

Design Thinking And Market Success: How Indian Startups Use User-Centred Design To Drive Consumer Innovation

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Abstract

The study examines the applications of user-centred design (UCD) and design thinking in Indian startups boAt, Lenskart, and Noise to find success in the market. The study is based on an interpretive, qualitative design, which utilises secondary data to explore the ways in which empathy-based, iterative, and low-cost design encourages innovation, loyalty, and differentiation. The results show that localised UCD, which incorporates cultural insight, affordability and functionality, will turn design into a strategic driver of growth. This paper concludes that contextualised design thinking empowers consumer interaction and competitiveness and suggests co-design practices, government-led design education, and academia-industry partnership to support the Indian design-led entrepreneurial ecosystem.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

The startup ecosystem in India has grown exponentially from 2016 to 2025 to become the third-largest in the world with more than 150,000 registered startups and a unified valuation of USD 450 billion (Ministry of Commerce & Industry, 2025). Such dynamic development demonstrates a paradigm shift from conventional technology-based innovation to the user-centred design (UCD) policy, which puts customer needs and culture into the forefront.

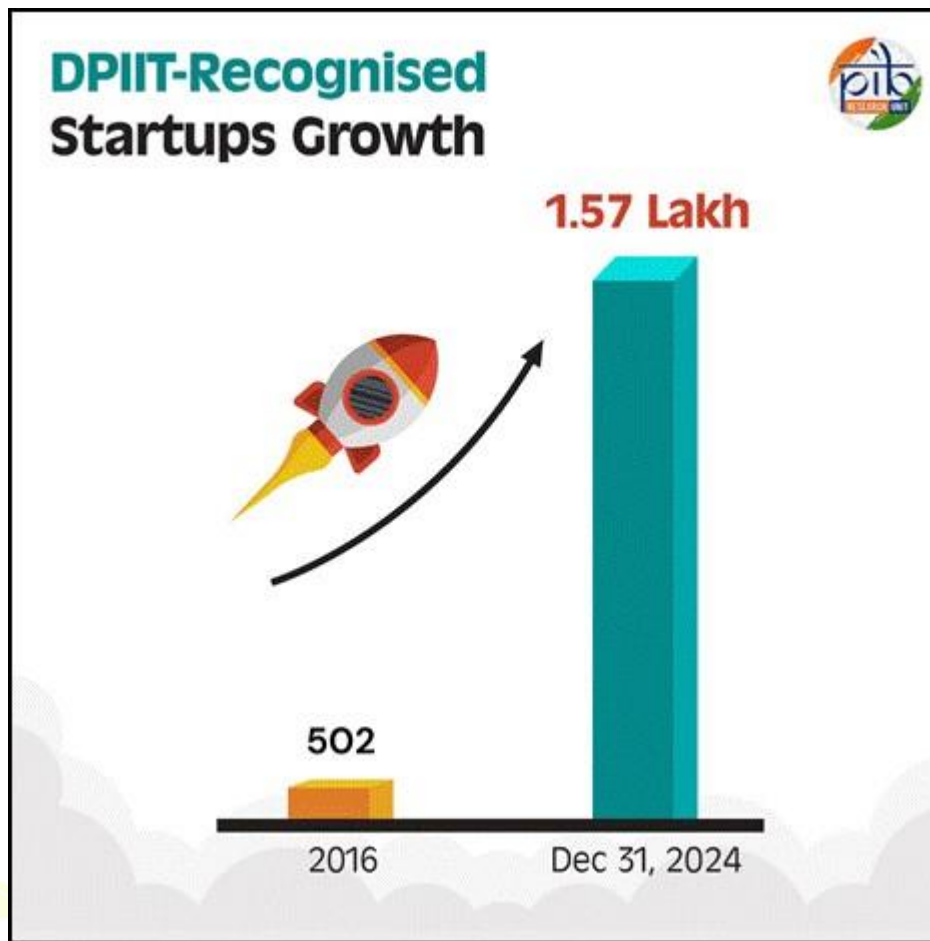


Figure 1.1: Growth of the Startups in India

(Source: Ministry of Commerce & Industry, 2025)

Start-ups like boAT, Lenskart and Noise are examples of how this change has been achieved by introducing affordability, lifestyle desire and beauty into the product making and consequently, they can win the varied middle classes of India (Gupta, 2023). In contrast to Western markets, where design thinking has become a creative problem-solving process spearheaded by IDEO, Indian entrepreneurs have localised the design thinking by considering empathy, cost-saving and functionality in all the design phases.



