

A case study of Kebaya Societé’s promotion of the Nusantara fashion and identity in Singapore through visual narratives

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ABSTRACT

Even in its globalised manifestation, fashion is often dominated by Eurocentric perspectives that place Western fashion as progressive and innovative. This inevitably relegates non-Western fashion as “the Other” - exotic but backwards and static. In recent years, however, a cultural renaissance, led by individuals redefining fashion through their heritage, has emerged from Southeast Asia. In Singapore, one of the examples of this resurgence is the Instagram account Kebaya Societé. The brains behind the account are Paris-trained fashion designer Sufiyanto A.S. (Sufi), who has worked in the creative teams of couturiers such as Stephane Rolland and Elie Saab, and Afiq Juana, a fashion business consultant interested in the intersections of fashion, data and web 3.0. Through the account, the duo aims to be a veritable resource for vintage Nusantara fashion, specifically in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia from the 1900s to the 1980s. This paper thus explores this cultural resurgence via a case study of the Instagram account @kebayasociete to show how it reshapes fashion narratives by challenging Eurocentric perspectives and promoting authentic cultural identities. The findings highlight the critical role of social media and physical exhibitions in this cultural movement, demonstrating how the platform not only educates but also attempts to inspire audiences on Nusantara fashion. By focusing on Kebaya Societé, this paper provides valuable insights into preserving and revitalising cultural practices, paving the way for a more inclusive and inspiring future in the fashion industry.

The content analysis systematically examines @kebayasociete’s Instagram posts, focusing on visual and textual elements that highlight traditional Malay fashion. Key themes such as cultural heritage, identity, and modern reinterpretations of the kebaya are identified and analysed. Additionally, the expansion of Kebaya Societé to physical exhibitions is examined, emphasising how these events further engage the community and promote cultural heritage.

Keywords: Fashion, Malay Community, Instagram, Kebaya, Cultural Renaissance

INTRODUCTION

In its economic and cultural context, fashion can communicate and construct identity and social status. Joanne Entwistle argues that what we choose to wear is often a compromise between the “demands of the social world, the milieu in which we belong, and our own individual desires” (114). However, it is important to acknowledge that Eurocentric perspectives still dominate fashion. These perspectives, which are usually deeply rooted in colonial history, often consider the Western aesthetic as a representation of progress and innovation.

In *Fashion and Cultural Studies*, Susan Kaiser wrote that wearing “Western-fashion-dress became framed as part of the process of becoming modern” (Kaiser, 2021, 48). This, in turn, places the non-Western traditions as exotic or static. In short, they get defined as “somehow lesser than, somehow Other to, and somehow more feminised than their perennial Western foil” (Jones and Leshkovich, 2003, 5). This dynamic is particularly evident in the context of Southeast Asia, where colonial histories profoundly shaped cultural representation. For instance, traditional Malay attire, such as the *baju kurung* and *baju kebaya*, hold significant cultural and historical value. While these garments reflect the rich heritage of the Malay people, the region’s colonial history has led to the marginalisation and commodification of these traditional forms. The marginalisation of traditional Malay attire can be traced back to the British colonial era, which began in the late 18th century and continued until the mid-20th century.

Western fashion and cultural norms were often imposed on the local population during this period. The colonial administration and European settlers viewed Western attire as superior, relegating traditional Malay clothing to a secondary status. This was part of a broader strategy to assert cultural dominance and control over the colonised population. As Western clothing became associated with modernity and progress, traditional Malay garments were increasingly seen as outdated and backward. For example, advertisements in colonial Malaya for Western clothing brands emphasised the modern and civilised nature of Western suits and dresses. This indirectly suggests that traditional attire was inferior and unsuitable for the modern world. This shift in perception was further reinforced through various colonial policies and social practices, where traditional clothes were often worn at cultural festivals and special occasions, rather than Western outfits, which were chosen for professional and educational settings. This became the standard dress code and reinforced the idea of modernity. This standard dress code prevails today.

