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# DETERMINANTS OF CUSTOMER LOYALTY TOWARDS WATSONS PRIVATE LABEL BRANDS: MODERATOR ROLE OF HEALTH CONSCIOUSNESS

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# Abstract:

Private label is rapidly placing great significance throughout the world nowadays with the brands are now being available in almost every product category. It refers to a range of products offered by a retailer under its own brand name and are usually cheaper than branded items. From the initial focus on low price strategy, private brands step into a quality and status positioning which using benefits from the retailers own private brand image. In the other words, private brands launched by retailers are not merely competing in terms of price, but also strived to access a significant market share traditionally owned by manufacturers. Even though private label brands are getting wellknown and becoming more relevant to customers throughout the world, it is still not gaining the momentum in Asian market. The growth of private label brand was slow and considered as under developed in Asian region. In relation to the case of Watsons Malaysia, its market share of private label brands was lower than 1%, as compared with 45% in Switzerland and 8% in Singapore. This is despite having significantly huge loyalty card members in Malaysia. Thus, the general aim for this conceptual paper is to propose several factors that can be used to determine the relationship between those factors and customer loyalty of Watsons private label brands as well as the moderating effect of health consciousness in those relationships. Therefore, this paper has proposed several propositions with regards to the aim identified earlier;

Proposition 1: Price influences the customer loyalty towards Watsons private label brands.

Proposition 2: Perceived Quality influence the customer loyalty towards Watsons private label brands.

Proposition 3: Perceived Value influence the customer loyalty towards Watsons private label brands.

Proposition 4: Health consciousness moderates the relationship between price, perceived quality, perceived value and customer loyalty.

**Keywords:** 

Customer Loyalty, Private Label Brand, Watson, Health Consciousness

# Introduction

Private label brand (PLB) or store brand, refers to a line or range of products offered by a retailer under its own brand name, sold in their outlets, controlled and managed by exclusive distribution. In contrast, manufacturer brand appears nationwide, achieving total or near-total geographical market coverage, where customers can buy those products bearing that brand virtually anywhere in the country.

Private brands were first introduced since 100 years ago started with beverage category such as tea and coffee (Abhishek, 2011); and now others than food and beverage, major supermarkets, hypermarkets and pharmacies serve almost any products under their own brand name which cover more than 60% of grocery products and fast moving consumers' goods (PLMA, n.d). In order to gain competitive advantage within the intense market, one of the vital strategies employed by the leading players in hypermarket industry is to pay concentration on their PLB.

Others than the groceries products, a shift toward private label is also ongoing in the beauty and personal care category. In fact, due to the increase in demand, the private label beauty and personal care products is now on the rise, such as Watson own brand. Watsons offers a range of products that fulfill consumers' daily needs. Others than their own name, Watsons also launched other brands for their own products such as Water 360, Beauty Buffet, Hair System, and Naturals; which are span across skin, bath and body, hair care and oral care product range.

Watsons opened their first store in Malaysia in 1994 and within 25 years Watsons have grown to 500 stores and with more than five million registered members of their loyalty card in Malaysia (Mohd Zakaria, 2019). However, Watsons' market share of PLB was lower than 1% in Malaysia, as compared with 45% in Switzerland and 8% in Singapore (Nielsen, 2018). The growth rate of Watsons private label brand in Malaysia is not likely to see much improvement during 2020 where the dynamics of beauty and personal care industry has been changed globally according to the Covid-19 pandemic (Kacey, 2020). In addition, Chee (2020) mentioned, consumers are currently still cautious about spending as they continue to feel the financial impact of the Covid-19 crisis; even though major of Asia countries have slowly rebuilt their nation economy. Hence, it is imperative for researchers to understand the issues of Watsons' continuously low market share in Malaysia even though it has a huge number of loyalty card holders.

# **Literature Review**

Indeed, several previous studies such as (Karampour & Ahmadinejad, 2014; Mostafa & Elseidi, 2018; Norfarah et al., 2018) determined that variety of crucial factor impacted consumer choice towards private label brands in relation to manufacturer brands. Some of the factors are found to be helpful in customer acquisition by attracting new buyers (Tih & Lee, 2013); especially during the economic downturn and Covid-19 pandemic where shoppers with tighter budgets will be looking for alternatives and private label brands can be an attractive choice.

# Customer Loyalty: Repurchase Intention

Customer loyalty is viewed as the strength of the connection between an individual's personal attitude and re-patronage. In line with that, customer satisfaction is perceived as one of the crucial part of customer loyalty where the satisfaction brings a positive financial result as it resulted in regular purchases. Griffin (2002) suggested, the firms need to pay more attention on the value of its products and shows its interest and ability to satisfied the unlimited public needs and wants; also desire to establish and strengthen the relationship with customers. Furthermore, according to Landis (2019), loyalty is more profitable where the cost to acquire new customers is much higher than retaining the existing one.

Customer's tendency to repurchase is an essential element of loyalty where repurchase and loyalty are usually correlated (Zhong & Moon, 2020). Repurchase refers to customers' exact behavior resulted in purchasing the same products or services on more than one occasion and the majority are potential repeat purchases (Suetrong et al., 2018). Customers acquired the similar products repeatedly from similar sellers, and most purchases represent a series of events rather than a single isolated event (Peyrot & Doren, 1994).