Figure 1.2: Progress and Impact of the Startups in India

(Source: Ministry of Commerce & Industry, 2025)

As such, design is no longer a product differentiator, but rather a strategy business driver that promotes sustained growth.

1.2 Research Aim

The aim of this study is to explore how Indian startups have applied user-centred design (UCD) and design thinking principles to enhance product-market fit, customer satisfaction, and competitive advantage within the consumer technology and lifestyle sectors.

1.3 Research Objectives

- To analyse how UCD principles are applied by Indian startups in product design.
- To evaluate how design thinking contributes to consumer engagement and loyalty.
- To identify cultural and economic factors shaping localised UCD approaches.
- To assess how UCD drives measurable market success.

1.4 Research Questions

- How do Indian startups implement design thinking and UCD principles?
- What is the relationship between user-centred design and market success?
- How do cultural and economic factors influence design decisions?

- What lessons can be drawn for future design-led innovation in India?

1.5 Problem Statement / Rationale

As the startup ecosystem is thriving in India, 90% of all new ideas fail within the first five years, mainly because of a lack of user insight and product-market mismatch (Shivam Maurya, 2025). Companies that have achieved success, like boAt and Lenskart, have illustrated that it is empathy, but not technological novelty, that creates consumer trust and loyalty (IRB, 2025). However, there is a dearth in the academic literature on the analysis of how localised UCD practices influence the competitive advantage in the cultural and economic background of India. In filling this gap, this research paper is a critical examination of how contextualised design thinking affects the success of the market and the brand and its sustainability.

1.6 Significance

The current research contributes to the knowledge of the application of design thinking to achieve sustainable development in the competitive startup environment in India. It provides practical recommendations to entrepreneurs, policymakers and educators on how to incorporate user empathy as one of the strategic pillars of business. Through analysing the combination of design and cultural acumen in startups, the study is adding to the larger debate on innovation in emerging markets.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Application of UCD in Indian Startups

User-Centred Design (UCD) was invented and developed worldwide by organisations like IDEO, which spread design as a process in a structured and iterative approach, and researchers like Donald Norman and Jakob Nielsen, who focused on usability, empathy, and the human experience in product design (Pacheco, 2025). These principles in India have transformed to become a regionalised concept that encompasses low-cost innovation and cultural sensitivity towards satisfying the wide range of user demands.

