

# **PURCHASE INTENTION TOWARDS PRIVATE LABEL PRODUCTS**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Global perception towards the private label (PL) has improved recently, but the market share distribution among regions is still distinct. The distribution is higher in developed region of the world such as Australia, Western Europe and North America. Meanwhile, shares in developing nations are improving especially in the Asia Pacific regions. Similarly, PL brand has achieved a significant influence in Southeast Asia market especially in Malaysia. Nevertheless, retailers with PL products face strong competition from national brands. Retailers are looking for factors that influence consumer purchase intention towards PL brands to create and expand their market share. Culture does play important role in PL acceptance. Hofstede Cultural Dimension Theory (2015), which some, may be applied in retail research. One of the theories tested within this research is the uncertainty avoidance. Retailers nowadays apply dual format strategies for their PL brands pricing schemes, which is one of the differentiation and low price strategies. For example, Tesco PL brands have two distinct categories which are Tesco Value and Tesco Finest products. It distinguishes PL brand products attributes between low-price versus high quality respectively. Outspread PL or store brands across the globe are mutually beneficial for both retailers and consumers compared to ultimate monopolization of national brands. The retailers, which supplied their own PL brands, will gain in terms of bargaining power over supplier, larger market share on the proportion of item sales on their retail floors and customers' loyalty which are created as the products are exclusive only from the retailer's store. Meanwhile, customers are able to enjoy products with in-par quality of national brands at competitive prices and they also have more choices. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to identify the relationship between consumers' behavior towards purchase intention of PL products in Malaysia, focusing in urban area of Kelana Jaya, by using the attributes of consumer price consciousness, value consciousness and risk perception as studied factor.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***RETAIL BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT***

Retail word can be traced back to old French vocabulary of *tailleur*, which is defined as the action of dividing, separating and cutting off (Douglas, 2008). It was later adopted into merchants' activities to illustrate the "sales in small quantities". Retail in the modern day can be described as the action of value exchange between merchants and consumers in which the business supplied the consumers with goods and services that has been through multiple channels of distributions. Retailer crafted the demand through selective selections of target markets and creative promotional tactics, in order to satisfy the consumers' wants and needs. Traditional retailing is highly influenced by the location factor to determine the business profitability meanwhile; studies suggested that the online retailer location correlation toward profitability is less prevalent (Karande, 2005).

Herstein and Gamliel (2004) simplified the PL brands history into five eras in which pioneering stage of the PL brands in retail industry (1840-1860), the declination of growth and perception of PL brands images (1861-1928), the re-emerging and transformative changes of PL brands, stable growth for the PL brands market (1946-1975) and highly competitive atmosphere between PL brands and branded national labels era (1976-present). Currently, the top retailers in Malaysia are Giant, Tesco, Aeon and Econsave. Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada reports (2014) stated Malaysia as the country with the highest share of sales in modern groceries retail format in ASEAN. The term of modern retail includes supermarkets, hypermarkets, and convenience stores. The research bodies also estimated that approximately 88 per cent of Malaysian grocery retail sales take place in the modern retail segment. Meanwhile, the rest is through traditional retailers such as small independent stores, wet markets, food stalls, and outdoor markets. The modern retailers are aggressively promoting their own PL brands within their stores but are lacking of promotion in mass media.

### ***PRIVATE LABEL POTENTIAL GROWTHS***

Schute (1969) defined private label as products exclusively owned and labeled by organizations whose concern are more on distributing the products rather than manufacturing it by themselves. Meanwhile, Baltas (1997) expressed PL brands as products that are manufactured by supplier intended exclusively for the retailers to sell it under their own brand names in their own stores. AC Nielsen's (2005) reports also depicted the growth of PL

will be a phenomenon as the PL brands already outpacing the top branded national brands' competitors. Private branding is amongst the cost effective ways to gain access to backward integration strategy without requiring large investment in manufacturing facilities and design team (Kandapa, 2015). PL branding is already popular in the industries, ranging from generic medicines, toiletries, foods and also cosmetics. They are positioned as lower cost alternatives to other top national brands. Nowadays, retailers have started to focus on the products' quality and followed the recent trend of positioning the PL brand as "premium" brand, to build a perception of superior quality and elevating the product's prestige in a way to compete with existing top branded goods. Economics of scales and minimal capital investment in PL products enable large retailers to succeed on their PL brands capitalizations.