In other words, it is the repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing. Thus, loyal customers are expected to consistently repurchase in spite of competitive efforts from other brands. A direct relationship between repurchase intention and customer loyalty is supported by a wide variety of product and service studies (Richard & Dorah, 2014). These studies established that overall customer loyalty with a service is strongly associated with the behavioral intention to return to the same brand provider.

### **Price**

Pricing is well acknowledged as one of the critical tactic in the marketing context which impacted the relative products demand and influenced the company profitability (Anuwichanont, 2011). Therefore, the displayed price usually serves as a vital role in impacting consumer decisions in making comparison between the available choices and alternative products brands. Past studies conducted by researchers showed that product price can be one of the main drivers that influenced customer perception towards the private in-house brands. (Beneke et al., 2012).

The perceived price has been a protrusive reason in consumer purchase behavior towards private brands, which has been a key factor in purchase intention. Other that, private brands are also perceived as good value for money options and a low and affordable price is the main reason of customer attraction towards the private brands, leading to customer willingness to purchase.

In making purchase decisions, consumers decide to allocate their money incomes so that the last dollar spent on each of the product purchased will yield the same amount of extra marginal utility. Hence, distinct customer group will react differently towards the prices, where it is mostly due to the respective income level. Some consumers view high price as a cue for their economic status; others seek out bargains and like to share this information with friends. Peng and Wang (2006) defined the "price consciousness" as the degree to which the consumer focuses exclusively on paying low prices and that research agreed that higher prices negatively affect purchase probabilities.

Cheaper price products will be on the top of the list of priority in making purchase decision and this will be selected by comparing the choices from the same category based on the price consideration. Past studies claimed that the price conscious customers are usually willing to give up other resources, such as time and effort to seek for more shops in order to gain the lowest possible price (Albert & Merunka, 2013).

In addition to that, price conscious users will come to a compromise with the product quality and prefer to switch to whichever brands that offer lower price. These group of user are easily attracted to the low priced private brand products and rank them as the preferable choice over other manufacturer brands. This phenomenon can be seen when the Malaysian economic growth was weak during the past three years somehow has also weaken the local demand towards beauty and personal care products (Noor'ain et al., 2018). Moreover, due to the Covid19 pandemic, people's priority right now is getting access to the essentials (Syahirah, 2020).

This has suggested that there is a form of price sensitivity in the cosmetic's consumer market in Malaysia irrespective of types and brands. However, in order to evaluate the relationship between of price and customer loyalty towards Watsons private label brand, this study proposed that:

Proposition 1: Price influence the customer loyalty towards Watsons private label brands.

# Perceived Quality

Products attributes and characteristics are usually used to examine the product quality. Good quality refers to the high reliable and effective performance of its functions (Wang et al., 2020). Abdul-Muhmin (2002) described product quality element comprise design, features as well as warranties. As high product quality gains greater product acceptance from users, it is deemed as closely linked to customer satisfaction and repurchase satisfaction that bring to customer loyalty (Khairawati, 2019).

Perceived quality is the subjective notion that was set in a consumer's mind towards to a particular product (Stylidis et al., 2019). It refers to the consumers' judgment regarding the superiority or excellence of a product. It also refers to the user's evaluation of a product which meet or exceed an individual's expectation (Sheau-Fen et al., 2012). When consumers perceive a brand as of superior quality, they have higher purchase intention towards that brand's products and vice versa (Karampour & Ahmadinejad, 2014).

In the rivalry between manufacturer brands and private label brands, quality is the one of the key success factor (Meza & Sudhir, 2010). In other words, when a customer is loyal to one company, they are not easily swayed by price or availability.

The role of perceived quality impacting consumer purchase intention towards private brands is well supported by previous studies (Sethuraman & Gielens, 2014). Additionally, findings by Calvo and Lévy (2017) highlighted that private brand's loyalty is strongly influenced by confidence for the level of perceived quality and followed by product price.

Underwood (2003) recommended that packaging design is also directly affecting customers' quality perception. Customers will judge retail products quality via packaging design and prioritize the packaging that features utilitarian benefits.

With the Covid-19 pandemic causing changes to shopper behavior, people who tend to choose private label brands does not necessarily do that due to the lowest price, but many are focusing on quality at a price that works for them (Keshia, 2020). In short, quality of the products will influence customers' willingness to continuously buy the products. Thus, the proposed hypothesis related to product quality for this research is as below:

Proposition 2: Perceived Quality influence the customer loyalty towards Watsons private label brands.

# Perceived Value

Basically, perceived value refers to the outcome or benefits customer will gain in relation to the total costs they have paid for (Kaul, 2017). Jirawat (2011) defined perceived value as the customers' overall assessment of a product' utility based on what they have received (quality) for what is contributed or scarified (money).

Sweeney and Soutar (2001) outlined the dimension of perceived value, which are functional value, utility that consumer perceives when made a decision that will brought him utilitarian results; economic value or financial value which involved in the trade; social value that linked to social acceptance in a reference group, because of the choice made; emotional value which refers to the positive emotional impact led from the choice made.

