

Cultural Meanings of Ghanaian Classic Wax Prints and Consumers' Preference in Ghana

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper was to assess the cultural meanings of Ghanaian classic wax prints and consumers' preferences in Ghana. The study employed a case study research design to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The target population for the study was retailers and consumers of wax prints in the Makola market in Accra, Ghana. The sampling technique used in this study was a Stratified sampling technique. The sample size of the study was 122. The data collection instruments used were a questionnaire and an interview guide. The study found that colour was the most important factor consumers considered when purchasing Ghanaian classic wax prints. The study also found that most consumers were ignorant about the cultural meaning of the Ghanaian classic wax prints they purchased. Since colour is the main influencer of the purchase of Ghanaian classic wax prints, the study recommended that the research section of textile companies should conduct research into colour trends so that the companies can produce classic wax prints to meet the demands of the consumers. The study also recommended that Ghanaian classic wax print producers should educate the general public on the cultural meanings of the symbols, motifs, colours, and patterns in Ghanaian classic wax prints.

Keywords: Classic wax print, culture, and textiles.

1. Introduction

Textiles and clothing form an integral part of the Ghanaian culture. Ghana is made up of different ethnic groups with different cultures, beliefs, and societal norms. Classic wax-printed textiles have since been used by the different tribes for aesthetic, spiritual, or religious purposes, illustrating the characteristics of an individual in relation to their society over the centuries. These Ghanaian prints come in different forms, such as wax, java, fancy prints, etc. [1].

Textile design involves a complete vision of the development of new design aspects for novelty in fabric surface, textile products, and various other textile materials [2]. It includes designing fabrics used in clothing, household textiles, decorative textiles, and others. It involves design intervention along with the development of the final product within the technical specification and the right commercial value.

In short, it has to do with the production process of the textile from a raw material into a finished product, such as wax prints, which is the fabric. Wax prints did not originate in Ghana, but Ghanaians have adopted them as their own. The dyed cotton cloth was first manufactured in Holland around the turn of the 19th century after the Dutch learned the art of wax resist from Javanese and Indonesian traders. Realising they had a large market in West Africa, Dutch manufacturers, such as Vlisco, designed special prints to meet the aesthetic demands of the African [3].

Textile design has had a big impact on the social, cultural, and economic health of people, communities, and countries [4]. To a large extent, culture and the greatness of ethnicity lie in the ability to keep alive the legacy of the symbols and the values of cultures [5]. The patterns, symbols, motifs, and colours in the wax prints reflect traditional Ghanaian proverbs, comment on areas such as politics, history, and represent local emblems and products [6].

African prints display a rich variety of dynamic patterns that are eye-catching and attractive. Africa has a rich textile history that is usually pregnant with cultural meanings and mostly associated with some of the symbols used. Some symbols have deeper significance than others, incorporating tribal references and defining age, status, and social rank. Designs may also commemorate special occasions such as marriage, birth, and death [7].

According to Wagoner [8], the word “symbol” comes from a Greek word meaning “to throw together.” It points to the fact that human beings have developed a way of transforming simple sensory material into a medium to represent something else. The medium becomes essentially human culture, which evolves.

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A symbol serves as an outward sign of something spiritual or material. For example, the ‘cross’ used by some Christians represents Christ’s crucifixion, and the ‘circle’, in the medieval era, represented eternity. Therefore, symbolism is the representation of ideas by the use of signs, literary and artistic invention to express ideas, emotions, and abstractions. A symbol, therefore, generally stands for something visible: an object, a mark, a sign, or an abstract idea.

Symbolism is a sign that is intricately woven or printed in such a way that expresses people’s perception of reality [9] and communicates an idea, emotion, and meanings to a phenomenon that is deeper than the sign in itself. It could be in the form of a sign, totem, symbol, colour, tattoo, or pattern [10]. Symbolism helps in indoctrinating oral tradition. The use of symbolism in oral tradition plays an important and integral role in transmitting culture from one generation to the next. It helps individuals, especially the younger ones, to understand and appreciate culture better. It serves as a vehicle for conveying ideas and concepts.

