

## Research article

# CONSUMER PREFERENCE AND BUYING PATTERN OF MEDICINES THROUGH E-PHARMACY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SILCHAR, ASSAM

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## Abstract

**Background:** As a consumer, all people are different from each other. One person may like a product or services which others may not like. Identification of consumer behavior and buying pattern of a product or service is an important tool to identify different factors affecting a consumer buying decision. **Objective:** COVID-19 is completely a new disease for the whole world. It has a great impact on people's lives and mainly on health. Due to Covid-19, the business scenario and buying pattern of a consumer is completely changed. Customers can avoid purchasing many things but cannot neglect medicine. Now a day's e-pharmacy is becoming popular because people can order medicine and any other pharmaceutical products using these e-pharmacy sites from their respective homes. Consumer preference and buying patterns may differ from location to location. The purpose of this study is to understand the various factors which are responsible for purchasing from an e-pharmacy site. **Methods:** This study is tested by interpreting the answers received from the survey questionnaire (N=250). **Discussion:** Though e-pharmacies are contributing a huge to the Indian economy as well as the health care system the legal regulations for e-pharmacies in India are not that distinctive. **Conclusion:** From the study, we can conclude that the consumers of Silchar are so inclined to use online e-pharmacy and their frequency of buying has also increased during the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Consumer behavior, buying pattern, online medicines, e-pharmacy.

## Introduction

The recent growth of e-commerce in India has attracted the customer to purchase medicine from online websites. The online drug store is one of the items which is going to encourage a gigantic interest in impending days. An online drug store is a web-based merchant of physician-recommended drugs. The sale of medicine

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through an online platform is not new. It has quite recently thrived in this internet age. In the late 1980s, drug stores started selling physician-endorsed meds employing mail requests in the US. Later this mail request business changed into the first web-based drug store, soma.com, in January 1999. Soon after that, the web drug store was dispatched in the UK. Assessments showed that there were more than 1000 sites selling medicines as of mid-2004. The retail drug store has so far stayed the greatest wellspring of medicines for the Indian populace. Far off territories in the nation also are profited with retail drug stores as it were. Maybe, since they don't know about the idea called online drug stores or the absence of fundamental prerequisites like the internet, a tremendous part of the Indian populace isn't buying medicine online. Notwithstanding, presently things are evolving. With the increase of computer literacy, availability of the internet, and popularization of smartphones. Though pharmacy shop was allowed to open during the lockdown situation many people ordered their medicine and other pharmaceutical products from online pharm [1].

### **Literature Review**

A study was undertaken by Srivastava *et al.*, (2020) on Consumers' usage and adoption of e-pharmacy in India. Lack of awareness regarding the benefits of using an online pharmacy in the common people so there is a need to demonstrate the use and benefits of using e-pharmacies along with enhanced instruction to the customers. The customers largely appreciated the "home delivery" of the online purchased medicines and would prefer to order online in cases of acute illness. The results suggest the e-pharmacy application be easy to use. Availability of obsolete and imprecise information would generate a fear of mistrust in the minds of the customers [2].

A study was undertaken by Singh *et al.*, (2020) on E-Pharmacy Impacts on Society and Pharma Sector in Economical Pandemic Situation. The work of this paper focuses on the impact of online pharmacy during the covid-19 pandemic situation. The author has written about the various good impact of e-pharmacy on society. The objective of e-pharmacy is to deliver medicine at an affordable cost to all places. But self-medication is a major problem of e-pharmacy. Govt. of India has drafted rules for running online pharmacies as Drug & Cosmetics Act 1940, Pharmacy Act 1948 was too much outdated were no provisions for selling medicine were there [3].

A study was undertaken by Anwar *et al.*, (2020) on Factors Leading to Preference for buying Online Medicines and their Effects on Actual buying Behavior: The work of this paper focusing on various factors for which e-pharmacy is accepted by the common people. Some of the key factors are cost-effectiveness, convenience,

availability of less common medicines, and anonymity. The author has also found out various other factors for which the e-pharmacy of India is growing so fast like-Digital India initiative, an e-healthcare initiative by the Govt. of India, Foreign direct investment, etc [4].

A study was undertaken by Gupta *et al.*, (2020) on Consumer Buying Behavior towards E-Pharmacy. In this study, 100 respondents from Jaipur city were taken by random sampling method. And the outcome of the study found was that the consumer awareness of e-pharmacy was very good. People of Jaipur city purchase medicine from both online and offline shops. But the Govt. and concerned authorities have lots of work to do for educating people about the various risk associating while buying medicine from e-pharmacy [5].

