Dutse Business Review (DBR): Volume 1, Issue 1 (2026) *ISSN Print: 3156-4062* *eISSN:3156-4852*

INFLUENCE OF BRAND DIFFERENTIATION STRATEGIES ON CUSTOMER PATRONAGE OF AUTOMOBILE PRODUCTS: A STUDY OF TOYOTA AND HONDA MOTOR MANUFACTURING COMPANIES N FEDERAL CAPITAL TERRITORY ABUJA, NIGERIA

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Abstract
This research analyzed how brand differentiation approaches affect consumer patronage toward automobile brands in Abuja, Nigeria's capital region. The study focused specifically on examining whether the design quality and performance quality of Toyota and Honda cars shape how customers relate to these brands—measured through their confidence in the brands, inclination to buy again, and willingness to recommend them to others. Using a survey methodology, 300 individuals participated in the research through convenience-based selection. Questionnaires were used to gather information, which was then processed using Linear Regression analysis via SPSS 22. The results indicated that both design quality and performance quality of Toyota and Honda automobiles significantly and positively affect customer loyalty toward these brands. The study recommends that company leaders prioritize investment in research and development focused on improving design and performance quality as a key marketing approach to win over new customers and maintain existing ones.
Key Words: Quality design, quality performance, referral, repeat purchase, trust

1.0 Introduction

Customer patronage describes how strongly consumers support, and continuously favour a specific brand, product, or service. According to Oliver (2019), patronage reflects patterns in how customers behave and think—specifically, their tendency to return to the same business rather than try competitors. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2020) further explained that patronage extends beyond a single transaction. It includes making repeated purchases, spreading positive feedback to others, and maintaining connection to a brand even when other options are available. Reichheld and Sasser (2021) contend that patronage is fundamental to a company's long-term success and expansion, noting that organizations with strong customer loyalty spend less on marketing since keeping current customers costs less than acquiring new ones.

In markets where many competitors offer similar products, companies employ different tactics to encourage customers to choose their brands over others, with brand differentiation being one such approach. Brand differentiation takes place when organizations promote distinctive aspects, superior quality, or innovative design that rivals struggle to replicate. Apple illustrates this concept well: as Johnson et al (2020) note, Apple sets its iPhones apart through elegant design, innovative technology, and a collection of related services and products. These features create extra appeal beyond the phone's basic functions. Ries and Trout (2021) add that differentiation depends on positioning theory—the idea that brands need to occupy a unique

spot in consumers' thoughts. According to them, successful differentiation requires developing a distinctive benefit through product qualities, psychological connections, or memorable brand interactions. They emphasize that differentiation involves not just what a brand provides, but equally importantly, how potential buyers view it relative to competing options.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The research examines a longstanding competition in the automotive industry between Toyota and Honda Motors Manufacturing Companies. A situation according to Kotler (1980) where they continuously introduce new vehicle variants to attract customers, boost sales, and maximize profit. In his contribution, Mellal (2020), explained that this approach is known as technological or functional obsolescence.

From a marketer's perspective, whether the improved brand actually represents a significant engineering advancement is secondary. According to Van et al (2024), what truly matters is how consumers perceive these changes and whether the differentiation strategy successfully influences their purchasing decisions and brand preferences.

It is the quest to understand how the differentiation strategies influence consumers buying behaviour that prompted the researcher to engage in the study with Federal Capital Territory (FCT) in Abuja, Nigeria as the study area.

1.2 Conceptual Framework

Every research study requires a conceptual framework—a critical component that establishes the theoretical and methodological foundation for the entire project. Beyond merely clarifying how different variables connect, a strong conceptual framework ensures that the research aligns with existing theories and previous scholarly work. According to Ravitch and Riggan (2017), a well-constructed conceptual framework offers clarity by establishing a structured perspective through which research goals are outlined and research challenges are examined. This study's conceptual framework illustrates how Toyota and Honda's brand differentiation strategies relate to their customers' brand loyalty, as outlined in the section below.

