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THE PURCHASE OF MEDICINES ONLINE

The results of the 2016 survey in UK, Italy, Spain and Portugal

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Online survey of "Fakeshare 2" project has been conducted for investigating behavioural and psychological factors linked to online purchasing of medicines. The aims of the survey were twofold: to assess the prevalence of purchasing of pharmaceutical products online in four European Countries: Italy, Spain, Portugal, UK; to investigate the impact of different psychological and socio-demographic variables on the Future Intention of Purchasing pharmaceutical products online. Data were collected on about 1.000 participants for each countries between fall of 2015 and early 2016. While there is a substantial awareness of the possibility of purchasing medicines online, there is a much lower awareness of the initiatives and events aimed at raising public awareness on the risks of buying medicines online. Percentage of respondents who purchased medicines online varied from 9% (Spain) to 26% (Italy). When the prevalence of the purchase of medicines online was weighted by the rate of ecommerce prevalence (2015, Eurostat), rates ranged from about 4% (Spain) to about 18% (UK). In all four countries the medicines purchased online are those for weight loss, for curing flue, and for quitting smoking. The percentage related to medicines for erectile dysfunction is marginal in Spain and Portugal, but higher in Italy and UK. Buy medicines online through contacts via social network (mainly Facebook) is a habit limited to a percentage ranging from about 1% (Spain) to 3.5% (Italy). Positive attitude toward purchasing medicine online is stable (Spain) or increasing (Italy, Portugal). Purchasing medicines online is still a behaviour that is generally non-approved by significant others. The perception of this behaviour as safe for health substantially increased from Fakeshare 1 survey to Fakeshare 2 survey. However the likelihood of a future purchase (although increasing) is still substantially low (ranging from about 6% of Portugal to about 13% of Italy). Regression analyses revealed that the best predictors of future purchase intention are approval from others (subjective norm), past purchase behaviour, perception of the behaviour as safe for health, and positive attitude toward the purchase. Further regression analyses investigated the beliefs on which attitudes and perception of safety are based. Results revealed that: a) the more the purchase is perceived as economically convenient and practically useful; b) the lower is the perceived quality of the products purchased online; the more positive is the attitude and the higher is the perception of the purchase as a safe behaviour.

In conclusion, purchasing pharmaceutical products online is a behaviour mainly guided by rational beliefs that can be changed, not by impulsive tendencies that are largely irrational. For reducing this behaviour awareness of its risk must be increased with communication campaigns on different media (the web, TV, smartphones, newspapers, wallpapers). In particular, approval of others, attitude and perception of safety are the most important variables in explaining online purchase, to be influenced with communication campaigns aimed at reducing future purchase. Communicating that medicines purchased online can be dangerous for health and economically unwise may lower the perception of this behaviour as safe, and lead to a negative attitude toward it, and to the expectation that it will not be approved by relevant others.