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INFORMATION ASYMMETRY: MEDIATOR BETWEEN PROMOTIONS AND USAGE OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE IN CENTRAL UGANDA

Nabachwa Sarah
Mbarara University of Science and Technology
P.O Box 1410, Mbarara, Uganda

Kamukama Nixon
Mbarara University of Science and Technology
P.O Box 1410, Mbarara, Uganda

Owino Odhiambo Joseph
University of Nairobi
P.O. Box 30197, 00100 Nairobi, Kenya

Nsambu Kijjambu Fredrick
Mbarara University of Science and Technology
P O Box 1410, Mbarara, Uganda

ABSTRACT: *There has been an overwhelming usage for traditional medicine (TM) in the recent times despite several developments in modern medicine. The increased demand is attributable to a number of factors among which is the aggressive promotions from the Traditional Health Practitioners (THPs). The TM promotions are however, suspected to be incomplete, inconsistent and inadequate which could explain the increased TM usage but the empirical evidence is limited. The study therefore set out to empirically test the mediating effect of information asymmetry on the relationship between promotions and consumer usage behavior of TM. A sample size of 369 participants was determined using Crochran's formula, and a structured questionnaire was administered using a face-to-face approach. SPSS Statistics 20 was used to run the preliminary analysis while SPSS AMOS 23 was used to test for mediation using bootstrapping. The results showed that information asymmetry is a significant partial mediator in the relationship between promotions and consumer usage behavior of TM users. In conclusion therefore, the study provides empirical evidence of the role of information asymmetries and their effect on TM usage. The findings should aid policymakers in their understanding of the influence of TM promotions and information asymmetry on the majority Ugandans, hence guide the formulation of laws and policies on TM promotions. The main study limitation was the cross-sectional approach used; hence a longitudinal approach should be explored to examine this mediation effect across time. There is also need to understand information asymmetry from the THPs' perspectives.*

KEYWORDS: information asymmetry, promotions, consumer usage behavior, traditional medicine, traditional health practitioners.

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional Medicine (TM) usage was expected to have diminished with the coming of modernity (Ndhlala et al., 2011) and with the expansion of modern medicine (Leonard, 2003). Instead, its usage has grown at an unprecedented rate both locally and globally as evidenced by the multitude of people using it (Lotfia et al., 2016; National Chemotherapeutic Research Institute 'NCRI', 2018). The trend has not only seen more educated, more religious or even younger urban dwellers continuously employ the services of THPs (Ndhlala et al., 2011), but has also seen more medical professionals integrating TM modalities into their practices (Stirling, 2004). In fact some health professionals often refer their patients to consult with Traditional Health Practitioners (THPs) for certain types of illnesses (Dania, 2011).

No wonder, the trend has seen an influx of THPs joining the trade, (Omoera et al., 2011) professing to be very knowledgeable in TM matters (Adegoju, 2008). This THP influx has in turn intensified competition in the TM market and has brought forth fierce promotions. It is however, suspected that most TM promotions are deceptive and exaggerated; in which THPs overstate their skills in order to take advantage of the patients' desperations and ignorance (Omoera et al., 2011). Unfortunately, TM promotions are barely constrained by law in Uganda and majority of THPs advertise, without seeking approval from the Uganda National Drug Authority 'NDA'. Moreover, the diseases that THPs promote are those specially prohibited for promotion by the authority (NDA policy and authority act, chapter 206).

Numerous articles on TM have been on motivations for consulting THPs (Sirois, 2007; Lotfia et al., 2016); its modernization (Marsland, 2007); its efficacy (Tabuti et al., 2012) and its preparation (Mafimisebi & Oguntade, 2010) but very little on its promotion. Studies specific to TM promotions have concentrated on among others; the rhetorical strategies employed in TM advertising (Adegoju, 2008) and the people's perceptions of TV/radio TM adverts (Omoera et al., 2011). It is however, necessary to take into account the role of the incomplete, inadequate and inconsistent TM information therein 'information asymmetry' to better explain the overly grown TM fame hence usage. Thus, the study empirically tested the mediating effect of information asymmetry on the relationship between promotions and consumer usage of TM which consequently has implications on drug laws and policy formulations in Uganda.

