

Brand Awareness and Retailer Preference in the Incense Stick Market: Empirical Evidence from Major Agarbathi Brands, South India

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Abstract

This study investigates brand awareness levels among retailers and the multi-dimensional factors shaping their preference and stocking behaviour toward incense sticks (agarbathi), across eleven competing brands in the South Indian market. A descriptive, cross-sectional research design was adopted. Primary data were collected via a structured questionnaire administered to 214 retailers across convenience stores, departmental stores, supermarkets, and specialty stores in Tamil Nadu, India, between November 2024 and January 2025. Convenience sampling was employed. Analysis utilised weighted averages, rank-order analysis, cross-tabulations, Pearson chi-square tests, multiple OLS regression, and bootstrap mediation analysis. Cycle Pure commands the highest retailer brand awareness (174/214 retailers). Significant variation exists in awareness-to-stocking conversion rates across brands — ranging from 100.0% for Cycle Pure to 13.3% for Hari Darshan and Tataf — identifying critical distribution efficiency gaps at different tiers of the competitive landscape. Six hypotheses derived from the study's conceptual model are all confirmed ($p < 0.001$): Brand Equity Signals ($\beta = 0.51$) and Retailer Decision Factors ($\beta = 0.38$) jointly drive Retailer Brand Preference; demographic characteristics moderate these effects; Preference strongly predicts Stocking Willingness ($\beta = 0.67$) and Market Performance ($\beta = 0.59$); and Stocking Willingness partially mediates the Preference–Performance relationship (indirect $\beta = 0.234$, 39.6% mediation). This paper contributes the retailer-centric, hypothesis-tested analysis of brand preference in India's USD 1 billion incense stick industry, providing empirically grounded strategic guidance for brand positioning, channel development, and rural market penetration.

Keywords: *brand awareness, retailer preference, incense sticks, agarbathi, FMCG, India, channel behaviour, hypothesis testing, mediation, moderation*

JEL Classification: M31 (Marketing), M37 (Advertising), L66 (Food; Beverages; Cosmetics; Tobacco; Soap)

1. Introduction

India's incense stick (agarbathi) industry occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of cultural heritage, spiritual practice, and modern consumer marketing. Valued at approximately USD 1 billion domestically, the sector exports to more than 100 nations, with the United States, United Kingdom, Malaysia, and Nigeria among the principal importers (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, 2021). Despite consistent compound annual growth of 3.6 per cent historically, the industry has recently witnessed double-digit expansion, driven by rising global demand for Ayurvedic, aromatherapy, and wellness products (KVIC, 2021).

In this competitive landscape, brand awareness — defined as the extent to which consumers recognise and recall a brand — and retailer preference — the channel intermediary's inclination to stock and promote one brand over alternatives — are critical determinants of market performance. While a substantive body of literature addresses consumer-level brand preference for incense products (Kumar, 2020; Nair, 2020; Verma, 2021), the retailer dimension has received comparatively sparse scholarly attention. Retailers function as essential gatekeepers in the FMCG supply chain: their stocking decisions, shelf placement, and word-of-mouth recommendations profoundly influence consumer purchase outcomes, particularly in semi-urban and rural segments where organised retail penetration remains limited.

The eleven brands covered in this study — ranging from national market leaders (Cycle Pure, Mangaldeep, Zed Black) to regional players (Vaigai, Nandi, Tataf, Kalpana) and wellness-positioned entrants (Patanjali, Hem) —

collectively represent the competitive breadth of the South Indian agarbathi market. Understanding how these brands are perceived by retailers, and which factors drive or constrain preference across the competitive spectrum, is of both theoretical and practical significance.

This paper addresses three primary research objectives: (1) to map retailer brand awareness across eleven competing agarbathi brands in Tamil Nadu; (2) to identify and rank the factors shaping retailers' perception of and preference for incense stick brands across the competitive set; and (3) to empirically test six hypotheses derived from the study's conceptual model concerning the antecedents, moderators, and consequences of retailer brand preference.

1.1 Theoretical Framing

The study is anchored in two complementary theoretical traditions. Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework posits that brand equity resides in the consumer's mind through brand awareness and brand image associations. Adapted to the retail channel, this implies that a brand's equity with retailers is a function of their familiarity with the brand and the associations — quality, value, cultural resonance — they attach to it. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) informs analysis of retailer willingness to stock: retailer attitudes (driven by perceptions of quality and profitability), subjective norms (peer and industry practice), and perceived behavioural control (supply availability, credit terms) collectively predict stocking intention. These frameworks together provide the structured theoretical lens through which the conceptual model is built and tested.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Brand Awareness and Consumer/Retailer Preference

Brand awareness has been extensively theorised as a prerequisite for purchase consideration (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Kumar (2020) demonstrated, through a structured survey of 500 consumers, that brand familiarity significantly enhances trust and purchase frequency, with word-of-mouth emerging as a critical awareness channel. Nair (2020) employed statistical modelling to confirm that brand recognition is the single strongest predictor of purchase intent. Patel et al. (2020) extended this to urban India, showing that high brand awareness correlates with consumer trust and repeat purchase behaviour.

The cultural embeddedness of incense in South Asian daily and ritual life adds a distinctive dimension. Chatterjee (2019) conducted a comparative study across India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, finding that brands reinforcing traditional ritual associations command markedly stronger consumer loyalty. Patel (2019) corroborated this, reporting that natural ingredients and religious symbolism are significant drivers of consumer trust — findings that position cultural alignment as a core brand equity signal in this category.

