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FACTORS INFLUENCING CONSUMERS' PREFERENCE IN CHOOSING A PETROL STATION: A CASE OF PETRONAS STATIONS AT AYER KEROH, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Malaysian petroleum retailing market has rapidly grown but the competition is tough. This study aims to identify key factors affecting consumers' decision making in selecting a petrol station. It focuses on five determining factors, namely product quality, service quality, advertising and promotion, cultural values, and marketing strategy factor. Data were collected from 100 local Ayer Keroh Petronas' consumers through a questionnaire and in-depth interviews. Consumers' perceptions of Petronas petroleum and products were investigated. Results of the Mean Test indicated that product quality, with the highest mean score, was the most influencing factor which determines Petronas consumers' behavior in choosing a petrol station. This finding is different from the findings of previous studies conducted in Yogyakarta and Jakarta, Indonesia, which were used as a comparison of consumers' decision making in choosing a petrol station. More fundamentally, it is suggested that to maintain and develop its quality of products, Petronas should consider to achieve an international standard and improve its fuel quality as its competitive advantage in the petroleum industry in Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

According to An, Wilhelm, and Searcy (2011), fuel is one of the most important elements in our life. Fuel, which consists of fuel oil and gasoline or petrol, can determine the economic situation within a country, such as when we faced the increasing petrol price changing the demographic of Malaysians' lives. Additionally, when petrol price is rising, many marketers try to increase the price of their products and services which causes bad impacts to the community in terms of money spending (Brown & Reingen, 1987).

Petrol businesses are expanding rapidly worldwide. The number of petrol stations in Malaysia is growing fast. More than 1,000 petrol stations were established by early 2012 (Elliott, 2015). There are several famous petrol

station brands which are the main competitors of Petronas, such as Shell, Petron, Chevron Caltex, and BHP. Each of petrol station brands produces its own petrol with various product differentiations. For example, Shell produces V-Power as high specification fuel for vehicles, Esso Mobil produces Synergy F1, Chevron Caltex produces Techron as its Top Tier standard for fuel clean gasolines, and BHP produces Infinity 92, Infinity 97 and Infinity Diesel. Meanwhile, Petronas produces Primax 3 to replace the previous Primax 2. Along with the tight competition among petrol stations in Malaysia, price competition is also increasing intensively. However, increasing oil price and higher product costs do not hinder Petronas' expansion plans (Elliott, 2015).

Petronas, established in August 1974, operates under the terms of the Petroleum Development Act passed in October 1974. It was modeled on Pertamina, the Indonesian State Oil and Gas Company. Petronas goals are to safeguard national sovereignty over oil and gas reserves, to plan for both present and future national needs for oil and gas, and to take part in distributing and marketing petroleum and petrochemical products at reasonable prices throughout the nation (IBP, 2007). In 2011, Petronas was ranked at 11th position on the top 50 World's Most Profitable Companies by Fortune Magazine (Demos, 2011). As of the end of March 2005, Petronas Group of companies comprised 103 wholly owned subsidiaries (IBP, 2007). These companies make the wide spectrum of oil and gas activities.

Regarding Petronas' products, in recent years, the company has launched several new products. The first is Primax 3. Almost similar with Techron from Chevron, Primax 3 was developed to maintain excellent engine condition, delivering superior cleanliness to a car engine (Petronas, 2009). Petronas' second favorite is Primax 95. This gasoline is the only Petronas fuel that meets the Euro 2-M Petrol Standards. Other products from Petronas are Petronas Diesel for industrial purpose especially for direct combustion engine, Petronas Jet-A1 for jets and airplanes which has met the specification of British MoD DEF STAN 91-91 and IATA Guidance Material for Aviation Turbine Fuels (Petronas, 2009). As described, some of Petronas' products have met the international fuel standards. However, consumer behavior toward petrol station selection is quite challenging.

Due to the "local brand" mindset, consumers perceive local products as having lower quality than imported products. Thus, through this research, the quality of product's factor will be evaluated to assess the loyalty of petrol users toward Petronas products especially Petronas fuel even during price crisis. Moreover, some argue that one of the reasons why people choose Petronas is because of the variety of services, advertising and promotion. Therefore, a comparison is made to contrast Malaysian consumers decision making of a petrol station with that of the Indonesian consumers.