LITERATURE REVIEW

TM promotions like advertisements (on TV/Radio, Newspapers and posters), sales promotions (price reductions, gifts and free trials), public relations (media tours/relations, sponsorships) and personal selling (on streets, Buses, burial grounds etc.), have become a common means which THPs use to communicate the TM attributes to potential consumers in Uganda. However, promotion of any medicine is often associated with quackery (Burton, 1991) and is known to rely on information asymmetry (McLaren, 1999). The extent of information asymmetry varies with product/service characteristics which can be categorized in relation to experience; credence, and search (Wells, Valacich and Hess, 2011).

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Goods and services where an expert knows more about what a consumer needs than the consumer does (in this case traditional medicine) are called credence goods (Cromwick, Root and Roehrig, 2007). In essence, credence products are more prone to information asymmetries because of the intangible attributes that consumers may not evaluate even after their purchase and consumption (Nayyar, 1993). There is often pre-purchase information scarcity for these products in which the consumer is incapacitated to access or interpret the product's quality attributes prior to making a purchase (Wells, Valacich and Hess, 2011). These asymmetries particularly persist in healthcare partially because of the health system idiosyncrasy; which often relates to the user's inability to accurately assess the need for care (Wang et al., 2011). They thus become fundamental barriers to rational and informed choices (Liberati and Magrini, 2003), as those that lack the information (patients) are often bound to make worse decisions than those that have it (health providers).

Asymmetries in information between THPs and TM consumers will almost certainly emerge because of the wide variations of TM attributes, the scarcity of information concerning its production techniques and the ignorance of most TM consumers. It can thus be assumed that most THPs (especially those deemed charlatans) often exploit the informational asymmetry by inducing demand hence take advantage of desperate patients. Feucht & Patel (2011) argued that CAM/TM providers hardly disclose any known, suspected, unknown, short-term and long-term health implications related to the usage of their therapies. Additionally, Omoera et al., (2011), concluded that THPs do not properly assess their clients' ailments before prescription or treatment.

Usually, the party with more knowledge about the transaction (in this case the THP) may continuously manipulate even the little information available in order to hold on to the upper hand in the transaction (Lightfoot and Wisniewski, 2014). Consequently for healthcare, the health providers may withhold or conceal some vital information or at times may not collect and communicate clinical information to specify what would constitute appropriate provision for the need of care relative to patients (Wang et al., 2011). So, these asymmetries are all over the healthcare markets, particularly those characterized by high levels of uncertainty (Haas-Wilson, 2001).

So, under conditions of the uncertainty in which information search is scarce and costly, the uninformed patients (who have no means to differentiate health service quality) have to rely on delegating health services to healthcare providers as their (imperfect) agents (Wang et al., 2011). Uncertainty in this case, will/can lead to the use of social information; which means that consumers will look at other people to get an indication of the best outcome (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2004**).** Often, patients will seek the information-enhancing instrument such as advertising to help fill in the missing information (Love & Stephen, 1996).

Advertising or promotion of any form is often viewed as an important information purveyor, which contributes to marketplace efficiencies (Belch and Belch, 2009). However, promotions of medicine have always been contentious particularly in conventional medicine. Proponents argue that medicine promotions especially advertising are a major source of patient information, raises awareness about diseases, educates consumers, and ultimately improves healthcare outcomes (Hasman & Holm, 2006; Suh et al., 2011).

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Critics however, argue that medicine promotions are detractors that not only lead patients to seek unnecessary treatments, which usually results from consumers misinterpreting the limited information presented in the advertisements (Grenard et al., 2011), but are often vague, irritating, deceptive and downplays product risks while overstating product benefits (Woloshin et al., 2001; Herzenstein, 2005).