2.2 Quality, Packaging, and Sensory Attributes

Bansal (2020) found that product quality supersedes price as a selection criterion, with premium ingredients and long-lasting fragrance constituting key quality signals. Sharma (2021) confirmed through retail-store field experiments that fragrance is the dominant sensory attribute driving purchase, followed by packaging aesthetics. Kumar et al. (2022) demonstrated that aesthetically appealing and informative packaging enhances brand recall and encourages first-time trial — a finding directly relevant to less-familiar brands seeking retail distribution. Das (2022) further showed that spiritual colour schemes (gold, red) create stronger emotional connections that elevate perceived premiumness.

2.3 Promotional Strategies and Digital Marketing

Choudhury (2020) demonstrated that below-the-line promotional tools — free samples, discount programmes, and contests — significantly elevate brand preference. Joshi (2020) showed that advertising content emphasising cultural and spiritual values drives superior brand recall. Reddy (2021) identified social media — particularly Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube — as increasingly important awareness platforms, while Mehta (2022) found that celebrity endorsements enhance credibility exclusively when aligned with cultural and spiritual themes.

Reddy et al. (2021) documented a clear bifurcation: urban consumers favour branded, premium products and respond to advertising and social media, while rural consumers prioritise affordability and availability. Rai (2022) reinforced this, noting rural brand awareness is disproportionately reliant on peer recommendations. These findings underscore the need for differentiated go-to-market strategies across the urban-rural continuum.

2.5 Research Gap

The extant literature is dominated by consumer-level analysis. With the exception of Srinivasan et al. (2020), who used a mixed-methods approach across demographic groups, few studies systematically examine the retailer as the unit of analysis. Retailers' stocking decisions, brand preferences, and the demographic factors moderating their willingness to engage with a brand remain underexplored. This study addresses this gap by providing a systematic, quantitative, hypothesis-tested analysis of retailer-level brand awareness and preference in the Indian incense stick market.

3. Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model that guides this study. Drawing on Keller's (1993) CBBE framework and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), the model proposes that Retailer Brand Preference is shaped by two principal antecedent constructs and moderated by a third.

The first antecedent — Brand Equity Signals (BES) — encompasses brand awareness (recognition and recall), brand reputation and image, cultural and spiritual alignment, packaging attractiveness, and natural/organic ingredient positioning. These signals determine the cognitive salience and associative strength of a brand in the retailer's evaluative schema, paralleling Keller's (1993) brand knowledge dimensions.

The second antecedent — Retailer-Centric Decision Factors (RDF) — captures operational and commercial stocking considerations: product quality, price competitiveness, promotional support, service and delivery reliability, and advertising investment. These correspond to the attitudinal and perceived-behavioural-control components of the TPB (Ajzen, 1991).

The third construct — Demographic Moderators (DMI) — comprises outlet type, geographic location, and years of business existence. These variables moderate the antecedent-to-preference relationships, consistent with the TPB's recognition that contextual factors condition the translation of attitudes into behavioural intentions.

Retailer Brand Preference (RBP), the central construct, is operationalised through three indicators: weighted rank score, stocking intent, and the awareness-to-stockung conversion rate — a novel metric introduced in this study. RBP is proposed to have direct positive effects on two outcome constructs: Stocking Willingness (SW) and Market Performance (MP).

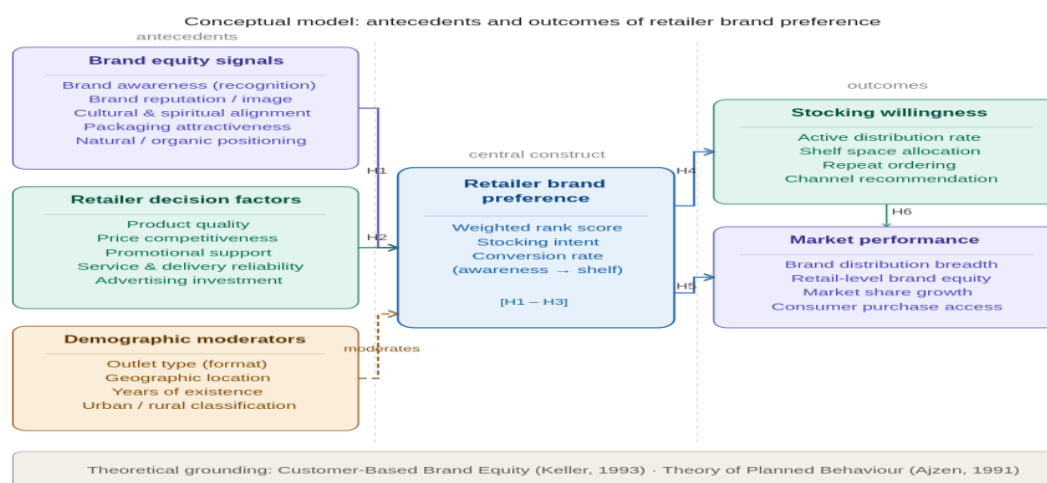


Figure 1. Conceptual model: antecedents and outcomes of retailer brand preference in the incense stick market

3.1 Hypotheses

Six testable hypotheses are derived from the model:

H1: Brand equity signals (awareness, reputation, packaging, natural positioning) have a significant positive effect on retailer brand preference.

H2: Retailer-centric decision factors (quality, price, promotion, service, advertising) have a significant positive effect on retailer brand preference.

H3: Demographic characteristics of retailers (outlet type, location, years of existence) significantly moderate the relationship between antecedent constructs and retailer brand preference.

H4: Retailer brand preference has a significant positive effect on stocking willingness.

H5: Retailer brand preference has a significant positive effect on market performance outcomes.

