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Analysis of Consumer Behavior and Purchase Decisions in the Phenomenon of Pertamina Fuel Adulteration: A Case Study on the Shift to Shell Fuel in Urban Areas of Indonesia

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Abstract: This study investigates the shift in consumer behavior and purchase decisions from Pertamina to Shell fuel in urban areas of Indonesia, with a focus on understanding the factors influencing this change. The objective was to explore the underlying motivations driving consumers to choose Shell over Pertamina, examining the role of price sensitivity, perceived fuel quality, brand trust, and promotional factors. A qualitative approach was employed, utilizing open-ended questionnaires to gather in-depth insights from 103 participants across major urban areas in Indonesia. The data analysis was conducted using an interactive model, which included data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. Results revealed that the primary motivations for choosing Shell included its perceived superior fuel quality, better vehicle performance, and smoother driving experience. Additionally, service quality at Shell stations contributed to customer satisfaction. Despite the positive feedback, a significant number of consumers expressed price sensitivity, with many indicating they would consider switching back to Pertamina if it improved its pricing or quality. The findings underscore the importance of both economic and psychological factors in consumer decision-making in the Indonesian fuel market.

Keyword: consumer behavior, consumer decision-making, perceived value, brand trust.

INTRODUCTION

The selection of fuel brands in urban areas has become a significant topic of discussion, especially with the growing shift from state-owned Pertamina to private fuel stations like Shell. This shift is largely influenced by the public's concerns over fuel quality and service reliability, triggered by the emergence of rumors about the adulteration of Pertamina fuel (Zaki, 2025). These concerns have been compounded by corruption scandals in the management of Pertamina's operations, leading many consumers to seek alternatives at private stations such as Shell.

Furthermore, Shell has capitalized on this situation by offering competitive promotions and services, which have increasingly attracted customers looking for assurance in the quality and consistency of their fuel (Abadiyah, 2021). The phenomenon of fuel selection in urban areas, especially the preference for Shell over Pertamina, highlights the critical role that trust, corporate governance, and consumer confidence play in shaping market dynamics. This article delves into the factors driving the shift in consumer behavior and explores the broader implications of these trends for both the fuel industry and urban consumer habits (Ateka et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2020). This behavior reflects a complex interplay of consumer decision-making processes influenced by fluctuating fuel prices, perceptions of fuel quality, and accessibility to alternative fuel brands. As competition in the fuel industry intensifies, understanding the rationale behind consumer choices becomes critical for policymakers and fuel providers alike.

This study aims to analyze the consumer behavior and purchase decisions behind the use of Shell, focusing on urban Indonesian consumers who opt for this strategy. It explores the underlying motivations, including economic considerations, brand trust, perceived value, and social influences.

The research is grounded in several key theories, including the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), Consumer Decision-Making Process (Kotler & Keller, 2016), and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which collectively provide a comprehensive framework for interpreting consumer actions in the context of fuel selection.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), proposed by Icek Ajzen, posits that individual behaviors are primarily influenced by three factors: attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (PBC) (Biber et al., 2025; Hamad et al., 2024; La Barbera & Ajzen, 2020; Nadlifatin et al., 2020; YOO, 2021). In the context of the questionnaire on Shell fuel usage, TPB helps explain why consumers switch to Shell over other fuel brands like Pertamina. Many respondents expressed positive attitudes toward Shell, citing fuel performance (e.g., smoother acceleration and better fuel efficiency) as key motivating factors. This aligns with the TPB's assertion that favorable attitudes toward a behavior—such as choosing a fuel brand—drive the intention to perform it.

Furthermore, the TPB emphasizes that intentions, shaped by attitudes, norms, and PBC, directly affect actual behavior (La Barbera & Ajzen, 2020). The data gathered indicates that many respondents, once switching to Shell, continued to use it due to the perceived long-term benefits (such as better engine performance and fuel efficiency). This behavior is consistent with TPB's premise that if consumers believe they have control over the decision (e.g., accessibility and affordability of Shell stations), and perceive positive outcomes (e.g., better vehicle performance), they are more likely to repeat the behavior. The combination of attitude, social influence, and perceived ease of switching fuel brands effectively explains the consumer behavior reflected in the survey responses (Catalano et al., 2025).