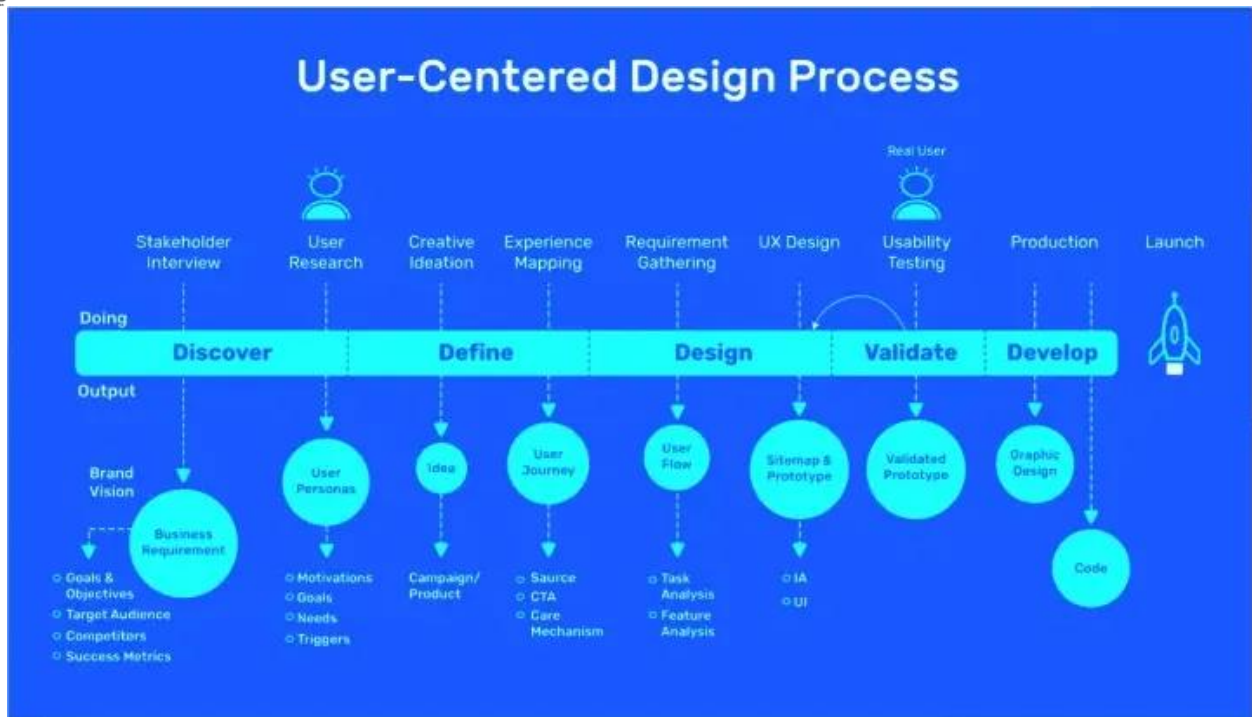


Figure 2.1: User-Centred Design

(Source: Pacheco, 2025)

Some of these principles have been used by startups like boAt, Lenskart and Noise that develop products that resonate with the expectations of the growing middle class in India and remain affordable and functional (Gupta, 2023). For example, boAt has more than 35% share of audio wearables in the Indian market, which has been reached by targeting the youths in their branding and designing the products in a way that supports the local commuting nature (Mallick, 2023).

On the same note, Lenskart made eyewear retail digital-first and home try-on, customised to convenience, and Noise made smartwatches fashionable and functional to meet the needs of the Indian climate and lifestyle diversity (Gupta, 2024). Through these brands, it is evident that UCD in India is not a direct import but a situationalized structure that changes the definition of affordability as a constraint to a creative force of innovation. Resultantly, UCD among Indian startups is a hybrid of international design rationale and national consumer understanding, which is directly related to the market relevance and achievement.

2.2 Impact of Design Thinking on Consumer Engagement and Loyalty

Design thinking is an iterative process with empathising, defining, ideating, prototyping, and testing structured in a way that encourages ongoing consumer participation during product development. This involvement model promotes emotional attachment, which leads to increased absorption and brand loyalty (Sreenivasan & Suresh, 2024). The community in boAt is found in India and has more than 80,000 active

members, which focuses on collective identity and lifestyle resonance (ISN, 2022). Similarly, Noise uses storytelling and campaigns using influencers in order to make the brand narratives more personal, turning products into a symbol of culture. This kind of engagement model enhances emotional connection and turns users into supporters. Empirical evidence indicates that startups with design practices are 1.5 times higher in terms of retaining customers than tech-oriented companies (Harlin & Berglund, 2020). Thus, the iterative empathy of the design thinking approach, in addition to functionality, provides higher user trust and is the basis of long-term brand equity and building sustainable consumer relationships.

