

Design Mediation in South–South Agri-Food Trade: A Comparative Study of Guyanese Sugar Branding in the Chinese Market

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Abstract:

This study examines design mediation in the South–South agri-food trade by comparing Guyanese sugar branding in China. Using a dual-perspective qualitative approach, this study explores how designers from Guyana and China negotiate cultural identity, trust, and market legibility in packaging. The findings reveal tensions between preserving the Caribbean identity and ensuring clarity for Chinese consumers managed through semiotic editing, cultural translation, and hybridity. Trust is built through storytelling, provenance narratives, regulatory compliance, and visual ordering. The concept of a “cultural hook” emerges as a strategy using familiar visuals to bridge cognitive distance. This exploratory study offers a preliminary framework for cross-cultural design mediation in the specific context of Guyanese sugar branding in the Chinese market, highlighting designers as cultural brokers who balance authenticity and adaptability. Initial practical implications derived from designer perspectives suggest the value of semiotic audits, stakeholder dialogues, and hybrid identity development to enhance brand legitimacy and consumer trust. Limitations include a small sample size and focus on designer perspectives. Future research is recommended on consumer reception and branding evolution. The framework advances the understanding of intercultural branding dynamics and supports sustainable design strategies in emerging trade networks.

Keywords:

Cross-cultural Branding, Design Mediation, Agri-food Packaging, South–South Trade, Hybrid Brand Identity

1. Introduction

The growth of South-South agri-food trade has increased the circulation of commodities between developing economies, reshaping supply chains and market dynamics [1]. As these products enter unfamiliar markets, packaging emerges as the primary symbolic interface, serving not only functional purposes, but also as a crucial

medium for conveying meaning, quality, and origin. Through culturally informed visual semiotics, packaging facilitates communication between producers and consumers by embedding narratives that resonate with their target audiences. In such exchanges, packaging becomes the key medium through which meaning, quality, and origin are communicated [2,3,4]. Unlike many Western brands that benefit from established and widely recognised symbolic templates, commodities from the Global South often enter new markets without stable visual vocabularies. This lack of pre-existing symbolic infrastructure forces designers to construct meaning from the ground up, navigating unfamiliar cultural codes and consumer expectations (Spence & Van Doorn, 2022; Xie et al., 2015). Consequently, designers face semiotic uncertainty and must create packaging narratives that effectively communicate quality, origin, and cultural identity despite the absence of standardised visual references. This core design tension, rooted in the absence of stable symbolic infrastructures in South-South branding, creates a challenging environment in which designers must balance authenticity with adaptability [7,8]. They must innovate within a context where symbolic meanings are fluid and contested, making packaging not only a functional container but also a complex site for cultural translation and meaning making.

Existing research predominantly addresses North–South branding dynamics, with limited focus on South–South commercial exchange. Empirical studies investigating designers’ roles in South–South trade contexts remain scarce, particularly those exploring the perspectives of designers from both exporting and importing countries [9,10]. This dual focus on designers across the trade continuum distinguishes the current study and addresses an underexplored dimension in agri-food branding and design mediation, providing a comprehensive understanding of cross-cultural packaging design challenges and strategies in South–South trade, specifically between Guyana and China. This study draws on two empirical datasets: Dataset A comprises Guyanese designers engaged in designing export packaging for agri-food products, and Dataset B comprises Chinese designers adapting foreign agri-food brands for local markets. Data were collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews with participants from both contexts. The analysis employs thematic methods to identify key patterns and insights across these design practices, focusing on how designers mediate brand identity and cultural meanings in South–South trade. This study aims to examine how designers construct meaning for unfamiliar Southern commodities, analyse how trust and authenticity are negotiated across contexts, and develop a bidirectional design mediation framework for branding in the Global South. This study contributes to design research by reframing South–South branding as a mediated symbolic process shaped by designer interpretation rather than pre-existing market templates.

1.1. Packaging as Semiotic and Trust Interface

Packaging functions as a critical meaning-making system by serving as a visual communication tool that conveys essential information and cultural significance to consumers and builds consumer trust. It not only presents product attributes but also creates symbolic meanings that influence consumer perceptions and behaviours. As a semiotic system, packaging employs visual elements, such as colour, typography, imagery, and layout, to create associative meanings that consumers learn through repeated exposure and market conventions, and translates abstract qualities like safety, quality, and origin into accessible cues that guide consumer decision-making [11–15]. These elements carry both denotative (literal) and symbolic (culturally assigned) meanings, enabling packaging to act as a language through which brands

communicate their identity, quality, and authenticity (Pereira, 2021; Spence & Van Doorn, 2022). This visual communication role is especially vital in food packaging, where direct sensory evaluation is limited prior to purchase, making packaging the primary interface for the formation of trust [17]. Semiotics plays a central role in branding by enabling packaging to act as a system of signs that conveys cultural meanings and brand identity. Designers strategically select and combine visual symbols to construct narratives that resonate with target consumers, mediating the relationship between a product's origin and the local cultural context [18,19].

This semiotic process involves extracting core brand elements and creating “cultural hooks” that bridge unfamiliar foreign products with familiar local symbols, thereby enhancing emotional connection and brand legitimacy [3,20]. For example, colours can function as icons, indexes, or culturally specific symbols, signalling qualities such as “sweetness,” “luxury,” or “authenticity” [21,22,23]. Simplicity in design is often linked to higher perceived authenticity, as it suggests clarity and identity coherence, whereas complexity can convey richness of cultural meaning [24,25]. Packaging thus becomes a curated cultural text, where visual codes are organised to reflect socially constructed identities rather than objective realities [26,27], and thus becomes a site of cultural mediation, translating and adapting meanings to align with consumer expectations and aesthetic preferences. Origin narratives embedded in packaging contribute significantly to building consumer trust, particularly in South-South trade contexts, where formal certification and established brand legacies may be absent [28,29]. Packaging communicates provenance and authenticity through visual and textual cues, serving as a “trust interface” that reassures consumers about product safety and quality in the absence of direct experience or institutional guarantees [14,17]. Designers employ storytelling and symbolic anchoring to embed foreign commodities within local cultural frameworks, thereby fostering emotional bridges that enhance perceived trustworthiness and acceptance [30].

