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CRITICAL EVALUATION OF FUNDING PATTERNS OF UNICORNS

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ABSTRACT

A mixed-methods approach is employed in this research to analyze the financing trends and strategic financing strategies of Indian unicorn companies. In-depth qualitative case studies of seven selected firms are paired with quantitative information from Twenty-two unicorns to reveal emerging patterns regarding capital deployment strategies, founder control, and investor relationships. By the findings of the quantitative study, more investments are made in more capital-intensive sectors such as food delivery and logistics, and later-stage rounds (Series D and later) cover a significant share of aggregate capital raised. Startups like Nykaa and Zerodha, on the other hand, have chosen more expensive routes. Five of the underlying themes of the Indian unicorn ecosystem are revealed by the qualitative findings: IPO readiness, strategic burn against capital restraint, infrastructure vs. asset-light strategies, founder vs. investor management, and mission-driven investor selection. These results show how the startup ecosystem is changing and how long-term strategy apart from valuation is playing an ever-bigger part in funding decisions. This study gives valuable conclusions to investors, entrepreneurs, and policy makers and contributes towards the growing conversation on startup finance in India.

KEY WORDS: *Unicorn Startups, Financing Patterns, Financial Strategy, Series Funding Rounds, Seed Funding.*

INTRODUCTION

India has emerged as a hotbed for unicorn companies, particularly over the last decade. With more than 100 unicorns, India is already one of the leading startup ecosystems globally due to the intersection of internet infrastructure, venture capital demand, and an entrepreneurial culture on the rise. Growing web usage, the adoption of fintech, and a digitally led economy driven by youth have all been responsible for the phenomenal growth of startups in sectors such as social commerce, e-commerce, edtech, logistics, and healthtech. However, fundraising trajectories for these companies are quite different. Some raise large amounts of money in short bursts, while others grow incrementally with minimal outside dependence or dilution. Through examination of founders' strategic decisions and the effects of investor communities backing such ventures, this research identifies these varied funding trends.

When, from whom, and why are some of the variables that affect a unicorn's trajectory and the amount of money it raises. More basic factors including the founder's plan, the network of investors, control needs, and the company's long-term strategy are all closely related to funding. Some unicorns, such as Delhivery and Swiggy, have adopted capital-intensive scaling methods, which frequently entail several sizable late-stage investments. Others, such as Nykaa and Zerodha, choose capital-efficient strategies that put governance, control, and profitability ahead of quick expansion. Both financial accessibility and strategic fit are equally vital when investing in the unicorn area, as these multiple pathways show.

Most stakeholders believe that comprehending these patterns is crucial. By striking a balance between control and expansion, entrepreneurs are better equipped to map out their financial trajectory. Investors can improve due diligence techniques and more closely align with the entrepreneur's principles. Policymakers and regulators can promote balanced ownership arrangements, financial stability, listing preparation, and easy access to capital. This study provides a thorough understanding of how Indian unicorns are deciding to invest, grow, and exit in a field that is undergoing rapid change by dissecting quantitative financing data and narrative intelligence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The initial capital market environment has undergone remarkable transformation in the past few years, particularly for unicorn-startups that are worth over $1 billion.

Entrepreneurs are more and more relying on the private markets instead of more traditional methods of raising capital, such as public offerings, due to tools such as venture capital, private equity, private initial public offerings (PIPOs), and informal sources of capital. Most notably, this transformation has changed investor relations, governance, and valuation alongside the way capital is acquired in rapidly developing countries such as India.

The emergence of PIPOs is a characteristic of the transition from public to private capital markets. This is illustrated by companies such as Uber and Airbnb, which raise huge amounts of money privately to postpone going public. Over 140 unicorns raised over $625 billion through private channels as of 2015. This allows companies to escape intense public scrutiny and retain strategic control. For Kerai (2017), "unicorn" is also both marketing leverage and a strategic weapon for the firm in

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gaining the private investor confidence, thereby paving way for high-valuations. Such practice threatens the hazard of overvaluing as well as undermining openness to influence the market in favor of something inaccurate.

Zhang (2024) discusses the effects of CER on financing behavior. Though it does not have a direct impact on short-term finance such as working capital loans, CER increases long-term financing capability by minimizing information asymmetry and creating reputational capital. Environmentally responsible companies-particularly large companies are more likely to have investors, supporting the pecking order theory that prefers internal financing over debt and then equity.

