



Unleashing the Power of SUVs: Consumer Preferences and Future Prospects in India

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Abstract

Automobile industry play a significant role in any economy and SUVs is one of the fastest growing segments of this industry known for its ruggedness, Sporty looks and spaciousness. The rising popularity of Sport Utility Vehicles (SUVs) in the Indian automobile market has attracted significant attention from researchers and industry practitioners. Understanding the factors driving this trend is crucial for industry stakeholders to meet consumer demands effectively. Our study aims to explore consumer preferences, purchasing behaviour and the underlying factors influencing the increasing demand for SUVs in the Indian market. Using a descriptive cross-sectional research design, data was collected through structured surveys administered via Google Forms. The sample consisted of 181 respondents, including both SUV owners and non-SUV owners, representing diverse populations in the Delhi, National Capital Region (NCR). The survey focused on collecting data to identify the most significant factors driving the demand for SUVs, factors considered by consumers while make purchase decisions and perceived limitations of SUVs. The findings revealed changing consumer perceptions, with Indian consumers shifting away from traditional notions and perceiving SUVs and MUVs as economical, powerful, and stylish options. Affordability, latest style and status were identified as key drivers of the increasing demand, with advancements in technology enhancing performance, fuel efficiency, and safety features. Launch of small size affordable models of SUV will be the success factor for competitors.

Keywords: SUVs, automobile market, consumer preferences, purchasing behaviour.

Introduction

Automobile industry play a major role in the progress of world economy. The Indian automobile industry has witnessed remarkable growth in recent years. Automobile Industry Report, 2023 by India Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF) says that India's automotive industry

is ranked fourth globally in terms of production. According to Economics Times Auto analysis on automotive industry, India is the third major automobile market globally in terms of sales. National Family Health Survey (2021) reported that less than 8% of Indian households own a car and India has just 22 cars per 1,000 people. The market is growing with compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 11.3% from 2020, reported by Grand View Research. Automobile industry expected to experience a surge in demand and had a growing prospect.

Sport Utility Vehicle (SUVs) is major segment in automobile industry and known for their robustness, spaciousness, and versatility, have gained immense popularity among Indian consumers in recent years. History of SUVs cars can be traced back to the early 20th century when rugged, off-road vehicles were used primarily for military and industrial purposes. However, the modern concept of SUVs as we know them today emerged in the mid-20th century, and their popularity has evolved over time (Lauer, 2005). The SUV market continued to evolve, with luxury SUVs becoming increasingly popular and many brands introducing smaller, more fuel-efficient models (Subramanian & Muthu, 2018). Compact sized sports utility vehicles (SUVs) started to become more and more common in a market and their affordability is reason behind the success of SUVs (Subramanian & Muthu, 2018). The Indian automotive market has experienced a shift in consumer preferences, with an increasing inclination towards SUVs. In future, SUVs will be one of the dominant car segments in India (Biawas, Mukherjee & Roy, 2014)

There are numerous personal factors and product features that effect the consumer buying behaviours for cars. Consumer behaviour is very complicated because automobile purchase decision involves high level of social, psychological and financial involvement (Shende, 2014). Product reliability, economic factor, current trend, level of non-price promotions & offers, trust-worthiness and brand association were found as the major predictors of car buying decisions (Mohan Raj, Sasikumar & Sriram, 2013) but in Indian automobile market driving comfort, availability of spare parts and pricing were analysed as the most significant influencers of consumer's buying behaviour (Subadra, Murugesan & Ganapathi, 2012). However, when it comes to SUVs car segment greater size & visibility, rugged & sporty look of SUVs and seating capacity & towing power were the factors behind influencing the Indian consumers for their inclination toward SUVs (Subramanian & Muthu, 2018; Dhiman, 2020). Consumer demographics like age and qualification didn't seem to influence their choice behaviour with respect to car purchase (Subadra, Murugesan & Ganapathi, 2012).

India being a developing economy had growing disposable income, that give rise to the aspirations of the Indian middle class which had resulted in a higher demand for vehicles that provide both comfort and style. SUVs, with their robust design and luxurious features, cater to these evolving consumer preferences. There are other numerous factors that affect the consumer preference and buying behaviour of SUVs. In Indian market perception of consumers toward SUVs is changing (Prasad, 2016). Our study is an attempt to study the buying behaviour of current and potential consumers of SUVs in Indian market. It is a descriptive cross-sectional study that present the buying behaviour of SUVs holders and potential consumers. Study will help the market players in SUVs segment for identifying the factors affecting buying behaviour of potential consumers and moving ahead in competitive edge. Hence the objectives of our study are as follows;

- To study the factors that promotes the consumers to purchase SUVs.
- To study the perception of consumers about the concerns with SUVs.