Packaging also plays a crucial role in food trust formation, particularly in cross-cultural contexts. Visual semiotics, primarily through colour palettes and typography, serves as a trust signal that communicates product quality, safety, and cultural legitimacy [31,32]. For example, culturally familiar colours, such as red and yellow, in Chinese markets symbolise auspiciousness and premium status, enhancing the perceived reliability of imported agrifood products [4,31]. Despite these insights, most studies implicitly assume that cultural templates and semiotic meanings are stable and universally recognizable across consumer groups. This assumption overlooks the dynamic, negotiated nature of cultural meanings in packaging design, especially in diverse South-South trade contexts, where designers actively mediate and adapt cultural elements to achieve cross-cultural legibility. This assumption provides a basis for further exploration of how packaging functions not only as a semiotic system but also as a site of cultural negotiation and mediation.

1.2. Cultural Translation and Design Mediation

Cultural translation in design involves transforming abstract brand concepts into tangible, visual, and physical representations that resonate with the target cultural context. It involves the negotiated adaptation of forms, narratives, and interactions beyond mere literal transfers of content, visuals, or language, emphasising transformation to reflect the cultural values of the target group [33,34]. This process shifts the focus from the product as an isolated object to the active role of designers as

interpreters and mediators of meaning [7,35]. Designers act as interpreters, mediating between the source culture and target audience, consciously selecting and modifying cultural elements to maintain authenticity while enhancing relevance and legibility across cultural boundaries [36,37]. They utilise their cultural knowledge to create meaningful connections between the brand and consumers by carefully selecting and adapting visual and experiential elements that align with local cultural norms. This mediation balances adaptation and preservation, where surface-level changes (language, imagery) coexist with deeper structural transformations of beliefs and idioms to produce culturally resonant design [38,39]. Therefore, authenticity emerges as a socially constructed and negotiated product, shaped by designers' decisions regarding which aspects of culture to retain, alter, or omit [34,40].

Designers' work embodies a continuous negotiation between adaptation and preservation, in which they balance maintaining the core authenticity of a brand with the need to tailor its identity to local cultural expectations. This negotiation reflects a dynamic process of design mediation, in which authenticity is not fixed but constructed through iterative cultural interpretation and strategic design decisions [3,30]. The obligation to interpret, as described in South-South branding contexts, manifests as a professional and ethical responsibility for designers to clarify ambiguous or unfamiliar product attributes through culturally appropriate design choices [14,28]. This interpretive duty ensures that a brand's symbolic meanings are accessible and trustworthy to consumers, especially in markets where formal certification or established brand legacies are lacking. Within this framework, selective authenticity exemplifies a manifestation of design mediation, whereby designers strategically curate cultural markers, such as narratives of origin, history, and terroir, to construct a coherent brand identity that resonates with international consumers without diluting cultural significance [41,42]. This process involves the deliberate simplification and editing of visual and narrative elements to achieve cross-cultural legibility while simultaneously preserving core cultural meanings and adapting to market aesthetics [21]. Thus, selective authenticity represents a dynamic negotiation of authenticity that mediates between cultural preservation and global market demand, illustrating the active role of designers as cultural brokers rather than passive transmitters. Thus, both the act of cultural translation and the obligation to interpret are integral manifestations of design mediation, emphasising the designer's role as a cultural translator who bridges the gaps in understanding and meaning. This mediation encompasses visual and narrative elements and strategic decisions about how culture is represented and consumed in diverse contexts [43,44]. However, existing research rarely addresses how designers operate in contexts where symbolic reference systems are absent, fragmented, or underdeveloped conditions common in many South-South design environments, such as the Caribbean. This gap underscores the need to further explore how designers navigate and construct meaning amid limited or contested cultural symbols, bridging local lived experiences with international market expectations.

1.3. South–South Branding Conditions

South-South agri-food trade is characterised by horizontal trade relations, where governance relies on negotiated norms and collaborative interactions among governments, producers, consumers, and civil society rather than top-down enforcement [28,45,46]. This horizontal coordination results in flexible and pluralistic standards, in contrast to the rigid compliance frameworks typical of North-South trade

[47]. Emerging commodity branding in South-South contexts faces the challenge of unstable aesthetic norms and the absence of hegemonic symbolic hierarchies, requiring ongoing negotiation of meanings related to quality, sustainability, and trustworthiness [28,29]. Unlike established Western brands with entrenched symbolic capital, South-South brands operate within a semiotic void, lacking legacy or standardised visual vocabularies [48,49]. Within this setting, commodity branding is evolving, shifting from raw exports toward culturally coded, value-added products that emphasise heritage and identity, particularly in agrifood sectors such as Guyana's Demerara sugar [50,51]. However, the absence of entrenched symbolic hierarchies in South-South markets means there is no dominant aesthetic or cultural standard to guide design, resulting in polycentric and contested visual logics that require negotiation among local, institutional, and academic actors [44,52,53]. Consequently, designers face the challenge of constructing symbolic legibility in the absence of established templates, making cultural mediation and strategic adaptation central design tasks in South-South branding and packaging design.