2.3 Cultural and Economic Influences on Localised UCD

Price sensitivity, regional diversity, and lifestyle aspirations are the primary influences behind the UCD development in India. Startups make products that are affordable but aspirational because more than 65% of the Indian population is less than 35 years old, and products that are affordable but of premium quality, like boAt waterproof speakers (Niti Aayog, 2025). Lenskart customisable eyewear and Noise smartwatch hybrid fit the preference of the region with respect to aesthetics and comfort (Gupta, 2024). The design iterations are affected by cultural diversity, the products have to be able to meet the different climatic conditions, tastes and digital literacy. As an example, commuters' ergonomic earphones and personalised eyewear with its customers who are fashionable are examples of localised innovation (Torrens, 2022). Economic utilitarianism and emotional dreams intersect in this market, and startups must provide utility and identity at the same time. In this way, localised UCD in India is a process of transforming the socioeconomic limitation into cultural chance, which connects inclusivity with differentiated value generation in consumer design.

2.4 UCD as a Driver of Market Success

The design-led innovation has a direct correlation to income increase and growth in the market among Indian startups. From 2019 to 2024, the valuation of boAt rose to more than 1.4 billion dollars due to the repetitive testing of its users and the design with affordability in mind (Financial Express, 2022). Equally, the omnichannel strategy of Lenskart that included online user experience and offline personalisation led to its growth of more than 45% annually in 2023 (Kapahi, 2021). Research indicates that companies that implement UCD principles have 23% greater customer satisfaction rates than those that focus only on technology (Singh, 2023). The findings highlight design as a strategic differentiator, which is associated with user empathy and business scalability. Therefore, UCD does not just aim to perfect the user experience and appearance but also serves as a catalyst to commercial growth, mediating consumer confidence and brand competitiveness in the dynamic markets in India.

2.5 Theories and Models

This paper relies on the IDEO Design Thinking Framework, which focuses on empathy, ideation, prototyping and testing to co-create user value (IDEO, 2025). The Consumer Behaviour Model by Kotler describes the ways in which the emotional experience that consumers perceive and are satisfied with is driven by design (Roy & Datta, 2022).

