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Factors That Influence Over-The-Counter (OTC) Medicines' Purchasing Decision

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Abstract:

The pharmaceutical industry in Egypt is rapidly growing and there are a lot of companies that compete in this market. The Egyptian Pharmaceutical market is considered among the largest markets in the Middle East & North African (MENA) Region and it had reached sales of more than 41 billion Egyptian Pounds in 2018 while, forecasted to reach more than 56 billion Egyptian Pounds in 2022 with compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 8%. The pharmaceutical market can be classified into Over-The-Counter (OTC) medicines and Prescription-Only Medicines (POM). OTC medicines' market is very competitive in Egypt and self-medication concept became prevalent among the Egyptian consumers and they became aware of different aspects in the medical and pharmaceutical sector due to the incremental usage of social media and internet sources so, it became a must for pharmaceutical companies with an OTC medicines portfolio to study well the consumers' behavior when purchasing this type of medicines so as to better formulate the marketing strategies that support their competitive place in the market.

This research explores the factors that can influence Egyptian consumers when purchasing OTC medicines from pharmacies and from the exploratory study, it was found that the main influences on consumers' purchasing decision of OTC medicines were the previous experience together with the recommendations from experts like pharmacists and family and friends' recommendations as well.

Keywords: OTC, purchasing behavior, consumer behavior, pharmaceutical market

1. Introduction

The pharmaceutical market in Egypt is growing and is termed by multinational pharmaceutical companies as an emerging market, also it is considered the fourth attractive pharmaceutical market in the African region. Many multinational pharmaceutical companies are aiming to extend their expansion and reach Egypt as an attractive market that is beside the national companies that are being established day after day making the Egyptian pharmaceutical market reaches more than 200 companies. The growing population in Egypt and their need for healthcare providers make it much more attractive for those companies to invest in the Egyptian pharmaceutical market.

The pharmaceutical market in general can be classified into brand drugs and generic drugs; the brand drugs are the drugs first produced with a new specific active ingredient and they are always subjected to patency while, the generic drugs are the drugs that are manufactured to be equivalent to the original/brand drug with the same active ingredient(s) after passing the patency period of the brand drug which would last up to 20 years in many countries.

Another classification of the pharmaceutical market is Over-The-Counter (OTC) medicines and Prescription-Only Medicines (POM). Over-The-Counter medicines are the medicines that don't need any prescription from a physician to be dispensed from a pharmacy/drugstore.

However, the prescription-only medicines as the name says always need a prescription from a physician to be dispensed from the pharmacy.

In many countries, Over-The-Counter medicines can be found in channels other than pharmacies/drug stores such as the retail channels or hypermarkets and also are found online via e-commerce websites whether general websites or a company-specific e-commerce website. However, this concept is still not well developed in the Egyptian market.

These are the general definitions for both OTC and POM medicines that are applied in many countries. On the contrary, the Egyptian pharmaceutical market is not following the same rule/definition as there are many drugs that should be dispensed by prescription, antibiotics as an example can be dispensed directly from the pharmacy before visiting a physician.

Over-The-Counter (OTC) medicines market in Egypt is not limited to cold and flu medicines nor analgesics/pain killers only but, it extends to include cough mixtures, bronchodilators, eye drops, antibiotics, anti-allergic medications, laxatives & anti-diarrheal.

The concept of self-medication is widely used among the Egyptian population as they always deal with minor symptoms and complains using over-the-counter medicines or the medicines, they find safe to use at home.

Generally speaking, the Egyptian consumers tend to decrease their costs and expenses and save their times and efforts so, they catch the opportunity of Over-The-Counter medicines to help them reach the above objectives of saving time and effort while decreasing their expenses. This is definitely not applied on any serious or major illnesses or health complains that need more investigations and require the diagnosis of a physician before using any medications especially when talking about high-risk people that include the elderly, people who have many health conditions and others.

For the above reasons, The OTC medicines market in Egypt show very strong and fierce competition between the pharmaceutical companies both multinational and national that have OTC medicines portfolio.

The consumers are deeply involved in the purchasing decision of the OTC medicines and it became a must for those pharmaceutical companies to further study the factors that influence the Egyptian consumers' when purchasing OTC medicines.

