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RESEARCH ARTICLE

**AN ANALYTICAL STUDY ON THE SHIFT IN CONSUMER PREFERENCES FOR
TANGIBLE GOODS IN INDIA OVER GENERATION**

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Abstract

Over the past six decades, consumer preferences in India have undergone a remarkable transformation, shaped by economic development, globalization, rapid technological advancements, urbanization, and rising disposable incomes. In the earlier decades, Indian households largely prioritized the purchase of essential tangible goods such as food, clothing, footwear, fuel, and other basic household necessities. Consumption decisions were primarily driven by need rather than choice, as limited purchasing power and restricted availability of branded products, consumer durables, and automobiles constrained spending patterns. The economic liberalization of 1991 marked a significant turning point in India's consumption landscape. With higher income levels, a growing middle class, and greater access to domestic and international markets, consumer behaviour began to change considerably. Today's Millennials and Generation Z exhibit a stronger preference for a wide range of tangible goods, including smartphones, consumer electronics, branded apparel, automobiles, premium housing, and lifestyle products. The rapid growth of e-commerce, social media, digital marketing, easy access to consumer credit, and increasing brand awareness has further accelerated this shift, making purchasing decisions more informed, aspirational, and experience-driven. The present study examines how consumer preferences for tangible goods have evolved across three broad generational groups in India—Pre-Liberalization consumers, Millennials, and Generation Z. It focuses on key expenditure categories such as food and beverages, healthcare, electronics and consumer durables, automobiles, real assets, and apparel and footwear to understand how spending priorities have changed over time.

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The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research approach and relies entirely on secondary data obtained from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI), government publications, and peer-reviewed research journals. By analysing consumption trends from 1965 to 2026, the study seeks to identify the long-term structural changes that have influenced purchasing behaviour across

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different generations. The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights for marketers, policymakers, and researchers by highlighting the gradual transition of Indian consumers from necessity-based purchasing to more aspirational and lifestyle-oriented consumption. Overall, the study concludes that consumer preferences for tangible goods in India have evolved substantially over time, reflecting the country's broader economic progress, changing social values, and shifting cultural aspirations.

Introduction:-

Consumer preference refers to the choices people make when selecting goods and services based on factors such as their needs, income, lifestyle, personal tastes, and social environment. These preferences are not static; they evolve over time in response to changes in economic conditions, technology, culture, and society. In India, consumer preferences have changed considerably over the past several decades, driven by rapid economic growth, urbanization, globalization, technological progress, and shifting socio-cultural values. These changes are particularly evident in the consumption of tangible goods, including food and beverages, healthcare products, electronics and consumer durables, automobiles, real assets, apparel, and footwear.

Before the economic reforms of 1991, Indian consumers were generally more cautious and necessity-oriented in their spending habits. Household budgets were largely devoted to essential items such as food, clothing, fuel, and other basic necessities. Purchases of consumer durables, automobiles, and real estate were relatively uncommon and were often viewed as long-term investments or symbols of financial stability rather than everyday consumption. Limited product availability, lower disposable incomes, and a restricted market meant that consumers primarily valued affordability, durability, and functionality over brand image or variety.

The economic liberalization of 1991 brought about a profound transformation in India's consumer landscape. Market-oriented reforms encouraged foreign investment, expanded organized retail, and increased competition across industries. At the same time, rising incomes, a rapidly growing middle class, and greater employment opportunities improved consumers' purchasing power. As international brands entered the Indian market and digital technologies reshaped retail, consumers gained access to a wider range of products than ever before. The growth of e-commerce platforms, digital payment systems, and easy consumer financing further simplified purchasing decisions, making consumption more accessible and convenient.

These economic and technological changes have influenced generations in different ways. Older generations, who experienced periods of economic scarcity and limited choices, generally placed greater emphasis on saving and purchasing only essential goods. Millennials, having grown up during India's period of economic expansion, became more receptive to branded products, consumer durables, and convenience-oriented purchases. In contrast, Generation Z has entered adulthood in an era of digital connectivity, social media, and global exposure. Their purchasing decisions are increasingly shaped by lifestyle aspirations, online reviews, influencer marketing, and brand experiences, leading to higher demand for smartphones, consumer electronics, fashionable apparel, automobiles, premium housing, and other lifestyle-oriented tangible goods.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the inter-generational shift in consumer preferences for tangible goods in India. It explores how expenditure patterns have evolved across major consumption categories, including food and beverages, healthcare, electronics and consumer durables, automobiles, real assets, and apparel and footwear. The study also compares these changes across rural and urban households to understand how economic development and changing lifestyles have influenced consumption behaviour over time. The analysis is based on secondary data obtained from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), the National Statistical Office (NSO), the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), and other government publications and research reports.

