
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Packaging Culture: Ghanaian Design Practitioners' Perspectives on Ethnopackaging, Authenticity, Trust and Brand Differentiation

Joseph Adjaho¹ ✉, Mary Frimpong², Adam Rahman³ and Ralph Nyadu-Addo⁴

^{1,2,3} *Department of Communication Design, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana.*

⁴ *Department of Publishing Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana.*

Corresponding Author: Joseph Adjaho, **E-mail:** joechibae@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Local manufacturers in Ghana use packaging to compete for attention and communicate product value. Cultural motifs, indigenous colour systems and local visual narratives may offer a distinctive design resource, but the way practitioners understand and apply these elements has received limited empirical attention. This study examines how Ghanaian packaging and branding practitioners understand the role of culturally grounded surface design in shaping anticipated perceptions of authenticity, trust and brand differentiation. The study adopted an interpretivist qualitative design. Fifteen professional graphic designers, creative directors, packaging specialists and brand practitioners in Accra were selected purposively and interviewed between January and April 2026. The transcripts were analysed through Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. Barthes' semiotic concepts of denotation and connotation informed the interpretation of the themes. Participants described four connected pathways through which ethnopackaging may support brands: emotional familiarity and belonging; identity representation; culturally familiar cues of authenticity and trust; and differentiation from imported or visually standardised competitors. These findings report professional interpretations of likely consumer responses. They do not constitute direct evidence of consumer behaviour. The findings offer a practice-based framework for using cultural resources with greater care and strategic clarity. They also identify propositions that should be tested with consumers before firms make claims about trust, safety, purchase intention or commercial performance.

KEYWORDS

Ethnopackaging; packaging surface design; cultural identity; visual semiotics; brand differentiation; design practice; Ghana

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1. Introduction

Packaging is often the first part of a product that shoppers see and handle. It identifies the brand, organises information and helps people form an initial impression before they have used the product. Research on packaging therefore treats the package as both a functional container and a communication medium (Underwood, 2003; Silayoi & Speece, 2007). In Ghana's fast-moving consumer-goods market, this communicative role matters to local manufacturers that must distinguish their products from established domestic and multinational competitors.

Many Ghanaian designers draw on Adinkra symbols, Kente-inspired geometry, indigenous colour associations, local languages and familiar narratives when developing packaging. These resources can make a package recognisably local, but their use also raises practical questions. A cultural symbol can strengthen a brand when it is relevant and carefully interpreted; the same symbol can appear superficial or misleading when it is used as decoration without regard to its meaning.

In this article, ethnopackaging refers to the deliberate use or reinterpretation of culturally specific visual resources in contemporary packaging. The term is used as an operational concept for this study rather than as a universally established category in packaging scholarship. This definition keeps the focus on design decisions: what practitioners choose to encode, how they combine cultural references with current commercial aesthetics and what responses they expect those decisions to produce.

Existing packaging research has established that visual design contributes to brand impressions and product evaluation (Orth & Malkewitz, 2008; Silayoi & Speece, 2007). Consumer culture research also explains how goods carry meanings that people use to express identity and belonging (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; McCracken, 1986). Less is known, however, about how Ghanaian

practitioners themselves reason through the use of cultural codes in packaging and how they anticipate the commercial value and risks of those codes.

The study therefore addresses two questions: (1) How do Ghanaian packaging and branding practitioners understand the role of cultural surface design in shaping perceptions of authenticity and trust? (2) What design strategies do these practitioners recommend for indigenous food and consumer-goods brands seeking differentiation? By centring the accounts of expert practitioners, the study explains the encoder side of packaging communication. It does not claim to measure how consumers actually decode or respond to the designs.

2. Literature review and conceptual framework

2.1 Packaging as visual communication

Packaging surface design includes typography, colour, illustration, symbols, patterns, images and the organisation of information across the package. These elements help consumers recognise a product category, distinguish one brand from another and infer qualities before purchase. Underwood (2003) describes packaging as a source of brand meaning, while Orth and Malkewitz (2008) show that the overall configuration of package design influences brand impressions. The value of a surface design therefore lies in the relationship among its elements, not in the isolated use of a colour or motif.

