

Empowering Asian Narratives Through Fashion: Unveiling the Journey of the Asian Fashion Archive

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ABSTRACT

The Asian Fashion Archive is a digital humanities project dedicated to highlighting and celebrating the diverse cultural narratives and histories of Asian communities through fashion, culture, and history. This paper explores the development of the Asian Fashion Archive, emphasizing its commitment to decolonizing fashion discourse and amplifying underrepresented voices and experiences. By engaging with the conference sub-theme, “Communities,” the paper focuses on the potential of collaborative methodologies to center global voices and share authentic stories.

Grounded in the frameworks of interdisciplinary, decolonization, and representation approaches, the Asian Fashion Archive emphasizes how fashion can serve as a lens to understand identity, heritage, and cultural exchange. The project draws upon digital tools to create a curated platform that connects global audiences with cultural and fashion narratives around Asian communities, challenging dominant Eurocentric ideals.

The paper also reflects on the challenges faced during the project’s development, including managing extensive research with no external funding or institutional support and examining the responsibility of accurate representations and constructive content. It also calls for collaboration opportunities and insights into creating a comprehensive platform that can foster new dialogues. Through reflection, this paper invites conference attendees to engage with the Asian Fashion Archive on how a digital humanities project can be a new place of learning and reimagining cultural narratives in fashion. Feedback for this project, particularly for sustaining community involvement, is critical to ensuring its ongoing relevance in fashion scholarship.

By documenting and amplifying marginalized voices and experiences within fashion narratives, the Asian Fashion Archive not only aims to contribute to a more inclusive understanding of fashion and culture, but hopes to serve as a collaborative, community-centered space.

Keywords: Asian Fashion, Digital Humanities, Cultural Sustainability, Community Storytelling, Fashion Narratives

INTRODUCTION

Launched in 2020, the Asian Fashion Archive is a digital humanities initiative designed to address the systemic underrepresentation of Asian communities and experiences in Western fashion narratives and media. Developed during heightened anti-Asian racism, the project seeks to combat harmful stereotypes, foster nuanced representations, and preserve the cultural heritage of Asian communities. By amplifying diverse stories and showcasing authentic stories, the platform aims not only to educate, but also to empower, fostering a more inclusive understanding of global fashion cultures.

The project currently operates across two platforms: Instagram (@AsianFashionArchive) and a website (www.AsianFashionArchive.com). The Instagram account serves as a visual curation space, sharing content related to Asian fashion, history, and culture, while inviting community contributions and engagement. In 2021, the project expanded with the launch of its website, which functions as a repository of curated visual, audio, and textual resources designed for educators, students, and broader audiences. These resources include links to films, clips, museum exhibitions, podcasts, publications, articles, and educational tools, such as curriculum guides and activity books tailored for younger learners.

This developmental paper explores the progress and challenges of creating the Asian Fashion Archive, with a focus on the conference's sub-theme, "Communities." It also demonstrates how the project seeks to amplify marginalized voices and tell authentic stories by focusing on potential collaborative methods and innovative approaches. It reflects on the potential of digital humanities to democratize access to fashion knowledge and reimagine cultural narratives. The paper underscores the transformative power of community-centered practices in reshaping global fashion ideals and invites feedback on strategies to further develop and sustain the Asian Fashion Archive's mission.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Asian Fashion Archive employs an interdisciplinary approach, integrating insights from cultural studies, fashion history, and anthropology to engage with and unconventionally expand fashion scholarship. Central to the project's mission is addressing the urgent calls for decolonizing fashion scholarship (Cheang, De Greef, & Yoko 2021), as well as advancing inclusive approaches (Cheang & Suterwalla 2020). Scholars making these calls emphasize the need to dismantle Eurocentric frameworks and center marginalized histories, enabling students and researchers to see themselves represented in fashion narratives. However, as Tanveer Ahmed (2021) underscores, achieving these goals requires confronting asymmetrical power dynamics within fashion education and seeking innovative methodologies to examine and redress racial inequities.

While the use of digital humanities in fashion remains underexplored, existing digital fashion projects provide important frameworks and insights. Yuniya Kawamura (2023) observes that digital spaces create opportunities for wider public engagement, particularly among younger audiences, enabling greater accessibility to fashion topics. Marco Pecorari (2019) highlights the potential of digital platforms to disrupt institutional hierarchies, employing digital storytelling and curatorial techniques to democratize access to fashion and foster inclusivity. Minh-Ha Pham's (2015) *Of Another Fashion* exemplifies this potential by providing a digital public space that centers on the fashion histories of minoritized communities, offering them tools to self-create and self-manage their representations.

Other impactful fashion digital projects include Tosin Adeosun's African Style Archive, which documents African fashion history through archival images, and Jonathan Square's *Rendering Revolution*, which examines the Haitian Revolution through the lens of fashion and material culture. Michelle McVicker (2024) further discusses the role of digital projects in providing "communal validation," a critical alternative to institutional limitations, particularly in the context of Latinx fashion narratives.

