



RESEARCH ARTICLE

MEDIA EXPOSURE AND ADVERTISING PRACTICES AMONG HERBAL MEDICINE DEALERS (HMDS) IN LIBERIA.

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the status of advertisement practices among Herbal Medicine Dealers (HMDs) on various media platforms, and stakeholders' perception of its relationship with profitability, business growth and overall standard of living. This survey was carried out using semi-questionnaire as data collection instrument. The participants include 70 HMDs, which includes 28 recognized Herbal Medicine Practitioners (HMPs) recognized by the Complementary Medicine Unit (CMU) of the Ministry of Health (MOH) and 42 Herbal Products Vendors (HPVs) within 7 major markets within the study area. Findings from this study indicate that of the 70 HMDs, 56 (80%) and 14 (20%) are exposed to radio and social media platforms, respectively, while 6% are not exposed to the media at all. Among the 56 HMDs who are exposed to the media, only 3 (5.4%) are involved with media advertisement, while the remaining 53 (94.6%) are not involved with media advertisement. By prioritizing media advertisement as part of their business strategy, HMDs in the study area can improve herbal product patronage, thereby increase their revenue. The findings of this study are relevant to the growth of the business in focus and the improved standard of living of related stakeholders in the study area.

KEYWORDS

Communication, Herbal Medicine, Media Exposure, Advertisement, Liberia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Media exposure is the frequency and extent to which a person accesses various forms of media platforms such as television, newspaper radio, or social media (De Vreese and Neijens, 2016). Advertising is a long-standing method of brand promotion. During the initial stages of human civilization, economic activity was disseminated in many ways, including the utilization of directional sign and the exhibition of names and symbols, among other techniques. Modern media advertising strategies, including print media (newspapers, magazines) and electronic media (television, radio, the internet, and mobile phones), have been enhanced to incorporate traditional techniques (Rabindranath and Singh, 2024).

The media plays a significant role in creating awareness by helping HMDs to reach a broader audience for easy communication of the benefits of HPs through the most suitable channel to the targeted population (Pearce et al. 2009). In Liberia, like in all other countries globally, the practice of advertising goods and services is increasingly prevalent. Promotions serve multiple purposes, including customer attraction, information dissemination, education, and getting a competitive edge over rivals. Furthermore, they contribute to the overall increase in market share and sales (Eiriz and Wilson, 2006). Because of their extensive user base, media platforms have become a lucrative avenue for advertising products and services, aiming to increase sales and generate more money. The correlation between media platforms and their impact on advertising has been a subject of contention for a significant period of time. The United States' rapid advancement in media technology has significantly changed the methods of acquiring, disseminating, and consuming information across various industries.

The changes described in the study conducted also have an impact on the herbal medicine business. The media plays a crucial role in helping businesses attract potential consumers' attention and educate them about the importance of a product and the reasons why they should purchase it, thereby increasing its economic value (Eiriz and Wilson, 2006; Jamil et al., 2022). The most popular medicinal system in use today is traditional herbal therapy. Approximately 80% of the population in Africa depends on medicinal plants to address their basic health needs (Adepoju et al., 2023). In areas where Herbal Medicine Products are mostly used, it is crucial to research the significance of the technique and how practitioners have popularized it through the media.

In order to examine the advertising practices of HMDs, it is important to take into consideration socio-cultural dynamics of the region as well as the regulatory framework which can significantly influence the practice of HM. This study seeks to provide deeper insights on the importance of advertising for increased brand awareness and overall success of HMDs in the study area while maintaining consumer safety. The findings provide valuable knowledge for HMDs, and policymakers, to strengthen HM implementation and boost HMD welfare.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a quantitative survey questionnaire research approach to assess the extent of media exposure and advertising practices among HMDs in the study area. This design was chosen because it facilitated the gathering of quantifiable data that provides a clear picture of the population and phenomena under study, leading to accurate results. A statistical data analysis was used to analyze the collected data. Montserrado is the oldest county in Liberia, and it consists of several

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towns and villages including the country's capital, Monrovia. Montserrado county is bordered by Bomi county on the west, Bong County towards the north, Margibi County towards the east and on the south by the Atlantic Coast. It occupies about 738.5 sq miles, making it the smallest county in the country by landmass. As of the 2022 census report, it has a population of about 1,920,914 making it the most populated county in Liberia.

