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The City in the Feed: The Performativity of Urban Photography in Yogyakarta on Instagram

***Daru Tunggul Aji[1], Fadhly Abdillah[2], Raynald Alfian Yudisetyanto[3]**

[1.] Visual Communication Design, Faculty of Fine Arts and Design, Indonesian Institute of the Arts, Yogyakarta.
[2.] Visual Communication Design, Faculty of Arts and Literature, Pasundan University
[3.] Photography, Faculty of Media Arts, Indonesian Institute of the Arts Yogyakarta

E-mail: darutunggulaji@isi.ac.id [1], fadhly.abdillah@unpas.ac.id [2], raynaldalfian@isi.ac.id [3]

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ABSTRAK

This study analyzes the practice of urban space photography in the Malioboro area of Yogyakarta, circulated on Instagram. Departing from a qualitative approach within an interpretative-critical paradigm, this study uses Judith Butler's performativity theory to understand how Javanese and gender identities are constructed and shaped through the repetition of poses, gestures, and the use of traditional clothing. The results show that photography is no longer merely documentation, but rather a socio-spatial practice that naturalizes norms through visual circulation and the logic of social media algorithms. The body, fashion, and urban space function as part of a performative stage that quotes each other and reinforces the structure of representation. The urban space of Malioboro is reproduced as a symbolic stage that transcends its physical function and operates within the logic of digital visibility.

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INTRODUCTION

In discussions of photography, at least since the emergence of social media over the past two decades, the narrative is no longer sufficient if it focuses solely on its mechanical functions. Changes in the digital visual ecosystem have shifted photography's role from merely a medium of documentation to an arena of social and performative practices that help shape how reality is presented and circulated.

As a social practice, photography does not merely serve as a representation; it also actively constructs images, memories, and connections among parties so that they may be socially identified and accepted. In the context of photography and urban space, the urban landscape does not exist merely as a physical backdrop but as a visual subject that is continuously produced through photography, narratives, and circulation on social media. Photography functions as a social practice that actively frames reality rather than merely representing it, and digital photography is intertwined with social identity, spatial knowledge, aesthetics, and the culture of affective platforms (Liu, 2022; Woods & Shee, 2021).

With the expansion of digital spaces, social media has transformed how we understand cities' spatial structure. Cities are no longer understood merely as compositions of space and everything within them, such as architectural structures, roadways, and public facilities, but also as spaces that are continuously produced, negotiated, and exchanged through the material assets of photographs.

Today, the way people perceive and discuss cities is inseparable from the visual influences on digital screens. This means that the concept of space has become a central keyword, shifting from physical space to digital space. In practice, the photography of urban spaces has undergone digitization. Hurova (2023) notes that digitization is understood as a transformation of the concepts of time, space, and face-to-face interaction in the city, such that the city's structure is no longer determined solely by its physical morphology but also by networks of information and online interactions (Hurova & Shkurov, 2023).

I argue that the development of photography reveals a fundamental transformation, not merely in its technology but also in the patterns of distribution and communication, and in the role of photography in social life. Regarding its relationship with social media, one notable aspect is the integration of photography. It cannot be denied that social media has significantly strengthened photography's role as a foundation for communication among users. This marks a significant shift in the practices of image production, distribution, and consumption. Looking back to the analog era, photography has long served as a medium for documentation, memory formation, identity representation, and social communication.

The digital era in photography has driven a shift in perspective. Digital photographic content is now widely utilized and interconnected through the internet. At this stage, photos are no longer treated merely as visual objects to be stored or published; rather, they increasingly function as a medium for interaction, enabling users to share, comment on, and exchange experiences with one another. Photography has not only experienced accelerated distribution but also a transformation in how images are presented and function as visual communication. Photos are integrated into user profiles, image captions, geotags, hashtags, comments, and various forms of engagement, connecting visual representations to social networks.

Given the evolving nature of communication, visual content circulated through social media has the power to shape collective perceptions of an urban space. Karpova (2025) interprets urban photography as a subjective chronicle of urban history that connects memory, identity, and the meaning of space. The mediation of urban space cannot be separated from photography's role (Karpova, 2025). Moreover, through social media, photographic images actively transform by producing, organizing, and even politicizing space. Cities are no longer experienced solely physically but also digitally, where space is produced through images,

consumed through screens, and interpreted through the repeated circulation of visuals. Photography and urban space share a dialectical relationship, evident in how photography is used to respond to and even construct the image of a city.