Definitely, the regulatory factors made it easier for different companies to enter the OTC medicines market in Egypt in contrast to other countries worldwide as well as made it easier for consumers to purchase OTC medicines every now and then without the need or necessity to visit healthcare professionals.

In regards to regulations in Egypt also, television, radio and billboards' advertising are allowed for over-the-counter medicines and other advertising media that permit the reach for a wider target audience which are referred to as direct-to-consumer advertising.

The purchasing decision of consumers generally are affected by four main factors which are cultural factors, social factors, personal factors, and psychological factors.

The cultural factors are not limited to the consumer's culture, and subculture but, they extend to reach the social class. The social factors are that factors that rely on the recommendations of others such as: family, friends, experts whom are called reference groups. The personal factors that affect the consumers' purchasing decision lie in the demographic classification of the consumers such as age, gender, lifecycle stage, occupation, economic situation, lifestyle, activities, interests, opinions, personality and self-concept. Eventually, the psychological factors include attitudes, beliefs, learning, perception, and motivation.

When it comes to the purchasing decision of Over-The-Counter medicines, cultural and psychological factors don't affect consumers when buying Over-The-Counter medicines specifically, while social factors may have an impact on the consumers when buying Over-The-Counter medicines as there are experts in this field which are represented by healthcare professionals; physicians and pharmacists.

Definitely, personal factors have a high impact on the consumers' purchasing decision of Over-The-Counter medicines.

2. Literature Review

The Literature review will discuss the definition and components of Over-The-Counter (OTC) medicines in addition to the consumer buying process including the purchasing decision concept definition and components as well. It will also discuss the relationship between those two variables mentioned in the literature before.

2.1. Over-The-Counter Medicines

Medicines in general are divided into two types; Over-The-Counter (OTC) & Prescription-Only Medicines (POM). Over-The-Counter (OTC) medicines are generally defined as all the medicines that don't need a prescription to be dispensed from a pharmacy. Also, we can find those medicines in other channels such as: Retail and Hypermarkets. They differ from the prescription-only medicines that need a prescription from a healthcare professional to be dispensed only from the pharmacy. (Habash & Al-Dmour, 2020, Cirstea, Teselios, and Iancu, 2017, Holecka *et al.*, 2012, Srivastava & Wagh, 2017)

OTC medicines are also the medicines that are allowed to be dispensed without prescription after passing a certain duration approving its safety for self-medication. (Guido, Pino and Frangipane, 2011)

OTC medicines are brought by consumers either by direct self-medication based on the consumer's decision or by seeking an advice from a healthcare professional. (Habash & Al-Dmour, 2020)

Self-medication is the expression used to describe when patients consume medicines without seeking the advice of a healthcare professional. (Yousef, Al-Bakri, Bustanji & Wazaify, 2007)

There are several reasons why patients prefer buying OTC medicines over prescription medicines such as: saving time and effort, decrease the financial burden and they feel it is more relevant especially when suffering from a very minor complaint they see don't need doctor's visit. (Habash & Al-Dmour, 2020)

As the competition became fierce between pharmaceutical companies who have an OTC Portfolio and the OTC sales revenue became very attractive to fight for, it became a must to study deeply the consumer behavior when purchasing OTC medicines in order to gain more market share in such a growing market. (Habash & Al-Dmour, 2020)

2.2. Consumer Buying Process

Kotler and Keller (2016) defined consumer behavior as *'the study of how individuals, groups, and organizations select, buy, use, and dispose of goods, services, ideas, or experiences to satisfy their needs and wants'*.

Consumer behavior in its definition relates any behavior showed by consumers when assessing, searching or buying a product or service they need. (Pujari *et al.*, 2016)

In the model of consumer behavior, the consumer buying process passes by many stages starting from problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, the purchasing decision and finally the post-purchase behavior.

2.2.1. Problem Recognition

The first stage of the consumer buying process is the problem recognition which starts by arising a need internally from the inside of the human himself or externally from the surrounding environment. Marketers have a role in defining these triggers or stimuli to further develop relevant marketing strategies.