This study identifies which factors are the most significant and appropriate regarding this research. There are five types of factors that are related with the petrol station customers' preference: *Product Quality Factor*, *Service Quality Factor*, *Advertising and Promotion Factor*, *Marketing Strategy Factor*, and *Cultural Value Factor*. This study may help Petronas make some improvements in terms of their services, facilities and others. Furthermore, this research can also give some ideas to Petronas to generate new perspectives and marketing strategies on their products, services, advertising

and promotion, marketing strategies, and facilities. It is expected that the results of this study can help Petronas increase its awareness toward consumers' preference and allow their customers to give feedback regarding its products, services, marketing and cultural value aspect. In addition, the results of this study is expected to give Petronas some suggestions to develop its market consumers' loyalty and to enable a further exploration of this topic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer spending or consumption is a process by which goods and services are put to final used by people. Consumption was at the end of the line of economic activities that starts with an evaluation of available resources and proceeds through production of goods and services and distribution of goods and services among people and groups. Last, the goods and services are used (Goodwin, Nelson, Ackerman, & Weisskopf, 2008).

Many studies are based on social learning theory, which proposes that individuals learn general behaviors and attitudes from past experiences.

In addition, some studies were done in relation to consumers' preference. Previous studies on outlet selection focused on other sectors rather than the petroleum industry (Shah, 2008; Bell, Ho, & Tang 1998; Sven, Andreas, & Ulrike, 2007). There had been some studies on the petroleum industry although they did not focus on the determinants of outlet selection (Mumo, 2006). Only one study by Marami (2006) focused on factors that determine brand loyalty in petroleum industry. By this, research examining consumers' preference in choosing petrol stations is still needed.

Consumers tend to assess the quality of products or services based on various informational dimensions associated with the products. Some of these dimensions are aspects intrinsic to the products such as after sales services, knowledge, brand name, design, and promotion (Haron, Ismail, Ganesan, Sankaran & Gautama, 2018). Moreover, media, advertising, cultural values, marketing strategies are also factors that influence consumers to choose petrol stations. These choices of behaviors were particularly relevant to the attitudes of interest (Ajzen, 2008).

According to Sheth and Solomon (2014), consumer behavior refers to mental and physical activities undertaken by household and business consumers that result in decisions and actions to pay for, purchase, and use products and services, which consumers define as payers and users. For example, a child may be the user but not the buyer or the payer, or in gift giving where the buyer and the payer are not the users (Sheth & Solomon, 2014). As stated by Solomon, Russell-Bennett and Previte (2012), "consumer behavior" is the process involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use, or dispose of products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy their needs and desires. On the other hand, Hawkins, Mothersbaugh, and Best (2006) define consumer behavior as the study about individuals, groups or organization and the processes they use to select, secure, use and dispose of products, services, experiences or ideas to satisfy their needs and wants.

Consumer behavior is a process where the buyer will eventually make purchase decisions. Some important points can be drawn from the definitions of consumer behavior: (1) behavior may occur and happen either for the individuals, or a group; (2) consumer behavior involves the study of the

process of consumers obtaining the product, purchasing the product, disposing the product (Setiadi, 2010). Ultimately, research on consumer behavior is a top priority for marketers both in third world countries (Albaum & Peterson, 1984; Kanwar & Pagiavlas, 1992) and in Eastern Europe (Kaynak & Samli, 1986). Many researchers studied the selected elements of consumer behavior in one or many cultures.

Five influencing factors are explored and assessed in this study, namely: products, services, culture, marketing strategy, and advertising and promotion. Firstly, according to Gerard (2004), a product is more than a physical item; it is a bundle of satisfactions or utilities that a buyer receives. In other words, a product is the sum of the physical and psychological satisfaction it provides to the user (Gerard, 2004). Espejel, Fandos, and Flavian (2007) believed that consumers relied on signals, both extrinsic and intrinsic attributes, to solve their asymmetric information problem regarding product quality. In this sense, particular color, flavor, smell, appearance, and shapes combination as intrinsic attributes were expected to enhance consumers' product quality perception, while extrinsic attributes such as brand, denomination of origin, and image also influenced consumer satisfaction, loyalty and purchasing intention (Espejel et al., 2007).