Understanding these changing consumption patterns is important because they reflect the broader economic and social transformation of India. The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the evolution of consumer demand and purchasing behaviour across generations. Such insights can help businesses develop more effective marketing strategies, assist policymakers in designing consumer-focused economic policies, and offer researchers a deeper understanding of the long-term changes shaping India's consumer market.

Review of Literatures:-

Consumer preferences have long been recognized as dynamic, evolving in response to changes in economic conditions, technology, culture, and social values. A growing body of literature suggests that these changes are particularly evident across generations, with each generation displaying distinct consumption patterns and purchasing priorities.

More recently, Ignatius Hari Santoso and I Made Sukresna (2025) conducted a systematic review of intergenerational consumer behaviour and found that younger generations now play a much stronger role in shaping household purchasing decisions. Their review shows that Millennials and Generation Z exert considerable influence over purchases related to technology, branded products, and lifestyle goods. The authors also observed a shift from traditional family decision-making, dominated by older members, to a more collaborative and bidirectional pattern in which younger family members actively influence household consumption.

In a narrative literature review, Ajay Kumar V. S. and Ajay Noronha (2024) examined the intergenerational shift in consumer preferences in Kodagu, India. Their study revealed a clear transformation in consumption patterns from the Baby Boomer generation to Generation Alpha. The authors observed that each generation possesses distinctive consumption characteristics and that spending has gradually shifted away from food and other essential items toward non-food products as income levels, lifestyles, and consumer aspirations have evolved.

The growing role of digital technology has also received considerable attention in recent research. Sangeeta et al. (2024) found that the rapid expansion of digital platforms, e-commerce, and social media has significantly transformed consumer behaviour in India. According to their study, greater access to online information has made consumers, particularly younger generations, more informed, brand-conscious, and quality-sensitive. As a result, expenditure on consumer electronics, branded apparel, and premium goods has increased substantially.

The influential work of Kotler and Keller (2016) highlights that consumer preferences are shaped by a combination of cultural, social, personal, and psychological factors. According to their framework, variables such as income, lifestyle, family structure, and exposure to technology play a crucial role in influencing purchasing decisions. These factors have become increasingly important in developing economies like India, where rapid economic growth has expanded consumer choices and altered spending behaviour.

The report *India @ 2030: The Future of the Indian Consumer* (2014) also highlights the changing nature of consumer demand in India. It attributes this transformation to demographic shifts, rapid urbanization, increasing disposable incomes, greater global exposure, and widespread digital adoption. The report projects that younger consumers will continue to drive demand for automobiles, housing, electronics, and other lifestyle-oriented products.

Similarly, Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard (2006) argue that consumer decision-making changes as income, education, and market awareness improve. Their consumer behaviour model explains that economic development gradually shifts consumption from fulfilling basic necessities to satisfying lifestyle needs and aspirational desires. This framework provides a useful foundation for understanding the evolution of consumer preferences in emerging economies.

Evidence from national expenditure surveys conducted by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) and the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) further supports these observations. These surveys consistently show a long-term decline in the proportion of household expenditure allocated to food, alongside a steady increase in spending on healthcare, consumer durables, automobiles, real assets, and other non-food tangible goods across both rural and urban India.

Overall, the existing literature clearly indicates that Indian consumers have gradually moved from a necessity-driven consumption pattern to one that is increasingly aspirational and lifestyle-oriented. While previous studies have examined consumer behaviour, digital transformation, and post-liberalization consumption trends, relatively few have explored the intergenerational evolution of preferences for tangible goods over a long historical period. In particular, there is limited research that traces these changes from 1965 onward using secondary national-level data. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining how consumer preferences for tangible goods have evolved across different generations in India and by providing a long-term perspective on the country's changing consumption patterns.

Methodology:-

Research Design:-

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the changing preferences of Indian consumers for tangible goods across different generations. By analysing historical expenditure patterns and consumption trends, the study seeks to understand how purchasing behaviour has evolved over time in response to economic, technological, and socio-cultural changes.