- To study the influential factors that consumer consider while purchasing SUVs.
- To study the most preferable type of SUV segment car.

Literature review

Growing SUVs and Changing Consumer Perception

The Indian automobile market has witnessed a remarkable transformation in recent years, with a notable surge in the popularity of Sport Utility Vehicles (Biswas, Mukherjee & Roy, 2014; Prasad, 2016). This shift in consumer preferences can be attributed to various factors, including changing perceptions (Prasad, 2016; Subramanian & Muthu, 2018), affordability (Biswas, Mukherjee & Roy, 2014; Subramanian & Muthu, 2018), improved technology, and shifting demographics (Solanki, Singh & Chauhan, 2020). Understanding the drivers behind this trend is crucial for both researchers and industry practitioners. The growth of the Indian automobile market is driven by several factors, including the rise in disposable income (Ramírez-Díaz, Ramos-Real, Rodríguez-Brito, Rodríguez-Donate & Lorente de las Casas, 2022), urbanization, leisure travel, and improved highway infrastructure (Biswas, Mukherjee & Roy, 2014). Lenient car financing options offered by financial institutions, as well as the availability of service centers and spare parts, have also contributed to the increased demand for SUVs and MUVs. The middle-class has emerged as a key consumer group due to the introduction of more affordable SUV models, with prices as low as 6 lakhs (Biswas, Mukherjee & Roy, 2014; Subramanian & Muthu, 2018). Perception plays a vital role in shaping their preferences and purchasing decisions but consumer preferences are unpredictable some time (Saxena, 2014). In the context of SUVs and MUVs, Indian consumers are now moving away from traditional notions of these vehicles being associated with vibration, high prices, and uncomfortable rides (Prasad, 2016). Instead, consumers now perceive SUVs and MUVs as more economical, powerful, and stylish options (Dhiman, 2020). Advertisements and promotional offers have significantly influenced this change in perception and have played a pivotal role in altering consumer preferences (Biswas, Mukherjee & Roy, 2014; Saxena, 2014; Prasad, 2016).

Factors enhancing inclination toward SUVs

Inclination towards SUVs is influenced by multitude of factors including socioeconomic class, status, personality, and attitudes (Solanki, Singh & Chauhan, 2020). Family opinions (Masi, 2018), references, and friend evaluations also play a significant role in shaping consumer preferences (Solanki, Singh & Chauhan, 2020). Additionally, the rise of the internet and increased consumer literacy and awareness has led to a shift in consumer behaviour (Prasad, 2016). Consumers are now more inclined toward SUVs due to urbanisation (Prasad, 2016), sporty & rugged looks (Davis & Truett, 2000; Solanki, Singh & Chauhan, 2020), seating capacity, comfort (Masi, 2018), big size and towing power (Subramanian & Muthu, 2018). Consumers viewed SUVs as more rugged and safe which keep them safe at the time of accidents (Davis & Truett, 2000). Furthermore, advancements in technology have enhanced the performance, fuel efficiency, and safety features of SUVs and MUVs, making them more appealing to Indian consumers. Availability of internet and rigorous advertisement campaigns were also responsible for enhancing inclination toward SUVs (Biswas, Mukherjee & Roy, 2014; Saxena, 2014; Prasad, 2016).

Key Factors Influencing SUV Purchasing Decisions

When purchasing SUVs, Indian consumers consider various factors. These include safety features (Rout, Mishra, Kantha & Bhatta, 2022), comfort (Masi, 2018), aesthetics, brand value, and mileage (Mohan Raj, Sasikumar & Sriram, 2013; Sravan, Sampathrushi, Sarakamu & Rao, 2014). High ground clearance, high seats, cargo space, the ability to navigate different terrains and a rugged & sporty look (Mayhorn, Wogalter & Conzola, 2010; Mohan Raj, Sasikumar & Sriram, 2013; Dhiman, 2020; Rout, Mishra, Kantha & Bhatta, 2022) are considered important attributes. Additionally, factors such as experience, life-time cost, and brand association influence consumer decision-making (Sravan, Sampathrushi, Sarakamu & Rao, 2014;). It is important for automakers to understand these factors and align their offerings to meet consumer preferences. Brand loyalty is an important factor influencing consumer purchasing decisions (Saxena, 2014). SUVs have gained popularity not solely based on vehicle price or fuel economy but due to their sporty, rugged image, and perceived safety. However, it is worth noting that the perception of safety may be subjective, and consumers may maintain positive perceptions of SUV safety despite evidence suggesting otherwise (Mayhorn, Wogalter & Conzola, 2010). Consumers conduct detailed research, considering factors such as car design, engine specifications, and technical details before making purchase decisions (Ramírez-Díaz, Ramos-Real, Rodríguez-Brito, Rodríguez-Donate & Lorente de las Casas, 2022; Dhanabalan, Subha, Shanthi & Sathish, 2018; Biswas, Mukherjee & Roy, 2014).