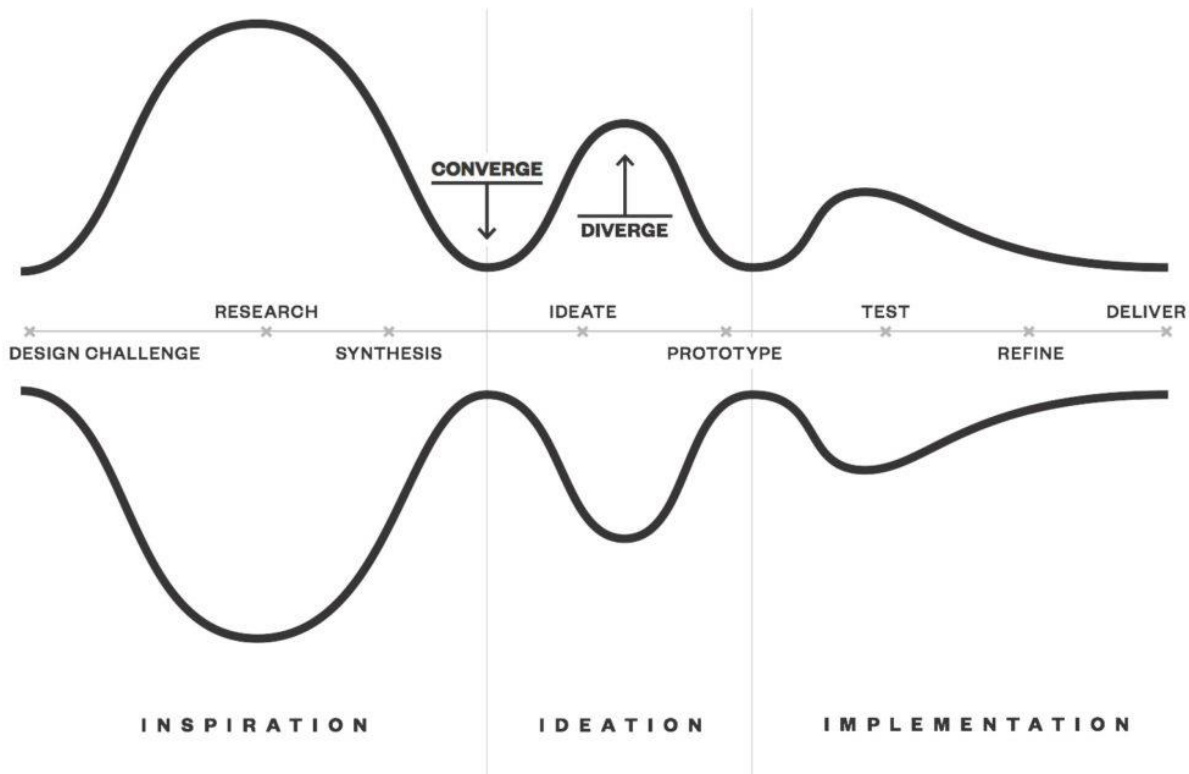


Figure 2.2: Design Thinking models. IDEO

(Source: Ramunas Balcaitis, 2019)

Further on, Blue Ocean Strategy illustrates how with UCD, Indian startups can establish uncontested market spaces by making affordability innovation and not compromising. All these frameworks combined put into perspective how sensitive and iterative design recharges spur measurable distinction and market dominance in Indian startup systems.

2.6 Literature Gap

The current literature on design thinking mainly discusses Western case studies on corporate innovation (Zhang et al., 2024). There is little academic study of UCD localising in India, especially in consumer-oriented startups. A limited number of comparative studies that analyse the impact of empathetic design practices on the performance outcomes in the emerging economies. In the attempt to fill this gap, the

current paper is a critical linkage between contextual design thinking and market success in Indian entrepreneurship.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy

The study is based on the interpretivist philosophy of focusing on the subjective experiences of Indian startups and users in applying design thinking to local contexts. Interpretivism permits investigating cultural, social, and contextual aspects that cause the principles of user-centred design (UCD) to be localised (Yazdi, 2023).

