Fashion Storytelling: Translating Bornean Landscapes Into Contemporary Fashion Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how natural and cultural landscapes can be translated into contemporary fashion aesthetics, using Bohey Dulang, Sabah, as a case study. While Malaysian fashion has historically privileged Peninsular motifs such as batik and kebaya, the ecological and cultural richness of East Malaysia remains underrepresented. Addressing this gap, the research explores how Bohey Dulang's volcanic topography, marine biodiversity, and Bajau Laut mythology can inform fashion design as a medium of cultural storytelling and identity expression. Adopting a qualitative, design-led methodology, the study integrates visual archiving, surface embellishment experimentation, and the Interpretative Engagement Framework (Drew & Guillemin, 2014). Ecological and cultural references were translated into fashion components including fabric manipulations, kaleidoscopic digital prints, and silhouette constructions. The findings demonstrate that landscapes and myths can be semiotically reinterpreted into wearable forms, creating narratives that embody both environmental awareness and intangible cultural heritage. The study contributes to fashion scholarship by advancing the discourse on place-based design, cultural sustainability, and fashion storytelling. It proposes a framework for understanding fashion as an interpretative bridge that connects ecological landscapes and cultural memory to contemporary design practice. Furthermore, the research underscores fashion's potential as a vehicle for cultural preservation and ecological advocacy within Southeast Asia's broader design context.

Keywords: Fashion Storytelling, Design-led Methodology, Sustainable Aesthetics

1. INTRODUCTION

Fashion functions not only as an industry of material production but also as a symbolic system that communicates identity, heritage, and cultural values (Barnard, 2014; Kawamura, 2005). Through colors, silhouettes, and textures, fashion can articulate narratives of place and belonging, reinforcing its position as a form of visual storytelling. Scholars such as Barthes (1967) argue that fashion operates semiotically, where garments act as signs loaded with cultural meaning. Increasingly, contemporary research has emphasized the potential of fashion to

extend beyond commercial aesthetics, positioning it as a medium for cultural preservation and ecological advocacy c

1.1 Global Shifts Toward Localized and Sustainable Aesthetics

The global dominance of Western fashion norms has been challenged by movements advocating for localized, culturally grounded aesthetics. These shifts are visible in slow fashion practices that prioritize quality, longevity, and sustainability, as well as in place-based design approaches that embed local narratives into creative outputs (Fletcher, 2008; Tonkinwise, 2011). In Southeast Asia, this turn toward cultural authenticity has fostered renewed interest in indigenous motifs, heritage textiles, and environment-driven design practices (Mohamad Zen & Bakar, 2024). By reinterpreting local resources and narratives, designers resist homogenized global trends and contribute to cultural diversity within fashion systems.

1.2 Malaysian Fashion and the Underrepresentation of Borneo

Despite Malaysia's multicultural richness, its fashion industry has historically emphasized Peninsular traditions such as batik and kebaya, while largely overlooking the ecological and cultural resources of East Malaysia (Tawie, 2024). This imbalance marginalizes indigenous narratives and undervalues the design potential embedded within landscapes and folklore from Sabah and Sarawak. For example, Bohey Dulang, an island within the Tun Sakaran Marine Park is recognized for its volcanic topography, turquoise lagoons, and Bajau Laut mythology, including the legend of the celestial princess. Yet, these narratives remain peripheral within Malaysian fashion discourse, despite their symbolic depth and ecological resonance. This gap reflects a missed opportunity to advance both cultural representation and sustainable design innovation.

1.3 Research Gap

Although studies have examined the role of fashion in cultural storytelling (Barnard, 2014; Kawamura, 2005) and explored site-specific aesthetics (Tonkinwise, 2011), limited research addresses how East Malaysian landscapes and intangible heritage can be systematically translated into contemporary fashion. Existing efforts remain sporadic and often superficial, failing to establish sustained frameworks that connect local ecology, mythology, and design processes. Furthermore, while digital design tools and embellishment techniques have expanded opportunities for creative translation, their application to Bornean cultural and natural contexts remains underexplored. This highlights the need for a design-led study that demonstrates how landscapes such as Bohey Dulang can inspire fashion as both aesthetic innovation and cultural advocacy.