Large retailers with higher purchasing power and the ability to negotiate with manufacturer would try to attain lowest price possible. According to report from AC Nielson (2008), it was identified that Malaysia PL brand sales in retail stores increased 32 per cent from RM181.71 million in 2007 to RM239.66 million in 2008. Top branded national brands usually have a longer foothold in the market and possess stronger domination. Retailers which sell multiple brands use this as strength to draw customers into their stores and smoothly persuade customers to make comparison between the two via in store advertisement. Currently, most part of retailing industries has already increased the proportion of their PL brands. Studies by Kotler (2013) indicated that customers who purchased PL brands are increasing and they are not planning to switch back to top branded national brands anytime soon as they anticipated the value and quality of PL brands product. However, PL brands have some limitations as they need to be aggressively promoted to increase the customers' awareness in which top brands already enjoyed the marketing status-quo. Kotler (2013) further stated that marketers already predicted that PL brands will eventually overtake many of the strongest top national brands.

### ***STORE BRANDS IN MALAYSIA***

Store brands (SB) are lines of products strategically branded by a retailer within a single brand identity. Store brands bear the common concept of house brands, corporate brands in Malaysia, PL brands (PLBs) in the United States, own brands in the UK, home brands in Australia and generic brands in the Middle East. Store brands are different from national brands because a store brand is managed solely by the retailer to be sold in only specific chain stores. The retailer or the brand name owner has the capabilities to customize

the design, order the unit to be manufactured, choose the type of packaging and the marketing mechanism to be applied to the goods, thus aligning the relationship between the products and the store's customer base. Store brand goods are generally cheaper than national-brand goods, because the retailer can optimize the production to suit consumers' demand and reduce advertising costs in mass media. Consumers' demand for store brands varies according to individual characteristics such as demographics and socioeconomic backgrounds.

A store brand is related to the different kinds of customer segments. For example, Giant Malaysia a no-frills retailer focuses on products that provide customers with high values and competitively low products. The PL pricing mechanism in Giant can be classified into two units which are a high preposition towards value and another one is higher in quality. The value type of PL is labeled with Giant Value, meanwhile higher-end products by retailers designated with individually unique PL brand name such as Market Garden, Papa Alfredo, Sun Harvest and Feather Soft. These mechanisms also replicated by Guardian Health and Beauty, a local chain pharmacy store. Guardian labels their value products with retailer brand Guardian meanwhile its' upscale high-quality products are labeled with Botanical Garden, Simply Men, Les Tentation, Mediterraneanes and Lip Hop. Both retailers offer easy cash back refund for satisfaction guarantees on their store brand products. The retailers already planned to expand the products' range by adding more of their store brands. In global views, store brand products are generally presented to consumers in a three tier format which are budget, mid-priced, and premium. According to the studies by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada in 2010, it stated that Malaysians are even more welcoming on PL products than Singaporeans. Malaysians view PL brands as a way to purchase quality imported goods at a cheaper price.

### ***PURCHASE INTENTION***

Purchase intention is an individual consumer cognitive function of planning on purchase considerations or ignoring it. It involves probability consideration in which higher probability on purchase intention leads to better sales conversion. Whitlark, Geurts and Swenson (1993) signified purchase intention as the probability level of an individual that will actually purchase products with direct association with intention category. This study defines consumer purchase intention as a consumer who is aware of PL brand products and already making a cognitive comparison between PL brand products and top branded national labels

with intention to switch between the brands if some criteria are fulfilled. This study looks at the criteria that best influence the customer purchase intention. This study applies price consciousness, value consciousness and risk perception as the independent variables from Kandapa (2015) to be tested in the Malaysian context. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) stated that consumers' attitude and consumer purchase intention constructs are the critical factors to predict consumers' behavior. Similarly, risk perception is selected as a critical factor to testify the Hofstede claims of cultural interactions towards human behavior.