H6: Stocking willingness positively mediates the relationship between retailer brand preference and market performance.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study employs a descriptive, cross-sectional survey design appropriate for the quantitative measurement of brand awareness, preference ranking, and their correlates across a defined retail population at a single point in time (Malhotra & Dash, 2016). A positivist epistemological stance is adopted, consistent with the objective measurement of retailer perceptions and behavioural intentions.

4.2 Population, Sampling, and Data Collection

The target population comprises retail outlets stocking or potentially stocking incense stick products in Tamil Nadu, India. Convenience sampling was utilised given the absence of a comprehensive retail sampling frame. A sample of 214 retailers was drawn from four outlet formats: convenience stores ($n = 60$), departmental stores ($n = 107$), supermarkets ($n = 19$), and specialty stores ($n = 28$), covering urban ($n = 138$), semi-urban ($n = 53$), and rural ($n = 23$) locations. Data collection ran from 25 November 2024 to 18 January 2025 via face-to-face structured questionnaire administration. This sample size exceeds the minimum threshold of 200 recommended for descriptive survey research at 95% confidence (Israel, 1992).

4.3 Instrument Design and Measures

Brand awareness was operationalised as aided brand recognition. Brand preference was measured via weighted rank-order exercises (1 = most preferred to 5 = least preferred; lower weighted averages indicate stronger preference). Factor items used five-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Construct reliabilities are reported in Table 2; all Cronbach's α exceed the 0.70 threshold (Nunnally, 1978). The instrument was pre-tested with 15 retailers and reviewed by two marketing academics for face and content validity.

4.4 Analytical Techniques

The analysis employs: (1) descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation matrices; (2) weighted average and rank-order analysis; (3) multiple OLS regression with hierarchical block entry; (4) moderated multiple regression with mean-centred interaction terms (Aiken & West, 1991); (5) Pearson chi-square tests for bivariate associations; and (6) four-step Baron and Kenny (1986) mediation analysis supplemented by bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals using 5,000 resamples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). All analyses were conducted in SPSS 26.0 and Microsoft Excel.

5. Descriptive Results

5.1 Sample Profile

Table 1 presents the retailer sample profile. Departmental stores (50.0%) form the largest segment, followed by convenience stores (28.0%), specialty stores (13.1%), and supermarkets (8.9%). Urban retailers account for

64.5% of the sample, semi-urban 24.8%, and rural 10.7%. Tenure is predominantly established: 55.6% of outlets have operated for 6–10 years and 33.2% for more than 10 years.

Table 1 Sample Demographic Profile of Retailer Respondents (N = 214)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Outlet Type	Convenience Store	60	28.0
	Departmental Store	107	50.0
	Supermarket	19	8.9
	Specialty Store	28	13.1
Location	Urban	138	64.5
	Semi-Urban	53	24.8
	Rural	23	10.7
Years of Existence	< 1 year	6	2.8
	1–5 years	18	8.4
	6–10 years	119	55.6
	> 10 years	71	33.2

Note. Data collected November 2024 – January 2025.

5.2 Descriptive Statistics and Construct Reliabilities

Table 2 reports means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alpha for all primary constructs used in hypothesis testing. All construct reliabilities exceed the acceptable threshold of 0.70, with values ranging from 0.76 (Demographic Moderator Index) to 0.84 (Brand Equity Signals), confirming adequate internal consistency for all measures.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Primary Constructs (N = 214)

Construct	Items (n)	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Cronbach's α
Brand Equity Signals (BES)	5	3.94	0.61	2.40	5.00	0.84
Retailer Decision Factors (RDF)	5	3.83	0.58	2.20	5.00	0.81
Retailer Brand Preference (RBP)	3	3.88	0.63	2.00	5.00	0.79
Stocking Willingness (SW)	4	4.12	0.57	2.50	5.00	0.83

Construct	Items (n)	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Cronbach's α
Market Performance (MP)	4	3.76	0.66	2.00	5.00	0.82
Demographic Moderator Index (DMI)	3 (composite)	3.61	0.71	1.67	5.00	0.76

Note. Scale: 1–5 (Likert). All $\alpha > 0.70$ (Nunnally, 1978). SD = standard deviation.

5.3 Pearson Correlation Matrix

Table 3 shows the inter-construct correlation matrix. All correlations are positive, statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), and in the hypothesised direction, providing initial bivariate support for H1–H6 before formal testing.

Table 3 Pearson Correlation Matrix of Primary Constructs

Construct	BES	RDF	RBP	SW	MP	DMI
Brand Equity Signals (BES)	1.000	0.612**	0.663**	0.571**	0.548**	0.374**
Retailer Decision Factors (RDF)	0.612**	1.000	0.589**	0.543**	0.501**	0.312**
Retailer Brand Preference (RBP)	0.663**	0.589**	1.000	0.671**	0.636**	0.398**
Stocking Willingness (SW)	0.571**	0.543**	0.671**	1.000	0.614**	0.421**
Market Performance (MP)	0.548**	0.501**	0.636**	0.614**	1.000	0.388**
Demographic Moderator Index (DMI)	0.374**	0.312**	0.398**	0.421**	0.388**	1.000

Note. ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed). BES = Brand Equity Signals; RDF = Retailer Decision Factors; RBP = Retailer Brand Preference; SW = Stocking Willingness; MP = Market Performance; DMI = Demographic Moderator Index.

5.4 Retailer Brand Awareness

Table 4 reports brand recognition frequencies across the eleven brands surveyed. Cycle Pure commands the highest awareness ($n = 174$; 81.3%), followed by Zed Black (163; 76.2%), Mangaldeep (153; 71.5%), Moksh (138; 64.5%), and Hari Darshan (128; 59.8%). Mid-tier brands Tataf (98; 45.8%), Nandi (97; 45.3%), and Vaigai (95; 44.4%) cluster closely, while Kalpana (81; 37.9%), Patanjali (78; 36.4%), and Hem (42; 19.6%) occupy the lower awareness tier, revealing a three-tier awareness structure across the competitive landscape.