Existing research predominantly addresses institutions, programs, and theoretical epistemologies, with limited attention to everyday visual and aesthetic practices within South-South design contexts. Empirical investigations into how Caribbean designers, particularly those from Guyana, conceptualise and operationalise identity translation, mediation, and symbolic negotiation across Southern markets remain scarce. This gap is especially evident in agri-food branding, where designers must convey origin, sustainability, and quality in ways that resonate with diverse South-South consumers. While the literature on packaging and visual design highlights their role as cultural mediators that influence perceptions of product quality, authenticity, and identity internationally, most cross-cultural adaptation studies focus on health, education, and Northern-centric design contexts. Research on Chinese consumer preferences emphasises culturally acceptable, giftable, and premium packaging; however, comparable studies for the Caribbean region are notably limited. South-South design scholarship has explored polycentric aesthetic negotiations, parallel development contexts, and issues of symbolic legibility; however, it lacks empirical data on Caribbean designers' strategies for identity translation and cultural adaptation in global or regional markets. This study bridges these gaps by examining how Guyanese designers visually articulate identity and culturally mediated meanings in branding agri-food products for international South-South distribution, as well as how Chinese designers adapt foreign agri-food brands to their local markets.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative methodology to analyse the mediating role of design in South–South agricultural trade. Using a comparative, dual-perspective approach, it investigates the branding of Guyanese sugar from the perspectives of designers in Guyana and China. Semi-structured interviews were employed to capture culturally embedded meanings, professional reasoning, and design decision-making processes. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (2006), was applied to identify recurring patterns, conceptual themes, and points of convergence or divergence between the two designer groups. This approach allows for a systematic comparison of branding strategies and the construction of symbolic models when products from the Global South enter culturally distinct markets.

2.1. Participant Selection

Purposive sampling was used to recruit information-rich cases with direct experience in cross-border packaging and branding within agricultural commodity contexts. Sample adequacy was determined by thematic sufficiency rather than a numerical scale, with recurring patterns in symbolic translation, authenticity negotiation, and market adaptation stabilising during analysis. The participant characteristics of both datasets are summarised in Table 1.

This section should contain sufficient details so that methods can be appropriately cited and readers can assess whether the materials and methods justify the conclusions or not. It can be divided into subsections if several other methods need to be described. You need explain how you studied the topic, identify the procedures you followed, and structure this information as logically as possible.

As shown in Table 1, the study draws on experienced designers from both origin and destination markets, enabling comparative insights into cross-cultural mediation practices.

Table 1. All tables are to be numbered using Arabic numerals.

Dataset	Number of Participants	Country	Years of Experience	Role / Focus
A	6	Guyana	Minimum 5 years	Designers engaged in branding, packaging design, motion graphics, or cultural design
B	5	China	Minimum 3 years	Designers adapting foreign agri-food brands for local markets

2.2. Data Collection

Interviews were conducted between May and June 2025. For Dataset A, a mix of Zoom video interviews (n = 3), WhatsApp voice notes (n = 2), and Facebook Messenger (n = 1) accommodated participants' availability and preferences. Zoom and voice interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, whereas text-based exchanges were exported for analysis.

For Dataset B, synchronous WeChat interviews (n = 5) allowed real-time interaction, with instant translation used when needed. Each session lasted 40–60 minutes. The interview formats and distribution across datasets are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Data Collection Methods

Dataset	Interview Method	Number of Participants	Duration / Notes
A	Zoom video interviews	3	Audio-recorded and transcribed
A	WhatsApp voice notes	2	Transcribed
A	Facebook Messenger	1	Text exported for analysis
B	WeChat synchronous interviews	5	Real-time, instant translation if needed; 40–60 minutes each

The semi-structured guide addressed the following topics: (1) aesthetic norms in branding, (2) evaluation criteria for foreign agri-food products, (3) trust signals in packaging, (4) cross-cultural adaptation strategies, and (5) challenges in mediating Global South brands. Ethical procedures included obtaining verbal or written consent, ensuring confidentiality via pseudonyms (e.g., “C Designer 1”), and secure data storage. Although the combination of formats maximised accessibility and comfort, asynchronous formats may have limited spontaneity. To mitigate potential impacts on

data comparability, particular attention was paid during analysis to ensure consistent thematic depth was extracted across all interview types. The diversity of interview platforms reflects a pragmatic adaptation to participants' contexts while maintaining methodological consistency.

2.3. Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and Chinese transcripts were translated into English for cross-dataset comparison. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. Open coding was conducted manually, with recurring ideas documented in Microsoft Word coding matrices. Codes were grouped into higher-order categories and iteratively refined to ensure an accurate representation of the data. Themes from both datasets were compared to identify mirrored, complementary, or contrasting mechanisms in cross-cultural brand mediation. To confirm interpretive consistency, initial coding and theme generation were regularly discussed with the supervisor. This involved comparing emergent themes, resolving discrepancies in interpretation, and ensuring that themes accurately reflected the raw data.

2.4. Reliability, Limitations, Context and Selection Rationale

Limitations include a small sample size, which constrains generalisability and sector specificity (Guyanese sugar), limiting transferability to other products. Reliability is enhanced through repeated transcript reviews, iterative coding, cross-dataset comparisons, and peer consultation. The Guyana–China trade dyad was selected for its high cultural distance and active agri-food exchange. The inclusion criteria required professional experience with consumer packaging or brand identity and direct involvement in packaging/branding projects within the last three years. This exploratory design prioritises analytical depth, generating insights into the mechanisms of cross-cultural brand mediation rather than statistical generalisations.

3. Results and Discussion

The thematic findings are organised within a conceptual framework that captures the interactions between designers, mediation processes, and branding outcomes (Figure 1).

This framework provides structural logic for the thematic analysis presented below:

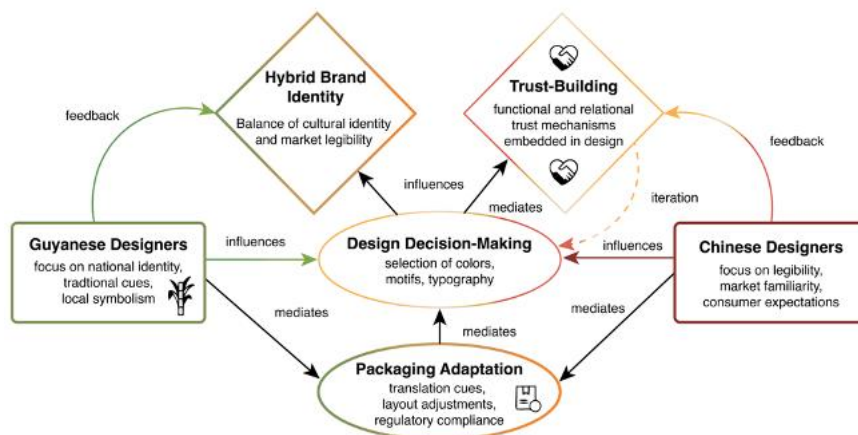


Figure 1. Cross-Cultural Branding Framework for Guyanese Sugar in the Chinese Market Context.