According to Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler (2009), services were deeds, performances and processes provided or coproduced by one entity or person for and with another entity or person. A service provision comprised a sequence of activities that did not result in ownership of the outcome. Grönroos (2001) suggested that service quality consisted of three dimensions, technical, functional and image, and that image functions as a filter in service quality perception. According to these researchers, in most services, customers formulated their perception of actual service quality during their interaction with the contact personnel of the service provider. It was further suggested that both service quality and service satisfaction a firm the importance of the quality of customer and employee interactions with service (Kassim & Bojei, 2002).

According to Johnson, Lenartowicz, and Apud (2006), a major challenge of doing business was to adapt effectively to different cultures. Such adaptation required an understanding of cultural diversity, perceptions, stereotypes, and values. According to Yoo, Boland Jr., Lyytinen, and Majchrzak (2012), culture helps to organize collective life by providing solutions to problems of everyday activities. It guides individuals by reducing the number of available interpretations of an event or person and in this way it is giving order to the world. It is this sense of order that people transmit via cultural values to new cultural members, which can be employees in an organization, or migrants in a host country (Baldwin, Faulkner, Hecht, & Lindsley, 2006; Roe & Ester, 1999). A culture value existed anywhere where a group of people shared a distinctive set of beliefs, norms and customs. As pointed out by Friestad and Wright (1994), fundamental cultural values factor such as religion, nation identity and loyalties, values and customs were known to be important influences on purchasing process. Izard (1992) identified culture value as a culture preference, ethnic taste, attitudes and the lifestyle. According to Spencer-Oatey (2012), culture was a social group such as family and social roles or statuses.

Fourthly, marketing strategy was a marketing logic by which the business units were aimed to achieve profitable relationships and marketing objectives (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

Lastly, the fifth factor was advertising and promotion which was defined as campaigns that attested to management's conviction that unified themes not only spur for short-term sales but also helped building long-term product identities (Agrawal, 1995). Advertising audiences were often relatively influential, either as members of the middle and upper social economic groups or as specialized professionals in a given industry (Dean & Biswas, 2001). Therefore, advertising may be used to enhance a company's reputation or prestige, or to reach opinion of people.

Consumers' decision making in selecting a petrol station may vary depended on the location or the country of the consumers. A research conducted at local petrol stations in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, suggested that promotion and price were giving a positive impact to consumers (Ratnaningrum, 2016) while a research conducted in Jakarta, Indonesia, indicated that location guidance on the roads influenced consumers in selecting a particular petrol station (Farizal & Putra, 2016).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research used mixed method (quantitative and qualitative approaches). For both approaches, respondents were asked to fill the questionnaire, including the questions. The independent variables used in this research were: "Product Quality Factor", "Service Quality Factor", "Marketing Strategies Factor", "Advertising and Promotion Factor", and "Cultural Values Factor", whilst the dependent variable was Petronas consumers' preference in selecting petrol station.

The population of this study was Petronas' customers who lived in Ayer Keroh, Malaysia and the survey was conducted at two branches, namely Ayer Keroh Height and Melacca International Trade Center (MITC) in 2012. This study used convenience sampling method to collect the data. Data were gathered by using the questionnaire that contained questions related to five factors. The evaluation of each factors used Likert scales (1-5) with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. There were 100 respondents who answered the questions. The questions were divided into 4 sections, A, B, C, and D.

The method of analysis data in this research used the influence to see if there are relationships or influences of products, services, cultural values, marketing strategy, and advertising and promotion on the point of view about consumers' behavior in selecting petrol station as shown in Figure 1. The analysis method included *Mean* test. Data from questionnaires were analyzed using correlation analysis as part of the statistical process by using SPSS software. The program provided an opportunity to analyze and interpret the results in a numerical form that supported conclusions and decision making.