The targeted population for this study is 32 recognized Herbal Medicine Practitioners (HMPs) of the Ministry of Health (MOH) and the 49 Herbal Product Vendors (HPVs) selling locally produced herbal products within 7 major markets such as; Redlight Market, Duala Market, Old Road Market, Fiamah Market, Waterside Market, Rally Time Market and Supermarket in urban Montserrado which amounts to 81 HMDs. Curry (1984), states that if the population is less than 100 persons, the researcher is required to select all of the population but it is considered appropriate if a researcher

is able to contact more than 50% of the target audience. Data were intended to be collected from the entire targeted population of 81 HMDs but due to the refusal of some HMDs to participate, only 70 responses were obtained from 28 HMPs who are registered with the CMU of MOH and 42 HPVs located in 7 major markets in the study area, making 86.4% of the total population. A quantitative survey questionnaire, exclusively using closed-ended questions was used because it best facilitated the collection of the necessary information from 23 full time herbal medicine practitioners, 5 part-time herbal medicine practitioners, 40 full time herbal product vendors and 2 part-time herbal product vendors. Among the HMDs there were 18 males and 52 females. Participants were approached, and their consent to participate was obtained. The quantitative survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistical procedures presented in Tables 1-3.

Table 1: Respondent's socio-demographic data

Gender	Frequency	Percentage%	Level of Education	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	18	25.7	Never been to school	32	45.7
Female	52	74.3	Primary School cert	11	15.7
Total	70	100	High School Drop out	5	7.1
			High school graduate	16	22.9
Age Range	Frequency	Percentage%	Ordinary Diploma	12	2.9
18-30 yrs	6	8.6	B.Sc.	3	4.3
31-45 yrs	19	27.1	B.Sc. Student	1	1.4
46-55 yrs	21	30	Total	70	100
55 yrs above	24	34.3	Nationality	Frequency	Percentage
			Ghana	1	1.4
			Nigeria	10	14.3
			Liberia	59	84.3
Total	70	100	Total	70	100

Source: Research field data (2023).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data in Table 1 indicates that of the 70 respondents, 25.70% were men (who claimed to have gotten the knowledge from their fathers), while 74.34% were women. This is traceable to ancestry in the profession, as most of the females in the study area confirmed that they were mentored by their mothers who were professionals in the field and other female professionals who trade these products in the local markets. This finding agrees with a study which concluded that more females are involved with the sales of HPs for the treatment of various illnesses than males, and that most HMDs are mentored and trained by their parents by (Asemah and Obukoadata, 2021).

The ages of the respondents range from 18 to 55 years old. With 34.3%

being 55 years and older, meaning that there are more elderly people in the practice of HM than the youths. It was also observed that the respondents are generally of very low educational statuses, with the majority of them not being exposed to formal education. 45.7% had never been to school; 15.7% only attended primary school; 7.1% high school dropouts; 22.9% were high school graduates; 2.9% diplomas; only 4.3% had a B.Sc.; and 1.4% were undergraduate B.Sc. students. It is also notable that the percentage of males with a university degree (4.3%) was higher when compared with the female respondents (0.0%). This could be based on the fact that majority of them were older in age and perhaps there was limited access to formal education when they were younger compared to now. The research finding based on distribution of nationalities showed that there were three different nationalities among the respondents; 1 Ghanaian (1.4%); 10 Nigerians (14.3%); and 59 Liberians (84.3%).

Table 2: HMDs media exposure level and advertising practices

Exposed to Media platforms	Frequency	Percentage%	Media platforms exposed to	Frequency	Percentage%
Yes	56	80%	Radio only	37	52.8
No	14	20%	Radio & Social media	17	24.3
			Social media only	2	2.9
			None	14	20
Total	70	100	Total	70	100
Social Media platforms exposure	Frequency	Percentage%	Media access rate	Frequency	Percentage%
Facebook & WhatsApp	5	7.1	Everyday	27	48.2

Table 2(Cont.): HMDs media exposure level and advertising practices

Advertisement through media	Frequency	Percentage%	Advertisement rate of advertising HMDs	Frequency	Percentage%
Facebook only	17	24.3	< 7 times/week	21	37.5
None	48	68.6	Only when needed	8	14.3
Total	70	100	Total	70	100
Yes	3	4.3	Every Week	2	66.7
No	67	95.7	Not Regularly	1	33.3
Total	70	100	Total	3	100%
Continued advertisement	frequency	Percentage%	Advert impact on sales	Frequency	Percentage%
Yes	2	66.7	+ve everytime	2	66.7
Maybe	1	33.3	+ve sometimes	1	33.3
Total	3	100	Total	3	100

Source: Research field data (2023)

According to Table 2, Majority of the HMDs n-56 representing 80% of respondents were exposed to some form of media platform, while 14 HMDs representing 20% were not exposed to any form of media platform. This means that more of the respondents were exposed to media platforms among the study population. Of all the different media platforms in Liberia, 37 HMDs represented by 77.1% of the respondents are exposed to radio only, 17 HMDs represented by 27.1% use social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, and radio, 2 HMDs represented by 2.9% use Facebook only and 14 HMDs represented by 20% use no media platform at all, meaning that more respondents use the radio than any other media platform.

