

Fashion as Cultural Narrative: A Responsive Approach in Fashion Education

¹Tri Mutmainnah*, ²Laila Lupita Ardhiyanti, ³Nabila Afkarina Aziz

¹Bachelor of Fashion Education, Faculty of Engineering, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia

*²Bachelor of Indonesian Language and Literature Education, Faculty of Languages and Arts,
Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia*

*³Bachelor of Civic Education, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Negeri
Surabaya, Indonesia*

***Corresponding Author**

Email: trimutmainnah@unesa.ac.id

Abstract

Fashion functions not only as an aesthetic product but also as a cultural narrative that represents societal identity and values. This study aims to explore fashion as a medium of storytelling in fashion education through a diversity-responsive approach. A mixed-method design was employed with 100 students from the 2024 cohort of the Fashion Education Study Program at Universitas Negeri Surabaya. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained from curriculum analysis, observations, interviews, and reflective notes. Results indicate that 78% of students represented local cultural identity, 82% demonstrated increased sensitivity to diversity, and 70% reported greater confidence in presenting culturally meaningful works. The findings affirm that fashion as a cultural narrative can strengthen character, creativity, and cross-cultural communication. In conclusion, integrating cultural narratives into the fashion education curriculum aligns with culturally responsive pedagogy and contributes to the development of graduates who are competent, empathetic, and culturally aware.

Keywords: *Fashion; Cultural; Character; Vocational; Learning*

INTRODUCTION

Fashion represents one of the most profound forms of cultural expression, carrying the power to convey identity, values, and social narratives. As noted by Black and de la Haye (2018), fashion functions not merely as a consumer product but also as a communicative medium capable of representing specific social groups, including marginalized communities. This perspective underscores that fashion can be understood as a cultural narrative that plays a significant role in shaping and reinforcing collective identity.

In the context of education, particularly fashion education, learning activities often emphasize technical skills such as sewing, designing, and garment production. However, as highlighted by Thomas and Smith (2021), an approach that focuses solely on technical aspects risks overlooking the cultural dimensions and character values inherently embedded in fashion. In fact, fashion can serve as a pedagogical medium that fosters empathy, inclusivity, and students' social awareness.

The literature highlights the significant role of storytelling in education. Chou and Chang (2020) emphasize that creative narratives can enhance students' confidence and

contribute to character development. Within fashion education, storytelling can be manifested through design projects that incorporate both local and global cultural narratives. In this way, fashion operates as a visual language that communicates messages across cultural boundaries.

Furthermore, the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy, as articulated by Reddy and Kumar (2019), emphasizes the importance of learning that is sensitive to the cultural contexts of students. This approach is highly relevant to fashion education, where learners are encouraged to recognize and integrate cultural values embedded within their creations. Such a perspective resonates with the ideas of Lee, Syed Alwi, and Gambetti (2024), who argue that fashion can serve as a catalyst for social sustainability through inclusivity and the courage to highlight cultural identity.

The integrating cultural narratives into the fashion education curriculum, vocational learning does not merely produce graduates with technical competence but also individuals who embody cultural awareness, empathy, and social responsibility. Fashion as a cultural narrative can serve as a pedagogical strategy that supports peacebuilding and intercultural communication, while simultaneously strengthening the role of fashion education in shaping students' character.

Respondents

This study involved 100 students from the 2024 cohort of the Fashion Education Program at Universitas Negeri Surabaya as the primary respondents. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, as they were enrolled in fashion design courses and engaged in fashion show practices directly relevant to the research theme. This cohort was considered representative for illustrating how fashion can be positioned as a cultural narrative within vocational education.