Culturally grounded packaging adds another layer to this communication. In Ghana, Adinkra symbols provide a visual vocabulary associated with proverbs, ethical ideas and communal experience (Willis, 1998). Kente-inspired structures, local language and familiar colour combinations can carry related associations. Their commercial use requires judgement because cultural legibility varies across communities, generations and contexts. A design that appears familiar to one audience may be obscure or differently interpreted by another.

2.2 Cultural meaning identity and brand authenticity

Consumer culture theory views products as carriers of social and cultural meaning rather than as purely functional objects (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). McCracken (1986) similarly explains that cultural meaning moves through goods and becomes available to consumers in everyday practices. Packaging participates in this movement because it places symbols, narratives and claims at the point where a product is encountered.

Cultural references may also contribute to perceived authenticity when audiences see a credible relationship between a brand, its product and the tradition it invokes. Authenticity is not created by the presence of a heritage symbol alone. It depends on consistency, evidence and the care with which the brand represents its claimed origins (Beverland, 2005). This distinction is important for ethnopackaging. Cultural familiarity may invite attention or recognition, but only consumer research can establish whether it improves trust, preference or purchase behaviour.

2.3 Semiotic framework and the boundary of interpretation

Barthes' semiotic framework distinguishes denotation, the relatively direct content of a sign, from connotation, the cultural and ideological meanings associated with it (Barthes, 1968). On a package, an Adinkra symbol, a geometric border or a local-language phrase can be described at the denotative level. Its associations with wisdom, belonging, heritage or national pride operate at the connotative level.

This distinction is useful for examining how designers encode meaning. It does not, by itself, show that consumers decode the signs as designers intend. The present framework therefore separates practitioner encoding from anticipated consumer interpretation and from outcomes that require direct consumer testing. Figure 1 presents this revised boundary of inference.

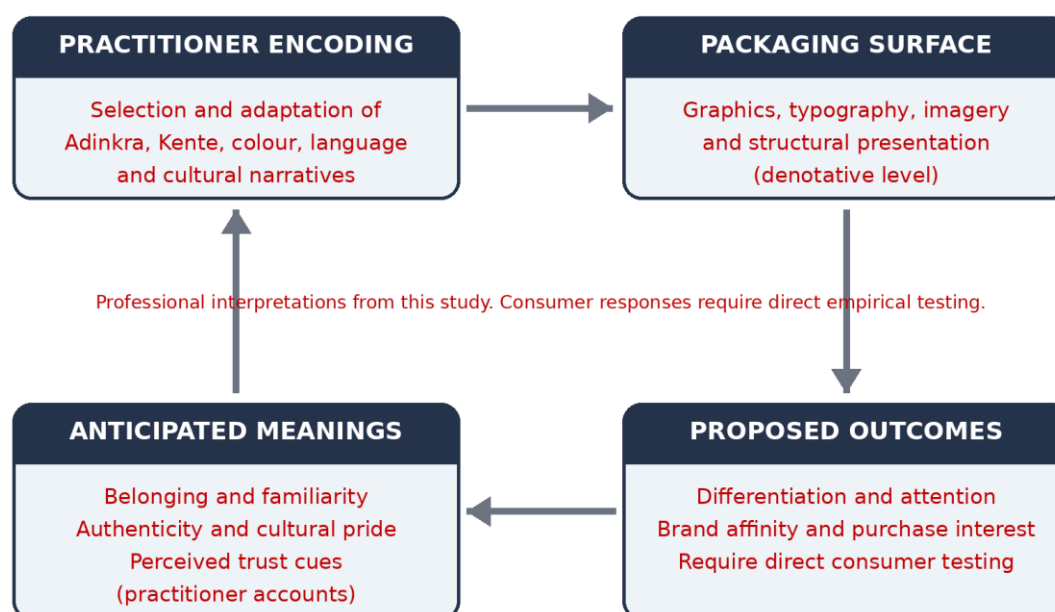


Figure 1 Practice based semiotic model of ethnopackaging and proposed brand outcomes

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research design and scope

The study used an interpretivist, exploratory qualitative design. This approach was appropriate because the research sought to understand how experienced practitioners make sense of cultural symbols and apply them in packaging work. The unit of analysis was the practitioners' account of design reasoning and anticipated market response. The study was not designed to estimate the prevalence of these views or to test a causal relationship between cultural packaging and consumer behaviour (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.2 Participants and sampling

The target group comprised graphic designers, creative directors, packaging specialists and brand practitioners working in Accra, Ghana's largest commercial and creative centre. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 15 participants who met three criteria: at least five years of professional experience in visual communication or packaging design; direct experience with packaged food, beverage or personal-care brands in Ghana; and evidence of using cultural motifs or local visual resources in commercial work. The sample was selected for relevant experience and depth of insight rather than statistical representation.