The adinkra-stamped cloths of Ghana are highly symbolic ceremonial textiles. The Asante people of Ghana use a language of motifs called adinkra in hand-printed cloth. The ram’s horn motif “*dweniniaben*” is associated with strength, and “*Aya*”, the fern, is a symbol of defiance. If a person wears this motif, it means that the person is not afraid.

The philosophy of the cultural significance of Ghanaian classic designed wax prints is not just an academic subject in Ghana. It is woven into the fabric of the culture, through Ghanaian values, proverbs, music, symbols, folktales, religion, politics, and other social and cultural practices.

Patterns, symbols, motifs, and colours used in printing the classic Ghanaian wax prints communicate the values, culture, and pride of the people who wear them and those they represent. The oriental people, notably our great grandparents and grandparents, used it as a form of dressing the body, as well as a medium of communication because they understood the messages each pattern, symbol, motif, or colour transmitted. The current generation of Ghanaians is wearing classic Ghanaian wax prints in more varied forms (shoes, purses, bags, bikinis, etc.) than has any other generation. However, even a casual enquiry would reveal a general unawareness of the names and meanings, and, therefore, the cultural significance of the patterns, symbols, motifs, and colours in the textiles that adorn many. The design elements in classic wax print textiles usually have some Ghanaian proverbial undertone. Yet, it appears that many are either unaware or have forgotten that the patterns, symbols, motifs, and colors are encoded and communicate messages. This apparent cultural deficiency needs to be examined in the light of current national and perhaps regional demand for the classic wax print textiles.

However, according to Orhin, cited by Howard et al [11], the era of cloth communication is fast fading. It is fast being replaced by a different culture and perspective, introducing new patterns, motifs, symbols, and colours in wax-printed cloths and cheaper screen and roller-printed imitations from China and other African countries. In the process, they have rather become intricately intertwined with the social and political life of Ghanaians, despite their external origin. The implication is that the aspect of cultural identity of Ghanaians displayed through symbols, patterns, and motifs is being lost because the contemporary textile prints do not possess the communicative value that classic prints do. There is a need, therefore, to assess the cultural meanings of Ghanaian classic wax prints and consumers’ preferences in Ghana.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To establish the factors that influence consumer preference for and purchase of Ghanaian classic design textiles.
2. To determine the occasions that influence the purchase of Ghanaian classic wax prints.
3. To determine the classic wax print brand and design that consumers preferred.
4. To determine consumers’ level of awareness of the cultural meanings of Ghanaian classic wax prints.

3. Research Questions

1. What are the factors that influence consumer preference for and purchase of Ghanaian classic design textiles?
2. What are the occasions that influence the purchase of Ghanaian classic wax prints?
3. What brand and design of classic wax print did consumers prefer?

Are the consumers aware of the cultural meanings of Ghanaian classic wax prints?

4. Materials and Methods

This study employed a case study design to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from the participants. A case study is a methodological research method used to generate an in-depth understanding of a modern issue or phenomenon in a

bounded system [12]. Case study research requires an in-depth enquiry conducted into an individual, group, or event to gain an understanding of a real-life phenomenon. A case study is often used in the social sciences and humanities to explore intricate matters and to provide insights into specific situations. The purpose of case study research is to attain a comprehensive understanding of the case issue and to create new philosophies or insights. A case study is one of the most extensively used and accepted means of qualitative research methods in the social sciences [13].

The case study approach is mainly beneficial to employ when there is a need to gain a detailed appreciation of a subject, incident, or phenomenon of interest, in its natural, real-life context [14]. Case studies provide academics with an opportunity for a better depth of understanding of a matter [15]. The case study design is preferred as a research strategy when “how,” “why,” and “what” questions are of interest to the researcher [16]. A case study can be defined as an

intensive study about a person, a group of people, or a unit, which is aimed at generalising over several units [17]. A case study has also been described as an intensive, systematic investigation of a single individual, group, community, or some other unit in which the researcher examines in-depth data relating to several variables. Case studies are typically defined by the intent of the case analysis. There are three types of case studies: (single) instrumental case study, collective (multiple) case study, and intrinsic case study. In a single case study, the researcher focuses on an issue or concern and then selects one bounded case to illustrate the issue [18]. If the researcher only wants to study one single thing (such as a single person from a specific group) or a single group (for example, a specific group of people within a bounded system), a single case study is the best choice.