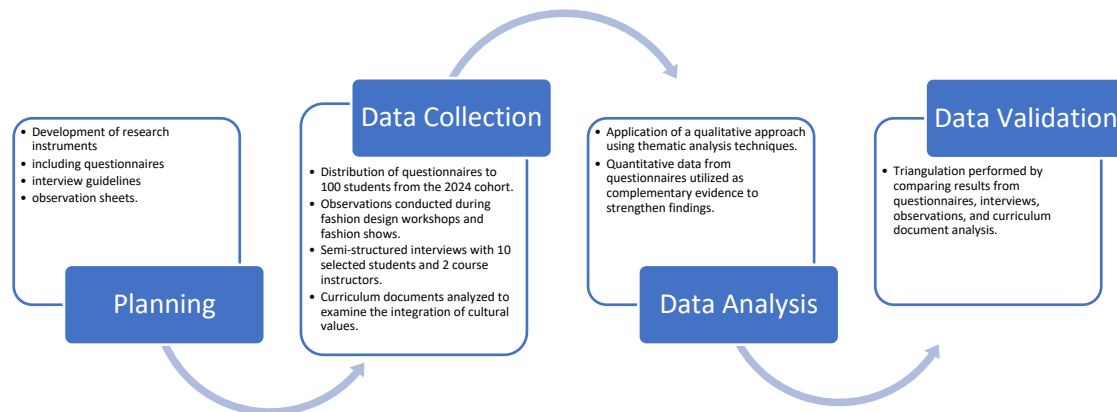
Instruments

The research employed several instruments, namely:

1. Curriculum document analysis: conducted to examine the extent to which cultural narratives and responsive approaches were integrated into fashion education courses.
2. Questionnaires: administered to 100 students to assess their perceptions of fashion as a cultural narrative and its impact on character development and creativity.
3. Participatory observation: carried out during fashion design workshops and fashion shows to capture the application of cultural values and character formation in practice.
4. Semi-structured interviews: conducted with course instructors and selected students to gain deeper insights into their experiences with culture-based learning.
5. Students' reflective notes: collected after practical sessions, documenting personal experiences in connecting fashion with cultural identity.

Procedures

The research stages were carried out in a systematic manner.



Data analysis

The analysis was conducted through the following steps:

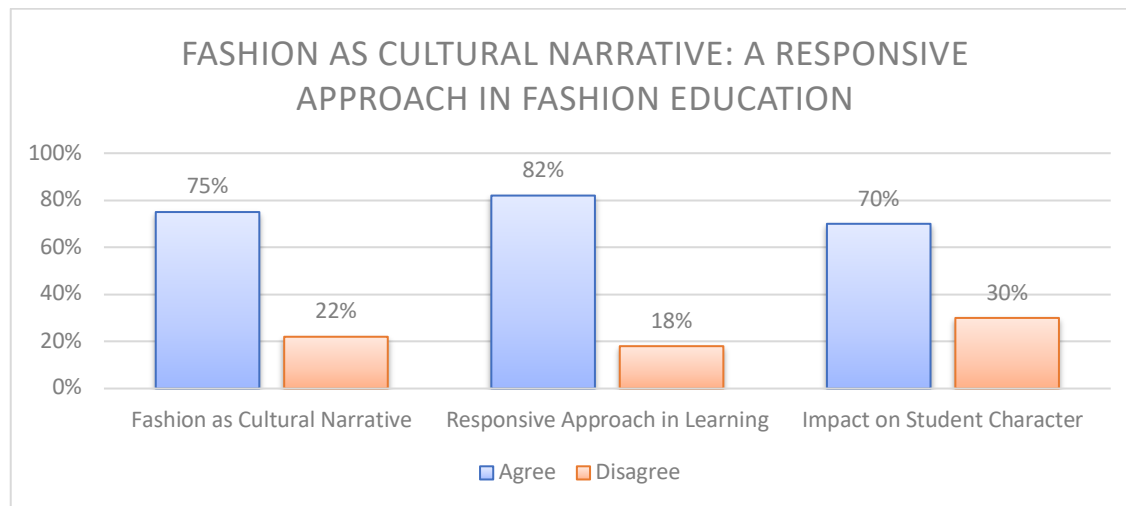
1. Data reduction: filtering relevant information obtained from questionnaires, interviews, observations, and curriculum documents.
2. Thematic categorization: organizing data into themes such as “cultural narratives in fashion design,” “responsive approaches in learning,” and “impacts on student character.”
3. Interpretation: examining the findings by linking them to the framework of culturally responsive pedagogy and literature on fashion as a medium of storytelling.