2.2.2. Information Search

The next step is to collect information about the needed product/service and there are many sources to gather information either from previous experience, friends, relatives, experts, surfing the internet or even visiting shops/stores. Marketers' role is to know their target audience's valuable information and their most credible sources of information.

2.2.3. Evaluation of Alternatives

After collecting and gathering the information needed for a specific product/service, consumers start to compare and select from different alternatives and they start to exclude alternatives and include others in their evoked set. Consumers evaluate the alternatives based on several attributes according to the nature of the product and according to their priorities.

2.2.4. Purchase Decision

The phase of purchasing decision comes after evaluating all the alternatives but, there are some intervening factors that interfere between the consumer's purchasing intention and his/her purchasing decision. These factors are either the attitude of others or unexpected situational factors.

The attitude of others whether positive or negative influences the consumers when evaluating the alternatives and it also depends on who are the others, are they experts and trustworthy or not. The second factor which is the unexpected situational factors can be expressed as the risk or the perceived risk which have many types ranging from functional risk, monetary risk, physical risk to social risk, psychological risk, or time risk.

The final stage of the consumer buying process is the after-purchase behavior where the consumers show whether satisfaction or dissatisfaction for a specific product/service. If they are satisfied, this will help marketers use the word of mouth to build on and increase their brand equity while, on the other side, dissatisfaction of consumers will require much efforts from marketers to do a survey for product/service improvements and development. (Kotler and Keller, 2016)

There are several factors that influence such buying process and these factors can be classified into internal and external factors. The internal factors can be age, gender, culture, socio-economic and psychological factors. However, the external factors include product/service and environmental factors. (Ling and Yazdanifard, 2015)

In other classification, the factors that influence consumers' purchasing decision can be divided into Cultural factors, Social Factors, Personal Factors and Psychographic Factors. (Kotler and Keller, 2016, Pujari *et al*, 2016)

2.3. The Relationship between Over-The-Counter Medicines and Consumers' Purchasing Decision

In a survey conducted in India by Pujari *et al*., it was found that almost three quarters of the prescriptions are not dispensed and the World Health Organization (WHO) claimed that 50% of the patients who visit physicians for serious or major illnesses don't stick to the medicines written in the prescription.

It was found that consumers go for self-medication in reference to their families and friends' recommendations (others' experience or reference groups). Also, the advertisements made by the pharmaceutical companies help in their purchasing decisions. (Pujari *et al*, 2016)

In a descriptive research to analyze the factors that affect the consumers' purchasing decision toward OTC Medicines in India, Kathiravan *et al*. mentioned that own previous experience, advice of the pharmacist and the insert leaflets of the medicines, television advertisements and different promotional campaigns can all affect the OTC medicines purchasing decision.

After surveying 417 consumers with the majority of males and age of 31-45, it was found that the perceived value of information followed by the brand of OTC products and self-confidence were the most common factors that affect OTC medicines' purchasing behavior. The perceived value of information components was the own previous experience, family and friends' recommendations (others' experience), advertising & promotional materials spread by the company.

However, the components of the brand of OTC products were as follows: the brand name, the efficacy and the effectiveness of the OTC medicine itself, packaging of the product, its price and any sales promotion made for this product. The self-confidence can be included in the personal factors and was to include the confidence of specifying the issue/abnormal health condition, general knowledge about the ingredients of the OTC medicine, and finally the feeling of self-satisfaction whenever being self-medicated. (Kathiravan *et al*, 2019)

In a cross-sectional survey for the factors that influence and affect the consumers' purchasing decision for OTC medicines in Bangladesh, Shohel surveyed 100 OTC consumers and the results showed how the previous experience, the trust to the company of the OTC medicine itself, and the word of mouth affected the consumers' purchasing decision.

Also, the type of the OTC medicines was surveyed and it was found that mostly cold and flu medications, followed by painkillers or analgesics and vitamins were included as well.

