

Assessment of Consumer Preference in the Use of African Wax Prints in Ghana

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Abstract

Africa as a continent is well noted for its artistry and culture which form integral part of everyday lives of the people. Africans portray themselves with rich material culture and this is expressed in the fabrics they adorn themselves with. Notable among such fabrics are the types known as “African prints” which are actually not of African origin but have come to be accepted as part of African textiles with incorporation of traditional motifs. A survey of the sales and usage of the prints shows that consumers mainly used the prints for making garments and accessories. With variety of colour ways, symbolic motifs, textures among others, consumers have the choice to select from a wider range of the prints that best suits the intended purpose. This paper assesses consumer preference of African Wax prints to ascertain the buying drivers that influenced consumers in choosing specific print for specific fashion need. The study finds that consumer preference for the prints have changed significantly due to dynamism in today’s fashion trend and needs of consumers. Factors such as brand and quality, colour scheme, pattern size and layout, symbolism and cultural significance and adaptability of the print design to fashion styles are the main driving forces that influence consumers to choose a particular print for specific need. It is recommended therefore that textile and fashion designers should make concerted efforts to consider these factors in their design process so as to satisfy the needs of their consumers to promote the prints both locally and internationally.

Keywords: *Wax prints; Consumer preference; Assessment; Textile design.*

Introduction

Real wax printed fabrics are fabrics that have been produced using a resist method of printing. The designs are usually etched on copper plates and printed with a resin in a liquefied state which is impermeable on both sides of the cloth (mainly cotton) to create a resist surface. The fabric is then dyed to allow the unprotected parts take up the dye liquor. The fabric can be dyed in several colours depending on the results wanted. The fabric is then dewaxed, printed and finished to produce a wax printed fabric. The fabrics are designed from geometric shapes, natural objects and proverbial African symbols and are made from a wide range of colour ways (Miles, 1994).

Real wax printed fabrics are believed to have originated from Indonesia and neighbouring Islands in Asia because they were developed to imitate the handmade Indonesian batik thus it is sometimes called “Industrial batik”. Dutch designers were intrigued with the designs and so learnt it from the Indonesians. After learning the art, they decided to discredit the Indonesians by imitating their art with industrialized machines that could print the wax or resin faster and produce the cloth more efficiently. The Indonesians were not happy with this development and the fabric was not accepted till Dutch traders brought the fabric to Africa (Elmina, Ghana) where the natives liked the cloth because it had some resemblance to batik, which was well known then.

With reference to Dyrenforth (1988), batik is believed to have originated from Java and the name batik stems from the word “tik” which means to “mark with spots or dots”. He asserts further that batik is the means of applying a design with colour onto a substrate (fabric) using a resist method of production where a resin (usually wax) is used to create patterns on the surface and then immersed into a dye bath for the uncovered areas to take up the dye whilst the waxed areas remain the same after the resin is taken out. When the Dutch colonized Java, batik was introduced to Holland in the seventeenth century and since then the art of batik has evolved and endured several changes all in a bid to make the process easier, faster and economical and this brought about the imitation of batik or otherwise called industrial batik which is now called real wax print.

Similarly, Nielson (1979) believes that African wax prints are cotton fabrics which are first of all blocked with wax or resin on either side of the cloth in a continuous process with a mechanism which employs engraved metal rollers and usually dyed in indigo leaving a blue pattern on a white background after the resin is removed. he also agrees that, wax prints are industrialised forms of batik making which are made specifically for the African market because they prefer it to other printed fabrics. In producing the fabric, the designs are engraved on copper rollers which rotate together to create the impression on both sides of the fabric after which it is allowed to cool, marbled, dyed, treated and finished for the market.

It is also believed that imported textiles trade dates back to the early West African empires that conducted business transactions with foreign markets before the Europeans. This was done via trade routes from the Mediterranean port of Africa to the Sahara and west coast. The fabrics were also partly conveyed with donkeys, camels and porters (Nielson, 1979). The Dutch learnt that adding native proverbial symbols added interest to the fabrics so they adapted them to capture the sense of local taste which became widely accepted in West Africa (Tulloch, 2004). To this day, these beautifully depicted and intricately designed fabrics are considered important and hold high social values. The fabrics play an important role in the daily lives of the people, West Africa in particular, and have significant communicative values; indicating status or wealth and conveying messages as a means of non-verbal expressions in official occasions, political avenues, and for social purposes.

