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Focus Group Method an Aid to Explore Brand Experience and Contextual Factors

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Abstract

Malaysia automotive industry is highly intense and it creates a challenge for local manufacturer sustaining brand name in the market. Remarkably, it has revolutionized the Malaysian consumer behaviour on purchasing cars. The importance of brand experience from the view of Malaysians is vital as they depend on extrinsic cues and experiences in purchasing. Indeed, brand experiences are gaining most of the attention in the eyes of marketers but there is still scarcity in empirical study. This study excavates consumer's experience and reveals consumer's emotion on national car brand consumption. The focus group is targeted on Proton and Perodua young urban adult car users between 18-35 years old with a minimum of one year car usage. The session encouraged respondents to freely speak in order to explore their emotions on their selected national car model. The moderator conducted two sessions that comprise ten panels, thus a total of twenty panels participated. The discussions were concluded whereby Malaysian respondents have difficulties in expressing their true emotions describing their experience of each car model. Respondents tend to comment more on the quality of product attribute compared to addressing their emotional experience. Results have shown that if consumers were given the opportunity to choose, they will switch to foreign car brand that has better quality. This study has been seen as series of attempts to understand the emotion of consumers with regards to their brand experience. Furthermore, contribution of the original knowledge through the development of new findings is a practical tool for a comprehensive brand experience.

Keywords: Brand experience; focus group; consumer research; automotive industry

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1. Introduction

The Asian region has been seen as promising as the needs for cars are growing and are becoming more sophisticated. Malaysian car producers are confident that vehicle sales will improve through continuous introduction of varied car models and value added specification. It is learnt that Malaysian automotive industry has become more intense thus creating a challenge to sustain customer satisfaction on the same automotive brand (Che & Seetharaman, 2009). Malaysia automotive industry is highly competitive and creates a challenge to the automotive manufacturers in sustaining brand name and market position. In today's fierce competitive environment, relying on incremental improvements to customer satisfaction index alone is insufficient. The seriousness of Malaysian government in positioning the national brand to its upmost advantage has initiated the National Branding Task Force to promote 'Made-in-Malaysia' image as a support to brand building efforts (IMP3, 2006). It is important for marketing professionals to understand why customers' experience is important in influencing their future behaviors. Albadavi (2009) urges automobile players to strengthen their strategy in producing quality products to be competitive. Marketers need to unravel the role that customer experience plays in enhancing behavioral intention and brand loyalty. Likewise, it is also critical to determine how to conceptualize and operationalize the concept of brand experience empirically. However, very few studies have attempted to address this pertinent research strand.

Extant literature unveils that quality of experience delivered by marketers through every touch point while interacting with customers is the key to prosper in business. Customers deeply value marketers who deliver consistent, unique and valuable experience. Thus, branding initiative should create a uniquely memorable brand experience because it will subsequently influence their future behaviour. Likewise, it is also critical how to conceptualize and operationalize brand experience empirically. Indeed, brand experience has emerged as one of the emerging concepts amongst top management and is becoming an uppermost-prioritized research stream in customer-orientation philosophy. Regardless of its importance, precise definition and measurement of brand experience are sparse, with notable exception of Brakus et al., (2009) and Mehrabian and Russel (1974).

1. Brand Experience

Experience can only occur when consumers search, receive and consume a product. Indeed, there are many meaning on experiences; nonetheless it varies on the environment setting. When a consumer consumed a product direct or indirectly, it is called product experience (Hoch, 2002). On the other hand, shopping experience exists when consumers are exposed to the physical environment of the store (Kerin, Jain & Howard 2002). However, feelings, fantasies, and fun are hedonic dimensions that create customer experience (Holbrook &Hirschman, 1982). As to date, most studies emphasise on the product attributes and shopping ambience. Scholars still explore on how consumer perceive and use brand experience in making purchasing decision. Marketers create positive brand experience as it leads to long lasting memory in consumer's mind, whilst it affects satisfaction and loyalty. Notably, brand experience is defined as an individual experience that contributes towards the holistic perception of a brand. The outcomes of positive experience lead to interest, trust and loyalty to the brand (Musa & Kassim, 2013). It is proclaimed that brand experience significantly influences satisfaction, faithfulness and attitude elements through brand personality (*Yang & Yang 2010*, Brakus et al., 2009).

