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BEYOND THE FRAGRANCE: CULTURAL STORYTELLING, SACRED-IMAGE SENSITIVITY, AND CONSUMER RESPONSES TO INCENSE PACKAGING—A MIXED-METHODS STUDY OF CYCLE PURE AGARBATTI IN INDIA

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Abstract
What happens when a heritage incense brand uses cultural stories on packaging that consumers will ultimately discard? This mixed-methods study examines how consumers and cultural stakeholders respond to proposed culture-led packaging for Cycle Pure Agarbatti in India. The research combines a reported overall survey sample of 160 respondents with four regional focus-group cohorts and depth interviews involving consumers, ritual practitioners, temple priests and an academic informant. Survey responses indicate broad initial interest in regionally themed packs, storytelling and limited editions, alongside stated willingness among some respondents to pay a modest premium. The qualitative accounts complicate this enthusiasm. Participants distinguish routine household purchases from gifting occasions and repeatedly emphasize fragrance quality, affordability, authentic representation and the handling of sacred imagery after use. The most consequential tension arises when reverential images are placed on disposable cartons. Integrating both strands, the paper proposes a Cultural Representation–Responsibility–Response framework for designing and testing culturally responsible packaging. Findings are exploratory: varying item-level response counts, non-representative sampling and qualitative summaries limit statistical generalization. The study contributes a context-sensitive account of cultural packaging in an everyday worship-adjacent product category and identifies practical questions for responsible brand experimentation.

Keywords: *cultural branding; cultural authenticity; incense packaging; sacred symbolism; consumer behaviour; mixed methods; packaging disposal.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Packaging is often the first physical point of contact between a consumer and a product. In fast-moving consumer goods, they perform practical functions such as protection, storage, identification and communication. It can also shape how consumers interpret product quality, brand personality and value. In a category such as agarbatti, packaging has an additional cultural context because the product is used in homes, places of worship and during religious or community occasions. Its meaning is therefore not limited to fragrance or price; it is also associated with habit, ritual, memory and regional practice.

Cycle Pure is a heritage agarbatti brand associated with Mysuru and the wider Indian incense market. The case material describes the brand as having a long operating history and an established consumer presence. At the same time, the agarbatti category faces competitive pressure from branded and local players, while consumers continue to evaluate products on fragrance, trust, availability and price. In such a setting, packaging can be explored as an additional point of differentiation, if it does not distract from product performance or compromise affordability.

India's cultural diversity offers a wide range of visual languages, art forms, regional stories and festival traditions. Packaging that draws on these references may help consumers recognize their own cultural context and may make a familiar household product more distinctive or suitable for gifting. Yet cultural references cannot be treated as interchangeable decorative elements. Some symbols have religious significance, some practices are community-specific, and some consumers may object to sacred imagery appearing on packaging that is later thrown away. These considerations make consumer research and consultation with knowledgeable stakeholders central to the design process.

The present study therefore investigates cultural packaging as a possible brand differentiation approach for Cycle Pure Agarbatti. It brings together survey responses and qualitative perspectives to understand not only whether consumers like the idea, but also why they may accept or reject it, what forms of cultural representation they consider appropriate, and what conditions should guide implementation.

The central question is not simply whether cultural graphics make incense cartons more attractive. It is whether a familiar, frequently discarded consumer pack can communicate local heritage in ways that users regard as authentic, respectful and worth paying for. This question is especially salient for incense, which moves between ordinary retail routines and practices of worship. The study uses Cycle Pure Agarbathi as a situated brand case rather than assuming its findings describe the entire Indian market.

The study is relevant to brand management because it considers packaging as a carrier of brand associations and cultural meaning rather than only as a container. Aaker's work on brand equity provides a basis for understanding how brand associations and perceived quality contribute to consumer-based brand value (Aaker, n.d.). Barney's resource-based perspective is relevant to the question of whether cultural knowledge, artist relationships and authentic community engagement can become capabilities that are more difficult to imitate than a surface-level design change (Barney, n.d.). The study is also relevant to the Indian agarbatti industry. The industry context discussed in The Hindu Business Line article provides background on competition and the market position of Cycle's brand (Hindu Business Line, n.d.). Work on brand culture further supports examining how brands participate in the creation and communication of cultural meanings (Jonathan, n.d.). For managers, the research provides consumer and stakeholder evidence that can inform a limited pilot, while for researchers it highlights the need to examine cultural sensitivity and disposal concerns alongside visual appeal and purchase intention.

Research Objectives:

- To examine consumer responses to culturally inspired packaging for Cycle Pure Agarbatti.
- To understand how regional identity, cultural familiarity and festival-related storytelling influence perceived attractiveness and brand perception.
- To identify concerns relating to cultural authenticity, sacred imagery, affordability, sustainability and packaging functionality.
- To interpret consumer survey findings through regional focus groups and stakeholder and consumer depth interviews.
- To propose a culturally sensitive and testable packaging approach for Cycle Pure Agarbatti.

The article offers three contributions. It places sacred-image disposal at the centre of packaging evaluation; distinguishes the economics and symbolism of everyday packs from festive and gift formats; and develops a culturally responsible packaging framework linking cultural representation, stakeholder review, material use

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and product performance. Its conclusions are interpretive and exploratory, not causal estimates of purchasing behaviour.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Brand Equity and Packaging

Aaker (1991) explains brand equity through assets and liabilities linked to a brand, including brand awareness, brand associations and perceived quality. Packaging can contribute to these associations by making a brand recognizable and communicating cues about quality and positioning. In the present study, cultural packaging is examined as a possible means of adding associations related to regional heritage, authenticity and contemporary design. Such associations can strengthen brand meaning only when they remain consistent with the product experience (Aaker, n.d.).

Brand Culture and Consumer Identity

Schroeder and Salzer-Morling's work on brand culture provides a lens for understanding brands as participants in cultural meaning-making. From this perspective, packaging may communicate stories and symbols that consumers interpret through their own cultural knowledge and experiences. The relevance of a cultural design therefore depends on whether it is recognizable, respectful and meaningful to the community represented. A design that appears attractive to one audience may be unfamiliar or inappropriate to another (Jonathan, n.d.).