The dual character of SME financing in India, wherein firms employ both official (banks, trade credit) and unofficial (friends, family, moneylenders) channels, is explained by Singh and Janor (2013). Because of their bad credit records, high collateral requirements, and financial illiteracy, sole proprietorships cannot access institutional financing. Private limited companies, however, have better access to official credit channels. Recommendations made are increasing the financial literacy and the enforcement of more inclusive banking policy.

Based on Shirai's (2004) analysis of capital market reforms in India, the SMEs remained outside the umbrella of access based on risk-averse banking habits and poor channeling of market-based funding even though large firms have been the prime beneficiaries of liberalization. These reforms have not yet touched the grassroots levels, revealing systemic imbalance in the availability of financial access.

The significance of working capital management (WCM) in determining a firm's financing behavior is noted by Akbar et al. (2020). Liquidity crises due to inefficient WCM compel firms to resort to costly external borrowing. Nevertheless, autonomy and debt independence are encouraged by effective cash management. Proper liquidity management is vital to the existence and development of unicorns and SMEs with unstable income flows. Lerner and The system of venture capital was broken down by Leamon into governance dynamics, systemic boundaries, and lifecycles of investment. It highlighted how venture capital choices are shaped by asymmetrical information and agency issues. Its analysis of ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) concerns in finance is weak.

Angel investors are differentiated from venture capitalists by Benjamin and Margulis because of their early-stage investment, greater risk tolerance, and bottom-up approach. In India, where entrepreneurs look for angel investors prior to institutional VC investors approaching, these abilities are essential for the startup process.

Beck et al. (2003) provide cross-country evidence of the obstacles to finance faced by firms, attributing these to institutional quality and firm characteristics. Their results are replicated in Vietnam by Nguyen and Luu (2013), who conclude that enhanced access to finance depends on education, networking, and regional support mechanisms. These results have parallels in India's weak financial infrastructure beyond the larger cities.

Capital structure theories, such as pecking order and trade-off theory, are empirically tested. Fama and French (2004) observe that companies often do not adhere to theoretical predictions of issuing equity when they have internal cash in hand due to good market conditions rather than funding requirements. In a similar vein, Gomes (2011) criticizes Tobin's q as an appropriate measure of investment behavior on account of problems with the data that may generate improper conclusions about financial constraints.

Allen, Qian, and Xie (2018) make a distinction between predatory and constructive types of informal finance. In countries where there is limited access to banking, constructive informal finance-such as trade credit and family loans-fills important gaps, but predatory activities-such as usurious moneylending-jeopardize the long-term sustainability of businesses. In India, informal finance is an essential source of cash, but it also threatens the system, particularly for microbusinesses.

Studies on the financial behavior of EU cross-country SMEs explore trends in self-financing, government support, and reliance on loans. Because of structural constraints, Indian SMEs tend to be more reliant on trade credit and working capital short-term loans. Regression of more than 1,500 Indian SMEs indicates that younger firms and firms located in less developed regions are more likely to have their loan requests rejected but profitability, age of the firm, and asset base enhance formal credit availment.

Startups involving a great deal of innovation tend to need equity funding because they are riskier and involve intangible capital. More established companies, though, are turning to intellectual property to enter the loan markets. Venture capital is necessary in this area as it not only supplies funding but also governance models, strategic guidance, and guidance. Early-stage capital is also enhanced through support mechanisms such as crowdsourcing, accelerators, and angel funding. Legal frameworks and financial reforms directly affect innovation outcomes. US case studies indicate that deregulated banking sectors encourage employment and R&D. In addition, it is found that labor financing, which has so far been overlooked, is credit-sensitive-firms use labor conservatively when finance is scarce.

As a contrast to finance for startups and SMEs, Kumar et al. (2011) evaluate public health expenditure in India, with a specific emphasis on chronic underinvestment, high out-of-pocket spending, and poor insurance protection. To guarantee equitable access to care, their study points out the wider impacts of financial exclusion and advocates for extensive public investment and regulation. The IPO delay is among the most important governance issues of the unicorn age. Today, startups attract a great deal of money in late-stage private market financings, tending to reach astronomical valuations. The approach raises good questions about transparency, investor protection, and market efficiency even as it preserves

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founder ownership and operational freedom. Unicorns commonly take dual-class share structures, which provide founders with control of a minority interest while undermining the standard checks and balances that public markets offer. To take on exaggerated values, early private buyers often cash out advantageously ahead of initial public offerings (IPOs). It has contributed to the significant underperformance of some prominent unicorns after their initial public offerings.