Objectives of The Study:-

1. To compare generational differences in preferences for tangible goods in India;
2. To analyse the factors driving the shift in preferences for tangible goods across generations;
3. To assess the impact of changing preferences on purchasing behaviour and ownership patterns;

Nature of Data:-

The research is based entirely on secondary data, as the objective is to examine long-term trends in consumer behaviour over several decades. No primary survey or field investigation has been undertaken. The data have been compiled from reliable and authoritative published sources, including government reports, statistical databases, academic journals, books, dissertations, and industry publications.

Sources of Data:-

Secondary data for the study have been collected from the following sources:-

- National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) – Consumer Expenditure Surveys
- National Statistical Office (NSO) – Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES)
- Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI)
- Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Annual Reports and publications
- Economic Survey of India
- Peer-reviewed research journals, books, dissertations, and published studies on consumer behaviour and household expenditure
- Industry reports published by consulting firms and market research organizations

These sources provide comprehensive and reliable information on household consumption and expenditure patterns in India over an extended period.

Period of The Study:-

The study covers the period 1965 to 2026, enabling a long-term analysis of changes in consumer preferences for tangible goods across different generations. This extended time frame captures the impact of major economic reforms, demographic changes, technological progress, and evolving lifestyles on household consumption.

For analytical purposes, the study period has been classified into the following generational groups:-

- Boomers: 1965–1980
- Millennial Generation: 1981–1996
- Generation Z: 1997–2012
- Generation Alpha: 2013–2026

This classification facilitates a comparative analysis of consumer behaviour across generations that have experienced different economic and social environments.

Area of The Study:-

The study covers India as a whole, with particular emphasis on comparing expenditure patterns between rural and urban households. This comparison helps identify differences in consumption behaviour arising from variations in income levels, infrastructure, market accessibility, and lifestyle.

Variables of The Study:-

The analysis focuses on household expenditure shares across the following major categories of tangible goods:-

- Food and Beverages
- Healthcare and Medical Products
- Electronics and Consumer Durables

- Automobiles
- Real Assets
- Apparel and Footwear

These categories have been selected because they represent the major components of household expenditure and reflect changes in consumer priorities over time.

Tools And Techniques of Analysis:-

The collected data are analysed using a combination of quantitative and descriptive techniques, including:-

- Percentage analysis to examine expenditure shares
- Comparative analysis to assess differences across generations and between rural and urban households
- Trend analysis to identify long-term changes in consumption patterns
- Tabular presentation for systematic organization of data
- Graphical presentation, including bar charts, line graphs, and pie charts, wherever appropriate, to improve interpretation and visualization of the findings

These analytical tools help reveal the changing structure of household expenditure and highlight the evolving preferences of Indian consumers across generations.

Limitations of The Study:-

Like any research, the present study has certain limitations that should be considered while interpreting the findings.

- The study relies exclusively on secondary data, and therefore its findings are dependent on the accuracy, consistency, and reliability of published sources.
- Historical expenditure data for earlier years may require estimation or the regrouping of expenditure categories because of changes in the classification system adopted by the NSSO and other statistical agencies over time.
- The scope of the study is confined to tangible goods. It does not include expenditure on services such as education, entertainment, tourism, financial services, or digital subscriptions, all of which have become increasingly important components of household consumption in recent years.