The purpose of this study is to examine how Bohey Dulang's ecological and cultural landscapes can be translated into contemporary fashion aesthetics, emphasizing fashion's role as a medium of storytelling, preservation, and sustainability. The specific objectives are:
1. To identify and interpret the visual and cultural elements of Bohey Dulang's landscape, including topography, colors, and folklore.

2. To develop a conceptual fashion collection that translates these elements into wearable narratives through surface embellishment, digital textile design, and silhouette exploration.

This research contributes to fashion scholarship by advancing a framework of fashion storytelling grounded in place-based design. It demonstrates how landscapes and myths can be semiotically reinterpreted into wearable forms, thereby enriching Malaysian fashion with underrepresented Bornean narratives. The study also contributes to broader debates on cultural sustainability by positioning fashion as an interpretative bridge between ecology, heritage, and contemporary practice. In doing so, it provides theoretical and practical insights into how localized design practices can promote cultural preservation and ecological advocacy within Southeast Asia's creative industries.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Fashion as Storytelling and Identity

Fashion has long been recognized as a communicative medium through which individuals and societies construct and express identity (Barnard, 2014; Kawamura, 2005). Beyond aesthetics, clothing operates as a semiotic system, where colors, motifs, and silhouettes signify cultural narratives (Barthes, 1967). This perspective positions fashion as a form of storytelling, allowing designers to translate collective memory, social values, and place-based heritage into material forms. Recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of cultural authenticity in fashion, arguing that localized narratives are increasingly valued as counterpoints to homogenized global trends (McHattie & Teo Boon Ting, 2024).

2.2 From Global Fashion Trends to Localized Aesthetics

The hegemony of Western fashion has been challenged by the rise of **localized aesthetics**, which prioritize cultural specificity and indigenous identity. This shift reflects broader movements toward cultural sustainability, where designers draw inspiration from their own heritage and environments (Fletcher, 2008; Kawamura, 2005). Southeast Asian fashion demonstrates this trend through the revival of indigenous motifs, textiles, and storytelling traditions (Mohamad Zen & Bakar, 2024). Such approaches enrich the global fashion landscape by diversifying aesthetic vocabularies while strengthening cultural resilience.

2.3 Cultural Sustainability and Slow Fashion

Sustainability in fashion encompasses not only ecological responsibility but also the preservation of cultural heritage. **Cultural sustainability** refers to the safeguarding of intangible traditions such as textile crafts, local dress codes, and mythologies within modern design contexts (Barnard, 2014). In parallel, the **slow fashion movement** advocates for practices that privilege quality, longevity, and meaningful engagement with cultural and ecological narratives (Fletcher, 2008).

Both frameworks provide designers with ethical alternatives to fast fashion and emphasize the social role of fashion in sustaining communities and environments.

2.4 Place-Based Design and Environmental Inspiration

Place-based design highlights how landscapes and ecological features act as catalysts for creativity. Scholars argue that embedding geographic and environmental narratives into design fosters site-specific aesthetics that resonate with local identity and sustainability principles (Tonkinwise, 2011). Empirical studies show that natural forms, textures, and colors can be reinterpreted into design practices that not only enrich aesthetics but also foreground environmental awareness (McHattie & Teo Boon Ting, 2024). This reinforces the potential of local ecologies to shape design methodologies in ways that are both innovative and contextually grounded.

2.5 Bornean Cultural and Natural Heritage

Despite its ecological and cultural richness, Borneo remains underrepresented within Malaysian fashion. National design narratives are dominated by Peninsular traditions such as batik and kebaya, while East Malaysian identities are often marginalized (Tawie, 2024). Bohey Dulang, situated in Sabah's Tun Sakaran Marine Park, exemplifies this oversight. The island's volcanic topography, marine ecosystems, and Bajau Laut mythology offer a wealth of symbolic material that has yet to be systematically explored in fashion contexts (Mohamad Zen & Bakar, 2024). This underrepresentation signals a critical gap in Malaysian fashion research, where Bornean narratives could significantly contribute to cultural visibility and sustainable design innovation.

2.6 Visual Storytelling in Fashion Design

Visual storytelling is a central mechanism for embedding place and culture into fashion practice. Designers use motifs, surface embellishments, and silhouettes as narrative tools to convey meanings beyond aesthetics. For example, coral textures or water gradients can be reimagined as fabric manipulations that communicate ecological significance. Semiotic perspectives reinforce this view, framing fashion as a language capable of transmitting cultural memory and environmental advocacy (Barthes, 1967; Barnard, 2014). Such approaches expand fashion's role as a form of narrative-making, bridging materiality with identity and heritage.

