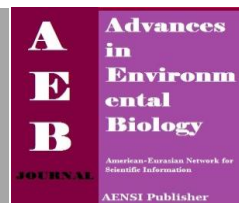




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Malaysians Perceptions Toward Proton Car

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ABSTRACT

Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional Berhad (PROTON), Malaysian automobile company, was incorporated in 1983 to manufacture, assemble and sell motor vehicles and related products. PROTON has produced its first Malaysia car, the PROTON Saga model in year 1985 by then Malaysian Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Mahathir Mohamed, the person who had coined the idea of national car. The establishment of national car in nearly 3 decades ago needs to be re-examined by Malaysian public as a major customer, the sustainability of the car in the market. The purpose of this study is to investigate Malaysian public perceptions toward Proton cars. Four main factors to be established in the present study include brand, price, advertisement and satisfactory level of the proton users. These factors were believed play a vital role in establishing an overall perceptions of Malaysian customers toward the car. Research methodology undertaken in the study is questionnaire and observation. 100 respondents are participated in the survey. The main findings of the study showed that all factors in advertisement have a positive correlation to consumers' perceptions. Conclusively, the study on Proton cars could help this automobile industry could consider the findings of the study to further improve their marketing.

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INTRODUCTION

Automobile industry becomes more competitive and always facing challenges. Globalisation allows the industry to penetrate the local and regional markets. The top names such as Honda, Toyota, Rovers, Volkswagen, Hyundai, Ford, BMW, Mercedes, Chery, to name few, have dominating the customers' mind and they shall threat the local products. More people concerns about quality, after sale-service, fuel consumption, environmental friendly, comfortability, size and price of their car. This study tries to reveal some analysis of the PROTON cars performance based upon customers' views.

Problem statement:

Contemporarily, there are a various choices of cars available in the Malaysian market. As one of the major player in the automobile industry, PROTON is facing many challenges and competitions. In order to sustain the popularity of the national cars amongst local people, the researchers have an intention to re-examine public's opinions and perceptions toward it. An investigation is necessary to clarify the choice made by the public's views toward Proton. Since Malaysia is the most advance developing state, the study provides a scope to understand the customers buying behaviour towards PROTON cars. And the implementation of minimum salary amongst employees, the transformation of economic vision which encourage more businesses and investors, it affects the household income of the citizens. This research intends to re-look customers' perceptions towards Proton.

Aim & Objectives:

Generally speaking, PROTON sales are less performing for the past few years though it ranks second best national car seller. The aim of this study is to improve the sales of the car. Findings shall allow PROTON to deeply consider new perspectives of public as customers towards new way of doing marketing, or perhaps re-branding the models.

This study focuses on four (4) objectives:

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- (a) To identify the various attributes of PROTON cars that influences on an individual's choice among alternatives.
- (b) To identify the level of brand loyal customers.
- (c) To identify the effect of car price towards customers perceptions.
- (d) To identify the attractiveness of the PROTON advertisement.

Research questions:

There are six main questions listed in this study:

- (a) What is the customer's level of satisfaction towards PROTON cars?
- (b) What are the reasons for the brand preference over the competing brands and to find out the customer perception on various attributes of the products?
- (c) What are the factors influencing the choice for a PROTON car?
- (d) How effective is PROTON marketing strategy?
- (e) What is the role of gender, age and religion on customer's intention to purchase PROTON cars?
- (f) What are the recommendation customers have for PROTON?

Significance of the study:

There are so many vital benefits that we can get from this study. The first benefit is PROTON will be able to improve their marketing style in order to attract more customers. This is because based on the recommendations by customers, PROTON will be able to know what they are lacking at. Furthermore it will give opportunity to other companies to know what are the criteria's that a customer's looks for when they choose an automobile and what are their expectations in purchasing the car.

