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PERCEPTION AND ACCEPTANCE OF GENERIC MEDICINES AMONG CONSUMERS: A COMPARATIVE QUALITATIVE STUDY WITH BRANDED DRUG

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***Abstract*:** This study explores whether consumers perceive generic medicines in the same way as branded ones, assuming that branded drugs are often preferred due to perceived higher quality and strong marketing influence, despite awareness of the cost-effectiveness of generics. A qualitative approach was adopted using in-depth interviews with 20 respondents from Sagar city to understand consumer perception and acceptance. The findings indicate that generic drug manufacturers can gain valuable insights into consumer pain points and perceptions, enabling them to refine marketing strategies for greater acceptance. Low awareness and lack of trust were identified as key barriers to the use of generics. Therefore, improving communication, ensuring product quality, and conducting awareness campaigns can enhance consumer confidence and sales performance. Overall, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of consumer behaviour toward generic medicines in India and addresses a significant gap in existing pharmaceutical research.

***Keywords*-** Consumer perception, Generic drugs, Marketing, Generic Medicines.

INTRODUCTION

India's domestic pharmaceutical industry is one of the largest globally, registering a turnover of approximately USD 50 billion (around ₹ 4.7 lakh crore) in FY 2023–24, reflecting steady growth in both domestic and export markets (Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2024). The Indian market is projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 10–12 % between 2024 and 2030, positioning the country among the top ten pharmaceutical markets worldwide (India Brand Equity Foundation [IBEF], 2024). Within this landscape, generic medicines dominate, accounting for nearly 69 % of the total market value and forming the backbone of India's pharmaceutical exports (Mordor Intelligence, 2024).

The purpose of this study is to determine whether consumer perception of generic drugs aligns with that of branded medicines. Branded drugs are those produced and marketed under patent protection, granting exclusive selling rights to the manufacturer. Once a patent expires, other pharmaceutical companies can produce the same molecule as a generic drug, which offers equivalent therapeutic benefits at a lower cost (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023). In theory, this affordability should make generics more attractive to consumers; however, research consistently demonstrates that this is not always the case (Joshi & Gandhi, 2021).

A primary reason for the limited adoption of generics lies in brand loyalty. Many consumers continue to purchase branded drugs, prioritizing familiarity and perceived quality over cost savings. Studies indicate that consumers often believe branded medicines are of higher quality, safer, and more effective than their generic counterparts (Suthar et al., 2022). Furthermore, habitual use of prescription medicines reinforces consumer inertia—patients who have positive experiences with branded formulations are reluctant to switch to less expensive equivalents (Panigrahy & Chaudhari, 2021). These behavioural tendencies reduce direct competition between branded and generic segments, especially since generics tend to target lower-income groups, whereas branded medicines remain accessible to more affluent consumers (Rathi & Biyani, 2022).

Consumer perceptions of generics are also shaped by drug-related characteristics such as price, perceived quality, and market familiarity (Jangra et al., 2020). Socio-economic differences further influence preferences: higher-income consumers tend to associate brands with quality assurance, while lower-income consumers emphasize affordability and tend to purchase generics more frequently (Uniyal, 2021). Despite generics offering identical therapeutic value, misconceptions persist regarding their effectiveness, safety, and manufacturing standards (Pushpa & Suryavanshi, 2023). Although regulatory oversight and production quality have improved substantially in recent years, public trust remains limited.

Globally, the share of generics in total pharmaceutical turnover varies significantly. In developed economies, such as the United States, generics represent about 77 % of total prescriptions, compared with 26 % in France (IQVIA Institute, 2023). Conversely, in developing nations, including India, generic usage remains lower despite their potential to improve healthcare accessibility and affordability (OECD, 2023). Even where governments, such as in Tunisia, have implemented strong pro-generic policies, generics account for only around 30 % of total pharmaceutical sales (Kacem & Ben Zineb, 2022).

Reluctance to adopt generics is particularly evident in the case of over-the-counter (OTC) medications, where purchasing decisions rest solely with consumers. In the absence of a physician's prescription, patients rely on extrinsic cues such as brand name, price, and country of origin to infer product quality (Joshi & Gandhi, 2021). The absence of professional reassurance increases the perceived risk associated with generic drugs, further strengthening preference for branded alternatives (WHO, 2023).