These initiatives demonstrate the transformative potential of fashion digital humanities projects in reshaping fashion scholarship, challenging dominant narratives, and fostering participatory knowledge production. Building on these foundations, the Asian Fashion Archive explores how digital tools can help to emphasize the need for more inclusive stories.

METHODOLOGY

The Asian Fashion Archive employs digital and social media tools to surface marginalized stories of Asian communities and identities through storytelling. Instagram, chosen for its visual immediacy and global reach, especially among younger audiences, serves as the foundational platform. The digital curation process on Instagram involves sourcing images and resources from institutional collections, media publications, and popular culture.

These resources include online databases, such as the Singapore National Heritage Board, the Museum of Art & Photography, the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, Nepal Picture Library, and CALISPHERE. These curated materials highlight narratives that have historically been overlooked, such as Singaporean stage actor Francis Hogan, Filipino fashion designer Salvacion Lim Higgins, Chinese American parades of 1938, and the activism of Princess Sophia Duleep Singh. Instagram features such as "Highlights" are used to organize previously posted content by region, ensuring accessibility, while the "Stories" feature provides timely updates on relevant fashion news and topics.

The scope of the Asian Fashion Archive expanded with the creation of a website in response to feedback from Instagram followers requesting a deeper educational engagement with its content. The website serves as a repository of diverse resources, including films, exhibitions, podcasts, and publications tailored for educators, students, and broader audiences. It also features a dedicated “For Students” section highlighting accessible educational resources for younger audiences. Current featured resources on the website include the *Dress History of Korea: Critical Perspectives on Primary Sources* (2023) by Kyunghye Pyun and Minjee Kim, the podcast Southeast Asian-focused Podcast series *In the Vitrine*, and the documentary film *Invisible Seams* (2022). Similar to Instagram, the website organizes its content by geographic regions, Asian Americans, East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, with plans for further expansion.

Collaborations form a cornerstone of the Asian Fashion Archive’s methodology. Calls for contributions of ideas, content, and resources are actively made through Instagram and its website. A recent partnership with *Fashion & Market*, a platform that uses an interdisciplinary approach to document processes in Southeast Asian fashion, enables the publication of a bimonthly column on Southeast Asian fashion history, distributed across both platforms.

Integrating digital tools, collaborative practices, and interdisciplinary engagement underscores the project’s commitment to centering marginalized voices in fashion narratives. Future growth necessitates further collaborative efforts to deepen the platform’s reach and impact. The methodology not only reflects a commitment to community storytelling, but also provides a framework for continuous expansion.

REFLECTION

Over the past four years, the Asian Fashion Archive has evolved into a communal space, currently engaging nearly 18,000 followers, with over 1,000 Instagram posts and a growing repository of curated resources on its website. While it has made strides in amplifying marginalized voices and enriching the representation of Asian fashion and culture, its development has not been without challenges. One of the primary hurdles has been the substantial amount of research required to build and maintain a comprehensive digital humanities project, particularly without external funding or institutional support. As a result, the project has relied heavily on personal commitment, which has, at times, limited its growth potential. Additionally, the responsibility of ensuring accurate and respectful representation of the diverse Asian communities has been a consideration. Given the complexities of identity, curating content that reflects the nuances of various Asian experiences requires careful deliberation.

Community engagement has played an essential role in shaping the direction of the project. Complimentary and constructive feedback from users has been invaluable, offering insights that have guided the development of content and refined the project's focus. However, further engagement is necessary to deepen its impact. Future growth will require increased collaborations to ensure diverse voices are truly centered. Expanding opportunities for user-generated content, incorporating firsthand narratives, and enhancing the resources available to educators and studies are crucial steps in strengthening the project. By fostering a more robust and participatory approach, the Asian Fashion Archive can evolve into a more dynamic and inclusive resource, ultimately fulfilling its mission to transform fashion narratives and broaden perspectives on cultural identities.

CONCLUSION

The Asian Fashion Archive has progressed in addressing the underrepresentation of Asian communities and experiences within Western fashion and media. By utilizing digital platforms and engaging with diverse sources, the project has created a space for amplifying marginalized voices and challenging prevailing narratives. Through ongoing community engagement and collaboration, it can continue to evolve, providing a valuable resource for educators, students, and those interested in Asian fashion, history, and culture. However, challenges related to resource limitations and the responsibility for accurate representation persist, requiring ongoing attention and innovation. Moving forward, the Asian Fashion

Archive aims to expand its collaborative efforts, integrate firsthand narratives, and develop more interactive tools to foster deeper community involvement. Ultimately, it strives to not only document, but also reshape fashion's cultural narratives, centering authentic voices and identities that have long been overlooked.

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