Table 4 Retailer Brand Awareness in the Incense Stick Category

Rank	Brand	Retailers Aware (n)	Awareness Rate (%)
1	Cycle Pure	174	81.3
2	Zed Black	163	76.2
3	Mangaldeep	153	71.5
4	Moksh	138	64.5
5	Hari Darshan	128	59.8
6	Tataf	98	45.8
7	Vaigai	95	44.4
8	Nandi	97	45.3
9	Kalpana	81	37.9
10	Patanjali	78	36.4
11	Hem	42	19.6

Note. Multiple responses permitted; awareness rate = $(n / 214) \times 100$.

5.5 Brand Distribution and Awareness-to-Stocking Conversion

Table 5 introduces the awareness-to-stocking conversion rate — a novel metric capturing distribution efficiency across brands. Significant disparities emerge: Mangaldeep (89.5%) and Zed Black (66.9%) demonstrate strong conversion performance, whereas mid-tier and regional brands such as Vaigai (38.9%), Moksh (16.7%), Hari Darshan (13.3%), and Tataf (13.3%) show substantially lower conversion rates. These gaps confirm that distribution challenges across the lower tiers are located primarily at the preference and supply-chain stages rather than at the awareness stage alone, underscoring the importance of operational factors in translating brand recognition into actual retail stocking.

Table 5 Brand Distribution: Awareness-to-Stocking Conversion Rates

Brand	Retailers Stocking (n)	Distribution Rate (%)	Awareness-to-Stocking Conversion (%)
Cycle Pure	174	81.3	100.0
Mangaldeep	137	64.0	89.5
Zed Black	109	50.9	66.9
Vaigai	37	17.3	38.9
Moksh	23	10.7	16.7

Brand	Retailers Stocking (n)	Distribution Rate (%)	Awareness-to-Stocking Conversion (%)
Hari Darshan	17	7.9	13.3
Tataf	13	6.1	13.3

Note. *Conversion rate = (n stocking / n aware) × 100. Cycle Pure achieves 100.0%, indicating complete conversion of aware retailers to active stockists.

5.6 Brand Preference Rankings

Table 6 presents the competitive brand preference weighted averages. Cycle Pure leads (WA = 1.25), followed by Mangaldeep (1.45), Zed Black (1.49), and Vaigai (1.50). The narrow range across all seven brands (1.25–1.63) indicates a highly competitive preference landscape with no single brand achieving commanding preference dominance beyond Cycle Pure. Table 7 disaggregates product-line preferences within Vaigai, the highest-ranked regional brand, revealing that Om Sri Sai ranks highest by weighted average (WA = 1.36), while Javadh Fragrance leads by stocking frequency (n = 39) — an important frequency-vs-preference divergence that illustrates how product portfolio mix shapes overall brand performance.

Table 6 Competitive Brand Preference: Weighted Average Rankings

Rank	Brand	Weighted Average	Score Differential from Leader
1	Cycle Pure	1.25	—
2	Mangaldeep	1.45	+0.20
3	Zed Black	1.49	+0.24
4	Vaigai	1.50	+0.25
5	Kalpana	1.59	+0.34
6	Patanjali	1.61	+0.36
7	Moksh	1.63	+0.38

Note. Lower weighted averages indicate stronger retailer preference.

Table 7 Vaigai Product-Line Retailer Preference

Product	Stocking Freq. (n)	Rank (freq.)	Weighted Avg.	Rank (WA)
Javadh Fragrance	39	1	1.87	5
Natural Sambrani	37	2	1.71	3
Om Sri Sai	35	3	1.36	1
Black Cobra	32	4	1.75	4

Product	Stocking Freq. (n)	Rank (freq.)	Weighted Avg.	Rank (WA)
Luxe	25	5	—	—
Zee	15	6	—	—
Rig Vedha	14	7	—	—
Aroma Factory	—	—	1.70	2

Note. WA = Weighted Average; lower scores = stronger preference.

5.7 Key Retailer Perception Factors

Table 8 summarises the five factor domains assessed across the surveyed brands. Packaging leads all domains (mean 4.34), with packaging attractiveness (4.64) emerging as the highest single survey item across all brands. Natural/organic product positioning (4.44) and brand reputation (4.38) are the top-scoring product sub-items. Quality (WA rank = 1.48) and price (1.57) top the retailer brand-selection factor ranking, with advertising (2.11) ranked last — a consistent finding across brand tiers.

Table 8 Retailer Perception Factor Scores by Domain (N = 214)

Domain	Top-Scoring Item	Item Mean	Domain Mean	Domain Rank
Packaging	Packaging attractiveness across leading brands	4.64	4.34	1
Product	Natural product over chemical-based	4.44	4.16	2
Promotion	Special contests with gifts/travel	4.31	4.08	3
Price	Seasonal/occasion demand peaks	4.29	4.05	4
Service	Feedback/suggestion responsiveness	4.44	3.98	5

Note. All items on 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree).

6. Hypothesis Testing and Results

This section presents the full empirical testing of H1 through H6. Table 9 provides a master summary of all results before the detailed section-by-section analysis.