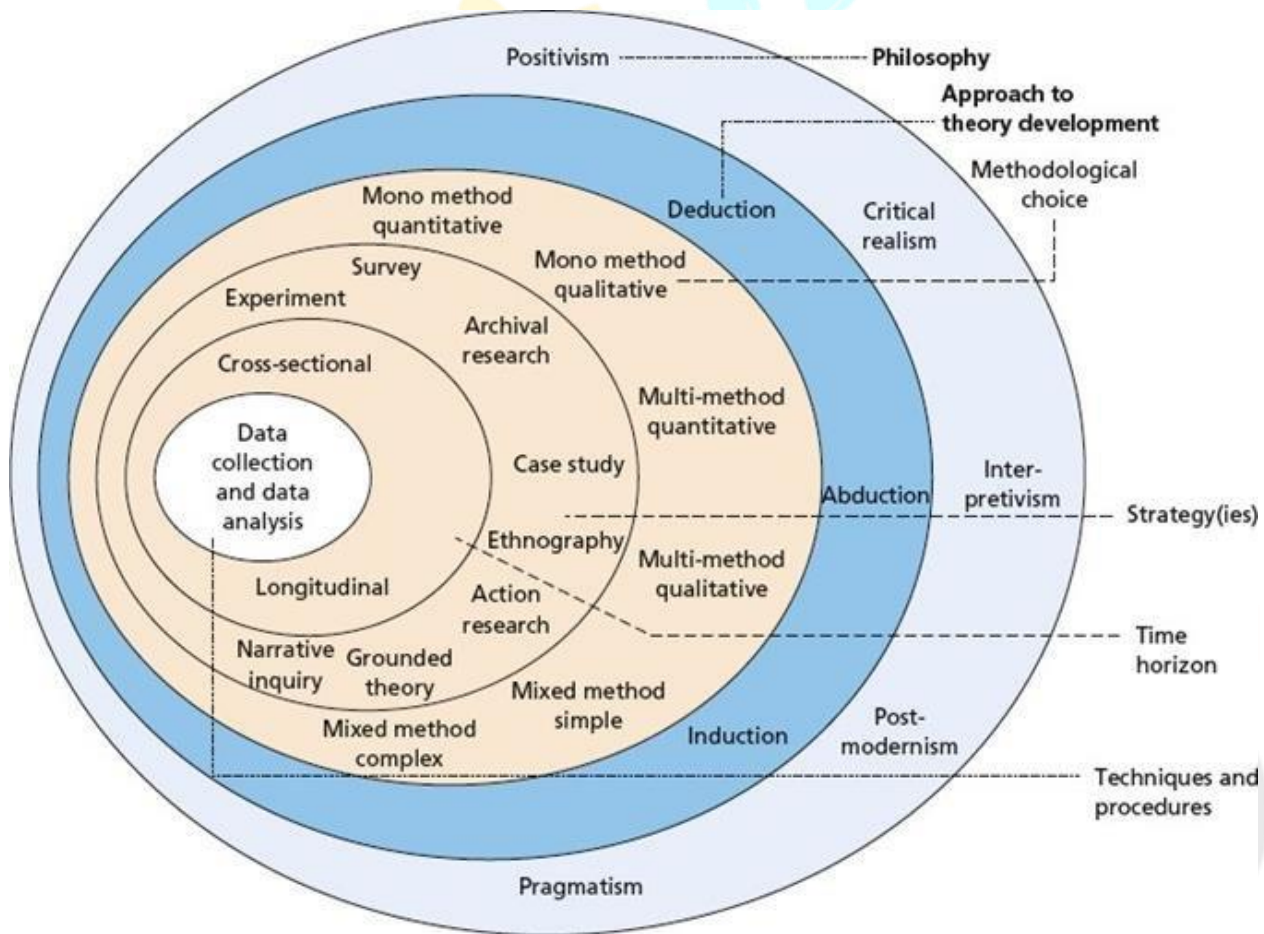


Figure 3.1: Saunders' Research Onion

(Source: Mbedzi et al., 2021)

This paradigm will go hand in hand with the purpose of the study to reveal how meaning and perception are the engines of market success based on empathic and contextualised innovation.

3.2 Research Approach

The research was a deductive one, whereby the existing theories on the design thinking and consumer behaviour were applied in interpreting the actual startup cases in the real world. The study uses theories like the IDEO model of designing processes and the consumer model developed by Kotler to investigate the validity of theoretical assumptions in the case of Indian businesses (Viswanathan et al., 2024). This methodology makes sure that the already existing theoretical forms are put to a critical test in the light of contextualised evidence in boAt, Lenskart, and Noise, and the validity of the analysis is established.

3.3 Research Design

The explanatory qualitative research design is used to address the question of how and why design thinking leads to the development of competitive advantage in Indian consumer markets (Kamble et al., 2023). The study employs a multiple case study approach to compare startups such as boAt, Lenskart, and Noise and draw cross-sectoral conclusions. This design describes causal relationships between empathy-based design, innovation, and performance, which enables extensive contextual analysis of results other than the numerical ones in order to justify the interpretivism comprehension.

3.4 Data Collection

The study utilises only secondary data collected by reliable authorities, such as journal articles, company financial reports, and industry analysis of NASSCOM, PwC, and Statista. Triangulation and reliability are ensured by a number of databases. Data about user interactions, sales volumes, and design behaviour are critically combined in order to find pertinent empirical trends. It is a method that permits a detailed analysis of UCD adoption in Indian startups using available and testable data.

3.5 Data Analysis

The thematic analysis approach is used to detect the patterns of the qualitative data with the reliance on user empathy, affordability-led innovation, and market success (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding of data in the cases is done to identify repetitive patterns and deviations to guarantee analytical rigour. Comparison between startups indicates how design thinking can be adjusted in various market segments. This analytical approach relates theoretical presumptions to practical implementations in culturally particular innovation approaches.