Table 1 Profile of expert participants N = 15

Code	Professional role	Experience	Primary sector speciality
D01	Senior Creative Director	12 years	Processed food and spices
D02	Lead Packaging Designer	8 years	Artisanal beverages and cocoa
D03	Brand Identity Consultant	10 years	Organic cosmetics and skincare
D04	Design Agency Founder	15 years	FMCG commercial brands
D05	Senior Graphic Designer	6 years	Local food processing
D06	Creative Strategist	9 years	Confectionery and snacks
D07	Packaging Illustrator	7 years	Traditional herbal teas
D08	Brand Manager	11 years	Dairy and beverage logistics
D09	Art Director	14 years	Premium gift packaging
D10	Freelance Package Designer	5 years	Micro-agro processing
D11	Visual Communication Lead	9 years	Cosmeceuticals and personal care
D12	Senior Brand Identity Lead	13 years	Export food products

Code	Professional role	Experience	Primary sector specialty
D13	Packaging Specialist	8 years	Grains and cereal processing
D14	Creative Director	16 years	Alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks
D15	Graphic Designer and Illustrator	6 years	Artisanal consumer goods

3.3 Data collection and ethics

Semi-structured interviews were conducted face to face or by secure telephone call between January and April 2026. The interview guide covered participants' use of cultural resources, their reasons for selecting particular motifs and the brand responses they expected those decisions to support. Two senior brand designers reviewed a pilot version of the guide, and their feedback was used to improve the wording and sequence of the questions. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and were audio-recorded with written informed consent.

The recordings were transcribed verbatim, producing more than 220 pages of interview text. Participants were assigned codes D01 to D15, and their names and organisational affiliations were omitted from the manuscript. These measures protected confidentiality while retaining the professional context needed to interpret each account.

3.4 Data analysis and trustworthiness

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases: familiarisation with the transcripts; generation of initial codes; development of candidate themes; review of themes against the coded extracts and the full dataset; definition and naming of themes; and preparation of the report. Coding first remained close to participants' descriptions. Barthes' distinction between denotation and connotation was then used as a sensitising framework to interpret how participants described the movement from visible design elements to anticipated cultural meanings.

The researchers maintained an audit trail of coding and theme decisions, discussed the emerging structure through peer debriefing and used participant feedback to check the clarity of the interpretations. These procedures supported credibility and transparency, although they do not remove the interpretive role of the researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.5 Boundary of inference

The evidence represents professional judgements from people who design and manage brands. Statements about consumers in the findings are therefore reported as participants' expectations or observations from practice. The study cannot establish that consumers experienced the proposed meanings, trusted a product more, intended to buy it or paid a price premium. Those questions require direct research with consumers and, where causal claims are made, controlled comparison of alternative package designs.

4. Findings practitioners' accounts of ethnopackaging outcomes

Four themes were developed from the interviews. Together, they show how participants explained the intended role of cultural surface design in brand communication. The themes should be read as a practice-based account of anticipated outcomes rather than as measured consumer effects.

4.1 Emotional familiarity and belonging

Participants described culturally familiar graphics as a way of making local products feel personally relevant. In their accounts, Adinkra geometry, local colour associations and language cues could interrupt the visual dominance of imported products and signal that a package had been designed with a Ghanaian audience in mind. Several practitioners also linked this familiarity to nostalgia, especially among urban consumers and members of the diaspora. These interpretations indicate the emotional intention behind the design decisions; consumer interviews would be needed to confirm whether the intended meanings are received in this way.

"When a Ghanaian consumer walks down a supermarket aisle filled with imported items and suddenly sees a package featuring familiar Adinkra geometry or warmth of local earth colors, something clicks emotionally. It tells them, 'This was crafted specifically for you; it understands your roots.' That immediate visual belonging opens the door to purchase way faster than a generic imported package."