Some of the major companies that are known worldwide for the production of African Wax prints are; ABC which has a subsidiary in Ghana called ATL, VLISCO which also has a subsidiary in Ghana called (GTP) and Julius Holland (Tulloch, 2004).

African printed fabrics whether it’s fancy, imitation, java or real wax, have become a part and parcel of the lifestyles of Africans as they express their beliefs, convey symbolic meanings, bring people together

and presently, other people from different continents are beginning to embrace and use these fabrics. Wax printed fabrics have different historical backgrounds and as to whether they originated from Africa, Indonesia, Java, China, Holland or wherever, the product outcome which evolved, remained and is still translated in different ways as being inspiring, colourful and graceful which has unique characteristics and is worth having among antiques.

African Wax Prints as they are widely known are patronised by individuals in Africa and beyond irrespective of the social, economic or political affiliation. This portrays the African rich heritage and provides a sense of belongingness in the society (source). To enhance and ensure that these African Wax Prints are used by a wider populace in the world necessitate an assessment of what drives consumers in purchasing the prints to provide textile designers a design direction to be pursued in their design process in order to create suitable designs that satisfy consumer needs and preference; hence this paper which investigates the use of African Wax Prints by consumers and make an assessment that will help enhance the designers' knowledge of the expectation of consumers.

Methodology

The study used triangulation of qualitative and quantitative research methods to assess consumer needs and preference for African prints. This involved the use of questionnaire and observation to come out with conclusive evidence to help in the assessment of consumer needs. This was done by designing questionnaire and observational checklists for the consumers and retailers of wax prints to know the marketability of the products.

Two hundred (200) copies of questionnaire were used to sample the opinion of the target market in Kumasi and Accra, Ghana. The aim of the questionnaire was to ascertain how consumers perceived the prints, the cultural significance that was associated with it, the messages that are conveyed with the fabrics, the price and colours used and the market for the product. The research was conducted in markets where African Wax Prints are mostly sold to find out the opinions of respondents about the wax print, the number of metres/ yards that were sewn, the choice of consumers, colour preference, motifs and their arrangements, the market for the prints and how advertisement influenced the sale of the prints. The simple random sampling technique was in this regard to administer copies of the questionnaire to respondents from different ethnicities in the country to obtain good and accurate results. The use of questionnaire for the consumers aimed at finding out their expectation from using the fabric, their colour preferences, motif arrangement and size and how this influenced their purchase.

Non participant observation was employed to study the accessible population from a distance with the objects of the study unaware so as to obtain factual data. It was expedient to watch people from a distance to see how they wore the fabric, the pride with which they used the fabrics, their comfortability in the fabric, the importance and use of the prints, how many people wore the prints, how often they wore it, the occasions they wore it to and the importance of the prints in the Ghanaian settings. Twenty hours of observations were done for two weeks at different vantage points in Kumasi and Accra using observation charts. This involved one and a half hours of observation a day to come out with evidences.

Results and Discussion

Using the descriptive analysis approach, the findings obtained from the questionnaire and observation were collated, synthesized and analysed using figures, charts, and tables as presented in the following sections of the paper.

Categorization of the age groups of respondents

Out of the 200 copies of questionnaire sent out, 185 representing 92.5% were retrieved from consumers with varied age group. Figure 1 shows the categorization of the various age groups who answered the questionnaire. It must be noted here that, the study focuses on the youth between the ages of 19-30 due to their characteristically unique traits and perception towards African prints.

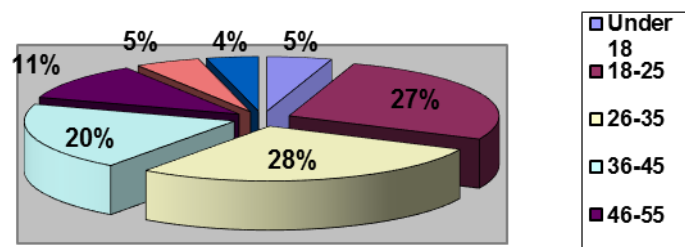


Fig. 1: Categorization of the age groups of respondents

The study revealed that, all the 185 respondents owned at least one wax printed fabric and were able to identify wax prints by the designs and the arrangements in the fabric, the textures, the precision of the patterns and the name of the cloth written on the selvedge. With regard to how often the respondents wear wax printed cloth, varied opinions were given as shown in Fig. 2. Evidently, 40% of the respondents wore wax prints on special occasion, 28% wear it once a week, 5% stored their wax prints in their wardrobe, 22% used the print twice a week, with very insignificant number of 5% using the print daily.