3.6 Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Description
Inclusion	Studies focusing on design thinking, UCD, and Indian startups (2019–2025), peer-reviewed articles, company and government reports.
Exclusion	Non-Indian contexts, unrelated innovation studies, pre-2019 articles, non-English sources, incomplete or biased datasets.

Table 3.1: Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria

(Source: Self-created)

3.7 Boolean Operators

Operator	Purpose & Example
AND	Narrow search to include all terms (“Design thinking AND India AND startups”).
OR	Expands search to include any term (“User-centred design OR consumer behaviour”).
NOT	Excludes terms (“Design NOT architecture”).

Table 3.2: Boolean Operators

(Source: Self-created)

3.8 Ethics

The research utilises secondary data only, with the help of reputable corporate and academic sources, therefore, the independent participants are not involved. Transparency and ethical recognition minimise dishonesty, inaccuracy, and negligence, bringing research to the benchmarks of scholarly work and validating the purpose of the contextual analysis as credible.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Findings

Theme 1: Empathy and Local Adaptation

Author	Year	Methodology	Findings
Sahadevan & Sumangala	2021	Literature Review	This paper brings out the fact that cross-cultural communication is important where startups are operating in different markets, such as India. Learning about the innuendos of a specific language, cultural values, and consumer behaviour increases trust and negotiation, making empathy the key to succeeding in global business.
Elizabeth	2024	Systematic Literature Review	It observes that low awareness and sensitivity to price make sustainable startups suffer from scaling. The engagement and trust between Indian consumers are more successful with startups that use user-focused narrative and situational pricing.

Table 4.1: Theme 1

(Source: Self-created)

Theme 2: Iterative Prototyping and Testing

Author	Year	Methodology	Findings
Ashlin & Sophia	2025	Literature Review	The study of the Lenskart AR application shows that there is high interaction with a moderate level of trust in the accuracy of the fit. The authors suggest combining AI customisation and human attentiveness to enhance user trust and online experience.
Lenskart	2023	Systematic Literature Review	According to the report by Lenskart, the implementation of data analytics, AR technology, with offline experience centres increases personalisation and scalability, which demonstrates that the empathetic design will lead to innovation and customer loyalty.

Table 4.2: Theme 2

(Source: Self-created)

Theme 3: Emotional Branding and Identity

Author	Year	Methodology	Findings
boAt	2024	Systematic Literature Review	The blog of boAt explains how community-based branding can be achieved with the concept of boAheads, which combines affordability and youth culture. With co-creation, which is driven by feedback, emotional association and long-lasting loyalty are generated.
Singh et al.,	2024	Literature Review	This paper identifies the data-driven marketing offered by the company boAt as influencers, humour, and personalisation that create engagement and brand awareness with the help of digital empathy.

Table 4.3: Theme 3

(Source: Self-created)

Theme 4: Affordability as Design Innovation

Author	Year	Methodology	Findings
Amend et al.,	2022	Secondary Quantitative	Smartphone modularity contributes to higher repairability and emotional bonds, making it more sustainable, and with user control, which can be applied to the Indian markets.
Parisi & Donyavi	2024	Mixed methods	The modular architecture is scalable and cost-effective, which gives Indian startups an insight into balancing innovation, flexibility and inclusive product development.

Table 4.4: Theme 4

(Source: Self-created)

4.2 Analysis

Theme 1: Cross-Cultural Communication and Sustainable Market Fit

Sahadevan and Sumangala (2021) also underline that empathetic communication and cross-cultural sensitivity contribute to the elevated level of consumer trust, which is the similarity of the empathy phase of IDEO, where one must understand the context of users. In the same manner, Elizabeth (2024) points out that Indian startups that provide sustainable products have obstacles to their advancement, as they are not affordable, and consumers are not well-informed. Both articles uncover that startups need to transform empathy into valuable propositions that people can perceive, which is consistent with the behavioural model of Kotler, in which the perceived value has a bearing on purchase intent. Designed to be perceptive of cultural diversity and economic reality in India, the middle-class markets can be considered by startups as economic reality introduces design as the perceptive of inclusion and aspirational, as a way of saying that empathy-based localisation of communication can be turned into a strategic differentiation.