From a managerial and policy perspective, understanding these perceptions is essential. The findings from this study can guide pharmaceutical companies in designing targeted awareness strategies and policy-makers in framing interventions that enhance consumer confidence in generic medicines. Moreover, the study contributes to broader discussions on affordable healthcare access, an essential component of sustainable health development in India.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Patients are largely unaware of the availability of generic medicines and often rely on the brands prescribed by physicians, which are frequently more expensive. Research suggests that consumers could save approximately 10–30% by purchasing generic equivalents instead of branded drugs (Mahajan, 2020). However, the potential of generics to improve the cost-effectiveness of drug therapy has not been fully recognized, and the reasons for this underutilization remain under discussion (McGettigan et al., 1997).

A key issue is the lack of confidence among stakeholders in the generic drug market. Many physicians hold misconceptions about generics due to insufficient information, while patients often express doubts regarding their efficacy (Mott & Cline, 2002). Studies have indicated that consumers frequently perceive branded drugs as superior in quality compared to their generic counterparts (Pedulka et al., 1989).

From an economic perspective, in many countries where treatment costs are covered by insurance, patients are often indifferent to the price of medications, as insurance companies bear the expense (Mott & Kreling, 1998). This dynamic reinforces a bias toward branded medicines, as both patients and physicians show little incentive to opt for less expensive alternatives (Ascione et al., 2001).

Patients with chronic illnesses, in particular, demonstrate hesitancy toward generic prescriptions, citing concerns over perceived health risks and lower effectiveness (Kohli & Buller, 2013). Physicians also find it challenging to persuade patients to switch to generics, especially when these alternatives are not introduced at the beginning of treatment (Gedadi et al., 2008). Geriatric patients, who consume medications regularly, are often more cautious, expressing fear of potential adverse effects. Interestingly, Brennan and Lee (2004)

found that some patients reported being allergic to generic products, while others associated generics with decreased efficacy—a phenomenon attributed to the "nocebo effect" (Barsky, 2002).

Historically, patient trust in generics has grown gradually since the 1970s, particularly in developed nations (Ascione, 2001). This progress has been closely tied to the role of healthcare professionals in educating patients and fostering confidence through effective communication (Benthin et al., 1995). Recent findings also suggest that mistrust in over-the-counter (OTC) generics is often higher among individuals with lower education levels (Betsch et al., 2010). Paradoxically, in some studies, patients from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have been more willing to purchase generic drugs than brand-name equivalents (Chapman & Coups, 2006).

Other studies have indicated that factors such as guidance from relatives, counselors, or friends; taste and packaging of the medicine; and severity of illness have little influence on patients' purchasing behavior (Connor & Siegrist, 2011). Conversely, belief, knowledge, and perceived effectiveness play dominant roles in determining acceptance of generic medicines (Figueiras et al., 2009). Notably, generic substitution is more common in acute conditions than in chronic or severe illnesses.

Globally, healthcare costs are rising faster than GDP in many countries, largely due to increased pharmaceutical expenditures (Cousin & Siegrist, 2008). The use of generic medicines has been identified as one of the most effective strategies to control healthcare spending without compromising quality of care (Consolidated FDI Policy, 2020). However, the adoption of generics remains inconsistent, and psychological as well as attitudinal barriers persist among consumers (Decollogny et al., 2011).

In China, the pharmaceutical industry tends to focus on short-term profits from generics rather than investing in research and innovation (Figueiras et al., 2010). In Portugal, pharmacists are permitted to substitute branded drugs with lower-priced generics, but physicians ultimately control this decision (Ferreira & Barbosa, 2017). Environmental factors may also play a role, as studies suggest branded manufacturers often adhere to more sustainable practices than generic producers, influencing the preferences of environmentally conscious consumers (Finucane et al., 2000).

The physician's influence remains paramount in the decision-making process of drug prescription (Hellerstein, 1998). Despite the widespread availability of generics, both healthcare professionals and patients continue to express scepticism regarding their quality (Gaither et al., 2001). Interestingly, while India exports only 10% of the world's branded drugs, it supplies about 20% of global generic exports—a share that has recently faced growing competition from other nations (Gill et al., 2010).