- Participant D01 Senior Creative Director 12 years' experience

"In diaspora markets, ethnopackaging is pure gold. When a Ghanaian in London or New York sees Kente-inspired linework on a box of chocolate or cassava flour, it isn't just food - it's nostalgia, identity, and a piece of home sitting on an international shelf."

- Participant D09 Art Director 14 years' experience

4.2 Identity representation and cultural pride

Participants also treated packaging as a public expression of cultural identity. They argued that a product can allow consumers to affirm national or community affiliation when its cultural references are recognisable and relevant to the product. At the same

time, they warned that symbolic accuracy matters. A motif used without regard to its meaning may weaken the authenticity that the design is meant to communicate.

"Packaging is no longer just a container; it is identity representation. When we designed the pouch for a local spice brand using the 'Asase Ye Duru' symbol [representing the divinity of the Earth], we were communicating that this product respects our land and our tradition. Consumers wear that purchase like a badge of pride."

- Participant D04 Design Agency Founder 15 years' experience

This theme locates brand equity in the relationship between the product, the cultural reference and the quality of its execution. Participants did not support the indiscriminate placement of heritage symbols. They described ethnopackaging as a considered act of interpretation in which typography, colour, materials and cultural meaning must work together.

4.3 Cultural cues as perceived signals of trust and authenticity

A third theme concerned trust. Participants believed that a well-executed cultural reference could make a local brand appear more familiar, deliberate and authentic. They described a process in which care in the presentation of a symbol may be read as care in the making of the product. This is an important professional proposition, but it must be stated cautiously. Cultural imagery is not evidence of product quality or safety and should never replace regulatory approval, accurate labelling or quality assurance.

"There is a subconscious leap that happens in the consumer's mind. When they see clean, well-integrated traditional motifs on a package, they reason: 'If this company took the time to respect our culture on the outside, they wouldn't put bad or harmful ingredients on the inside.' It establishes an immediate baseline of safety and integrity before they even read the ingredient list."

- Participant D03 Brand Identity Consultant 10 years' experience

"Historically, local products suffered from poor visual presentation - flimsy plastic bags with cheap labels. By combining high-end packaging materials with refined, modern interpretations of traditional motifs, we completely flip the narrative. The consumer instantly perceives the product as premium, authentic, and safe."

- Participant D12 Senior Brand Identity Lead 13 years' experience

The theme therefore concerns perceived credibility in practitioners' accounts, not verified safety or an observed consumer judgement. Its value lies in identifying a testable hypothesis: when production quality and mandatory information are held constant, culturally coherent surface design may influence perceived authenticity and trust.

4.4 Differentiation in a visually standardised market

Participants saw cultural specificity as an alternative to imitating the minimalist conventions associated with many international brands. They argued that local firms may struggle when they copy a visual language already strongly associated with established competitors. A carefully controlled combination of contemporary typography, clear information hierarchy and culturally grounded pattern could give a local package a recognisable position on the shelf.

"If a local brand tries to copy European or American minimalist design, it will always look like a second-rate clone of a Western brand. You cannot beat foreign brands at their own visual game. But when you leverage rich, vibrant indigenous patterns, bold cultural color schemes, and authentic storytelling, you stand out instantly. It creates visual disruption on the shelf."

- Participant D02 Lead Packaging Designer 8 years' experience

Participants referred to this balance as a hybrid aesthetic. In their descriptions, the design remains contemporary and legible while its cultural references give the brand a distinct voice. The commercial value of this approach is plausible, but it should be evaluated through shelf tests, consumer choice tasks or market trials rather than assumed from practitioner experience alone.

5. Discussion

5.1 A practice based semiotic account

The study explains how practitioners move from visible cultural elements to proposed brand meanings. At the denotative level, a package contains an identifiable symbol, pattern, phrase or colour arrangement. At the connotative level, participants associated those elements with belonging, cultural pride, authenticity and trust. This account is consistent with Barthes' (1968) distinction between literal form and culturally produced meaning, and with McCracken's (1986) explanation of how meaning is transferred through consumer goods.