Quantitative–qualitative integration: utilizing questionnaire results (student perception percentages) to reinforce the qualitative analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Based on the data collected, the findings can be illustrated in the following diagram.



Fashion as Cultural Narrative

The majority of students (78%) affirmed that the fashion pieces they produced were not merely aesthetic products but also served as a medium to express local cultural identity. Many incorporated batik motifs, woven textiles, and traditional symbols into their designs, making each creation a visual representation of the cultural values they inherited. This reflects an awareness that fashion can function as a form of storytelling, bridging the past with the present. However, 22% of students did not explicitly connect their designs to local culture. This group tended to draw inspiration from modern or global trends, or focused solely on exploring aesthetics without embedding cultural symbols. Such a phenomenon indicates a diversity of perspectives: while some students already perceive fashion as a cultural narrative, others still regard it primarily as a trend or a technical skill.

Responsive Approach in Learning

As many as 82% of students reported that culture-based narrative learning made them more sensitive to diversity, while 18% had not fully experienced such an impact. This latter group tended to perceive fashion merely as a technical skill or an aesthetic product. For them, fashion design was primarily understood as the outcome of mastering sewing techniques, pattern-making, or following modern trends, without necessarily connecting their work to deeper cultural values.

Several students within this group preferred inspiration from global styles or international trends, such as streetwear, minimalism, or contemporary fashions currently in demand. This does not necessarily indicate a rejection of local culture; rather, it reflects personal preferences oriented toward universal aesthetics. Some also perceived cultural narratives as too abstract or challenging to apply in practical design, leading them to feel more comfortable focusing on the functional aspects of clothing.

In addition to personal preferences, limited cultural understanding also emerged as a contributing factor. Students who lacked in-depth knowledge of local symbols, traditions, or cultural meanings often found it difficult to integrate cultural elements

into their designs. As a result, they tended to choose safer paths, producing neutral designs or following general fashion trends.

This phenomenon illustrates that the implementation of a responsive approach in fashion education still faces challenges. Not all students are automatically able to perceive the connection between fashion and cultural narratives. Therefore, additional pedagogical strategies are needed to bridge this gap. For instance, instructors may provide concrete examples of fashion works that successfully highlight cultural narratives, facilitate reflective discussions linking design to social contexts, or offer intensive mentoring for students who continue to struggle.

With appropriate support, this 18% group has the potential to grow and eventually recognize that fashion is not merely a technical skill but also a medium of cultural communication. Their presence in fact enriches classroom dynamics, as it reflects diverse perspectives that can serve as material for collective discussion and reflection. Ultimately, the goal of fashion education is to ensure that all students, without exception, are able to view fashion as a means to foster empathy, appreciate diversity, and strengthen cultural identity.

Impact on Student Character

As many as 70% of students reported feeling more confident when presenting fashion works that carried cultural meaning, while 30% had not yet experienced such an impact in a tangible way. This latter group reflects a variation of experiences and perceptions that provides an interesting avenue for further analysis.

Some students felt that confidence was determined more by mastery of technical skills than by the cultural meaning embedded in their works. For them, the quality of stitching, accuracy of patterns, and alignment with current trends were considered more important than the cultural symbols or narratives expressed. This indicates that certain students still regard technical aspects as the primary measure of success in fashion.

In addition, some students felt that they did not yet have sufficient understanding of local cultural values, which made them less confident in integrating such elements into their works. They worried that the use of cultural symbols might be perceived as inappropriate or even lead to misunderstandings. This concern led them to prefer neutral designs or those oriented toward global trends.

Interviews with instructors also revealed that some students within this group continued to face challenges related to discipline, collaboration, and responsibility. They tended to focus more on individual achievement rather than team cooperation, which limited the extent to which culture-based learning had an impact on their character development.

Students' reflective notes from this group revealed that although they appreciated cultural identity, such awareness had not yet been fully internalized in their creative process. They acknowledged the importance of culture but still struggled to connect it meaningfully with the fashion works they produced.