Lack of knowledge continues to be one of the primary barriers to acceptance of generics (Granlund, 2009). Many patients are unaware of the basic regulatory differences between branded and generic drugs, such as patent expiry processes and testing exemptions (Hassali et al., 2009). Although the quality control standards are identical, this information gap reinforces misconceptions and mistrust among consumers.

Research further shows that knowledge, beliefs, and emotions collectively influence the acceptance of generics (Keller et al., 2012a). Patient education and counseling have been found to improve perceptions and willingness to use generic medicines (Leiserowitz, 2005). Therefore, targeted awareness programs emphasizing the safety, efficacy, and cost benefits of generics can significantly enhance their adoption (McCaul et al., 1996).

METHODOLOGY

The data for this qualitative study were collected between August and September 2025. A total of 20 respondents participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews aimed at exploring their awareness, attitudes, and perceptions toward generic medicines. The participants represented diverse demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds and were residents of Sagar city and its surrounding areas in India.

Respondents were identified using a snowball sampling technique, which was considered appropriate for this study as it enabled the researcher to reach individuals who had prior

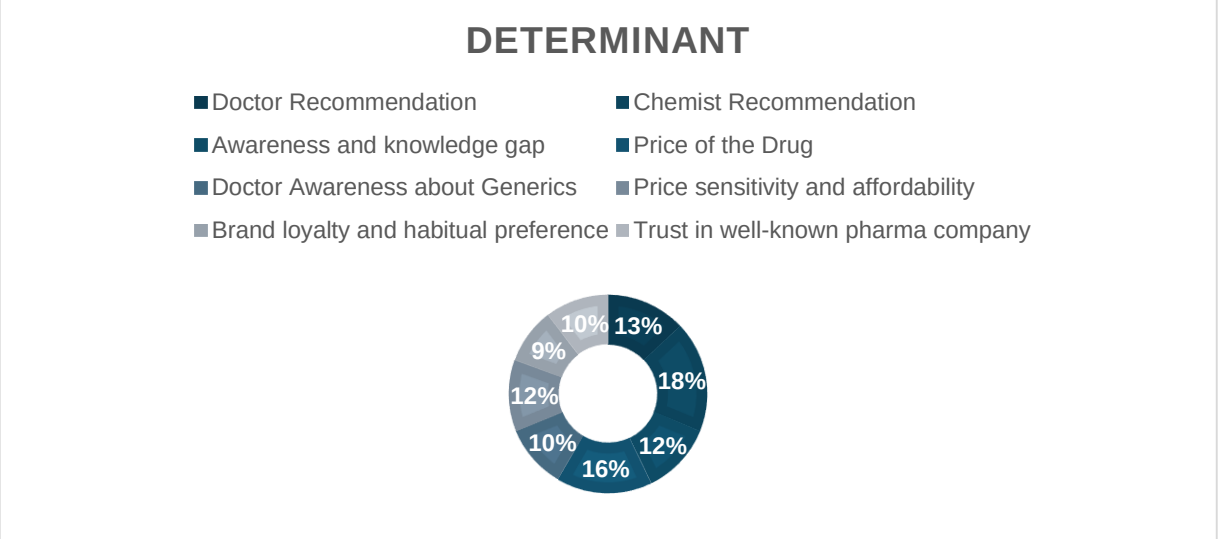

Table1

experience in purchasing or using generic medicines for a considerable period. This approach was particularly useful for accessing participants with relevant experiential knowledge and insights on the subject matter.

Given the exploratory nature of the research, emphasis was placed on allowing respondents to articulate their views and experiences freely, without being restricted to predetermined response options. Accordingly, the interviews were conducted as semi-structured, conversational interactions, providing flexibility to probe deeper into emerging themes while maintaining consistency across participants.

All interviews were conducted in accordance with ethical research standards, ensuring informed consent and voluntary participation

RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF THE PROPOSED STUDY

To ensure reliability, all interview notes were carefully reviewed to identify and correct any inconsistencies or omissions. The data were coded systematically, and the codes were compared and refined through repeated checks to maintain consistency in interpretation. This process minimized researcher bias and ensured that no relevant response was overlooked while deriving themes.