Competitive Advantage and Distinctive Capabilities

Barney (1991) argues that resources and capabilities can contribute to sustained competitive advantage when they possess characteristics that make them valuable and difficult to imitate. Applied to cultural packaging, the artwork itself may be copied; however, sustained relationships with regional artists, accurate cultural research, community trust and a disciplined review process may take longer to develop. The study therefore treats cultural packaging not as a one-time graphic redesign but as a capability-building process (Barney, n.d.).

Industry Context

The Hindu Business Line (2018) article on the agarbatti market and Cycle brand provides contextual evidence for discussing the competitive environment in which the brand operates. It is used as industry background and not as a source for the survey's consumer findings. The Google Drive reference supplied by the researcher should be cited only after its author, title, date and relevant content are verified; its bibliographic details have not been assumed in this draft (Hindu Business Line, n.d.).

THE FINDINGS FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature suggests four points relevant to the present research. First, packaging can reinforce brand equity when it builds recognizable and credible associations. Second, cultural meanings are interpreted by consumers rather than simply transferred by the brand, making regional knowledge and authenticity essential. Third, a distinctive design becomes more defensible when supported by capabilities such as artist partnerships and community relationships. Fourth, packaging-led differentiation must remain consistent with product quality and the expectations of the category. These points inform the analysis of survey and qualitative evidence in the following sections.

Taken together, brand-equity and brand-culture perspectives suggest that imagery does not carry a fixed meaning into consumers' homes. Consumers interpret a motif through familiarity, lived practice and the material context in which the object is used and ultimately disposed of. This makes packaging simultaneously a brand cue, a cultural claim and an object with a post-consumption life. The resource-based view adds a managerial distinction: reproducing a familiar motif is relatively easy; developing credible relationships with artists and custodians of local traditions may be more difficult to imitate.

3. RESEARCH GAP AND QUESTIONS

Existing discussions of brand equity, brand culture and competitive advantage explain why packaging and cultural meaning may matter to brands. However, these concepts alone do not establish how consumers respond to culturally inspired packaging in the agarbatti category. The category has specific usage conditions: the product is often purchased routinely, used in domestic worship or ritual settings, and associated with religious respect. These conditions create questions that may not arise in the same way as ordinary food or personal-care packaging.

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A further gap concerns the possible conflict between cultural expression and packaging disposal. A package carrying sacred imagery may be considered inappropriate if it is later discarded as waste. The present study addresses this gap by combining a consumer questionnaire with regional discussions and interviews with practitioners and priests. It also examines whether consumer interest in cultural packaging extends to price acceptance, gifting suitability, practical functionality and brand perception.

Research on branding and packaging provides useful explanations of associations, visual differentiation and identity. Less clearly addressed in the literature considered here is how consumers negotiate the coexistence of culturally meaningful imagery, routine price sensitivity and the disposal of packs used with worship-related products. The study does not claim that this issue has never been researched; rather, it examines this intersection in an empirical Indian incense-brand setting.

RQ1. How do surveyed consumers evaluate the attractiveness, perceived value and possible price premium of culturally themed incense packaging?

RQ2. How do regional consumers and cultural stakeholders distinguish acceptable local storytelling from inappropriate commercial use of sacred symbols?

RQ3. How do purchase occasion, product performance and the package's material life cycle qualify the potential value of cultural packaging?

4. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study follows a mixed-method design. The quantitative component consists of a structured consumer questionnaire administered through Google Forms. The qualitative component comprises four regional focus-group cohorts and a set of depth interviews with individuals whose experiences relate to regional traditions, worship practices, incense use and consumer purchasing. The two forms of evidence serve complementary purposes: the survey indicates the direction of stated consumer attitudes, while the discussions and interviews provide explanations, qualifications and context.

Quantitative Data Collection: Google Forms

The questionnaire was designed to capture respondents' profile and agarbatti usage, brand preference, purchase drivers, monthly spending, response to the proposed cultural packaging concept, preferred packaging benefits, concerns, willingness to pay, cultural-theme interest, perceived brand impact and interest in limited-edition packaging. The case narrative reports 160 respondents overall. However, the response charts supplied with the study show different item-level response counts. Accordingly, the total sample is described as the reported overall sample, and item-level findings are interpreted using the counts available for the relevant question.

The questionnaire findings are descriptive. They are not treated as evidence of actual purchases, repeat buying or sales growth. Responses about willingness to pay represent stated intentions and should not be equated with observed market behaviour. Similarly, favourable reactions to a concept do not establish that every regional design will be accepted by every consumer group.

Qualitative Data Collection: Focus Groups and Depth Interviews

The qualitative component covered four regional cohorts: Tulu Nadu (Dakshina Kannada and Udupi); the Hindi/non-South belt, with participants from Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Bihar; Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh; and Mysore/Karnataka. The research work also records depth-interview perspectives from Daivaradhane practitioners Chandrashekhar and Narayana; temple priests Shankar Bhat and Shivaprasada Aithal; Prof. Sridhar of SDMIMD, Mysore; domestic consumers from Mumbai and Pune; and one US-based Indian consumer.

The available research material provides summarized findings rather than complete verbatim transcripts, full participant-level records or a detailed account of the number of participants in each focus group. Therefore, the qualitative results are presented as themes documented in this research manuscript. No direct quotations have been invented, and the views of individual interviewees are not generalized to the entire consumer population.

Data Analysis

Survey responses were examined descriptively to identify patterns in usage, brand preference, concept acceptance, concerns and stated willingness to pay. Qualitative notes were organized thematically by region

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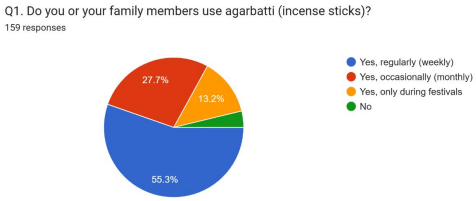
and stakeholder group. The analysis then compared the two evidence streams to identify areas of convergence and difference. For example, positive survey responses toward cultural packaging were considered alongside qualitative concerns about sacred imagery, disposal, affordability and product quality. This triangulation helps avoid interpreting a positive concept rating as unconditional acceptance.