Consumer Perception About Issues with SUVs

While SUVs are popular among consumers, it is essential to address safety concerns associated with these vehicles. Research shows that the fatality rate for SUVs is higher compared to non-SUVs (Davis & Truett, 2000), highlighting the need for continuous improvement in safety measures. The perception of safety among consumers may not always align with actual safety statistics (Mayhorn, Wogalter & Conzola, 2010) and this discrepancy needs to be addressed through education and awareness campaigns. Other issues with SUVs researched were rollover, poor mileage and environmental concerns (Ramírez-Díaz, Ramos-Real, Rodríguez-Brito, Rodríguez-Donate & Lorente de las Casas, 2022).

The Indian automobile market is evolving, and consumer preferences are subject to change. As the market matures, automakers need to stay attuned to emerging trends and understand consumer demands. Additionally, understanding consumer preferences and providing innovative features will be crucial for sustaining a competitive edge in the market. To effectively cater to their evolving needs, automakers and researchers must stay abreast of these developments and continue to study and understand consumer behaviour.

Research Methodology

The research design adopted for the study was a descriptive cross-sectional research design that aimed to investigate consumer behaviour, preferences, and factors influencing the rising demand for SUVs. The study adopts a non-probability convenience sampling method, targeting individuals in the Delhi National Capital Region (NCR). The sample consists of SUV owners and non-SUV owners, representing diverse populations such as private employees, government employees, businessmen, and University students. Data collection was conducted through structured questionnaire circulated through Google forms, chosen for its effectiveness and flexibility in collecting both quantitative and qualitative data from a

large number of respondents. Questionnaire was checked by marketing experts for content validity. The survey was conducted from April 27th, 2023 to May 15th, 2023, to ensure a sufficient number of responses.

A total of 181 respondents participated in the survey, providing valuable insights into the market dynamics and buying behaviour for SUV cars. All the respondents were included in the study as all questionnaires were completely filled & correct. Participants included 50 females (27.6%) and 131 males (72.4%). 66 (36.5%) respondents were the owners SUV car while 115 (63.5%) respondents did not own SUV segment cars and might be the potential consumers of this segment. All the participants were aged 20 years and above, with 153 (84.5%) young participants who aged below 35 years. 159 (87.8%) participants were either university graduates or holding higher degrees. 66 (36.5%) participants were private sector employees and 77 (42.5%) participants were university students. 145 (80%) participants lived in nuclear families.

The main statistical tools employed for data analysis in this research project include descriptive analysis, frequency charts, bar graphs, tables and pie charts. These tools will help summarize and present the collected data in a clear and organized manner, facilitating the identification of patterns and trends in consumer preferences and factors driving the demand for SUVs. Ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their privacy and confidentiality was ensured. The research adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects.

Limitations of the study include the use of a convenience sampling method, which may introduce selection bias, and the geographical scope limited to the Delhi NCR, potentially affecting the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, self-reporting biases and limitations inherent in cross-sectional studies should be considered when interpreting the results. Overall, this research methodology provides a systematic approach for investigating consumer preferences and factors influencing the rising demand for SUVs, using a well-designed survey and appropriate statistical tools for data collection and analysis.

Data analysis

Analysis of factors promoting purchase of SUVs

When discussing consumer behaviour, it is essential to thoroughly examine the factors that drive consumers to perceive a need for a particular product. Understanding these factors enables businesses to better cater to consumer demands and devise effective marketing. In our study following factors emerged as top 5 reasons behind SUVs purchase decision for existing SUV owners: Status/ Prestige (62.1%), High ground clearance (57.6%), Coping/following trend (51.5%), off road capability (42.4%) and Higher driving position (36.4%) (Figure 1). However, status/ prestige (73.9%), more seating capacity (51.3%), Higher ground clearance (49.6%), Coping/ following the trend (46.1%) and high-powered engines (34.8%) came out to be the top 5 main reasons in the perspective of non-SUV owners (Figure 2). It is analysed that both SUV owners and potential buyers in Indian market provide higher value to the societal status than functional features of the product. Status, current trend and high ground clearance were common for both but non-SUV owners were more concerned towards the seating capacity and powered engine which can be because of group travel goals and growing knowledge of technicalities respectively. Manufacturers and marketers should

focus toward the needs of future potential owners i.e., higher seating capacity and powered engines while launching the trendy styles of SUVs.

