

FRAGRANCE AND PERSONAL CARE

How home fragrances became a post-COVID-19 craze in China

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The COVID-19 crisis, a greater awareness of perfume culture, and growing patriotism have all played a critical role in China's hot home fragrance market. Image credit: Le Labo

By [Jiaqi Luo](#)

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Perhaps nothing is more symbolic of how consumerism has changed in 2020 than the rise of home fragrances.

As a pandemic sweeps across continents and continues to keep people at home, ambiance-elevating and mind-soothing scents have become a global consumer priority. And lately, brands such as Byredo, [Le Labo](#) and Loewe have released ranges of home scented candles and diffusers.

In China, where contagion levels have been low for months, the narrative is slightly different.

While the [COVID-19](#) crisis ignited consumer passion for home improvement, a growing awareness of perfume culture along with a heightened sense of patriotism has played a critical role in China's current home fragrance market.

Inflowing streams of capital from big fragrance houses are a testament to the industry's faith in China.

In 2018, CITIC Capital, a major state-owned investment company, acquired the New Zealand natural fragrance group Trilogy International Limited for its strong China potential. And, today, despite an uncertain economic outlook, perfume labels such as Le Labo, [Diptyque](#) and Loewe have continued to expand their store presences across the country.

Yet, as global businesses keep pouring capital into China's home fragrance market, local players have also emerged as social media stars, further intensifying the shopping hype.

DTC brands such as To Summer and The Beast, which feature a [Goop](#)-inspired portfolio that includes aromatherapy, meditation and healing, have also become an influencer-must category for [Chinese Gen Zers](#).

Year of critical mass

Home fragrances reached critical mass in 2020 after years of steadily gaining momentum among young, novelty-driven youth in China.

Tianle Feng, CEO of Double Horse Fragrances & Flavors and a Chinese perfume **KOL**, told *Jing Daily* that the market has already seen soaring sales before the pandemic hit.

"The home scent category was growing at around 35 percent for the past 3-5 years," Mr. Feng said. "Due to China's skyrocketing property price in recent years, young consumers have been shifting their spending from bigger purchases to smaller ones that could concretely improve their life quality, such as candles. People have become more demanding about sensory experiences in their homes."

In much the same way lipstick sales rose in popularity during the Great Depression, scent sticks have become mood-lifting treats for today's **millennial** generation, which increasingly faces more pressure to "live life to the fullest" and spend rather than save.

The pandemic has further pushed this niche market into the public eye. Suddenly confronted with more stay-home time, heightened anxiety, and deteriorating mental health the defining features of the post-COVID-19 life consumers saw home fragrance as an easy solution for escaping reality.

"COVID-19 eliminated the ability to go out for much of the beginning of the year, which accelerated the growth of the "Otaku" [stay-home] economy," said Tracy Zhang, director of fashion and beauty at the luxury intelligence firm Gusto Luxe.

"Shopping for home fragrances became more mindful, as consumers are looking to create a comfortable and romantic atmosphere," she said.

Also, as these consumers shift their spending toward local brands, their knowledge of scents has become more varied and sophisticated.

"For example, in June, our research on **Shanghai** luxury consumers indicates that consumers will select different scents for each room of the house, with each serving a specific purpose," Ms. Zhang said.

Cultural confidence is key

Heightened patriotism in China is also shaping the current scentscape.

As younger generations are increasingly taking pride in their heritage, scents with a strong association with China are becoming hit sellers.

"Home fragrances that have a local imprint are the new trend," Double Horse Fragrances & Flavors' Mr. Feng said.

"As a perfume making company, we have worked on many projects meant to evoke people's childhood memories. We did a money-themed fragrance that smells like the Renminbi (the Chinese yuan) with **WeChat Pay** and a perfume with the Palace Museum that incorporates elements of Chinese poetry," he said.

In other words, today's Chinese youngsters are more inspired by the smells of Beijing than those of exotic Western locales such as Paris or Capri.



Double Horse Fragrances & Flavors collaborated with WeChat Pay on a money-themed fragrance that smells such as the Chinese yuan. Image credit: @DHFF

The domestic fragrance brand To Summer now sells crystal candles named after traditional Chinese poetries and plants, which perfectly taps into the current demand for scents with "cultural confidence."

Since its launch in 2019, the brand quickly became a social media sensation, soon opening a flashy concept store in

Lane Crawford a Beijing luxury landmark. Its star product a scented oil that is dropped onto natural crystal stones and comes in a glass jar is perfect for social media posts with a self-care message.

The traditional Chinese elements behind every candle, be it ancient poetry or a Chinese plant, justifies that every purchase is a form of cultural patronage for consumers.



To Summer, a Chinese home fragrance brand born in 2019, has become a social media sensation and sales hit. Image credit: @ToSummer Weibo

But cultural relevance alone does not guarantee success.

Momo Xie, the founder of the Chinese perfume brand Aromag, told *Jing Daily* that a balanced mix is crucial for long-term brand health.

"To be a successful home fragrance brand, you need a good visual identity, ingredients quality, and production expertise," she said. "All three pillars are indispensable. Brands like To Summer are at the height of their market hype right now because they have a lot of investment capital. But it is hard to say if they can gain a solid reputation when that hype wanes."

While the luxury world grapples with the repercussions of a global pandemic, China's craze for home fragrance remains a unique opportunity. But savvy brands must pivot quickly to thrive.

In today's China, that means making scents that are not only anxiety-relieving, but also culturally correct.

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