A study was undertaken by Salter *et al.*, (2014) on E-Pharmacies: An emerging market in Indian retail pharmacy, An Indian perspective. In this study 252 number of the respondent was taken into consideration and majority of them i.e.66% of them bought medicine from online. As there is still no such proper guideline for selling medicine online author suggested that there must be proper verification of scanned prescription during the order placed and again the prescription must be re-verified at the time of delivery to stop the miss use of drugs [6].

A study was undertaken by Pujari *et al.*, (2016) on Consumer's Pharmaceutical Buying Behavior towards Prescription and Non-Prescription Drugs: The study was done to find out what is the source of information people choose about the pharmaceutical product. What are influences purchasing behavior for the choice of medicines? The survey was done among 100 participants and the results were very interesting. Only 60% population was buying medicine by physician's choice, whereas other factors like the magazine, internet literature, family, and friendly advice were also matters while purchasing a medicine. The author finds that people want their prescription on their own choice and price, while pharmacist's and physician suggestion is not an influencing factor over money [7].

### **The legal entity of e-pharmacy in India**

For drugs and cosmetics, in India, we have various Acts. But all these Acts were very age-old these acts came into existence before the era of computers and the internet has started. So for regulating e-pharmacy Information Technology Act 2000 are taken into consideration as Drug and Cosmetics Act 1940, Drug and Cosmetic Rule 1945, Pharmacy Act 1948, Indian Medical Act 1956, Drugs and Magic Remedies Act 1954 has not any specific provisions for selling medicine online. It seems that online pharmacy websites are not following these age-old Acts they want to just bypass these Acts. Drug and Cosmetic Act 1940 clearly state that for selling a medicine a pharmacy must have a proper drug license and the medicine can be

sold only with a proper prescription from the doctor. Schedule H and X drugs are named as ‘restricted drugs’ which can be sold only after a proper prescription from a medical practitioner. For record-keeping purposes, one copy of the prescription must be there in the pharmacy for at least 2 years [8]. Many reputed online pharmacies dispense medicine only after verification of e-prescription. The definition of e-prescription is given in the Pharmacy Practice Regulations 2015 in regulation 2. (j) “Prescription” refers to a formal or electronic direction by a Registered Medical Professional or other duly licensed professionals such as a Dentist, Veterinarian, and so on to a Pharmacist to compound and dispense a certain form and quantity of preparation or prefabricated medicine to a patient [8]. Rule 65 of Drug and Cosmetic Rules, 1945 states that a pharmacist must be present while dispensing medicine to the patient. Though this e-pharmacy concept is mostly opposed by the offline pharmacist we can see that they are also not following their duty properly. Many pharmacists dispense medicine without a proper prescription, many pharmacists don’t inspect the prescription thoroughly and many are not even present in their respective pharmacy shops. They just rented their drug license to the pharmacy owner. So self-medication of medicine, drug abuse, drug dependency, and antibiotic resistance cases are more often in India. All these problems can be solved by e-pharmacy. Because most the e-pharmacy does not dispense any medicine without a proper e-prescription [9]. The government of India has set draft rules for sales of drugs by e-pharmacy so we can believe that India will have a well-defined law for online pharmacy and telemedicine in near future.

### **Consumer preference**

Consumer preference means an individual’s subjective taste for a particular product. While buying a product a consumer analyzes various alternating brands, products. It is normally measured by their satisfaction with those. While studying consumer preference various factors like- offer/ discount, location, belief, thought, communication may affect the preference.

### **Research Methodology**

The research has been done with a quantitative analysis method to seek out answers to the research questionnaire. An analysis feedback form consists of 25 numbers of questions was developed, validated and circulated among the 250 numbers of the customer (through random sampling) with the help of direct interview method or by using an online platform like- e-mail, Google form, WhatsApp, etc. to know the consumer preferences and buying pattern towards e-pharmacy.

### Objectives of the study

- i. To know the factor responsible for buying medicine from online e-pharmacy.
- ii. To understand the buying pattern of the e-pharmacy customer of Silchar during COVID-19.
- iii. To know the current trends of the pharmacy business

### Data collection and analysis

The first part of the questionnaire consist of the demographic profile of the research sample. It encompasses gender, age, educational qualifications, marital status, income, occupation, expenditure on the internet. The second portion of the questionnaire consists of various questions related to knowing the consumer preference and buying pattern towards e-pharmacy. The tabulation and pie diagram are used to analyze the responses of the sample respondents.