This resonates with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s critical interrogations in her essay “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*”. Spivak’s arguments point to how the voices of the marginalised are often “constituted as the Other” (Spivak, 1988, 76). This is often done by violently imposing narratives that erase or distort the subaltern histories. Thus, the subaltern becomes an object of representation rather than a subject with agency and struggles to communicate their own narratives outside Western perspectives. Spivak

critiques how even well-meaning intellectuals often “speak for” the subaltern, which reduces their voices to native informants within hegemonic structures (Spivak, 1988, 79). In this context, marginalised fashion histories are frequently appropriated, commodified, or erased, limiting the ability of non-Western fashion narratives to exist on their own terms.

This theoretical framework offers a critical lens for examining Southeast Asia’s cultural landscape, where colonial histories have left deep imprints on fashion narratives. As a region shaped by intersecting cultural exchanges and histories of colonial occupation, the region can be used to show how fashion can simultaneously reflect cultural resilience and systemic marginalisation.

Here, and against this backdrop of Eurocentric dominance in fashion narratives, we can take the *baju kebaya* as a potent symbol of the Nusantara’s rich, yet often marginalised, cultural identity. The term “Nusantara” has its roots in the old Sanskrit language, and refers to the maritime Southeast Asian world. This would include modern-day Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and parts of the Philippines and Thailand (Evers, 2016, 7-9). During this time, the region had produced a rich textile heritage shaped by indigenous practices, foreign influences, and colonial interventions. Key garments such as the *kebaya*, *batik*, *songket*, and *sarong* reflect this dynamic interplay. *Baju kebaya*, a traditional garment worn predominantly by women in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei, thus epitomises the syncretic identity of the region.

With its intricate embroidery and graceful silhouette, *baju kebaya* represents a fusion of Southeast Asian and European influences, which reflects the interconnected histories of maritime Southeast Asia. Historically, the *baju kebaya* has been both a marker of identity and a site of negotiation, adapting to the socio-political landscapes of its wearers. Its evolution over centuries challenges the binary distinction between “tradition” and “modernity”, which, as Jansen argues, is a dichotomy that continues to shape global perceptions of non-Western fashion. This significance was formally recognised in 2024 when the kebaya was inscribed onto UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, a recognition jointly championed by Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei (Channel News Asia, 2024). The UNESCO inscription affirms the kebaya’s historical and cultural significance while underscoring its role as a shared heritage that transcends national boundaries.

Given the historical marginalisation of non-Western fashion narratives, the advent of social media platforms provided an avenue for cultural reclamation and dialogue opportunities. In the last five years, platforms like Instagram have emerged as powerful tools for preserving and promoting cultural heritage. Instagram’s visual and interactive nature makes it particularly suited for storytelling, education, and advocacy. Authors Tim Highfield and Tama Leaver observe that the visual is critical because it allows for

story-telling and meaning-making, and on social media, this variously incorporates the original image, the edited and collaged media, and the appropriated visual” (Highfield and Leaver, 2016, 53). This highlights how social media platforms like Instagram function as dynamic spaces for constructing narratives through visual media, allowing users to engage with and reinterpret cultural artefacts while fostering global conversations about identity, heritage, and belonging.

Given this potential, individuals and cultural activists have turned to Instagram to reclaim histories and challenge institutional narratives. In the context of fashion, Instagram acts as both a digital archive and a creative space, enabling users to document and reinterpret traditional garments in ways that resonate with contemporary audiences. These capabilities provided accounts like Kebaya Société to challenge dominant narratives and provide a platform for marginalised voices. They use visual storytelling to highlight the evolving cultural heritage of the Nusantara region.

The account is founded by Sufiyanto A.S (Sufi), who is a Paris-trained fashion designer, and fashion business consultant Afiq Juana. The aim of the account is to celebrate fashion in the Nusantara, which is deeply rooted in the region’s complex history of cultural exchanges, migration, and colonial rule. It also offers a nuanced perspective on the significance of the featured garments through a combination of archival research, visual storytelling, and digital curation. By foregrounding Malay identity and heritage, Kebaya Société challenges global narratives that often marginalise or tokenise non-Western traditions.