In the context of TM, Adegoju (2008) postulates that with these rampant TM promotions all-over the media coupled with the potentially conflicting information provided by THPs and the stiff competition in the TM market; one cannot help but worry about the accuracy and quality of the information in these ads. Adegoju points to several propaganda techniques such as bandwagon, testimonials, assertion, euphoria, and narration, among others which are usually employed in these promotions. Certainly these highly unbalanced TM marketing and promotional activities raise fears that many TM users could be lured into taking TM instead of going to hospitals for better diagnosis and treatment (Masaba, 2014).

Owing to this background, it is arguably patent to note that promotions could be fuelling information asymmetries which could in effect lead to usage behaviour. The theoretical assertions also point to information asymmetry as a conduit between promotions and usage behaviour (Adegoju, 2008; Omoera et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2011), yet the phenomena has not been empirically tested particularly in the context of traditional medicine. Nonetheless, the investigation on information asymmetry as a mediator between promotions and usage behaviour is important to TM consumers, THPs, policymakers and other interested parties since it deepens their understanding of the overwhelming demand for TM and the likely consequences.

Testing for mediation is always crucial in any study; as studies that fail to consider the possibility of mediator effects in their data may miss more explanations for the outcomes (Bennet, 2000). Similarly, a relationship study that does not address the mediating mechanism ends up with facts, although with an incomplete understanding (Rosenberg, 1968).This study therefore should aid policymakers in their understanding of the influence of information asymmetry regarding TM on the majority Ugandans hence support their decisions on regulations regarding these promotions.

METHODOLOGY

Study population

The population for TM users in Uganda is estimated at 60% (De Coninck, 2016; NCRI, 2018). The study focused on adult TM users who buy TM from THP clinics or had bought TM in the past 12 months within Central Uganda.

Study site

Participants were selected from Central Uganda (Mpigi, Kampala, Wakiso, Mukono, Luwero). Central Uganda is a cosmopolitan region which not only has all kinds of Ugandans, and is the business herb of the country. However, most importantly, Central Uganda has more media houses which THPs use to promote their businesses (Uganda Communication Commission, 2016). This means media consumption including; the listen-ship, viewer-ship and reader-ship of the various TM communications is concentrated in Central Uganda. The unit of inquiry was the TM users and

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they (TM users) were the unit of analysis. From the 26 districts that make up Central Uganda, these districts were particularly selected because of their closeness to the capital city, Kampala.

Study design

A cross sectional quantitative survey from the months of September 2018 to November 2018 was carried out.

Sample size

A sample size of 369 participants was determined using Crochran's formula for determining a sample from unknown populations and the proportion in the population was taken at 60%.

$$n_0 = \frac{Z^2 pq}{e^2}$$

Sampling techniques

We worked with the National Council for Traditional Healers and Herbalists' Association (NACOTHA), who were charged with profiling and registering all THPs in Uganda. The NACOTHA exercise however was still ongoing at the time of our data collection and we could not be availed the THPs' lists. Nonetheless, NACOTHA helped us construct our sampling frame and non-probabilistic sampling techniques were used to recruit the participants. We were introduced to different Community Development Officers (CDOs) in the selected districts that had particularly worked with NACOTHA in registering the THPs.

The CDOs introduced us to herbalists particularly those renowned for their large clientele. Majority of the THPs were contacted through their mobile phones and we scheduled appointments with them. In each district except for Kampala, 5 THP clinics were visited and at each THP's clinic, at least 10 participants were recruited as they came to buy medicines from the clinic. Because Kampala had the highest concentration of THPs, more THPs' clinics were visited (10). Some Clinics had fewer patients on the specific days of the data collection, so we often requested the THPs to direct us to their clients' homes in their neighbourhoods (snowballing).

Data collection techniques

A structured questionnaire was administered using a face-to-face approach. The questionnaire was a five-point likert scale with altered anchors ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree) and from 5(very likely) to 1 (not likely at all). It was also divided into sections to capture the demographics, promotions, information asymmetry, and usage behaviors of TM users.