### Demographic profile

Demography is the special attribute of a particular sample population. While conducting a survey it is very much important to know about the demographic characteristic of the sample population because only after knowing the special attributes of the sample population we can able to classify the data in a meaning full way. So the first part of the questionnaire consists of a special type of questions relating to gender, age, educational qualifications, marital status, income, occupation, and expenditure on the internet. Based on this data summary table was prepared. Factors influencing their motive to buy medicine from online e-pharmacy differ from person to person, their income level, occupation, and expenditure on the internet. Based on these parameters summary tables of the responses have been prepared and analyzed in the following table.

Table 1: Demographic profile of the sample respondents (N\*=250)

SL. NO.	Demographic Factor	Sample Respondents	Percentage %	Cumulative Frequency
1	Gender			
	Male	143	57.2	57.2
	Female	107	41.6	100
2	Age			

	18-30 years	148	59.2	59.2
	31-40 years	45	18	77.2
	41-50 years	30	12	89.2
	51-60 years	15	6	95.2
	61-70 years and above	12	4.8	100
3	Educational qualification			
	Class 10 pass	15	6	6
	Class 12 Pass	30	12	18
	Graduation Pass	55	22	40
	Post-Graduation	119	47.6	87.6
	M.Phil. / Ph.D.	31	12.4	100
4	Marital Status			
	Unmarried	169	67.6	67.6
	Married	81	32.4	100
5	Occupation			
	Student	169	67.6	67.6
	Self Employed	08	3.2	70.8
	Govt. Employee	25	10	80.8
	Pvt. employee	37	14.8	95.6
	House Wife	11	4.4	100
6	Expenditure on internet			
	Less than Rs. 100/- per month	9	3.6	3.6
	100 Rs – 250 Rs per month	25	10	13.6
	250 Rs – 500 Rs per month	51	20.4	34
	More than 500 Rs per month	165	66	100

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Source: Compile from primary data, N\*=250

Table 1 described the demographic profile of the sample respondent which reveals that there were a total 250 numbers of the respondent in the sample, among which the majority of the sample respondent i.e. 57.2 percent were male, and the

remaining 41.6 percent were female respondents. The age group is classified into five categories that are 18-30 years, 31-40 years, 41-50 years, 51-60 years, 61-70 years, and above. From the table, it is observed that most of the sample respondents are fall under the age group of 18-30 years which consist of 59.2 percent of the total sample respondents followed by the age group of 31-40 years (18%), 41-50 years (12 %), 51-60 years (6%) and 61-70 years and above (4.8%). The majority of the sample respondents is found student (67.6%) which means they don't have any regular income source. But they can order a medicine from e-pharmacy for their family members and 14.4% are Pvt. Sector employee followed by Govt. employee (10%), housewife (4.4%) and self-employed (3.2%). Marital status is a very important factor that may influence the buying pattern. 67.6% of the sample respondent are found unmarried and the remaining 32.4% are married. The majority of the sample was highly educated 47.6 % are post-graduate followed by graduates (22%) and M.Phil. / Ph.D. (12.4%). A huge majority of people i.e. 66% expends more than Rs.500/- on the internet per month.

**Sample responses towards the statement offers/discount is a reason for influencing consumer preference for buying medicine from e-pharmacy**

Table 2: Offer/ discount is a reason of influencing consumer preference

SL. NO.	Respondents opinion	Number respondents	of Percentage
1.	Agree	138	55
2.	Disagree	70	28
3.	Neutral	42	17
Total		250	100

Source: Compiled from primary data.

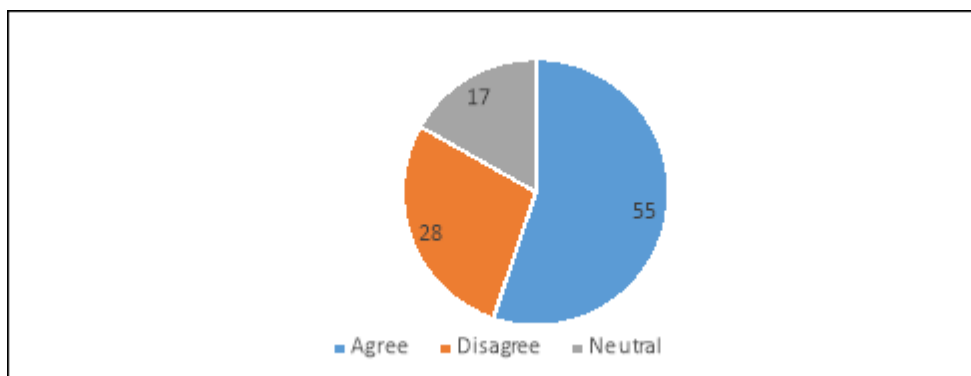


Fig. 1: Using the pie chart seen above, depicts that a majority of the people *i.e.* 55 percent are agreed with the notation that offers / discount is a reason for customers to choose e-pharmacy, followed by 28 percent of the people who disagree with the statement. Almost 17 percent of people are indifferent regarding discount/offer influencing customer preference.