3.1. The Semiotic Tug-of-War: Identity vs. Legibility

Designers consistently describe a central tension between preserving Guyanese cultural identity and ensuring visual legibility for Chinese consumers. This “semiotic tug-of-war” reflects the need to retain authentic brand markers while adapting them for cross-cultural readability. The tension between identity preservation and market legibility is visualised in Figure 2. Maintaining original symbols and colour palettes is viewed as essential for conveying cultural integrity. Guyanese designers emphasise preserving a distinct Caribbean “vibe” through vibrant tones and heritage-linked imagery. However, this expression must be calibrated to avoid alienation or confusion in the Chinese market. As one participant notes, “You want to be unique, but you want to be familiar, you know?” (G Designer 5). This statement encapsulates the strategic balancing act between differentiation and accessibility. Typography and layout emerge as key tools in negotiating this tension. Designers critique excessive font variation and visual clutter as barriers to narrative clarity. Referring to the existing Demerara Gold sachet, one designer observes it contains “one, two, three, four or five different fonts on it at different weights” (G Designer 5), which undermines coherence. Chinese designers similarly advocate for restraint, arguing that packaging should be “easily translated... even if they don’t understand the language initially” (C Designer 4). Minimalist typographic systems and simplified composition, therefore, function as mediating devices, preserving identity while enhancing legibility. Avoiding cultural misinterpretation further complicates this negotiation. Designers express concern about vibrant Caribbean aesthetics being perceived as unsophisticated or “too tacky” (G Designer 5). This perceived risk leads some to “play very safe,” muting expressive elements in favour of controlled refinement. Such caution reveals how cross-cultural branding involves not only expressive creativity but also defensive moderation to manage potential misreadings. Collectively, these findings suggest that successful South–South packaging design depends on disciplined semiotic editing rather than maximal cultural display. Identity is not abandoned, but selectively refined through typographic restraint, compositional clarity, and moderated symbolism to ensure that authenticity remains both visible and intelligible within the Chinese market context.

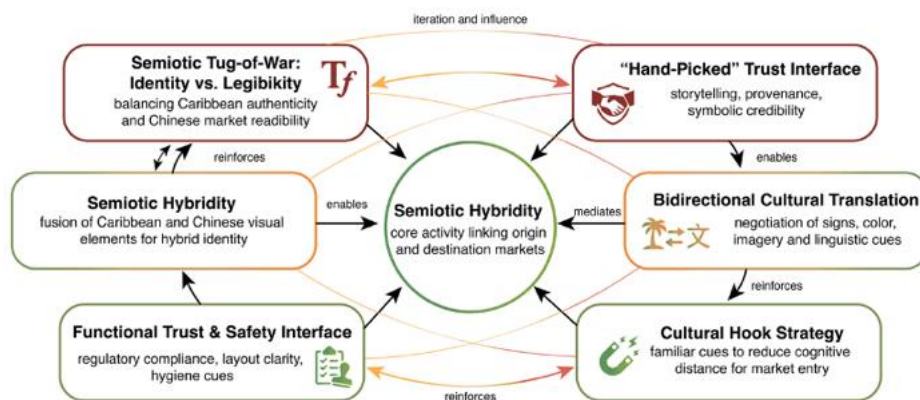


Figure 2. *Semiotic Tug-of-War: Identity vs. Legibility.*

The Figure 2 illustrates how designers continuously negotiate visual intensity, typography, and symbolism to achieve cultural balance.

3.2. The “Hand-Picked” Trust Interface

In the absence of strong institutional brand recognition, designers construct trust through narrative and symbolic strategies that foreground authenticity. This “hand-picked” trust interface relies less on formal certification as a marketing device and more on storytelling, provenance, and culturally grounded symbolism to cultivate credibility. Storytelling has emerged as a primary trust-building mechanism. Designers from both contexts emphasise that a compelling brand narrative transforms consumer engagement from transactional to relational. As one Guyanese designer explains, the value lies not merely in the packaging but in “the story behind it” (G Designer 1). Similarly, Chinese designers have argued that brands must communicate symbolic meanings and heritage to resonate over time. One participant noted that storytelling enables users to feel emotional connection and resonance, positioning narrative as a bridge between unfamiliar origin and local consumer imagination (C Designer 4). Trust, in this sense, is narratively staged rather than assumed. The provenance and artisanal framing further reinforce its credibility. Although participants rarely describe this explicitly as a “labor premium”, references to heritage production, traditional methods, and cultural continuity suggest that human effort and origin authenticity are embedded within the trust signal. Rather than relying solely on institutional endorsement, designers elevate the perceived integrity of a product by embedding it within a culturally rich production narrative. Importantly, packaging is understood as an extension of the story rather than a standalone proof of legitimacy. Visual systems must reinforce, rather than substitute, narrative authenticity. As designers articulate, packaging supports credibility when it visually aligns with the brand’s values and origin story. Trust therefore emerges from coherence: the alignment of the story, symbol, and visual execution. Overall, the “hand-picked” trust interface demonstrates that in South–South branding contexts, credibility is constructed through curated narrative depth and cultural symbolism. Designers compensate for limited institutional brand capital by staging authenticity through storytelling, symbolic continuity, and visual consistency, transforming packaging into a vehicle for relational trust rather than merely regulatory assurance.