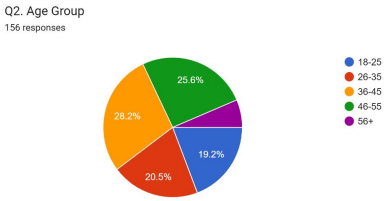
The design integrates descriptive survey evidence with discussions and depth interviews. Integration occurs at interpretation: positive survey evaluations are considered alongside the objections, boundary conditions and practical suggestions emerging from the qualitative accounts. No inferential statistical tests, experimental manipulation or representative sampling claims are made.

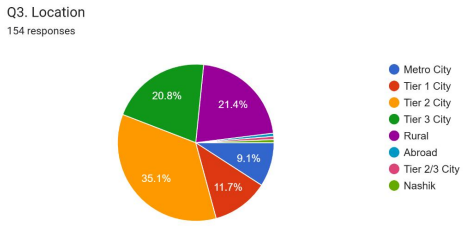
5. QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Reporting rule. The source describes an overall survey sample of 160, while some figures display item-level denominators of 153–156. Percentages must therefore use the actual response count for each question, not 160 by default. Where the prose and charts cannot be reconciled confidently, the result is presented as a direction of response rather than an exact percentage. The item-level results are descriptive and should not be interpreted as population estimates.

Respondent Profile and Category Usage





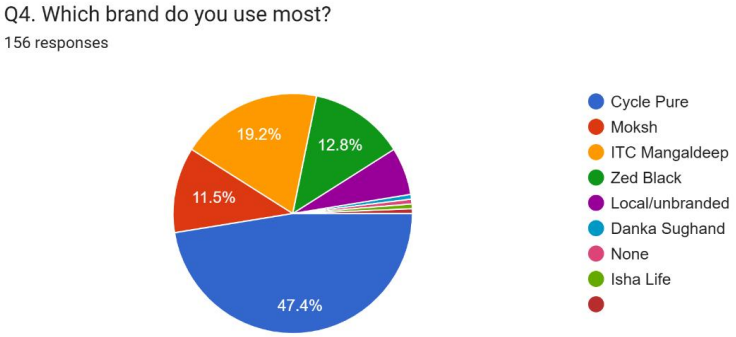


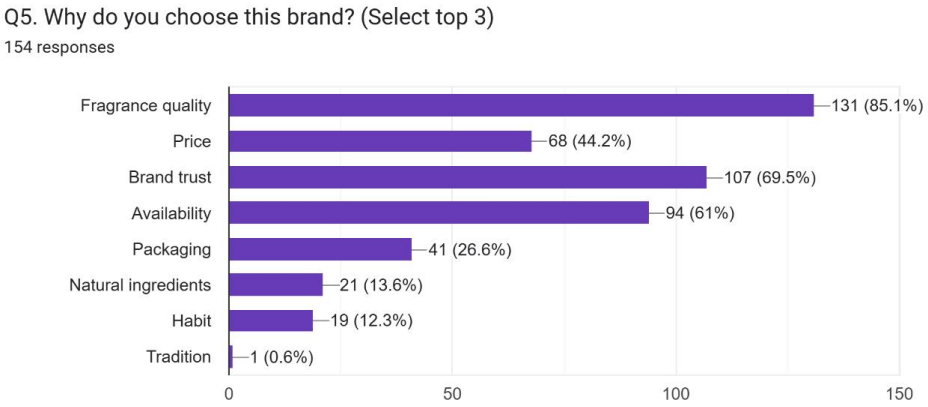
The case narrative reports 160 survey respondents. The age profile recorded in the source material includes a substantial representation of middle-aged consumers: 44 respondents were in the 36–45 age group, 40 in the 46–55 group, 32 in the 26–35 group and 30 in the 18–25 group. This mix is useful because the study is concerned with both established category users and younger consumers who may respond differently to design-led packaging. The geographic profile includes Tier-2, rural and Tier-3 locations, with comparatively fewer metropolitan and Tier-1 respondents. The findings should therefore be interpreted as reflecting the surveyed group and not as a nationally representative sample.

Agarbatti usage was frequent among respondents. The case material records 88 respondents (55%) using agarbatti regularly every week, 44 (27.5%) using it occasionally and 21 (13%) mainly during festivals; six respondents reported not using it. This pattern indicates that the questionnaire reached a group with meaningful category experience. Their views on packaging are therefore connected to an existing product routine rather than being based only on a hypothetical or unfamiliar category.

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Brand Preference and Purchase Drivers

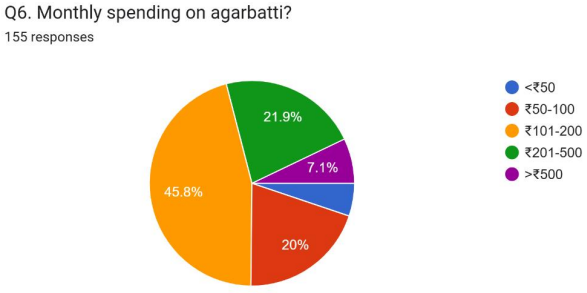




Cycle Pure was the most frequently reported preferred brand, selected by 74 respondents. Other choices included established competing brands and local alternatives. This result indicates familiarity with Cycle Pure within the survey group, but it does not establish market share or overall category leadership. The presence of competing choices also reflects the availability of alternatives and the importance of retaining consumer preference.

The purchase-driver responses show that fragrance quality, brand trust, product availability, natural ingredients and habitual buying remain important. This is a central finding for the packaging proposal. Cultural storytelling should be treated as an additional source of value, not as a substitute for the attributes that make consumers choose and continue using an agarbatti brand. If the fragrance or burn experience does not meet expectations, attractive packaging may create a short-term trial but is unlikely to sustain satisfaction.

