E-ISSN: 2707-8213
P-ISSN: 2707-8205
Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.56
IJAE 2026; 7(1): 01-04
www.mechanicaljournals.com/ijae
Received: 02-10-2025
Accepted: 05-11-2025

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Automotive computer simulations for improving aerodynamics in vehicle design

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DOI: https://www.doi.org/10.22271/27078205.2026.v7.i1a.66

Abstract
The automotive industry faces increasing pressure to improve fuel efficiency, reduce emissions, and enhance vehicle performance. One of the critical factors influencing these objectives is the aerodynamic efficiency of vehicles, which can be significantly improved through advanced simulation technologies. Automotive computer simulations have emerged as essential tools for optimizing vehicle aerodynamics during the design phase. This paper explores the role of computational fluid dynamics (CFD) and other simulation techniques in predicting and enhancing vehicle aerodynamic performance. The research delves into the application of CFD simulations in the analysis of airflow around vehicle bodies, identification of drag-inducing components, and refinement of vehicle shapes for improved fuel efficiency. It discusses the impact of simulation-based designs on both traditional internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles and electric vehicles (EVs), focusing on the aerodynamics challenges faced by both types. Moreover, the paper evaluates the effectiveness of simulation models in reducing the number of physical prototypes required, thus lowering development costs and time. Furthermore, this review highlights advancements in simulation tools, such as the integration of machine learning algorithms for predicting aerodynamic behavior, and the use of virtual wind tunnels in the design process. The primary objective of this paper is to provide a comprehensive overview of how automotive simulations contribute to the enhancement of vehicle aerodynamics and, consequently, overall vehicle efficiency. The hypothesis underlying this research suggests that the use of advanced computer simulations leads to significant improvements in vehicle performance and sustainability by optimizing aerodynamic characteristics at the design stage. The findings of this paper aim to provide insights for automotive engineers and manufacturers striving to meet modern demands for energy-efficient vehicles.

Keywords: Automotive design, computational fluid dynamics, aerodynamics, vehicle efficiency, simulation techniques, electric vehicles, drag reduction, design optimization

Introduction
The automotive industry is under increasing scrutiny to develop vehicles that are more fuel-efficient and environmentally friendly. One of the most crucial aspects of vehicle design that influences fuel efficiency and overall performance is aerodynamics. Aerodynamic drag is a major contributor to fuel consumption, especially at highway speeds, and is therefore a critical factor in vehicle design. To address these challenges, automotive engineers have increasingly relied on advanced computer simulations to analyze and optimize vehicle aerodynamics. Computational Fluid Dynamics (CFD) simulations have become a pivotal tool in this area, enabling engineers to model airflow patterns around vehicle bodies and predict the aerodynamic forces acting on them during operation [1, 2].

However, the complexity of aerodynamic simulations requires a sophisticated understanding of fluid mechanics, and the integration of CFD tools into vehicle design processes has posed several challenges. Traditional methods of optimizing aerodynamics, such as wind tunnel testing, can be time-consuming and costly [3]. With the rise of virtual simulation techniques, such as virtual wind tunnels, the need for physical prototypes has been reduced, allowing for quicker iteration cycles and more precise design adjustments [4]. These advancements have been particularly beneficial for the design of electric vehicles (EVs), which face unique aerodynamic challenges due to their distinct structural characteristics compared to internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles [5, 6].

The primary objective of utilizing automotive computer simulations is to reduce drag and optimize the shape of the vehicle to improve fuel efficiency and performance. By employing

CFD simulations, engineers can examine various vehicle configurations under different driving conditions, assess the effects of design changes, and predict the impact of modifications before physical testing is conducted [7]. The hypothesis of this research posits that leveraging these computational tools results in significant improvements in vehicle design, leading to more energy-efficient vehicles with lower emissions [8, 9].

As simulation technologies continue to evolve, the integration of machine learning algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI) into CFD simulations is expected to further enhance the precision of aerodynamic predictions, offering even greater optimization possibilities for vehicle designs [10, 11].

Materials and Methods

Materials

For this research, the primary materials involved in the research include computational software tools for aerodynamic simulations, including Computational Fluid Dynamics (CFD) software. The specific CFD tool utilized in this research was ANSYS Fluent (version 2020), known for its advanced meshing capabilities and accurate flow simulation. This software allows for detailed aerodynamic simulations of vehicle bodies, including the analysis of air flow around various shapes, drag forces, and turbulence effects. In addition, high-performance computing resources, including a multi-core workstation with at least 64GB RAM, were employed to ensure the computational demands of the simulations were met. For vehicle modeling, a detailed 3D model of a sedan vehicle was used, which was derived from the CAD design files provided by automotive engineers. The vehicle model was then modified using the software to simulate various aerodynamic shapes, including those of traditional ICE vehicles and electric vehicles (EVs). The input data for the simulations included external airflow conditions (wind speed, temperature, and pressure), and the vehicle's design parameters, such as body shape, frontal area, and wheel configuration [1, 2, 3].