On the other hand, in the future, if we want to start a business and sell automobile, we have to begin with customers' favourable. The study could help industry to see the behavioural patterns of the potential customers towards cars. Moreover, these findings will also tell us the buying patterns of customers and level of brand's loyalty amongst the PROTON users.

Literature review:

Government of Malaysia has always give focus to the development of PROTON. Some assistances – financial (at the early period of the establishment), promotion, marketing etc, are given to this national automobile entity. For example, in the year 2010, with the help of the authority, PROTON has increased its sales to 6%.

Rajan [35] reports "... PROTON is basically a large manufacturing company which has a high capacity of service departments. Only 80% of service centres is belongs to PROTON and the other 20% is outsourced to other dealers such as PROTON EDAR, and EON. Being a large manufacturing company, it has many problems on its service departments this is due to the satisfaction expressed by customers. This is because customers still tend to have the same problem after few months of servicing the vehicles."

Customer's attitude:

Attitude is a predisposition or a tendency to respond positively or negatively towards a certain idea, object, person, or situation. Attitude influences an individual's choice of action, and responses to challenges, incentives, and rewards. Bagozzi *et al.* [5] says " (Attitude). ..is a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour." In the context of this study, consumers' general attitudes toward PROTON car shall be an important point to understand intention for customers to buy PROTON cars. Rajan [35] noted that there are some negative attitudes of the public toward PROTON service which considered as at poor level.

International-related branding:

Influences the perceptions. Kinra [30] reveals his research findings on this matter, whereby foreign brands became significant factor influencing consumers' attitudes and preferences as it was correlated highly with "quality" and "status and esteem". This type of attitude can be considered as "ethnocentrism". "Consumer ethnocentrism" is defined as the beliefs held by consumers about the appropriateness, indeed morality, of purchasing foreign made products. Baker and Michie [7] realised that British car driver's perception and attitude towards foreign cars - Honda, Hyundai, PROTON, and Toyota are more positive as compare to Rover – British automobile producer. Contradictorily, findings from Schuiling *et al* [37] across four largest European countries - United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Italy showed that the local brands benefit from strong brand equity and it has higher consumer awareness than international brands do.

Price consciousness:

Can be defined as the market segment or buyers who seek best prices which are also known as the lowest price [13]. Lichtenstein *et al.* [13] have conducted an examination of seven price-related constructs and separated them according to their positive or negative effect on consumers' purchasing behaviour. Rajendran and Tellis [36] noted that the lowest price is an important cue for a reference price, whereas over time, the past prices of the actual brand seem to become the most important cue.

Brands and branding:

Brand is defined as a specific name, symbol or design or, more usually some combination of these and that is used to distinguish a particular seller's product [14]. Aaker [1] asserts that brand is a complex symbol and presents six levels of meaning – attribute, benefit, value, culture, personality and user. Consumers use brands as cues to make decisions to purchase or try products [16]. Few examples of intrinsic cues are taste and design, while extrinsic cues include country of origin, brand, and price [2]. Doyle [14] asserts that brands are bought by consumers for emotional as well as functional reasons. It is also said that people use brands to show off their lifestyles, interests, values or wealth. Not only customers choose brands that they perceive as meeting their needs, but also for gaining a sense of belonging, and esteem.

Value consciousness:

Refers to the quality one gets for the price one pays and that if consumers see the price as a monetary sacrifice, they will be more conscious about value [13]. Perceived value is a primary factor influencing purchase intention [9]. Value conscious consumers often use shopping lists, compare unit prices, watch the checkout scanner, and check prices on items. In a private brand study in food and home appliance in Korea attempted to integrate consumer perception factors to comprehend better consumer attitude and purchase intention by [8] found that depending on the product category, contribution of the factors vary. There were four factors that were used in the study which were price consciousness, value consciousness, perceived quality variability and consumer innovativeness.