Monthly Spending and Price Context

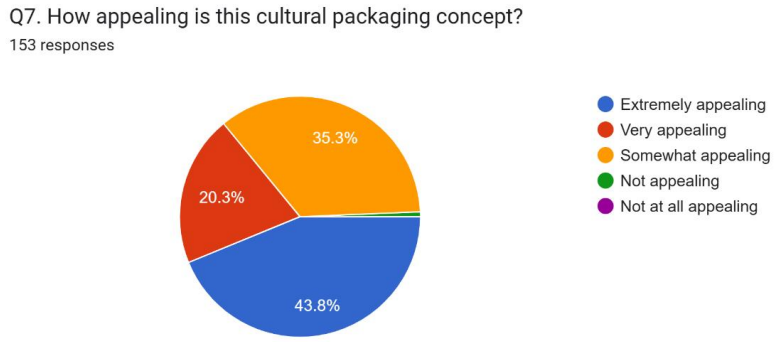


The monthly spending pattern indicates that agarbatti is a recurring household purchase for many respondents. The largest reported group spent ₹101–₹200 per month, followed by respondents in higher and lower spending

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bands. This suggests that consumers may be attentive to small changes in pack price, particularly when the product is purchased regularly. Packaging innovation must therefore be evaluated against the economics of repeat household consumption, not only against the appeal of a one-time festive purchase.

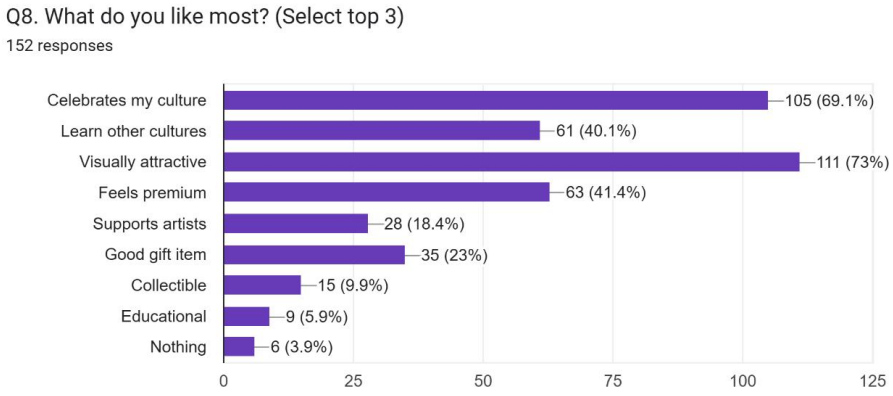
Acceptance of the Cultural Packaging Concept



The concept-appeal chart records 153 answers and indicates a large majority of favourable ratings. The accompanying narrative reports 67 “extremely appealing,” 54 “somewhat appealing,” and 31 “very appealing” responses. The supported conclusion is favourable initial concept appeal among respondents to this question, not universal endorsement of any cultural imagery.

This result suggests that consumers can see a role for cultural storytelling on an everyday product. The appeal appears to arise from more than decoration: cultural references can make a familiar pack distinctive, communicate regional identity and create a stronger connection between the brand and the consumer's lived context. However, the concept rating does not reveal whether every proposed motif, deity representation or regional story would be accepted. That question is clarified by the qualitative findings.

What Consumers Value in Cultural Packaging

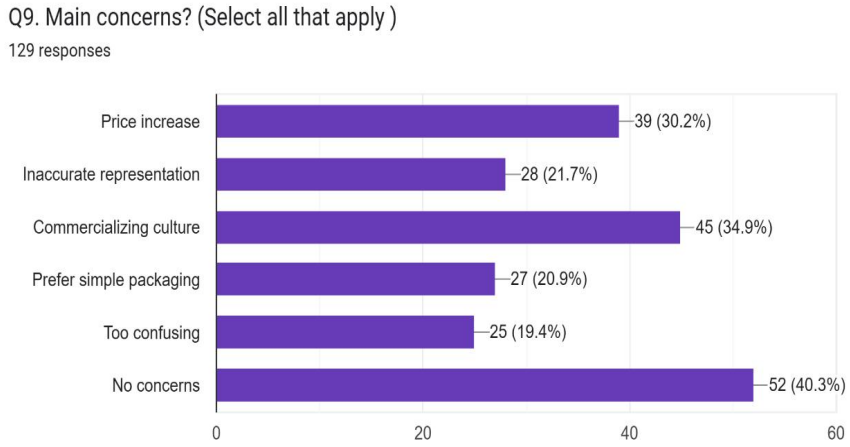


The survey identifies a cluster of benefits: celebration of Indian culture, an opportunity to learn about regional traditions, visual attractiveness, support for local artists and improved suitability for gifting. Taken together, these responses suggest that respondents value cultural packaging for its symbolic, educational and aesthetic dimensions. Packaging is being evaluated not only for how it looks on a shelf but also for the meaning it can communicate and the experience it can create after purchase.

The gifting response is particularly relevant because agarbatti is usually treated as a routine household purchase in qualitative discussions. A thoughtfully designed pack may help reposition selected variants as occasion-led products. This possibility should not be extended to all regular packs without testing. The more defensible interpretation is that gifting and collectability may provide an additional use occasion for a limited range.

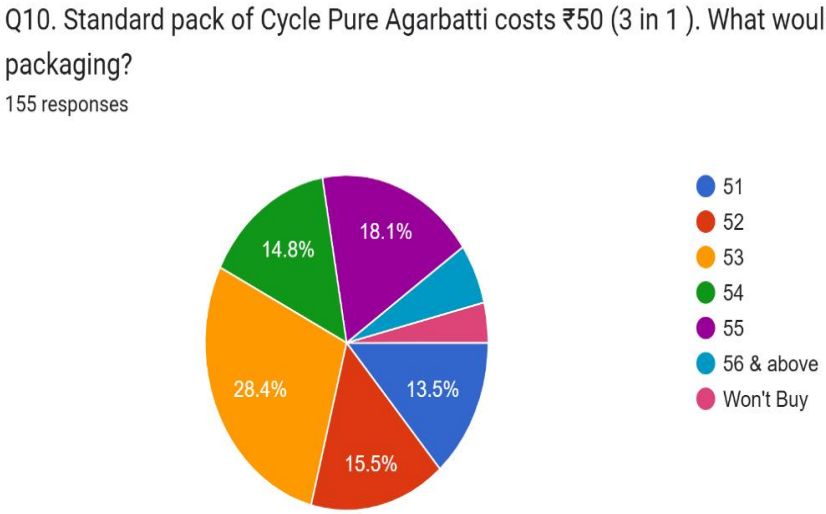
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Concerns About Cultural Packaging