**Sample response towards the statement role of recommendation to buy the medicine from e-pharmacy**

Table 3: Role of recommendation to buy the medicine from e-pharmacy

SL.NO.	Respondents opinion	Number of respondents	Percentage
1.	Agree	85	34
2.	Disagree	122	48.8
3.	Neutral	43	17.2
Total		250	100

Source: Compiled from primary data.

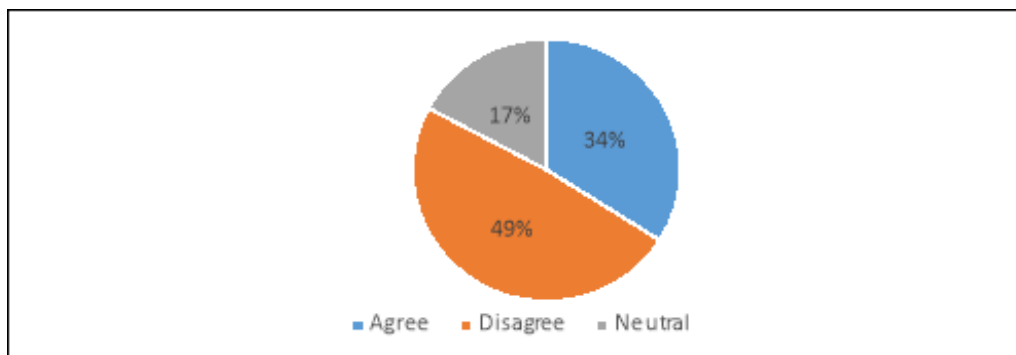


Fig. 2: Using the pie chart seen above, it can be easily understood that the majority of the persons *i.e.* 49 percent of the total respondents disagree with the statement that recommendation is a reason for the customer to purchase e-pharmacy followed by 34 percent of the sample are agree with the statement. Almost 17 percent of people are indifferent regarding the statement.

**Sample responses towards the frequency of shopping medicine from the online pharmacy before COVID-19**

Table 4: Frequency of shopping medicine from the online pharmacy before COVID-19



SL.NO.	Respondent opinion	Number of respondents	Percentage
1.	Occasionally	105	42
2.	Monthly	95	38
3.	Weekly	31	12.4
4.	Bimonthly	19	7.6
Total		250	100

Source: Compiled from primary data.

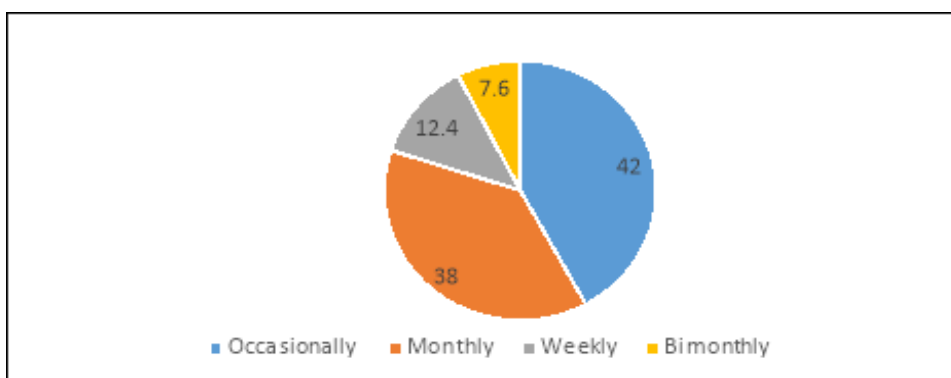


Fig. 3: Using the pie chart seen above, it is easily understandable that a huge population *i.e.* 42 percent was buying medicine online only occasionally before the COVID-19 pandemic whereas 38 percent of the sample respondent bought medicine from online pharmacies monthly before the Covid-19 pandemic, followed by 12.4 percent purchased weekly and only 7.6 percent of the sample population purchased medicine from online pharmacies bimonthly.