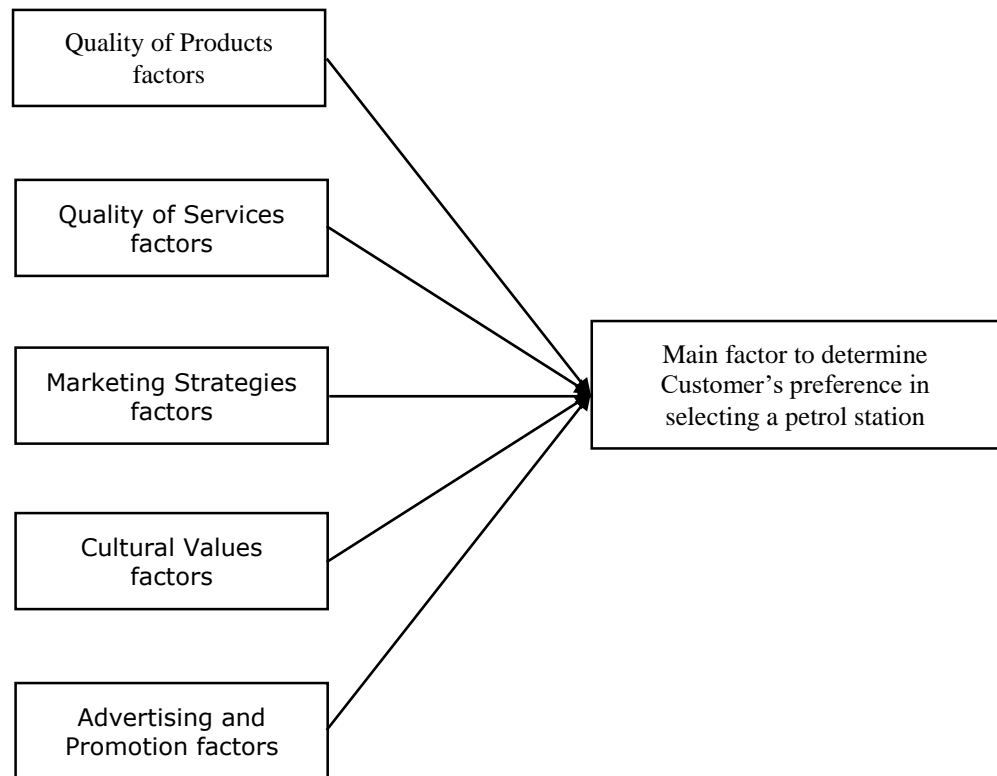


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Demographic aspects such as gender, age, marital status, education, professional status, income level were the first questions examined in this study. Figure 1 showed the sample composition based on gender.

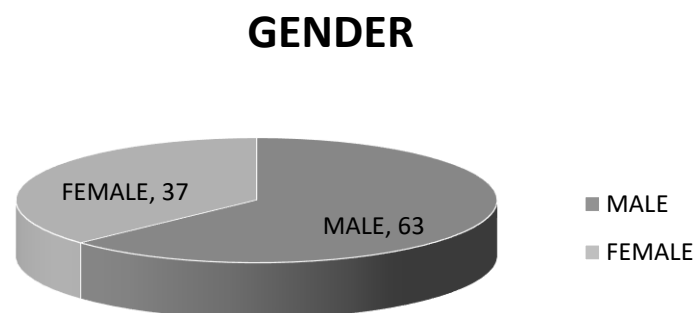


Figure 2. Gender of Petronas' customers

As Figure 2 indicates, 63% of the respondents were males and 37% were females; from these percentages, the respondents were classified into age groups: 45% were below 25 years old, 21% were 26 to 30 years old, 18% were between 31 and 40 years old, and 14% were between 41 and 50 years old, and the rest were above 51 years old. From the demographic aspect, the respondents were also grouped based on marital status, 37% were married, 58% were single and 5% were divorced.