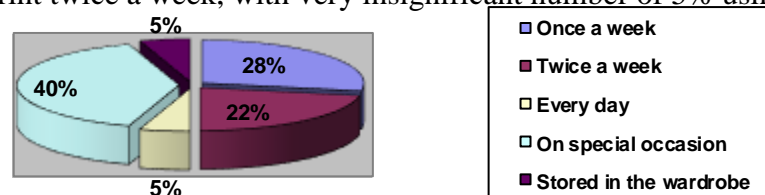


Fig. 2: Ownership and identification of wax prints by respondents

Consumer preference of wax prints

The respondents assessed the consumer preference of wax prints based on brand and quality, colour scheme, pattern size and layout, symbolism and cultural significance, and adaptability to fashion styles.

Preferred Brand and quality

With reference to brand and quality, 60% of the respondents indicated that they prefer wax prints of specific brands because of brand loyalty, class and the quality of the fabric. 20% opted for any brand

because they just wanted to wear the fabric whereas 20% declared their preference for all the brands depending on the occasion for which the fabric will be worn. This shows that consumers of wax prints are more inclined to brands of specific textile companies and would not want to switch to other brands as they have become more loyal to those brands.

Fig 3: Response to brand and quality

Preferred Colour scheme

About the option of colour preference, the findings revealed that 40% of the respondents wanted their prints with a combination of blue, green and gold colours, 10% preferred pink and purple colour schemes while 50% have no colour preference because all the colours were interesting and suited different occasions and established that they will buy a particular colour based on the occasion. With regards to preferred motifs, about 25% preferred geometric motifs but the 45-65 age groups preferred motifs that possessed cultural significance and could convey a message that could be easily interpreted. They asserted that the prints portrayed a sense of belongings among Africans, portrayed national heritage, and origin.

Preferred pattern size and layout

On the question of pattern preference, 50% of the respondents preferred small patterns as they could easily be adapted to garment designs. Thirty five (35%) preferred large patterns because of its appeal and boldness. 10% did not mind about the size and will go for patterns of any sizes provided they have good aesthetic appeal. Five percent (5%) however prefer both small and large patterns. This clearly indicated that, printed fabrics with small patterns are gaining popularity in use due to their adaptability nature which makes it easy to fit into wider range of fashion silhouettes.

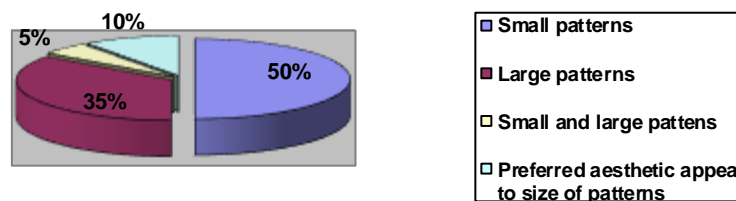


Fig 4: Responses on the size of patterns on the fabric

Symbolism and cultural significance

Responding to the question on what made them buy a particular print, 34% preferred to buy the print based on the symbols in the fabric, the name of the fabric and the arrangement of the motifs.

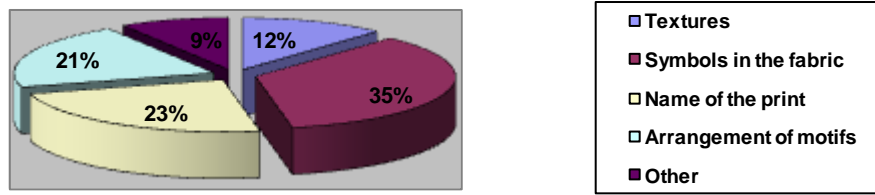


Fig 5: Respondents’ determining factors for purchasing wax prints

Adaptability to fashion styles

Respondents were asked about their willingness to sew the garment into different designs other than the usual “kaba and slit”. All of the respondents answered yes which suggest that, wax prints are now being used for other fashion design silhouettes and for that matter can be established that design application for the prints have been widened. On the question about their willingness to purchase the fabric if they were already fashioned and displayed in a department or retail store, 40% of the respondents answered in affirmative as it would save them time of buying the fabric and looking for a designer who would design to suit their needs and the occasions.