To establish validity, the findings and key themes were shared with selected respondents to confirm that their views were accurately represented. Feedback received from them was incorporated to refine the analysis and strengthen the credibility of results. Peer review by academic experts further enhanced the accuracy and impartiality of the interpretations, ensuring that the conclusions drawn reflected genuine consumer perceptions toward generic medicines.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Several complex aspects related to generic drug were raised during the in-depth interviews to understand whether consumer preferred to use these drugs as compared to the branded ones. After conducting 20 interviews with the respondents who were exposed to generic drugs, the study derived a exhaustive list of themes, Identification of themes would help us understand the facilitators and barriers to the consumer purchase decision with reference to generic drugs. During the interviews, some respondents talked for a long duration about a few themes that they could relate to the most while others provided their views on a wide array of themes which were facilitators as well as barriers to the purchase decision. while reporting the findings, pseudonyms were used for the participants to maintain anonymity.

Many recurring themes emerged during the interviews, as facilitators of generic drugs like doctor's recommendation, chemist recommendation, minor illness, cost/price of drug, doctor's awareness about generics, branded drug in availability, time required for the drug to act and usage. Table I provides the coding sheet for the facilitators for purchasing the generic drugs. These factors were generally observed to turn the discussion in favour of generic drugs and the presence of these factors made patients more receptive to considering the idea of usage and adoption of generic drugs.

Doctor Recommendation

Participants regarded medical professionals as a highly influential factor in shaping their acceptance of generic medicines. Many expressed a strong willingness to switch from branded to generic drugs if recommended by their physicians. The trust placed in doctors was evident in their responses. One participant stated,

"We always use the medicines prescribed by our doctor because we trust them completely. If the doctor recommends generics, we will certainly buy them."

"My doctor has never mentioned generic medicines to me, but if he does, I would start using them immediately."

Chemist Recommendation

Several participants mentioned that their local and trusted chemists often recommended generic medicines, and many had been purchasing such alternatives for several years. Some respondents also expressed openness to switching from branded to generic drugs based on the pharmacist's advice. One participant noted,

"When the prescribed medicine is unavailable, my local pharmacy suggests an alternative with the same basic composition. I purchase it regardless of whether it is branded or generic."

"My local chemist often informs me about cheaper substitutes for the medicines I usually buy, and I always prefer the more affordable option."

Price of the drug

Price emerged as a significant factor influencing respondents' preference for generic medicines over branded alternatives. Many participants highlighted affordability as a major motivator for their willingness to purchase generics. One participant stated,

"If these generic drugs have a large price difference from branded ones, it would save me a lot of money, and I would definitely want to use them."

"I was not aware that generic medicines are so inexpensive. I will look into them and start using them as much as possible."

Doctor Awareness about generics

Many participants expressed the belief that their doctors lacked adequate awareness or knowledge about generic medicines. They emphasized that healthcare professionals should stay updated on patent expiries and newly available generics so they can inform patients accordingly. One respondent remarked,

"If my doctor knew about generic medicines, he would definitely prescribe them. But since he has never recommended any, I feel he might not be aware of them himself."

"I don't think my doctor even knows that these generic medicines exist."

Price Sensitivity and Affordability

Most participants highlighted that affordability was a key reason for preferring generic medicines over branded ones. The lower cost of generics made them particularly attractive to individuals managing long-term treatments or those with limited income.

"Medicines are getting very expensive these days. If I can get the same result at a lower price, then why not use generics?"

"For people like us, saving even a few hundred rupees every month makes a big difference. I don't mind switching if the medicine works well."

Perceived Quality and Effectiveness

A number of respondents expressed doubts about the quality and effectiveness of generic medicines compared to branded drugs. Some believed that lower price implied compromised quality, while others felt that generics might not act as quickly or effectively.

"I feel branded medicines work faster; maybe they have better ingredients."

"I tried a generic once, but I didn't feel the same relief as the branded one, so I went back to what my doctor usually prescribes.

Awareness and Knowledge Gap

Many participants admitted that they were not well informed about generic medicines before this study. Some even confused generics with fake or duplicate drugs, indicating a significant awareness gap among consumers.

"I always thought generics were like duplicate medicines until I heard they are approved by the government."

"I didn't know these medicines were the same as branded ones in terms of ingredients. No one ever explained that to me."

Brand Loyalty and Habitual Preference

A considerable number of respondents showed a strong attachment to certain branded medicines they had used for years. Their familiarity and trust

in those brands made them hesitant to switch to generics.