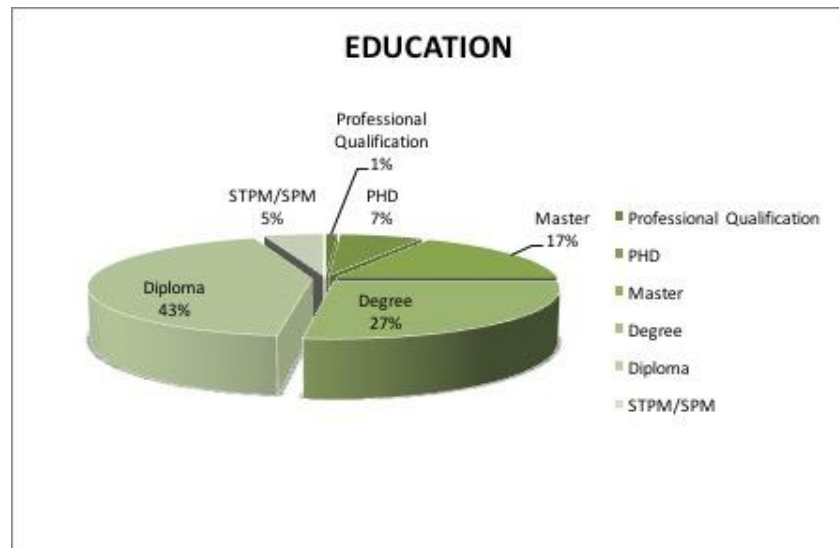


Figure 3. Education Level of Petronas' customers

As illustrated in Figure 3, most respondents were diplomas and bachelor degree graduates, while small percentages of them had a master's degree and higher education. It was also indicated that most respondents were students (48%), and the second large group was self-employed respondents (15%). Other respondents work as educators, managers, doctors, and unemployed.

The respondents' income level per month showed that 50 percent of the respondents received below 1500 Ringgit Malaysia (RM). The largest consumers' occupation group was students with the average monthly income were below 1500 RM. This leads to the assumption that most of the Petronas' consumers were students.

To measure the quality of products factor, the respondents were asked to rank the qualities of petrol fuel, and some other factors as described in table 1.

Table 1. *Quality of Products Factor*

Items	Mean	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Either Agree Or Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Conclusion
Qualities of petrol fuel	4.68				32	68	Most agree
Qualities of others	4.19			18	45	37	Less agree
PETRONAS brand name							
products							
Variety of products	4.01			28	43	29	Less agree
Effect to vehicle engine	4.58				42	58	More agree
Price of the product	4.47				53	47	More agree

As Table 1 shows, consumers' perception toward quality of products factor was positive. It can be assumed that respondents agreed that it was a factor that influenced consumers in selecting Petronas as their preferred petrol station based on quality of products.

Table 2. *Quality of Service Factor*

	Mean	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Either Agree Or Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Conclusion
Qualities of services	4.52				48	52	Most agree
Variety of services	4.40			11	38	51	More agree
"Mesra" service theme	4.19			23	35	42	More agree
Free water and air for tire	4.06			28	38	34	Less agree
Car wash provided	2.65		58	19	23		Not agree

Table 3. *Marketing Strategy Factor*

	Mean	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Either Agree Or Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Conclusion
Contests and Rewards	3.87			43	27	30	Less agree
Partnership with F1	3.49			63	25	12	Less agree
Convenient facilities such as diffable toilet	4.08			23	46	31	More agree
Competitive Price	4.22			15	48	37	More agree
Strategic location	4.37			9	45	46	Most Agree

From the data presented in Table 2, it was obvious that Petronas' petrol stations did not provide car wash facility which was one of the consumers' demands. The mean average of marketing strategy factor showed 4.01 which was above 3.00. This means that strategic location as one of the marketing strategies affected consumers' decision in selecting a petrol station (see Table 3). Furthermore, Table 4 presents consumers' preference of advertising

and promotion based on how much those sub-factors may influence their decision in selecting a petrol station, indicating that advertising and promotion also influenced consumers in selecting a petrol station.

Table 4. *Advertising and Promotion Factor*

	Mean	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Either Agree Or Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Conclusion
Television Ads	4.19			17	47	36	Most Agree
Radio Ads	3.2		40	34	26		Less Agree
Banners, brochures	2.79		39	43	18		Not Agree
Point Rewards	4.01			31	37	32	More Agree
Cash Back Rewards	3.18		30	25	42	3	Less Agree

Table 5. *Cultural Value Factor*

	Mean	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Either Agree Or Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Conclusion
Consumers' Knowledge toward petrol station brand	4.06			18	58	24	Less agree
Concern of Malaysian products	4.57			3	37	60	Most agree
Friends, relatives, word-of-mouth	2.96		43	18	39		Not agree
Family influence	4.16		12	5	38	45	More agree
Famous brand image	4.16			22	40	38	More agree

The fifth factor evaluated was Cultural Value. As part of the situational problem factor or environmental factor, cultural value was determined by several parameters as shown in Table 5. It was apparent that commonly Malaysians prefer to use Malaysian brands, there was a probability that Malaysians had a high sense of nationality.