Of the total n-70 of respondents, 5 representing 7.1% are exposed to both Facebook and WhatsApp, 17 representing 24.2% are exposed to Facebook only, and 48 representing 68.6% don't use social media platforms at all (meaning that there are a majority of the respondents who are not exposed to any form of social media platform at all). The media access rate among the total n-56 respondents who are exposed to media platforms, 27 representing 48.2% use media platforms every day, 21 representing 37% use media platforms less than 7 times but more than once a week, and 8 representing 14.3% use media platforms only when needed; meaning that majority of the media platform users do it daily (Table 2).

Of the total n-70 respondents, 3 representing 4.3% of the respondents advertise their businesses in the media, while 67 representing 95.7% do not advertise in the media (meaning that there is a greater number of respondents who do not practice media advertising at all). This finding ascertains that of the number of n-3 of respondents who advertise, 2 representing 66.3% advertise every week, while 1 respondent representing 33.3% do not advertise regularly (Table 2). This means a greater number of the respondents who advertise do so regularly.

The impact of media advertisement shows that of the n-3 respondents who advertise, 2 respondents representing 66.7% experience increased sales every time they advertise, while 1 respondent representing 33.3% sometimes experience increased sales when they advertise. This shows that a greater number of people experience an increase in their sales due to media advertisements. To ascertain whether the respondent will continue to advertise 2 respondents representing 66.7 percent stated that they will want to continue to advertise, while 1 respondent representing 33.4% are not sure as to whether they want to continue or not (Table 2), meaning that more of the respondents who advertise desire to continue with the advertisement in the media.

The study was aimed at accessing the media exposure level and the rate at which HMDs utilize various media platforms for advertisement in urban Montserrado, Liberia. The study found out that more i.e., 80% of the HMD's in the study area are exposed to media platforms and among the different platforms, 52.8% are exposed to radio only and this could be for several reasons one of which is that radio is considered the traditional media and majority of the HMDs are older people (meaning that they are not really exposed to the new media since it is considered a new generational trend), another reason could be the high rate of poverty in Liberia among the older population as most people cannot afford television nor smartphone unlike in the case of the newspaper which is readily available. Thirdly, the majority of the HMDs are older and might not be exposed to formal education and are unable to read the newspapers, making the radio their only means of accessing information and entertainment. This finding is

similar to a study done by Pabelona and Lausa (2022), which reported the radio as a widely used media platform among HMDs in Nigeria. With the understanding that most of the HP consumers are illiterates, HMPs may decide not to advertise through newspapers, but use the radio and television as advertisement tools instead.

Among those respondents who listen to radio, a common theme was observed from the responses, and it shows that the majority of them prioritize listening to ELBC radio (a state-owned station), and Truth FM (a private media institution with a wide media coverage across Liberia). Even though this study did not consider reasons why the respondents preferred listening to these two radio stations, their wide coverage could be a contributing factor to their preference by HMDs in the study area. The study had earlier reported that ELBC and Truth FM are the most widely used radio stations across the various counties in (Liberia Awunyo-Victor et al., 2013).

Another key finding of this research is that among the HMDs who prioritize listening to radio as a source of information and entertainment, majority of them do not utilize those radio platforms as advertisement tools for their businesses. This might be a reason why most of their businesses are not visible enough to the general public. This could be as a result of their ignorance about the power of the media on business growth and sales (unlike the USA, Europe, Ghana and Nigeria, where HMDs have very good brand visibility due to media advertisement thus leading to a very good standard of living). This discovery is contrary to the point made, that most traders find the radio as a perfect advertisement tool with the aim of improving sales of their HPs, which makes them visible and financially buoyant by (Kitchen, 2014).

This research also found out that among the respondents who are exposed to media platforms, majority which makes up 48.2% of them access these platforms daily, while a smaller number access the media only when needed. This is because the majority of the respondents are elderly people, and those people monitor radio daily to stay up to date with information. Those who use media platforms when needed might be younger people who utilize the media for information only when there is a trending issue that they need to stay up to date with. This finding is in correlation with a study done in Ghana, which states that the majority of the population uses the media as a daily source of information and entertainment by (Kretchy et al., 2021). This study also found that among the 56 HMDs who are exposed to media platforms, 53 of them marking 94.6% do not advertise their herbal products on the media, except for a 3 HMDs representing 5.4% who consider advertising their herbal products. Examining advertising practices based on nationalities, among the 3 HMDs who advertise the study found out that 1 is a Ghanaian and 2 are Nigerians with no Liberian HMD involved with media advertisement.