There are several factors that lead to purchase intention, as stated by previous researchers. Some of the studies are from Sciffman (2000), who mentioned that higher purchase intention increases the level of willingness of consumers to buy unfamiliar product or brands. Chi, et al., (2009) also proposed that in order for retailers to increase the purchase intention of PL brands among consumers, retailers must invest in expertly curated advertising, build up popularity and the products itself must have an attractive appearance that quickly captures the customers' eyesight. Moreover, consumers' attitude toward PL brand name and its purchase intention deliberately will increase when a product has a better preferable image and familiarity (Laroche, 1996). Fournier (1998) in his research found that suitable brand functionality which successfully matched the consumers' needs eventually creates psychological associations and relationship between the brands and consumers. Thus, the association subjectively increases the consumer purchase intention. The way to create this association is through availability of samples or testers to be tried by consumers which promotes experience of the products physically.

### ***PRICE CONSCIOUSNESS***

Kotler (2013) stated that the PL brand products usually offer lower price than the national brands, as to trigger the consumers to purchase more PL brands. Meanwhile, Lichtenstein (1998) purported price consciousness as the degree to which consumers strive to find and try to pay the lowest price possible on every purchase. An economist has a different perspective on price matching policies which potentially help firm to identify and discriminate consumer with low price or high price concern (Hirshleifer, 1987). Until now, the research on how the PL brand prices affect the customer purchase intention is still limited (Kandapa, 2015).

Store price perceptions refers to consumers' generalization of the price level of the retailer relative to their competition. Customers with attributes of price consciousness usually

did the pre-purchase price research to get the overall store price perception. Pre-purchase price research is the extent to which the consumers search and compare the product and price information among competing retailers before making the actual purchase. Consumers with high level price consciousness attitude pay more attention on products with low price in comparison with brands. Thus, this type of consumer is more likely prone towards PL brand which is actively being competitive with pricing mechanism. (Ailawadi et al., 2001; Hansen et al., 2006). Therefore, this study purports that:

H1: There is a positive relationship between price-consciousness and purchase intention towards PL brands.

### ***CONSUMER DEFINITION OF VALUE BASED ON PERSONAL PERCEPTION***

Products value in consumers' perspective is the perception of price versus quality comparison of products. Consumers perceive products value from the price-quality comparison. High value product has superior quality that meets or exceeds the value of price paid by consumers. Dodds and Monroe (1985) proposed the relationship model of the perception of value with the price, and quality. They mentioned that perceived value is an important factor in the consumers' purchasing decision process, and consumers will buy a product with high perceived value. The consumers tend to purchase products with better perceived value instead solely based on low prices. The consumers' perception of value derived from the physical presentment of the products, and also from the word of mouth. Cognitive judgment on the product's value is an important factor that guides customer purchasing processes (Dodds and Monroe, 1985). In contrast, the utility theory by Dickson and Sawyer (1990) explained that in order for retailers to increase the probability of customer purchase intention, the retailers must be able to make customers feel that their products have more beneficial characteristic than what customers actually pay for the products. Swait and Sweeney (2000) discovered that each individual customer has a different level of value perception and exhibit different type of purchasing behavior. Ravald and Gronroos (1994) noticed positive perceived value as an advantage to retailers as it differentiates a company from its competitor and as a benchmark of its brand competitiveness. Many studies have agreed that consumer value perception is a strong predictor towards PL purchase intention (Garretson et al., 2005). Therefore, this study hypothesized that:

H2: There is a positive relationship between value-consciousness and purchase intention towards PL brands.

## ***MALAYSIAN RISK PERCEPTION***

The consumers always have uncertainties when they are purchasing new products or switching between brands. Every purchase transaction may contain some chances of undesirable attributes, product malfunctioning, not as expected, and also social objections from communities (Dick et al., 1996). Sarin et al., (2003) stated that consumers have limited access to knowledge when they make a new product purchase and they tend to avoid buying new unfamiliar products. This avoidance behavior diminished the purchase intention towards the PL brands despite the benefits and improvement associated with new products or new brands may offer (Runyon and Steward, 1987). Bauer (1960) on the risk taking theory suggested that consumers perceive new product adoption as potentially poses a high risk as new products provide unfamiliar and ambiguous stimuli. Consequently, consumers will engage in risk-management behavior to alleviate the certainty of the probable consequences of the purchase decision or reduce the amount of money at stake (Mitchell and McGoldrick, 1996). This behavior is similar to a loss aversion theory proposed by Simpson (2008). Loss aversion theory suggested that people response to losses more extremely compared to gains (Simpson, 2008). For example, consumers may postpone purchases of new products as they fear that the new products may not work as promised. The fear of losing money is greater than the possible gain from ownership of the new product (Simonson, 1992). Therefore, purchase postponement enables the consumer's perceived risk to be reduced to a tolerable or acceptable level (Germunden, 1985).