### Sample responses towards the frequency of shopping medicine from the online pharmacy after COVID-19

Table 5: Frequency of shopping medicine from the online pharmacy after COVID-19

SL.NO.	Respondent opinion	Number of respondents	Percentage
1.	Occasionally	49	19.6
2.	Monthly	121	48.4
3.	Weekly	11	4.4
4.	Bimonthly	69	27.6
Total		250	100

Source: compiled from primary data

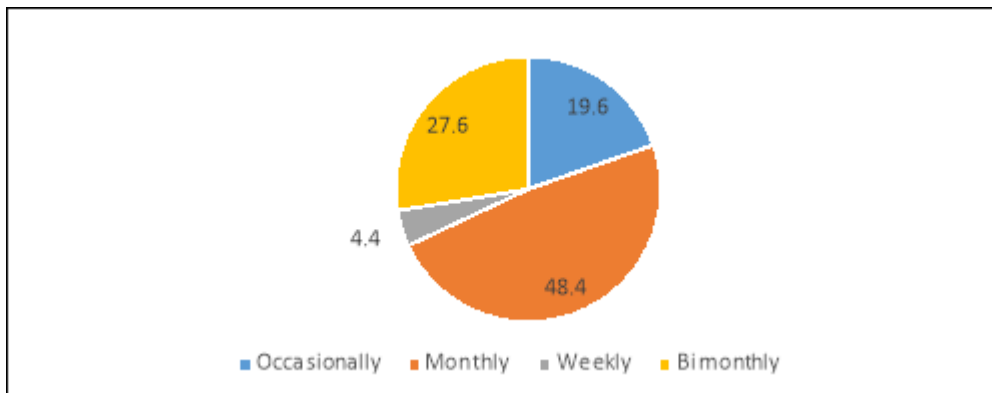


Fig. 4: Using the pie chart seen above, it depicts that after the COVID-19 pandemic has started a huge number of the population *i.e.* 48.4 percent bought medicine monthly from an online pharmacy, followed by 27.6 percent purchased bi-monthly, 19.6 percent occasionally, and 4.4 percent purchased weekly.

**Sample responses towards the statement details information about the drug on the pharmacy website is a reason of influencing consumer preference for purchasing medicine from online pharmacy**

Table 6: Details drug information is a reason for consumer preference

SL. NO.	Respondent opinion	Number of respondents	Percentage
1.	Agree	99	39.6
2.	Disagree	67	26.8
3.	Neutral	84	33.6
Total		200	100

Source: Compiled from primary data.