The educational potential of social media is particularly relevant in contexts where institutional representation of non-Western histories is limited. As Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin observe in *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures*, platforms like Instagram is a “conduit for communication” where “the visual focus is particularly important in the success and relevance of the platform” (Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, 2022, 1). Here, the authors posit that Instagram is more than just an app used to share photos. Rather, it is also the key to “understanding and mapping visual social media cultures” (Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, 2022, 2). This highlights how the platform democratises access to knowledge, enabling users to curate their own narratives and challenge institutional hierarchies. This democratisation is evident in Kebaya Société’s ability to reach diverse audiences, from academic researchers to young fashion enthusiasts, inspiring them to engage with the kebaya as both a historical artefact and a living tradition.

The platform’s impact extends beyond historical documentation to actively engaging with contemporary socio-political issues. This was evident in 2022 when Kebaya Société highlighted a controversial statement made by Singapore designer Priscilla Ong Shunmugam during a virtual panel organised by the Asian Civilisation Museum.

In her response to a question posed by an audience member, Ong made a remark which suggested that Chinese women were “more progressive” than their Malay and Indian counterparts. She went on to add that “Chinese women were the first Asian women to shake hands with men ... [and] were culturally the first Asian women to adopt Western dressing, be it the dress or mini skirt” (Marketing Interactive, 2022). This exchange was uploaded onto Kebaya Societé’s Instagram account, which sparked widespread criticism of the designer, and ignited discussions on racial and cultural biases within Southeast Asia’s fashion landscape. Here, it can be argued that the platform’s decision to amplify this discourse held Ong accountable and reaffirmed its commitment to advocating for respectful representation and cultural equity (The Straits Times, 2022).

At the heart of Kebaya Societé’s mission is the challenge of balancing tradition and modernity, a tension that defines much of non-Western fashion. Using the *baju kebaya* as a starting point, the account attempts to educate and show how the *baju kebaya* is not a static artefact but, in fact, a living tradition that continues to evolve while reflecting the aspirations and identities of its wearers. The account achieves this by sharing stories of *baju kebaya* wearers on its account, posting images of how the outfits are worn, and naming the wearers. In an interview with Female Singapore magazine, Sufi posits that museums “tend to focus on the piece itself without the wearers and their story”. Thus, through their posts, the duo attempts to “share the stories of the owners who wore the kebaya” (Female, 2022). This is in line with Craik’s observations that fashion is a ‘body technique’ that displays “markers of social conduct expressed and displayed through clothes”. In this way, it signals “place and identity as well as performing social intercourse” (Craik, 1992, 9). Thus, by documenting and celebrating the *baju kebaya* and its wearers, Kebaya Societé contributes to a broader movement of cultural reclamation and decolonisation, reshaping the global fashion narrative to include the voices and histories of the subaltern.

This paper situates Kebaya Societé’s work within the broader framework of decolonising fashion studies and reshaping cultural narratives. This study uses qualitative content analysis of the platform’s Instagram posts to explore how digital media can facilitate cultural preservation, education, and advocacy. Specifically, it addresses three key questions:

1. How does Kebaya Societé challenge Eurocentric and local biases in fashion?
2. What role does Instagram play in promoting and preserving Nusantara heritage?
3. How does the platform balance tradition and modernity in its narratives?

This study focuses on how meanings are constructed through digital media. The research uses content and visual semiotic analysis to examine how Kebaya Societé’s digital and physical activities frame narratives of Nusantara identity, heritage

preservation, and socio-political advocacy. It will analyse four key case studies chosen between 2020 and 2024. These activities were selected based on thematic relevance, historical depth, and socio-political impact. They are:

1. Educational content
2. Cultural Diversity
3. Political and cultural activism
4. Bridging the digital and physical worlds to create a tangible impact

Additionally, relevant media coverage, including articles from *The Straits Times*, *Channel News Asia*, and fashion commentary platforms, was reviewed to provide contextual depth. It is important to note that the founders have always emphasised their goal of preserving Malay cultural history through a critical, community-driven lens. As Sufi shared in an interview with Singapore's *The Peak* magazine: "(Coming) from the Malay community, we see a lot of our identity, culture, and heritage be erased or replaced" (*The Peak*, 2024). Thus, it can be said that their work reflects an urgent response to cultural erasure, addressing a national narrative that has often sanitised and commodified history.

