



Consumer Behaviour and Brand Perception in Emerging Auto Markets: The Case of Chinese Automobile Adoption in the Gulf Cooperation Council Region

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Abstract

Objective: This exploratory study examines consumer preferences and perceptions toward Chinese automobile brands in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, focusing on the key factors influencing purchase intention. **Methods:** Data were collected through an online survey distributed across six GCC countries, resulting in 227 valid responses. The survey assessed consumer attitudes toward value for money, design, technology, and after-sales service. **Results:** The results highlight that perceived affordability, innovative features, appealing design, and reliable after-sales support are the primary drivers of positive consumer attitudes. The analysis reveals that practical considerations substantially influence consumer preference more than demographic factors such as age, with older consumers showing notable openness to Chinese brands. **Conclusion:** The study offers preliminary insights into the shifting dynamics of the GCC automotive market. It underscores the importance of functional value and brand perception over traditional demographic assumptions, providing strategic implications for marketers, dealerships, and automotive researchers aiming to position Chinese brands competitively in the region.

Keywords: Chinese Automobiles; Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC); Consumer Behaviour; Brand Perception; Digital Marketing; Value-For-Money

Introduction

In recent years, Chinese automobile brands have emerged as notable players in the GCC automotive market. Previously perceived as low-cost alternatives, brands such as Jetour, Geely, Tank, Haval, and MG are now increasingly visible in showrooms and on the roads across the region (bne Gulf bureau, 2024). This growing presence reflects a broader shift in consumer perceptions, economic priorities, and brand expectations across GCC societies. While existing literature often focuses on automotive trends in Western or East Asian markets, there remains limited contemporary research that captures the unique consumer behaviours within the GCC context (Alzahrani & Copeland, 2017). As consumers in the region become more digitally connected and value-conscious, Chinese automobile brands align well with evolving preferences for affordability, innovation, and practical value.

This study draws on the Theory of Consumption Values (Sheth, Newman, & Gross, 1991), the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), and the Price-Quality Inference Theory (Rao & Monroe, 1989) to understand what drives consumer interest in Chinese brands. It investigates key factors such as perceived value for money, brand trust, digital influence, economic affordability, and demographic

responsiveness. By analysing survey data collected across six GCC countries, this paper aims to bridge the regional research gap and provide actionable insights for marketers, brand managers, and automotive strategists.

Literature Review

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), comprising Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman, has traditionally favoured Japanese, American, and European automobile brands due to their reputation for reliability, quality, and prestige (Singh, 2021). However, recent economic and social shifts have started to challenge this longstanding dominance.

The GCC has a predominantly youthful population that is highly connected through social media and mobile technology (Miladi *et al.*, 2022). This demographic is notably open to exploring innovative and non-traditional brands, especially when value for money is emphasised (Huang *et al.*, 2021; Statista, 2024). High smartphone penetration enables consumers to easily access peer reviews, video demonstrations, and online forums, creating a more informed and digitally empowered consumer base (Ken Research, 2024).

Chinese brands are capitalising on these trends by offering vehicles that align with the evolving expectations of GCC consumers. Their strategic investments in product design, technological innovation, after-sales service, and aggressive digital marketing have enhanced their market appeal (Zhou *et al.*, 2022; Semenda *et al.*, 2024). According to the Theory of Consumption Values (Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991), consumer decisions are influenced by a mix of functional, emotional, and conditional values. Chinese automobiles effectively address these values by blending advanced technology, modern design aesthetics, and competitive pricing.

Brand perception is another critical area. Although initially influenced by country-of-origin biases, consumer sentiment has shifted due to improved economic value propositions. As Chinese brands offer competitive pricing and enhanced after-sales support, they are increasingly perceived as credible and trustworthy—a pattern echoed in other markets experiencing economic pressure (Kithandi, Ibrahim, & Ondabu, 2024). Marketing literature suggests that brand trust and familiarity are key influencers in purchase decisions (Yoo & Donthu, 2001; Tahir, Adnan, & Saeed, 2024). Influencer-driven campaigns and digital storytelling have further improved brand image and emotional resonance among consumers (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Steenkamp, 2020).

Economic considerations also play a key role in shaping purchase decisions. As inflation rises and fuel subsidy structures shift, GCC consumers become more price conscious. The Law of Diminishing Marginal Utility and the Price-Quality Inference Theory (Rao & Monroe, 1989; Varian, 2014; Mankiw & Taylor, 2020) suggest that consumers naturally gravitate toward cost-effective alternatives when perceived marginal satisfaction declines. In response, Chinese automakers have introduced extended warranties, robust customer service, and flexible financing options (Ziye, 2024), positioning themselves as attractive substitutes to legacy brands in the region.