This could be based on the educational status of the HMDs as well as socio cultural background since the three HMDs who advertise are educated with one having a B.Sc, the other is a B.Sc candidate while the other is a high school graduate, this shows that education plays a major role in designing advertisement strategies for businesses with Nigeria having 62.8% literacy rate compared to Liberia which has 43% furthermore the 3 HMDs who are engaged with media advertisement are non-Liberian HMDs residing in Liberia (Ahaiwe, 2019). This shows that even though a greater number of the respondents are exposed to media platforms, they still do not utilize these platforms for business advertisement. Advertising

significantly influences consumer buying habits, and herbal firms should prioritize effective methods like radio, television, outdoor, newspaper, and social media to gain market dominance and build consumer awareness, which is one knowledge that most HMDs in the study area might not be aware of. This finding is contrary to a study done in Ghana, which suggests that most HMDs advertise HPs daily by (Ahaiwe, 2019).

Furthermore, among the minority who advertise, a greater number of them ascertain that their sales improve after every media advertisement and will wish to continue to advertise their HPs on the media and this is in line with Shahab et al. (2021) study on the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which suggests that media utilization for advertisement can influence consumers by providing them with relevant and persuasive information that can lead to attitude change and purchase intentions. This proves that the practice of HM can be improved if HMDs in Liberia prioritize media advertising as part of their business strategy for brand visibility and increased income.

Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High cost of advertisement	11	15.7
Fear of victimization of HMDs	3	4.3
Govt. restriction due to incomplete accreditation	11	15.7
Ignorance about media advertising	19	27.1
Nothing	26	37.1
Total	70	100

Source: Research field data (2023)

Considering the HMDs' reasons for not engaging in media advertisement, 11 HMDs (representing 15.7% of the respondents) do not advertise because of the high cost of advertisement, 26 HMDs (37.1%) stated that there is no particular reason for which they do not advertise their products, 19 HMDs (27.1%) expressed that ignorance is their reason for not having been advertising, 3 HMDs (4.3%) do not advertise due to the negative reaction of the public about anything herbal and 11 HMDs (15.7%) do not advertise due to government's restriction of their advertisement because they have not been accredited to do so (Table 3).

According to the common reasons why 95.4% of the HMDs do not advertise (Table 3), these themes were more common amongst the responses: cost of advertisement, negative reaction of the public about anything herbal, hindered access to media houses and their representatives, while the majority has no reason in particular except for the fact that they have never thought of advertising their herbal medicine business. These findings show that the high cost of advertisement is one key reason why HMDs do not advertise their products in the media, negative reaction from the public about anything herbal was also noted by the respondents as part of the reasons why some HMDs do not advertise their businesses in the media, and a contributing factor to this could be the fact that most potential consumers are not knowledgeable about the facts regarding HP, so they consider the myths told by others. The respondents also expressed that their discouragement about advertising was partly due to their 'unregistered' status with certain bodies who have been authorized by the government to accredit each of them as professionals in that field.

This study correlates with a study carried out in, which agreed that the cost of advertising discourages some HMDs from advertising their products, which in turn leads to low patronage of HP (even though, after every media advertisement, there is increase in sales) (Aziato and Antwi, 2016). Furthermore, discovered that 69% of the patronages that HMDs receive in Ghana is often after they might have engaged in media advertisement (Ogidi and Emaikwu, 2023). According to the majority of the respondents in this study, the media portrays herbal medicine both positively and negatively depending on the circumstances.

Based on the results gathered from the study, the HMDs are more exposed to the radio than any other media platform, such as television, newspapers, and social media. However, the majority of them have not been utilizing the various media platforms at their disposal for brand visibility and increased impact on sales. Even though positive media portrayal of HM is important, it is not enough to promote the practice of HP or increase sales. It is very key for HMDs in Liberia to make use of the media as an advertisement tool to promote their products, increase sales, and improve income. Other studies concur with the findings from this

study that HMDs are exposed to media platforms, while some studies contradict this finding that HMDs in other countries are deeply engaged with media advertisement.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the advantages of trading in herbal medicine needs be further exposed to the younger generation in the study area, for the sake of sustainability and prevention of the extinction of the profession. HMDs should be encouraged with incentives, formal herbal medicine trainings and other professional supports which may come from either the government or NGOs who are involved in related issues. In addition to this, there is need for MOH to create awareness on the importance of herbal medicine in the area, to reduce ignorance among citizens and attempt to curb victimization against HMDs.

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