The action of postponement of purchases translated into lower PL brands acceptance. Hofstede (2015) researches on the cultural dimension described Malaysian cultures as community with low level of uncertainty avoidance. The research identified that Malaysians usually maintain a more relaxed attitude towards uncertainty and risky situations in which practicality values more than principles and changes or shifted norm is more tolerable. This can be associated that Malaysians attitude towards PL brands is practically positive. In order to reduce the customer perception of the risk of switching cost between products, many retailers use the marketing strategies of offering easy money back guarantee for any dissatisfaction on their PL brand products. Satisfaction or money-back guarantees signals quality as the manufacturers or seller are committed to deliver their promises (Boulding and Kirmani, 1993). Money back guarantee is being used to attract new consumers when consumer perceived the product quality is difficult to assess directly, for example, when the test sample and other consumer reviews not available. The guarantee is able to imply a

positive effect on both perceived quality and purchase intentions among consumers (Moorthy and Srinivasan, 1995). The guarantee, coupled with the low price of PL brands assured consumers with their decision and increases the perceived quality. With the PL brands posing a low risk alternative to the consumer, it can be anticipated that risk-averse consumers would rather purchase these products:

H3 – There is a positive relationship between risk perception and purchase intention towards PL brands.

## UNDERPINNING THEORY

### *THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOR*

The theory is used in many researches to study the complex psychological human behaviour that links between perception and behavioral actions, and being used as social cognition models. The theory is applied in studying the psychological relationship between human attitudes, intentions, beliefs and behaviors in a multitude of fields such as marketing research, business strategies and retail planning. This study used this theory to understand the underlining of consumer pre-purchase behavior. The theory was proposed to update the previous Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) which does not cover the perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991).

In this study, the independent variables (price consciousness, value consciousness and risk perception) are adopted as to predict the consumers' purchase intention. According to Conner and Sparks (2005), the intention is among the important determinants of behavioral actions. The intention is subject to the consumer attitudes, perceived control and subjective norms toward the behavior. The three constructs later developed into consumer behavioral beliefs, normative beliefs and control beliefs. Meanwhile, purchase intention can be defined as consumer cognitive consideration on trying and purchasing particular goods which are unfamiliar in terms of features or brands. Thus, the theory is being applied to determine the consumer purchase intention towards PL brands in retails that will be further discussed within this literature review. Following is the proposed theoretical framework.

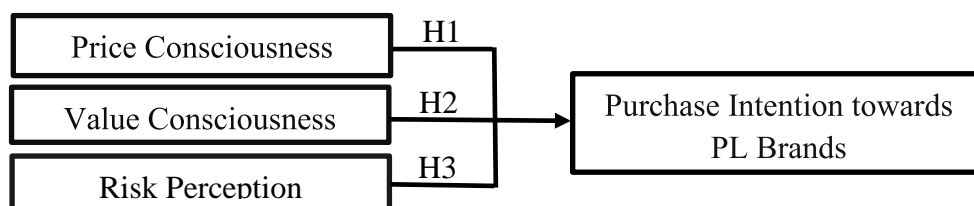


Fig Proposed Theoretical Framework

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### ***RESEARCH DESIGN***

Sampling technique used in this study is convenience method. The respondents were selected randomly. 300 set of questionnaires were distributed. Eventually, 163 ideal questionnaires were used for further analysis as 42 questionnaires were incomplete and 61 non-response. Based on Roscoe (1975) definition of sample size, it is supported that the size of sample collected for this study is sufficient. The unit of analysis is individuals from the Kelana Jaya community who agreed to participate in the survey. Kelana Jaya community is a multicultural population with robust demographic ranging from low, middle and high income earner that may provide some important pattern over the spending behavior of Malaysian. The questionnaire is operationalized using 5 point Likert scale, anchored by 1 = strongly disagrees to 5 = strongly agree and it is a self-administrated questionnaire. The sample was designed based on Fowler (2002) survey research method guidelines.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### ***RESPONDENTS' PROFILES***

Approximately 88.30 per cent of the respondents stated that they live in Kelana Jaya. 60 per cent of the respondents are female. A good proportion of 40.50 per cent of respondent ages between 40-49 years old, followed with respondent of age between 20-29 years old which account of 29.40 per cent of respondents. 39.90 per cent of respondent is Malay, followed by Chinese 30.10 per cent, Indian 20.20 per cent and other race 9.80 per cent. From the occupational aspect, approximately 30 per cent of the respondents were blue collar worker, followed by housewives 20 per cent, and students 20 per cent. It is recorded that 60 per cent of the respondents' monthly income are less than RM2500.