Rate of patronage of wax prints

Responding to the question on quantity of wax prints they sold in a week, merchandisers and retailers asserted that they sell between 500 and 1,500 pieces. They however added that they mostly engaged in Vlisco, GTP, ABC, ATL, GTMC brands as these are the most popular brands on the market. With regards to the types of brands customers mostly buy, it was established that ABC, ATL, GTP brands are the most preferred brands by consumers. This to the research team is attributed to the a number of factors with the major ones being “name game”, quality in terms of design innovation, good colour fastness and quality base fabric. Among the brands, GTMC brand was considered as the least purchased. Preferred colour schemes by customers according to the respondents were blue, yellow and green and this confirms the questionnaire responses on preferred colours of wax prints.

Preferred motifs and textures

Evidence of the study indicates varied opinions on consumers’ preference for motifs and textures in wax prints. Whereas some consumers laid emphasis on the motifs, most of them think that the type of motifs and textures in the prints do not matter but rather the quality of the print, brand name, symbolic name and colours in the prints are the major factors that influence them to buy wax prints.

Packaging of wax prints

Packaging is the key to attraction of consumers to products. In other words, it is a way of branding to attract consumers. However, when consumers were asked about their impression on how the wax printed fabrics are packaged, consumers responded that they are not worried about that but would not mind if the fabrics were packaged differently at no extra cost. Observable findings on packaging of wax prints show that the prints are not packaged in any special way but are usually folded in twelve yards (1 piece) and

wrapped in rubber material with labels in them. To increase consumer attraction, however, requires proper packaging concept which will as well brand the prints to keep customers loyal to the products.

Advertisement

When asked about whether advertising make a difference in the sale of wax prints, respondents said it made a great difference as it created more awareness of the fabrics thereby causing people to come and inquire and buy them. From observation, it was noticed that the prints are usually displayed in open areas and stores by merchandisers and retailers to attract customers. Merchandisers and retailers do not embark on any form of advertisement. Advertisement is mainly done by the textile factories that produce the prints but due to high cost of advertisement, the factories advertise the prints occasionally through television, radio, newspapers, beauty pageants, promotion sales among others.

The age group that fancy wax prints

The study revealed that African prints are mostly purchased by young adult class. From Fig. 6 it is evident that the prints are purchased mainly by customers between the ages of 35 and 42. This to the research team is due to the fact that such age class are inclined to aesthetic and symbolic features of African prints. The ages between 18 and 34 are more aesthetically oriented whereas those above 42 are symbolically inclined. Based on these premises it can be established that designs that target the youth below 25 must possess design elements with high aesthetic values. Those targeting the young adult class between 35 and 42 must combine aesthetic and symbolic design elements while designs that target elderly folks above 42 must feature symbolic design elements.

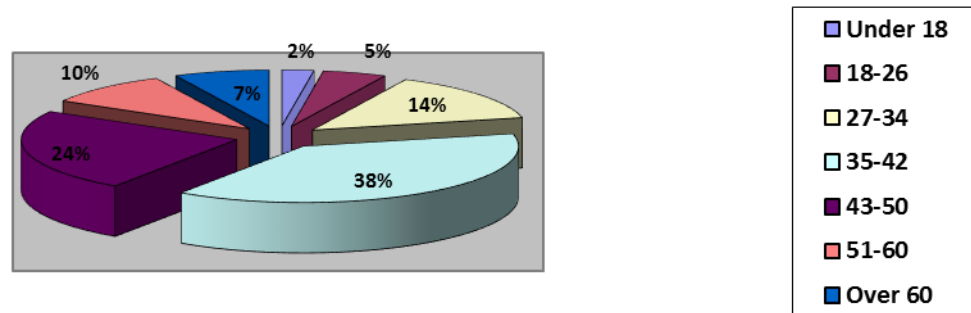


Fig. 6: The age group that fancy wax prints

Period for Purchasing Wax Prints

With regard to the period in within which consumers normally purchase wax prints, consumers gave varied views responding that they usually buy the prints between July and December as exhibited in Fig. 7. Evidently, the prints are usually purchased between October and December. This is so because of the Christmas festivity which compels most people to buy printed fabrics for their love ones, wards and themselves to grace the occasion. Again, it is apparent that fewer quantities of the prints are purchased between January and March due as this period is perceived by many people as hectic times in the year.