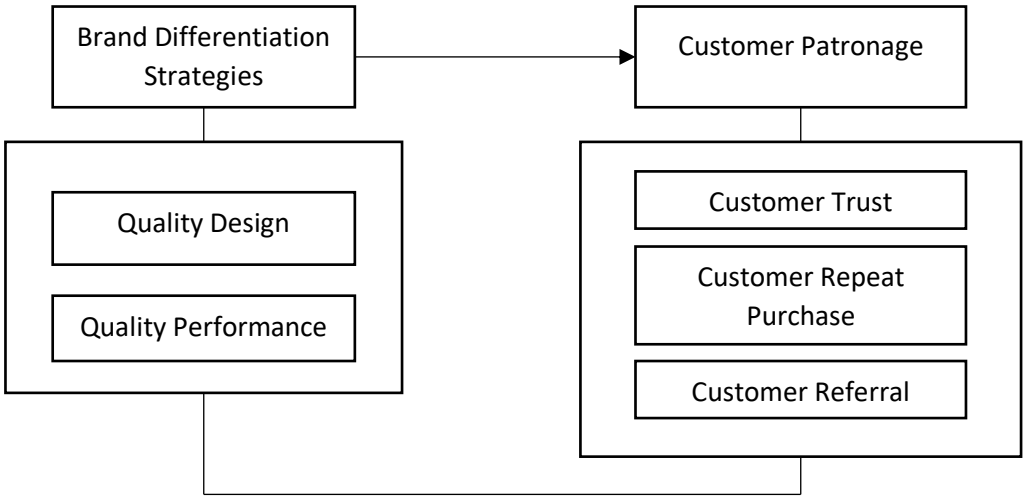


Figure 1.1: A conceptual framework

Source: Adapted from Ravitch & Riggan (2017).

1.3 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to assess the influence of brand differentiation strategies of Toyota and Honda Motor Manufacturing Companies on customers' patronage of their brands in Federal Capital Territory Abuja, Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. examine the influence of quality design of Toyota and Honda vehicles on customers trust in the brands.
2. assess the influence of quality design of Toyota and Honda vehicles on customers repeat purchase of the brands.
3. assess the influence of quality design of Toyota and Honda vehicles on customers referral.
4. Ascertain the influence of quality performance of Toyota and Honda vehicles on customers trust in the brands.
5. assess he influence of quality performance of Toyota and Honda vehicles on customer repeat purchase of the brands.
6. assess he influence of quality performance of Toyota and Honda vehicles on customers referral of the brands.

1.4 Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested in the research.

Ho_1: Quality design of Toyota and Honda vehicles has no significant influence on customers trust in the brands.

Ho_2: Quality design of Toyota and Honda vehicles has no significant influence on customers repeat purchase of the brands.

Ho_3: Quality design of Toyota and Honda vehicles has no significant influence on customers' referral of the brands.

Ho_4: Quality performance of Toyota and Honda vehicles has no significant influence on customers trust in the brands.

Ho_5: Quality performance of Toyota and Honda vehicles has no significant influence on customers repeat purchase of the brands.

Ho_6: Quality performance of Toyota and Honda vehicles has no significant influence on customers' referral of the brands.

2.0 Review of Related Literature

This section presents a conceptual examination of the research, followed by its theoretical framework and a review of relevant existing studies that relate to this research. The section also identifies gaps in the current literature.

2.1 Conceptual Review

This subsection outlines the main variables studied in the research—both those being tested and those being measured—along with their components and assessment methods.

2.1.1 Brand Differentiation Strategies

Modern business environments are highly competitive, prompting organizations to develop distinctive identities that set them apart from rivals. This identity-building process, called brand differentiation, is fundamental to successful marketing. According to Kotler and Keller (2020), brand differentiation involves intentional efforts by companies to shape how consumers perceive their offerings. They warn that without differentiation, brands risk becoming interchangeable commodities sold primarily on price rather than perceived value. Porter (2022) emphasizes that differentiation strategies are essential for sustained business growth, as they enable companies to gain advantages in crowded markets and influence how customers make purchasing decisions by aligning with their preferences and providing distinctive features.

To thrive in today's demanding markets, organizations employ various approaches to set their brands apart, aiming to build competitive strength, boost sales, and increase profitability. These approaches may involve differences in product features, quality, design, performance, pricing, and other factors. This research focuses specifically on quality design and quality performance.