Conceptual Framework:

Currently there are many car brands in Malaysia which include PROTON and Perodua. Both are national automobile industries. This study consists of people's perception identification, cars' preferences criteria, PROTON marketing strategy re-examination and loyalty program. Taking into account these ideas, the theoretical and methodological proposal of the research is based on the following hypothesis:

- (a) Customers choose PROTON cars because it is able to fulfil customer's requirements. This is because when a single product is able to satisfy a customer, they will prefer to select that product. Ha has expressed the view that satisfaction is a crucial factor of the customer performance and attitude. In the example, the researcher gets the data from different countries. Even though the culture is different, the result of the conclusion is the same.
- (b) The marketing strategy of PROTON can be improved to attract more customers. This is because we believe that the current PROTON advertisements and promotions are less attractive compare to their competitors.
- (c) Brand image play an important role in brand building, especially in customer dependability. As Reichheld (quoted in Hsieh and Li) perceptively state that preferable brand image will lead consumers to conceive a perception of an organization's public relationship practice, which matches the corporate reputation better. With this in mind, customers are more likely to retain optimistic faith, attitude, and action. It must be therefore be acknowledged that customer loyalty grows fast through approving brand image. Hence there are many customers who are loyal towards PROTON brand. This is why PROTON is able to continue its sales.
- (d) Price has been studied extensively in the literature and regarded as one of the most important kinds of information customers use when they make a purchase decision and plays an important role in affecting customer's behaviour. Price consciousness is defined as: "the degree to which the customers focuses exclusively on paying low prices" [20]. Customers purchase PROTON cars because it is cheaper than other foreign brands in the market.

*Methodology & Sampling:**Questionnaire:*

A set of questionnaire was developed and comprises 14 items which were allocated into four (4) parts: demographic profile of the respondents, public's views toward PROTON; customers' satisfaction level; and recommendation or suggestion. Respondents need to tick given 5-Points Likert scales. The self-administered questions have been tested their reliability status, and in general all questions are at 0.87 Cronbach-Alpha point. The selection of 100 Kangarian-respondents is based on stratified random sampling method.

Observation:

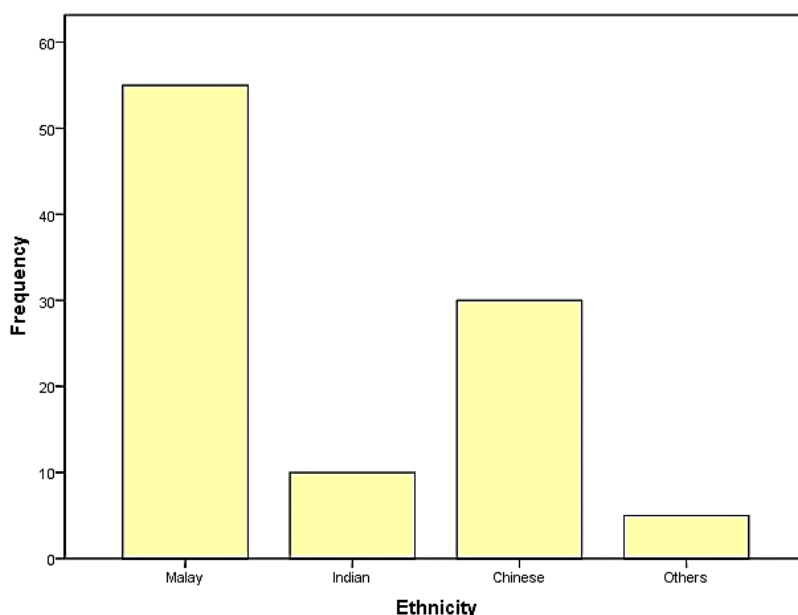
Method was also used to see the patterns of PROTON's popularity. Researchers took several photos on car parks in Kangar City during working days setting. Then they have calculated the number cars available i.e Proton car and non-Proton.

Results:

The photos undertaken showed that there are 40 PROTON cars (53.3%) over 75 parked-cars on the Parking Lot 1 and 30 (37.5%) over 80 on the Parking Lot 2. As a result, the ratio of PROTON cars and non-PROTON cars is 5 or less to 10.