Analysis and Interpretation:-

Shift in the consumption pattern of tangible goods in India:-

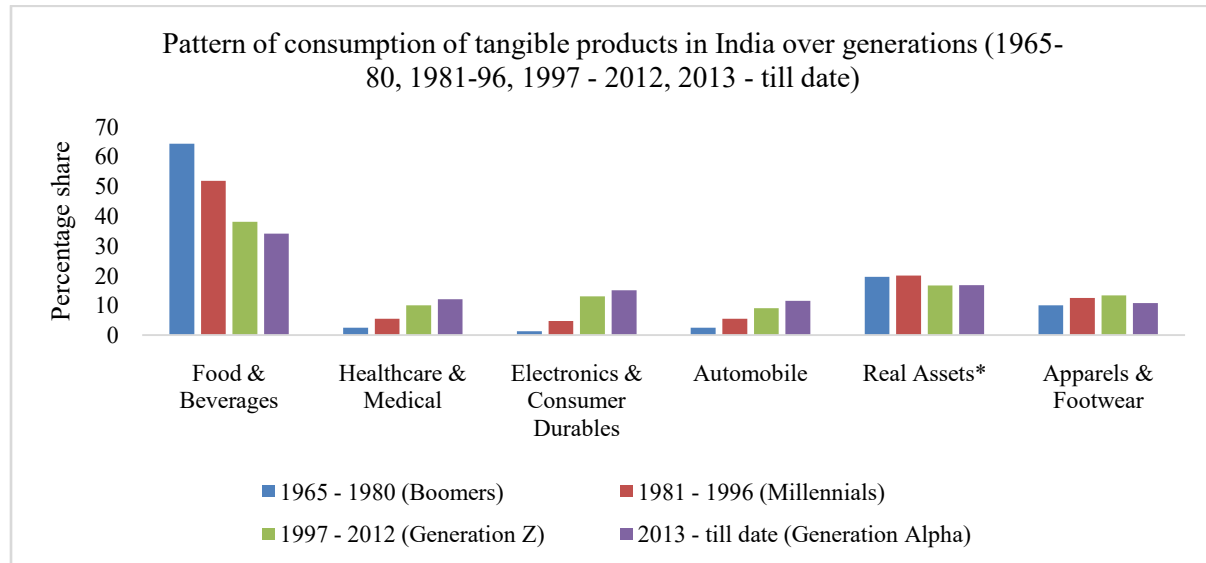
We have studied the change in the pattern of tangible goods in India from 1965 till 2026, which covered three major generations namely, boomer (who born between 1946 – 1964) and are now 60+ years of age, the generation X (who born 1965 – 1980) and are now in their mid-fifties, the millennials (who born between 1981 – 1996) and are now almost 40 years of age, the current generation Z (who born in between 1997 – 2012) and are now in their 30s, and the current generation alpha (who born after 2012) and now in their teens. If we closely look into the percentage share of consumption spent on tangible goods like food & beverages, healthcare and medical expenses, electronics and consumer durables, automobile, real assets, apparels & footwear, we see a vast change in the pattern.

Table 1: Percentage share of tangible products consumption in India over generations

Year	Food & Beverages	Healthcare & Medical	Electronics & Consumer Durables	Automobile	Real Assets*	Apparels & Footwear
1965 - 1980 (Boomers)	64.25	2.5	1.25	2.5	19.5	10
1981 - 1996 (Millennials)	51.75	5.5	4.75	5.5	20	12.5
1997 - 2012 (Generation Z)	38	10	13	9	16.67	13.33
2013 - till date (Generation Alpha)	34	12	15	11.5	16.8	10.7

From Table 1, it is evident that out of the total expenses made on tangible goods in India over generations experienced significant drift from food and beverage dominated consumption pattern during 1965 - 1980 to non-food tangible products consumption more rapidly. Over the generation we have seen that a significant drop in the

consumption of food and beverages to 34 percent during the ongoing generation (Generation Alpha) from 64.25% during the generation of Boomers, whereas non-food items like electronics & consumer durables, healthcare & medical, automobile spending increased significantly by sacrificing food & beverages consumption, although nominal expenses on food & beverages has increased but the percentage share has dropped significantly.



Graph 1: Bar diagram showing the change in consumption pattern of tangible products in India over the generations.

Table 2: Change in consumption pattern of tangible products in India over generations

% change	Food & Beverages	Healthcare & Medical	Electronics & Consumer Durables	Automobile	Real Assets*	Apparels & Footwear
1965 - 1980	-	-	-	-	-	-
1981 - 1996	-19.46	120	280	120	2.56	25
1997 - 2012	-26.57	81.82	173.68	63.64	-16.65	6.64
2013 - till date	-10.53	20.00	15.38	27.78	0.78	-19.73

Table 2 shows that over the generations share of expenses reduced considerably for food and beverages while a galloping 280% increase in electronics and consumer durables from the generation Boomers to the generation Millennials. Healthcare and Medical expenses rose sharply as well followed by Automobile consumption. The rising middle income groups in India, growth in their per capita income, urbanization, technological advancement together might have caused the shift from their traditional consumption pattern. This suggests that over the generations, Indian citizens are more concerned about non-food tangible goods consumption than food which is an important fact for the growth of our industrial sectors. This results suggests that in future to come, Indian consumers will be more inclined towards non-food consumption of tangible products.