Inclusion criteria

To participate in the study, one must have come to buy TM or should have used TM in the past 12 months (for those recruited through snowballing). They should have had a radio and/or Television and they should have heard /seen a TM promotion. The TM promotions should have been an advert (messages, posters etc.), a sales promotion (price-reduction), a public relation program (media

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relations) and personal selling (on buses, on the streets, burial grounds etc.). The participant had to be of a sound mind.

Operationalization of the variables

The independent variable was promotions; the mediating variable was information asymmetry and consumer usage behaviour was the dependent variable. Promotions was measured using the perceived promotional credibility adopted from Gaziano and McGrath (1986) while consumer usage behavioral intentions were measured using items adapted from Friedman and Gould (2007); Baumgartner and Steenkamp (1996) and Bearden & Netemeyer's handbook of marketing scales (1999). The researchers modified these items to suit the study context; as majority had been applied on search and experience products and in developed countries. Information asymmetry on the other hand was measured by evaluating the quality of information in the TM promotions and was developed by the researchers with the guidance of Wang et al., (2011).

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Faculty of Business and Management Sciences and the University Research Ethics Committee, Mbarara University of Science and Technology. Further approval was got from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology and from NACOTHA. NACOTHA introduced the researchers to the different district CDOs who in turn introduced us to the various THPs. A written consent was obtained from each participant before administering the questionnaire.

Data analysis and management

SPSS Statistics version 20 was used to clean and edit the data and to run the preliminary analysis while SPSS AMOS version 23 was used to test for mediation using bootstrapping. Thorough checking for missing data and outliers (using minimum and maximum frequency counts) was done to establish whether data was correctly entered, or that there was no missing information and that it was useable, reliable, and valid for further analysis. From the 369 observations, data for 367 respondents was used as 2 became unusable after editing. All items that had a reverse interpretation as intended compared to the reset of the items on the measure such as Information Asymmetry were reverse coded.

Parametric tests such as; normality of the distribution of the data, linearity, multi-Collinearity and homogeneity of variance were carried out. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed to identify patterns in data and to reduce it to manageable levels (field, 2009). The analysis produced two factors for information asymmetry (*relevance and volume*), four factors for promotions (*advertising, sales promotions, public relation and personal selling*) and two for consumer usage behavior (*information search and repetitive proneness*). This accounted for 62.582%, 91.71% and 67.156% of variance and the KMO for all variables was above .80 which was very good according to Lowry and Gaskin (2014).

These data structures were further confirmed using the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) as seen in table 1. The researchers specified separate measurement models for promotions, information asymmetry and consumer usage behaviours, and the CFA results were calculated using AMOS basing on the following fit indices (Hair et al., 2010): GFI ≥0.95, AGFI ≥0.90, RMSEA≤ 0.05-

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0.08, NFI ≥.95, TLI≥ .95, CFI ≥ .95, CMIN/df or Chi-Square<3; <5. The CFA saw a few items from promotions (2), information asymmetry (3) and consumer usage behavior (6) being deleted from the models in order to obtain more parsimonious models.

Table 1: Summary of Measurement Model Results

Variable	CMIN	DF	PCLOSE	CMIN/ DF	GFI	AGFI	NFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	AVE
			≥.05	**<3**	**≥.95**	**≥.90**	**≥.95**	**≥.95**	**≥.95**	**≤.08**	**≥.5**
Promotions	125.59	71	.686	1.769	.954	.932	.982	.990	.992	.046	0.89
Information Asymmetry	13.545	8	.555	1.693	.988	.968	.983	.987	.993	.044	0.51
Consumer usage Behaviors	50.632	19	.093	2.665	.966	.935	.979	.981	.987	.067	0.64

Source: AMOS

The CFA output in table 1 show that the P-close for all the variables was non-significant, the Root Mean Square of Approximation was all below 0.08, which indicated measurement model fit of the data (Hair et al., 2010). The absolute and incremental fit indices that were represented by the Goodness of fit Index, the Adjusted Goodness of fit Index, Comparative fit Index, Tucker Lewis Index and Normed Fit Index was all above the recommended thresholds by Hair et al. (2010) . The results indicated that the measurement models for all the variables fit the hypothesized models and the observed data as recommended by Hu & Bentler (1999).