The literature establishes that fashion operates as a system of cultural storytelling and that place-based design enhances authenticity while supporting sustainability. However, East Malaysia's ecological and cultural narratives remain marginalized in national fashion discourse. By focusing on Bohey Dulang as a case study, this research addresses the gap by demonstrating how landscapes and folklore can be systematically translated into fashion aesthetics. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on identity, sustainability, and cultural preservation in fashion.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, design-led research approach to explore how ecological and cultural narratives of Bohey Dulang can be translated into contemporary fashion aesthetics. Design-led research emphasizes practice as a mode of inquiry, where iterative experimentation not only produces artefacts but also generates knowledge (Fletcher, 2008). The study combined visual analysis, creative experimentation, and audience feedback to construct a framework of fashion storytelling grounded in place-based design.

3.2 Data Collection

Primary data were collected through visual archiving and secondary documentation, including photographic images of Bohey Dulang's volcanic topography, marine ecosystems, and cultural mythology. These visual materials provided inspiration and reference points for the creative process. Secondary literature on fashion, cultural sustainability, and site-specific design further informed the theoretical framing of the study (Barnard, 2014; Tonkinwise, 2011).

3.3 Analytical Framework: Interpretative Engagement

To analyze and translate visual materials, the study employed the Interpretative Engagement Framework (Drew & Guillemin, 2014). This framework recognizes that images are not static representations but active sites of meaning-making. It comprises three interconnected stages:

Participant Meaning-Making: Visuals are first understood through cultural and contextual perspectives, such as local narratives or archival sources. These insights establish a foundation for interpretation.
Researcher Interpretation: The researcher analyzes and reconfigures the visuals, identifying motifs, textures, and symbolic elements. These are then translated into design features such as surface embellishments, prints, and silhouettes.
Re-contextualization for Audiences: The creative outputs are presented to audiences (e.g., academic peers, design critiques), who provide interpretations and feedback. This stage allows refinement of the work and ensures cultural legibility and conceptual rigor.

Audience feedback was collected through structured design critiques involving academic peers and fashion practitioners. Feedback was analysed thematically, focusing on recurring interpretations of form, symbolism, and narrative clarity. Instances of misinterpretation such as volcanic textures being read as floral motifs were coded as semiotic ambiguity. These insights informed subsequent refinement of surface treatments and silhouette structures, ensuring that audience engagement functioned as analytical data rather than anecdotal response.

3.4 Design Development Process

The design process unfolded through iterative stages:

i. **Surface embellishment techniques** such as pleating, applique, and fabric manipulation were employed to mimic ecological textures including coral reefs and volcanic strata.
ii. **Digital textile experimentation** involved the transformation of photographs into kaleidoscopic prints, capturing the multiplicity of perspectives embedded in Bohey Dulang's landscapes.
iii. **Silhouette development** was guided by both ecological forms and Bajau Laut mythology, embedding intangible heritage within material outputs.

Each iteration was subject to critique and re-evaluation, aligning with the cyclical nature of interpretative engagement. This process ensured that the outcomes were not only aesthetically innovative but also culturally resonant.

3.5 Validity and Ethical Considerations

The study's validity was strengthened through triangulation across visual sources, theoretical frameworks, and audience critiques. By situating interpretation within collaborative meaning-making, the methodology reduced the risk of imposing singular or externalized narratives. Ethical considerations centered on respectful engagement with cultural narratives and the avoidance of misrepresentation or appropriation of local heritage.
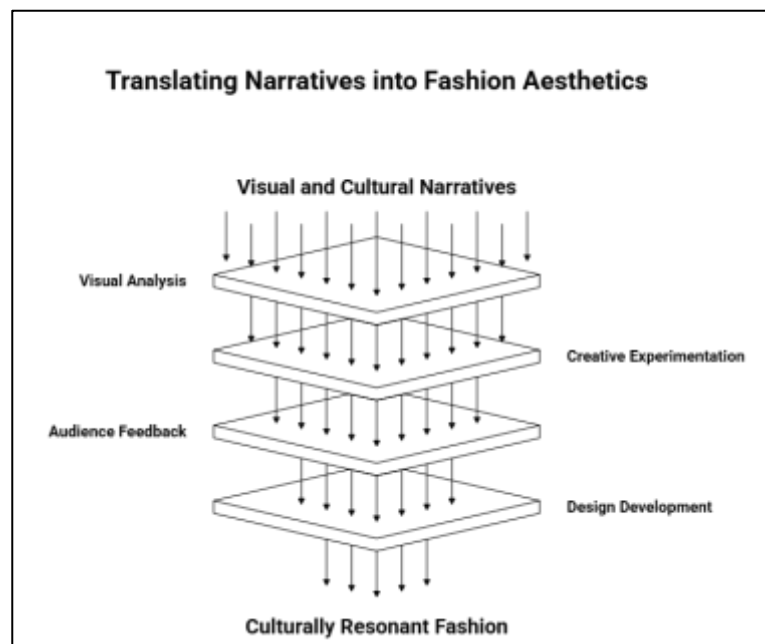