Positive concept acceptance was accompanied by concerns about higher prices, the commercialization of culture and the possibility of cultural misrepresentation. These concerns are important because they identify conditions under which the innovation could lose credibility. A consumer may appreciate cultural representation in principle but reject a design that appears inaccurate, superficial or disrespectful. Likewise, a large price increase may be difficult to justify for a product purchased as part of a regular household routine.
The concerns therefore qualify as the favorable concept response. They suggest that the design process should involve artists and people familiar with the tradition being represented, provide clear attribution, avoid careless use of sacred symbols and maintain a price structure appropriate to the intended occasion.

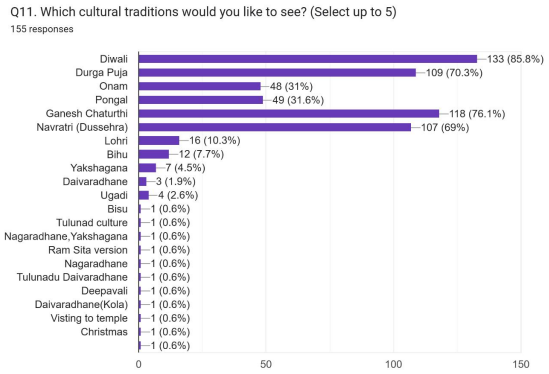
Willingness to Pay

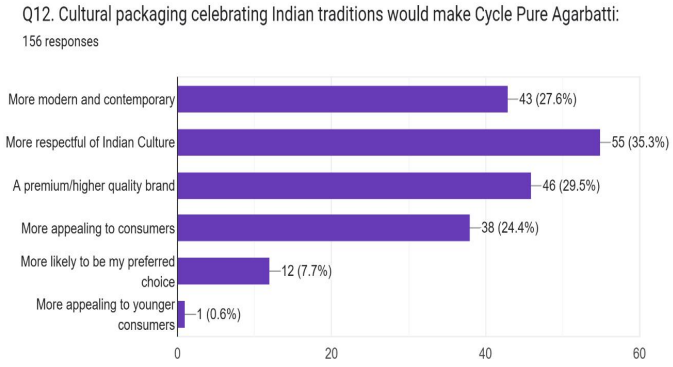


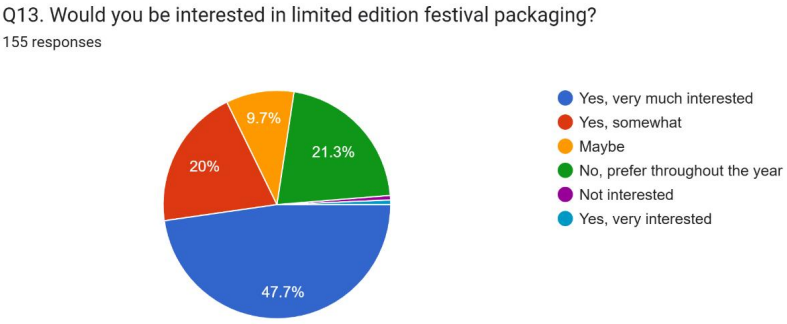
For a pack with a stated existing price of ₹50, the survey narrative indicates that many respondents who were willing to pay more selected a price in the ₹51–₹55 range. A smaller group indicated willingness to pay ₹56 or more, while only a limited number rejected a price increase. The direction of the finding is that respondents may accept a modest premium when additional design and cultural value is offered. It does not support assuming that all consumers will accept a substantial premium.
The price result should also be interpreted alongside the qualitative distinction between daily-use packs and festive or gift-oriented packs. A small increase may be more realistic for everyday variants, whereas a higher-priced collectible or gift pack could be tested with a narrower audience. Actual price elasticity can only be established through a market test.

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Cultural Themes, Brand Perception and Limited Editions







Responses to the cultural-theme question showed interest across multiple regional and festival traditions. Rather than pointing to one universal theme, the range of responses indicates that consumers value diversity and may respond to a rotating series of region-specific designs. For the paper's interpretation, the important finding is the breadth of cultural interest, not a catalogue of every festival selected by respondents.

The brand-perception question suggests that cultural packaging could make Cycle Pure appear more respectful of Indian culture, more contemporary, more premium and more appealing. This indicates a possible link between packaging cues and brand associations. However, these are stated perceptions of a proposed concept and should not be described as a measured change in actual brand equity.

Interest in limited-edition packaging was also favourable. The source narrative records 74 respondents as very interested, with additional respondents expressing moderate interest; some suggested that such designs need not be restricted to festival periods. This supports testing a limited-edition approach, but the study does not establish likely sales volumes, repeat-purchase rates or the commercial success of a national rollout.

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Overall Interpretation of the Google Forms Findings

The Google Forms results point to a consistent pattern: respondents are open to culturally inspired packaging, value its ability to communicate heritage and improve presentation, and show some willingness to pay a modest premium. At the same time, core purchase criteria remain functional, especially fragrance quality and brand trust. Price sensitivity and concerns about cultural misuse qualify the positive response. The quantitative evidence therefore supports further testing of cultural packaging, but not an assumption that packaging alone will change consumer behaviour or guarantee higher revenue.

6. QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

The themes below are reconstructed from the documented field summaries and interview notes. They are not direct verbatim quotations, and the available source does not support assigning numerical frequencies to themes or ranking their prevalence across regions. Differences are best read as situated perspectives from the participating cohorts.