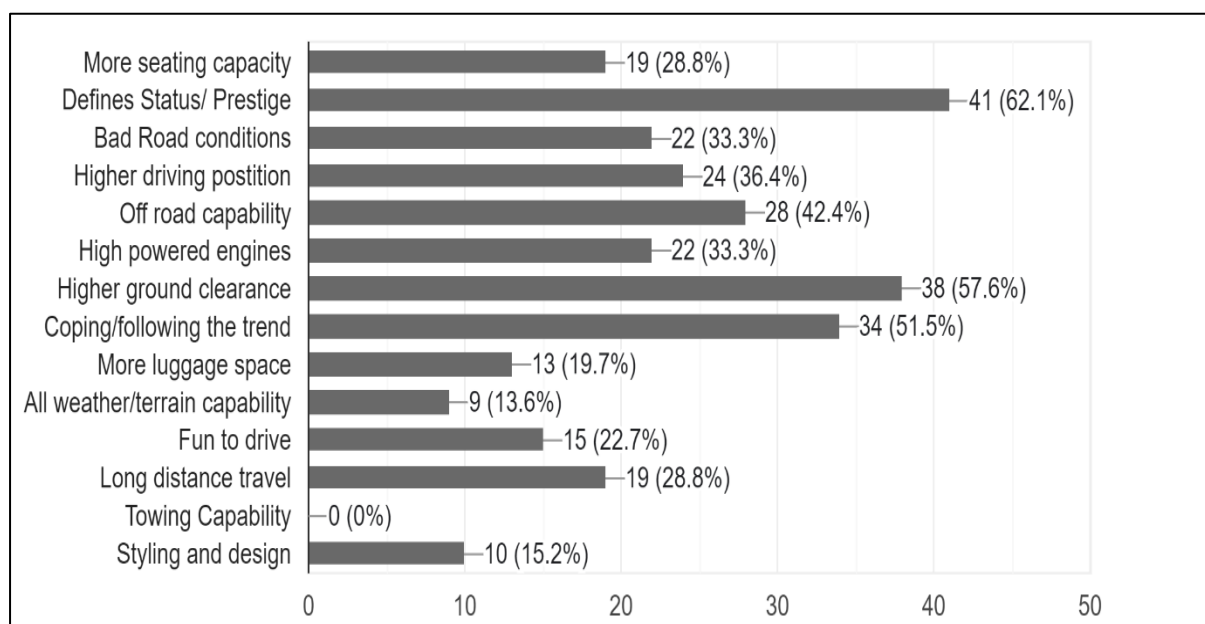


Figure 1; Factors that lead SUV owners to purchase a SUV

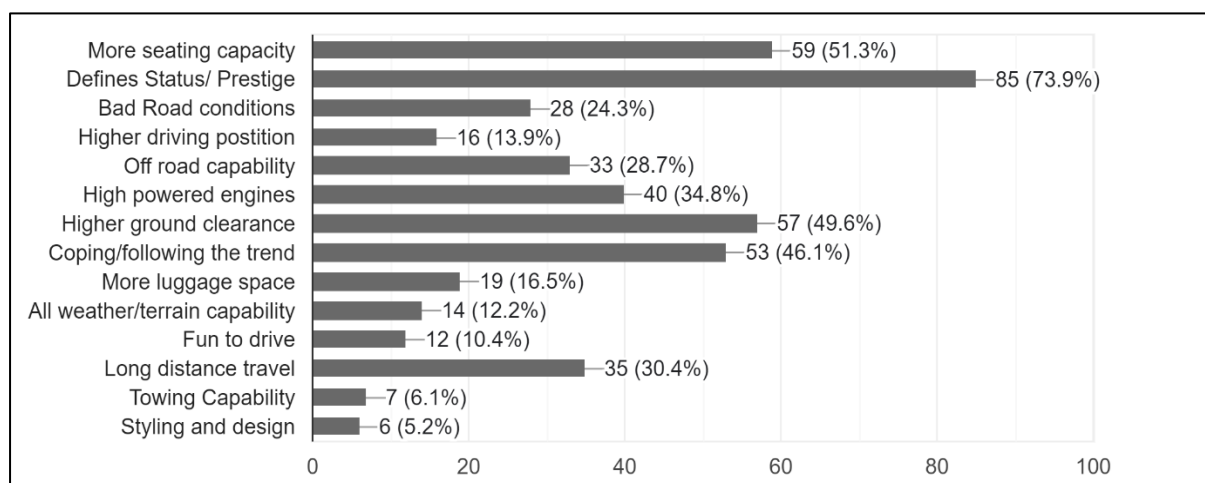


Figure 2; Factors that lead non-SUV owners to purchase a SUV

Table 1; Factors considered by SUV owners and non-owners while purchasing SUVs

Consideration	Owners	Percentage	Non-owners	Percentage
After Sales Service Availability	14	21.2%	33	28.7%
Brand Value	49	74.2%	45	39.1%
Colours	19	28.8%	54	47%
Comfort	21	31.8%	78	67.8%
Country of Origin	25	37.9%	35	30.4%
Customers review	15	22.7%	31	27%

Dimension of SUV	20	30.3%	24	20.9%
Drivetrains	15	22.7%	10	15.7%
Driving Experience	22	33.3%	33	28.7%
Easy Availability of Parts	19	28.8%	29	25.2%
Engine Capacity (CC)	19	28.8%	28	24.3%
Exterior Design	14	21.2%	20	17.4%
Fuel Option	9	13.6%	26	22.6%
Gear option	18	27.3%	40	34.8%
Infotainment	26	39.4%	41	35.7%
Interior Design	13	19.7%	17	14.8%
Looks & design of the SUV	16	24.2%	19	16.5%
Maintenance cost	19	28.8%	58	50.4%
Mileage	13	19.7%	69	60%
Off Road capability	11	16.7%	10	8.7%
Power/Performance	17	25.8%	35	30.4%
Price	9	13.6%	65	56.5%
Purpose of Usage	6	9.1%	11	9.6%
Resale Value of SUV	10	15.2%	20	17.4%
Ride Quality	11	16.7%	12	10.4%
Safety (EBS/ Airbags/ Control)	28	42.4%	41	35.7%
Safety Rating	34	51.5%	67	58.3%
Seating Capacity	9	13.6%	13	11.3%
Technology	10	15.2%	16	13.9%
Warranty	7	10.6%	11	9.6%

Analysis of Factors considered by buyer while purchasing SUVs

The features related with the product were analysed and evaluated by the owner before purchasing the product but, some features that were important for the consumers were given due consideration in pre purchase evaluation of available products and brands. In our study we found Brand value (74.2%), Safety rating (51.5%), Safety (ABS/EBD/EBS) (51.5%), Infotainment, Country of origin, driving experience, Comfort, Dimension of SUV, Colours, easily availability of parts, Engine capacity and Maintenance cost came out to be the top 10 main priority considerations while purchasing of an SUV by their owners (Table 1). SUV owners