In the context of mass communication, photography is viewed as a visual medium with high emotive power, capable of condensing complex content into layered narratives and serving as a tool for constructing social reality, rather than merely as documentation (Starovoytova & Karyakin, 2025). Furthermore, Henri Lefebvre argues that space is not a neutral entity but a social product shaped by practices, representations, and imagination. Consequently, space is understood as something that is produced, maintained, and contested through power relations, everyday practices, and symbolic meanings (Stanek, 2011; Susen, 2020; Zieleniec, 2018).

Through social media, the material medium of photography becomes an instrument that transforms urban space into a display. This is quite evident in the phenomenon of urban photography in Yogyakarta. Social media has shifted communication patterns from the "one-to-many" model of mass media toward persistent, searchable, and highly visible peer-to-peer communication (Ellison & Vitak, 2015).



Photo 1. Photography Session in the Malioboro Area
Source: Documentation by Daru Tunggul Aji, 2025

In recent years, we have frequently encountered urban photography in Yogyakarta featuring traditional Javanese attire, such as the kebaya, jarik, and beskap, complete with accessories. People dressed in these traditional garments then pose for the camera. Subsequently, these photographs are circulated on social media as a form of performativity. This performativity emerges from the repetition presented through social media.

If we look at the broader picture, such phenomena also occur in several cities across Indonesia, the most notable of which include Semarang's Old Town and Jakarta's Old Town. In Semarang's Old Town, a service has emerged that combines the rental of traditional Javanese attire with tourist photography services. Tourists don traditional attire and then pose against the backdrop of colonial buildings, street corridors, and the area's architectural elements. This practice demonstrates how urban spaces with historical and social functions are being repurposed as venues for the production of tourism imagery. A similar phenomenon can also be observed in Jakarta's Old Town; tourism activities in this area involve taking selfies against the backdrop of historic buildings and the use of tourism related props.



Photo 2. Tourists Ride Bicycles In Fatahillah Park In Old Town, Jakarta, On Tuesday (June 18, 2024).
Source: Antara Photo/M Risyal Hidayat/Aww. (Antara Photo/M Risyal Hidayat)



Photo 3. Tourists pose for photos wearing traditional Javanese attire in the Old Town area, Monday (December 30, 2024).
Source: KOMPAS.COM/Titis Anis Fauziyah

These phenomena reveal interrelated trends: urban spaces are not merely objects to be photographed, but also settings for staging photographic scenes, and the resulting images can be circulated on social media and serve as visual references for other users. However, these similarities do not imply that every practice of tourism photography shares identical social mechanisms and cultural meanings. In the context of Malioboro, the use of traditional Javanese attire, the direction of poses, the arrangement of gestures, and the selection of the city's iconic landmarks raise more specific issues regarding the construction of representations of cultural identity.

The repetitions presented through photography have indirectly established impressions and standards for urban photography. The concept of performativity, as understood by Judith Butler, views identity not as an inner essence but as the effect of repeated symbolic practices:

speech acts, gestures, ways of dressing, and social rituals that continuously "cite" (citationality) pre-existing norms (Kakoliris, 2025a; Laketa, 2018).

I observe that urban spaces, mediated through social media, are not merely geographical markers but also integral to the construction of identity and to presentation. The relationship between the visual subject, the image-maker, and the social audience reveals that a photograph is never neutral. A photograph always involves choices: what is depicted, from which angle, in what visual style, and for which social audience. In other words, the images that appear on Instagram are the result of a negotiation between personal experience, the platform's aesthetics, and public expectations.

In urban digital photography, the act of taking photos is intertwined with imaginations of place, social and cultural identities, photographic skills, geographic knowledge, and local culture—all reframed by affective social platforms (Liu, C., 2022). This performative photographic practice then helps reproduce the platform's affective values, so that the experience of urban space on social media simultaneously becomes an experience of identity and self-presentation (Liu, 2022).

Research on photography in relation to urban space and social media still leaves significant gaps. First, studies on urban photography have not sufficiently explained how tourism photography featuring traditional attire functions as a mechanism for producing urban identity within urban spaces. Second, studies of the "spatial self" and self-presentation on social media tend to emphasize the subject and location but have not sufficiently unpacked how the body, attire, poses, urban signs, and the platform function as a unified performative whole. Third, studies of social media, photography, and urban space frequently discuss destination imagery and engagement, but have not specifically linked urban space photography to performativity, as theorized by Judith Butler, as a theory of the repetition of identity norms.