Figure 1: Research Flow in Translating Narratives into Fashion Aesthetics

3.6 Alignment of Design Stages with Research Objectives

Each stage of the design-led research process was explicitly aligned with the study's research objectives to ensure methodological coherence and analytical rigor.

The first objective; to identify and interpret the ecological and cultural elements of Bohey Dulang was addressed through visual archiving and interpretative engagement at the participant meaning-making stage. Photographic documentation of volcanic landforms, marine gradients, and Bajau Laut mythological references was examined to identify recurring visual signifiers such as stratification, fluidity, and celestial symbolism.

The second objective; to translate these elements into contemporary fashion aesthetics was realized through iterative design development. Surface embellishment techniques translated ecological textures, digital textile prints reconfigured landscape imagery into abstracted visual narratives, and silhouette exploration embodied mythological meanings. Each design iteration functioned simultaneously as a creative artefact and an analytical response to the interpreted data.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Translating Place into Fashion Semiotics

Bohey Dulang's volcanic landscape informed sharply structured silhouettes characterised by angular shoulder lines and tiered panel constructions that visually echo geological stratification. These rigid forms were intentionally contrasted with fluid lower garments inspired by marine currents, creating a dialogue between solidity and movement reflective of the island's terrestrial marine ecology.

Colour palettes were derived from lagoon gradients and volcanic stone, combining deep turquoise, ash grey, and muted coral tones. These translations exemplify Barthes' (1967) conceptualization of fashion as a semiotic system. These palettes functioned semiotically, encoding environmental narratives within wearable forms rather than serving purely decorative purposes.

4.2 Surface Embellishment as Narrative Device

Surface embellishment operated as a primary narrative mechanism. Pleating and layered fabric manipulation referenced coral accretion and volcanic layering, while applique techniques introduced tactile depth suggestive of reef ecosystems. Audience feedback revealed that some textured embellishments were interpreted as botanical rather than geological forms. Rather than diminishing narrative clarity, this interpretative openness reflects the dialogic nature of fashion semiotics (Drew and Guillemin, 2014), where meaning is co-produced between designer and viewer.