were more inclined to brand value and safety feature & its ratings but they were considering some post purchase factors like spare parts and Maintenance cost. Comfort (67.8%), Mileage (60%), Safety rating (58.3%), Price, Maintenance cost, Colours, Brand value, Infotainment, Safety (ABS/EBD/EBS), Gear options (Auto/Manual) came out to be the top 10 main priority considerations a non-SUV owner will consider while purchasing of an SUV. Non-SUV holders were more conscious about financial factors like mileage, price and maintenance cost. Safety was a major concern for all the respondents. SUV owners were more inclined toward brand value may be because of their earlier association with brand while non-SUV owners were giving due consideration to the functional and technical features like comfort, infotainment and gear options. Colour was a common factor and play important role in purchase decision. So, marketers should ensure higher safety measures and affordability (pre purchase and post purchase) of SUVs because safety being a constant concern while affordability was the concern of future potential buyers.

Analysis of issues with SUVs

It is significant for marketers to know about the issues that consumers might face while using the product because they could work on these limitations to attain the competitive edge. In our study we analysed that Less fuel efficiency (68.2%), Higher cost of maintenance (48.5%), Parking issues (42.4%) were top 3 main issues/limiting factors associated with SUV and are practically being faced by SUV owners (Table 2). Higher price (73.9%), Higher cost of maintenance (48.7%), less fuel efficiency (46.1%) came out to be the top 3 main issues/limiting factors associated with SUV in perspective of non-SUV owners (Table 2). Fuel efficiency and high maintenance were the common issue with both owner and non-owners. Non-owners were more concerned with financial issue/affordability of SUVs while the SUV owners who were having practical experience faced the parking issue due to bigger size of SUVs.

