

Determinants of Foreign Automobile Purchase behaviour in Malaysia: A Conceptual Integration of the Theory of Planned behaviour and Signaling Theory

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ABSTRACT

Foreign automobile brands in Malaysia operate in a market shaped by intensified local competition, shifting consumer preferences, and growing pressure to reflect actual purchasing behaviour better. This conceptual paper synthesises the study into a focused framework that explains foreign automobile purchase behaviour by jointly accounting for behavioural drivers and market signals. Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Signaling Theory, the paper positions attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control as core behavioural predictors, while perceived product quality and brand credibility are treated as extrinsic signals that reduce uncertainty in high-involvement automobile decisions. The paper argues that actual purchase behaviour offers a stronger conceptual outcome than purchase intention in this context because automobile acquisition involves financial commitment, extended evaluation, and substantial risk. Building on the study's literature synthesis and framework development, five propositions are advanced linking these determinants to actual foreign automobile purchase behaviour. The paper contributes by narrowing the explanatory gap between behavioural intention models and realised consumer action, while clarifying how signaling variables strengthen consumer confidence in foreign automobile brands.

Keywords: Foreign automobile purchase behaviour, Theory of Planned Behaviour, Signaling Theory, Attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control, product quality, brand credibility, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Globalisation has broadened consumer exposure to foreign products and reinforced the symbolic appeal of global brands, which are often associated with quality, innovation, prestige, and modernity. In Malaysia, this pattern is especially evident in the automobile sector, where vehicle ownership remains highly important, and the market has reached record sales levels in recent years (Bernama, 2024; Malaysian Automotive Association, 2025). At the same time, competitive conditions have changed. National brands, particularly Proton and Perodua, have consolidated their dominance. In contrast, the relative share of foreign brands has narrowed, creating strategic pressure for foreign automakers to understand what truly drives actual buying decisions in this market (Lye, 2025; Malaysian Automotive Association, 2025; WapCar, 2025).

This context makes foreign automobile purchase behaviour a significant conceptual problem. The study argues that actual behaviour is more informative than purchase intention because automobile acquisition is costly, risky, and highly involved. It requires information search, financial commitment, confidence in product performance, and trust in the brand's long-term reliability. For that reason, the study provides a useful foundation for a conceptual manuscript centred on direct determinants of realised behaviour rather than stated preference alone (Ajzen, 2020; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010; Chekima & Chekima, 2019; Yong et al., 2021; Chekima et al., 2023; Febrilia et al., 2024).

Problem Statement

The first gap identified in the study is market-based. Although Malaysia's automobile market reached record sales in 2024, foreign brands experienced a notable decline in relative market share as local manufacturers

strengthened their position. The study treats this decline as more than a descriptive trend. It frames it as a strategic problem that requires a stronger explanation of how Malaysian consumers evaluate and choose foreign automobiles in a market where local alternatives have become increasingly competitive (Lye, 2025; Malaysian Automotive Association, 2025; WapCar, 2025).

The second gap is theoretical. Prior work has often applied the Theory of Planned Behaviour in a relatively narrow manner, focusing on Attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control without fully integrating the product-related signals that matter in high-risk purchases. The study addresses this limitation by incorporating Signaling Theory and treating perceived product quality and brand credibility as conceptually distinct explanatory variables that strengthen the behavioural account of automobile purchasing (Ajzen, 1991; Erdem & Swait, 1998, 2004; Spence, 1973).

The third gap is conceptual. The study argues that intention-based models can be weak proxies for actual behaviour, especially in high-involvement categories such as automobiles. Reliance on intention alone may therefore overstate demand expectations and weaken strategic decision-making. This justifies the article's focus on actual foreign automobile purchase behaviour as the more appropriate outcome for conceptual development (Ajzen, 2020; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Malaysian automobile market

The study presents Malaysia as a high-relevance context for examining foreign automobile purchasing. The market has expanded in absolute terms, yet local brands now dominate overall sales, while foreign brands account for a much smaller share than in earlier years. This shift indicates that foreign automakers can no longer rely on global prestige alone. They must understand the behavioural and evaluative mechanisms that shape actual purchase decisions in a more domestically oriented market (Bernama, 2024; Lye, 2025; Malaysian Automotive Association, 2025; WapCar, 2025).

Theory of Planned Behaviour

The Theory of Planned Behaviour provides the study's core behavioural logic. It explains behaviour through Attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). In the foreign automobile context, Attitude reflects consumers' favourable or unfavourable evaluations of foreign car ownership; subjective norm captures perceived pressure from important others; and perceived behavioural control reflects how manageable consumers believe acquisition and ownership will be. The study considers TPB especially appropriate because foreign automobile purchase is a high-cost, high-commitment behaviour shaped by both internal evaluations and external constraints (Ajzen, 1991, 2002, 2020; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, 2010).