(a) Demography characteristics:

This study has involved 100 respondents and 47% of them are male and 53% are female. In term of age range, 74% of them are below 31 years old, 23% are 32 to 41 years old, and only 3% can be categorised as above 42.



Graph 1: Respondents by Ethnicity.

Graph 1 show the distribution of respondents according to ethnic group. 55% of the respondents, are Malays, 30% Chinese, 10% Indian and 5% others.

Table 1: Marital status.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Married	42	42.0	42.0	42.0
Unmarried	58	58.0	58.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

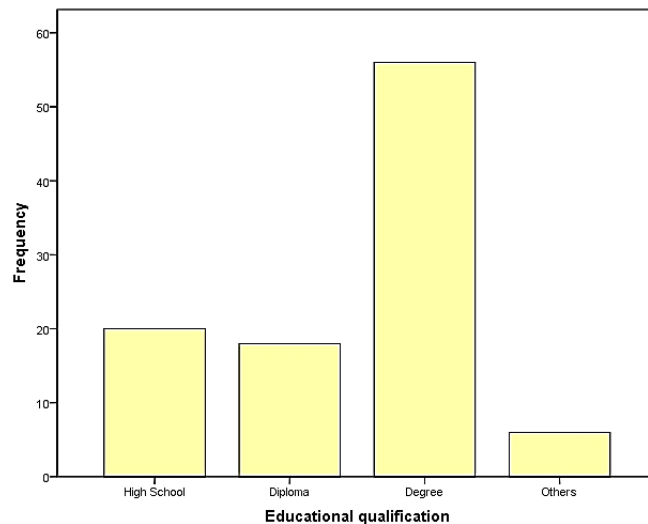
Table 1 shows the marital status on the respondents – 58% of them were single and 42% were married.

Graph 2 explains education qualification of the 100 respondents. Most of the respondents (56%) have degree, 20% have a high school certificate. While about 18 respondents has a diploma qualification. The balance of 6 respondents has other qualifications.

Table 2: Occupations.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Government servant	19	19.0	19.0	19.0
Private Sector	67	67.0	67.0	86.0
Student	14	14.0	14.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

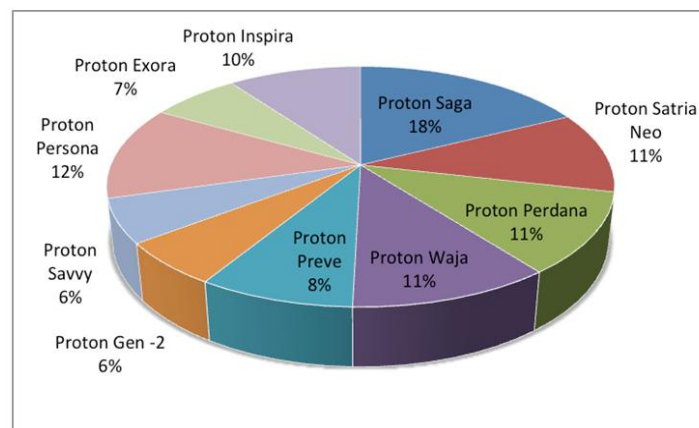
More than two-thirds of the respondents working in the private sector, 19% government employees and 14% are students. More than half of them (55%) had a monthly income of more than RM2, 000. 33% have an income of RM2, 000. And 12 respondents had more than RM5, 000.