"I have been using this brand for a long time, and it always works for me. I don't want to take a chance with something new."
"When it comes to my health, I prefer to stick with what I know. Even if generics are cheaper, I'm not sure they will suit me."

Trust in Well-Known Pharma Companies: Participants expressed greater trust in medicines produced by large, established pharmaceutical companies and were hesitant to use generics from unknown manufacturers.

"*I prefer medicines made by big companies; I feel they are safer."*

"I've never heard of the companies making these generic drugs."

BARRIERS

Limited Government Promotion

Many participants were unaware of government initiatives like Jan Aushadhi and felt that the authorities should do more to promote generics.

"I've never seen any campaign or ad from the government about generic drugs."
"If the government promotes it more, people will start trusting them."

Safety Concerns and Trust Deficit

Several participants acknowledged the affordability of generic medicines but expressed hesitation regarding their safety and manufacturing standards. They were uncertain whether such drugs undergo the same rigorous quality checks as branded ones, leading to distrust.

"If generic medicines are so inexpensive, the companies must be saving money somewhere in production. I don't feel confident about their safety."

"I am doubtful about how safe these medicines really are, even if they claim to be the same as branded ones."

Fear of Counterfeit Medication

A significant concern among respondents was the fear of counterfeit or substandard generic drugs being sold in the market. Many participants believed that, due to the lower cost, there was a higher chance of fake products entering the supply chain.

"I know that generic medicines contain the same ingredients, but I still worry that many fake versions might be sold because of their low price."

"Anything that is too cheap raises suspicion; I find it hard to trust these generics completely."

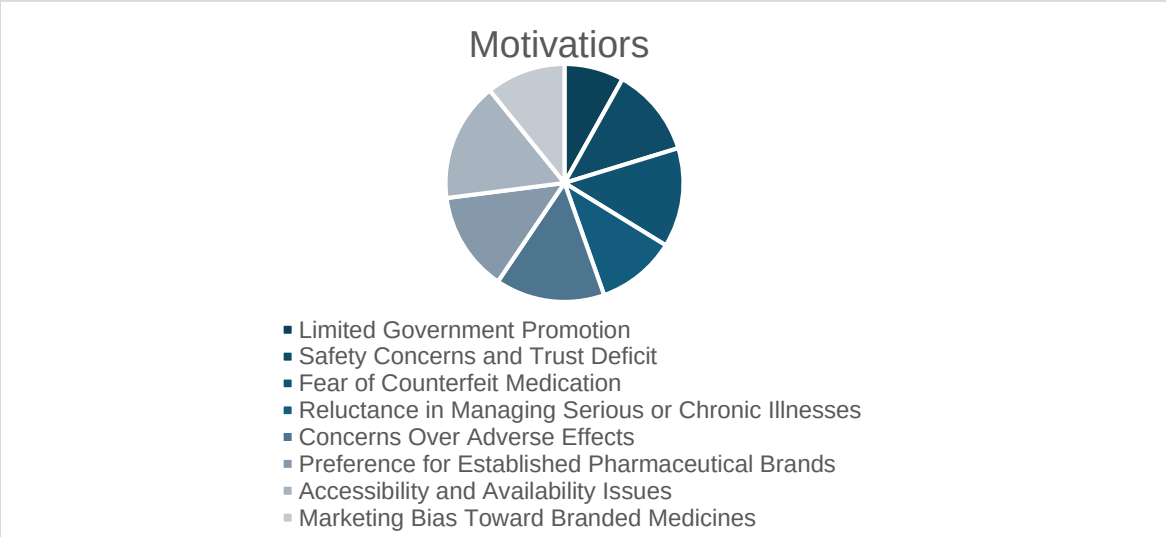

Table 2

Reluctance in Managing Serious or Chronic Illnesses

Participants suffering from chronic or serious health conditions expressed reluctance to replace their trusted branded medicines with generic alternatives. They feared that generics might not provide the same therapeutic effect for critical ailments.

"*I have heart problems and diabetes, so I can't take risks by switching to something I'm not sure about."*
"For my asthma, I prefer to stick with branded medicines because I don't think generics will work as effectively."

Concerns Over Adverse Effects

Despite generics containing the same active ingredients as branded drugs, some participants feared increased or different side effects. Personal experiences with medication-related adverse effects heightened apprehensions about switching to generics.