Quality Design. This dimension involves deliberate efforts to create products that blend practicality, visual appeal, and ease of use in distinctive ways. In marketing, design quality extends beyond physical characteristics to encompass the entire customer experience, including how products are packaged and

function. Kotler and Keller (2020) note that thoughtful product design communicates dependability and innovation, strengthening how customers perceive value. Norman (2021) observes that design-based differentiation is particularly significant in sectors like electronics, fashion, and automotive industries, where appearance, comfort, and precision matter greatly in determining consumer preferences. Bloch (2019) adds that quality design offers practical advantages while also creating psychological bonds with consumers, conveying qualities such as status, dependability, and uniqueness.

Quality Performance. This aspect addresses how consistently a brand fulfills its claims regarding reliability, longevity, and uniformity. Keller (2022) describes performance quality as the extent to which consumers believe a brand meets or surpasses their expectations during actual use. When a brand performs better than competitors through greater efficiency, durability, or affordability, it achieves performance-based differentiation. Aaker (2019) notes that brands excelling in this area develop strong reputations that create lasting competitive advantages. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2020) further argue that exceptional performance builds customer commitment and reduces how price-sensitive consumers are, as satisfied customers willingly pay more for dependable products.

2.1.2 Customer Patronage

Customer patronage refers to how frequently consumers return to purchase from the same brand, driven by their level of satisfaction, confidence in the brand, and the value they perceive. Oliver (2019) distinguishes between two dimensions of patronage: the observable element, which involves actual purchasing behavior, and the psychological element, encompassing brand commitment, recommendations, and customer connection. Oliver emphasizes that patronage transcends simple transactions—rather, it represents a lasting bond that develops between consumers and brands through accumulated interactions and impressions. Kotler and Keller (2020) suggest that how companies set themselves apart—whether through superior quality, outstanding features, emotional messaging, or creative pricing approaches—affects customers' views of a brand's importance and distinctiveness. They argue that when such differentiation is evident and persuasive, customers form deeper connections with the brand, ultimately resulting in continued patronage.

In practice, customer patronage is shaped by multiple elements: brand confidence, the frequency of repeat buying, and customer word-of-mouth promotion.

Customer Trust. Customer trust describes the degree to which customers believe a brand will meet its commitments reliably. Morgan and Hunt (2020) characterize brand confidence as an implicit agreement that decreases doubt and exposure to risk when customers make purchasing decisions. They contend that trusting customers are inclined to keep purchasing from a brand, as trust cultivates both emotional bonds

and a sense of dependability. Additionally, they note that trust provides protection against competitive threats, with loyal customers less inclined to abandon a brand for cheaper or promoted alternatives.

Customer Repeat Purchase. Repeat buying describes the observable pattern of customer patronage, reflecting how often customers purchase the same brand repeatedly. Dick and Basu (1994) identify repeat buying as a straightforward, measurable sign of patronage since it reflects genuine consumer actions in the marketplace rather than what consumers claim they'll do. They suggest that repeat purchases typically stem from positive past experiences, confidence in product performance, or well-executed brand differentiation.

Customer Referral. Customer word-of-mouth or referral occurs when pleased customers voluntarily suggest a brand to others, either in conversation or online. Reichheld (2021) views this as a significant indicator of patronage because it moves beyond individual transactions to actively drive brand expansion. He notes that customers engage in recommendations when they believe a brand offers distinctive advantages, reliability, or superior value, and that this organic promotion is an economical marketing channel for acquiring new customers.

2.2 Theoretical Foundation

The research is grounded in Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework, introduced in 1993. This framework proposes that successful brands are created by establishing brand recognition, positive connections, perceived excellence, and customer commitment. Brand differentiation strengthens each of these components by making brands stand out and easier to remember. Consequently, brands with distinctive qualities tend to experience stronger customer patronage because, according to the framework, customers recognize and value their superior offerings.

2.3 Empirical Review

This section examines existing scholarly work that connects to the present investigation in various ways.

Lalekael et al (2023) conducted a survey-based study with 282 participants in Tehran, Iran to explore how brand differentiation and loyalty influence brand equity within the automotive sector. Using questionnaires for data collection and Linear Regression for analysis, the findings indicated that brand differentiation positively impacts brand equity.