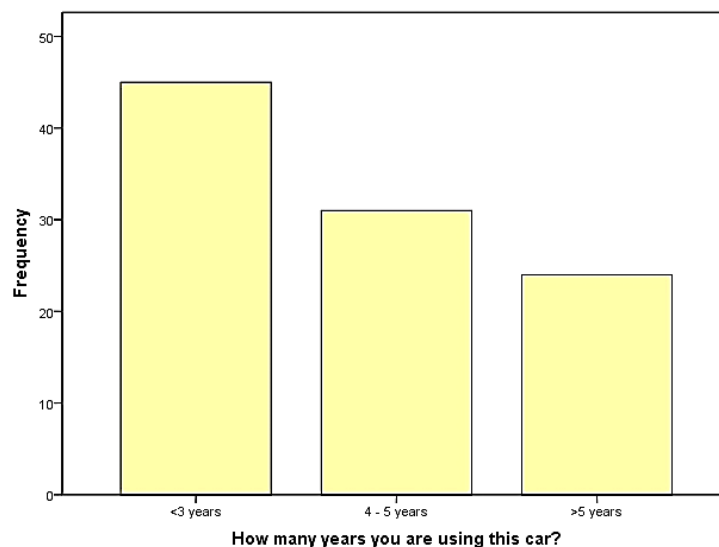
Graph 2: Education qualification.

(b) Issues on PROTON:

Graph 3 reveals the ownership distribution of Proton car models by respondents. The respondents are allowed to choose more than one car. The total number of Proton car owned by the respondents is 119, and the most popular model (18%) is PROTON Saga. Persona model ranks number two in the list – 12%, and Satria Neo, Perdana, Waja – 11% respectively. The least popular models are Gen-2 (7%), , Savvy (7%), Exora (7%) and Inspira (10%).



Graph 3: Models of PROTON car owned.



Graph 4: How many years you are using this car?

Graph 4 shows the number of years of the usage of PROTON cars. 45% of the respondents owned their car for below 3 years, 31 respondents owned between 4 to 5 years and only 24% used it more than 5 years.

Table 3: Do your family members own a PROTON car?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No	17	17.0	17.0	17.0
Yes	83	83.0	83.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

83% of the 100 respondents claimed that their family members has also own PROTON car. Only 17% of the respondents denied such allegation.

Table 4: Do you think PROTON cars are serving better than other brand cars?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No	55	55.0	55.0	55.0
Yes	45	45.0	45.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

55% of them noted that PROTON does not serve better than other brands. While the other 45% claimed that PROTON serve better than other brands.

Table 5: Do you think PROTON has a wide variety of cars?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No	26	26.0	26.0	26.0
Yes	74	74.0	74.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

75 respondents showed their agreement that PROTON has a wide variety of cars. On the other hand 26% of them said that PROTON does not have a wide variety of cars.

Table 6: Do you think PROTON cars are worth their price?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No	35	35.0	35.0	35.0
Yes	65	65.0	65.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Nearly two-third of the respondents (65%) shows their satisfaction toward PROTON car has a value-for-money model. And the 35% put their contradictory stand.

Table 7: If opportunity arises in the future to buy a car, would you prefer to buy a PROTON car?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No	55	55.0	55.0	55.0
Yes	45	45.0	45.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

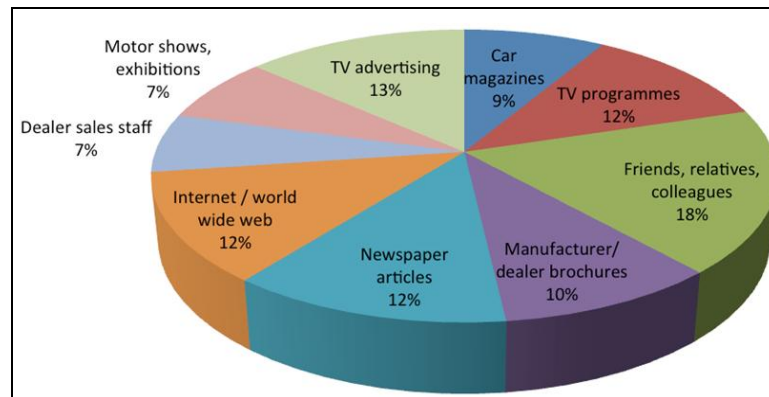
Despite its popularity and positive views about PROTON, 55% of the respondents showed their less interest to purchase another PROTON car in the future. Less than half of the respondents (45%) show their willingness to do so.