Signaling Theory

The study strengthens the behavioural account through Signaling Theory. In automobile markets, consumers cannot fully verify intrinsic quality before purchase. They therefore rely on observable cues such as warranties, awards, engineering reputation, after-sales networks, and consistent brand communication. The study treats perceived product quality and brand credibility as key signals that reduce information asymmetry and increase consumer confidence in foreign brands, especially in high-involvement markets where uncertainty is substantial (Akerlof, 1970; Akdeniz et al., 2014; Erdem & Swait, 1998, 2004; Kirmani & Rao, 2000; Spence, 1973; Li et al, 2024; Lada et al, 2024).

Core constructs

Attitude is described in the study as a broad evaluative disposition toward buying a foreign car, shaped by beliefs about performance, innovation, prestige, safety, and long-term value (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). In

Malaysia, favourable attitudes toward foreign automobiles are often reinforced by perceptions of superior engineering and status associations, although these evaluations can be tempered by concerns over maintenance costs and service availability (Atiyah & Kusumawati, 2022; Boo & Tan, 2024).

Subjective norm reflects the influence of family, peers, colleagues, and broader social expectations. The study argues that this construct becomes especially relevant in collectivist and socially visible consumption settings, where foreign automobile ownership may be read as a marker of modernity, success, and prestige (Ajzen, 1991; Ali et al., 2017; Atiyah & Kusumawati, 2022; Jayaraman et al., 2018).

Perceived behavioural control captures consumers' sense of whether buying and owning a foreign car is feasible and manageable. In this context, perceived control depends on affordability, financing availability, dealership access, after-sales service, and information accessibility. The study emphasises that these control beliefs matter because interest in a foreign brand will not necessarily convert into action unless ownership is seen as practical and within reach (Ajzen, 2002; Boo & Tan, 2024; Chinedu et al., 2023).

Perceived product quality is conceptualised as an overall judgement of the vehicle's excellence or superiority. In the study, this includes durability, safety, engineering, and functional performance. Brand credibility is conceptualised as the extent to which the brand is perceived as trustworthy, expert, and able to fulfil its promises. Together, these two signaling constructs help explain why some foreign brands remain persuasive despite intensified local competition (Akdeniz et al., 2014; Cai et al., 2024; Erdem & Swait, 1998, 2004; Styliadis, 2020; Li et al., 2024b).

Theoretical Foundation

For this conceptual paper, the strongest theoretical foundation is the integration of the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Signaling Theory. TPB explains the motivational side of behaviour through evaluative, normative, and control-related mechanisms. Signaling Theory explains how consumers interpret external quality and trust cues when they face uncertainty. The study explicitly argues that adding such signals is consistent with Ajzen's position that theory extensions should introduce causally independent variables that improve explanatory power (Ajzen, 1991, 2020; Spence, 1973).

This integration is particularly suitable for foreign automobile purchase behaviour because the decision is both psychological and informational. Consumers do not choose foreign vehicles only because they like them or feel socially encouraged to do so. They also look for credible evidence that the product is superior and that the brand can be trusted over time. The conceptual value of the model lies in linking these two decision logics within a single framework (Akerlof, 1970; Erdem & Swait, 1998, 2004; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010; Kirmani & Rao, 2000).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework in fig. 1, retained from the study, focuses on five direct determinants of actual foreign automobile purchase behaviour. Attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control form the TPB block. Perceived product quality and brand credibility form the signaling block. The dependent variable is actual foreign automobile purchase behaviour. (Ajzen, 1991; Erdem & Swait, 1998, 2004; Spence, 1973).

Conceptually, the framework proposes that actual foreign automobile purchase behaviour emerges from the combined effect of favourable evaluation, social endorsement, perceived manageability, strong quality perception, and trust in the brand's credibility. The model therefore shifts attention away from intention alone and toward realised consumer action in a high-involvement product category (Ajzen, 2020; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