With the U.S. JOBS Act, startups are now able to raise hundreds of millions of dollars in private capital without the regulatory cost of going public. It has accelerated innovation and lengthened private finance life cycles but also reduced accountability and raised the risk of a valuation bubble. The emergence of "shadow unicorns"-funding-rich but open businesses-is attributed to systemic issues, particularly during a downturn in the market.

Apart from representing a new age of entrepreneurial energy, unicorns also symbolize pervasive deficiencies in the existing financial system. Their success illustrates the strength of private wealth to transform, but their extravagance is a caution against unchecked market euphoria. On the other hand, SMEs remain outside financial inclusion even though they are the economic drivers of developing nations such as India. For inclusive economic growth to take place, this divide must be bridged.

RESEARCH GAP

Despite the exponential growth of Indian unicorns over the last ten years, little is known about their funding models and strategic financial decisions. Most of the current research focuses on increase in startup valuation, total capital raised, or industry comparison. Less emphasis is placed on the "why" and "how" of fundraising decisions, though. Why, for example, do certain unicorns use venture funding to grow quickly while others grow more gradually by internal sales or little a reduction?

Furthermore, studies hardly ever merge qualitative and quantitative techniques to uncover the sophisticated trade-offs founders exercise, especially in IPO timing, alignment of investors, and retention of ownership.

The lack of research analyzing trends in funding by stage, for instance, how much money was raised in early versus later rounds and its impacts on founder control or readiness for public markets, is another big void. Rich data exist online at websites such as Crunchbase and Tracxn, but the narrative around the numbers is often overlooked. By contrasting business models, types of investors, control methods, and founder attitudes in addition to analyzing unicorn capital through stages, this research aims to bridge that gap. A richer understanding of Indian unicorn finance is formed by combining the use of both statistical analysis and thematic qualitative interpretation a much-needed contribution to the evolving literature on startup ecosystems in emerging markets.

OBJECTIVES

The key objectives of this research are:
1. To study the funding trend of unicorns in India at various stages and sectors.
2. To determine the effect of funding strategy on founder control and investor relations.
3. To reveal masked patterns in funding practices through qualitative and quantitative means.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

The Indian unicorn funding trends are examined in this research with the help of a mixed-method approach. 22 unicorn ventures across industries had quantitative information available, with the focus on stage-by-stage fund raised, round-by-round numbers, and whether they had done an IPO, collected from resources like Crunchbase and Tracxn. Furthermore, seven unicorns' qualitative cases underwent theme coding to identify patterns in investor dynamics, founder behaviors, and strategic choices. Both rich contextual insight and extensive pattern detection become possible as a result of the design. The triangulated approach ensures exhaustive exploration of how funding strategies map long-term growth desires, control preferences, and business models.

Sources

Crunchbase- Company Database, Tracxn- Unicorn Funding Reports, NSE India- IPO Listings, BSE India- Public Offerings, YourStory- Startup & IPO News, TechCrunch- Startup & VC Reports, Inc42- Indian Startup Funding, Moneycontrol- Financial News & IPOs, Economic Times- Startup and Tech, Forbes India- Founder Interviews & Features, InDrive Official Site, SEBI India- Regulatory Guidelines

Statistical tools used to analyse

Excel, Python, Thematic coding (Manual)

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

This study tried to analyse both quantitative and qualitative data.

- **Analysis of Quantitative Data**

Amongst the financial, logistics, e-commerce, edtech, and social commerce industries, 22 Indian unicorn companies were given quantitative studies. Sources of data were IPO filings, company websites, Crunchbase, Tracxn, and stable media sources such as TechCrunch and YourStory. Fundraising histories for each unicorn from inception to the latest funding event were reconstructed, including initial public offerings (IPOs) where necessary.