Figure 2: Experimental surface embellishment

Figure 3: Experimental surface embellishment to imitate the flow of nature

4.3 Digital Prints and the Mediation of Authenticity

The integration of digital textile design facilitated kaleidoscopic reinterpretations of Bohey Dulang imagery. Photographs of lagoons and rock formations were transformed into symmetrical patterns that visually captured ecological multiplicity. These outcomes align with Fletcher's (2008) call for innovation in sustainable fashion through creative reinterpretation. However, the findings also raise questions regarding authenticity: while digital mediation enables aesthetic innovation, it risks detaching design outcomes from their ecological origins. This tension contributes to debates on how technological processes in fashion may simultaneously enable and complicate cultural and environmental storytelling (McHattie & Teo Boon Ting, 2024).
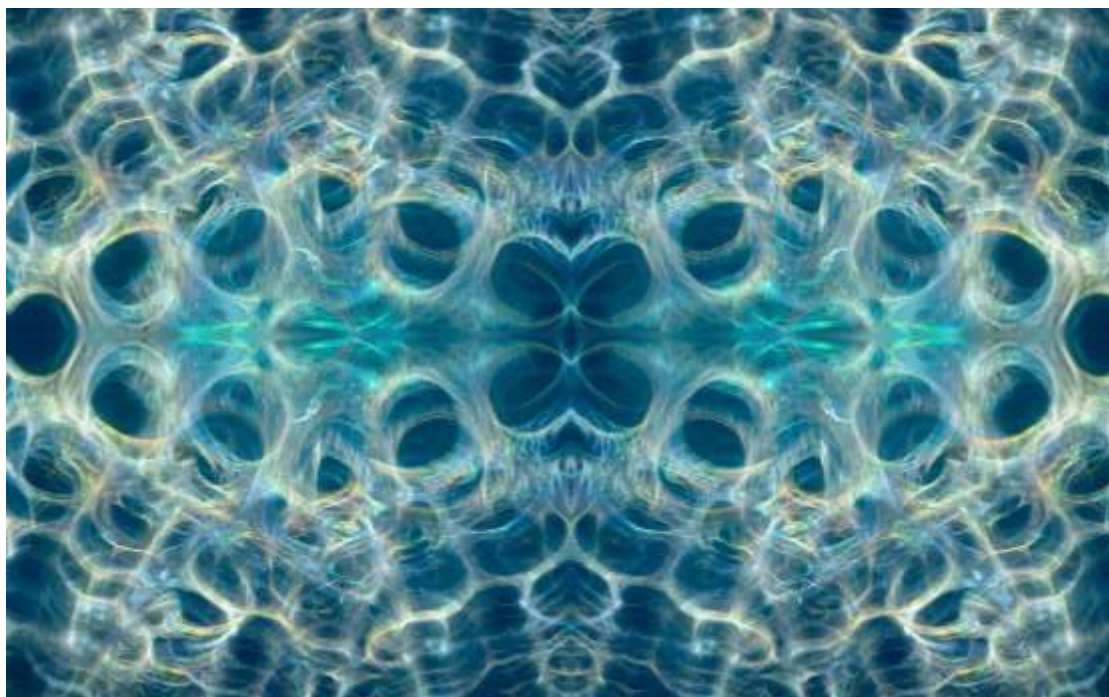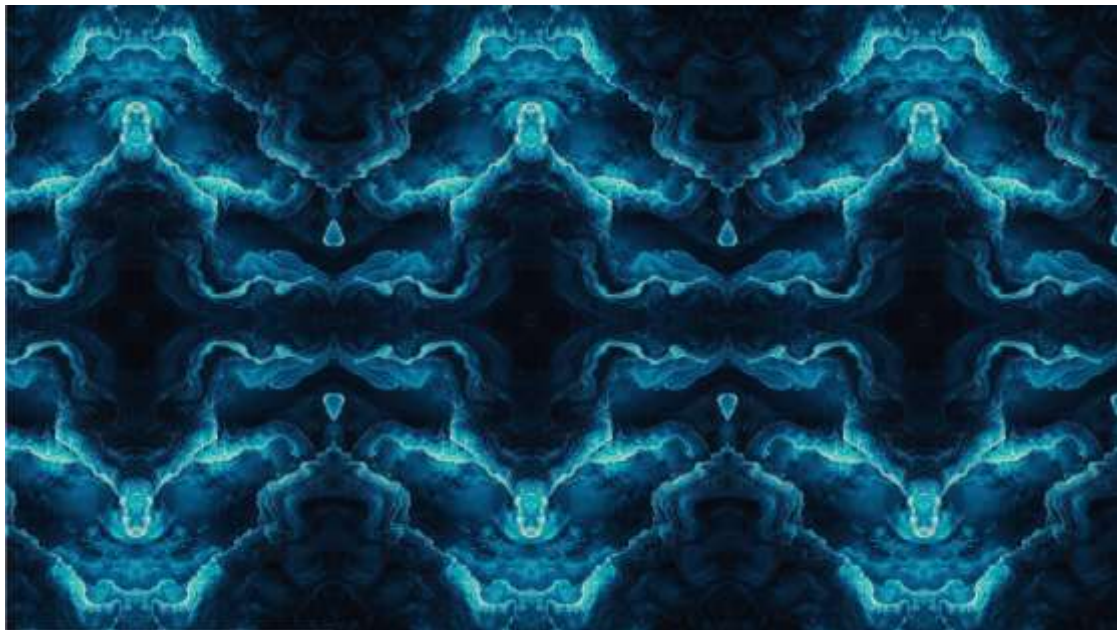