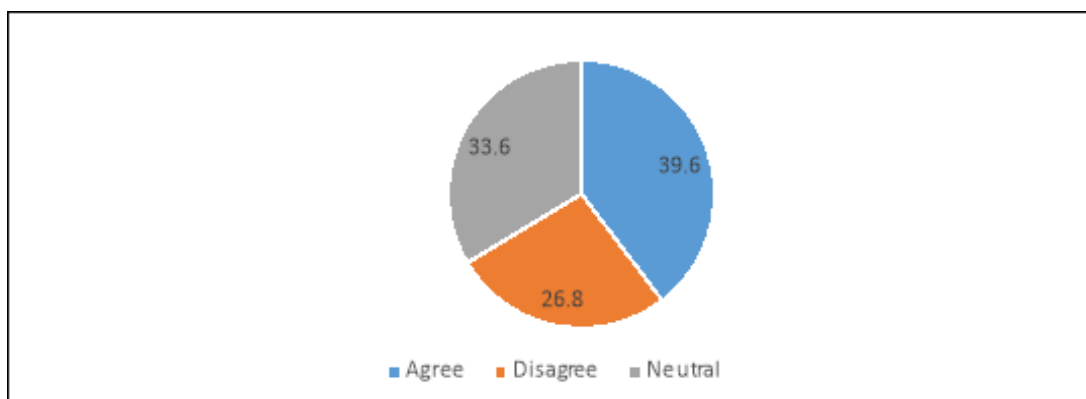


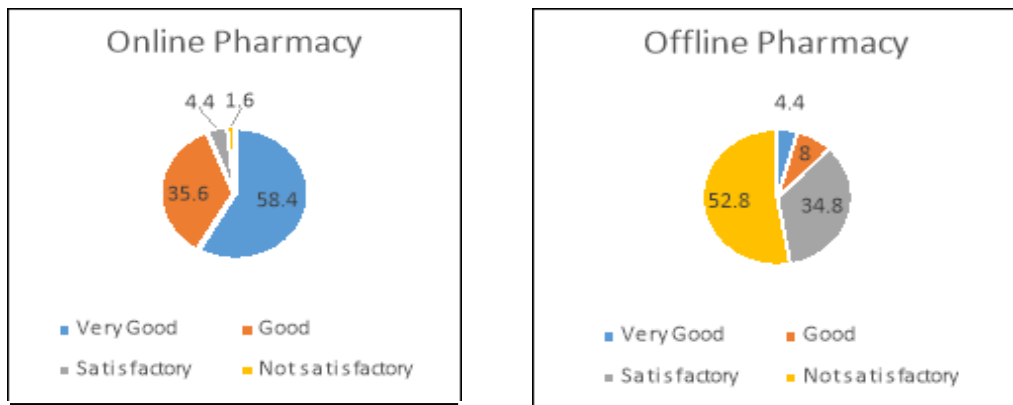
Fig. 5: Using the pie chart seen above, it can be easily understood that a huge number of sample respondent *i.e.* 39.6 percent agrees with the statement that Details information about the drug on the pharmacy website is a reason of influencing consumer preference for purchasing medicine from an online pharmacy and 26.8 percent disagrees with the statement whereas 33.6 percent of the sample are neutral with the statement.

**Sample responses towards the comparison of customer relationship management in online pharmacy versus offline pharmacy**

Table 7: Comparison of customer relationship management in online pharmacy versus offline pharmacy

SL.NO.	Type of Pharmacy	Respondents opinion	Number of respondents	Percentage
1.	Online Pharmacy	Very Good	146	58.4
		Good	89	35.6
		Satisfactory	11	4.4
		Not satisfactory	4	1.6
2.	Offline Pharmacy	Very Good	11	4.4
		Good	20	8
		Satisfactory	87	34.8
		Not satisfactory	132	52.8
Total	Online Pharmacy		250	100
	Offline Pharmacy		250	100

Source: Compiled from primary data.



**Fig. 6 and 7:** Using the pie chart seen above, it can be understood that a majority number of the sample respondents *i.e* 58.4 percent are very much satisfied with the customer relationship management of online e-pharmacy, whereas a huge number of the sample are very much dissatisfied with the customer relationship management of offline pharmacy.

**Sample responses towards the statement Contact less delivery of medicines is a reason of influencing consumer preference for buying medicine from e-pharmacy**

Table 8: Contactless delivery of medicines is a reason of influencing consumer preference for buying medicine from e-pharmacy

SL. NO	Respondent opinion	Number of respondents	Percentage
1.	Agree	145	58
2.	Disagree	43	17.2
3.	Neutral	62	24.8
Total		250	100

Source: Compiled from primary data.

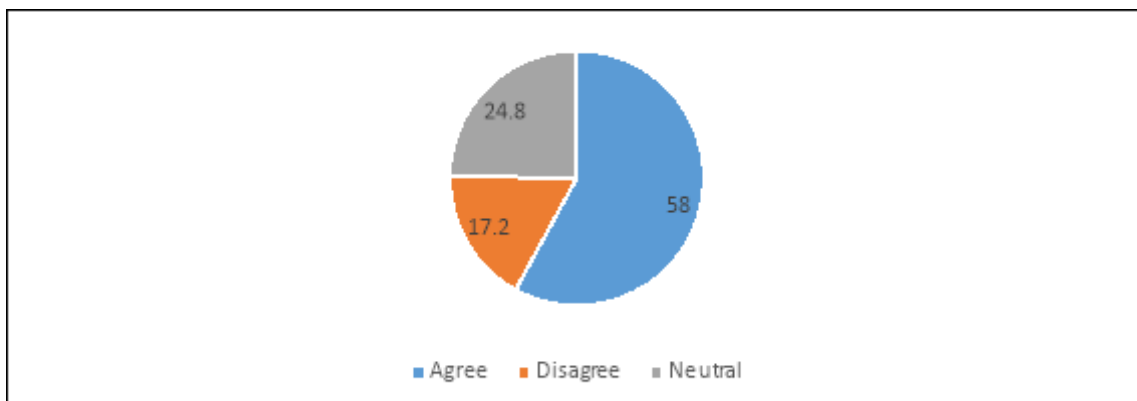


Fig. 8: Using the pie chart seen above, it can be depicted that a huge number of sample respondent *i.e* 58 percent agree with the statement that contactless delivery of medicines is a reason for influencing consumer preference for buying medicine from e-pharmacy whereas 24.8 percent of the respondent are neutral with the statement followed by 17.2 percent are disagree with the statement.