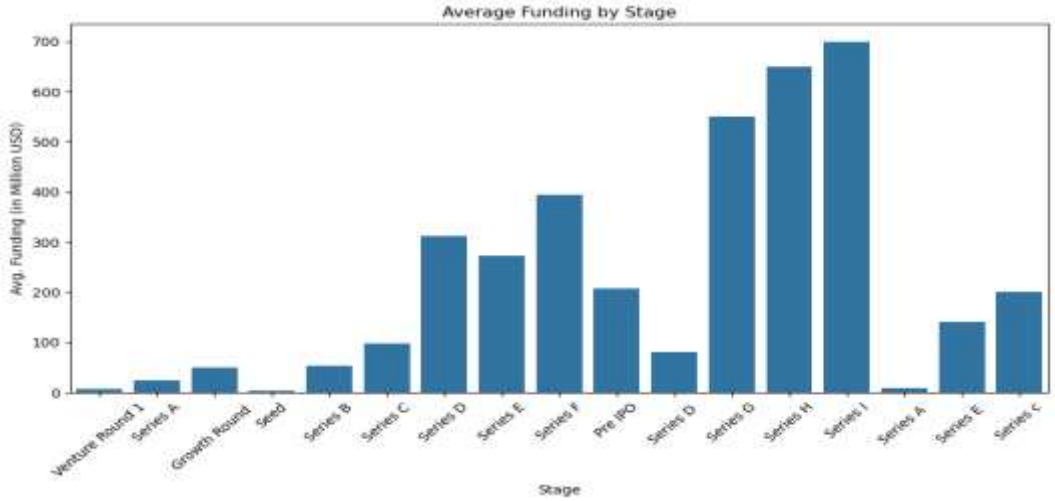
For every unicorn, funding was segmented into the following variables:

- Overall amount of funds raised in total rounds
- Number and type of rounds (Seed, Series A through H, Pre-IPO, IPO)
- Funds raised per stage and dominant rounds identification
- Timing gaps between rounds, marking acceleration in growth or funding dries
- IPO status and corresponding timing

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Important Points

- ❖ Average funding by stage:

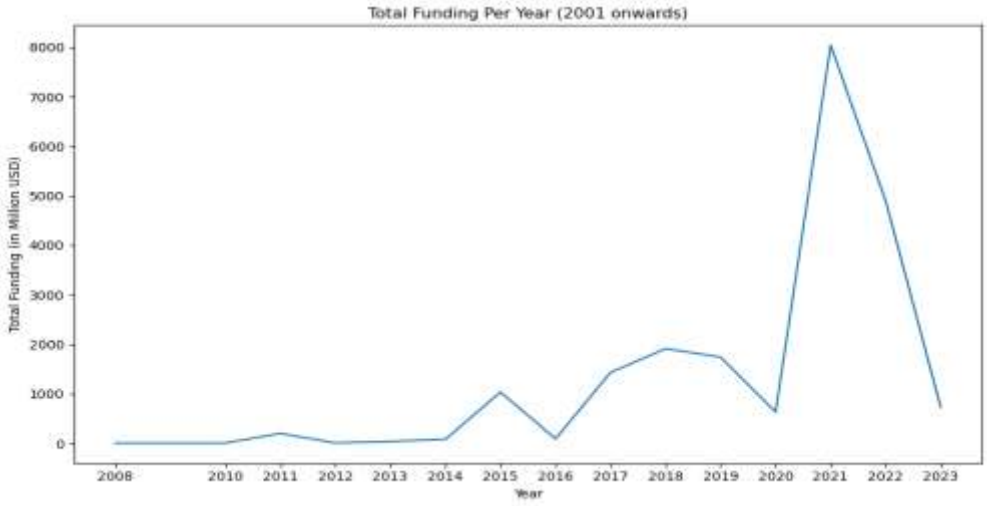


- Series D and E rounds had the highest average funding.
- Seed and Series A stages saw much smaller funding volumes

Inference

"The average funding amount increases significantly as startups move into later stages, peaking at Series D and Series E. This pattern reflects investor confidence in mature ventures with proven traction and scalability. Typically, such rounds were big money inflows between $150 million and $600 million

- ❖ Total Funding per year across all unicorns.