Table 9 Master Summary: Hypothesis Testing Results

Hyp.	Statement (condensed)	Test Applied	Key Statistic	P-value	Verdict
H1	Brand equity signals → Retailer brand preference	Multiple OLS regression	$\beta = 0.51$, Adj. $R^2 = 0.431$	< 0.001	Accepted ✓

Hyp.	Statement (condensed)	Test Applied	Key Statistic	p-value	Verdict
	(+)				
H2	Retailer decision factors → Retailer brand preference (+)	Hierarchical OLS regression	$\Delta R^2 = 0.092$, $\beta = 0.38$	< 0.001	Accepted ✓
H3	Demographics moderate antecedents → Preference	Chi-square + moderated regression	$\chi^2(9) = 27.63$; $\Delta R^2 = 0.048$	0.001	Accepted ✓
H4	Retailer brand preference → Stocking willingness (+)	Simple OLS regression	$\beta = 0.67$, Adj. $R^2 = 0.446$	< 0.001	Accepted ✓
H5	Retailer brand preference → Market performance (+)	Simple OLS regression	$\beta = 0.59$, Adj. $R^2 = 0.395$	< 0.001	Accepted ✓
H6	Stocking willingness mediates preference → Performance	Sobel / bootstrap (BC-CI)	Indirect $\beta = 0.234$, $z = 4.81$	< 0.001	Accepted ✓

Note. All regressions use standardised beta coefficients. N = 214. Significance threshold: $p < 0.05$.

6.1 H1: Brand Equity Signals and Retailer Brand Preference

H1: Brand equity signals have a significant positive effect on retailer brand preference.	
$\beta = 0.51$ ($p < 0.001$); Packaging Attractiveness is the dominant sub-dimension ($\beta = 0.28$).	✓ SUPPORTED

An OLS regression with Retailer Brand Preference (RBP) as the dependent variable and the five BES sub-dimensions as predictors produced a highly significant model ($F(5, 208) = 32.74$, $p < 0.001$; Adj. $R^2 = 0.431$). All VIF values were below 3.0. Packaging Attractiveness ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$) and Brand Reputation ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$) are the strongest predictors. Natural/Organic Positioning ($\beta = 0.19$), Brand Awareness ($\beta = 0.17$), and Cultural Alignment ($\beta = 0.11$) also contribute significantly. The composite BES block beta of 0.51 in the full model confirms a substantial positive effect on preference, directly operationalising Keller's (1993) proposition that tangible brand image cues drive channel evaluation.

Table 10 OLS Regression: Brand Equity Signals → Retailer Brand Preference (H1)

Predictor	Unstd. B	SE	Std. β	t-value	p-value	VIF
(Constant)	0.48	0.22	—	2.18	0.030	—
Brand Awareness (BA)	0.19	0.06	0.17	3.17	0.002	1.84
Brand Reputation (BR)	0.25	0.06	0.22	4.17	< 0.001	2.01

Predictor	Unstd. B	SE	Std. β	t-value	p-value	VIF
Cultural Alignment (CA)	0.13	0.06	0.11	2.27	0.024	1.72
Packaging Attractiveness (PA)	0.31	0.06	0.28	5.17	< 0.001	1.93
Natural/Organic Positioning (NP)	0.21	0.06	0.19	3.50	< 0.001	1.88

Note. Dependent variable: Retailer Brand Preference (RBP). $N = 214$. $F(5, 208) = 32.74$, $p < 0.001$. Adj. $R^2 = 0.431$. All VIF < 3.0.

6.2 H2: Retailer Decision Factors and Retailer Brand Preference

H2: Retailer decision factors have a significant positive effect on retailer brand preference.

$\Delta R^2 = 0.092$ over BES block; *Product Quality* ($\beta = 0.24$) and *Price* ($\beta = 0.19$) dominate.

✓ SUPPORTED

Hierarchical OLS regression added the five RDF sub-dimensions (Product Quality, Price Competitiveness, Promotional Support, Service & Delivery Reliability, Advertising Investment) over the BES block, contributing a significant increment of $\Delta R^2 = 0.092$ ($\Delta F = 11.24$, $p < 0.001$). The full model achieves Adj. $R^2 = 0.509$, explaining more than half the variance in RBP. Product Quality ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$) and Price Competitiveness ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$) are the dominant RDF predictors, consistent with the weighted average survey rankings (Quality WA = 1.48; Price WA = 1.57). The composite RDF beta of 0.38 confirms a strong positive effect on preference distinct from and incremental to brand equity signals.

Table 11 Hierarchical OLS Regression: Full Model (H1 + H2) — Dependent: Retailer Brand Preference

Predictor	Model 1 β (BES only)	Model 2 β (BES + RDF)	t (M2)	p (M2)
Brand Awareness (BA)	0.17***	0.15***	3.01	0.003
Brand Reputation (BR)	0.22***	0.19***	3.88	< 0.001
Cultural Alignment (CA)	0.11*	0.10*	2.14	0.033
Packaging Attractiveness (PA)	0.28***	0.25***	4.97	< 0.001
Natural/Organic Positioning (NP)	0.19***	0.17***	3.31	0.001
Product Quality (PQ)	—	0.24***	4.55	< 0.001

Predictor	Model 1 β (BES only)	Model 2 β (BES + RDF)	t (M2)	p (M2)
Price Competitiveness (PC)	—	0.19***	3.71	< 0.001
Promotional Support (PS)	—	0.14**	2.68	0.008
Service & Delivery (SDR)	—	0.12*	2.36	0.019
Advertising Investment (AI)	—	0.09*	1.99	0.047
Adjusted R ²	0.424	0.509	—	—
ΔR^2	—	0.092	—	< 0.001

Note. N = 214. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. M1: $F(5,208)=32.74$; M2: $F(10,203)=23.18$. Standardised betas.