Tulu Nadu: Dakshina Kannada and Udupi



The Tulu Nadu cohort connected Cycle Pure with its familiar yellow pack and with the everyday household use of agarbatti. This is significant because it shows that a new design must work alongside an established visual memory. Participants saw potential in regional art and heritage as a way of making the pack more distinctive, but they drew a clear boundary around sacred ritual representation. Daivaradhane and Bhoota Kola were not viewed as motifs that should be casually reproduced on disposable commercial cartons. The discussion therefore distinguishes cultural pride from the commercial display of sacred practices.

The cohort's views also suggest different expectations for different purchase occasions. A regular household pack should retain familiarity and affordability, while a festive or collectible format may allow more design investment and a higher price if the value is clear. This distinction supports a two-tier approach: preserve the regular pack while testing selected cultural editions separately.

Hindi/Non-South India Belt



Participants from the Hindi/non-South India cohort distinguished habitual neighborhood-store purchases from more exploratory shopping through modern retail and e-commerce. Everyday purchases were described as practical and price-conscious, whereas visually distinctive packs may attract attention during festive shopping or online browsing. The discussions also surfaced the 'deity disposal dilemma'. Consumers may feel

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uncomfortable purchasing a carton with a deity's face if the empty package will later be discarded with household waste.

This concern is important because it identifies a conflict between reverence and the material life cycle of packaging. The implication of design is not to remove all cultural references, but to consider alternatives such as folk art, festival objects, architectural details, patterns and other community-approved visual elements. Where direct religious imagery is contemplated, the decision should be made only after consultation with knowledgeable representatives and consideration of how the package can be respectfully handled after use.

Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh



The discussions in this cohort highlighted environmental and functional expectations. Participants showed interest in materials such as kraft board and biodegradable inks, and in practical features such as an integrated stick holder. This adds an important dimension to the survey's emphasis on visual appeal. Cultural packaging may be attractive, but consumers also evaluate whether it protects the product, is easy to use and creates less unnecessary waste. The finding suggests that material choice and functional design should be treated as part of innovation rather than as secondary production details.

Mysore/Karnataka



The Mysore/Karnataka cohort supported the use of locally recognizable heritage and artistic references, including Mysore Dasara-related visual elements. Such motifs can communicate a strong sense of place and regional pride without requiring sacred figures or active ritual scenes on a disposable pack. The discussion reinforces the need for cultural specificity: a design should reflect the actual tradition and its local meaning rather than use generic imagery that could be associated with any region.

Across the four cohorts, participants were generally receptive to the idea of cultural packaging as a way to make a familiar product more distinctive and meaningful. However, the discussions did not support a single design language for the whole country. Regional variation, ritual sensitivity, price expectations and use occasions all influenced what participants considered appropriate.

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Daivaradhane Practitioners: Chandrashekhar and Narayana



The interviews with Daivaradhane practitioners focused attention on ritual sanctity, natural resins and the limits of commercial representation. Their perspectives support a careful distinction between a tradition as a living sacred practice and a visual element used to decorate a consumer carton. For Cycle Pure, the implication is that coastal Karnataka editions should not turn Daivaradhane or Bhoota Kola into ornamental motifs without community approval. Secular folk-art forms, landscapes, craft traditions or other community-approved references may offer a more respectful route to regional storytelling.

Temple Priests: Shivaprasada Aithal and Shankar Bhat



The temple-priest interviews emphasized dignified presentation, appropriate disposal and the quality of fragrance used in worship. These perspectives connect packaging design to the context in which the product is consumed. A pack that carries a religious or cultural promise must not distract from the actual performance of the incense. Fragrance quality remains central to the user's experience, and a mismatch between the visual promise and the product inside could weaken trust. The interviews also identified temple-adjacent retail and pilgrimage locations as possible channels for appropriate cultural editions, although retailer demand and channel feasibility require separate validation.



Academic Perspective: Prof. Sridhar, SDMIMD, Mysore

Prof. Sridhar's perspective linked product quality with the social and cultural story of the brand. The notes describe his preference for mild and pleasant fragrance and his attention to soot or carbon-related product performance. He also identified the company's social contribution, including women's employment and hand-

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rolling work, as a possible story that could be communicated through packaging. His support for a Mysore Dasara edition suggests that locally grounded design may make the category more interesting to younger consumers. Any individual price premium mentioned in this interview should be treated as a personal view, not as a representative estimate of consumer willingness to pay.

Domestic Consumers: Mumbai and Pune



The domestic metro consumer interviews distinguished routine monthly purchases from impulse purchases during festive shopping. Participants indicated that visually distinctive packaging could attract attention in an occasion-led context, but they also expected the quality of the pack to match the quality of the incense. This finding highlights the risk of expectation mismatch: premium-looking packaging can raise expectations, and disappointing fragrance or burn performance may reduce satisfaction. Packaging innovation should therefore be coordinated with product quality assurance.

US-Based Indian Consumer



The interview with a US-based Indian consumer introduced a diaspora perspective. The interview notes describe cultural nostalgia and an interest in sharing Indian traditions with younger family members. A sturdy and well-designed pack was considered more suitable for gifting than standard commodity-style packaging. This perspective provides a reason to test gift-oriented formats among diaspora consumers, but a single interview cannot establish the size of export demand or prove that cultural packaging will generate export growth.

Synthesis of the Interviews

The interviews deepen the survey findings in three ways. First, they show that cultural authenticity is not an abstract design preference; it is connected to the knowledge and lived experience of people who practice or understand the traditions. Second, they reinforce that product quality, especially fragrance, remains essential even when packaging is visually distinctive. Third, they identify different contexts: everyday household consumption, worship, festive shopping, gifting and diaspora gifting. These contexts may require different packaging choices and price points.

7. INTEGRATED DISCUSSION

Joint interpretation of evidence

The quantitative and qualitative materials converge on the possibility that cultural imagery adds recognition and interest, but the interviews sharply qualify what “appealing” entails. Survey-level receptivity does not imply approval of every motif. In coastal Karnataka and among the priest and practitioner interviewees, the sanctity of ritual imagery made appropriateness contingent on context and disposal. Price sensitivity likewise limits the transfer of festival-oriented preferences to everyday household packs. Finally, calls for sustainable

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materials and convenient use show that the cultural story must survive contact with the physical product. These findings should be understood as complementary interpretations, not as statistically demonstrated relationships. The combined evidence suggests that cultural packaging can work through several consumer mechanisms. Cultural recognition may create a feeling of familiarity, identity and belonging when the design reflects a tradition that consumers know or value. The survey's positive response to cultural storytelling and the regional focus-group discussions both support this interpretation. The effect, however, is likely to depend on the consumer's relationship with cultural reference.