Today's marketers are increasingly engaged into brand experience by creating appealing marketing activities for consumers. The Malaysian automotive industry is struggling to provide a unique and distinctive experience to the consumers. Brand experience enables to amplify the sense of experience as consumers are strongly loyal to a brand. Indeed the brand experiences are gaining most of the attention in the eyes of the marketers. Yet, there is still scarcity in precise definition of concept and empirical research on literature as many researchers have strongly addressed the absence in the empirical support (Verhoef, , Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros, & Schlesinger, 2009; Bäckström, & Johansson, 2006). With reference to the study, the researcher integrates existing brand experience dimension using Pleasure-Arousal-Dominance (PAD) Theory by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) and Brakus et al., **(**2009**)** scale as guideline for the focus group. PAD theory refers to consumer's emotion and intrinsic feelings towards a brand. However, Brakus et al., **(**2009**)** relate on consumers creative thinking such as intelligence (I) in reproducing things in a different way.

2. Methods and Panel

In order to investigate brand experience in depth, focus group has been conducted. The persistence of this research is to unravel feelings and emotions in relation to brand experience. Focus group is a qualitative method that explores broader insights and emerging ideas within a group of individual on a particular issue. Respondents are selected based on similar interest and responding to multiple questions postulated by the moderator (Glitz, 1997). It aims to distinguish issues that arise and gain in a fuller understanding on the problem that exists and what contributes to it.

This focus group conducted to gain in-depth insight on consumer's experience and belief concerning national car consumption. The focus group is defined as:

[...] group discussions exploring a specific set of issues. The group is "focused" in that it involves some kind of collective activity – such as viewing a video, examining a single health promotion message or simply debating a set of questions (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999).

Focus groups intend to explore attitudes and experiences by allowing participants to generate as much ideas using their own words (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999). The benefits of focus group are that it can be conducted quicker compared to surveys and interviews. Pickard (2007) suggests that focus group helps to reduce cost and promote faster completion time as it enables the gathering of information from different sources at a particular time using relatively little face-to-face researcher contact (Parker & Tritter, 2006). This focus group conducted to gain in-depth insight on consumer's experience and belief concerning national car consumption. It is an ideal method in closing the gaps of brand experience and generating influx of ideas relevant for the study.

2.1. Panel

Two focus group discussions with ten participants per group were conducted. Participants were current users of Proton and Perodua are selected from different social classes and education levels within Klang Valley. As stated by Arnett (1998), young adults can be defined as experiences and roles if individual feeling "must be achieved before a person can be considered an adult". Arnett (2001) suggested the individualistic criteria of young adults are between adolescents (13-19 years), emerging adults (20-29), and young-to-midlife adults (30-55 years). A study conducted by Lowe, Dillon, Rhodes, & Zwiebach (2013) that studied on young adults between the ages of 18 and 35 years old affirms that young adults have high purchasing power and able to make sound decision making. Besides that, young people who live in cities are more explorative and self-oriented. Young urbanities were selected as respondents as they play and important role of sharing products knowledge and generating newly ideas through social network (Skelton & Gough, 2013). There are few studies focusing on young people urban lives such as Laughlin and Johnson (2011), Porter et al., (2010) and Langevang and Gough (2009). The researcher chose Klang Valley as it has one of the highest population density cities in Malaysia. Thus, it is evident to investigate young urban adult national car users ranged at18- 35 years old for this study.

The average car usages of respondents are between 1 to 9 years old. This study is also aimed at investigating factors that may influence car purchasing of a consumer. It acts as a platform for researchers to explore consumer's preferences when using the national car. Thus, focus group is the best method to elicit feedback and explore the lived experiences of individuals consuming national car. A moderator is assigned to facilitate the discussions within the guided questions. The session encouraged respondents to speak freely in order to seek their emotions when selecting national car. The moderator presents pictures of different car models and logos to excavate the experience, feelings and preference of respondents. A special meeting room with adequate seating and audio visual equipment were used. During the session, all information were recorded and transcribed by an interpreter.