Preference for Established Pharmaceutical Brands

Trust was closely tied to recognized pharmaceutical companies. Participants tended to distrust generics produced by lesser-known manufacturers, indicating that involvement of major pharma companies in producing generics could improve acceptance.

Accessibility and Availability Issues

Some participants reported difficulty in locating generic drugs locally, either due to limited stocking at pharmacies or lack of knowledge about where to purchase them, which hindered their willingness to consider generics.

"I don't think my local pharmacy sells generic medicines — I've never seen any there."

"Are you sure these generic medicines are available here? I've never noticed them in my area."

Marketing Bias Toward Branded Medicines

Advertising predominately focused on branded drugs influenced consumer preferences, as participants stated they would consider generics only if similar promotional efforts and information were available.

"I might try generic medicines if I see some information or ads about them, but until then, I won't."

DISCUSSION

After analysing both the facilitators and barriers influencing the adoption of generic medicines, several insightful observations emerged. It was evident that consumers consider multiple factors beyond the *price of the drug* when deciding between generic and branded medicines. For many respondents, price was not the primary determinant in their purchasing decisions. This finding can be attributed to the inherently inelastic demand in the pharmaceutical sector, where the price elasticity of demand typically ranges from –0.18 to –0.60. Inelastic demand implies that changes in price have a relatively small impact on the quantity demanded, unlike in the FMCG sector, where consumer response to price changes is much higher. Consequently, even a significant price reduction in medicines does not necessarily lead to a proportionate increase in their demand.

Another key factor influencing the acceptance of generic drugs was the severity of the illness. Respondents were generally more comfortable using generics for minor ailments such as cold, cough, or mild fever, where brand preference was less pronounced. However, in the case of chronic or life-threatening diseases such as diabetes, asthma, or heart conditions, patients exhibited strong brand loyalty, driven by concerns over treatment effectiveness and potential health risks.

Interestingly, despite the fact that many reputed Indian pharmaceutical companies — such as Sun Pharma, Lupin Pharmaceuticals, and Sandoz — manufacture generic medicines, respondents often assumed that well-known brands were not involved in the generic market. This misconception likely stems from the limited marketing efforts directed toward generics compared to the extensive promotional campaigns undertaken for branded, patent-protected drugs.

Awareness also emerged as a significant theme. Many participants perceived a general lack of knowledge about generic medicines among healthcare professionals, pharmacists, and the community at large. This lack of advocacy from trusted sources contributed to their own limited awareness and hesitancy toward generics. Furthermore, despite generics undergoing standardized quality checks and regulatory approvals, several respondents associated their lower cost with compromised safety and reliability. Some also expressed fears of side effects or counterfeit products, reinforcing the need for stronger public education and transparent communication regarding the quality and efficacy of generic medicines.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that consumer perceptions toward generic medicines are diverse and largely shaped by individual experiences, socioeconomic status, and personal beliefs. Respondents from higher economic backgrounds tended to exhibit lower awareness of generic medicines, primarily because they possessed the financial means to consistently purchase branded drugs without considering cost alternatives.

It was also observed that the majority of participants relied heavily on their doctors' prescriptions and recommendations. This highlights the pivotal role of healthcare professionals in promoting awareness and acceptance of generic medicines

through informed guidance and active prescription practices.

Interestingly, the participants' educational background did not appear to significantly influence their perceptions of generic drugs. In several instances, even highly educated respondents were unaware of the existence or therapeutic equivalence of generics, revealing a considerable gap in communication and public education. This underscores the need for more effective marketing, outreach, and awareness initiatives by both pharmaceutical companies and government health agencies.

Moreover, differing opinions were found even among members of the same household, despite shared exposure to similar doctors, pharmacists, and social environments. This suggests that perceptions are shaped by individual attitudes and trust levels rather than shared informational sources.

The study also revealed that the language and framing of information play a crucial role in shaping consumer understanding and acceptance of generic medicines. Clear, positive, and easily comprehensible messaging was found to enhance receptiveness toward generics. Overall, while many participants expressed willingness to adopt generic medicines—particularly for minor ailments—wider acceptance will depend on strengthening awareness, trust, and communication between consumers, healthcare providers, and the pharmaceutical industry.

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