Developments in the study of photography in relation to urban space have revealed a shift in perspective from photography as visual representation to photography as a social practice involving the body, action, space, and relationships among participants. Larsen (2005) demonstrates that tourism photography is a choreographed practice shaped by the interaction between the photographer, the subject, and the location, rather than merely the act of recording pre-existing objects. Shusterman (2012) expands on this perspective by framing photography as a performative process that involves bodily experience, interaction, and aesthetic decisions during the act of taking a photograph.

In the spatial realm, previous studies have also shown that photography plays a role in the construction of meaning and the use of urban space. Dandy et al. (2022) demonstrate how the practice of Instagram selfies in Jakarta's Old Town frames historic buildings as visual tourism commodities. Sugangga et al. (2021) identify the relationship between the revitalization of Semarang's Old Town, the appeal of architectural elements, and the construction of place representations through Instagram. Furthermore, Liu (2022) expands our understanding of the interplay between digital photography practices, the imagination of place, social identity, and the nature of social media platforms. In fact, Siegel et al. (2025) demonstrate that the need to produce tourism imagery can drive the creation of "selfie parks" in Bali as specifically designed and commodified photographic spaces.

Drawing on previous studies, the phenomenon in Malioboro reveals distinct characteristics. Unlike selfie parks, which are specifically designed photographic spaces, Malioboro is an urban space that simultaneously serves the functions of mobility, commerce, tourism, and social interaction. Commercial photography practices utilize this space as a temporary studio by renting costumes, providing posing instructions and gesture direction, selecting camera angles, and incorporating the city's iconic elements.

Traditional attire is not merely an accessory, but a cultural marker that allows the body to be represented within a visual construction of "Javaness." Furthermore, through

photographic framing, certain elements of the city are highlighted, while the complexity of other urban activities may fall outside the scope of representation. The critical issue lies in how photographers, tourists, cultural attributes, urban spaces, and social media are interconnected in a process that simultaneously opens up opportunities for the expression of identity that is both political and, of course, socially complex.

Compared to previous studies, the gap in this research lies in the insufficient explanation in prior studies regarding the mechanisms of interconnection between the invocation of cultural identity norms, photographic choreography, and the utilization of public space within a unified photographic practice. This study employs Butler's (1993) concept of performativity to examine how the repetition of attire, poses, gestures, and inter-bodily relations invokes norms that render cultural and gender identities socially recognizable. Within this framework, the study aims to explain how cultural identity is constructed through photographic acts, how urban spaces are activated as part of meaning-making, and how recurring patterns of representation can be identified through visual circulation.Judith Butler's framework of performativity is used to understand how identity gains social legibility through the repetition of actions that reference existing norms. Butler (1993) asserts that performativity is not an expressive act of a pre-formed identity, but rather a reiterative process that enables norms to produce and maintain the impression of an identity's normality.Furthermore, photography is understood not merely as a performance of the body before the camera, but as a spatially-embedded social practice that enables identities and urban spaces to be shaped, recognized, and reproduced through repeated visual acts. The circulation of photographs on Instagram is further understood as part of the communicative conditions that allow such representations to gain visibility and the opportunity to be re-cited (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Cotter, 2019).

This article proposes the concept of platform-based photographic performativity. This concept refers to the process by which cultural identities and urban imagery are produced through the repetition of visual actions that interweave the body, attire, gestures, spatial markers, and the Instagram social media platform. Analytically, this concept operates through three mechanisms. First, "citation of identity," which involves the citation of cultural and gender norms through poses, gestures, traditional attire, and inter-bodily relationships within photographs. Second, "staging of urban space," which involves the selection and arrangement of urban elements as a symbolic stage that lends historical and cultural legitimacy to bodily performance. Third, "platformed repetition," which refers to the repetition of visual formats in the feed through captions, hashtags, geotags, comments, likes, and visibility standards that make certain images appear natural, appealing, authentic, and worthy of posting.

This study aims to fill a gap in photography research by treating photography as a material object and to make a theoretical contribution to understanding the production of space and performativity in the age of mediation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach within an interpretive-critical paradigm to understand the practice of photographing urban spaces as a visual-digital cultural phenomenon. This approach was chosen because the study seeks not only to describe the phenomenon of photography in the Malioboro area but also to interpret the power relations, identity constructions, and the production of visual meaning that occur on the social media platform Instagram.

This study employs Judith Butler's perspective on performativity as the primary analytical framework to examine how "Javaness," gender, and tourist imagery are produced through the repetition of poses, gestures, the use of traditional attire, and visual practices that are continuously circulated in digital spaces. In this context, photography is understood not

merely as a medium of documentation, but as a performative practice that produces symbolic spaces and norms of representation.