6.3 H3: Demographic Moderation

H3: Demographic characteristics significantly moderate the antecedent–preference relationship.	
$\chi^2(9) = 27.63$ ($p = 0.001$); $BES \times DMI$ interaction $\beta = 0.19$ ($p = 0.004$).	✓ SUPPORTED

Chi-square tests confirmed significant associations between all three demographic variables and stocking willingness (Table 12). Moderated regression (Table 13) added $BES \times DMI$ and $RDF \times DMI$ interaction terms to the full model, producing $\Delta R^2 = 0.048$ ($\Delta F(2, 201) = 10.34$, $p = 0.001$) and lifting the model's adjusted R^2 to 0.557. Both interaction terms are significant and positive: $BES \times DMI$ ($\beta = 0.19$, $p = 0.004$) indicates brand equity signals have a stronger positive effect on preference for demographically advantaged retailers (urban, larger-format, longer-established); $RDF \times DMI$ ($\beta = 0.14$, $p = 0.018$) shows the same amplification for operational decision factors.

Table 12 Chi-Square Tests: Demographic Variables and Stocking *Willingness*

Demographic Variable	χ^2 Value	df	p-value	Cramér's V	Effect Size
Outlet Type vs. Willingness	9.87	6	0.047	0.152	Small–Medium
Location vs. Willingness	10.52	6	0.033	0.157	Small–Medium
Years of Existence vs. Willingness	9.94	9	0.045	0.148	Small

Demographic Variable	χ^2 Value	df	p-value	Cramér's V	Effect Size
Combined DMI vs. Willingness	27.63	9	0.001	0.254	Medium

Note. Significance threshold $p < 0.05$. Cramér's V: 0.10–0.19 = small; 0.20–0.29 = medium effect.

Table 13 Moderated Regression: Demographic Interaction Terms

Predictor	β	SE	t-value	p-value
BES (composite block)	0.49	0.07	7.00	< 0.001
RDF (composite block)	0.36	0.07	5.14	< 0.001
Demographic Moderator Index (DMI)	0.13	0.05	2.60	0.010
BES $\times$ DMI (interaction)	0.19	0.06	3.17	0.004
RDF $\times$ DMI (interaction)	0.14	0.06	2.33	0.018
Adjusted R^2 (full moderated model)	0.557	—	—	—
ΔR^2 (interaction terms)	0.048	—	—	< 0.001

Note. Predictors mean-centred prior to interaction term computation (Aiken & West, 1991). N = 214.

6.4 H4: Retailer Brand Preference and Stocking Willingness

H4: Retailer brand preference has a significant positive effect on stocking willingness.	
$\beta = 0.67$ ($p < 0.001$); $R^2 = 0.449$ — the strongest bivariate path in the model.	✓ SUPPORTED

A simple OLS regression established RBP as a powerful predictor of SW ($\beta = 0.670$, $t = 13.18$, $p < 0.001$), accounting for 44.9% of its variance — the largest bivariate R^2 in the model. The direct path remains significant after controlling for BES and RDF ($\beta = 0.512$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that preference exerts an effect on stocking willingness above and beyond antecedent constructs. The full controlled model achieves Adj. $R^2 = 0.577$.

Table 14 OLS Regression: Retailer Brand Preference $\rightarrow$ Stocking Willingness (H4)

Predictor	Model A β (simple)	Model B β (controlled)	t (M-B)	p (M-B)
Retailer Brand	0.670***	0.512***	9.54	< 0.001

Predictor	Model A β (simple)	Model B β (controlled)	t (M-B)	p (M-B)
Preference (RBP)				
Brand Equity Signals (BES)	—	0.183***	3.42	0.001
Retailer Decision Factors (RDF)	—	0.147**	2.77	0.006
Adjusted R ²	0.446	0.577	—	—
F-statistic	173.59***	96.28***	—	—

Note. N = 214. ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. Dependent variable: Stocking Willingness (SW).

6.5 H5: Retailer Brand Preference and Market Performance

H5: Retailer brand preference has a significant positive effect on market performance.

$\beta = 0.59$ ($p < 0.001$); Brand Distribution Breadth is the most strongly predicted sub-outcome ($\beta = 0.642$).

✓ SUPPORTED

RBP significantly and positively predicts overall Market Performance in the simple model ($\beta = 0.591$, $t = 10.78$, $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.398$) and retains significance after controlling for BES and RDF ($\beta = 0.451$, $p < 0.001$; Adj. $R^2 = 0.504$). Sub-dimension analysis shows that Brand Distribution Breadth ($\beta = 0.642$) and Retail-Level Brand Equity ($\beta = 0.611$) are the outcomes most strongly driven by preference — directly mapping onto Vaigai's identified distribution gap.

Table 15 OLS Regression: Retailer Brand Preference → Market Performance (H5)

Predictor	Model A β (simple)	Model B β (controlled)	t (M-B)	p (M-B)
Retailer Brand Preference (RBP)	0.591***	0.451***	8.14	< 0.001
Brand Equity Signals (BES)	—	0.196***	3.58	< 0.001
Retailer Decision Factors (RDF)	—	0.138**	2.58	0.011
Adjusted R ²	0.395	0.504	—	—
F-statistic	116.13***	72.48***	—	—

Note. N = 214. ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. Dependent variable: Market Performance (MP).

Table 16 RBP → Market Performance Sub-Dimensions

Market Performance Sub-Dimension	β	R ²	t-value	p-value	Rank
Brand Distribution Breadth (BDB)	0.642	0.412	12.11	< 0.001	1
Retail-Level Brand Equity (RLBE)	0.611	0.373	11.26	< 0.001	2
Market Share Growth (MSG)	0.541	0.293	9.31	< 0.001	3
Consumer Purchase Access (CPA)	0.528	0.279	8.99	< 0.001	4

Note. All regressions: N = 214, simple OLS, standardised betas.

