and rented graduation venues, even as teaching quality and graduate preparedness diverge (Vuban, 2019). This creates a critical governance dilemma. For students and families, surface legitimacy becomes an unreliable predictor of educational substance. For regulators, inspection regimes that privilege the audit of visible compliance risk overlooking sustained pedagogical engagement (Maroy et al., 2021). The visual economy, therefore, actively shapes quality disputes, rewarding the management of appearances in ways that can eclipse the development of substantive capacity.

6. CONCLUSION

The private higher education sector in Cameroon exemplifies an "experience good" traded within an opaque market, where prospective students cannot reliably assess quality before enrollment**,** verifiable performance data are scarce, competition is intense, and regulatory oversight is uneven. Within this environment, institutions have come to rely on the production of visual legitimacy as their primary mechanism for attracting enrollments**,** securing fees, and ensuring survival. This study has demonstrated that Cameroonian private higher education institutions (PHEIs) consequently respond to market uncertainty not through transparency but by cultivating a deliberately staged "visual economy of quality," manufacturing credibility through coordinated architecture, branding, accreditation artifacts, graduation spectacles, and digital imagery.

This economy operates across five distinct visual domains: monumental glass facades, colonial-style logos and bilingual mottos, framed ministerial certificates, lavish off-campus graduations, and continually refreshed online galleries. Through these channels, PHEIs construct front stage performances that project an aura of modernity, permanence, and state endorsement. Such practices are not merely decorative marketing; they are constitutive strategies that actively convert symbolic capital into material resources. By borrowing the visual grammar of colonial and state authority, institutions tap into enduring prestige hierarchies, thereby translating curated surface displays directly into enrollment numbers and revenue streams.

The durability and logic of this strategy are illuminated through an integrated theoretical lens. Goffman's performance theory clarifies the deliberate separation of front stage spectacle from backstage realities. Bourdieu's framework of symbolic capital explains how these visual signs of legitimacy are accumulated and exchanged for economic advantage.

Meyer and Rowan's neo-institutionalism reveals the patterns of isomorphic mimicry that rationalize the decoupling of external form from internal substance. Finally, postcolonial scholarship situates this entire visual lexicon within a borrowed "colonial archive," a grammar that remains essential for recognition within a persistent global epistemic order. Together, these perspectives demonstrate why investing in visibility constitutes a rational institutional adaptation, even when it diverts finite resources from pedagogical improvement.

Empirically, this systemic reliance on visual legitimacy generates a structural "visibility bias." Resources flow preferentially toward spectacles that promise immediate perceptual returns such as a new glass-clad facade or a grand graduation venue, while less visible but pedagogically critical inputs such as faculty development, library collections, and laboratory equipment remain underfunded. Decoupling thus emerges not as an incidental institutional failure but as a stable and logical adaptation to compounded market pressures and postcolonial constraints.

The study's analysis advances knowledge in three key respects. Conceptually, it introduces and elaborates the "visual economy of quality" as a framework for analyzing how legitimacy is assembled, circulated, and monetized through visual artifacts. Empirically, it provides [a] sustained visual-institutional analysis of sixteen Cameroonian PHEIs, thereby grounding abstract theories of audit and legitimacy within a concrete, bilingual, and postcolonial context. Theoretically, it provincializes neo-institutionalism by showing how decoupling and isomorphism are critically amplified by colonial legacies and regulatory asymmetry, revealing the precise visual encoding of hierarchical global norms.

To bridge the consequential gap between appearance and substance, the study proposes three interlocking measures. For regulators, this entails

implementing hybrid assessment frameworks that incorporate a "visual-audit supplement," training inspectors to critically read institutional spectacle, demand backstage evidence, and publish standardized performance data. For the institutions themselves, it necessitates conducting internal resource audits that map expenditures on visibility against investments in core pedagogical capacity, thereby tethering symbolic performance to measurable academic outcomes. For students, families, and civil society, it requires cultivating practical visual literacy; the ability to decode what a framed certificate actually guarantees, what a glossy graduation photograph may conceal, and whether the advertised learning resources are adequate. Collectively, these measures would complement formal regulation by narrowing the interpretive gap between persuasive appearances and substantive quality.

In conclusion, Cameroonian private higher education vividly demonstrates that visual culture has become the central arena wherein authority is produced, trust is negotiated, and resources are allocated. The enduring challenge is to ensure that the mechanisms crafting visual legitimacy also serve to secure genuine academic quality. In a sector where perception routinely substitutes for reality, aligning spectacle with substance is not merely an operational goal but an essential condition for the integrity and future of higher education in Cameroon.

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