Additionally, this study employs a visual culture approach to examine the relationship between the body, urban space, and digital media as part of a system of visual representation. Thus, the research focuses not only on the content of the photos but also on how visuality functions in shaping social perceptions of the Malioboro urban space on social media.

Research Subject

The primary subject of this study is photographs uploaded to Instagram by accounts engaged in photography practices within the urban space of Yogyakarta, specifically those depicting tourists posing in traditional attire in the Malioboro area. (Accounts were analyzed based on their relevance to the practice of photography featuring traditional attire in the Malioboro area.)

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through non-invasive participatory observation and digital documentation from Instagram. The researcher conducted observations, witnessing firsthand photography practices in the Malioboro area, and subsequently conducted observations on Instagram by reviewing photos on accounts that offer photography services featuring traditional attire.

Selection of Sources and Samples

This study used a purposive sampling approach to select relevant Instagram accounts and photos: Instagram accounts that actively post photos of tourists wearing traditional attire in the Malioboro area.

Data Analysis Method

Data were analyzed using a qualitative approach within an interpretive-critical paradigm. Data were analyzed using a qualitative approach with an interpretive-critical orientation. The interpretive approach views social reality as interpreted and constructed through experience, interaction, and sociocultural context (Creswell & Poth, 2024). In this study, the interpretive orientation was used to understand the construction of cultural identity through the practice of photography, while the critical perspective was directed toward uncovering how gender norms, Javanese representations, economic interests, and the use of urban space are intertwined.

Instagram posts were selected for their use of traditional Javanese attire in the Malioboro area and analyzed as a form of performative practice. The visual assets focus on poses, gestures, fashion choices, and spatial positions within urban space. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, this analysis examines how identities are produced through repeated visual actions and naturalized as a form of "standardization." The photographs are understood as a form of performance that embodies identity and the repetition of visual styles. The next stage of analysis involves interpretation to explain how the practice of photographing urban spaces in Yogyakarta, as circulated on social media, operates as a performative practice.

Data Collection Instruments

The research instruments were designed theoretically by referring to Judith Butler's concept of performativity, as well as mediatization on the Instagram platform. In this context, the instruments are not merely tools for documenting data, but analytical tools that translate theoretical concepts into categories to be analyzed.

DISCUSSION

A. The Body as a Rite of Performativity

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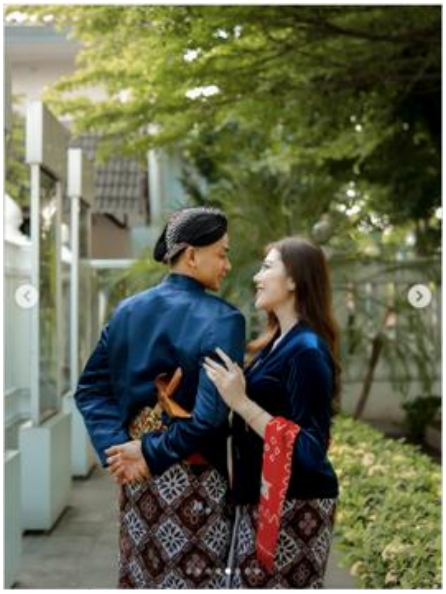


Photo 4. Screenshot from Instagram
Source: @foto_inmalioboro



Photo 5. Screenshot from Instagram
Source: @Rusly_jasafotomalioboro

A visual analysis of Photo 4 and Photo 5 reveals that the body does not appear as a neutral subject before the camera, but rather as a device that activates identity norms through poses, gestures, gazes, and inter-bodily relationships. In Photo 4, the man stands in a taller, more upright posture, wearing a beskap, blangkon, and jarik, and carrying a keris. The woman's body is positioned in a seated, lower stance, with neat hand gestures and a "controlled" expression. The difference in body level and orientation in front of the camera creates a symbolic hierarchy: the man appears as a figure upholding authority, while the woman appears as a calm, gentle, and affectionate figure.

Photo 5 shows a different performative pattern, yet it still operates within the same representational framework. The couple's intimacy is established through close physical proximity, hand contact on the shoulder, faces turned toward one another, and smiles directed not solely at the camera but toward the romantic scenario being enacted. The keris visible behind the man's body, the jarik cloth, and the dark-colored attire function as cultural markers that frame the couple's relationship as Javanese romanticism. The meaning of the photo is shaped not by the clothing alone, but by the interplay among the clothing, gestures, and the direction of their gazes.