Additionally, subjective norms play a role, with many respondents mentioning that recommendations from friends and family, as well as online reviews, influenced their decision to try Shell (Li et al., 2023). In line with Ajzen's model, perceived behavioral control (PBC) may also be relevant as some consumers noted that the convenience of finding Shell stations and avoiding queues influenced their choice, thus making the purchase behavior easier to execute (Anshori et al., 2021; Bruijns et al., 2023, 2025).

Consumer Behavior and Purchase Decision Theory; Consumers' decisions to purchase fuel are often driven by various factors, particularly price and quality (Alshammari, 2024). In this context, consumers' attitudes toward certain fuels are influenced by the perceived fairness of the price and the quality of the fuel (Azman et al., 2021). Therefore, when choosing between Pertamax and Shell, consumers will first assess these two aspects.

Economic Factors in Purchase Decisions; In the fuel industry, prices are a major factor influencing consumer decisions. Previous research shows that consumers in Indonesia tend to choose more affordable fuel options to save on expenses. The phenomenon of "mixed Pertamina " (a mixture of Pertamina and other fuels) often arises as an alternative to reduce fuel costs, despite the risk of lower quality (Privana, 2022). This phenomenon indicates a shift in consumer preferences driven by price, where consumers opt for cheaper options even if it means sacrificing fuel efficiency.

The consumer decision-making process, based on Kotler's model, plays a significant role in the way customers choose products or services, including fuel brands like Shell. This process includes five stages: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior (Marcelo et al., 2024; Septiano & Sari, 2021). In the case of Shell, consumers recognize a need for better fuel performance, such as smoother acceleration and improved engine efficiency. During the information search phase, customers gather information from various sources like social media, advertisements, and personal recommendations. The decision-making process culminates in the evaluation of alternatives, where consumers compare Shell's fuel quality with other brands like Pertamina, considering factors like fuel performance and pricing. Ultimately, post-purchase behavior involves assessing the satisfaction levels, which, according to the survey, reflects higher satisfaction among those who switched to Shell, citing improved vehicle performance and fuel efficiency.

The consumer feedback collected in this questionnaire reveals important insights into their decision-making process. Many respondents expressed a preference for Shell due to its fuel quality, which they believe enhances engine performance, offers smoother rides and more efficient fuel consumption. Although some participants reported no significant difference between Shell and other brands, a majority felt that Shell's higher-quality additives contribute to better engine maintenance and a more enjoyable driving experience. These findings align with Kotler's model, where consumer attitudes and beliefs significantly influence their final purchase decision. This model is further validated by the respondents who are likely to remain loyal to Shell if the quality remains consistent, despite the higher cost. Hence, the consumer decision-making process reflects a combination of both rational evaluation (performance and price) and emotional factors (brand reputation and past experiences).

Perceived Quality and Its Impact on Purchase Decisions; In addition to price, fuel quality also influences purchase decisions. Consumers typically choose fuels they believe are of high quality and will not harm their vehicles. Pertamina, as a product of Pertamina, is considered to have a more guaranteed quality standard compared to mixed Pertamina, which may be combined with lower-quality fuels. This aligns with findings from (Indri, 2022), which show that consumers are more likely to choose products perceived to be of better quality even at a higher price (Zollo et al., 2020). Furthermore, research also indicates that quality-related risks act as barriers for consumers in choosing mixed Pertamina.

The Influence of Promotion and Information on Purchase Decisions; Promotional offers and discounts also have a significant impact on fuel purchase decisions. According to a study by (Akbar et al., 2022; DAM & DAM, 2021), promotions and discounts are commonly used by fuel providers to attract consumers, particularly for fuel types such as Shell and Pertamina. Offering lower prices or special promotions can influence consumer choices, even when the fuel quality is lower compared to other premium products.

Social and Psychological Factors; Social and psychological factors also play an important role in consumers' decisions to choose certain fuels. Social norms in Indonesian society, such as influence from friends, family, or colleagues, often affect consumer choices. As found by (Privana, 2021), consumers tend to select fuels based on suggestions or influences from those close to them, often relying on shared experiences or received

information. Brand trust also plays a role where consumers may feel more confident in certain brands due to perceived quality (Sundar & Cao, 2020; Wahyu & Nilo, 2021).

Environmental Impact and Government Policy; In addition to internal factors, government policy also influences consumer choices. Subsidy policies and fuel pricing regulations implemented by the Indonesian government often encourage consumers to choose more affordable fuel options, such as mixed Pertamax. Previous studies also show that fuel distribution in urban areas significantly affects purchasing decisions, as easier fuel availability can steer consumers toward fuel choices (Indri, 2022).