The majority of the respondents declared that going to the doctor is unnecessary and self-medication is much more convenient in such health issues. (Shohel, 2013)

In an online questionnaire made for 183 students and 141 employed consumers in Romania to determine the factors that influence OTC purchase decision, the majority of the students revealed that the doctors' choice, own previous experience, and pharmacists' recommendation are the main factors that affect their purchasing decision of OTC medicines. While, the employed consumers differ from students in adding two more factors to the latter which are the OTC medicines' insert leaflet information and advertising and its quality and the information included. (Cirstea, Teselios, and Iancu, 2017)

In a field survey made by Tiwari (2016) to find out which advertising media has a high impact on the OTC Purchasing behavior in Nepal, it was observed that among the 128 respondents, the medical recommendations/advices constitute the highest influence on the purchase decision followed by family and friends' recommendations before reaching to advertising on different platforms.

In a study made in India, it was found that consumers are still seeking a doctor's suggestion before dispensing any OTC medication but, other people in rural areas found it easy to dispense OTC medicines because of some factors, such as money, easy access, convenience, and loyalty towards a specific brand. (SurajKusheShekhar, Tony P Jose &Rehin K R, 2019)

In 2012, a structured questionnaire was made for 1820 pharmacies' customers in Estonia to investigate the factors that influence the purchase of both OTC and prescription medicines. At first, the sales of both types of medicines were almost equivalent with a high percentage of cold and flu and analgesics being purchased.

The results were that the pharmacists' recommendations are the highest influential factor on consumers' purchasing decision of OTC medicines followed by doctors' recommendations, price and others' recommendations or experience and eventually the advertising factor. (Villako, Volmer, and Raal, 2012)

In another study made in India in 2017, a sample of 300 respondents was collected from different demographics (age, gender, religion and educational level) and different geographical locations. It was observed that influencers, (family and friends' recommendations and also doctors' and pharmacists' advices) reliability, awareness, image of the company and promotions were the main factors that influence OTC medicines' purchasing decision in three different cities in India. Price was also a significant factor in addition to pack size and availability were also found very significant. (Srivastava &Wagh, 2017)

Dadhich and Dixit in 2017 also made a study in Jaipur city in India with a sample of 100 consumers of age 18 to more than 50 years old to address their purchasing decision of OTC medicines. It was found that almost 5% to 7% use OTC medicines every day.

The most common medications bought for self-medication were headache and cold and flu remedies. 81% of the respondents have trust of the pharmacists' advices while the remaining 18% don't trust those advices.

The brand name was the highest influential factor for purchasing OTC medicines for the respondents with 28.8% while the symptoms themselves came in the second place with 25.6%. 16.9% of the respondents considered that dosages of the OTC medicines are of significance and 11.9% said that the price is of high influence. OTC medicines packaging and their advertisements constitute the least 2 considerations for the respondents with 10.6% and 6.3%. (Dadhich and Dixit, 2017)

Another analysis made for 160 American consumers to study their purchasing behavior when buying over-the-counter medicines in 2013, 15 factors were studied to discover which factors are of significance for the consumers when buying over-the-counter medicines and which are not.

The 15 factors were as follows: doctors' advice, family and friends' recommendations, drug packaging, the degree of severity of the symptoms, taste of the medicine, the corporate, duration of the medicine, safety of the medicine, price, the number of doses, advertising, the method of taking the medicine and whether the medicines relieve and treats many symptoms.

It was found that the one and only factor that was of high statistical significance and impact to the American consumers studied is the lower cost or price. (Kohli&Buller, 2013)

In another context, an analysis was made in Slovakia on 357 consumers lie under the age of 40 years old of educated consumers to study the factors that affect them when buying both over-the-counter and prescription medicines. The sales of both types of medicines were almost equal. There were 5 factors studied in this analysis; for the prescription medicines, the highest 2 influential factors affecting the consumers' purchasing decisions were Physicians' recommendation followed by pharmacists' recommendation then comes in the third, fourth and fifth places were family and friends' recommendation, price and advertising.

For over-the-counter medicines, Pharmacists' recommendation comes in the first rank before the Physicians' recommendation then price, family and friends' recommendation and advertising at the end. (Haramiova, Kobliskova and Soltysova, 2017)

In Bangladesh, Babu made an empirical study and surveyed 280 respondents to analyze the factors that contribute to the purchasing decision of over-the-counter medicines in 2007 and it was concluded that the past experience with the medicine itself constitutes the highest impact. Company and brand image that was expressed also as awareness or being aware of the product together with the safety of the medicine were among those factors.