3.3. Bidirectional Cultural Translation

The findings position designers as cultural brokers who mediate meaning between Guyanese producers and Chinese consumers. Rather than a one-way adaptation, branding emerges as a bidirectional process in which cultural symbols, aesthetic expectations, and market logics are continuously negotiated. Guyanese designers selectively calibrate the Caribbean visual intensity to align with Chinese symbolic literacy. One participant explains the need to “tone down” vibrant palettes and instead foreground symbolism that Chinese consumers can readily interpret (G Designer 4). This adjustment does not abandon identity, but moderates its expression to reduce semiotic “noise” and increase cross-cultural clarity. Simultaneously, designers retain key Caribbean markers, such as tropical colours or palm imagery, to anchor the brand in its origin. As one designer states, maintaining a vibrant palette and storytelling elements ensures that the product remains recognisable to the Caribbean while remaining legible to a new audience (G Designer 4). Conversely, Chinese designers articulate local consumer expectations and provide culturally specific guidance. Familiar cultural references are recommended as accelerators of recognition. One participant suggested borrowing concepts already known to Chinese consumers, such as associations with the Caribbean popularised through global media, to quickly establish brand awareness (C Designer 3). Beyond recognition, designers emphasise the selective integration of symbolic traditional elements to enhance authenticity and

resonance within the Chinese context (C Designer 4). These insights help Guyanese stakeholders understand which visual cues are culturally persuasive and may require adaptation.

An important dimension of this translation process involves navigating cultural sensitivities and taboos. Chinese designers explicitly warn against motifs associated with blood, violence, skulls, or other potentially negative imagery. Colour symbolism also carries regulatory and emotional implications; red connotes luck and celebration, while excessive black-and-white palettes may evoke funerary associations. Linguistic taboos, such as avoiding the number “4” due to its phonetic association with death, further illustrate how cultural codes impose constraints on design choices. These boundaries represent a defensive layer within translation, ensuring cultural compatibility and protecting brand perception. Notably, similar prohibitive frameworks were not foregrounded in the Caribbean interviews, suggesting an asymmetry in regulatory and symbolic constraints within the exchange. This difference highlights how bidirectional translation involves unequal densities of cultural coding, requiring heightened sensitivity when entering the Chinese market. This asymmetry suggests that while the process is bidirectional, the negotiation might be weighted toward adaptation to the market with more stringent symbolic and regulatory codes, impacting the strategic priorities of designers from the exporting country. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that cross-cultural branding in South–South trade operates as a dialogic negotiation rather than simple localisation. Designers translate, filter, and recalibrate cultural signs while managing symbolic opportunities and constraints. Bidirectional cultural translation, therefore, emerges as both creative elaboration and strategic moderation, requiring aesthetic innovation alongside deep cultural literacy. The bidirectional mediation process between origin and destination designers is illustrated in Figure 3.

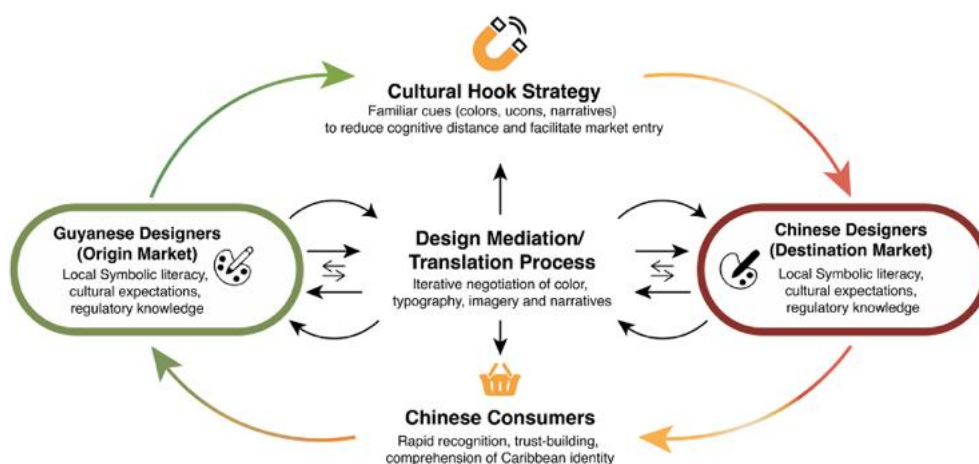


Figure 3. *Bidirectional Cultural Translation and the Cultural Hook in South–South Sugar Branding.*

The Figure 3 emphasises the iterative negotiation that underpins cross-cultural brand adaptation.

3.4. The “Cultural Hook” as Market Entry Strategy

Designers describe the deliberate use of culturally familiar cues as “hooks” to facilitate the introduction of Caribbean products into the Chinese market. Unlike bidirectional translation, which involves a deeper negotiation of meaning, the cultural hook functions as an entry mechanism, reducing cognitive distance and accelerating

initial recognition. Colour symbolism plays a significant role in this strategy. Chinese designers emphasise the importance of aligning palettes with local aesthetic codes, particularly the use of saturated traditional colours associated with celebration and prosperity. The selective incorporation of black is described as signalling premium quality. These colour decisions operate as visual anchors, enabling unfamiliar Caribbean products to appear culturally legible within a Chinese retail environment. Iconography further supports this bridging function. Designers recommend leveraging globally recognisable associations connected to the Caribbean to establish rapid consumer recognition. As one participant explains, borrowing concepts already familiar to Chinese consumers helps “quickly establish recognition in consumers’ minds” (C Designer 3). Such references act as transitional symbols, providing familiarity before deeper brand narratives are introduced.

Narratives then extend the initial connection established by visual cues. Designers describe a two-step process: first, identifying a point of cultural resonance or curiosity, and second, embedding the product within local consumption scenarios, emotions, or lifestyles. In this sense, the cultural hook operates not as a superficial decoration but as a gateway to relational meaning. As one designer noted, storytelling and symbolic meaning represent the long-term value system of the brand (C Designer 5). Collectively, these findings suggest that the cultural hook functions as a pragmatic market-entry strategy. By foregrounding familiar visual and narrative elements, designers lower perceptual barriers while gradually introducing the Caribbean identity. Rather than diluting authenticity, the hook created a staged process of recognition, moving from immediate familiarity to deeper cultural engagement.