Value conscious users are those who concentrate on the quality in relation with the price that has been charged in particular product. By offering improved quality and competitive as compared with manufacturer brands, private label brands are perceived as high value product by major local customers.

Deanna (2020) mentioned, during the Covid-19 pandemic, for those who have tried private label brands products and feel satisfied or better than their expected, they will likely to continue purchasing them if the prices provide them with value.

As explained by Garretson et al (2002) value conscious consumers held a perception in mind that they need to gain a good deal, hence this consumer group often more sensitive to the product value during their purchasing decision making, in order to ensure they are always achieving high value.

In the other words, value conscious users usually ensure they are getting the best deal, by not only considered and looking for low priced products, but also they desired equivalent quality with the paid price (Norfarah et al., 2018). Especially during the economic recession, the value conscious consumers are aggressively demanded good deal products. Hence, it is proposed in this study that:

Proposition 3: Perceived Value influence the customer loyalty towards Watsons private label brands.

### Health Consciousness

Conscious consumerism comprises all the manner of purchase decision drivers, which covers from ethics and sustainability to health and wellness (Kirsty, 2019). Health consciousness defined as "the degree of readiness to undertake the health actions" and the users would like to adjust their consumption pattern because they believe that their decision will impact their health (Schifferstein & Oude Ophuis, 1998).

Kraft and Goodell (1993) stated, individuals who live a "wellness-oriented" lifestyle are conscious with nutrition and the fitness and from the marketing perspective, health lifestyle behavior are linked to an orientation towards the consumption and purchase of various wellness-related products and services. Demand for these goods is highly motivated by market segments which are health conscious and tends towards adopting and sustaining a healthy lifestyle (Divine & Lepisto, 2005).

In general, most of the people who are highly concentrate in the health issue are willing to spend more money and change preferences towards firms that are more attentive to healthfriendly products and services. In fact, consumer demand of natural personal care products is now start to flourish and grow and the demand is mainly led by younger consumer (Latimer, 2019). These consumers will pay more attention to the product brands which is ecofriendly in-terms of packaging, ingredients or production; also focus on the firms who practicing the promoting health practices as well.

Such behavioral changes towards health awareness have opened a new niche market for companies to penetrate. As corresponding to the trend of blooming concern towards health issue, a bulk of consumer goods are now appeared on both physical store shelves and online estore boasting green labels.

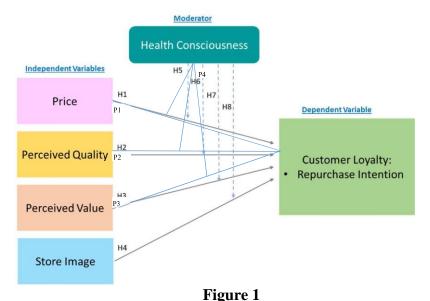
However, Al Mamun et al (2018) found the green products do not create instant sales volume despite the dramatic rise of health consciousness among the consumers. Part of the customers perceived that health awareness act as life guiding their daily consumption; while for some, health awareness is not always translated into green purchase due to the existence of other barriers, such as prices and convenience.

Many customers are still not willing to forego financial and other benefits offered by conventional products and pursuing health issue (Vanit-Anunchai & Schmidt, 2004). The health consciousness can be a valid decisive factor only when the other fundamental human needs have met, otherwise only wealthy customers could afford this attitude.

The fluctuation of consumer behavior would be directed with the existence of health awareness. Wang et al (2020) mentioned, due to the rising of purchase power and consumption knowledge, consumers with higher levels of health awareness are more concerned with their well-being and they are more desire for healthier choices, as compared with those who are lower health consciousness. Hence, in order to understand about the impact of health consciousness in the customer loyalty towards Watsons private label brand, the following hypothesis is established:

Proposition 4: Health consciousness moderates the relationship between price, perceived quality, perceived value and customer loyalty.

The proposed model comprises one dependent variable and three independent variables: customer loyalty as dependent variable, whilst price, perceived quality and perceived value are considered as independent variables. Moreover, health consciousness is added in the framework as moderator. These variables and the moderator are established from extensive literature review that proved their relevance towards the customer loyalty in Watsons private label brands.



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# **Conclusion**

To date there has been limited researches conducted to examine the customer loyalty towards private label brands in Malaysia's context. Majority of the studies were more to study the purchase intention and access the grocery or hypermarket industry, such as Tesco, AEON, and Giant. In addition, customer loyalty on private label branding products in retailing still possess a vague picture in Malaysia. This research is conducted in order to ascertain the relationship between the various influential factors and customer loyalty towards private label brands in beauty and personal care industry with taking Watsons as the research setting.

Hence, it is imperative for researchers to understand the various aspects that influence the success of private label brands like Watsons in Malaysia and how the local people are being motivated to be loyal for their branded products. This will allow companies like Watsons to not only increase their loyalty card memberships, but to increase their market share as well. The influential factors such as price, perceived quality and perceived value; as well as the moderating role of health consciousness are proposed to be investigated in order to determine their relationships towards customer loyalty on Watsons private label products.

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