RESULTS

Sample characteristics

57.5% of the respondents were female, 74.9% had not obtained any university degree or diploma and majority (84.7%) had used TM for five or more years. 94.6% of the respondents admitted to being exposed to more than two TM promotions on a daily basis which is evidence of the overwhelming promotions on the various media platforms.

Correlation and regression analysis

The results generated in SPSS statistics indicate that TM promotion is positively and significantly correlated with consumer usage behaviour, (r=.607, p≤.01) however, negatively correlated with the mediating variable of information asymmetry (r=-.526, p≤.01). Likewise information asymmetry was negative and significantly correlated with consumer usage behaviours (r=-.436, p≤.01).

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Testing for mediation

We performed a mediation test using bootstrapping in AMOS as seen in figure 1 and in tables 2 and 3, using Preacher and Hayes' (2014) indirect SPSS macro. The bootstrap estimates used were based on 2,000 bootstrap samples, with a 95 percent BC confidence intervals.

Table 2: Mediation effect of information asymmetry

Standardized Total Effects	**Promotion**	**Info. Asymmetry**
Information asymmetry	-.526**	.000
Consumer Usage behavior	.607**	-.161*
Standardized Direct Effects		
Information asymmetry	-.526**	.000
Consumer Usage behavior	.522**	-.161 *
Standardized Indirect Effects		
Information asymmetry	.000	.000
Consumer Usage behavior	.085*	.000

Source: AMOS

Table 3: Bootstrap Mediation results of Model

Path	**Point estimate**	**S.E**	**Lower bound**	**Upper bound**	**P**
Consumer behavior <--- promotions	.085	.036	.039	.138	.001

Source: AMOS

Table 2 proves the four conditions for mediation as recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, there is an effect to be mediated (β=.607, $p<0.01$). Second, there is a significant relationship between promotion and the mediator (β=-.526, $p<0.01$), and third, the coefficient of the mediator (information asymmetry) (-.161, $p<0.05$) with both promotion and consumer usage behavior as predictors was significant. Finally, the absolute indirect effect of promotion on consumer usage behavior is less (β=.522) than before the mediator was introduced in the model (β=.607).

The results therefore reveal that an association between the independent variable (promotions) and the dependent variable (consumer usage behavior) has been reduced (.607 to .522) by the inclusion of the mediating variable (information asymmetry). The mediation type was partial because whereas the correlation between the independent and the dependent variables was reduced, it remained statistically significant.

Lastly, the ratio index of 14% given by (0.085/0.607*100) implies that 14% of the effect of promotions on consumer usage of TM goes through information asymmetry and about 86% of the effect is direct or goes through other variables.