Dixit and Bhatnagar (2024) conducted survey research in India's consumer electronics industry to assess how product differentiation approaches shape consumer purchasing choices. With 491 participants selected from a population of 500, data were collected via questionnaire and analyzed using Linear Regression and ANOVA. The analysis demonstrated that product differentiation strategies significantly and positively affect consumer purchasing decisions.

Owenda and Samboro (2024) performed a survey examining how product differentiation and social reference groups influence consumer purchasing behavior, using Xiaomi Smartphones as their focal case in Indonesia. All 68 respondents served as both the population and sample, with questionnaire-based data analyzed through Multiple Linear Regression. The findings revealed that both product differentiation and reference group variables significantly and positively influence Xiaomi Smartphone purchase decisions in that market.

Tariq et al (2020) studied how differentiation strategies—including pricing, packaging, and perceived quality—shape customer purchasing behavior in Japan. Their survey of 250 respondents involved questionnaire distribution and ANOVA-based analysis. Results showed that all examined differentiation strategies significantly and positively influenced customer purchasing behavior and brand loyalty.

2.4 Gap in Literature

An examination of the reviewed literature reveals that no prior studies were conducted in Nigeria or specifically within the automobile industry, as this research addresses. These geographical and sectoral gaps represent the knowledge contributions that this study fills by investigating the automobile sector within the Nigerian context. This distinction establishes the study's originality and scholarly value.

3.0 Methodology

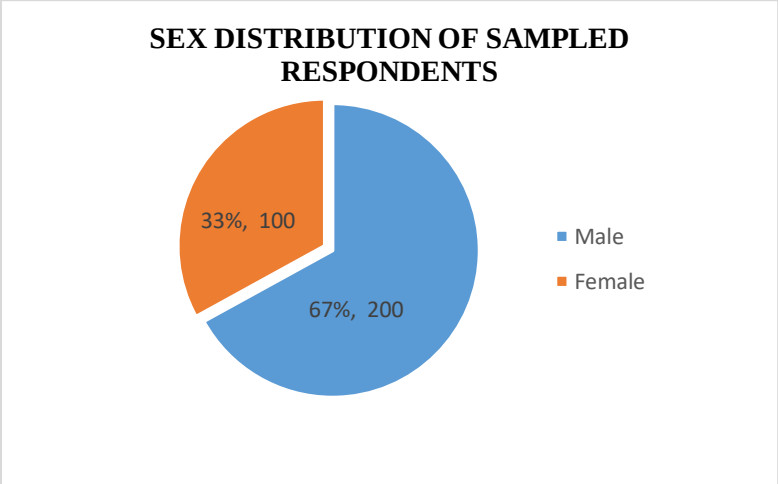
This is quantitative survey research. Because of lack of accurate and documented data on the number of customers of Toyota and Honda Motor Manufacturing Companies in the study area – Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja, the researcher worked with an estimated population of 300 respondents and this also served as the sample size for the study. The 300 respondents were shared equally to the six area councils that make-up the FCT – Abaji, Abuja, Kwali, Kuje, Gwagwalada, and Bwari, Individual respondents from the council areas were randomly selected through convenience sampling method. Data were collected with questionnaire. The questions were designed in modified Likert 4-scale such as strongly agree-4, Agree-3, Disagree-2, strongly disagree-1. The collected data were analyzed with Linear Regression under 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error with the aid of SPSS version 22. Therefore, the standard significance level equals 0.05.

4.0 Data Presentation, Analysis, Results and Discussion of Findings

300 copies of questionnaire were distributed to the respondents in this research and they were properly filled and collected back. Decisions on this research were therefore based on information from the 300 valid questionnaires.

