

Media Exposure and Advertising Practices Among Herbal Medicine Dealers (HMDs) in Liberia

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Abstract

Background: Herbal medicine dealers (HMDs) play a significant role in the promotion and distribution of traditional remedies. However, their advertising practices and the impact of media exposure on their business growth and standard of living remain underexplored. **Objective:** This study aims to examine the advertising practices of HMDs and assess how these practices contribute to their business growth and overall standard of living, with particular focus on the use of various media channels. **Methods:** A quantitative survey design was employed using a structured questionnaire to collect data from 70 HMDs. The participants included 28 recognized Herbal Medicine Practitioners from the Complementary Medicine Unit of the Ministry of Health and 42 Herbal Product Vendors across seven major markets in the study area. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was assured. **Results:** Findings revealed that 80% (56) of HMDs were exposed to radio, 20% (14) to social media platforms, while 6% reported no media exposure. Among those exposed to media, only 5.4% (3) engaged in media advertising, whereas 94.6% (53) did not, likely due to limited understanding of the potential benefits of media promotion for business growth. **Conclusion:** The study highlights a gap in the utilization of media advertising among HMDs. By incorporating media-based promotional strategies, HMDs can enhance their business visibility, increase sales, and improve their standard of living. The findings provide valuable insights for stakeholders and policymakers to support sustainable growth in the herbal medicine sector.

Keywords: Advertisement, communication, herbal medicine, Liberia, media exposure

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).^[1] 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 signs 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).^[2]

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 (Parce *et al.* 2009).^[3] 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).^[4] 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

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for a significant period. 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 by Jamil *et al.* (2022)^[5] 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).^[4] 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).^[6] 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 the sociocultural 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 into 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.

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 the West African

nation Liberia containing its national capital Monrovia, bordered by Bomi County to the west, Bong County to the north, Margibi County to the east and to the south by the Atlantic Coast. It has a square mile of 738.5 making it the smallest county in the country by landmass. As of the 2022 census report, it has a population of 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 seven 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.^[7] Curry (1984), states that if the population is <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. The researcher should have collected data from the entire targeted population of 81 HMDs but due to official bottlenecks and refusal of some HMDs to participate, the researcher could not get responses from all the targeted persons.

Therefore; the study population is 70 HMDs which includes 28 HMPs and 42 HPVs and 70 of 81 equals 86.4% of the population thus making this research population appropriate for the study. The total population of this study is 70 HMDs, consisting of 28 HMPs who are registered with the Complementary Medicine Unit of MOH and reside within the urban regions of Montserrado, as well as 42 HPVs located in 7 major markets in the study area. 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 HMPs, 5 part-time HMPs, 40 full-time HPVs and 2 part-time HPVs. Among the HMDs there were 18 males and 52 females. Participants were approached, and their consent to participate was obtained.

Table 1: Respondent's socio-demographic data

	Frequency	Percentage%		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender			Level of Education		
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
Age Range			High school graduate	16	22.9
18-30 yrs	6	8.6	Ordinary Diploma	12	2.9
31-45 yrs	19	27.1	B.Sc.	3	4.3
46-55 yrs	21	30	B.Sc. Student	1	1.4
55 yrs above	24	34.3	Total	70	100
Total	70	100	Nationality		
			Ghana	1	1.4
			Nigeria	10	14.3
			Liberia	59	84.3
			Total	70	100

Source: Research field data (2023)

Table 2: HMDs media exposure level and advertising practices

	Frequency	Percentage%		Frequency	Percentage%
Exposed to Media platforms			Media platforms exposed to		
Yes	56	80%	Radio only	37	52.8
No	14	20%	Radio & Social media	17	24.3
Total	70	100	Social media only	2	2.9
			None	14	20
			Total	70	100
Social Media platforms exposure			Media access rate		
Facebook & WhatsApp	5	7.1	Everyday	27	48.2
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
Advertisement through media			Advertisement rate of advertising HMDs		
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			Advert impact on sales		
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). HMDs: Herbal medicine dealers

Table 3: Respondents reasons for not advertising

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).

The quantitative survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistical procedures presented in tables [Tables 1-3].

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data in Table 1 indicates that of the total n-70 respondents, 25.70% were men and 74.34% were women. Meaning majority of HMDs in urban Montserrado County were women but based on categories, there are more males who are HMPs than females because most of the male respondents in the study area claimed to have gotten the knowledge from their fathers, and there are more females who are HPVs than males. One reason for this is that most of the females in the study area ascertained that they saw and aided their mothers in selling these products in their local markets. This finding concurs with a study done by Asemah and Obukoadata (2021)^[8] in Nigeria, which states that there are more females involved with the sales of HPs for the treatment of various illnesses than males, and most of the HMDs also got their knowledge from their parents.