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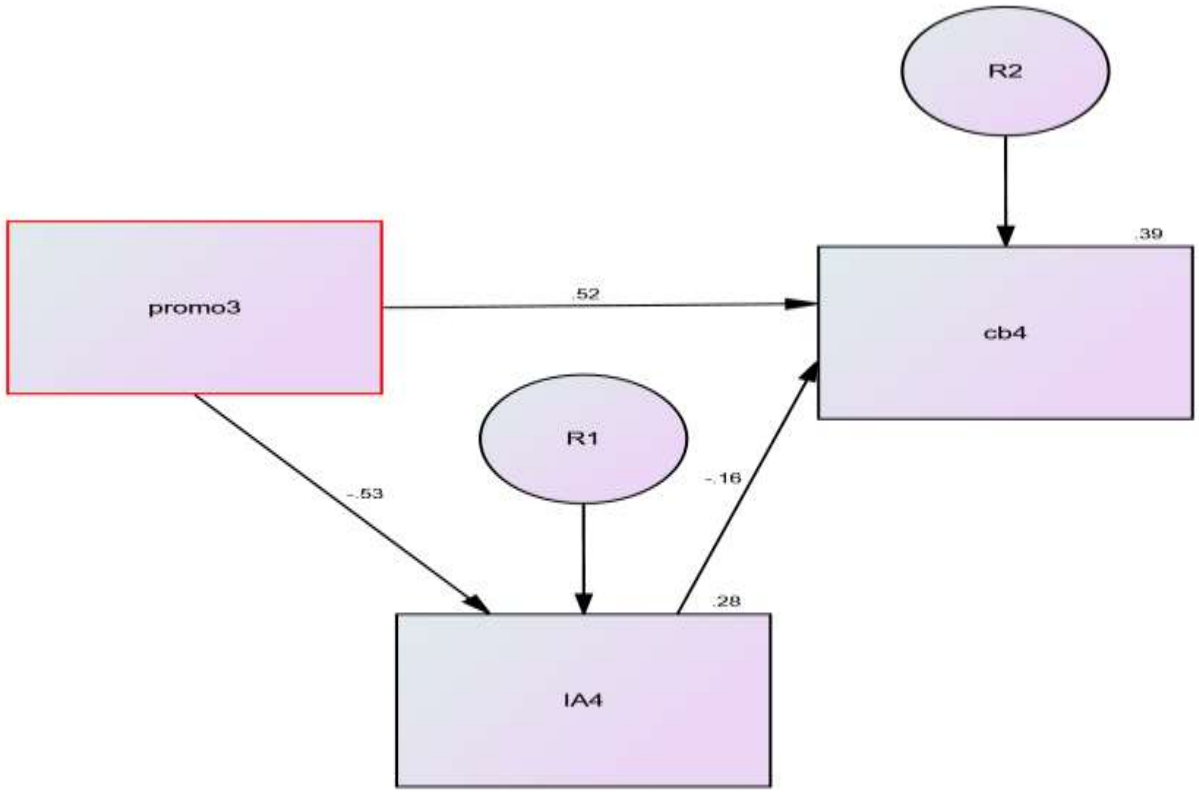

Figure 1: Path diagram

DISCUSSIONS

Undoubtedly, TM usage in Uganda will certainly continue to increase. It is therefore, imperative that TM consumers, THPs and policymakers have a complete understanding of the information asymmetries that underlay this market; especially its mediating effect on promotions and consumers' usage behaviour. The bootstrap results indicated that the partial mediating effect of information asymmetry on the relationship between promotions and consumer usage behaviours satisfied the conditions of mediation as pointed out by Baron and Kenny (1986). The results imply that the specific mechanism or pathway by which the relationship between promotions and consumer usage behaviours occurs is direct, although information asymmetry takes away part of the contribution. Central to these findings, a ratio index of 14 percent signifies that information asymmetry partly augments the relationship between promotions and consumer usage behaviours.

The results mean that as THPs communicate and share information with their prospective TM users through promotions, they tend to manipulate the information or at times withhold important

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information. Interestingly, this tends to get TM users to instead increase usage of TM. In other words, the less information the TM consumers are exposed to, the more likely they are to use or buy traditional medicine. Many THPs (whose trade was passed on down the generations), ignorantly share false information such as; TM has no toxicity, which gets many TM users to prefer it to convention medicine. This in part, can be attributed to the consumers' reluctance to adequately verify the information they hear from the promoting THPs, and the consumers' illiteracy levels which make them naive in judging between truthful and untruthful THPs.

The study established that TM hardly contains expiry dates (55.1%) and majority has no proper dosage labels (70.3%) on the containers. Over 80% TM lacks government seals or stamps from regulatory bodies like National drug authority (NDA) or Uganda national bureau of standards (UNBS). This implies that anyone can make any concoction from anything and put it to market without being subjected to any clinical trials. Additionally, 79.2% of TM users disagreed to having heard any promoting THPs talk about TM side effects. This gets many TM users to develop a belief system that TM is very natural, fresh with no toxins. This result is in support of Feucht and Patel's (2011) study, who concluded that CAM/TM providers hardly disclose any information related to their therapies.