However, between July and September is considered as fruitful period of the year as major productive activities take place within this period which generates income to individuals to purchase the prints.

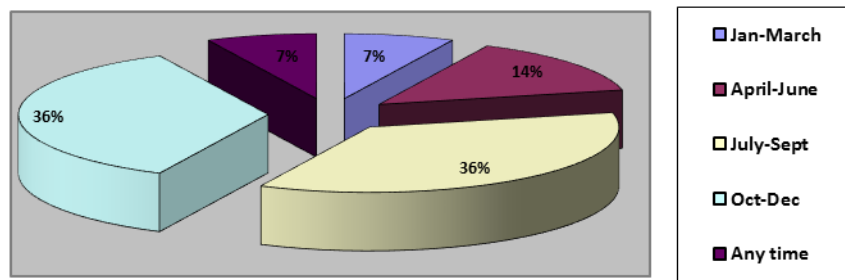


Fig. 7: Period for Purchasing Wax Prints

Cost of the Wax Print Brands on the Ghanaian Market

A survey of brands of wax prints on Ghanaian market revealed varied price points depending on the brand. Table 1:1 shows cost of wax print brands on the Ghanaian market.

Table 1:1 Cost of wax print brands on the Ghanaian market

Brand of wax prints	Wholesale price (12 yards)		Retail price (12 yards)	
GTP	¢29	= £ 14.50	¢ 31.20	= £ 15.60
Vlisco	¢143	= £ 71.54	¢ 178	= £ 89.05
ATL	¢35	= £ 17.51	¢ 38 – 40	= £ 19 - 20
ABC	¢58-60	= £ 29 - 30	¢ 60 - 65	= £ 30 –32.51
Holland	¢143	= £ 71.54	¢ 178	= £ 89.05
Hightarget	¢15-16	= £ 7.50 – 8.00	¢ 18	= £ 9
GTMC	¢23	= £ 11.51	¢24 - 25	= £ 12 –12.51

Source: Field Survey (2013)

It can be inferred from Table1.1 that Vlisco brand is highly priced with ABC, ATL, GTP, GTMC and imitation brands following the price points respectively. It was observed that there is not much difference in terms of quality and design in the various brands of wax prints of the respective factories. However, the price difference has come about not only by the perception of Ghanaians on foreign and local printed fabrics but as a result of “name game” and the extent to which the factories have been able to brand themselves and their products.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A survey of the sales and usage of wax printed fabrics in Ghana shows that consumers mainly for used the prints for construction of garments and accessories. With variety of colour ways, symbolic motifs, textures among others, consumers have the choice to select from a wider range of the prints one that best suits the intended purpose. Evidence of the study proved that wax printed fabrics are mostly used on

Sundays for church service and on special occasions. It is revealed that 40% of women on weekdays wear the prints whilst 60% wear westernized clothing. This notwithstanding, on Sundays, Saturdays and on special occasions, about 90% of women wear African fabrics; predominantly kente cloths and wax prints. Again, most wax print retailers wear the cloth almost everyday as a means of advertising to boost sales. It is a joyful sight to observe in Ghana on Fridays and Sundays both women and men flaunting themselves in African fabrics to exhibit the artistry of the fabrics and also to help sustain the textiles and fashion industry as part of the President of Ghana's Friday wear initiative which aimed at increasing the patronage of locally-made textiles to help revive the sub-sector for artistic, cultural and economic developments.

The study finds that consumer preference for the prints have changed significantly due to dynamism in today's fashion trend and needs of consumers. Factors such as brand and quality, colour scheme, pattern size and layout, symbolism and cultural significance and adaptability of the print designs to different fashion styles, are the main driving forces that influence consumers to choose a print for specific need. It is recommended therefore that textile and fashion designers make concerted efforts to consider these factors as very expedient in their design process so as to satisfy the needs of their consumers to promote the prints both locally and internationally.

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