### ***RELIABILITY TEST AND PEARSON CORRELATION RESULTS***

All variables recorded Cronbach alpha's value above 0.90 which indicates an excellent level of internal consistency. This current research is consistent with Kandapa (2015) research which (Risk Perception) scored the highest among other variables (0.91), meanwhile the current research value scored 0.973. The (Risk Perception) records the highest reliability followed by purchase intention, value consciousness, and price consciousness with Cronbach alpha value of 0.960, 0.951 and 0.943 respectively. The result from Pearson

correlations indicates there was a significant, strong, and positive correlation between the two variables; purchase intention (PI) and price consciousness (PC) [ $r=0.964$ ,  $n=163$ ,  $p<.001$ ], with high levels of price consciousness associated with the purchase intention. Furthermore, there was also a significant, strong, and positive correlation between the two variables PI and value consciousness (VC) [ $r=0.967$ ,  $n=163$ ,  $p<.001$ ], and a high level of positive risk perception (RP) [ $r=0.980$ ,  $n=163$ ,  $p<.001$ ] associated with PI. In this study, RP shown the strongest correlation, followed by VC, while PC has the least correlation with PI. In conclusion, if the intensity of any of the independent variables within this research is increased, the dependent variables consequently increased.

### ***MULTIPLE LINEAR REGRESSIONS***

Multiple linear regressions were performed to test hypothesis on the independent variables (price consciousness, value conscious and risk perception) towards purchase intention (dependent variable). The result of this regression was shown in Table 1. The result for the regression model depicts that all the variables were found to be significant to purchase intention.

Table 1 Result of multiple regressions tested among the variables

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	$\beta$	t	Sig.	Support
Purchase Intention	Price Consciousness	.175	2.983	.03**	Yes
	Value Consciousness	.243	4.084	.00**	Yes
	Risk Perception	.577	9.350	.00**	Yes

Note: \*\* significant,  $p < .05$

### **DISCUSSION**

This study was conducted to determine Malaysian consumers' purchase behavior in influencing the purchase intention towards PL brands. This study tested the selected attributes from Kandapa (2015) and affirmed the results from previous research. Generally, all the attributes studied within this research show strong, significant and positive influence of consumer purchasing attributes toward PL purchase intention. According to the World Bank data on the gross national income per capita (PPP method) in 2014, Malaysia ranked 62<sup>nd</sup> in the world at the level of \$27,700. This level classified Malaysian(s) as upper middle-income range earners. Therefore, it is not a surprise that many Malaysian consumers react positively towards PL brands.

Results from hypothesis testing revealed that price conscious consumers have positive perception over the PL brands and perceive it as an alternative to the national brands. Respondents of this research can be classified as savvy consumers. Price is an important aspect of purchasing decisions. Consumers in Kelana Jaya strongly perceived PL brands as the brands that always offer a lower price compared to national brands. The perception has long been instilled into consumers' minds due to the traditional marketing strategy of PL brand which wages the price war towards national brand. The drawback is, that the PL products are perceived to have lower qualities compared to national brands as previously some retailers cut corners in products quality to offer it at a lower price. However, PL brands already adopted a new pricing segment to meet all tiers of consumers' expectation (AC Nielsen, 2015). The segmentation offered is the premium, mid-price and very low price. The consumer segment whose concern and sensitive about price are offered with very low price products, for example retailers' unbranded product with simple packaging. Meanwhile, consumers who are concern about value can choose mid-priced products, which offer good value products and value for money. For example, the retailers exclusive brand such as Botaneco Garden by Guardian.