In a multiple case study, the researcher selects multiple cases to illustrate a one issue or concern. The goal of a multiple case study is to compare cases to identify common patterns, relationships, or similarities. In a multiple case study, the cases may be similar in nature, or they may be diverse, but the researcher is looking for patterns or relationships across cases. This method is often used when the phenomenon being studied is rare or difficult to observe. In an intrinsic case study, the focus is on the case itself because the case presents a unique situation, thus resembling the focus of narrative research but maintaining the analytic procedures of a case study. In an intrinsic case study, the case is the primary focus of the research, and the goal is to gain an in-depth understanding of the case itself. Intrinsic case studies are often used in the social sciences and humanities, particularly when the case being studied is unique or rare, or when the researcher wants to gain a deeper understanding of a specific issue or situation.

The target population for this study was textile retailers of Ghanaian classic designed wax print fabrics at the Makola market in and consumers of Ghanaian classic designed wax prints who were present at the market at the time of the study were included in the target population for this study. A stratified sampling technique was used in this study. Stratified sampling was employed in this study because two specific subgroups or strata: (1) textile wax prints retailers and (2) consumers of textile wax prints, were targeted. Data was collected from these participants who were easily accessible or just happened to be available at the time of the study and were willing to participate. The sample size for this study was 122 (32 retailers & 90 consumers).

The instruments used for data collection were a closed-ended questionnaire and an interview guide. A questionnaire was used to collect data from the consumers. The interview guide was used to collect data from the textile wax print retailers, and some of the consumers of textile wax prints who filled out the questionnaire

Data collection for the study followed a process of an initial visit to the market queen to familiarise with some of the members of the various textile retailers at the market. The meeting with the market queen and some members of the retailers provided the researchers with an opportunity to explain the rationale of the study and to seek their consent to conduct the research in the market. It also allowed the researchers to agree on the day(s) and time for the administration of the research instruments. On the actual days of the data collection in the market, the researchers explained the rationale of the study to each retailer and consumer who agreed to be involved in the study.

The textile wax print retailers were interviewed in the market during selling hours. This is to enable the researchers to get access to the consumers who came to purchase textiles, wax prints, to fill the questionnaire, since there is no data about the whereabouts of the consumers of the textiles and wax prints. The researchers collected the mobile phone numbers of some of the consumers who filled out the questionnaire in the market. An interview was later conducted with those consumers whose mobile phone numbers were collected via a phone conversation. The quantitative data collected were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS Version 23) to generate descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics generated were percentages for the variables. The qualitative data were analysed manually under the various themes.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Results

Objective one: Factors that influence consumer preference and purchase of Ghanaian classic design textiles.

This objective was to find out from the consumers about the factors that influence their preference and purchase of Ghanaian classic design textile prints. Figure 1 shows the results of the factors that influence consumer preference and purchase of Ghanaian classic wax prints.

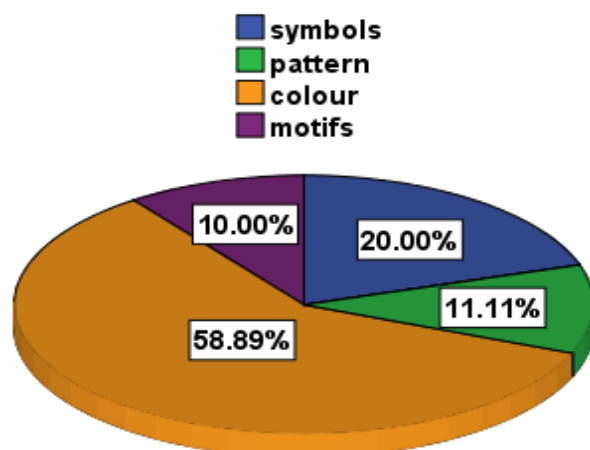


Fig. 1: Factors that influence consumer preference and purchase of Ghanaian classic design textiles

The results on the factors that influence consumer preference and purchase of Ghanaian classic wax prints indicated that (58.89%) of Ghanaian wax print consumers were influenced by the colour of the fabrics, (16.67%) were influenced by the symbol, (14.44%) were influenced by the pattern, while (10.00%) were influenced by the motifs of the fabrics.