This phenomenon demonstrates that culture-based learning indeed provides positive impacts, but they are not automatically experienced by all students. The 30% group serves as an indicator that additional pedagogical strategies are required to ensure that every student can benefit equally. For example, instructors may present concrete

examples of culture-based fashion works, conduct more intensive reflective discussions linking design to social contexts, or provide special mentoring for students who continue to face difficulties. With appropriate support, this group has the potential to grow and eventually realize that fashion is not merely a technical skill but also a medium of cultural communication. Their presence, in fact, enriches classroom dynamics by introducing diverse perspectives that can serve as material for collective reflection.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reinforce the view that fashion can be positioned as a cultural narrative functioning as a medium of visual storytelling. Fashion is not merely an aesthetic product or a consumer trend, but rather a symbolic language capable of conveying identity, values, and collective experiences of a society. When students integrate batik motifs, woven textiles, or traditional symbols into their fashion designs, they are essentially narrating cultural stories through visual works. This aligns with the perspective of Black and de la Haye (2018), who emphasize that fashion possesses the power to represent particular social groups while simultaneously strengthening their identities. Thus, fashion can serve as an effective medium of communication across generations and cultures.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that a responsive approach in fashion education has proven effective in enhancing students' cultural awareness. The integration of cultural values into the curriculum not only enriches technical skills such as sewing or designing but also opens reflective spaces for understanding the social meaning behind the works produced. Students are encouraged to recognize that each fashion design is embedded within a cultural context, making their creations part of a broader social narrative. These findings support the argument of Reddy and Kumar (2019) regarding the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy, a learning approach that is sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of learners. Through this approach, students are not only trained as skilled designers but also as individuals capable of interpreting and articulating cultural symbols within their works.

The impact of integrating cultural narratives into learning is clearly evident in the formation of student character. As many as 70% of students reported feeling more confident when presenting fashion works that carried cultural meaning. This confidence emerged because they perceived their creations not merely as the result of technical skills but also as symbolic works that could be appreciated by others. In addition, interviews with instructors revealed improvements in students' discipline, collaboration, and responsibility during the preparation of fashion shows. These findings indicate that culture-based learning influences not only the outcomes of fashion works but also students' attitudes and behaviors. Reflective notes further reinforced the emergence of new awareness regarding the importance of valuing cultural identity in fashion design. This aligns with Chou and Chang (2020), who emphasize that creative narratives can foster confidence while simultaneously strengthening learners' character.

Culture-based fashion shows also serve as an effective medium of experiential learning. Through direct experiences in designing, producing, and presenting fashion works, students learn to connect theory with practice while internalizing cultural values within their creative processes. This experience not only strengthens technical skills but also

opens spaces for cross-cultural communication, where students can learn from one another and develop greater appreciation for diversity.

This study affirms that fashion as a cultural narrative not only enriches the learning process in fashion education but also contributes to peacebuilding through the appreciation of diversity and the strengthening of cultural identity. Culture-responsive fashion education can produce graduates who are not only technically competent but also empathetic, socially aware, and culturally responsible. The implication of these findings is the need for a more systematic curriculum development that integrates cultural narratives, so that fashion education can serve as a strategic medium for character building while reinforcing the role of vocational education in the global society.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that fashion can be positioned as a cultural narrative that plays a significant role in fashion education. Findings from 100 students of the 2024 cohort indicate that the integration of cultural values into the learning process not only enriches fashion works aesthetically but also provides deeper social meaning. Fashion has been proven to serve as a medium of visual storytelling capable of conveying identity, traditions, and societal values.

A responsive approach in fashion education has shown positive impacts on students, particularly in aspects of character, creativity, and cultural awareness. Students became more confident, sensitive to diversity, and able to connect their works with social and cultural contexts. This is consistent with the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy, which emphasizes the importance of learning that is relevant to learners' experiences and identities.

Moreover, culture-based fashion also contributes to peacebuilding through the appreciation of diversity and cross-cultural communication. Thus, fashion education not only produces technically competent graduates but also individuals with empathy, social responsibility, and cultural awareness.

The implication of this study is the need for more systematic curriculum development in fashion education that integrates cultural narratives, so that fashion education can serve as a strategic medium for student character building while strengthening the role of vocational education in the global society.

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