To assess respondents' preference of fuel stations, additional questions were asked by using two opposite options: agree and disagree. From the data obtained, 64% responded mentioned that cleanliness influenced their preference while service hospitality scored 61%. Strategic location and quality of products scored 66% and 65%. This means over 50% of the respondents agreed that Petronas petrol stations' location was strategic and convenient, making them easier to access.

Table 6. *Frequency of Visiting Petronas' Petrol Station per Month*

		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Valid Percent</i>	<i>Cumulative Percent</i>
Valid	Daily	30	30.0	30.0	30.0
	Once a week	17	17.0	17.0	47.0
	2-3 Times a week	40	40.0	40.0	87.0
	Once a Month	7	7.0	7.0	94.0
	2-3 Times a month	6	6.0	6.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 7. *Preferable Time (Day) to Visit Petronas' Petrol Station*

		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Valid Percent</i>	<i>Cumulative Percent</i>
Valid	Weekdays	34	34.0	34.0	34.0
	Weekends	23	23.0	23.0	57.0
	Every time Needed	43	43.0	43.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

From the observation data presented in Table 6 and 7, it can be argued that normally consumers do not have an exact schedule to visit a petrol station. The behavior of purchasing petrol fuel depended on their cars' need. To understand more about the preference of consumers, a survey was also conducted to identify what consumers did at Petronas petrol stations other than filling fuel.

PURPOSE OF GOING TO PETROL STATION:	PERCENTAGE (%):
Fuel	95
Contests/rewards	83
Purchasing other products(lubricants)	80
Using Toilet	74
Using ATM	18

Table 8. *Consumers' Purposes of Going to Petronas' Petrol Station*

As Table 8 shows, 95% of consumers visited Petronas petrol stations because they wanted to buy fuel for their cars. Other factors that scored high included contests and rewards, and purchasing other products with scores of 83% and 80%.

Table 9. *Importance Rating of Factors Influencing Consumer's Preference of Petrol Station*

NO	STATEMENT	MEAN	RATING
1)	Quality of Products factors	4.38	1
2)	Quality of Services factors	3.96	4
3)	Marketing Strategies factors	4.01	2
4)	Cultural Values factors	3.98	3
5)	Advertising and Promotion factors	3.47	5

The advertising and promotion was ranked the lowest at 3.47 where the respondents agreed with the fact that quality of product was the most important factor in choosing a petrol station with a mean score of 4.38.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study is to examine how product quality, service quality, advertising and promotion, marketing strategy, and cultural value factors affect consumer behavior when selecting a petrol station, and obtain an understanding of Petronas consumers' decision-making process. The research shows that consumers visited petrol stations whenever they need to buy fuel for their vehicles, 2 or 3 times per week. Due to this reason, to keep consumers' loyalty, it is very important to understand what the most influencing factor is and use it as a competitive advantage.

The results of the empirical study indicate that the five factors influence consumers' decision-making process in petrol station selection. However, not all factors give the same mean score, meaning that the influence of each factor is not the same. The results show that quality of product is the most important factor affecting decision making when selecting a petrol station.

This result is different from the results of previous studies conducted in Indonesia. Research conducted in Yogyakarta showed that promotion and price are the most influencing factors for Indonesian consumers, while Jakarta's consumers are influenced by petrol stations' locations.

Since quality of product gives a significant impact to decision-making, it can be suggested that Petronas should maintain and develop its quality of products. Petronas should consider achieving an international standard and improving its best in class fuel quality as its competitive advantage in the petroleum industry in Malaysia. Future research dealing with this topic should enlarge the sample. Additionally, benchmark data from main competitors are also needed by research investigating the topic.

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