Objective two: To determine the occasions that influence the purchase of classic wax prints

The purpose of this objective was to find out from consumers about the occasion most likely to influence their purchase of classic wax print. Figure 2 displays the results of the occasions that influence the purchase of classic wax print.

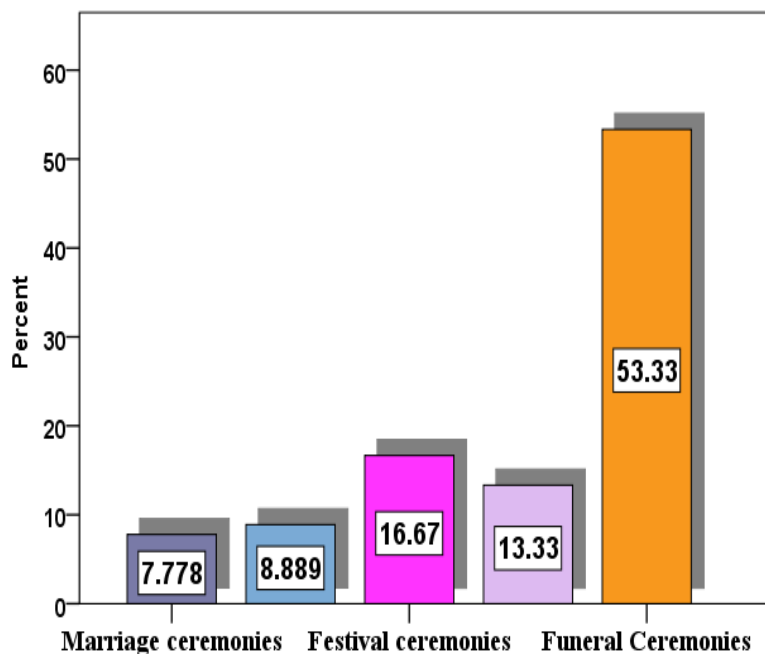


Fig. 2: Occasions that influence the purchase of classic wax prints

In Figure 2, the majority of consumers, 48 (53.33%), said they purchased classic wax prints for funeral ceremonies rather than any other ceremonies, while 15 (16.67%) indicated that they purchased classic wax prints for festival ceremonies. The results also show that 12 (13.33%) of consumers purchased classic wax prints for religious ceremonies, whilst 8 (8.889%) said naming ceremonies influence their purchase of the classic wax prints. Finally, 7 (7.778%) of the consumers named marriage ceremonies as the occasion that influenced their purchase of classic wax prints.

Objective three: To determine the classic wax print brand and design that consumers preferred.

This objective was to find out the classic wax print brand and design that consumers preferred. Figure 3 shows the results of the classic wax print brand and the design that consumers preferred.