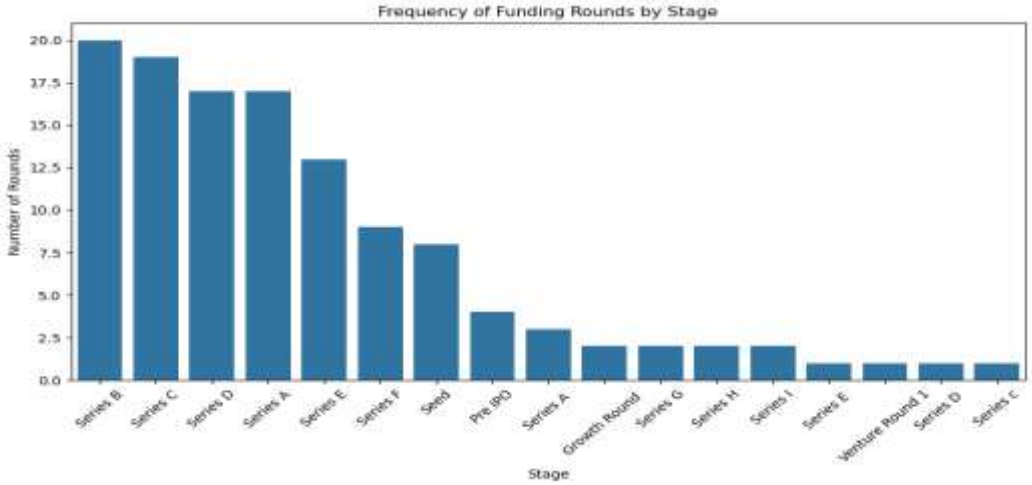
- Sharp growth in funding activity post-2015, peaking around 2021.
- Sudden drop after the funding boom (likely due to market corrections).

Inference

"Funding activity among Indian unicorns has grown exponentially since 2015, with a major peak in 2021. This surge corresponds to global capital inflow and startup maturity, followed by a correction phase likely influenced by economic conditions."

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❖ Frequency of Funding round by stage

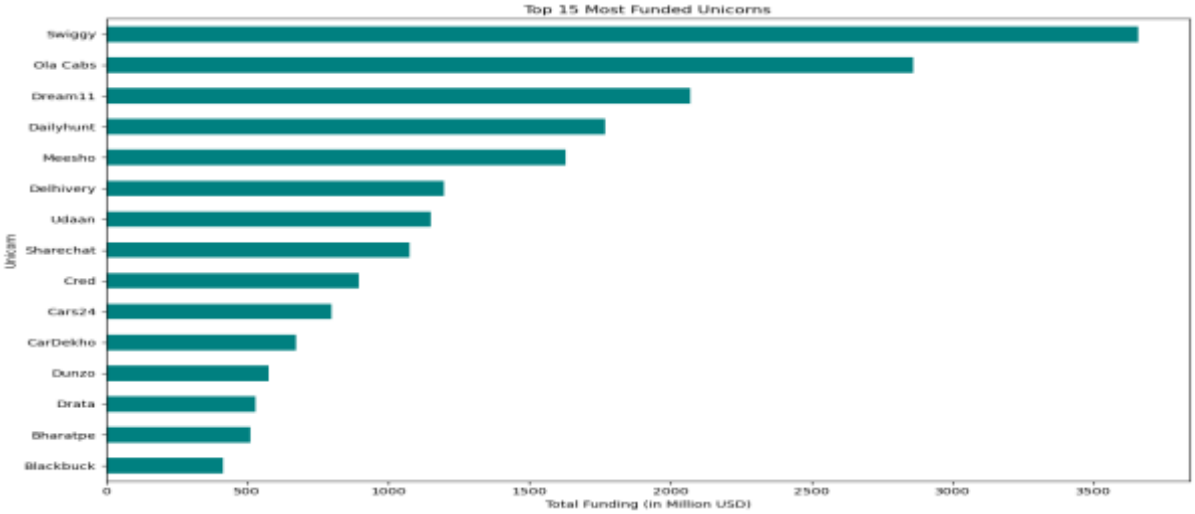


- Series A and Series B are the most common stages.
- Fewer unicorns raise beyond Series F or IPO rounds.

Inference

"Most unicorns raise capital up to Series C or D, with Series A being the most frequent entry point into institutional investment. This shows that while early-stage funding is accessible, sustained capital availability declines in later stages."