Table 8: What are the factors you considered while purchasing your car?.

Ranks	Factors	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
1	Quality	4.36	5.00	.85
1	Safety	4.36	5.00	.86
3	Comfort	4.28	4.00	.84
4	Performance	4.26	4.00	.89
5	Petrol Consumption	4.09	4.00	.95
6	Maintenance Cost	4.05	4.00	.82
7	Price	4.04	4.00	.82
8	Design	3.95	4.00	.96
8	Interiors	3.95	4.00	.82
9	Exteriors	3.94	4.00	.84
10	Size	3.76	4.00	.87
11	Brand Name	3.65	4.00	.89

Table 8 listed the ranking of criteria that favourable to customer when considering to purchase car. The study shows that mean marked by respondents on twelve (12) factors ranges between 3.65 and 4.36 (5-point Likert scale). However, the top most favourable are Quality (4.36), Safety (4.36), Comfortability (4.28) and

Performance (4.26). And the least ones are Brand (3.65), Size (3.76), Exteriors (3.94) and Interior (3.95). The standard deviation (SD) value ranges between 0.84 and 0.96, which can be interpreted as good. were within -3.0 to 3.0.



Graph 5: Which of the following information sources did you use to find out about PROTON cars?

The last and not the least is advertisement practiced by PROTON. Respondents were allowed to tick more than one advert or sources. The total number 366 mentions has been recorded. Graph 5 reveals the multitasking of advert tools used by this company as admitted by its customers. The most influence adverts or sources include friends/colleagues/relatives (18%), television (13%), newspaper (12%), internet (12%). And the least influence are exhibitions (7%) and salesperson (7%).

Discussions, Recommendations & Conclusion:

The results from the study reveal the satisfaction level of customers towards PROTON car were at average high status. However, the respondents show their uncertainty whether or not to recommend PROTON car to their friends and relatives and more surprisingly, they themselves have a tendency to switch over to other brands in future. Such notions could signal some pro-active actions are needed in PROTON industry.

The study also gives picture to the readers many PROTON car users own the car less than 3 years and they also claimed that most of their immediate family members become owner of PROTON car. And on the other hand, they commented poor service provided by PROTON. This is could be said that the brand heritage plays its role on the quality perceptions. The relationship between brand heritage and perceived product quality, as observed by Mats Urde [33], occurs because brand heritage can be perceived externally to be relevant and valuable by customers. In short, if the heritage of a brand embraces certain values such a quality, those values will be perceived and valued by the customers. We may conclude that PROTON cars have lack of its product quality on its brand heritage though it can be said that they do admitted that PROTON cars still do have a certain quality. Such brand loyalty has become valuable assets for many multinational companies. In a cluttered marketplace, brands stand up as the source of differentiation for providers of products and services that can be quickly tracked with easy access to technology and information [32].

Generally speaking, customers seem to favour car which has 12 factors: price, quality, safety, interiors, exteriors, performance, comfort, maintenance cost, brand name, design, size and petrol consumption. However, the top seven (7) factors have been selected by respondents - price, quality, safety, performance, comfort, maintenance cost and petrol consumption. Such preferable notion is in line with Choy Johnn Yee [11] view i.e “when customers want to purchase a car, they look for reliability and durability of the cars”. This means they think that those with high quality cars are those car which adopt advance technology and have high performance which lead to longer lifetime of the car. They also believe that high quality cars have good safety systems, comfortable and help them save unnecessary repairing cost. Besides that, with the continues increment of the petrol price, many customers are becoming very concern about the petrol price. Based on Chang [9], and Jaffe [22], people have to cut down on their budgets due to the increment of the petrol price, and some tend to use more public transportation than to drive their cars to work. Hence customers tend to find cars that has low petrol consumptions, which are mostly Perodua cars which are more fuel saving compare to other brands.