Storytelling may also add perceived value by giving the pack meaning beyond its basic function. The survey respondents valued the opportunity to learn about regional traditions and to support local artists. Artist credit and a short, accurate explanation of the design could make this value more tangible. A QR code may extend the story, but only if the linked information is reliable and maintained.

The deity disposal dilemma reveals a different psychological process: anticipated discomfort or guilt associated with discarding a package that carries a sacred image. This concern emerged in the qualitative material and should be treated as a design constraint. It indicates why direct deity imagery may be unsuitable for ordinary disposable cartons even when consumers generally support cultural packaging.

The findings also show a balance between emotional value and price fairness. Survey responses suggest acceptance of a modest premium, while the focus groups distinguish daily-use purchases from occasion-led purchases. Consumers may be more willing to pay for a well-designed gift or collectible pack than for a routine pack that performs the same functional role. This supports testing differentiated formats instead of imposing a price increase across the portfolio.

Finally, the interviews reinforce the importance of consistency between the packaging promise and product performance. Cultural meaning can encourage trial, but fragrance quality, usability and availability continue to shape satisfaction. The overall implication is that cultural packaging should complement the core product proposition rather than replace it.

8. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: CULTURALLY RESPONSIBLE PACKAGING

Based on the combined evidence, this paper proposes the Cultural Representation–Responsibility–Response (CRR) framework. It is a research-informed proposition for future testing rather than a validated causal model.

Stage 1 — Representation inputs: locally specific art, truthful storytelling, credited artistic contribution and preservation of familiar brand cues.

Stage 2 — Responsibility filters: consultation with knowledgeable community representatives; avoidance or careful treatment of sacred images; respectful end-of-use handling; functional and environmental suitability; and accurate product claims.

Stage 3 — Consumer appraisal: perceived cultural fit, authenticity, visual attractiveness, price fairness, trust and anticipated disposal discomfort.

Stage 4 — Contextual conditions: region, familiarity with the tradition, routine-versus-occasion purchase, retail channel and expected fragrance performance.

Stage 5 — Potential outcomes to test: attention, stated preference, trial purchase, gifting suitability, complaint incidence, repeat purchase and actual willingness to pay.

Proposed logic: representation inputs filtered through cultural and material responsibility shape consumer appraisals; the strength and direction of those appraisals vary by context, and may subsequently influence purchase behaviour. The present study informs the constructs and boundaries of this framework but does not estimate the links between them.

9. THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical implications

The findings extend a brand-association perspective by highlighting post-consumption treatment of the pack as part of meaning-making. They also suggest that symbolic fit and ritual acceptability are distinct from visual attractiveness: a design may be aesthetically appealing yet inappropriate when used on a disposable carton. In addition, purchase occasion appears to condition the relationship between cultural meaning and perceived value. These are propositions suggested by the data, not effects established through causal testing.

Managerial implications

The research supports a cautious, evidence-led approach to packaging innovation. Cycle Pure should retain its familiar everyday packaging while testing a limited number of region-specific or occasion-led editions. The

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first designs should be selected based on the availability of credible cultural knowledge, artist collaboration and consumer feedback, rather than solely on the popularity of a festival.

- Create a cultural review process involving artists and knowledgeable representatives from the communities being represented.
- Use non-sacred regional art, craft, architecture, patterns and festival elements where these can communicate identity without trivializing worship practices.
- Credit artists clearly and consider fair design fees or royalty arrangements for commercial use of their work.
- Test modest price differences for regular packs and separate premium price points for gift or collectible formats.
- Evaluate sustainable materials, inks, package durability and practical features such as an integrated stick holder.
- Protect fragrance quality and product performance; packaging should not create expectations that the product cannot meet.
- Pilot designs in selected regions and channels before considering wider distribution.

A credible next step is a small, controlled pilot involving existing pack designs and two or three community-reviewed alternatives. Pretest culturally specific motifs with relevant practitioners, document artist permissions, verify recycling and disposal claims, and compare actual shelf choice, price acceptance, repeat purchase, complaints and retailer feedback. These metrics should be collected separately for routine and festive purchases.



Author's Creation of Pilot Design of cultural celebration-based packaging

A pilot should evaluate consumer acceptance, actual sell-through, repeat purchase, retailer feedback, price response, packaging damage, material performance and complaints relating to cultural sensitivity. These are proposed evaluation measures, not outcomes already established by this study.

10. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study has limitations. First, although the case narrative reports 160 survey respondents, item-level responses vary across the charts supplied. Second, the available qualitative material provides summarized findings but does not include complete transcripts, full participant counts for each focus group or detailed fieldwork dates. Third, the survey measures stated attitudes and intentions rather than actual purchase behaviour. Fourth, the findings are not based on a nationally representative sample and should not be generalized to all Cycle Pure consumers.

The financial and sales projections contained in the wider case proposal are scenario assumptions and are not reported as empirical outcomes in this research paper. A market pilot would be required to estimate production cost, price elasticity, sell-through, repeat purchase and profitability. Future research could compare responses across regions and age groups, test alternative designs with controlled concept stimuli, examine disposal behaviour, and track actual sales performance over time.

Further limitations include the absence of verified respondent-level data in the manuscript, the use of discussion summaries rather than transcript-coded excerpts, and uncertain comparability across regional groups. Because interviews included specifically knowledgeable cultural participants, their judgments provide valuable safeguards but should not be mistaken for the prevalence of these views in a wider population. Future

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studies should preregister alternative pack designs, capture actual choice and disposal behaviour, and examine whether cultural authenticity and sacred-image discomfort moderate purchase decisions.