To evoke emotions from the panels, series of reliable items were selected in describing their brand experiences. After extensive literature screening, researcher retained 20 adjectives (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) and 7 adjectives (Brakus et al., 2009). The focus group is guided by a few instructions and the details are as follows:

1. Focus group in-depth discussion. Participants were asked array of questions on factors infuencing purchase of national cars: Why do you buy Brand X? What makes you choose brand X? What are the brands that come to your mind? How do you position Proton and Perodua if you compare them with other brands? How do you rate level of trustiness in a Brand X? Where do you position Proton and Perodua? Why? What

activities do you do before purchasing? After using Brand X for a year/ more, are you loyal to the brand? Do you often visit Brand X website? Do you share or post any comments via social media?

2. Explore consumer's experience. Moderator began to show flashcards of car logos and slides of car model. Structured questions were asked to evoke consumer's emotion. Do you rely on the past experience before purchasing? What do you feel about the logo of Proton and Perodua? What do you feel when you see the car models? Happy? Sad? Aroused?

3. Results

Based on the discussion of 20 urban young adults from Klang Valley, it shows that price is the main factor when purchasing national cars (Table 1 and 2). Malaysians are classified as upper middle income nation (World Bank, 2013) and it signifies that Malaysians have high purchasing power, yet conscious in spending. In this session, 80 percent of the respondents agreed that they depend much on previous experience Schmitt and Roger, (2008) ; Lindstrom (2005) ; as well as Smith and Milligan (2002) and remaining 20 percent are recommendation from millennial when purchasing. It is learn that, the respondents agreed that their buying behaviors are influenced by their millennial friends. Millennial are generations born from 1980s to 2000s. Indeed, millennial are challenging consumers as they demand customization as a part of their satisfaction in goods or services (Howe & Strauss, 2003; Paul 2001; Sweeney, 2006). They are customer oriented and constantly connected themselves through social media (Pate & Adams, 2013) . Social media provide informative value to consumers as it motivates millennial to gather and share product knowledge among their peers. Undeniably, social network has instrumental value in assisting consumers decision making as about what, where and when to purchase the products (Pate & Adams, 2013;Li, Kuo, and Russell, 1999). It is evident that millennial consumers are engaging on social network before deciding to purchase a product or services. Practitioners need to be more actively involved in social network as it is the best medium to reach millennial. In a contrarily note, a discussion held on national car experience, most respondents provide comments such as:

.... If I were given the opportunity to choose a car regardless of price, I would definitely switch to imported cars due to higher quality and performance in comparison to national car...

This alarming statement reflects that Malaysian consumers have negative experience and are yet satisfied with the national car. Individual usually keen to share their negative experience via online due to secrecy of their identity hidden from public that prevents facing any social implication (Elzerman, 2013). The internet act as a platform for consumers to connect, share and generate ideas. Nowadays, consumers are more turning into social media such as corporate blogs, Facebook and Tweeter, leaving negative comments instead of communicating with call centres. Consumer's malicious comments smothered on social network shall affect firm's revenue (Liu, 2006; Reichheld, Markey and Hopton, 2000). Practitioners must be vigilant in handling consumer's complaints and assist them promptly. As stated by Albadavi (2009), he urged brand-owner automobile players to strengthen their strategy in producing unquestionable quality products to encounter future hurdles before being left behind. Failure to do so, the demand for national cars may dampen and affect Malaysian economy.

Table 1: Factors influence purchasing decision of Proton users

Factors influence purchasing decision for Proton users
(Rank from most important to less important)
Price
Car Design
Brand Image
Functionality
Fuel Efficiency
Spare Parts
Post services

Table 2: Factors influence purchasing decision of PRODUA users

Factors in purchasing decision for PRODUA users (Rank from most important to less important)
Price
Fuel Efficiency
Brand Image
Car Design
Technology Advancement
Post services
Safety and Comfort

Both groups clearly affirm that Malaysian national car brand image are lacking in positioning consumer's mind. Majority of the respondents agreed that national car brand image is deteriorating due to poor quality and performance. Brand image is perceived by consumers (Dodni & Zinkhan, 1990) and affects how customers think, feel and expect in a particular brand. In other words, consumers who have negative connection with attributes and images may influence negative brand experience. Ha and Perks (2005) state that strong brand image influences high trust, thus contributes to a positive brand experience. Alloza (2008) asserts that brand experience is defined as consumer's perception on brand image shown in advertisements, level of quality that the customer received. Shamim et al., (2013) state that consumers voluntarily switch to other brands for their experiential benefits, suggesting there is direct relationship between brand experience and brand equity. Thus, it is relevant to argue that a positive or negative experience perceived by customer affects their perception on the brand credibility. Clearly, marketers must make brand experience their priority in providing their best for consumers to avoid brand switching.