In term of sources of advertisement for PROTON cars, respondents claimed that they get their information about the cars from various tools – friends/relatives/ colleagues (the most popular), television, newspapers, internet, salespersons, exhibition. Hence PROTON should improve their marketing strategy. In which they can emphasize on product qualities that can be easily perceived or observed by consumers, especially feature, serviceability and aesthetics aspects such as petrol tank size, number of seats, type of engine, type of fuel, number of service centre, and design. They can also do as what is being suggested by Kha Ching Wee [29], that

is to use IKEA as a benchmark example, by emphasizing its Malaysia identity in the global market to differentiate itself and prevent itself from becoming “just another car”.

There several recommendations that PROTON can consider in the future for improvements. The first thing is they should improve the quality of their car. This includes the body parts, technology, and engine. As for the body part, this includes the raw materials used to create the body parts. Due to this, Kha Ching Wee [29], noted that PROTON tends to produce body parts which are not strong, due to its low quality raw materials used. Hence if they would improve the quality of the raw materials, they would be able to produce solid body parts that don't dent easily. As for the technology used, PROTON should always equip the latest technologies in to their production, such using digital meters. They should also ensure that the technology they use have a long life span. This is because based on Rajan [35], PROTON cars are synonym with its power window problematic. Therefore if PROTON is able to use a new technology to solve that problem and make sure it has a life span, whereby if any problem were to occur before the life span, the customers can claim for warranty. This will increase the trust of the customers. As for the engine, PROTON should start to create new cars with high performance and fuel saver. This is because many youngsters prefer cars with high performance and also that does not consume much petrol. Hence by doing so, they would be able to capture the future market.

PROTON should also reduce the price of their car, this is because as a local manufacture, they should not be selling their product at a high price. On top of it their spare parts are very costly and almost the same price foreign products such as Toyota, Honda and Mazda. Based on Choy Johnn Yee, [11], the results of decreasing of car prices can increase the competitiveness of Malaysia automobile industry, and this will become their challenge to compete effectively with those foreign car makers among ASEAN countries. Therefore PROTON should instead create car that are for average monthly income earners and charge the car price at a reasonable price.

PROTON should consider the important of new innovations in the car design. The company needs to look at the continuously innovative design of Japanese Honda and Korean Hyundai creations. This is because the new generation prefer car that looks more futuristic, hence PROTON can try to design cars using that team as a guild line. Besides that they could also come out with better looking interiors as customers nowadays prefer new looks than the old traditional interior style.

Finally, PROTON has to do improvement in their marketing techniques. Hossein Nezakati [18] put a strong notes on this matter - marketing strategy plays and important role for a manufacturing company. For example, IKEA incorporates its history and identity into the company's branding strategy and has successfully differentiated itself from the competition, certainly, with marketing strategy that focuses on product innovation. Hence, PROTON should also try use the same method.

Direction for future study:

- (a) Further on-going studies or researches need to be proceeded as often as possible to cope with the contemporary situation of the automobile industries. The complexity of human needs and wants and the competitors – local or international, fast innovative technology and design, reflects the urgency to do networking with engineering universities – Research & Development division.
- (b) As there are some limitations of the study transpired such as sampling parameter includes only City of Kangar, Perlis state of Malaysia, it is good if we may extend it to all states of Malaysia. The results may or may not similar to this study as demographic profiles, cultures, values, or beliefs system of respondents are differed.

In conclusion, this research was able to answer the objectives. Factors price, quality, safety, interiors, exteriors, performance, comfort, maintenance cost, brand name, design, size and petrol consumption of PROTON car influence the choices of customers. Besides that, the advertisement of PROTON was moderately attractive. It also could be seen that people would still buy PROTON due to their brand loyalty towards PROTON cars.

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