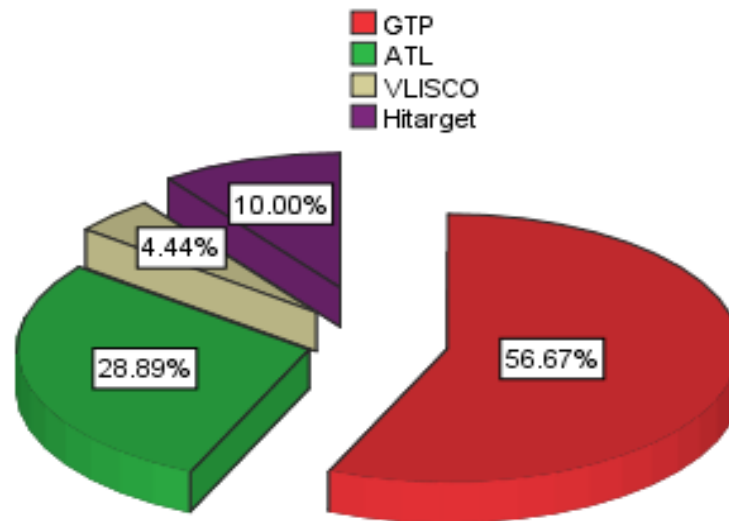


Fig. 3: Classic wax print brand consumers preferred

In Figure 3, the majority of classic wax print consumers, 51 (56.67%), said they preferred the Ghana Textiles Printing (GTP) brand, while 26 (28.89%) said they preferred purchasing Akosombo Textiles Limited (ATL) for their occasions. Also, 9 (10.00%) of consumers preferred buying Hitarget classic wax print for their occasions, and the lowest number, 4 (4.44%), said they preferred purchasing VLISCO brand for their occasions. About the design consumers preferred, Figure 4 indicates the results.

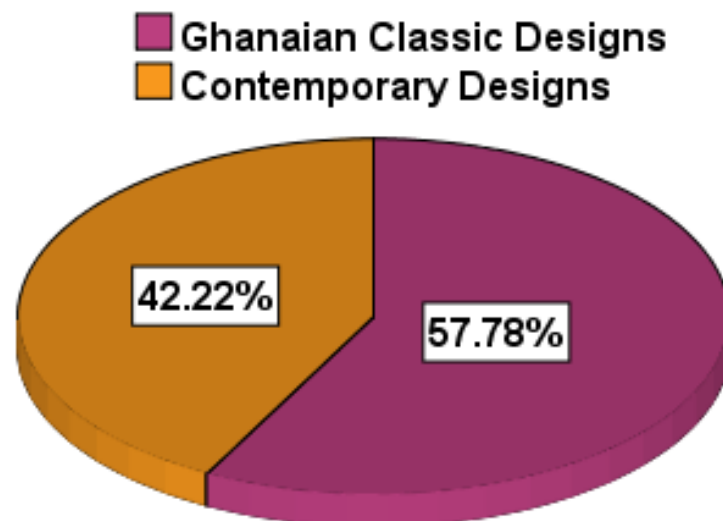


Fig. 4: Classic wax print design consumers preferred

The results in Figure 4 indicate that the majority of the consumers (54.76%) preferred Ghanaian wax classic print designs over contemporary designs, while a smaller number of consumers (45.24%) preferred contemporary designs. This statistic suggests that classical print designs are more popular among textile consumers in Ghana than contemporary designs.

Objective four: Consumers' level of awareness of the cultural meanings of Ghanaian classic wax prints.

This objective was to find out about the consumers' level of awareness of the cultural meanings associated with Ghanaian classic wax prints. Figure 5 illustrates the results of consumers' level of awareness of the cultural meanings of Ghanaian classic wax prints.