❖ Top 15 most funded unicorns



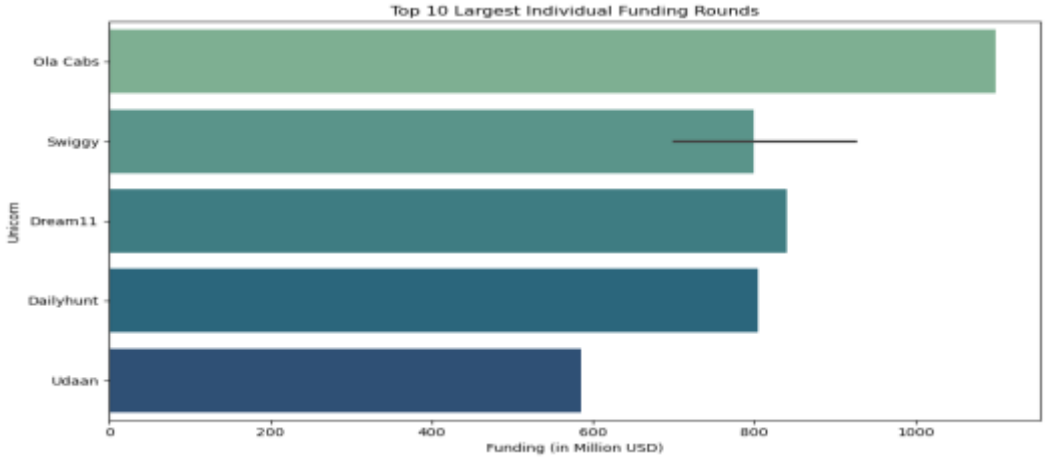
- Swiggy, Ola, Meesho, and Delhivery lead in total funding.
- Capital-intensive models (like logistics, e-commerce, food delivery) dominate the top slots.

Inference

"The most heavily funded unicorns operate in capital-intensive sectors like food delivery, logistics, and mobility. These models demand high upfront investment for customer acquisition and operational scaling."

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❖ Top 10 largest individual Funding rounds



- Swiggy and Meesho have raised some of the biggest single rounds.
- Late-stage rounds dominate the list.

Inference

"The largest individual funding rounds typically occur during Series D and beyond, highlighting that investors allocate large capital infusions to unicorns with established models and high market potential."

TOOLS & VISUALIZATION

- Tools used are Microsoft Excel and Python libraries like pandas and matplotlib.
- Visuals:
  - Stacked bar charts comparing capital raised per stage
  - Pie charts for ownership dynamics (founder vs investor control)
  - Line graphs showing year-wise growth in funding activity and unicorn emergence

Particularly in high-burn company models, the data clearly show a tendency toward late-stage capital dependency. However, bootstrapped unicorns like Zerodha show that prudent financial management, customer-led scaling, and sound governance can equal high-capital businesses in terms of valuation and performance, offering an alternative unicorn roadmap.

➢ **Analysis of Qualitative Data**

A qualitative study of seven selected unicorns- Swiggy, Zerodha, Meesho, Nykaa, Delhivery, CRED, and InDrive was carried out to complement the data. To capture a set of finance strategies, ownership forms, business types, and exit paths, these firms were sampled on purpose. Data was sourced from startup blogs, investor reports, media reports, and founder interviews. Using manual thematic coding in Google Sheets, we identified 4 dominant patterns across case narratives:

1. Control of the Founder

Others, such as Zerodha and Meesho, opted for mission-oriented investors or deliberately avoided external funding to preserve strategic freedom. Even when Zerodha turned into a unicorn, its founders still owned 100% of the company, which is a rare feat. With VC support, Nykaa adopted a disciplined approach to dilution and utilized the IPO as a strategic exit without diluting founder ownership.

2. The Influence of Investors

Investor involvement was crucial for startups such as Delhivery and Swiggy. Strategic shifts, like Delhivery's full-stack logistics push or Swiggy's Instamart launch, were led by their venture capitalists. These unicorns were blessed with funds, but they also had to deliver on performance expectations and growth targets set by investors.

3. Burn Strategy vs Capital Efficiency

CRED took a high-burn approach, rationalizing expenditure on branding and high-end customer acquisition as investments in trust and long-term user behavior. InDrive took a burn-light, community-led approach. Their success was not through ad spend, but through decentralizing pricing decisions and maximizing driver-partner loyalty — a departure from standard VC-backed growth strategies.

4. IPO Readiness

Nykaa and Delhivery took 1.5-2 years to prepare for IPOs, working on profitability, board composition, ESOP distribution, and earnings stability. IPO was not only a money-making event but also a long-term governance overhaul, demonstrating how listing requires profound internal restructuring beyond profitability.

Techniques In brief

• Thematic coding: Manual, covering a range of material categories

• Case selection: Deliberate by diversity of funding and growth

• Matrix development: Themes are checked for anomalies and trends among the companies.