### Sample responses towards the privacy of online pharmacy

Table 9: Sample ranking towards the privacy of online pharmacy

S. NO.	Respondent Opinion	Number of respondents	Percentage
1.	Five-star rating	9	3.6
2.	Four-star rating	25	10
3.	Three-star rating	35	14
4.	Two-star rating	83	33.2
5.	One-star rating	98	39.2
Total		250	100

Source: Compiled from primary data.

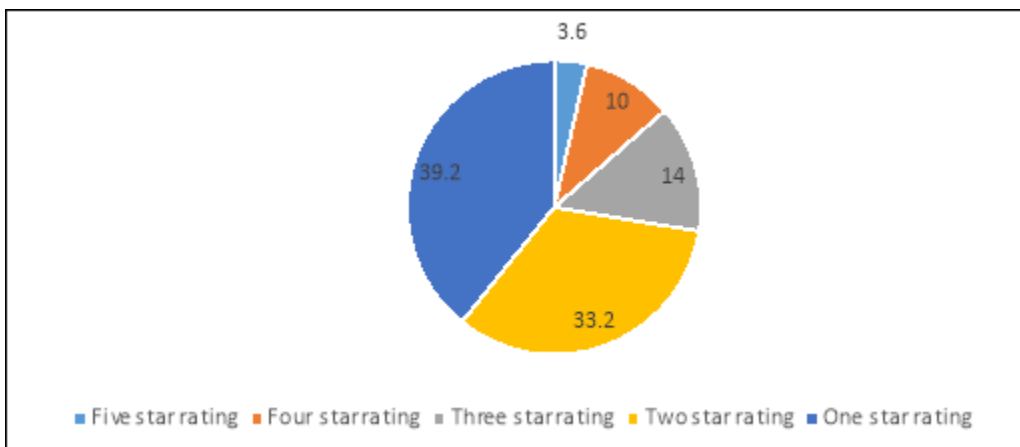


Fig. 9: Using the pie chart seen above, it can be depicted that a huge number of the sample respondent are unhappy with the privacy of online pharmacies. 39.2 percent of the sample respondent are giving a one-star rating followed by two stars (33.2 percent), three stars (14 percent), four-star (10 percent), and five-star (3.6 percent).

**Sample responses towards the statement lack of proper billing system in most of the offline pharmacy shops is a reason of influencing buying medicines from online e-pharmacy**

Table 10: Lack of proper billing system in offline pharmacy shops is an influencing factor for buying medicine from online pharmacies

SL.NO.	Respondent opinion	Number of respondents	Percentage
1.	Strongly agree	56	22.4
2.	Agree	178	71.2
3.	Disagree	8	3.2
4.	Neutral	8	3.2
Total		250	100

Source: Compiled from primary data.

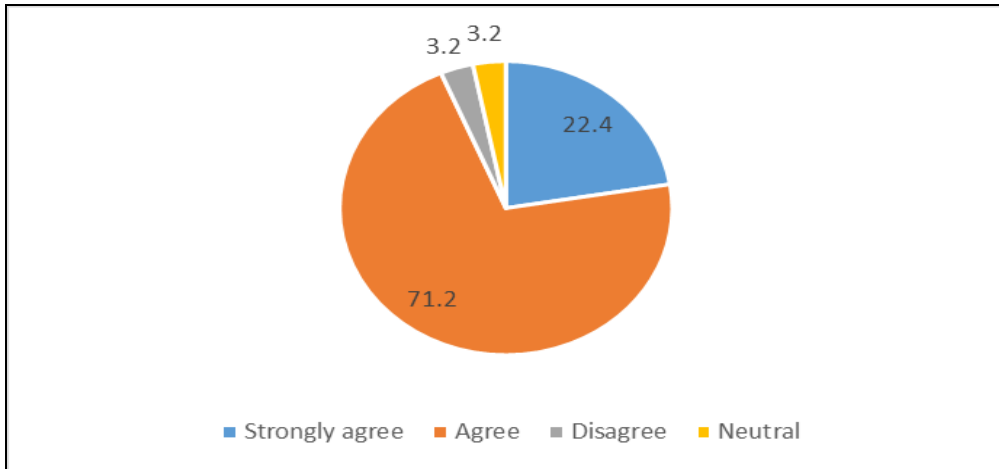


Fig. 10: Using the pie chart seen above, it can be depicted that a majority number of the sample respondents *i.e* 71.2 percent agree with the statement that lack of a proper billing system in most offline pharmacy shops is a reason of influencing buying medicines from online e-pharmacy. Followed by 22.4 percent of the sample respondents are fully confident about the statement, only 3.2 percent are found to disagree, and 3.2 percent of the sample was neutral with the statement.