3.5. Functional Interface of Trust and Safety

Beyond narrative authenticity, designers emphasise the importance of functional trust cues in establishing legitimacy within the Chinese market. In contexts where imported agricultural goods may face scepticism, regulatory compliance, visual order, and clear provenance operate as baseline signals of safety and credibility. Chinese designers have highlighted legal compliance as a non-negotiable foundation of trust. Packaging must adhere to strict requirements regarding labelling, bilingual text, and avoidance of exaggerated claims. As one participant explains, specific rules govern font size, language pairing, and the prohibition of extreme descriptors such as “first” or “most” (C Designer 5). Although these elements are not inherently creative, their visibility reassures consumers that a product meets institutional standards. Regulatory conformity, therefore, functions as a structural trust mechanism rather than a branding embellishment. Provenance is central to the construction of trust. Guyanese designers stress the importance of clearly identifying geographic origins, often through imagery and explicit textual references to production regions. One participant notes that incorporating recognisable landscape elements makes it “obvious where the product comes from” and anchors the brand in its root identity (G Designer 4). Such cues elevate authenticity by linking a product to tangible place-based credibility.

Visual order reinforces perceptions of hygiene and reliability. Chinese designers associate stable typography and symmetrical layouts with professionalism and security, suggesting that compositional harmony conveys “a sense of reliability and quality” (C Designer 1). Similarly, Guyanese designers critique clutter packaging as having diminishing professionalism and clarity. Across interviews, simplicity emerged as a shared design principle: excessive visual complexity is perceived as undermining trust, whereas restraint signals competence and safety. The layered

construction of trust in cross-cultural sugar branding is conceptualised in Figure 4. Together, these findings reveal a layered functional interface for trust. Regulatory compliance establishes baseline legitimacy, clear origin claims authenticate provenance, and compositional clarity communicates hygiene and reliability. While narrative storytelling builds relational depth (as discussed in Section 4.2), these functional cues form the structural foundation upon which consumer confidence rests. Therefore, in sceptical or unfamiliar markets, trust is not only emotional but also operational, embedded in visible systems of compliance, clarity, and order.

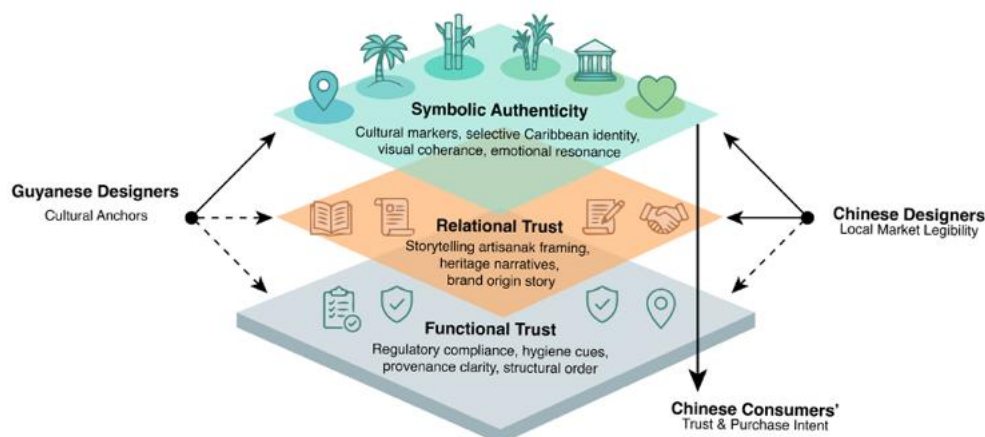


Figure 4. Trust Interface Framework for South–South Agri-Food Branding: Integrating Functional Cues and Relational Storytelling.

As shown, relational and functional mechanisms operate simultaneously, rather than sequentially, in shaping consumer confidence.

3.6. Semiotic Translation and Hybridity

The final theme examined how designers created hybrid brand identities by blending Guyanese authenticity with Chinese visual expectations. Hybridity has emerged as a strategic mechanism to achieve both cultural fidelity and market accessibility.

Fusion of Colors, Symbols, and Typography

Designers deliberately combine visual elements from both cultures. Chinese designers integrate local symbols and colour cues within minimalist frameworks, whereas Guyanese designers maintain Caribbean motifs and narratives. As C Designer 4 explains, foreign brands can retain distinctive characteristics by using Chinese cultural symbols and colors alongside simplified visual forms, achieving a “collision between Chinese and Western cultures” that highlights brand uniqueness.

Selective Preservation of Foreign Elements

Both groups stress the need to preserve authentic identity while adapting to local comprehension. Guyanese designers retain national symbols, such as sugarcane or the jaguar, to anchor heritage, whereas Chinese designers support simplified or culturally resonant adaptations to communicate effectively in the local market. This selective preservation ensures that hybridity does not dilute origin identity but rather translates it into a visually legible, cross-cultural form.

Integration of Global and Local Stylistic Cues

Global minimalist norms provide a baseline for international readability; however, designers layer culturally specific storytelling and symbolism on top. Guyanese participants emphasised narrative depth, whereas Chinese designers prioritised visual clarity and structural order. This interplay balances authenticity with market pragmatism, ensuring that the brand is simultaneously recognisable and credible to multiple audiences.

Hybridity as a Mechanism for Market Acceptance

By combining these strategies, hybridity facilitates brand acceptance in both local and international contexts. Symbolic collisions, merging Chinese motifs with Caribbean elements, create identities that are emotionally resonant yet functionally legible. However, designers caution that over-reliance on global standards may suppress cultural expression. Thus, successful hybridity depends on nuanced negotiation: maintaining authenticity of origin while integrating cues that enable comprehension, trust, and engagement in foreign markets. The process of semiotic hybridity emerging from this negotiation is synthesised in Figure 5. In summary, hybridity is not merely aesthetic but also a strategic semiotic process. This allows designers to mediate cultural translation, preserve meaningful identity, and construct brand legitimacy, ultimately bridging the gap between heritage and market expectations. The six themes identified through the thematic analysis are consolidated in Table 3 for comparative clarity.