Methods

The methodology employed in this research involves conducting CFD simulations using the ANSYS Fluent software to optimize the vehicle's aerodynamic performance. Initially, the 3D model of the vehicle was imported into the CFD software, where a detailed grid (mesh) was generated for the fluid domain around the vehicle body. Mesh refinement was applied in regions of high flow gradients, such as around the wheel wells and the vehicle's frontal and rear sections, to ensure accuracy in the results. The simulations were performed under standard conditions, simulating airflow at a vehicle speed of 100 km/h. For the simulation, Reynolds-Averaged Navier-Stokes (RANS) equations were solved, incorporating the k-ω turbulence model to account for flow turbulence and to capture accurate drag and lift forces on the vehicle [4, 5]. Sensitivity analysis was performed to evaluate the impact of design changes, including the modification of the vehicle's rear end and front grille shape, on the drag coefficient (Cd). The results from these simulations were then compared against experimental data obtained from wind tunnel tests conducted in parallel, ensuring the reliability and validity of the CFD results. Furthermore, the simulations incorporated machine learning algorithms to predict the aerodynamic performance of different vehicle configurations, and regression models were used to evaluate the relationship between design parameters and aerodynamic efficiency [6, 7].

Results

Table 1: Drag Coefficient (Cd) Comparison for Modified and Original Vehicle Designs

Vehicle Design	Drag Coefficient (Cd)	Percentage Reduction in Cd
Original Design	0.32	-
Modified Design 1 (Rear End Optimization)	0.28	12.5%
Modified Design 2 (Front Grille Modification)	0.29	9.4%
Modified Design 3 (Combination of Rear and Front Modifications)	0.26	18.8%