### Study Results

From the survey questioner, the major findings are -

- i. The majority of people are influenced by Offers/discounts for buying medicine from e-pharmacy.
- ii. Recommendation plays an important role while purchasing medicine from online e-pharmacy. A particular e-pharmacy website may be recommended by a doctor, paramedical staff, friends, or relatives of a person, which is a very much influential factor for buying medicine from an online pharmacy.
- iii. The frequency of buying medicines from e-pharmacy before the COVID-19 was very occasional but when COVID-19 had emerged the frequency of buying medicines from the online pharmacy has been increased. The majority of people buy medicine monthly after the Covid-19 has emerged.
- iv. Most of the online e-pharmacy websites having detailed information about the medicine like its side effect, mechanism of action, maximum

dose, etc. In this survey, it was found that this detailed information about the medicine is a factor influencing buying medicine from online pharmacies.

- v. Customer relationship management is a technology that helps an organization for making long-term relationships with its customers. It is also an essential tool for gaining customer loyalty. Customer relationship management is becoming more essential as the market competition and market players are increasing day by day. In this study, it was found that comparing with the offline pharmacy a majority of the people are happier with online e-pharmacy customer relationship management. Which may be a reason for influencing consumer behavior.
- vi. The business trends and demands nowadays have completely changed due to the emergence of COVID-19. People are attracted more towards those products and services which are delivered without person-to-person direct contact. The majority of the online pharmacy products are delivered with contactless delivery. In this study, it was found that this contactless delivery of medicines is a key factor in influencing the consumer to buy medicine online pharmacy.
- vii. Though issuing a bill to the customer is mandatory for both offline and online pharmacies. But in this study, it was found that the lack of a proper billing system in most offline pharmacy shops is a reason for influencing buying medicines from online e-pharmacy.

## **Discussion**

For a company, it is very much important to study consumer behavior and buying patterns of its product. The pharmaceutical market is very much unpredictable. Because buying cloth and medicine is completely a different thing. But nowadays as more players are also there in the pharmacy market, people can choose among them. The result of our survey reported that due to the emergence of COVID-19 online pharmacies are becoming more popular due to various factors like contactless delivery of medicines, offer and discount, good customer relationship management, etc.

## **Conclusion**

E- Pharmacy in India is a new and attractive business model which can contribute positively to the healthcare system. The supply of medicine in every corner of the



country is becoming easier after e-pharmacies came into the Indian market. Due to the other advantage of e-pharmacy like a discount, good customer relationship management, contactless doorstep delivery, etc. the business model of e-pharmacy is becoming popular among the customer. But there are also various types of risk associated with e-pharmacy for example drug resistance, drug abuse, illegal reselling of medicine, etc. While conducting this survey convenience sampling technique was used. So the survey's conclusion should be used with certain limitations. Like-

- i. The sample size considered for the study is comprised of 250 respondents so it might not be a proper representation of the entire population of Silchar.
- ii. In answering the questions the respondent may have framed the answers according to their wish.
- iii. Respondents in answering some of the questions seemed very hesitant and might not have revealed the facts. This can be a major hindrance in a research study.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Figure 6 and 7: Using the pie chart seen above, it can be understood that a majority number of the sample respondent *i.e.* 58.4 percent are very much satisfied with the customer relationship management of online e-pharmacy, whereas a huge number of the sample are very much dissatisfied with the customer relationship management of offline pharmacy.

Figure 8: Using the pie chart seen above, it can be depicted that a huge number of sample respondents *i.e.* 58 percent agree with the statement that contactless delivery of medicines is a reason for influencing consumer preference for buying medicine from e-pharmacy whereas 24.8 percent of the respondent are neutral with the statement followed by 17.2 percent are disagree with the statement.

Figure 9: Using the pie chart seen above, it can be depicted that a huge number of the sample respondent are unhappy with the privacy of online pharmacies. 39.2 percent of the sample respondent are giving a one-star rating followed by two stars (33.2 percent), three stars (14 percent), four-star (10 percent), and five-star (3.6 percent).

Figure 10: Using the pie chart seen above, it can be depicted that a majority number of the sample respondents *i.e.* 71.2 percent agree with the statement that lack of a proper billing system in most offline pharmacy shops is a reason of influencing buying medicines from online e-pharmacy. Followed by 22.4 percent of the sample respondents are fully confident about the statement, only 3.2 percent are found to disagree, and 3.2 percent of the sample was neutral with the statement.