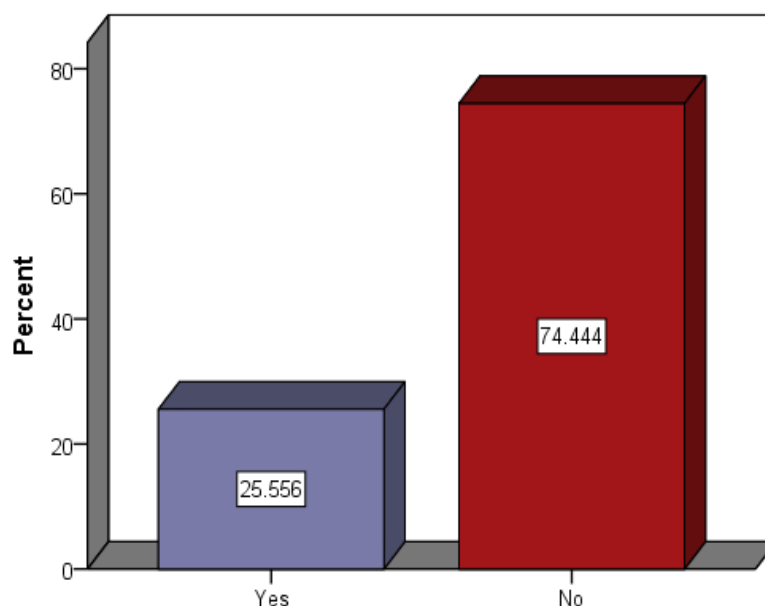


Fig. 5: Consumers' awareness of the cultural meanings of Ghanaian classic wax prints

The results in Figure 5 indicate that the majority of the consumers (74.44%) were not aware of the fact that classic textile designs had meanings, whilst a lower number (25.56%) were aware that classic textile designs had meanings.

5.2 Discussion

Research question one: What are the factors that influence consumer preference for and purchase of Ghanaian classic design textiles?

The study found that most classic wax print consumers in Ghana were influenced by the symbols, patterns, colours, and motifs in a print when they made a purchase. The results showed that the majority of the classic wax print consumers were influenced by the colour of the fabric when purchasing. The study also found that the symbol was the second factor consumers consider when purchasing classic wax prints. It was found that pattern was the next factor consumers consider after colour and symbol. Motif was the least factor that Ghanaian classic wax print consumers consider when purchasing.

Research question two: What are the occasions that influence the purchase of Ghanaian classic wax prints?

The study found that the majority of consumers purchased classic wax prints for funeral ceremonies rather than for any other ceremonies. It was also found that the second highest occasion that influenced the purchase of Ghanaian classic wax print was a festival, followed by a religious ceremony. The least common occasion for the consumers' purchase of classic wax prints was a marriage ceremony.

Research question three: What brand and design of classic wax prints did consumers prefer?

The study found that GTP as a brand was the most preferred among consumers of classic textile prints in Ghana, followed by ATL due to their durability. The study also found that Hitarget was the third classic wax print preferred while VLISCO was the least preferred brand when consumers were selecting a brand for occasions. The study found that a majority of textile consumers in Ghana preferred classic print designs over contemporary designs. This suggests that classic wax print designs are more popular among textile consumers in Ghana than contemporary designs.

Research question four: Are the consumers aware of the cultural meaning of Ghanaian classic wax prints?

The study found that most of the consumers were ignorant of the fact that Ghanaian classic wax prints had cultural meaning associated with Ghanaian classic wax prints.

6. Conclusions

Classic wax design textiles are still popular among consumers, particularly among the older generation. In fact, classic wax prints generally enjoyed higher favour among consumers than contemporary prints do. However, consumers buy classic design textiles for funerals than for other occasions and events.

This is likely because they would rather purchase contemporary prints, which are more fanciful, or other cloths such as Kente for more joyous occasions, such as marriage ceremonies. This study has also shown that colour is a more important factor in the choice of classic print textiles than are symbols, patterns, and motifs. The researchers attribute this preference or choice behaviour to the low knowledge among both retailers and consumers of the names and meanings or significance of the designs in classic print textiles. The researchers posit that if greater awareness were created of the communicative value of the designs of classic print textiles, it could stimulate the cultural sensitivities of Ghanaians, thereby promoting and sustaining the cultural significance of these textiles.

7. Recommendations

1. Since colour is the main influencer of the purchase of Ghanaian classic wax prints, the research section of textile companies should research colour trends so that the companies can produce classic wax prints to meet the demands of the consumers.
2. The marketing section of Textile companies should design adverts that promote funeral colours and patterns of textile fabrics, since most of the African wax prints are purchased and used for funerals.
3. They also recommended that GTP & ATL should continue to invest in the creation, innovation, and promotion of their classic wax prints since their brands are the most preferred in Ghana.
4. The study recommended that Ghanaian classic wax print producers should educate the general public on the cultural meanings of the symbols, motifs, colours, and patterns in Ghanaian classic wax prints.

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