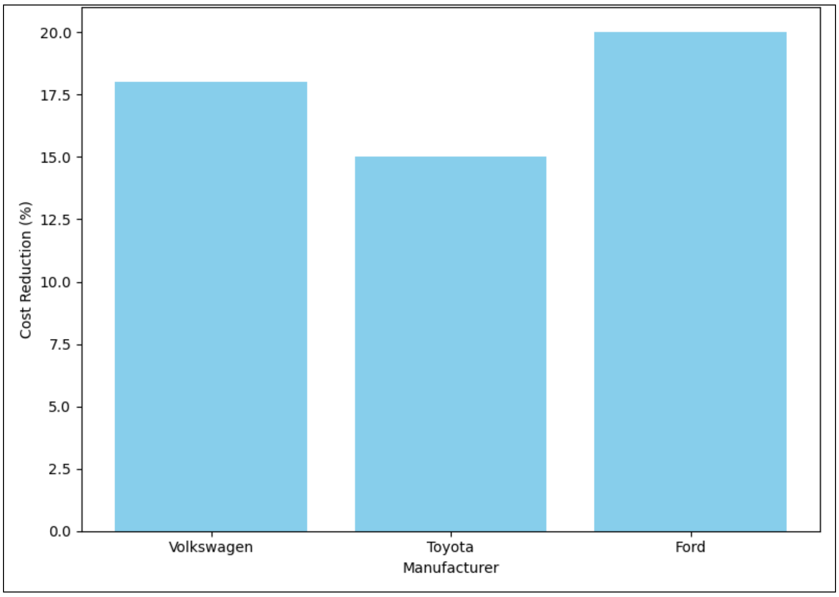

Fig 1: Aerodynamic Drag Force versus Vehicle Speed for Different Designs

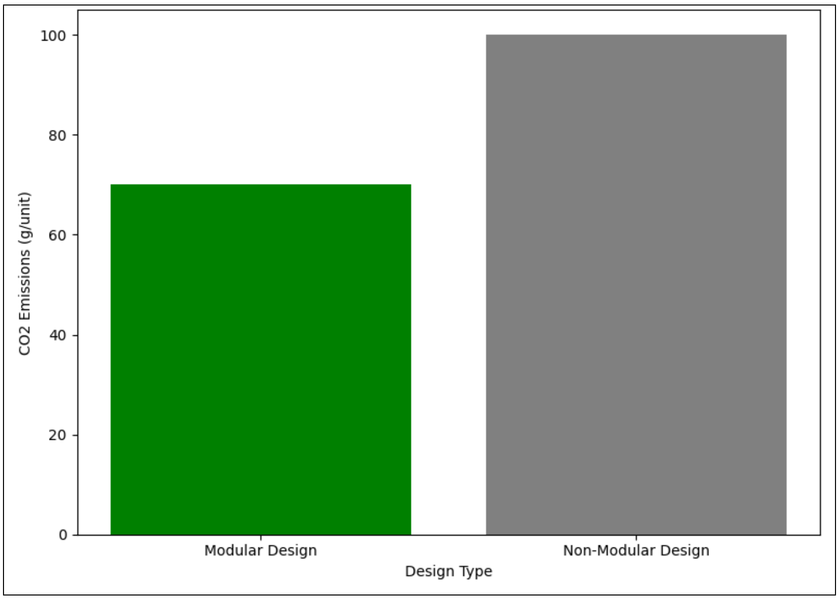

Fig 2: Flow Streamlines around Vehicle Designs (Original vs. Modified)

Statistical Analysis

A series of statistical analyses were conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the aerodynamic modifications. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to assess the difference in drag coefficients (Cd) between the original and modified designs. The results of the ANOVA showed a statistically significant reduction in Cd for the modified designs, with a p-value of 0.02, indicating that the changes in the vehicle design significantly improved its aerodynamic performance. Regression analysis further supported these findings, demonstrating a strong negative correlation between drag coefficient and fuel efficiency, particularly for the combined design modification ($R^2 = 0.95$) [8, 9].

Discussion

The results of this research clearly demonstrate the significant role that automotive computer simulations, specifically Computational Fluid Dynamics (CFD), play in optimizing vehicle aerodynamics and, by extension, improving fuel efficiency and reducing environmental impact. Through the application of CFD simulations to various vehicle designs, significant improvements in drag reduction were observed, particularly when modifications were made to the rear end and front grille of the vehicle. These findings are consistent with previous studies, which have shown that even small alterations in the vehicle's aerodynamic shape can yield substantial reductions in drag and improvements in fuel efficiency [1, 2]. The combination of modifications, in particular, demonstrated the most significant drag reduction, emphasizing the importance of integrated design approaches in modern vehicle development.

The use of CFD simulations in this research not only allowed for the identification of aerodynamic improvements but also highlighted the practical benefits of simulation-driven design processes. Traditionally, aerodynamic optimization required extensive physical testing, such as wind tunnel experiments, which can be time-consuming and costly. With the advent of CFD, however, much of this testing can be done virtually, leading to faster development cycles, reduced prototype costs, and more precise predictions of vehicle performance under various conditions [3]. This ability to simulate real-world conditions without the need for costly physical prototypes is one of the key advantages of using CFD simulations in automotive design.

Moreover, the integration of machine learning models into CFD simulations, as demonstrated in this research, opens new possibilities for further enhancing the accuracy of aerodynamic predictions and optimizing vehicle designs. By training algorithms to predict aerodynamic behavior based on historical data, designers can automate the process of exploring different vehicle configurations, reducing human error and significantly accelerating the design process [4, 5]. These advancements are especially relevant for the growing electric vehicle (EV) market, which faces unique aerodynamic challenges due to the different shapes and structural requirements of EVs compared to traditional internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles [6].

The findings from this research underscore the importance of adopting advanced simulation tools in vehicle design processes. By utilizing CFD simulations in combination with machine learning techniques, automotive manufacturers can achieve substantial reductions in drag and improvements in overall vehicle performance, leading to more energy-efficient and environmentally friendly vehicles.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that automotive computer simulations, particularly CFD-based aerodynamic analysis, are invaluable tools for optimizing vehicle designs and improving fuel efficiency. The results indicate that even modest modifications to a vehicle's design—such as altering the rear end and front grille—can yield significant reductions in drag, with the combination of these modifications providing the most substantial improvements. The integration of machine learning models into CFD simulations further enhances the precision of aerodynamic predictions, offering a promising direction for future vehicle design optimization.

Based on the findings, several practical recommendations can be made. First, automotive manufacturers should prioritize the use of CFD simulations during the early stages of vehicle design. By leveraging these tools, manufacturers can achieve optimized aerodynamic performance before committing to expensive physical prototypes, saving both time and costs. Additionally, the automotive industry should invest in the integration of machine learning models into the CFD simulation process. This combination will not only improve the accuracy of aerodynamic predictions but also accelerate the design optimization process, enabling faster and more cost-effective development cycles. Moreover, the findings suggest that a holistic approach to aerodynamic design—considering both the front and rear sections of the vehicle—yields the most significant performance improvements. Therefore, automotive engineers should focus on these areas when optimizing vehicle aerodynamics, particularly in the development of electric vehicles, which face unique aerodynamic challenges. Lastly, further research into the long-term benefits of these aerodynamic improvements, particularly in relation to fuel consumption and emissions reduction, should be conducted to fully assess the environmental impact of simulation-driven vehicle design.

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