There is no single funding path. Some unicorns intentionally scale with frugal spending and internal leadership, while others scale with rapid financial injections and external guidance. Numbers alone cannot reflect the impact of founder ideology, industry forces, and ultimate exit intention.

FINDINGS

Merging both data sets, the study identified five prevailing patterns that characterize unicorn funding behavior in India:

1. Founder Control vs Investor Dominance

Companies such as Zerodha, Meesho, and Nykaa had high founder control through bootstrapping or choosing mission-fit

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investors. Swiggy and Delhivery, on the other hand, had deeper VC integration, which resulted in changes to product direction or market expansion plans.

Implication
Control is a function of capital strategy less external capital means more control.
2. Strategic Burn vs Capital Discipline
Firms like CRED raised huge sums without monetization pressure, presenting it as a brand trust investment. InDrive and Nykaa, on the other hand, scaled up modestly and stayed profitable.

Implication
There's no one-size-fits-all. The ecosystem has room for both blitzscaling and capital-discipline models.
3. Infrastructure vs Asset-Light Models
Infra-intensive unicorns such as Delhivery required huge late-stage rounds for physical scaleup. While asset-light platforms (e.g., InDrive, CRED) raised funds for branding and acquiring users instead of hard assets.

Implication
Sector and business model are key determinants of stage-wise funding requirements.
4. IPO-Readiness
Nykaa and Delhivery started in-house reforms 18-24 months prior to IPO. These were: burn reduction, transparency build-up, cap table cleanup, and demonstration of EBITDA improvements.

Implication
A public listing is not only a funding choice - it is a long-term governance process.
5. Mission-Aligned Investors
Meesho and Zerodha eschewed overfunding to ensure vision clarity. Swiggy and Delhivery partnered with global funds for scaling.

Implication
Startups are discovering the art of approaching investor choice as a strategic alignment, not a cash exchange.
Overall Insight:
Indian unicorn funding trends are no longer purely capital availability-based - they are informed by founder values, market forces, investor priorities, and long-term strategic goals.

RECOMMENDATION

The recommendation of this research is based on the combined analysis of quantitative and qualitative data for 22 unicorns and 7 deep case studies.

- Quantitative Recommendations

Quantitative analysis found that later stages of funding (Series C to Series F) contributed over 65% of total capital raised in most unicorns. These stages experienced rampant capital inflows, particularly in high-burn industries such as logistics, e-commerce, food delivery, and fintech. Startups like Swiggy, Delhivery, and CRED raised over $400–$800 million at these stages, which were generally supported by international venture capital firms.

On the other hand, capital-efficient ventures such as Zerodha, Nykaa, and InDrive either raised much smaller amounts or stretched out funding rounds in a strategic manner. For instance, Zerodha never took external VC funding at all, solely depending on internal earnings. This strategy not only ensured founder control but also provided governance freedom across their lifecycle.

Another striking trend was that IPO-bound unicorns like Nykaa and Delhivery had a more formalized and transparent funding trend. They tended to raise a terminal Pre-IPO round, sanitised their cap table, prepped financials well in advance, and established governance structures for public market inspection. This contrasted with firms like CRED, which remain private and continue to raise enormous capital for scaling and ecosystem-building.

Statistical visualization also assisted in demystifying timelines. Early profitability and slender growth model's startups raised fewer rounds but were able to maintain valuation and ownership potency over the longer term. Meanwhile, high-growth startups raised capital in diminishingly shorter cycles usually every 12–18 months reflecting hyper-scaling reliance on VC capital.

- Qualitative Recommendations

Qualitative analysis provided additional evidence for this conclusion. Every unicorn's funding experience was not only monetary but also philosophical - linked to founder belief systems, investor networks, and vision for the long term.
•The Kamath brothers at Zerodha prioritized profit-first growth and never diluted ownership. Their philosophy influenced a dramatically different funding trajectory - lean, internally funded, and control-focused.
• Nykaa, being VC-backed, was guided by Falguni Nayar's disciplined capital approach: investors handpicked with care, tight cost discipline, and orderly exit through IPO. Her banking experience dictated both fundraising and governance temperament.
• Swiggy, on the other hand, matured with aggressive VC-driven scaling, venturing into verticals such as Swiggy Genie and Instamart under investor pressure. This produced several giant rounds but also heightened dependency and pivot intensity.
• CRED, by Kunal Shah, adopted a "burn for trust-building" model - where growth in valuation was facilitated by long-term usage over short-term income. This drew strategic long-horizon capital, but also pushed timelines for profitability and exits.
• InDrive, as a global mobility company, took a distinctive asset-light, community-pricing model that entailed much less burn. Their funding trajectory was based on expansion by territory, and not scale-for-scale's sake.
These philosophical and operational differences - despite all companies being unicorns highlight a fragmented, founder-driven funding landscape. Themes like "strategic burn vs capital discipline", "founder control vs investor-led governance", and "IPO planning vs private scaling" repeatedly appeared in coded interviews and public statements.