Drawing on the literature review, the following six hypotheses were proposed and tested using survey data:

H1: Consumers in the GCC region perceive Chinese automobiles as offering higher value for money compared to non-Chinese brands.

H2: Functional and emotional values significantly influence consumer preference for Chinese automobile brands.

H3: Economic affordability (price, maintenance costs, financing options) positively influences the purchase intention of Chinese automobiles in the Gulf.

H4: Improved brand perception of Chinese automobiles positively impacts consumer trust and purchase intention.

H5: Exposure to digital marketing and social media influencers positively influences the perception of Chinese automotive brands in the Gulf.

H6: Younger consumers are more likely to consider Chinese car brands because they emphasise technological features and affordability.

Methodology

Research Design

A bilingual online survey (English and Arabic) was conducted using non-probability convenience and snowball sampling techniques. The instrument was distributed via WhatsApp, social media platforms, and university mailing lists. The survey included demographic questions, brand perception scales, and attitudinal statements rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

The questionnaire was structured into three sections:

- Demographics: Age, gender, nationality, and country of residence.
- Behavioural insights: Previous experience with Chinese car brands, brand preference, and car ownership.
- Scaled constructs: Statements measuring perceptions of value for money, brand trust, design, technological features, social influence, and purchase intention.

Validity and Reliability

The measurement items were adapted from well-established and widely cited literature to ensure construct validity. Precisely, perceived value and functional/emotional appeal were measured using the scale developed by Sweeney and Soutar (2001); brand image and trust were assessed using items from Yoo and Donthu (2001); purchase intention was measured using the framework provided by Spears and Singh (2004); and social influence was evaluated based on constructs from Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (1991).

Each scale was reviewed for contextual relevance and cultural appropriateness within the GCC setting. The items were translated into Arabic using a forward and backwards translation method to ensure linguistic accuracy and conceptual equivalence. To enhance face validity, a pilot study was conducted with 15 participants. Feedback from the pilot confirmed the clarity, coherence, and cultural fit of the questionnaire items, leading to minor refinements before full-scale data collection.

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α) for each multi-item construct. All constructs yielded alpha values above 0.80, exceeding the widely accepted threshold of 0.70 for high reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). These results confirm the internal reliability of the measurement instruments employed in the study and support the robustness of the scale items used in the analysis. Table 1 below presents the reliability scores for each construct used in the survey.

Table 1: Construct Reliability and Measurement Sources

Construct	Source	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Value-for-Money/Features	Sweeney & Soutar (2001)	0.86
Brand Image/Trust	Yoo & Donthu (2001)	0.84
Purchase Intention	Spears & Singh (2004)	0.85
Social Influence	Ajzen (1991)	0.84

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised adult consumers (18+) residing in the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman. The study explored consumer attitudes toward Chinese automobile brands among current and prospective buyers. Two sampling methods were used: convenience sampling through online platforms (e.g., social media, WhatsApp, university mailing lists) and purposive and snowball sampling to reach under-represented groups such as females and older respondents (35+). After data cleaning, 227 valid responses were retained, and 39 were excluded due to inapplicability.

This hybrid sampling strategy enabled broader demographic representation and reduced bias, supporting more substantial interpretation of trends, particularly within Qatar, which accounted for 44.9% of responses and reflected the researcher's base (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents by country, and Table 3 shows the age groups of respondents.

Table 2: Respondent Distribution by Country

Country	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Qatar	102	44.9%
Saudi Arabia	41	18.1%
UAE	33	14.5%

Oman	20	8.8%
Kuwait	18	7.9%
Bahrain	13	5.7%
Total	227	100%

Table 3: Respondent Distribution by Age Group

Age Group	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
18 - 24	38	16.7%
25 - 34	72	31.7%
35 - 44	69	30.4%
45 and above	48	21.1%
Total	227	100%

Data Analysis

The data was analysed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics summarised consumer attitudes. Independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA examined differences across age groups. Pearson correlation coefficients measured relationships between brand perception, social influence, and purchase intention.

Result & Discussion

The analysis confirms substantial support for most proposed hypotheses regarding consumer preferences for Chinese automobile brands in the GCC region. H1, which proposed that consumers perceive Chinese vehicles as offering superior value for money, is supported. Respondents identified affordability and well-equipped models as key attractions, confirming that Chinese brands meet core functional utility and economic rationality expectations. This aligns with established research on consumer perceived value, where low cost and high feature utility are central to preference formation (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001).