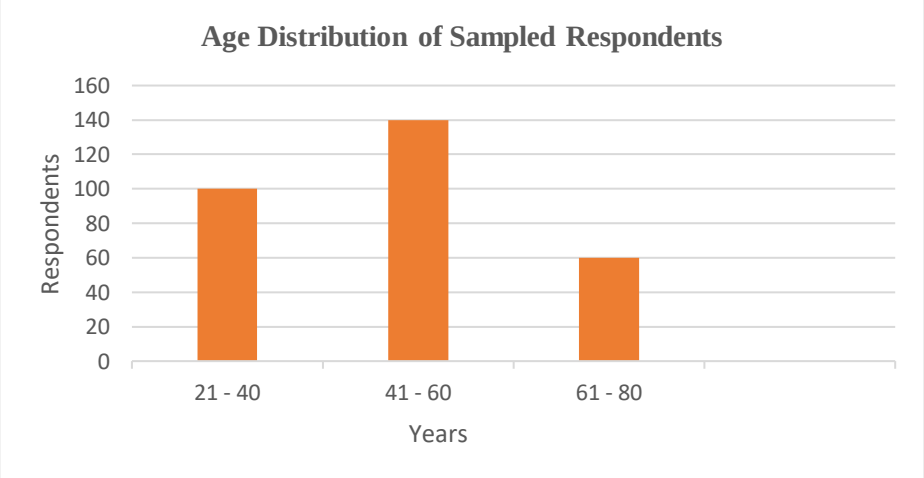
4.1 Biodata Analysis of Sampled Respondents

4.1.1 Sex Distribution of Sampled Respondents



The pie chart above indicates that 67% representing 200 respondents are males while 33% that constitute 100 respondents are females.

4.1.2 Age Distribution of Sampled Respondents



Information from the bar chart shows that respondents within the age bracket of 21-40 years are 100, those within 41-60 years are 140 while those within 61-80 years are 60.

4.2 Bivariate Analysis of Sampled Data i. e. Hypotheses Testing

Six hypotheses were tested in the research and the test done with Linear Regression under 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error with the aid of SPSS version 22. The decision criteria are as specified in section 3.1 under methodology.

Hypothesis One

Ho_1: Quality design of Toyota and Honda vehicles has no significant influence on customers trust in the brands.

Table 4.1: Influence of quality design of Toyota and Honda vehicles on customers' trust

Model Summary[b]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics					Durbin-Watson
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	
1	.75.1[a]	.67.4	.66.7	30.18	.610	3.13	1	2	.02	2.036

a. Predictors: (Constant), Quality Design

b. Dependent Variable: Customers Trust

From table 4.1, Z value is 0.02 which is less than P value of 0.05. HO is rejected and HI accepted. Quality design of Toyota and Honda vehicles has positive and significant influence on customers trust in the brands. Also, R-Squared is 67.4 while the Adjusted R-Squared is 66.7. This shows that 66.7% of positive changes in customers trust in Toyota and Honda vehicles in Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja can be attributed to the influence of quality design of the brands.

Hypothesis Two

Ho_2: Quality deign of Toyota and Honda vehicles has no significant influence on customers repeat purchase of the brands

Table 4.2: Influence of quality design of Toyota and Honda vehicles on customers repeat purchase

Model Summary[b]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics					Durbin-Watson
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	
1	.727[a]	.68.6	.68.2	20.134	.701	.688	1	2	.0.01	.787

a. Predictors: (Constant), Quality Design

b. Dependent Variable: Customers Repeat Purchase

Looking at table4.2, Z value equals 0.01 which is less than P value of 0.05. HO is therefore rejected and HI accepted. Statistically, quality design of Toyota and Honda vehicles has direct positive correlation with customers repeat purchase of the brands. Again, R-Squared is 68.6 while the Adjusted R-Squared is 68.2. This indicates that 68.2% of positive changes in customers repeat purchase of Toyota and Honda vehicles in FCT Abuja can be associated with the influence of quality design of the brands.

Hypothesis Three

Ho_3: Quality design of Toyota and Honda vehicles has no significant influence on customers' referral of the brands.

Table 4.3: Influence of quality design of Toyota and Honda vehicles on customers referral

Model Summary[b]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics					Durbin-Watson
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	
1	.737[a]	.68.4	.66.8	20.000	.601	4.685	1	2	.004	.724

a. Predictors: (Constant), Quality Design

b. Dependent Variable: Customers Referral

Result of the analysis in table 4.3 reveals that Z value is 0.004 which is less than P value of 0.05. HO is hereby rejected and HI accepted. Equally, R-Squared equals 68.4 while the Adjusted R-Squared is 66.8. It shows that 66.8% of positive changes in customers' advocacy for Toyota and Honda vehicles in FCT Abuja is as a result of the influence of quality design of the brands.