The level of education of people affects the purchasing of over-the-counter medicines in Bangladesh and in a decreasing order of significance, the brand name consideration over the generic name, doubting the physicians' recommendations and making assumptions about the physicians' prescriptions, information of the insert leaflet, side effects of the medicine and the promotional materials and marketing activities that the company makes were claimed by the respondents. (Babu, 2007)

In another setting, 351 consumers of age range 35-54 males and females with the majority of males were asked about the factors that influence them the most when purchasing Over-The-Counter medicines in Jordan.

The results showed that more than half of the respondents purchase Over-The-Counter medicines from 1 to 3 times per month. The factors studied were divided into internal and external factors; the internal factors were further sub-categorized into country of origin, brand experience and personal characteristics like age, gender, education and specialization. The external factors on the other side were classified into brand advertising, brand package, professional advice, price, family and friends' opinion and drug availability.

It was concluded that both the internal and external factors are of high influence on the Jordanian consumers when buying OTC medicines.

Of the internal factors, brand experience showed the highest significance and of the external factors, professional advice followed by drug availability, family and friends' opinion, price and brand packaging all have significant relationship with the OTC purchasing behavior or intention of the Jordanian consumers. (Habash& Al-Dmour, 2020)

According to Temechewu&Gebremedhin, consumers in Ethiopia are mainly affected by previous experience, pharmacists' recommendations, family and friends' recommendations, price, and country of origin when purchasing Over-The-Counter medicines from community pharmacies. However, the factors of previous experience and family and friends' recommendations were not that significant in terms of statistics. (Temechewu&Gebremedhin, 2020)

3. Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are as follows:

- RO1: To explore the consumer buying behavior in respect of Over-The-Counter medicines in Egypt
- RO2: To explore the factors that influence the consumers' purchasing decision of Over-The-Counter medicines from pharmacies.
- RO3: To emphasize the importance of studying the consumers' buying behavior towards Over-The-Counter medicines in Egypt.

4. Methodology

An exploratory study was conducted to provide deep understanding of the consumers' insights and their behaviors when buying OTC medicines and also to answer the following questions:

Q1: What are the main factors that influence the consumers when buying Over-The-Counter medicines?

Q2: How do consumers buy Over-The-Counter medicines?

The researchers made in-depth interviews with a convenient sample of males and females of the age range 25-34 years old living in Cairo city who visit pharmacies regularly and buy Over-The-Counter medicines at least two times per month to ask them about the factors that affect their purchasing decision.

5. Results

Respondents were asked about the frequency of buying Over-The-Counter medicines and they contended that they buy these medicines more than twice per month and they use them on regular basis. They were also asked about the type of Over-The-Counter medicines they buy and it was found that antibiotics, cold and flu medicines, headache and analgesic medicines, and medicines that aid in the indigestion conditions are the most widely used among the respondents.

Respondents when asked about the factors that influence them during buying Over-The-Counter medicines from pharmacies, most of the respondents claimed that previous experience is the main factor that influences their purchasing decision.

Pharmacists' recommendation was mentioned by most of the respondents. However, this factor was not that significant for the respondents and they found it as a complementary factor in certain conditions.

The respondents argued that whenever pharmacists recommend a specific Over-The-Counter medicine, they feel that this recommendation is profit-centric more than being patient-centric.

This point should be covered in further researches about the reasons why the pharmacists' recommendations are not often that effective.

Half the respondents said that the price is among the factors that influence their purchasing decision of Over-The-Counter medicines but, they always look at the efficacy first before the price or even a promotional offer. Some respondents claimed that the packaging of the medicines is very important for them, also the efficacy of the medicine is important for some respondents but, not all.