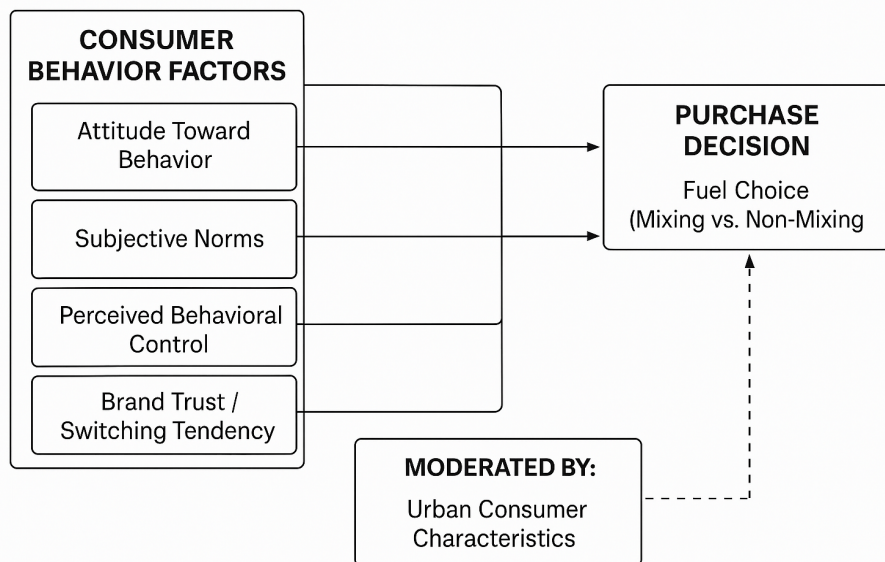


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Source: Research Results

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach to analyze consumer behavior and purchase decisions in the phenomenon of mixed Pertamax with Shell fuel in urban areas of Indonesia. The qualitative approach is chosen because the research aims to gain a deeper understanding of consumers' motivations, perceptions, and experiences in choosing fuel, as well as the social and psychological factors that influence their decisions. Qualitative research is chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of individual motivations, perceptions, and social influences that shape consumer behavior (Sugiyono, 2020, 2022).

Research Design; the research was conducted through open-ended questionnaires to collect detailed responses from participants. This design allows respondents to express their views freely without being limited by predefined answer choices, thereby providing richer and more nuanced data for analysis (Sugiyono, 2022).

Research Approach; The method used in this study is a case study with a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it can reveal the meaning behind the experiences of consumers who use mixed Pertamax and Shell fuel. This research focuses on understanding how consumers experience and interpret the phenomenon within their social and economic contexts.

Research Location; The study will be conducted in several major cities in Indonesia, such as Jakarta, Surabaya, and Bandung, which are urban areas with a high concentration of motor vehicle users. In these areas, the distribution of Pertamax and Shell fuel is relatively

even, and the Pertamina mixing phenomenon is quite common among consumers from various socio-economic backgrounds.

Sampling Technique and Participants; The study used a purposive sampling technique, where participants were selected based on specific criteria (Campbell et al., 2020; Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024): individuals who regularly use private vehicles and have experience purchasing or using mixed Pertamina. A total of 103 respondents from various urban areas in Indonesia were involved in this study.

Data Collection; Data were collected using an open-ended questionnaire distributed online and offline. The questionnaire included questions related to price sensitivity, brand perception, fuel quality perception, influence of social environment, and promotional awareness. The open questionnaire format enabled participants to provide explanations and opinions in their own words, contributing to the depth of the analysis.

Data Analysis; The data obtained were analyzed using interactive model analysis, which includes three components: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Sugiyono, 2020, 2022). The responses were categorized based on recurring themes and interpreted to identify patterns and insights related to consumer behavior and decision-making.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the survey provide valuable insights into the preferences, behaviors, and perceptions of users regarding Shell and Pertamina fuels. The survey collected data from a diverse demographic, revealing key trends in fuel consumption, vehicle types, and user satisfaction.

1) **Demographic Profile:** The respondents predominantly consisted of young adults, with 71.8% of participants between the ages of 20-30 years. Students or college attendees represented most respondents (60.2%), while private employees made up 38.8%. The gender distribution was nearly equal, with 51.5% male and 48.5% female respondents. Most participants had high school or vocational education (56.3%), and a large proportion used motorcycles (86.4%) as their primary mode of transportation.