11. CONCLUSION

The study finds that culturally inspired packaging has potential to create additional meaning and differentiation for Cycle Pure Agarbatti. The Google Forms responses indicate broad initial interest in cultural storytelling, attractive presentation, regional learning and limited-edition formats, together with some willingness to pay a modest premium. The qualitative evidence explains why this interest is conditional. Regional focus groups and depth interviews emphasize cultural authenticity, ritual sensitivity, affordability, sustainable materials, practical usability and fragrance quality.

The concern about sacred imagery on disposable cartons is a particularly important finding. It demonstrates that cultural packaging cannot be approached as purely visual exercise. The brand must understand the meaning of the symbols it uses and consider how the package will be treated after the product is consumed. The research therefore recommends retaining familiar everyday packs while testing carefully selected cultural editions developed with artists and community-informed review. Cultural packaging may strengthen brand associations when it is authentic and useful; it may damage trust when it is superficial, insensitive or disconnected from product quality. A phased pilot, supported by verified survey data and actual market testing, is the appropriate next step.

The principal lesson is that cultural storytelling in incense packaging is an exercise in judgment, not a search for more decorative surfaces. For a heritage brand, distinctiveness is most credible when the design is regionally grounded, the product works as promised and the final disposal of the carton does not contradict the respect its imagery seeks to evoke.

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APPENDICES: FIELD INSTRUMENTS AND SUPPORTING MATERIAL

Annexure A. Survey Questionnaire

1. Do you or your family members use agarbatti (incense sticks)
2. Age Group
3. Location
4. Which brand do you use most?
5. Why do you choose this brand? (Select top 3)
6. Monthly spending on agarbatti?
7. How appealing is this cultural packaging concept?
8. What do you like most? (Select top 3)
9. Main concerns? (Select all that apply)
10. Standard pack of Cycle Pure Agarbatti costs ₹50 (3 in 1). What would you pay for cultural packaging?
11. Which cultural traditions would you like to see? (Select up to 5)
12. Cultural packaging celebrating Indian traditions would make Cycle Pure Agarbatti
13. Would you be interested in limited edition festival packaging?
14. Open Feedback: Any suggestions or concerns about cultural packaging?

Annexure B. Focus-Group Discussion Questions

1. When you look at agarbatti packaging today, what is missing?
2. Would cultural artwork on packaging make you choose Cycle Pure over a competitor?
3. Which Indian festival or tradition would you most like to see on the pack?
4. How much more would you pay for a beautifully designed cultural edition? (vs ₹50 standard)
5. Would you gift this cultural packaging to family/friends during festivals?
6. Any concerns - authenticity, religious sensitivity, or quality perception?

Annexure C. Questions - Daivaradhane Practitioners – Chandrashekhar and Narayana

1. What is the cultural and spiritual significance of Daivaradhane in coastal Karnataka?

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2.What role do natural materials and resins play in traditional religious practices?
3.Do you think sacred traditions such as Daivaradhane and Bhoota Kola should be represented on commercial product packaging?
4.What concerns might arise when sacred symbols or ritual representations are used as decorative elements by consumer brands?
5.How can brands communicate regional cultural identity without compromising the sanctity of traditional practices?
6.Would secular folk-art forms, local landscapes or traditional craft elements be more appropriate for representing coastal Karnataka?
7.What role should local communities and cultural practitioners play when brands use regional cultural references?

Annexure D. Questions - Temple Priests – Shankar Bhat and Shivaprasada Aithal

1.What qualities are most important in agarbathis used during daily worship and religious ceremonies?
2.How important are fragrance quality and the use of appropriate ingredients in the worship experience?
3.What is your perspective on using religious imagery and cultural symbols on agarbathi packaging?
4.Are there any concerns regarding the disposal of packaging that carries religious images or symbols?
5.How can brands maintain a dignified presentation when incorporating religious or cultural references into their packaging?
6.Do you think attractive cultural packaging can influence consumers purchasing agarbathis near temples or pilgrimage locations?
7.What should brands prioritise to ensure that packaging innovation does not compromise the actual quality and purpose of the product?

Annexure E. Questions - Prof. Sridhar, SDMIMD, Mysore

1.How important is product quality in building consumer trust for an established agarbathi brand?
2.What are your views on mild and pleasant fragrance as a product-quality attribute?
3.How should manufacturers address concerns relating to soot or carbon residue during product use?
4. Do you think a company's social contributions, such as women's employment and hand-rolling work, can strengthen its brand identity?
5.How can such social contributions be communicated effectively through product packaging?
6.Would a regionally themed edition, such as a Mysore Dasara-inspired pack, make an established product more appealing to younger consumers?
7.How can brands balance traditional cultural identity with contemporary packaging design?
8.Do you think consumers would accept a price premium for packaging that offers cultural or social value? What factors would influence that acceptance?

Annexure F. Questions - Domestic Consumers – Mumbai and Pune

1.How frequently do you purchase agarbathis, and are these purchases mainly part of your regular household shopping or festive shopping?
2.What factors influence your choice of agarbathi products?
3.How much importance do you give to packaging when purchasing an agarbathi product?
4.Would distinctive cultural or festival-themed packaging attract your attention during festive shopping?
5.Do you think premium-looking packaging makes a product more attractive as a gift?
6.What expectations would you have regarding product quality when purchasing agarbathis in premium or culturally themed packaging?
7.Would you continue purchasing a product if its packaging looked attractive but its fragrance or burning performance did not meet your expectations?
8.What improvements would you like to see in the packaging of established agarbathi brands such as Cycle Pure?

Annexure G. Questions - US-Based Indian Consumer

1.How frequently do you purchase or use Indian agarbathi products while living in the United States?

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2. Does the use of agarbathis help you maintain a connection with Indian traditions and cultural practices?
3.Do you think culturally themed packaging could help introduce Indian traditions to younger family members?
4.Would packaging inspired by Indian art, festivals or regional traditions attract your interest?
5.Would you consider purchasing culturally themed agarbathi products as gifts for family members or friends?
6.How important are packaging quality, durability and visual presentation when purchasing products intended for gifting?
7.What features would make an Indian agarbathi product more appealing to consumers living abroad?

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