Hypothesis Four

Ho_4: Quality performance of Toyota and Honda vehicles has no significant influence on customers trust in the brands

Table 4.4: Influence of quality performance of Toyota and Honda vehicles on customers trust

Model Summary[b]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics					Durbin-Watson
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	
1	.792[a]	.78.3	.77.6	40.104	.611	3.232	1	2	.02	1.546

a. Predictors: (Constant), Quality Performance

b. Dependent Variable: Customers Trust

Information from table 4.4 indicates that Z value equals 0.02 and this is less than the P value of 0.05. Based on this, HO is rejected and HI accepted. Quality performance of Toyota and Honda vehicles has direct positive correlation with customers trust in the brands. Also, R-Squared equals 78.3 and Adjusted R-squared

is 77.6. The indication is that 77.6% of positive changes in customers trust in Toyota and Honda vehicles in FCT Abuja can be attributed to the influence of quality performance of the brands.

Hypothesis Five

Ho_5: Quality performance of Toyota and Honda vehicles has no significant influence on customers repeat purchase of the brands

Table 4.5: Influence of quality performance of Toyota and Honda vehicles on customers repeat purchase

Model Summary[b]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics					Durbin-Watson
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	
1	.781[a]	.77.8	.77.3	30.081	.510	3.102	1	2	.004	2.016

a. Predictors: (Constant), Quality Performance

b. Dependent Variable: Customers Repeat purchase

Table 4.5 shows that Z value is 0.004 and this is less than the P value of 0.05. Quality performance of Toyota and Honda vehicles has positive and significant influence on customers repeat purchase of the brands. HO is therefore rejected and HI accepted. Again, R-Squared is 77.8 while Adjusted R-Squared equals 77.3. It means that 77.3% of positive changes in customers repeat purchase of Toyota and Honda vehicles in FCT Abuja can be associated with the influence of quality performance of the brands.

Hypothesis Six

Ho_6: Quality performance of Toyota and Honda vehicles has no significance influence on customers' referral of the brands

Table 4.6: Influence of quality performance of Toyota and Honda vehicles on customers referral

Model Summary[b]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics					Durbin-Watson
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	
1	.748[a]	.78.4	.77.1	30.431	.731	4.621	1	2	.0.003	.747

a. Predictors: (Constant), Quality Performance

b. Dependent Variable: Customers Referral

Result of the analysis in table 4.6 reveals that Z value is 0.003 and this is less than the P value of 0.05. HO is hereby rejected and HI accepted. R-Squared equals 78.4 and Adjusted R-Squared is 77.1. This indicates

that 77.1% of positive changes in customers' advocacy for Toyota and Honda vehicles in FCT Abuja can be associated with the influence of quality performance of the brands.

4.3 Results and Discussion of Findings

Following data compilation, statistical analysis, and result interpretation, the study found that both investigated variables—quality design and quality performance as components of brand differentiation strategies employed by Toyota and Honda Motor Manufacturing Companies—positively and significantly affect customer loyalty toward these brands in Abuja, Federal Capital Territory. This influence manifests through customer trust, repeat purchasing, and word-of-mouth recommendations, though the magnitude of each variable's effect differs. Quality design demonstrated a moderately strong positive impact, with 66.7% of customers expressing trust, 68.2% indicating repeat purchase intent, and 66.8% willing to provide referrals. In contrast, quality performance exhibited substantially stronger positive influence, reflected in 77.6% customer trust, 77.3% repeat purchase likelihood, and 77.1% referral willingness.

These results suggest that while Abuja customers recognize the importance of quality design—encompassing vehicle features, aesthetic appeal, and form—alongside quality performance regarding dependability, longevity, and operational capability, they place greater emphasis on performance quality than design quality when making purchasing decisions.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The research concludes that brand differentiation strategies significantly determine customer loyalty toward Toyota and Honda vehicles in Abuja, Federal Capital Territory, and more broadly across Nigeria. This conclusion rests on empirical evidence demonstrating that quality design and quality performance, as differentiation strategy dimensions, maintain direct positive relationships with customer loyalty, measured through trust, repeat purchases, and recommendations—all critical factors that strengthen market demand for products and services.

Consequently, leadership at Toyota and Honda Motor Manufacturing Companies, as well as other automotive manufacturers, should prioritize investment in research and development focused on enhancing quality design and quality performance. Such initiatives serve dual purposes: attracting new customers while simultaneously building long-term customer retention for sustained business growth.

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