Case Study #1: Educational Focus

Baju Kebaya and Baju Kurung Feature Post by Kebaya Societé, 3 December 2024

The series of images uses historical and modern visual language and styles to engage the audience. Designed as a series of infographics, the post details the various styles of garments that are worn by women in the Malay and Indonesian world. It also comes with visual schematics and descriptions of textiles, silhouettes, and cultural significance.



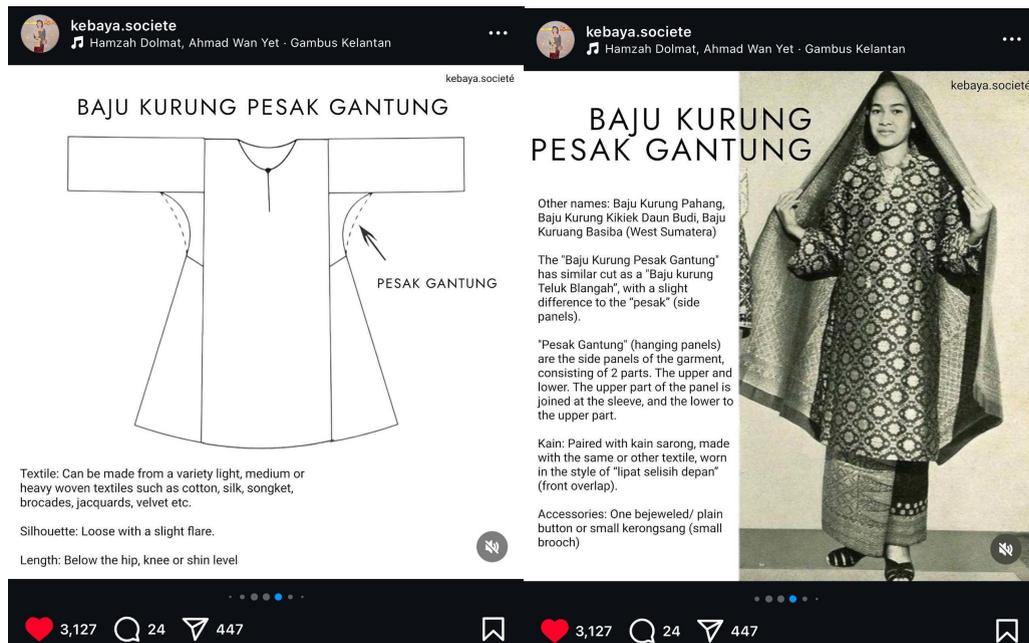


Figure 1: A carousel of educational infographics exploring *baju kebaya* and *baju kurung* across the Malay and Indonesian worlds. Credit: Kebaya Societé/Instagram

What is interesting about the post is how it not only highlights Kebaya Societé’s commitment to cultural preservation and education but also shows the diversity within the *baju kebaya* and *baju kurung*—from the *Baju Panjang* to the *Telok Blangah*. This thus highlights the cultural plurality of Nusantara fashion. The inclusion of infographics breaks down technical details, making the information accessible to a broader audience. For example, explanations of *pesak gantung* (hanging side panels) or *kekek* (triangular gussets) not only educate followers about garment construction but also emphasise the craftsmanship inherent in traditional attire.

The inclusion of sepia-toned and black-and-white images situates the *kebaya* and *kurung* within their historical and cultural contexts. For example, by using an archival photo of a Malay woman from the 1920s wearing the *Baju Telok Blangah* as opposed to a flatlay image of the outfit itself, the post shows authenticity while connecting the audience in the present to the past.