In addition, consumers whose concerns are about quality, choose premium quality PL brands such as Tesco Finest and Cold Storage First Choice. The consumers in Kelana Jaya also have positive perceptions over retailers, who sell PL products under their brands and consumers perceive the product(s) offered by the retailer(s) usually offer better deals than national brands. The better deals can be described as PL brand products usually comes with more quantity or free gifts and offered at a lower price which instantaneously attract consumer for purchase intention. The lower price offering of PL products intended to lower down consumer switching cost which helps to increase consumers' intention to switch label thus enhances the level of sales conversion. Price consciousness among Kelana Jaya residents in this research is the lowest among the three independent variables. Although it is the lowest within this research, in Kandapa's (2015) study she ranked price consciousness of Thailand people at the highest level. She related the results of high level of price consciousness level among Thais to the level of income of Thai's community which is a lower middle income nation at USD 14,870 compared to Malaysian(s) at USD 27,700 which is double the Thais. It shows that Malaysians have larger disposable income compared to Thais. With higher level of disposable income, the community of Kelana Jaya seems least affected by price compared to value consciousness and risk perception.

Concomitantly, value consciousness also shows strong positive influence towards Kelana Jaya community purchase intention. In comparison, Thai consumers show the negative influence of value perception towards the PL brands. Kandapa (2015) assumed that value conscious consumers tend to avoid the PL brands. But results from her research proved the assumption to be insignificant. The rationale behind this insignificant result could be the existence of good-quality PLs as well as low-quality national brands. Therefore, it is not necessarily true that value conscious consumers will not purchase PL brands. The interpretation of this result is also related to the comparison between risk perception of Thai consumers and Kelana Jaya consumers. Value is closely related to the quality and functionality of a product. The products that offer more than average quality and functionality will be perceived as having better value. In order for consumers to have perception of value over new products, the consumers must at least experience the products. The experience can be in form of visual, physical and practicality (Laurent, 1985). Laurent (1985) also stated that the retailers may drive consumers experience by providing samples or testers. Retailers which carry PL brands usually ensure their PL products come along with testers and their employees are adequate with product knowledge. The experience over the products enhances the consumer decision making processes which may drive the positive behaviour toward purchase intention.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Significant majority of consumers in this study shows a positive outlook over PL brand, strong purchase intention towards it and associated PLs with potential saving gains compared to national brands. It is recommended for retailers to emphasise the savings comparison of PL products versus the national brands. Retailers that carry national brands in their stores should intentionally persuade consumers to switch brand by displaying PL products and national brands side by side. This will induce the consumer cognitive evaluation of the price. As this study found a strong consumer purchase intention towards PLs, retailers should increase PL products engagement with the consumers, enabling the consumers to experience the products, by ensuring the availability of products samples. Retailers that carry PL brand products should maintain the competitive advantage by continuing the low price strategy with advance crafted pricing strategy. Retailers may apply a three-tier strategy of “goodbetter-best”. The strategy (is) intended to capture broader spectrum of customer segmentation. The “good” strategy targets consumers who want acceptable quality at the

lowest price, the “better” strategy aims at consumers who expect equivalent quality at a lower price, and the “best” strategy targets consumers who prefer high quality with a slightly lower price (Kumar and Steenkamp, 2007). This strategy helps consumers to understand better that PL brands offer tiers of level of quality standards which progressive to the value of money the consumer(s) paid, similar or exceeding the national brand standards.

High number of consumers within this study are already aware of PLs sold at lower price and offered better deal compared to national brands. Consumers anticipated their attractiveness towards PL products. Retailers with PLs are encouraged to keep on current price war towards national brands. The price war is for both premium and value products of PL. Retailers must sustain their price lower than national brands. This is because, the majority of consumer(s) that actually purchase PLs are from consumer segment which is price sensitive. Consumers in Kelana Jaya are concerned about low price but equally concerned about the product quality. Consumers also compare the price to get best value products to maximise quality for money spent and getting their money worth.

Finally, the retailers should focus on improvement of the products quality. This is to cater the broader segment of consumers which focusing on the value of products. Consumers in Kelana Jaya strongly believe that they can always get refund over product that does not meet their expectations. Consumers are also actively trying products from different brands and will not upset over wrong purchase they made. It is suggested that retailers expand their product mix width. Product mix width is the number product categories or product lines that a retailer or PL company sells. A longer stretch or wider product mix allows a company to diversify its businesses, consequently increases the number of customers it can target. Retailers also should ease the refund processes on their PL products to reduce the perception of risk among consumers. PL purchase should be viewed as least risky and hassle-free compared to the national brands.

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