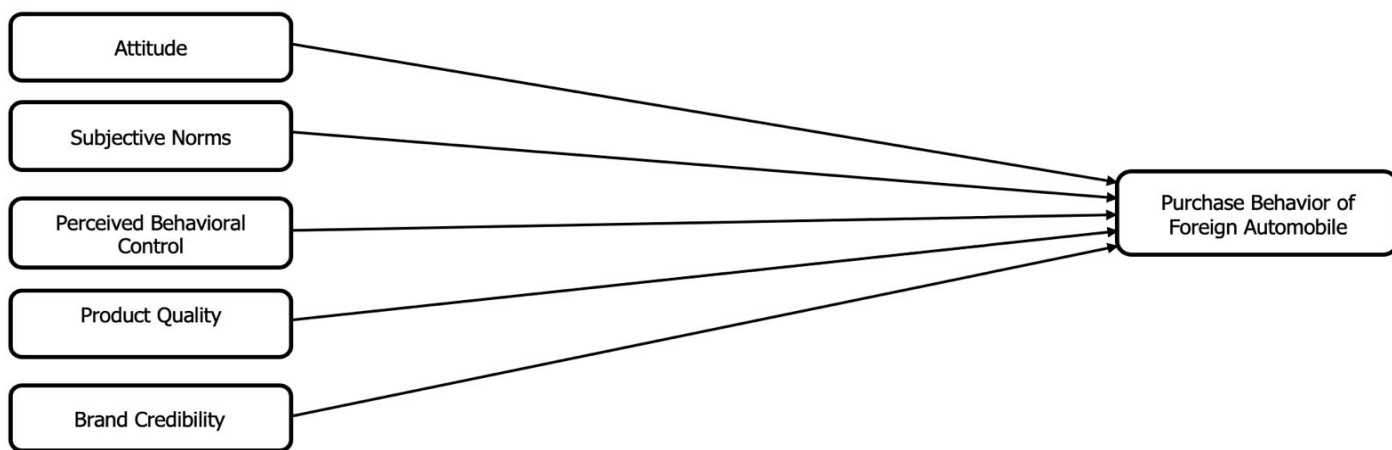


Fig 1: Conceptual Framework

Hypothesis Development

Attitude positively influences actual foreign automobile purchase behaviour

The study presents Attitude as a primary behavioural determinant. Positive attitudes toward foreign automobiles arise from beliefs about superior engineering, safety, technological advancement, prestige, and long-term value. In high-involvement contexts, these evaluations are formed through information search, prior experience, and symbolic interpretation. The study therefore supports the view that favourable attitudes increase the likelihood of actual foreign automobile purchase behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Atiyah & Kusumawati, 2022; Boo & Tan, 2024; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

Subjective norm positively influences actual foreign automobile purchase behaviour

The study positions subjective norm as the social influence component of the model. In Malaysia, family, peers, and important reference groups can shape automobile choice, especially when foreign brands carry status-related meanings. Although social pressure may vary across contexts and groups, the study supports the proposition that stronger perceived encouragement from important others increases the likelihood of actual foreign automobile purchase behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Ali et al., 2017; Atiyah & Kusumawati, 2022; Jayaraman et al., 2018).

Perceived behavioural control positively influences actual foreign automobile purchase behaviour

The study treats perceived behavioural control as the consumer's assessment of how feasible and manageable it is to buy and own a foreign vehicle. This includes financing, access to dealerships, after-sales infrastructure, and broader ownership requirements. Because automobile acquisition involves real constraints, perceived behavioural control is conceptually important not only for intention but also for actual behaviour (Ajzen, 2002; Boo & Tan, 2024; Chinedu et al., 2023).

Perceived product quality positively influences actual foreign automobile purchase behaviour

The study argues that consumers infer product quality through both intrinsic and extrinsic cues, especially when direct verification is difficult before purchase. In the case of foreign automobiles, signals such as engineering reputation, warranty depth, safety ratings, and technological leadership help shape perceived quality. When these signals are interpreted favourably, they increase confidence in the product's long-term value and support actual purchase behaviour (Akerlof, 1970; Akdeniz et al., 2014; Cai et al., 2024; Kirmani & Rao, 2000; Stylidis, 2020).

Brand credibility positively influences actual foreign automobile purchase behaviour

Brand credibility functions in the study as a trust-based assurance mechanism. It reflects whether consumers believe the brand is competent, honest, and able to deliver what it promises. In high-involvement purchases such

as automobiles, credibility reduces uncertainty and perceived risk. The study therefore supports the proposition that stronger brand credibility increases the likelihood of actual foreign automobile purchase behaviour (Erdem & Swait, 1998, 2004; Spence, 1973).

DISCUSSIONS

The study's central conceptual message is that actual foreign automobile purchase behaviour should be understood as the outcome of both behavioural dispositions and market-signal interpretation. TPB explains why consumers are positively disposed, socially encouraged, or practically able to act. Signaling Theory explains how they develop confidence in the product and the brand under conditions of uncertainty. When combined, these perspectives offer a more grounded explanation of actual behaviour than an intention-only model (Ajzen, 1991, 2020; Erdem & Swait, 1998, 2004; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010; Spence, 1973).