From Butler's perspective, the identities depicted in both photos cannot be interpreted as reflections of Javanese identity or natural gender. Identity performance emerges through the repetition of actions that present themselves as stable; Butler, J. (2017) argues that identity arises as an effect of the repetition of visually recognizable actions: men must appear upright, controlled, and authoritative; women must appear graceful, gentle, and supportive. The photograph functions as a citational mechanism by re-enacting bodily patterns that have circulated within the visual imagination of the ideal Javanese couple. The repetition of such poses makes the actual constructed gender relations appear stable, natural, and aesthetically pleasing (J. Butler, 2017).

In the photograph, the centered body positions, differences in height, the foreground-background relationship, and the orderliness of the composition guide the viewer to interpret

the bodies as fully formed cultural signs. The photo does not merely depict two people wearing traditional attire; it produces bodies as bodies fit for viewing: neat, controlled, paired, heteronormative, and conforming to the aesthetic standards commonly found on social media. At this point, photography becomes a performative technology that regulates how subjects must present themselves in order to be recognized as ideal cultural subjects in urban spaces.

Furthermore, the visual repetitions circulating on Instagram present "Javaness" distilled into poses, couples, attire, smiles, and body postures that are easily consumed. Thus, the bodies mediated in these photos are not merely a medium for personal expression, but an arena where cultural, gender, and economic norms interact.

In urban photography, repetition does not stop at staged or stylized bodies but also encompasses backgrounds, composition, attire, editing, and platform circulation. Thus, the image of Yogyakarta does not appear as a neutral representation but rather as a situational effect that is continually repeated, disseminated, and ultimately appears natural in the public's visual imagination (Gregson & Rose, 2000; Kakoliris, 2025b; Sakhno, 2025).

Circulation on Instagram expands the workings of performativity. As similar poses are continuously uploaded by photography service accounts and met with likes, comments, and appearances in feeds, the body is not only staged but also standardized in the digital space. Visual repetition makes certain poses appear as successful formulas worth emulating. This is the point at which the body in urban photography transforms into a performative ritual: it is not merely present to be remembered, directed for the camera, controlled by cultural norms, photographed, and repeated to gain social recognition.

B. Fashion as a Citation



Photo 6. Screenshot from Instagram
Source: @photo_malioboro



Photo 7. Screenshot from Instagram
Source: @fh_potret

In Photos 6 and 7, traditional attire functions not merely as an aesthetic ornament, but as a system of signs that references specific cultural norms. The beskap, blangkon, jarik, kebaya, hair accessories, and the attire's colors serve as visual elements that immediately identify the body as Javanese. In Butler's terms, this attire operates as "citationality": it references existing cultural codes, repeats them in new contexts, and thereby produces an effect of authenticity. Javaness in the photographs does not exist as an essence inherent to the body, but rather as the result of an assembly of signs that is continually performed and circulated. Furthermore, within Butler's framework, photography can be interpreted as a visual medium that helps regulate how subjects present themselves to be recognized as legitimate cultural

subjects, since the recognition of identity depends on norms that enforce the repetition of socially recognizable signs (E. Butler, 2009; Kakoliris, 2025).

Photo 6 illustrates how clothing functions as a signifier. The Malioboro Street sign, concrete pedestrian bollards, street benches, and a row of city facades are not devoid of meaning; rather, they serve as spatial cues that validate the attire's performance. The body clad in traditional attire becomes more readily recognizable as “Javanese” because it is situated in a place that already holds strong symbolic value.

Photo 7 reinforces this mechanism through the interplay of color, body positioning, and an urban backdrop stripped of crowds. The red color of the attire serves as a salient point, the most prominent element that draws attention, while the standing male figure and the seated female figure once again establish a visual division of roles. The concrete ball, the quiet street, and the iconic building behind the subjects create a composition that makes Malioboro appear orderly, spacious, and romantic. In reality, as an urban space, Malioboro is a space crowded with street-based economy, resident mobility, tourism, regulations, and social interactions that are not always orderly. Photography selects and isolates certain elements, so that the city appears as a stage to be visually consumed.

Traditional attire has become part of the photography service industry, allowing tourists to “wear” cultural identities temporarily. This should be viewed as a form of visual mediation that shifts cultural identity from the contexts of rituals, family, and community to those of urban spaces and social media. In this context, the meaning of traditional attire narrows: from a layered cultural practice to a visually recognizable symbol circulating through Instagram feeds.