Table 3: A comparison of rural and urban consumption pattern in India over tangible goods:

Period	Rural pattern	Urban pattern
1965 – 1980	Rural households remained constrained by income and accessibility towards consumption of tangible goods except food items	Urban households adopted non-food tangible goods consumption quickly due to better income and accessibility.
1981 – 1994	Rural households expanded their consumption more towards non-food tangible goods by	Urban households continued to lead consumption of non-food

	compromising food item consumption.	tangible goods in India due to the expansion of urbanization and rising middle class.
1995 – 2010	Consumption of non-food items surged particularly durable consumer goods and electronic items, medical expenses, education, automobiles and partially on clothing, bedding and footwear. But percentage share on non-food tangible goods remained lesser than urban households.	Urban society in India continued to grow faster in the consumption of non-food tangible goods consumption particularly automobile, electronic and durable consumer goods, healthcare and medical expenses, entertainment and luxury item.
2011 – 2022	Rural expenditures reached to 52.96% out of total spending on non-food tangible goods consumption especially on consumer durables and electronic items, automobile and conveyance, medical expenses and clothing & footwear consumption.	Rural households spent 60% of their income on non-food tangible goods with more thrust on conveyance, automobiles, entertainment and luxury items, electronic and durable goods.

Table 3 has clearly highlighted that over the generations of boomers, millennials, generation X, generation Z and the current generation (generation alpha), preference of non-food items like automobile, electronic and durable consumer goods, healthcare and medical expenses, real asset, footwear and clothing has surged significantly irrespective of rural and urban India. Although the gap between rural and urban consumption pattern remains for tangible goods consumption, but that gap has narrowed down significantly during the last decade. This emphasises that demand for non-food tangible goods has surged significantly in India and will continue more in India. This is due to the policy adopted by the government to promote consumerism on non-food items and the expansion of middle class society with rise in their disposable income.

Macro-economic factors responsible for the shift in consumption pattern:-

Table 1 and 2 exhibited clearly that there is a major shift in the consumption pattern in India from food to non-food tangible items. Table 3 also exhibited a pattern of change is almost similar in between urban and rural areas of India although urban pattern is more inclined towards non-food tangible products. A lot of factors were responsible for that shift. Let us see a few of them which appeared prominent.

- a. A sharp rise in income and disposable income in India since 1991. During 1991, per capita income was Rs 11,500 at current prices which rose to Rs 172000 during 2022-23 indicating almost 14 times larger than 1991-92 per capita annual income. This phenomenal rise surely affected Indian consumers to spend more money towards non-food tangible goods by sacrificing food consumption. The rise was sharpest during 2010-11. Although marginal propensity to consume in India decreased from 0.86 in 1991-92 to 0.75 in 2022-23 on an average, total nominal consumption expenditure grew up significantly leading to spend more expenses towards non-food tangible goods in India irrespective of rural and urban society.
- b. Market liberalization and product availability is another important macro-economic factor influencing the rise in demand for non-food tangible goods in India over the generations particularly after 1991. The strongest official evidence available here shows that the non-food shares of MPCE rose to 53.6% in rural India and 60.8% in urban India by 2022–23, up from 47% and 57.4% in 2011–12.
- c. Digital and financial accessibility by Indian consumers improved sharply since liberalization policy adopted by India. Internet penetration, smartphone usages, easy credit facilities empowered Indian consumers more towards the consumption of non-food tangible goods;
- d. Urbanization and change in lifestyle affected Indian consumers to spend more money towards non-food items especially for the generation born after 1997, i.e. generation Z.

Findings and Conclusion:-

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that consumer preferences for tangible goods in India have undergone a profound transformation across generations. Over time, purchasing behaviour has evolved from being largely necessity-driven, with limited choices, to becoming more diversified, quality-conscious, and aspiration-oriented. This transformation reflects not only changes in income and living standards but also the broader economic, technological, and socio-cultural changes that have reshaped Indian society.

Earlier generations, particularly the Baby Boomers and, to some extent, the early Millennials, grew up in an environment characterized by limited product availability, lower purchasing power, and restricted market choices. Consequently, household expenditure was concentrated on essential goods such as food, clothing, fuel, and other basic necessities. Spending on non-food tangible goods—including consumer electronics, automobiles, healthcare products, branded apparel, footwear, and real assets—was relatively low and often viewed as a long-term investment rather than a regular component of household consumption. Consumer decisions during this period were guided primarily by affordability, durability, and functional utility.