Theme 2: Technological Integration and Perceived Authenticity

As demonstrated by Ashlin and Sophia (2025), the AI-driven augmented reality of Lenskart is more engaging to users, but it should be made more realistic to gain trust. Its own report (Lenskart, 2023) shows how the brand has steadily improved through prototyping and experimenting, which are the main concepts in the cyclical design approach of IDEO. They both bring out the importance of usability and emotional assurance in perceived quality and loyalty as a point in favour of Kotler, stating that psychological satisfaction maintains repeat behaviour. The Indian startups are examples of how technology can be made empathetic design, to meet the cultural demand of reliability and convenience, to build long-term brand credibility and advocacy by consumers.

Theme 3: Community Building and Emotional Branding

Taking into consideration, boAt (2024) and Singh et al. (2024) show that community-focused storytelling is turning the users of the brand into co-producers of brand identity. By introducing new branding narratives with each user feedback via digital campaigns and collaborations with influencers, boAt implements the testing component of IDEO by adjusting its branding to customer feedback. This reflects the focus of Kotler on emotional involvement as the important motivating force of retention. Incorporating affordability into the concept of aspirational branding, boAt transforms empathy into quantifiable profitability, demonstrating that contextualised storytelling requires bridging the cultural relatability with market growth.

Theme 4: Modularity, Affordability, and Sustainability

Amend et al. (2022) and Parisi and Donyavi (2024) demonstrate that modular design promotes the notion of adaptability, sustainability, and emotional attachment, which can be applied to the Indian markets that are cost-sensitive. These results are similar to the prototyping principle of IDEO, which puts an important stress on the empowerment of users with the help of customisation. Bringing Indian startups, modular approaches are turned into chances of personalisation and survival based on consumer constraints. This adds to the thesis that design thinking in India is not simply a form of creative innovation but a business approach that is strategic and scalable, resulting in user loyalty and inclusive market transformation.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1 Conclusion

Indian startups prove that contextualised design thinking is one of the most important differences in the competitive markets. The tactical approach to design that companies such as boAt, Lenskart, and Noise have adopted allows the companies to align prices with desire. This is the cultural sensitivity coupled with innovation that has made design no longer an artistic endeavour but a business catalyst to growth, brand recognition, and consumer retention. Finally, the localised user-centred design is sustainable competitiveness in India, which has a fast-changing entrepreneurship landscape.

5.2 Study Limitations

The study will only use secondary data and, therefore, will not be able to provide first-hand information on the designers and consumers. Also, emphasis on three startups such as boAt, Lenskart and Noise limits the external applicability of results to the industry. Greater empirical support using field interviews or quantitative data would give a more in-depth insight into the role of UCD in market performance.

5.3 Future Scope

In future research, interviews with founders, designers, and customers of startups in a qualitative format should be included to provide more contextual information. The extension of research to FinTech and EdTech industries will underscore the flexibility of UCD in terms of industries. A quantitative study that investigates the correlation between UCD investment and revenue increases would add to the evidence base of the strategic role of design to innovation-based economies.

5.4 Recommendations

Design research teams are to be included in the first stages of product development, so that at the start of startup activities, the evidence-based decision-making is implemented (Glaveckaitė, 2020). Introduction of co-design workshops would lead to better empathy and participative innovation. The government incubators should incorporate design thinking training so as to empower the entrepreneurs. Lastly, the academia-industry partnerships are to be enhanced to institutionalise the design-led innovation ecosystems that facilitate the long-term competitiveness and sustainable market transformation.

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