6. Research Conceptual Model

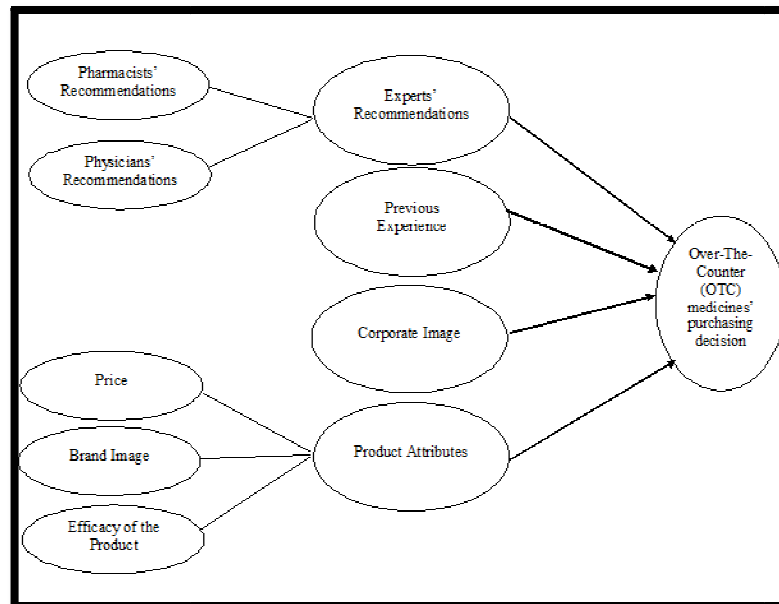


Figure 1: Research Conceptual Model

7. Conclusion

The researchers observed from the literature that mostly the factors that influence the consumers when buying over-the-counter medicines are either related to the self-concept or brand/product attributes. In other words, the consumers themselves are affected by their beliefs, values, abilities and their knowledge and awareness. Also, they are affected by the relatives, friends, and experts' opinions which we can refer to as reference group.

They are also affected by external factors related to the medicine itself such as the price, the packaging of the product, the advertisements made by the company, the image of the brand, and the efficacy and safety of the medicine.

The responses of the interviews showed that the factors that influence Over-The-Counter medicines purchasing decision in Egypt are mostly consistent with what found in the literature and the factors don't differ that much and they are related to previous experience or some product attributes including price, packaging of the products, image of the brand or the corporate.

However, the display in the pharmacy was one factor that didn't appear in the literature and it seems that it is somehow specific to the Egyptian culture and it shows the importance and significance of the visual merchandising departments found in some but, not all the pharmaceutical companies.

Other factor which is the physicians' recommendations don't appear as one of the most influencing factors that affect the Egyptian purchasing decision of OTC medicines as opposed to the literature. Advertising is a factor that affect OTC medicines purchasing decision appeared in literature which was found inconsistent with the real life.

8. Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

This research intends to address the factors that influence Egyptian consumers when buying Over-The-Counter (OTC) medicines and it is important for pharmaceutical marketers to address them and explore what these factors are, in order to formulate better marketing strategies toward consumers (Direct to Consumer Advertising) and integrate their promotional mix effectively and efficiently. The research addresses and approaches those pharmaceutical companies to turn their heads to the consumers and communicate with them with the relevant message that will result in increasing their credibility and their corporate and brands' images as well. It also emphasizes the significance of creating a unique message to the user of the medicines, the influencer, the purchaser and the decision maker as well.

This research can be replicated in countries where the regulations and policies of Prescription-Only Medicines (POM) are relaxed and pharmaceutical companies can advertise those medicines directly to the consumers.

There are also some questions that need to be further investigated in future research papers, they are as follows:

- How do the Egyptian consumers see the role of pharmacist when purchasing Over-The-Counter medicines from the pharmacy?
- How does the price affect the Egyptian consumers when buying Over-The-Counter medicines? Does direct to consumer advertising have an impact on the purchasing decision of Egyptian consumers towards OTC medicines?
- To what extent do the physicians' recommendations play a role in the Egyptian consumers buying behavior of OTC medicines?
- How does visual merchandising affect the Egyptian consumers when buying OTC medicines?

9. Research Limitations

The main limitations of this research include that this research was made only for Cairo city residents while, it should be made to cover the whole country. Also, the budget allocated for buying Over-The-Counter medicines was not studied in that research. The research also didn't cover the preference of the consumers whether to buy brand or generic medicines. Factors of advertising, demographics and other factors were not studied in this research which can be studied in future research papers. These items weren't covered due to time limitation of the researchers.

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