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Leveraging consumer's behaviour to promote generic drugs in Italy

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study was to fill the lack of knowledge regarding a more grounded exploration of the consumer's decision-making process in the context of generic drugs. In this perspective, a model, within the theoretical framework of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), for studying the consumers' purchase intention of generic drugs was developed.

Methods: An online survey on 2,222 Italian people who bought drugs in the past was conducted. The proposed model was tested through structural equation modelling (SEM). **Results:** Almost all the constructs considered in the model, except the perceived behavioural control, contribute to explain the consumer's purchase intention of generic drugs, after controlling for demographic variables (age, income, education). Specifically, attitude, subjective norm, past behaviour, self-identity and trust in the pharmacist have a positive influence on the intention to buy generic drugs. On the contrary, perceived risk towards products and brand sensitivity act negatively.

Conclusions: The results of the present study could be useful to public policy makers in developing effective policies and educational campaigns aimed at promoting generic drugs. Specifically, marketing efforts should be directed to inform consumers about the generic drugs' characteristics to mitigate the perceived risk towards these products and to raise awareness during their decision-making process.

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1. Introduction

Health expenditure measures the value of goods and services necessary for people's health prevention and care. Among the components that make it up, pharmaceutical spending stands out in importance: on average, it accounts for almost 20% of the health expenditure across EU countries, while prescription volume increased more than 100% in several key therapeutic areas from 2005 to 2015 [1]. Therefore, reducing pharmaceutical costs has become a

high-priority target for European governments, in order to provide a sustainable healthcare system. Functional to the achievement of this objective have been the responsible use of drugs and the increase of the market share of generic drugs. These are unbranded medicines bioequivalent to the originator brands – that is, characterized by the same amount of active ingredients and the same bioavailability – but sold at a lower price.

Policies aimed at promoting generic drugs are urgently required in countries where the public debt exceeds the GDP, like Italy. Despite the controls introduced by legislation on physicians (mandatory prescription of the international non-proprietary name) and pharmacists (mandatory generic substitution), together with the

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drugs reimbursement linked to the internal price reference (patients may refuse substitution but must pay the price difference), Italy is one of the countries with the lowest levels of generics' consumption (20%), before Ireland and Greece [2]. Conversely, generic drugs account for more than half of the market by volume in countries with similar institutional settings and policies (60% in Germany and 50% in France). The above-mentioned evidence indicates that the price and volume controls adopted by governments are just one of the broad range of factors which determine the success of generic substitution. In the Italian legal framework, where the influence of the physician on the brand choice has been neutralized, and that of the pharmacist has been weakened, all the remaining factors are attributable to the patient buying behaviour.

The path of literature adopting a consumer perspective has primarily focused on attitude towards generic drugs, perceived risk and the relationship between these constructs and purchase intention. Bearden and Mason [3] showed that attitude positively impacts on generic drugs purchase intention, whereas perceived risk impacts it negatively. Tootelian et al. [4] highlighted the role played by the brand in constructing attitude and perception of risk. Specifically, a high perceived risk for an active ingredient degrades the attitude towards the generic drug and improves the attitude towards the brand-name drug. Both the attitude and the perceived risk may vary depending on the severity of the disease being treated. When a drug is targeted to the treatment of diseases with a low level of severity, consumers have a positive attitude towards the generic product; conversely, those who suffer from chronic diseases tend to have a more negative attitude and refuse the replacement [5]. The same happens for the perceived risk: the more severe the disease, the greater the perceived risk related to the use of generic drugs [6,7]. The attitude and purchase intention of generic drugs are also influenced by past behaviour. When the consumer has experienced the product and is satisfied, the probability of both a positive attitude towards it and a high intention to use it increases [5]. Finally, purchase intention is influenced by the action of health professionals (namely, doctors and pharmacists). Several studies highlighted that the consumer is more willing to replace the brand-name drug with the generic drug if it has been recommended by the pharmacist or doctor [8–11].

Hitherto, the models used to investigate the generic drugs buying behaviour do not take into account some relevant variables that could affect the decision-making process. Furthermore, and this is even more relevant, no theoretical framework is adopted to consider the relationships between such variables and their impact on generic drugs purchase intention.

That being stated, the paper provides a more grounded exploration of consumer behaviour towards generic drugs, using recent theoretical advances related to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) [12]. The TPB basic model has been integrated with additional relevant predictors of the intention to buy generic drugs: self-identity, brand sensitivity and trust in the pharmacist, to which perceived risk was added as previous studies highlighted its relevance in the decision-making process. As a result, the present study contributes both theoretically and empirically to the

understanding of generic substitution. At the theoretical level, it demonstrates that the TPB is an adequate theoretical framework to investigate the decision-making process in the context of generic drugs. At the empirical level, the understanding of the determinants of consumers' purchase intention is valuable to public policy makers for its strategic implications, in particular the increase in generic drugs' market share.

2. Background and research hypotheses

Ajzen's [12–14] Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) was used and validated in a variety of settings to explain individual behaviour. This theory explains the roles of attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control and past behaviour with regards to behavioural intention and actual behaviour. Attitude represents individuals' positive or negative evaluation of performing the particular behaviour of interest. Subjective norm describes the perception of social pressure to perform or not perform a behaviour and the motivation to comply with this pressure. Perceived behavioural control refers to whether individuals believe that they can perform the behaviour or not. Past behaviour is a powerful predictor of intention as past experiences influence the future behaviour [15,16].

In the context of drug consumption, no studies have applied the TPB to predict consumer behaviour. Only Bearden and Mason [3] partially used it to explore generic drugs purchase intention, demonstrating the influence of attitude (and risk perception) on the consumer intention to buy. Starting from the TPB basic model, the present study proposes an extended version following suggestions from Ajzen [13], who argued that the theory "is open to the inclusion of additional predictors". As a consequence, the ability of the theory to explain generic drugs purchase intention has been improved.

To confirm the validity of the TPB model in the context of generic drugs, the following hypothesis is stated:

H1. Generic drugs purchase intention is positively influenced by (a) attitude, (b) subjective norm, (c) perceived behavioural control and (d) past behaviour.

In the conceptual framework of the present study, other predictors are proposed to better understand the consumer's generic drugs purchase intention. More precisely, perceived risk, brand sensitivity, trust in the pharmacist and self-identity may increase or decrease the willingness to accept generic substitution (Fig. 1).

Perceived risk is defined as the degree to which individuals feel the uncertainty and consequences associated with their actions [17]. This construct plays a crucial role in the decision-making process [18–22], because it negatively influences the willingness to engage in a risky behaviour [23,24]. That is why the perceived risk was often inserted in the TPB model to improve its predictive power [20,25–27]. Remaining in the context of generic drugs, some scholars demonstrated the negative impact of perceived risk on purchase intention [3,6]. In light of these results, the present study aims to confirm such a relationship, and investigate if a high risk perception regarding the choice of generic drugs may negatively impact the attitude towards the purchase

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