The text also describes the historical and cultural significance of each garment. For instance, the caption for *Baju Kurung Pesak Gantung* explains its unique side panels and their origins in both Malay and Indonesian tailoring traditions. By naming specific regions and design variations, the post highlights the geographical and cultural diversity within Nusantara fashion. The language used in the post avoids overly academic jargon, making it approachable for a diverse audience. Phrases like “the kebaya, plain in its form, can be worn as is or embellished” balance accessibility with informative depth. This narrative framing positions the *kebaya* and *kurung* as both historical artefacts and living traditions.

Additionally, hashtags such as #KebayaSociete, #NusantaraHeritage, and #CulturalPreservation expand the post's reach and connect it to broader conversations about cultural identity. It should also be noted that the post is accompanied by an instrumental track. The song, *Gambus Kelantan* by Hamzah Dolmat and Ahmad Wan Yet, which uses the Malay folk lute instrument further enhances the immersive experience, creating a multisensory connection to heritage.

Cited sources, including books like *Rupa & Gaya: Busana Melayu* and institutional references from Jabatan Muzium Negara, lend credibility to the content. These citations position the post as a scholarly yet accessible resource, challenging mainstream narratives that often overlook or misrepresent non-Western clothing. The cited sources further enhance the post's educational value, offering audiences an opportunity to delve deeper into the subject. This academic rigour challenges the Eurocentric biases that often exoticise or oversimplify non-Western fashion. Instead of reducing the *kebaya* and *kurung* to mere traditional costumes, the post positions them as dynamic garments with a rich history of adaptation and innovation.

Case study #2: Cultural Diversity

"Pakai Kain Apa Tu?! - A Look Into the Different Styles of Wearing Kain", 4 July 2023

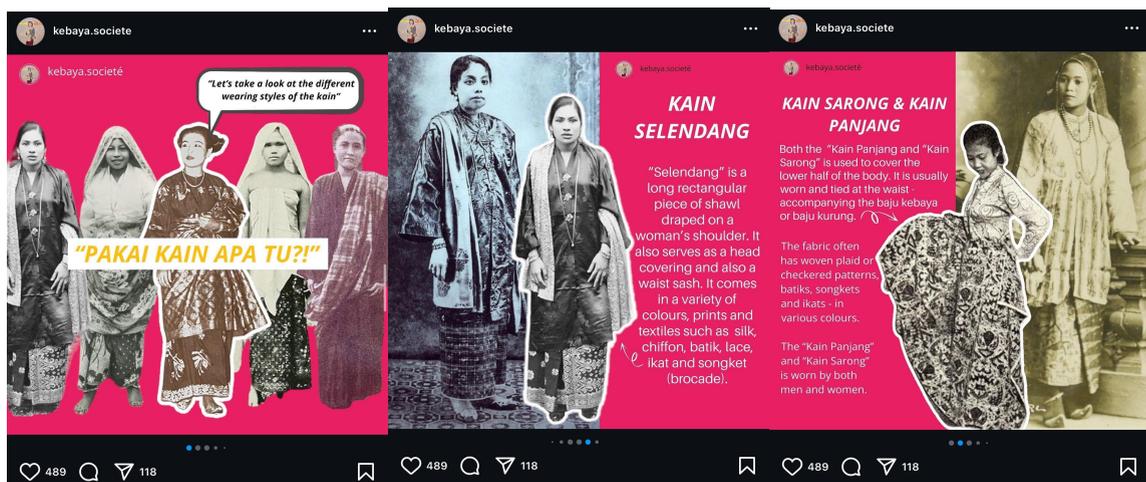


Figure 2: A carousel post on the different types of kain sarong worn by the womenfolk of the Nusantara region. (credit: Kebaya Societé/Instagram)

Figure 2 shows the diverse ways the *kain*, or the sarong, has been worn across time and space, reinforcing its importance in Malay and Indonesian heritage. By highlighting regional styles like *Kain Kemben* (Javanese) and *Kain Kelubung* (Kelantanese), the content combats monolithic representations of Southeast Asian attire.