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CONCLUSION

Based on quantitative data from 22 companies and qualitative data from seven in-depth case studies, we conclude that there is ample heterogeneity in the funding style of Indian unicorns. A variety of variables such as developmental stage, requirements of the sectors, preferences related to founder control, investor connection, and exit strategy for long-term impact play a role towards this heterogeneity. Whereas some unicorns leverage substantial external capital to achieve rapid growth, others pursue a disciplined, capital-efficient strategy. These differences illustrate how unicorn funding is a deliberate choice driven by internal vision and philosophy of governance as much as by market opportunity.

IMPACTS OF THE RESEARCH

This study has significant implications across the startup landscape - for entrepreneurs, investors, policy-makers, and researchers. By examining both the quantitative trends and qualitative tales of unicorn finance, this work reveals not merely what financing patterns there are, but why it matters.

Impact on Founders

This work provides founders with a clear window into how varied financing philosophies affect control, valuation, and exit opportunities. It points out that bringing more money is not necessarily better - and sometimes in the right hands, capital efficiency can construct superior governance, healthier margins, and enhanced long-term freedom. To bootstrapping entrepreneurs or entrepreneurs who start earlier, this work reaffirms alternate models of growth like Zerodha's or InDrive's. It also prepares founders with stage-based funding dynamics awareness, indicating when to raise funds, how much, and what investor expectations could accompany the funds.

Impact on Investors

For investors - particularly venture capitalists, family offices, and angel networks - this study offers insight into unicorn levels of maturity, founder mindset trends, and warning signs in unsustainable burn models. The comparison of high-burn vs capital-efficient unicorns enables investors to evaluate startup fit, exit opportunities, and needed governance monitoring. Knowing founder intent and funding philosophy also enables VCs to better strategically curate their portfolios, prioritizing mission-aligned partnerships over mere scale-chasing.

Effect on Policymakers and Ecosystem Enablers

The policy institutions like Startup India, DPIIT, and SEBI will be able to make use of these insights to create improved frameworks for IPO-readiness, dual-class share rules, ESOP design, and early-stage funding assistance. The divergence between IPO-ready unicorns (like Nykaa) and long-standing private companies (like CRED) brings out the significance of governance structure, transparency, and valuation discipline to generate public trust. These observations can inform public listing standards, tax regimes, and incentives for equitable capital deployment.

Impact on Academic and Research Communities

This study makes an incremental contribution to the scarce literature on unicorn financing models in emerging economies, particularly India. With the integration of statistical stage funding analysis and case-based thematic coding, the study creates a benchmark for mixed-method analysis in startup studies. Subsequent scholars can expand on this framework to study other themes like gender relations in startup financing, internationalization models, or unicorns' post-IPO performance.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although this research is valuable in terms of explaining unicorn funding in India, it is not perfect. The first limitation is the sample size 22 unicorns for quantitative analysis and 7 for qualitative case studies — which does not represent the full complexity of India's startup ecosystem. Some industries (such as SaaS or healthcare) are not represented adequately. Secondly, information was mostly pulled from public records like Crunchbase, Tracxn, media articles, and company announcements. Although caution was exercised to ensure verifications, private funding statistics, valuation corrections, or in-house cap table adjustments might not be disclosed at all, with possible implications for accuracy. Thirdly, qualitative coding procedure, although systematic, was done manually and involves embedded subjectivity. Researcher predisposition, tone of interpretation, or omitted context might influence the ultimate theme matrix. Also, as the research does not contain in-depth stakeholder interviews or board-level information, some of the findings are interpretative rather than absolute. Lastly, the research is dated to early 2025, and the rapid development of unicorns ensures that some of the data (particularly post-IPO performance or subsequent rounds) can alter after publication. These are recognized limitations in the expectation that future research will build on and continue to develop this work.

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