

Are Internet lifestyle products counterfeit? A consumer-based survey

The use of lifestyle products has increased over the last few years particularly with the change in the social behaviour of individuals and the ease of access of medicines via the Internet. Lifestyle products can be of medicinal or non-medicinal origin, herbal or synthetic, and are intended to improve the physical appearance and/or mental performance. Lifestyle products include cognitive enhancers, cosmetics, dietary supplements, mood enhancers, muscle enhancers, sexual stimulants, tanning agents and weight loss products. Purchasing these products over the Internet is quick, private and more convenient for users than buying from high street shops, healthcare centres and pharmacies. However, Internet purchases place consumers at further risks by not having a reliable advice from healthcare professionals. Issues associated with the authenticity and quality of lifestyle products purchased from the Internet was conveyed, and this places the consumer at risk of undesirable health consequences.

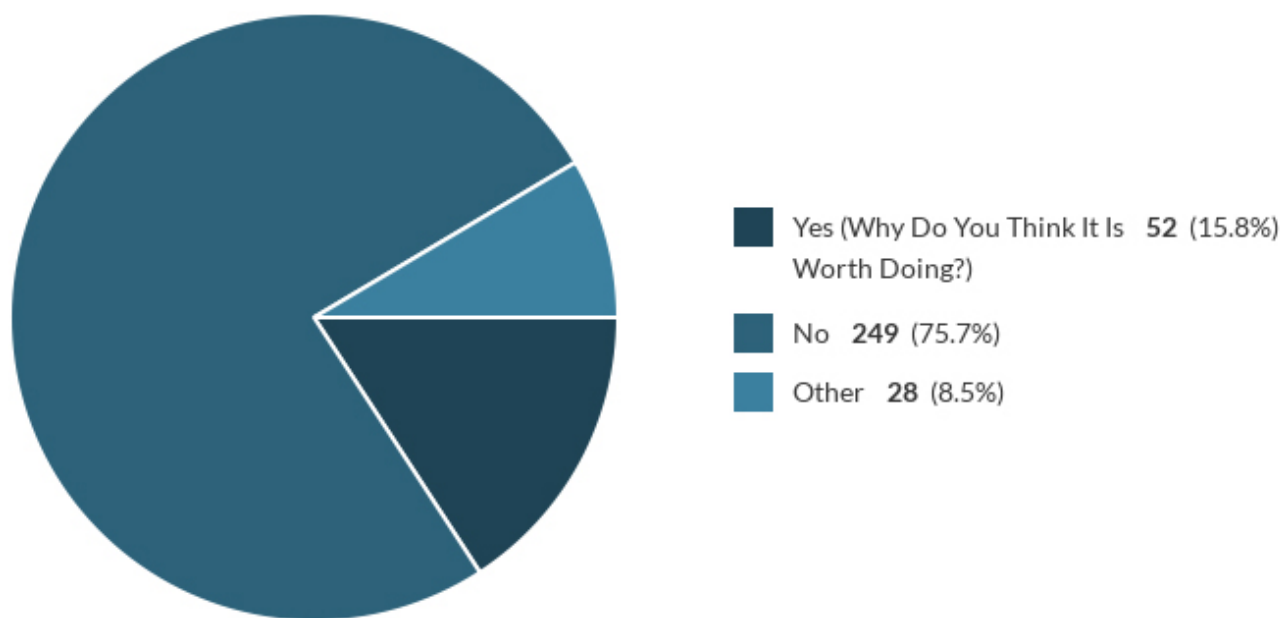


Fig. 1. Consumers' perception on taking the risk of purchasing a potential counterfeit product from unlicensed Internet source.

According to the World Health Organization, more than 50% of medicines purchased on the Internet could be counterfeit (WHO, 2006). Many studies assessed the prevalence of counterfeit medicines on the Internet, yet no study has looked specifically into the wider lifestyle products. This work comprised a web-based survey to examine the consumers' knowledge and attitudes towards the purchase of lifestyle products via the internet and look into the authenticity, effectiveness and

toxicity of the products from the users' perspectives. The survey was publicised through social media, emails, discussion forums and personal communications, and yielded 320 respondents from 22 countries. Of the 320 respondents, 208 (65%) reported obtaining lifestyle products from Internet websites and were mainly attained via online retailers. More than half of the products purchased were cosmetic products (including facial creams) followed by nutritional and herbal supplements. On the other hand, medicinal products intended for lifestyle use represented only 12% of the total purchase. Respondents provided several reasons for purchasing lifestyle products over the Internet including: convenience, low cost and better offers, time-saving and less embarrassing. None of the respondents commented on the quality of the products. When asked about awareness of counterfeit products, 62.8% of consumers were aware of counterfeit lifestyle products sold via the Internet, and knew this information from Internet discussion forums, TV, family/friends and newspapers/magazines. Only 12% of the respondents experienced counterfeit lifestyle products and in three cases it was reported to authorities. When asked about means of identifying a counterfeit product, consumers pointed to looking at the products' package, appearance, label claim, efficacy after use and adverse effects. Respondents were all aware of the risks associated with the use of counterfeit medicines; yet, 14% of respondents stated that it was acceptable to take the risk especially in cases of poor finance and/or lack of availability of medicines (Fig. 1). Adverse effects reported from using a counterfeit lifestyle product were below 10%; nonetheless, the aforementioned adverse effects were not stated on the products' label claim. These adverse effects were mainly encountered with cosmetic and herbal products, and were attributed mainly to poor quality. Only one person reported the adverse effects encountered to authorities.

Although users were familiar with counterfeit lifestyle products and their prevalence on the Internet, there was limited level of awareness about the health risks associated with the use of counterfeit products. Educational campaigns tailored towards public in relation to toxicity and harm associated with the use of counterfeit lifestyle products are indispensable.

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