Table 2; Issues with SUVs

Issues	Owners	Percentage	Non-owners	Percentage
Parking issues	28	42.4%	45	39.1%
Less fuel efficiency	45	68.2%	53	46.1%
Higher Price	14	21.2%	85	73.9%
Higher cost of maintenance	32	48.5%	56	48.7%
Body Roll	19	28.8%	15	13%
Manoeuvrability issue	14	21.2%	18	15.7%
Doesn't match with requirements	3	4.5%	39	33.9%
Environmental concern/Pollution	6	9.1%	9	7.8%
Safety concern	16	24.2%	22	19.1%
Poor Handling	19	28.8%	8	7%
Poor Braking	9	13.6%	9	7.8%
Comfort/ Ride Quality	7	10.6%	7	6.1%

Other key analysis of the study

Our study was not limited to the analysis of factors affecting purchase decisions and issues faced by the consumers. In our study we analysed that 80% of SUV owners were having the small size variants of SUVs i.e., mini-SUV, Sub-compact SUV and compact SUV. More than 81% of non-SUV owners were also considering to purchase the small-size variants. Preference for mid-size and full-size SUVs was around 20% for both SUV owners and non-owners. Which indicated a market potential for small size SUVs. In our study we also found that 36% SUV owners had spent up to Rs.10 lakhs and 73% owners had spent up to Rs. 15 lakhs on SUV purchase. 73% non-SUV owners were also ready to spend up to Rs. 15 lakhs on SUVs. It clearly indicated an increasing demand of affordable small-size variants of SUVs in Indian market. 55% of non-SUV owners were likely to purchase SUVs in future. 80% of SUV owners were found to be satisfied with their SUV purchase and recommended other to purchase SUVs. All the analysis indicates a huge potential for small-size and affordable cars of SUV segment in Indian automobile industry and the demand will rise from middle class Indian families.

Table 3; Types of SUVs preferred by consumers

SUV Type	Owners	Percent	Non-owners	Percentage
Mini SUV	5	7.6%	4	3.5%
Sub-Compact SUV	29	43.9%	37	32.2%
Compact SUV	19	28.8%	53	46.1%
Mid-Size SUV	11	16.7%	12	10.4%
Full Size SUV	2	3%	9	7.8%
Total	66	100%	115	100%

Table 4; Amount spend or likely to be spend by SUV owners and non-owners

Likely Spending	Owners	Percentage	Non-owners	Percent
Up to 10 Lakh	24	36.4%	36	31.3%
Up to 15 Lakh	24	36.4%	48	41.7%
Up to 20 Lakh	13	19.7%	19	16.5%
Up to 30 Lakh	3	4.5%	6	5.2%
Above 30 Lakh	2	3%	6	5.2%
Total	66	100%	115	100%

Conclusion

The research highlighted the significant role of consumer preferences and lifestyle needs in driving the demand for SUVs in the Indian market. The analysis reveals that SUVs currently hold a substantial market share and exhibit promising growth potential. Compact SUV models are particularly favoured by consumers, followed by sub-compact variants. It is noteworthy that the appeal of SUVs extends beyond their seating capacity, with factors such as status/prestige, high ground clearance, and staying in line with trends influencing the purchase decisions. The survey data emphasizes the importance of brand value for existing SUV owners and associated safety features as key considerations for potential SUV buyers. However, non-SUV owners express concerns regarding price, maintenance costs, fuel efficiency, and parking limitations. There is a growing aspiration among customers to transition to the SUV segment for their next vehicle, indicating potential future demand. For the rise in demand for SUVs, it is essential to address these concerns and consider to launch small size affordable versions as compact SUVs are projected to dominate the market, presenting opportunities for automakers to cater to evolving consumer demands. Policy makers and industry stakeholders must collaborate to implement regulations and safety initiatives that ensure responsible SUV usage and minimize potential negative impacts.

This research provides valuable insights for industry stakeholders, policymakers, and automotive companies operating in the Indian market. By understanding consumer preferences and addressing challenges proactively, stakeholders can make informed decisions to meet the evolving demands of SUV ownership while promoting safety and sustainability. Future researchers can work extending it further to PAN India and larger sample size to enhance the generalisation of the study.

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Data Availability: Data is available with corresponding author and will be submitted at reasonable request.

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