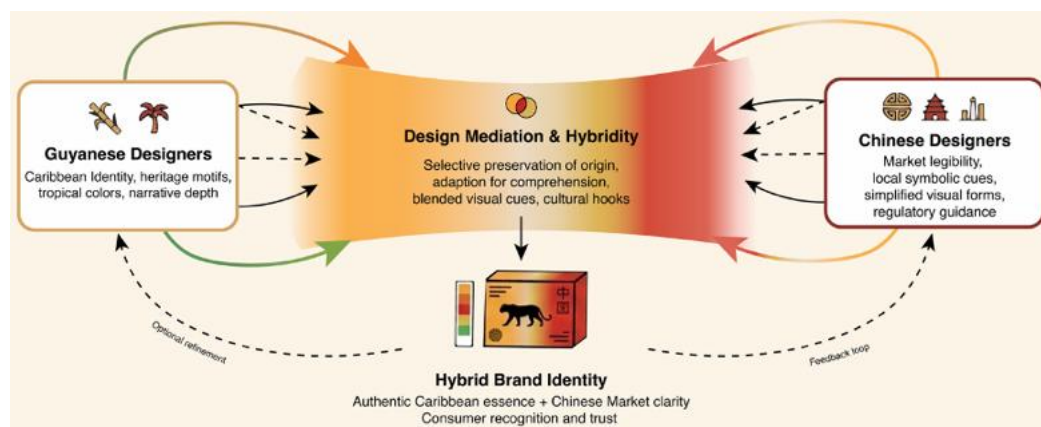


Figure 5. Hybridity and Cross-Cultural Mediation in South–South Sugar Branding.

The hybrid output reflects the selective preservation of the original identity alongside strategic adaptation for market legibility.

Table 3. Key Themes from Thematic Analysis.

Theme	Description	Illustrative Findings
Semiotic Tug-of-War: Identity vs. Legibility	Tension between preserving Guyanese cultural identity and ensuring visual legibility for Chinese consumers	Designers moderate Caribbean colors, heritage imagery, and typography to balance authenticity and readability
“Hand-Picked” Trust Interface	Building trust through narrative, provenance, and culturally grounded symbolism	Storytelling and artisanal framing foster credibility; packaging aligns with the brand story rather than relying on institutional certification
Bidirectional Cultural Translation	Designers act as cultural brokers, negotiating visual and narrative elements	Guyanese designers adapt Caribbean visual intensity; Chinese designers provide culturally resonant guidance and caution about sensitive motifs

Cultural Hook as Market Entry Strategy	Use of culturally familiar cues to reduce cognitive distance for consumers	Visual anchors such as color, iconography, and recognizable references accelerate initial brand recognition
Functional Interface of Trust & Safety	Operational cues for legitimacy	Regulatory compliance, clear provenance, and compositional order signal hygiene, reliability, and product safety
Semiotic Translation & Hybridity	Hybrid brand identities integrating Caribbean authenticity with Chinese visual norms	Fusion of colors, symbols, and typography preserves identity while enhancing market comprehension

The Table 3 summarises the core conceptual tensions, mediation strategies, and trust-building mechanisms that structure cross-cultural sugar branding.

This study explored how cross-cultural branding mediates the identity of Guyanese sugar in the Chinese market. It focuses on the role of designers in navigating tensions between preserving authentic cultural markers and ensuring market legibility across distinct cultural contexts. The following discussion interprets the findings through the lenses of semiotics, cultural translation, and design mediation, linking empirical insights to theoretical frameworks and highlighting contributions to South–South agri-food branding research.

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3.7. Theme-by-Theme Interpretation

3.7.1. Semiotic Tug-of-War: Identity vs. Legibility

Designers in the South-South agri-food trade negotiate a semiotic tension between heritage preservation and readability for diverse audiences. Caribbean cultural markers, vibrant colours, and heritage imagery are moderated for clarity in the Chinese market, often using minimalist typography and restrained composition. This “semiotic tug-of-war” confirms semiotic theory, which holds that signs carry both denotative and symbolic meanings that must be legible across cultural boundaries [54,55]. The findings reinforce prior literature indicating that excessive complexity can hinder comprehension, while overly simplified heritage elements risk dilution [56]. In practice, disciplined typographic and symbolic adaptation facilitates authentic, legible branding across markets [6,57].

3.7.2. “Hand-Picked” Trust Interface

Designers have articulated that trust emerges as a dual mechanism, relational and functional. From their perspective, storytelling and artisanal cues are intended to establish relational trust, connecting consumers emotionally to provenance, heritage, and production methods [3,28]. Packaging has become an extension of brand narrative, compensating for weak institutional frameworks in emerging markets [17,29]. By embedding culturally anchored narratives, designers foster credibility and long-term

consumer engagement, demonstrating that trust-building extends beyond formal certification.

3.7.3. Bidirectional Cultural Translation

Designers function as cultural brokers, mediating between Guyanese producers and Chinese consumers through bidirectional translation. Guyanese designers adjusted vibrant palettes and imagery to align with Chinese symbolic literacy, while Chinese designers introduced culturally resonant cues to facilitate recognition. This negotiation supports cultural translation theory, highlighting designers as active mediators who adapt signs for authenticity and market comprehensibility [7,33,34]. Cultural literacy is critical, encompassing regulatory awareness, symbolic taboos, and emotional associations that shape design decisions.

3.7.4. Cultural Hook as a Bridge

The “cultural hook” leverages colour, iconography, and familiar references to reduce cognitive distance and enable rapid recognition in the Chinese market [4,31]. Caribbean symbols and saturated colors act as visual anchors, easing consumer engagement and supporting deeper narrative integration [3,14,15,20]. This staged engagement balances accessibility with authenticity, facilitating initial market entry while preserving brand distinctiveness.

3.7.5. Functional Interface of Trust & Safety

As found in the results, functional trust relies on regulatory compliance, provenance clarity, hygiene cues, and compositional order. These baseline mechanisms convey operational reliability and complement relational trust established through storytelling, which aligns with the literature [14,15]. Thus, packaging simultaneously signals legitimacy and supports emotional engagement, reflecting a layered trust-building approach that is essential in cross-cultural south-south branding.