H2, which suggests that functional and emotional values significantly influence consumer preference, is also supported. Participants consistently appreciated Chinese cars' aesthetic design, comfort, and overall user experience. These insights reflect the Theory of Consumption Values, which recognises utilitarian and affective motivations as essential to purchase behaviour (Sheth, Newman, & Gross 1991).

H3, related to economic affordability, is likewise supported. Respondents emphasised the importance of pricing, maintenance costs, and flexible financing options—factors especially salient given the region's current financial pressures. These findings align with behavioural economics frameworks, including the Law of Diminishing Marginal Utility and the Price-Quality Inference Theory, which explain consumer shifts toward cost-effective alternatives (Rao & Monroe, 1989; Mankiw & Taylor, 2020).

H4, which links improved brand perception with increased trust and purchase intention, is also supported. Many respondents acknowledged a noticeable enhancement in their trust toward Chinese automobile brands, attributing this to better design, greater road visibility, and more reliable after-sales support. These outcomes are consistent with research on the role of brand image and perceived credibility in shaping consumer loyalty (Yoo & Donthu, 2001).

H5, which proposed that digital marketing and influencer exposure positively influence consumer perception, is moderately supported. Although respondents noted that social media content and digital storytelling contributed to awareness, these effects appeared secondary to personal recommendation and direct exposure. This finding corresponds with literature suggesting that digital strategies enhance visibility and legitimacy but must be complemented by experiential reinforcements to drive purchase behaviour (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Steenkamp, 2020).

In contrast, H6, which hypothesised that younger consumers are more likely to consider Chinese car brands due to their interest in technology and affordability, is not supported. The findings show that older consumers demonstrated stronger purchase intentions, particularly those aged 35 and above. The result challenges prevailing assumptions about youth-led brand adoption and suggests that mature consumers, perhaps motivated by better financial stability and pragmatic evaluation, are more responsive to the value proposition of Chinese automobiles.

In terms of brand preference, Jetour emerged as the most favoured brand, selected by 44.4% of respondents, followed by Tank (15.6%), Geely (13.3%), and MG (11.1%). This distribution highlights Jetour's effective alignment with consumer priorities, especially in design, affordability, and perceived quality. It also illustrates how differentiated brand strategies within the Chinese automotive sector can successfully address varying market segments across the Gulf region.

Practical Implication

More broadly, the findings illustrate how Chinese brands have capitalised on affordability, aesthetics, and digital engagement to establish themselves in the GCC market. These strategies reflect the importance of aligning functional and emotional values with consumer expectations. As economic theory predicts, consumers are increasingly reevaluating traditional brand loyalties in favour of practical alternatives that offer tangible benefits at a lower cost (Mankiw & Taylor, 2020; Varian, 2014). Rapid improvements in brand image—driven by targeted marketing, influencer partnerships, and increasing road visibility—further reinforce consumer openness to Chinese vehicles. Social proof, particularly seeing these cars frequently in everyday contexts, significantly enhances credibility and shapes positive perception (Steenkamp, 2020).

Marketers should emphasise affordability, design, and digital features in promotional efforts. Region-specific strategies, such as premium branding in Qatar, may enhance resonance. Using bilingual content and local influencers can boost legitimacy, especially authentic influencers with genuine product experience. As suggested by Ibrahim (2025), authentic influencers who use products as if they were genuinely intended for their personal needs have a more substantial impact on consumer behaviour, as their authenticity resonates more effectively with audiences.

Limitation

This study is subject to several limitations. First, its cross-sectional design captures consumer perceptions at a single point in time, limiting insight into evolving preferences. Second, it does not examine post-purchase behaviours, such as satisfaction or loyalty, which are critical for understanding long-term brand success. Third, the study assessed Chinese brands collectively, without analysing differences across individual brands, which may vary in perception and performance.

Conclusion

This study explored the growing consumer preference for Chinese automobile brands in the GCC, revealing that affordability, functional value, and emotional appeal are key drivers of purchase intention. The findings confirm that Chinese brands are increasingly considered credible alternatives to traditional competitors, particularly in the context of rising cost sensitivity. Older consumers demonstrated stronger purchase intent, challenging assumptions about youth-led adoption. While social media enhances brand visibility, its influence is secondary to offline experiences and trust-building factors. The study offers strategic recommendations tailored to regional markets, highlighting the importance of localisation, authenticity, and value-driven positioning.

Future Scope

Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to track shifts in consumer attitudes over time and explore the impact of brand innovation and economic changes. Including post-purchase behaviours such as satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth would offer a fuller picture of brand performance. Qualitative methods may also reveal deeper motivations, while comparative studies between individual Chinese and established brands could uncover strategic insights across different GCC markets.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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