The post utilises vibrant visuals with a bright pink background that immediately captures attention. The arrangement of images—archival photographs juxtaposed

with digital illustrations—creates a balance between historical reverence and contemporary design aesthetics. Each style of kain is accompanied by corresponding figures, emphasising how these textiles were worn. The visuals effectively convey the diversity of styles, highlighting intricate details in fabric patterns and draping techniques, which underscores the rich cultural history of Nusantara fashion.

The captions accompanying each slide provide educational insights into the specific types of *kain* and their historical, cultural, and functional significance. Terms like *Kain Sarong*, *Kain Kelubung*, and *Kain Kemben* are clearly defined, with explanations of their usage in different regions and contexts. By including both technical details (e.g., the fabrics used, such as batik and songket) and their symbolic roles (e.g., ceremonial versus everyday use), the captions serve as a valuable resource for cultural education.

The use of rhetorical questions, such as “Pakai Kain Apa Tu?!” (“What kain are you wearing?!”), adds a conversational and engaging tone, inviting the audience to learn more. This approach bridges traditional knowledge with modern engagement strategies, making the content accessible to both younger audiences and those interested in cultural heritage.

By focusing on traditional styles and their cultural significance, the post challenges Eurocentric fashion norms that often overshadow non-Western clothing traditions. It reclaims these garments as symbols of identity and pride rather than reducing them to exotic curiosities.

Both these posts show how Kebaya Societé’ is attempting to preserve culture and educate the audience through the use of visual storytelling. It strikes a balance between celebrating the past and engaging the present, offering a nuanced perspective on how traditional garments like kain can be appreciated as both historical artefacts and living traditions. The combination of vivid imagery and informative text makes this post a powerful tool for cultural advocacy, aligning perfectly with the platform’s goal to reshape narratives about Nusantara fashion.

Case Study #3: Political and cultural activism

Kebaya Societé and the Ong Shunmugam Controversy, 2022

While Kebaya Societé’s work in cultural education and heritage preservation underscores its commitment to celebrating Southeast Asian identity, its engagement with socio-political issues reveals a broader mission. The platform has emerged as an advocate for accountability within the fashion industry, as exemplified by its response to controversial remarks made by local designer Priscilla Shunmugam. This incident highlights Kebaya Societé’s role in fostering critical conversations about race, representation, and cultural equity.



Figure 3: Screenshot of the webinar hosted by the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM). (credit: Kebaya Societé, instagram, 2022)

In September 2021, during a webinar hosted by the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) titled "Designing Singapore's Contemporary Fashion Identity," Priscilla Shunmugam, founder of the fashion label Ong Shunmugam, made remarks suggesting that "Chinese women have progressed significantly faster and further than their Malay and Indian counterparts." She attributed this perceived progression to Chinese women's early adoption of practices such as shaking hands with men and wearing miniskirts (The Straits Times, 2022).

These comments resurfaced in March 2022 when Kebaya Societé shared a webinar clip on their Instagram account, igniting widespread backlash. The platform criticised Shunmugam's statements as a "false narrative," asserting that "progressive is a mental state of mind—not physical" (AsiaOne, 2022). This critique resonated with many, leading to a broader discussion on racial and cultural biases within Singapore's fashion industry.

The controversy compelled Shunmugam to issue a public apology in The Straits Times, Singapore's national broadsheet, acknowledging that her remarks were "clumsy, hurtful, and insensitive" (Today Online, 2022). She admitted that she was "rightly being held accountable" for her comments.

Kebaya Societé's decision to highlight this issue underscores its role in advocating for respectful representation and cultural equity. By bringing attention to Shunmugam's remarks, the platform facilitated a critical dialogue on the complexities of cultural

identity and progression, challenging reductive stereotypes and promoting a more nuanced understanding of Southeast Asian women's experiences.

This incident exemplifies Kebaya Societé's commitment to preserving Nusantara heritage and engaging in socio-political activism. By leveraging its digital presence, the platform effectively amplifies marginalised voices and fosters accountability within the fashion industry, aligning with broader decolonial efforts to reclaim and reframe cultural narratives.