The study determined that 52.6% of the THPs never deliver on their promises as seen/heard in the media and over 75% of TM users cannot easily verify the TM information they hear from TM promotions. The finding implies that the TM users have no choice but to instead just trust that whatever service the THP will be delivering will be truthful. In most cases, TM patients move from one THP to another in search of honest THPs. However, finding truthful THPs is not always easy, as most THPs portray themselves as very knowledgeable and have mastered the art of communication which is very appealing to the feelings, needs, and values of their listeners. However, Nayyar (1990) posits that information asymmetries often make buyers weary in trying to determine the right provider and often lead the bad-quality providers to lower prices hence causing the good-quality providers to be driven out of the market since they cannot obtain economic returns on their investments for competence.

The findings also revealed a negative but significant relationship between promotions and information asymmetry. This means that the information shared during the promotions, only increases the information asymmetry because it is often biased or manipulated. THPs overly exaggerated their abilities yet no or less risk information is shared. In reality, most Ugandan THPs have had their TM skills passed on from generation to generation and the TM businesses often run in specific families. So, many promoting THPs often brag of having inherited the art from their fore-fathers whose healing abilities were regarded extraordinary in their days. This, according to Adegoju (2008), is a case of rhetorical appeal of "hereditary endowment", where any trait that is inherited is generally believed to be more enduring than that which is learnt. This therefore implies that the current THPs, whose ancestors were TM gurus, but have not bothered to add to the knowledge/research that they inherited; will ignorantly continually to share wrong information. Unfortunately, majority of such THPs are perceived as more authentic than those that learnt the trade from institutions by majority TM users.

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CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Whenever TM is advertised or promoted using the various promotional strategies, the resultant behaviour of TM usage is often observed. However, there seem a lot of unobservable antecedents that have an effect on this relationship. In order to have a meaningful interpretation of the results in the relationships between study variables, it is always vital to assess the role of the third variable in that relationship (Kamukama & Natamba, 2013). In this regard the significance of information asymmetry on the association between promotions and consumer usage of TM should always be addressed by scholars, policy makers and practitioners if legitimate decisions are to be drawn. Understanding the TM market failures will not only help policy makers to craft appropriate corrective policies but will also enable THPs to intensify initiatives to encourage greater transparency and make clearer communications of at least the most critical information.

In summary, the potential for inconsistencies, inadequacies and incompleteness in promotions of traditional medicine is large. Thus, the rationale for public intervention on the grounds of information asymmetry arises in this particular market. In order to protect the public, Government has to ensure that consumers are exposed to fair and balanced TM information they need with respect to their illnesses, side effects and available treatments. For instance, public agencies like ministry of health and the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) can be charged with public service advertisements in which they pass warnings to the public about certain THPs that are deemed deceptive. They should also be charged with regulation of the advertising content or prohibit advertising that is unbalanced. Additionally, there should be minimum quality standards for all traditional health practitioners, short of which, a THP should not be certified or should be banned from marketing his/her services. Finally, the bill on traditional medicine that was passed this year (2019) should be enforced and the governing body should be empowered to develop a clear TM professional structure in Uganda.

Limitations and future research

Although this investigation provides useful insights for THPs, TM consumers, policymakers, and other interested parties, it has some limitations and also lends itself to additional research. First, it was a cross-sectional survey, so the researchers recommend that future research should be undertaken to examine the mediation effect across time. Secondly, all variables under investigation had a domestic emphasis, despite the growing importance of TM promotions, information asymmetries and TM usage globally. Thirdly, although the variable particularly information asymmetry (which was developed by the researcher) were defined as precisely as possible by drawing from relevant literature and validating them through a pilot study, they can realistically only be proxies for an underlying latent phenomenon that is itself not fully measurable. There is a need to study information asymmetry from the THPs' perspective; as it could be perceived differently.

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