In the second session, each respondent was presented with 27 adjectives describing their feelings by showing them logos and national car models. Some respondents suggest new 17 adjectives that describe their feelings (see Table 3). The most frequent adjectives were happy, excited, trustworthy and competent. After screening and evaluation, 6 items were eliminated due to unrelated adjectives that do not describe feelings such as sporty, glamour, young, style, efficient and affordable. The discussion raised a few issues pertaining to the adjectives given, most respondents find them hard to understand due to language barrier. Malaysian respondents find it difficult expressing their emotion describing their experience relating to car consumption. Instead, they tend to comment negatively on the performance and quality of national cars as compared to describing their feelings. Thus, the moderator is accountable to guide them along the process. Despite the issues that arise, this study helps to measure emotional responses of consumers on national car. It acts as a platform for marketers to understand on positive brand experience which leads to consumers's preferential of a particular national car brand.

4. Conclusion

The significance to understand brand experience is that it facilitates the potential in creating innovation and the development of richer customer relationships. This can lead to heightened customer satisfaction and loyalty which in turn leads to long-term opportunities for sustainable growth and profit of national car producer. It is evident that brand experience can panetrate into the consumer's mind and subsequently influence perceptions and attitudes. Furthermore, marketers are able to understand consumers accurately and positioning 'National Brand' at its upmost advantage aligned with Malaysian government to promote 'Made-in-Malaysia' image as a support to brand building efforts under the National Branding Task Force program (IMP3). The results help national car producers to penetrate global market by adapting latest consumer brand experience thus enhancing profitability of Malaysian GDP. These findings are appropriate and useful for decision making at the management level to predict brand experience and could guide policymakers. Failure to capture potential consumers might influence national producers to bear the increased costs associated with managing the brand as an asset that drives every strategic and investment decision. It will be exciting for future researcher to unravel brand experience scale using Mehrabian and Russel (1974) and Brakus et al., (2009) by conducting series of pilot studies in the automotive industry. Future research may incorepate brand experience with post -purchase services especially in automotive industry.

Acknowledgements

Appendix A

Table 3: List of emotions

ITEMS	RESPONDENTS																				Total
	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12	R13	R14	R15	R16	R17	R18	R19	R20	
Pleasure	√					√		√			√					√					5
Happy	√	√	√		√	√	√			√		√		√			√	√	√	√	14
Pleased																					0
Satisfied	√	√	√				√	√	√												6
Contented		√		√			√	√	√			√	√		√		√				9
Hopeful				√		√							√			√					4
Relaxed			√				√						√					√			4
Arousal	√												√								2
Stimulated				√								√									2
Excited	√	√	√			√	√				√	√		√	√	√		√	√	√	15
Frenzied				√									√								2
Jittery				√																	1
Wide-awake																					0

ITEMS	RESPONDENTS																				Total
	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12	R13	R14	R15	R16	R17	R18	R19	R20	
Aroused														√							1
Dominance		√			√			√			√	√		√	√		√		√		9
Controlling				√	√				√	√									√	√	6
Influential		√		√			√			√			√			√		√			7
In control				√	√	√					√	√		√			√			√	8
Important		√	√			√					√			√							5
Dominant					√							√					√			√	4
Intelligent		√					√					√				√				√	5
Intellectually stimulating			√										√								2
Curious		√							√				√					√			4
Trustworthy	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√	√	√		√			√				√	14

Attribute	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Total
Analytical		√									√				√				√		4
Competent		√	√		√		√	√					√	√	√	√	√	√			12
Problem solving			√						√				√								3
Autonomous												√									1
Sporty		√		√	√	√	√		√		√	√	√		√	√	√	√		√	14
Proud						√		√								√					3
Cheated													√	√	√	√					4
Glamour		√														√					2
Young	√	√					√	√	√				√			√		√		√	9
Style			√	√	√						√	√	√			√	√	√		√	10
Beautiful			√	√	√																3
Comfortable	√		√	√	√			√			√	√	√			√	√	√			12
Aggressive			√					√					√								3
Efficient		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√				√	√			√	√			12
Fun			√					√					√		√			√			5
Affordable	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	20
Cool		√				√			√				√			√					5
Energetic				√								√									2
Power	√					√							√						√		4

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