The ages of the respondents range from 18 to 55 years old. With 34.3% being 55 years and older. Meaning there are more

elderly people into the practice of HM than younger people. The educational status of both male and female respondents was very low, 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; BSC 4.3%; and BSC Candidate 1.4%. However, the percentage of males with a college education was higher when compared with the female respondents (4.3% to 0.0%). This could be based on the fact that majority of the them were of the older population and at the time there was limited access to formal education when compared to now. The research finding based on distribution of nationalities states that there were three different nationalities among the respondents, there was 1 Ghanian amounting to 1.4%; 10 Nigerians amounting to 14.3%; and 59 Liberians amounting to 84.3%.

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 more respondents use radio than any other media platform.

Of the total n-70 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% do not use social media platforms at all. Meaning 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 <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 there are a greater number of respondents who do not practice media advertising. 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% stated that they will want to continue to advertise, while 1 respondent representing 33.4% is 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 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 and as for the newspaper, it is mostly centralized meaning one might likely find a newspaper to buy in Central Monrovia only, thirdly the majority of the HMDs are older and might not be exposed to education, therefore, they cannot read a newspaper making radio the only means of accessing information and entertainment. This finding is similar to a study done by Rajagopal (2010)^[9] in Nigeria which states that radio is a widely used media platform among HMDs and most of the HP consumers are illiterates therefore HMPs do not advertise through newspapers instead they use the radio and television as advertisement tools in Nigeria.

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, which is state-owned, and Truth FM, which is a private media institution but has wide media coverage across Liberia even though the study did not consider why the respondents preferred these two radio stations for entertainment or news, but trust in the radio station or wider coverage could be a contributing factor to why these two are widely used among HMDs in the study area. This finding is also in correlation with a study done by Awunyo-Victor *et al.* (2013)^[10] in Liberia, which states that ELBC and Truth FM are the most widely used radio stations across various counties in Liberia. Another key finding this research gathered is that among the HMDs who prioritize listening to radio as a source of information and entertainment, the majority of them do not utilize those radio platforms as advertisement tools for their businesses, which might be a reason why most of their businesses are not visible enough to the general public. A reason for this could be that they might not have much idea about the power of the media on business growth and sales unlike the USA, Europe, Ghana and Nigeria, where those HMDs have very good brand visibility due to media advertisement thus leading to a very good standard of living. This finding is contrary to a study done by Kitchen, 2014 in Ghana, which found that most HMDs found the radio as a perfect advertisement tool with the aim of improving sales of their HPs, which makes them visible and financially buoyant.

This research also found out that among the respondents who are exposed to media platforms, the 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 the 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 by Kretchy *et al.* (2021)^[11] in Ghana, which states that the majority of the population uses the media as a daily source of information and entertainment. 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 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 sociocultural background since the three HMDs who advertise are educated with one having a BSC, the other is a BSC 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).^[12] 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 such as 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 by Ahaiwe, (2019)^[12] in Ghana, which suggests that most HMDs advertise HPs daily.

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)^[13] 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.

Accessing 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 representing 37.1% stated that there is no particular reason for which they do not advertise their products, 19 HMDs representing 27.1% stated that there is no particular reason for which they do not advertise except that they have never given it a thought, 3 HMDs representing 4.3% do not advertise due to the negative reaction of the public about anything herbal and 11 HMDs representing 15.7% do not advertise due to MOH restriction of their advertisement of HP.

According to the common reasons why 95.4% of the HMDs do not advertise [Table 3], these themes were more common among the responses: cost of advertisement, negative reaction of the public about anything herbal, hindered access to media houses and their representatives, the CHD of MOH restricted their advertisement of HP, 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 said that they get discouraged about advertising because the CMD, which is the governing body for HMDs, told them not to advertise their businesses until the MOH could authenticate their specialty in handling ailments and they are yet to be told when.

This is a serious official bottleneck for HMD business when it comes to media advertisement, meaning that as long as the CMD does not authenticate exactly what aspect of HM-related cases they can properly heal, they will have to continue doing their business without media promotion. This study correlates with a study done in Ghana by Aziato and Antwi (2016),^[14] which states 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. Infect, 69% of the patronage HMDs in Ghana receive is after a media advertisement (Ogidi, 2023)^[15] According to the majority of the respondents, the media portrays herbal medicine both positively and negatively depending on the circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results gathered from the study, 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.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study's conception and design. Manuscript preparation, interpretation, data collation and analysis were performed by Christina F. Blama-Hessou, Adeyinka O. Adepoju, and Abraham J. Wennah. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Christina F. Blama-Hessou and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors have read through and approved the final manuscript.

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Data availability and sharing policy

Data used for this study was directly gathered by the authors. The authors wish to state that the data may be utilized freely

for academic purposes only, with appropriate reference stated each time of reference. For other cases of usage, kindly obtain written permission from the corresponding author.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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