3.7.6. Semiotic Translation & Hybridity

Designers agree that hybrid identities emerge when they integrate Caribbean motifs with Chinese visual norms, thereby creating brands that are both authentic and accessible. This hybridity reflects semiotic negotiation, balancing origin authenticity with market expectations, and aligns with literature on cross-cultural adaptation and cultural hybridity [7,43,44]. Designers’ deliberate blending of visual elements enhances comprehension, emotional resonance, and market acceptance, positioning hybridity as both a strategic process and an outcome of effective cross-cultural mediation.

3.8. Contributions and Novelty

This study confirms the centrality of semiotics in cross-cultural branding, emphasising the contested and fluid nature of symbolic infrastructures in South–South contexts [48,54,55]. It expands cultural translation theory by highlighting bidirectional negotiated adaptation, positioning designers as active mediators rather than passive implementers [7,34]. The Guyana–China context reveals asymmetrical symbolic coding and market complexity, demonstrating that hybrid semiotics serves as a practical strategy for preserving authenticity while ensuring market legibility. Empirically, this study contributes a dual-perspective view, capturing both origin and destination designers, which is rarely addressed in South–South branding research. It

foregrounds the strategic role of design in mediating trust, cultural legibility, and hybrid identity, providing a framework for scholars and practitioners working in polycentric international trade contexts.

3.9. Practical Implications

Based on designer perspectives, this study offers actionable guidance for designers engaged in South–South agri-food branding. Future research incorporating consumer reception is crucial to validate the effectiveness of these strategies. To balance authenticity and market legibility, designers should conduct semiotic audits of existing cultural markers, such as colours, imagery, and typography, to identify the core elements essential for preserving brand identity. Disciplined semiotic editing, including simplified typography and restrained visual composition, enhances clarity without eroding cultural distinctiveness, whereas moderated palettes ensure that vibrant heritage elements do not overwhelm or alienate target consumers.

Designers also function as cultural brokers, mediating bidirectional translations between origin and destination markets. Continuous dialogue with stakeholders in the target market helps designers understand local symbolic literacy, aesthetic norms, and potential taboos. Selective adaptation of visual elements, such as incorporating culturally resonant cues or “cultural hooks,” bridges cognitive distance and facilitates initial recognition while preserving signature origin markers, such as tropical motifs or heritage symbols. Avoiding elements with negative connotations or regulatory conflicts is essential to maintain brand credibility and prevent misinterpretation.

Hybridity emerges as a strategic semiotic process in which designers blend origin and destination cultural symbols to produce brand identities that are simultaneously authentic and accessible. Global minimalist design norms, including clean typography and balanced layouts, serve as a structural baseline upon which culturally specific storytelling and symbolic cues are layered. Preserving key heritage elements while adapting others improves cross-cultural comprehension and emotional resonance.

Storytelling and narrative depth play a central role in fostering relational trust. Packaging narratives that emphasise provenance, artisanal production methods, and cultural heritage creates emotional connections and reinforces authenticity. Designers should ensure that visual design elements align coherently with these narratives, positioning packaging as a cultural text rather than as a mere container.

Finally, designers must manage semiotic tensions strategically, balancing expressive cultural display with market legibility. Excessive complexity or clutter can confuse consumers or undermine perceived professionalism; therefore, iterative testing and feedback with target market representatives are recommended to calibrate the level of cultural expression and legibility effectively. The development of cross-cultural checklists and documented translation decisions can support consistency and knowledge transfer across projects, whereas collaborative prototyping with designers from both markets enhances hybrid identity and trust cues.

4. Conclusions

This study highlights four key interpretations central to understanding cross-cultural design mediation in South–South trade contexts: identity negotiation, trust-building, cultural translation, and hybridity. Identity negotiation is revealed to be a dynamic process in which stakeholders actively shape and redefine cultural and design identities to ensure relevance and resonance across diverse markets. Trust-building is

identified as a foundational mechanism that facilitates collaboration, mutual acceptance, and the smooth exchange of cultural and commercial values. Cultural translation emerges as a critical practice that adapts and mediates design elements and meanings, effectively bridging distinct cultural understandings and expectations. Hybridity underscores the creative blending and fusion of multiple cultural influences, resulting in innovative design practices that embody plural narratives and foster intercultural dialogue. This research primarily contributes an empirically grounded exploratory framework for cross-cultural design mediation within the specific South-South trade context of Guyanese sugar in China. This framework advances scholarly understanding of how branding strategies and cultural mediation operate in these dynamic intercultural exchanges and offers practical insights into sustainable and effective design approaches that are responsive to evolving market conditions and cultural shifts.

Longitudinal studies are recommended to explore how branding strategies and cultural mediation evolve over time in response to ongoing market feedback, regulatory changes, and shifting cultural dynamics. Such research would deepen insights into sustainable design practices in South-South trade by capturing the temporal dimension of cultural negotiation and mediation processes. This would further enhance the applicability and robustness of the proposed framework, supporting practitioners and scholars in navigating the complexities of intercultural design collaborations in emerging global trade networks.

4.1. Limitations and Future Research

Despite these practical insights, this study has several limitations. The small sample size restricts the generalisability of findings beyond the specific context of Guyanese sugar branding, whereas the focus on the Guyana-China trade dyad limits transferability to other South-South trade relationships or product categories. Furthermore, reliance on designer perspectives alone excludes a direct examination of consumer interpretations, which may omit critical dimensions of brand effectiveness and trust formation.

Future research could address these gaps by investigating consumer reception and interpretation of South-South branded agri-food products to validate packaging effectiveness and explore market engagement. Extending the analysis to other product categories would test the applicability of semiotic and mediation strategies across diverse commodities. Longitudinal studies could further examine how branding strategies and cultural mediation evolve over time in response to market feedback, regulatory shifts, and changing cultural dynamics, providing deeper insights into sustainable South-South design practices.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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