Case Study #4: Bridging the digital and physical worlds to create a tangible impact.

Gaya Kebaya Exhibition, 2023

Beyond digital activism and socio-political advocacy, Kebaya Societé has demonstrated its capacity to translate online engagement into real-world impact. In November 2023, Kebaya Societé took its advocacy for cultural preservation beyond the digital realm with the Gaya Kebaya Exhibition, held at One Kampong Gelam. The exhibition, which ran for seven days, was a monumental celebration of the kebaya's rich heritage, attracting over 2,000 attendees and showcasing 130 years of history through 35 kebayas. The event featured an impressive range of garments, from archival pieces to contemporary interpretations, emphasising the kebaya's evolution as a living tradition (Channel News Asia, 2023). A notable highlight was the inclusion of a kebaya gifted by Toh Puan Noor Aishah, the wife of Singapore's first president, Yusof Ishak. This specific piece underscored the kebaya's role as an everyday garment and a symbol of political and cultural identity.

The exhibition highlighted the kebaya as a dynamic garment, adaptable across historical periods and regional contexts, rather than a static artefact. By presenting the kebaya in its historical, social, and political contexts, Kebaya Societé challenged the Eurocentric lens that often relegates non-Western fashion to the realm of the "exotic" or "traditional".

Interactive displays provided insights into the evolution of the kebaya, from its early Javanese origins to its adaptations during the colonial and post-independence eras. By reclaiming the kebaya as a living symbol of identity, the exhibition disrupted narratives that commodify or erase Southeast Asian fashion histories.

The curation of garments, accompanied by historical narratives and sepia-toned visuals, mirrored the visual storytelling framework described by Highfield and Leaver. By blending archival and contemporary elements, the exhibition evoked a sense of continuity and evolution, underscoring the kebaya's relevance as both a historical artefact and a living tradition. By translating its digital advocacy into a physical format, Kebaya Societé demonstrated the scalability of its mission to reclaim and celebrate Southeast Asian fashion heritage.

CONCLUSION

The above analyses of Kebaya Societé’s digital and physical initiatives and activities show how social media platforms, specifically Instagram, can drive cultural preservation, political advocacy, and heritage education. Kebaya Societé’s Instagram posts demonstrate the platform’s capacity to act as a digital archive that effectively balance visual appeal and educational content. This is mostly done through detailed infographics that highlights historical facts and narratives. This approach aligns with Highfield and Leaver’s “visual meaning-making” concept, showing how social media fosters deeper cultural engagement through carefully curated content. By spotlighting racially insensitive remarks, Kebaya Societé was able to hold industry figures accountable. The platform disrupted mainstream fashion discourse, fostering a critical dialogue on representation. This act of socio-political engagement demonstrates how digital platforms can challenge entrenched power dynamics, supporting Spivak’s theory of reclaiming subaltern voices.

Additionally, the founders were also able to successfully translate their digital advocacy into a physical exhibition. The showcase of various styles and types of *baju kebaya* combined historical garments, cultural narratives as well as interactive displays. This further validated Kebaya Societé’s commitment to preserving cultural heritage.

Overall, Kebaya Societé’s digital and physical activities resist Eurocentric frameworks that often depict non-Western clothing as exotic or static. By addressing issues of cultural representation, heritage preservation, and industry accountability, the platform emerges as more than a fashion-focused Instagram account. Rather, it is an active agent of cultural reclamation and identity politics. The strategic use of multimedia elements and thoughtful narrative construction also shows how digital platforms can democratise history while fostering a deeper, more inclusive understanding of cultural heritage.

Ultimately, Kebaya Societé’s work serves as a model for decolonial cultural advocacy, reminding us that fashion is not merely about aesthetics but also about the stories, struggles, and identities woven into every garment. Its efforts reflect a broader movement toward reclaiming agency in defining cultural narratives, ensuring that the rich heritage of Southeast Asia is preserved, celebrated, and continually reimagined.

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