The economic liberalization of 1991 marked a turning point in India's consumption landscape. Rising incomes, rapid urbanization, greater exposure to global markets, technological progress, and the expansion of organized retail significantly broadened consumer choices. The growth of digital commerce, social media, and easy access to consumer finance further accelerated this transformation. These changes are particularly evident among Generation Z and the generations that followed, whose purchasing decisions increasingly reflect lifestyle aspirations, brand preferences, convenience, and product quality rather than merely fulfilling basic needs.

Official household consumption data support this changing pattern. Over the years, the proportion of household expenditure devoted to food has steadily declined, while spending on non-food tangible goods has increased across both rural and urban India. This shift became especially noticeable after 2011–12 and gained further momentum following the 2023–24 Household Consumption Expenditure Survey. The evidence suggests that India's consumption pattern has gradually moved toward a more diversified expenditure structure as households allocate a growing share of their budgets to healthcare, consumer durables, automobiles, housing, apparel, and other lifestyle-related products.

The transformation is also clearly visible across generations. Older consumers generally continue to emphasize value for money, durability, and practical utility when making purchasing decisions. In contrast, younger generations, particularly Generation Z and the emerging Generation Alpha, are more inclined toward branded products, wider product choice, convenience, innovation, and lifestyle-oriented consumption. Their purchasing decisions are increasingly influenced by digital platforms, online reviews, product comparisons, social media, and e-commerce rather than traditional advertising or in-store experiences. As a result, quality, user experience, and convenience have become as important as price in shaping consumer preferences.

Looking ahead, the consumption behaviour of Generation Alpha is expected to further transform India's market for tangible goods. Having grown up in a digitally connected environment, this generation is likely to adopt a digital-first approach to consumption while remaining conscious of functionality, innovation, and frequent product upgrades. Even during childhood, Generation Alpha is influencing household purchasing decisions in categories such as clothing, toys, educational technology, snacks, consumer electronics, and personal care products. As they enter adulthood, their demand is expected to expand further into smart devices, gaming equipment, branded apparel, compact home appliances, automobiles, premium lifestyle products, and technologically advanced household goods.

Unlike previous generations, the preferences of Generation Alpha are being shaped from an early age by digital media, online videos, gaming platforms, social networking sites, e-commerce applications, and the digital experiences of their families. Consequently, future consumer demand is likely to focus on products that combine functionality, innovation, convenience, and personal identity. This changing mindset is expected to create sustained opportunities for manufacturers and retailers offering technologically advanced, value-added, and lifestyle-oriented tangible goods.

Interestingly, it can be concluded that people are now spending less on basic items and more on premium products. In simple terms, households are choosing higher-value goods like electronics, fashion, and branded durables more often, while being more careful with spending on everyday necessities. More people now own durable goods than before, and younger buyers are pushing demand for products that feel modern, convenient, and socially desirable. So, in future this trend will continue even with the larger volume. For future generations, people are also looking at how a product reflects their identity, supports their well-being, and fits into how they present themselves to others. In the future, people are likely to choose tangible products more carefully, with a stronger preference for premium and personalized items that match their lifestyle and identity. Meanwhile, everyday necessities may grow more slowly than categories like healthcare, personal care, electronics, and lifestyle products.

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that the market for non-food tangible goods in India will continue to expand in the coming years. While premium products will experience growth, the strongest demand is likely to emerge from mass-market and mid-market segments, where affordability, accessibility, quality, and utility remain key purchasing considerations. The pace of this growth will naturally differ across income groups, regions, and product categories. Nevertheless, India's expanding middle class, rising disposable incomes, increasing digital adoption, and favourable demographic profile indicate that consumer demand for tangible goods will continue to strengthen. Industry forecasts reinforce this outlook, projecting that India's non-food and grocery value retail market will grow from approximately US\$111 billion in FY2023 to around US\$170 billion by FY2026, representing an estimated compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of about 15 percent. These trends underscore the continuing evolution of India's consumer market and its growing importance in the global economy. Across generations, buying habits are moving away from simply meeting everyday needs and toward choosing products that reflect personal taste, identity, and a preference for premium options. This change is expected to influence what people in India want to buy in the years ahead.

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