This synthesis is especially important for the Malaysian automobile market. Foreign brands compete in an environment where local alternatives have become stronger and where ownership decisions are shaped by cost, risk, value, and trust. The study suggests that positive evaluation alone is not enough. Consumers also need manageable purchase conditions, credible evidence of quality, and trust in brand execution. In this sense, the direct determinants work cumulatively rather than in isolation (Bernama, 2024; Lye, 2025; Malaysian Automotive Association, 2025; WapCar, 2025).

The narrowed framework also sharpens the paper's conceptual focus on actual behaviour. In high-stakes consumer contexts, what matters most is not what people say they may buy, but what they buy. The study repeatedly argues that real behaviour better captures the influence of structural constraints, risk reduction, and evaluative certainty. That insight gives the framework both theoretical and managerial relevance (Ajzen, 2020; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

Implications

Theoretical Implications

The first theoretical implication is the extension of TPB from an intention-centred logic toward actual behaviour in a high-involvement purchase context. The study explicitly argues that actual behaviour is a more valid outcome when the decision involves cost, commitment, and post-purchase consequences. This moves the framework closer to real consumer action and responds to concerns surrounding the intention-behaviour gap (Ajzen, 1991, 2020; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

The second implication is the integration of Signaling Theory into behavioural modelling. By conceptualising perceived product quality and brand credibility as direct explanatory variables rather than secondary background factors, the study clarifies their causal relevance. This improves the theoretical account of how consumers behave in markets characterised by information asymmetry and signal dependence (Akerlof, 1970; Erdem & Swait, 1998, 2004; Kirmani & Rao, 2000; Spence, 1973).

The third implication is conceptual refinement. The narrowed model shows that foreign automobile purchase behaviour can be explained through a cleaner two-block architecture. The first block captures behavioural motivation. The second captures informational trust and quality inference. This structure preserves the study's core theoretical contribution while giving the conceptual manuscript a tighter and more publishable narrative (Ajzen, 1991; Erdem & Swait, 2004).

Practical Implications

The study offers several practical implications for foreign automobile marketers in Malaysia. First, they should invest in shaping favourable attitudes by emphasising attributes that consumers already associate with foreign brands, such as safety, reliability, innovation, long-term value, and suitability to Malaysian driving conditions. Communication should strengthen broad positive evaluations, not merely short-term promotional appeal (Atiyah & Kusumawati, 2022; Boo & Tan, 2024).

Second, marketers should reduce barriers that weaken perceived behavioural control. The study highlights the importance of accessible financing, clear information, dealership availability, and reliable after-sales service infrastructure. These factors help convert favourable evaluations into actual purchase action (Ajzen, 2002; Boo & Tan, 2024; Chinedu et al., 2023).

Third, foreign automakers should treat product quality and brand credibility as strategic signals. They should emphasise verifiable quality cues such as safety performance, durability, engineering reliability, and everyday usability, while also strengthening credibility through transparent pricing, stable warranties, visible service competence, and consistent delivery across consumer touchpoints. In this market, trust and quality signals are not peripheral. They are central drivers of behaviour (Akdeniz et al., 2014; Cai et al., 2024; Erdem & Swait, 1998, 2004; Styliadis, 2020; Bouteraa et al., 2023a; Bouteraa et al., 2023b).

Fourth, the study suggests that firms should be cautious about relying too heavily on intention-based surveys for demand forecasting and strategic planning. Behaviour-based understanding is likely to provide more realistic guidance for inventory, positioning, and brand management decisions in the automobile sector (Ajzen, 2020; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper, derived strictly from the study, explains foreign automobile purchase behaviour in Malaysia through the combined influence of Attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control, perceived product quality, and brand credibility. The study's strongest contribution lies in showing that actual behaviour is better explained when behavioural predictors are integrated with signaling-based cues that reduce uncertainty in high-involvement decisions (Ajzen, 1991; Erdem & Swait, 1998, 2004; Spence, 1973).

The resulting framework offers a focused explanation of how Malaysian consumers move from evaluation and social influence to confidence and actual purchase. It also clarifies why foreign brands seeking to regain market relevance must work on both sides of the decision process, namely the consumer's behavioural disposition and the brand's ability to send credible, high-quality signals. In this form, the study provides a coherent conceptual basis for a journal article focused on the direct determinants of actual foreign automobile purchase behaviour (Bernama, 2024; Lye, 2025; Malaysian Automotive Association, 2025; WapCar, 2025).

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