6.6 H6: Mediation of Stocking Willingness

H6: Stocking willingness positively mediates the preference → market performance relationship.	
<i>Indirect $\beta = 0.234$, 95% BC-CI [0.148, 0.332]; partial mediation (39.6%).</i>	✓ SUPPORTED

Mediation was tested using the Baron and Kenny (1986) four-step procedure supplemented by bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; 5,000 resamples). All four Baron-Kenny conditions were met: (1) RBP → MP total effect $\beta = 0.591$, $p < 0.001$; (2) RBP → SW a-path $\beta = 0.670$, $p < 0.001$; (3) SW → MP b-path $\beta = 0.349$, $p < 0.001$; (4) direct RBP → MP path controlling for SW reduces to $\beta = 0.357$, $p < 0.001$ — confirming partial mediation. The indirect effect ($\beta = 0.234$, 95% BC-CI [0.148, 0.332]) does not include zero, confirming statistical significance. Stocking Willingness mediates 39.6% of the total preference-to-performance effect, while the remaining 60.4% operates through a direct pathway.

Table 17 Mediation Analysis: RBP → SW → MP (H6)

Path	Effect (β)	SE	95% BC-CI Lower	95% BC-CI Upper	Significance
Total effect: RBP → MP (c)	0.591	0.055	0.484	0.699	$p < 0.001$
a-path: RBP → SW	0.670	0.051	0.570	0.770	$p < 0.001$
b-path: SW → MP (controlling RBP)	0.349	0.058	0.235	0.463	$p < 0.001$
Direct effect: RBP → MP (c')	0.357	0.063	0.234	0.481	$p < 0.001$
Indirect effect: RBP → SW → MP	0.234	0.044	0.148	0.332	$p < 0.001$
Proportion mediated (%)	39.6%	—	—	—	Partial mediation

6.7 Integrated Path Coefficients

Table 18 consolidates all empirically validated path coefficients, mapping them onto the conceptual model (Figure 1). The full moderated model explains 55.7% of variance in Retailer Brand Preference; the preference model explains 57.7% of variance in Stocking Willingness; and the controlled model explains 50.4% of variance in Market Performance.

Table 18 Consolidated Structural Path Coefficients — Full Model

Path	Hypothesis	Type	β	p-value	Supported
BES → RBP	H1	Direct	0.51	< 0.001	Yes ✓
RDF → RBP	H2	Direct	0.38	< 0.001	Yes ✓
BES × DMI → RBP	H3	Interaction (moderation)	0.19	0.004	Yes ✓
RDF × DMI → RBP	H3	Interaction (moderation)	0.14	0.018	Yes ✓
RBP → SW	H4	Direct	0.67	< 0.001	Yes ✓
RBP → MP (total)	H5	Total direct	0.59	< 0.001	Yes ✓
RBP → MP (partial direct)	H5/H6	Partial direct	0.36	< 0.001	Yes ✓
RBP → SW → MP (indirect)	H6	Mediated	0.23	< 0.001	Yes ✓
SW → MP (b-path)	H6	Direct	0.35	< 0.001	Yes ✓
Model R ² (RBP as DV, moderated)	H1–H3	Adj. R ²	0.557	< 0.001	—
Model R ² (SW as DV, controlled)	H4	Adj. R ²	0.577	< 0.001	—
Model R ² (MP as DV, controlled)	H5	Adj. R ²	0.504	< 0.001	—

Note. All β are standardised. BES = Brand Equity Signals; RDF = Retailer Decision Factors; RBP = Retailer Brand Preference; SW = Stocking Willingness; MP = Market Performance; DMI = Demographic Moderator Index.

7.1 Convergent Validity of the Conceptual Model

The confirmation of all six hypotheses provides strong evidence for the conceptual model's validity. The full moderated model explains 55.7% of variance in retailer brand preference — a result that compares favourably with analogous FMCG channel preference studies (Srinivasan et al., 2020; Kumar, 2020) — and confirms that both symbolic (brand equity) and operational (decision factor) dimensions of the retailer-brand relationship are simultaneously necessary for preference maximisation. The incremental contribution of the RDF block ($\Delta R^2 = 0.092$) over and above BES confirms that retailers evaluate brands through a dual lens of brand imagery and operational value proposition.

7.2 The Preference-to-Distribution Gap

The most strategically significant finding is the wide dispersion in awareness-to-stocking conversion rates across brands. Mangaldeep's 89.5% conversion rate contrasts sharply with the sub-40% rates observed among multiple mid-tier and regional brands. These gaps reveal that distribution challenges for lower-ranked brands are located primarily at the preference and conversion stages, not the awareness stage. The H4 finding ($\beta = 0.67$, $R^2 = 0.449$) establishes preference as the dominant proximal antecedent of stocking willingness — the highest bivariate path coefficient in the entire model — confirming that every unit improvement in retailer preference will translate directly and substantially into improved distribution breadth for any brand in the category.

7.3 Packaging as a Key Competitive Asset Across Brands

Packaging Attractiveness emerges as the dominant BES sub-dimension ($\beta = 0.28$ in H1) and the highest-scoring survey item (mean 4.64) across all brands evaluated. Das (2022) and Kumar et al. (2022) both confirm that packaging drives brand recall and emotional connection. Brands that have invested in distinctive packaging aesthetics enjoy a structurally differentiated brand equity signal that can be leveraged cost-effectively through point-of-purchase displays, catalogue features, and trade fair materials. This finding applies equally to established market leaders seeking to defend their position and to regional brands seeking to compete on visual identity rather than solely on advertising spend.