The findings illuminate the encoding side of the process. They do not demonstrate that audiences share a single interpretation. Consumers may accept, reject, overlook or reinterpret the cultural cues, depending on their knowledge, age, community, product involvement and prior experience with the brand. The revised model therefore treats trust, purchase interest and differentiation as proposed outcomes for testing rather than results established by this sample.

5.2 The designer as cultural mediator

Participants described design work as a form of mediation between cultural heritage and present-day markets. Their task involved more than inserting a familiar motif. They selected, simplified and combined symbols with type, colour, images and package structure in ways that could function within retail constraints. This account extends the communicative role of packaging described by Underwood (2003) by showing how cultural knowledge enters professional design decisions.

The role also carries responsibility. Because symbols may have philosophical, historical or community-specific meanings, designers need enough research to avoid distortion. Consultation with cultural knowledge holders may be necessary where a symbol has restricted, contested or sacred associations. Such care strengthens the credibility of the work and reduces the risk of turning cultural heritage into an arbitrary surface style.

5.3 Implications for brand strategy and design testing

For local brands, the main strategic lesson is not to maximise the number of cultural elements on a package. It is to choose a relevant cultural idea and integrate it with clear information, suitable materials and consistent brand behaviour. Packaging can attract attention and frame expectations, but authenticity also depends on product quality, sourcing, communication and customer experience (Beverland, 2005).

The themes can guide prototype development. Designers can create matched alternatives that vary the cultural treatment while keeping the product, material, information and brand name constant. Consumers can then assess recognition, cultural fit, perceived authenticity, trust, purchase intention and willingness to pay. This sequence would connect practitioner insight to direct audience evidence and would provide a firmer basis for commercial decisions.

6. Conclusion, implications and future research

6.1 Conclusion

This study shows how 15 Ghanaian design and branding practitioners understand the strategic use of cultural resources in packaging. They associated ethnopackaging with emotional familiarity, identity representation, perceived authenticity and market differentiation. Their accounts also emphasised the need to combine cultural references with contemporary design discipline and accurate cultural knowledge.

The study's contribution is a practice-based explanation of how designers encode cultural meaning and what outcomes they expect. It does not establish that consumers interpret the designs as intended or that ethnopackaging causes trust, purchase or commercial growth. Framing the findings within this boundary makes the evidence more credible and provides a clear agenda for the next stage of research.

6.2 Recommendations for practice

- Use a focused hybrid aesthetic. Combine a small number of relevant cultural references with legible typography, clear information hierarchy and appropriate packaging materials.
- Research the meaning and context of motifs before use. Where necessary, consult cultural knowledge holders and document the basis for the design decision.
- Test alternative prototypes with intended consumers before market launch. Measure cultural fit, recognition, authenticity, trust and choice rather than relying only on professional judgement.
- Keep cultural familiarity separate from evidence of safety and quality. Regulatory marks, accurate ingredients, traceability and quality assurance must remain explicit and verifiable.
- For diaspora and export markets, test whether the cultural references are understood and valued by the intended audience rather than assuming that heritage cues will carry the same meaning across locations.

6.3 Institutional implications

Business-support institutions, including the Ghana Enterprises Agency and relevant trade and design bodies, can incorporate culturally informed packaging into training for small and medium-sized enterprises. Such programmes should connect visual identity with material performance, labelling requirements, consumer testing and intellectual-property considerations. This broader approach would help firms treat cultural design as part of responsible brand development rather than as a decorative add-on.

6.4 Limitations and future research

The study has four main limitations. First, the purposive sample was small and confined to practitioners in Accra, so the findings cannot represent all Ghanaian designers or regions. Second, the participants were professional encoders of brand messages; consumers, retailers and manufacturers were not interviewed. Third, the analysis relied on self-reported professional experience and did not systematically compare actual packages. Fourth, no behavioural, sales or price data were collected. The study therefore identifies professional interpretations and testable propositions, not consumer effects or commercial outcomes.

Future research should combine practitioner interviews with consumer evidence from more than one region of Ghana. Controlled experiments could compare culturally grounded and non-cultural package variants while holding other attributes constant. Surveys, focus groups, shelf-choice tasks, eye-tracking studies and field trials could examine whether cultural fit influences attention, trust, purchase intention, actual choice or willingness to pay. Research should also consider differences across age, cultural background, product category and diaspora context.

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