Figure 4: Experimental printing on fabric

Figure 4: Experimental printing on fabric by emphasizing lines and character

Figure 5: Repetition motif representing waves and nature

4.4 Silhouettes and Mythological Embodiment

Garment silhouettes extended the translation process by engaging with Bajau Laut mythology. Flowing lines referenced the celestial princess legend associated with Bohey Dulang, while structured layering reflected volcanic formation. In this way, the outputs embedded intangible heritage into tangible fashion artefacts. This supports Mohamad Zen and Bakar's (2024) argument that fashion can act as a vehicle for cultural sustainability, preserving oral traditions and symbolic narratives within contemporary contexts. By combining ecological and mythological references, the silhouettes demonstrate how fashion can embody multi-layered cultural narratives.

Figure 6: Silhouettes alignment with mythological embodiment

4.5 Fashion as Cultural Preservation and Advocacy

The findings collectively suggest that fashion can function as an interpretative bridge linking ecology, heritage, and contemporary design. Place-based fashion design, when grounded in rigorous interpretative engagement, resists homogenized global aesthetics and amplifies marginalized narratives such as those of East Malaysia. This outcome validates Tawie's (2024) assertion that Bornean heritage remains underrepresented in national identity discourses and demonstrates how fashion can redress this imbalance. The study therefore positions fashion not merely as aesthetic practice but as a mode of cultural preservation and ecological advocacy, advancing scholarship on sustainability and identity within fashion studies.

While previous design-led fashion research frequently employs place-based inspiration, this study advances the field by demonstrating a systematic interpretative framework that integrates ecology, mythology, and semiotic translation within a single design process. Unlike descriptive applications of cultural motifs, the research positions fashion artefacts as analytical outcomes that actively mediate cultural memory and environmental awareness. This reframing distinguishes the study from existing practice-led research by articulating fashion not merely as representation, but as an interpretative methodology.

Figure 7: Final outcome of the research process

5. CONCLUSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

This study has demonstrated how the ecological and cultural landscapes of Bohey Dulang can be reinterpreted into contemporary fashion through design-led research. By employing visual archiving, surface embellishment, digital textile experimentation, and the Interpretative Engagement Framework, the project produced garments that embody both environmental textures and mythological narratives. The findings reveal that fashion can function as more than an aesthetic practice: it can serve as a semiotic and interpretative bridge, preserving cultural memory and advocating for environmental awareness.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

The research contributes to the discourse on fashion as storytelling by advancing a framework that integrates place-based design with cultural sustainability. It extends semiotic perspectives of fashion (Barthes, 1967; Barnard, 2014) by demonstrating how ecological forms and myths can be systematically encoded into garments as visual signs. Furthermore, it contributes to sustainability debates by illustrating how cultural preservation and environmental advocacy can be pursued simultaneously through fashion design.

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5.2 Practical Implications

For practitioners, the study offers a model for embedding underrepresented cultural narratives into fashion processes. By translating landscapes and folklore into surface embellishments, prints, and silhouettes, designers can expand their creative vocabulary while contributing to heritage visibility. The findings also hold implications for Malaysia's fashion industry, suggesting pathways for integrating East Malaysian cultural resources into national identity discourses. More broadly, the study highlights fashion's potential as a tool for ecotourism promotion and cultural education, bridging creative industries with community-based heritage initiatives.

5.3 Limitations

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary visual documentation rather than prolonged ethnographic immersion within the Bohey Dulang community. Interpretations of Bajau Laut mythology were therefore mediated through archival and academic sources rather than co-created narratives. Additionally, audience feedback was drawn primarily from academic and design contexts, which may differ

from community-based or commercial interpretations. These constraints limit the generalisability of findings beyond conceptual and exploratory design research.

5.4 Future Research

Future research could enhance this framework by incorporating participatory design approaches involving indigenous artisans and local communities to co-create fashion outcomes that ensure authenticity and shared ownership. Integrating sustainable material innovation such as plant-based fibres or biodegradable printing technologies would deepen the ecological dimension of fashion storytelling. Furthermore, expanding dissemination through digital exhibitions, augmented reality, and immersive media could amplify global access and cultural appreciation, positioning Malaysian design narratives within international dialogues on sustainability and heritage preservation.

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