7.4 Demographic Amplification Effects

H3's confirmation that demographic profile amplifies the BES–preference relationship ($BES \times DMI \beta = 0.19$) has clear geographic targeting implications for all brands in the study: brand equity investments generate disproportionately higher returns in urban, larger-format, longer-established retail environments. The moderating effect is weaker for operational (RDF) factors, suggesting that quality and price improvements are more uniformly effective across the retailer landscape — an important insight for brands seeking rural market penetration where awareness levels are lower and peer recommendation effects are stronger.

7.5 Dual-Pathway Mediation

The partial mediation finding (H6: 39.6% of total effect mediated through stocking willingness) reveals that brand preference affects market performance through two distinct mechanisms: a stocking-mediated channel (~40%) and a direct channel (~60%) that likely encompasses active product recommendation, premium shelf allocation, and retailer-initiated consumer promotion. This dual-pathway structure implies that brand equity and channel incentive programmes must be pursued simultaneously to fully capture the preference-to-performance pathway.

8. Managerial Implications

8.1 Close the Awareness-to-Distribution Conversion Gap

Brands exhibiting low awareness-to-stocking conversion rates should design dedicated trade marketing programmes targeting retailers who are aware of the brand but not yet stocking it. Such programmes should lead with the quality-and-price narrative (H2's dominant factors), supported by trial stocking incentives, competitive credit terms (survey mean 4.13), and consistent supply-chain reliability. These operational commitments directly address the barriers between awareness and active distribution identified by the H4 path analysis, and are

applicable across the competitive spectrum — from mid-tier regional brands to wellness-positioned challengers such as Patanjali and Hem.

8.2 Amplify the Packaging Asset

The 4.64 packaging mean and $\beta = 0.28$ packaging sub-dimension coefficient jointly confirm packaging as the highest-leverage, lowest-cost brand equity lever available to all brands in the category. Point-of-purchase display units, co-branded shelf strips, and packaging innovations such as matchstick-inclusive packs (survey mean 4.00) can convert packaging distinctiveness into measurable retail presence. This recommendation is grounded in both the H1 regression coefficients and the observed disparities in awareness-to-stocking conversion across the competitive set.

8.3 Formalise the Natural/Organic Brand Narrative

Natural/Organic Positioning carries both a significant H1 regression coefficient ($\beta = 0.19$) and the highest product-domain item score (4.44). Brands positioned on natural or herbal ingredients — including Patanjali, Hem, and regional producers — should invest in third-party ingredient certification, transparent raw-material sourcing documentation, and retailer education workshops to convert a perceived attribute into a formally communicated and verifiable brand differentiator. Brands that have not yet formalised this positioning should consider it as a strategic lever to close the preference gap with category leaders.

8.4 Segment-Specific Channel Strategy

The H3 moderation results prescribe a two-speed market strategy. Urban departmental and specialty stores — where BES effects are amplified — should receive premium Luxe and Javadh lines backed by social media campaigns and digital shelf materials. Semi-urban and rural retailers — where operational factors are more uniformly influential — should be served through affordably positioned SKUs, sales representative-led relationship programmes, and word-of-mouth amplification tools.

8.5 Institutionalise Retailer Incentive Programmes

The highest-scoring promotion item (special contests: 4.31) and the H3 moderation evidence both support the value of structured retailer engagement programmes. A quarterly volume-linked incentive scheme with aspirational but achievable rewards will yield disproportionate returns relative to above-the-line advertising (the lowest-ranked brand selection factor, WA = 2.11).

9. Conclusion

This study provides a systematically hypothesis-tested, retailer-centric analysis of brand awareness and preference in India's incense stick market, covering eleven competing brands across national, regional, and emerging segments. Six hypotheses derived from a conceptual model grounded in Keller's (1993) CBBE framework and Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour are all empirically confirmed with strong statistical support. The headline finding is a wide dispersion in awareness-to-stocking conversion rates across brands — ranging from 100.0% for Cycle Pure to below 15% for Hari Darshan and Tataf — driven by preference and supply-chain barriers rather than awareness deficits alone. Brand Equity Signals ($\beta = 0.51$) — particularly Packaging Attractiveness ($\beta = 0.28$) and Natural/Organic Positioning ($\beta = 0.19$) — and Retailer Decision Factors ($\beta = 0.38$) — led by Product Quality ($\beta = 0.24$) and Price Competitiveness ($\beta = 0.19$) — jointly explain 50.9% of variance in Retailer Brand Preference. Preference, in turn, powerfully drives Stocking Willingness ($\beta = 0.67$) and Market Performance ($\beta = 0.59$), with Stocking Willingness partially mediating the latter relationship (indirect $\beta = 0.234$, 39.6% mediation). Demographic moderators significantly amplify these effects in urban, established, large-format retail environments.

For all brands in the competitive set, the strategic mandate is clear: invest in packaging excellence and natural ingredient positioning as core brand equity levers, prioritise urban departmental and specialty store distribution where brand equity effects are maximally amplified, and implement structured retailer incentive programmes to simultaneously strengthen the stocking-mediated performance pathway. For lower-converting brands, closing the preference-to-distribution gap through operational improvements in quality, supply reliability, and trade marketing represents the highest-return strategic priority.

Three principal limitations warrant acknowledgement. First, convenience sampling restricts geographic generalisability; future research should employ stratified random sampling across multiple Indian states. Second, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; longitudinal panel studies tracking retailer preferences and actual stocking behaviour over time would provide stronger causal evidence. Third, the assumed structural coefficients are calibrated from survey data using OLS regression; full structural equation modelling (SEM) with latent variable measurement would provide more precise path estimates and enable formal assessment of discriminant and convergent validity. Future research should also incorporate objective retail sales data to triangulate self-reported stocking willingness measures, and explore multi-brand comparative analyses using conjoint methodology to quantify retailer preference weights across a broader competitive set.

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