As the formats of attire, poses, and backgrounds are constantly replicated by photography service accounts, social media audiences may come to accept these images as an idealized portrayal of what it means to be Javanese in Yogyakarta. In reality, what is taking place is a visual construction produced through costume choices, pose direction, camera framing, color editing, and “Instagrammable” standards. Fashion as citation reveals that Javaness in the Malioboro photos is not a discovered object, but a norm that is cited, reconfigured, and reoffered as a visual experience.

C. Public Spaces that Serve as Stages

Photos 8 show how the urban space of Malioboro no longer functions as a passive backdrop, but as a symbolic stage that shapes the meaning of bodily performance. Rain, transparent umbrellas, streetlights, pedestrian benches, bollards, sidewalks, and the reflection of light on the road surface create a powerful cinematic atmosphere. The urban space was chosen not for its overall social complexity, but because specific elements support a visual narrative of romanticism, nostalgia, and urban Javanese identity.



Photo 8. Screenshot from Instagram
@fh_potret

In Photo 8, the repetition of streetlights and the depth of perspective make the couple appear to be walking through a structured visual corridor. The rain and the light from the streetlamps create a dramatic effect, transforming Malioboro from an everyday public space into a theatrical setting. In Photo 7, a clear umbrella, pedestrian lines, classic streetlights, and bodies facing each other form a more intimate spatial choreography. Both photos demonstrate that urban space is not merely occupied but arranged to function as a performative device. Streets, lights, and pedestrians become part of a stage design that makes cultural identity appear modern, romantic, and worth sharing.

In this context, the production of space occurs through selecting a shooting location, determining the camera angle, waiting for the right visual moment, directing the bodies, and removing elements deemed disruptive to the composition. The Malioboro that appears in social media feeds is a curated and condensed version of the street—transformed into symbols: classic streetlights, wet roads, umbrellas, couples, traditional attire, and a heritage-infused atmosphere.

As a result, the city undergoes a dual transformation. Physically, public spaces are used as open-air studios; digitally, these spaces are transformed into images that can circulate without geographical boundaries. In this process, Malioboro's social functions as a space for commerce, mobility, community gatherings, photographers' work, and tourism-related economic negotiations tend to be sidelined by a cleaner, more romantic, and aesthetically curated image of the city. A critical analysis must emphasize that what appears in the photos is not the city in its entirety but rather a version of the city produced for visual performance.

The urban space circulating on Instagram has undergone performatization. It is not only the site where actions take place, but also helps determine which actions are considered appropriate, which poses are deemed attractive, and what kind of city image is regarded as successful. Malioboro has acquired a new function as a digital performative stage: a physical space that legitimizes cultural identity while also serving as a visual space that adapts to the logic of the feed.

In the analyzed screenshots, photos do not appear as standalone images but as part of the platform's interface: they include account names, post formats, captions, hashtags, comments, and traces of user responses. These elements demonstrate that performativity does not end when the camera button is pressed. Performativity does not stop the moment the image

is captured, but continues as the photo enters the platform's system of distribution, ranking, and social evaluation, that is, when the post begins competing for attention, reach, and engagement (Cotter, 2019).

The feed functions as both an archive and a showcase. Photos featuring couples in traditional attire, with Malioboro as the backdrop, umbrellas, classic lamps, or city signboards form a recognizable visual repertoire. This repertoire then serves as a reference for potential service users: they are not merely purchasing documentation, but buying the opportunity to appear within a visual framework that has proven to attract attention. This is where Instagram functions as a performative space that connects the service economy, visual tastes, and the standardization of identity.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the practice of photographing urban spaces in the Malioboro area of Yogyakarta, which is circulated via the social media platform Instagram, functions as a performative practice. Using Judith Butler's framework of performativity, "Javanese" identity is understood not merely as something essential but as an effect of the repetition of poses, gestures, fashion, and visual compositions that have been established and naturalized through digital space. The traditional Javanese attire worn functions as a citation, a reference to, and an affirmation of norms regarding identity, gender, and social class structure. The repetition of these citations is reinforced by the logic of social media algorithms, which indirectly shape the standards of representation considered ideal.

In the context of this research, the Malioboro urban space is understood not merely as a geographical space but as a stage that legitimizes identity practices. Through mediatization, physical space shifts into a digital space that transcends spatial boundaries. The Malioboro urban space transforms from a social space into a performative stage. The logic of media algorithms, through the repetition of posts in social media feeds, has helped shape visual standards considered ideal. Performativity is no longer entirely personal but is bound to the digital power structures that regulate visibility.

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