2) **Fuel Usage Patterns:** A significant portion of respondents (31.1%) reported fueling up at Shell occasionally (30-70% of the time), while 17.5% used Shell exclusively (100% of the time). The frequency of Shell fueling shows a general preference for Shell over competitors, although many respondents still rely on other brands based on specific needs.

3) **Comparative Service and Fuel Quality Evaluation:** The vast majority (61.2%) of respondents rated Shell's service significantly better than Pertamina's, with an additional 26.2% considering it slightly better. Furthermore, 61.2% believed Shell's fuel quality was far superior, with respondents attributing its performance benefits, such as smoother acceleration, higher fuel efficiency, and improved engine cleanliness, to Shell's superior additives and technologies.

4) **Intentions to Switch Brands:** Despite the positive feedback regarding Shell's fuel quality, over half of the respondents (53.4%) indicated they would consider switching back to Pertamina if the latter improved its pricing or quality. This reflects a level of price sensitivity and an openness to switching depending on competitive factors. A significant portion (41.7%) expressed their intentions to continue using Shell under current conditions.

5) **General Satisfaction and Information Sources:** Respondents were largely satisfied with Shell's service quality, citing well-maintained stations and quick service as positive aspects. When asked about how they first learned about Shell, most respondents cited direct exposure through Shell stations, followed by recommendations from family and friends.

The results highlight a strong preference for Shell Fuel based on perceived quality and improvement in vehicle performance. This finding aligns with the open-ended responses, where users noted better acceleration, smoother engine operation, and enhanced fuel efficiency as key benefits of using Shell. The presence of Shell's Dynaflex technology, which

is credited with improving engine cleanliness and performance, is frequently mentioned as a distinguishing factor.

Interestingly, despite the clear preference for Shell's fuel, many respondents remain open to switching back to Pertamina if it becomes more competitive in terms of price or service. This highlights the importance of price sensitivity in the fuel market, suggesting that even with superior product quality, consumer loyalty can be influenced by factors such as cost and availability of services. Moreover, while many respondents noted an improvement in vehicle performance, a few did not perceive significant differences between Shell and Pertamina, particularly when using comparable fuel grades. This could be attributed to individual vehicle types, driving conditions, or maintenance practices that influence the perceived benefits of fuel quality.

The demographic profile also shows that younger individuals, especially students and young professionals, are the primary consumers of Shell fuel. This age group may be more receptive to factors like fuel efficiency and vehicle performance, which could explain their preference for Shell. The overwhelming use of motorcycles over cars further suggests that Shell's marketing and product offerings are aligned with the needs of this key segment, which values cost-effective yet high-performance fuel.

Additionally, satisfaction with Shell's service quality, such as well-maintained stations and efficient service, indicates that Shell's investment in customer experience is paying off. However, the presence of competitors like Pertamina, which could improve its offerings, suggests that Shell should continue to monitor customer needs and service perceptions to maintain its competitive edge.

Overall, while the survey reveals strong support for Shell in terms of fuel quality and performance, it also underscores the importance of pricing and service quality in shaping future consumer behavior. The willingness of respondents to switch back to Pertamina if conditions improve serves as a reminder of the dynamic and competitive nature of the fuel market.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the survey results demonstrate a clear preference for Shell fuel among respondents, primarily due to its perceived superior quality, enhanced vehicle performance, and fuel efficiency. Shell's use of advanced technologies, such as Dynaflex, contributes to positive consumer perceptions of its products, particularly in terms of smoother acceleration and better engine cleanliness. Service quality at Shell stations also plays a significant role in fostering customer loyalty, with respondents expressing satisfaction with well-maintained facilities and efficient service.

However, despite the positive feedback, a notable portion of respondents expressed openness to switching back to Pertamina, especially if it becomes more competitive in terms of pricing or service offerings. This reflects the importance of price sensitivity and highlights that while fuel quality is a key factor, economic considerations continue to influence consumer decisions.

Overall, Shell enjoys a strong position in the market but must remain vigilant in addressing potential competitive challenges, particularly from Pertamina. By continuing to focus on product quality, customer service, and pricing strategies, Shell can maintain its loyal customer base while attracting new users in an increasingly competitive fuel market.

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