



## Unraveling the Social Currency of Sustainable Streetwear Brands among Gen Z

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates how brand sustainability perception, social influence, and identity expression shape the social currency of sustainable streetwear brands among Generation Z. Using a quantitative approach with an online survey of 250 Gen Z respondents and SEM-PLS analysis, the results show that sustainability perception and social influence significantly enhance social currency, with identity expression strongly mediating the link between brand perception and social legitimacy. The findings highlight sustainability as both an ethical value and a status symbol within Gen Z communities. This study contributes to understanding social currency in sustainable brand management and provides practical guidance for marketers to strengthen brand value through sustainability-focused communication strategies.

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## INTRODUCTION

The global fashion industry is currently undergoing a major transformation with increasing consumer demands for sustainability. Pressure on more environmentally friendly production practices is getting stronger, especially due to the negative impact of fast fashion which contributes to large amounts of textile waste and global carbon emissions (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Generation Z, known as digital natives as well as conscious consumers, has been the most vocal group in pushing for this change. RMIT University (2024) reports that 58% of Gen Z are willing to pay more for sustainable products and 62% prefer brands that align with ethical values. This reflects that fashion consumption for Gen Z is not only the fulfillment of needs, but also the expression of moral values and self-identity.

In the context of streetwear, sustainability trends are giving it a new dimension. Streetwear has long been synonymous with urban culture, creativity, and resistance to the mainstream. Now, with increasing concern for the environment, sustainable streetwear is not only a lifestyle symbol, but also a means of gaining social recognition in the community (Han et al., 2021). Sustainable streetwear allows Gen Z to show concern for the environment while maintaining an image as part of an exclusive subculture. Thus, sustainable streetwear is one of the mediums for the formation of social currency, which is social value obtained from ownership, use, or association with a brand (Katz et al., 2022).

However, the phenomenon of the value-action gap is still clearly visible. Despite claiming to care about sustainability, many Gen Z still buy fast fashion products for price, accessibility, or trend reasons (Djafarova & Foots, 2022; Williams & Hodges, 2022). This gap indicates the presence of other factors that drive consumption behavior, such as social influences, recognition needs, and personal identity. In other words, sustainable streetwear consumption is not only determined by ethical factors, but also influenced by the symbolic value and social legitimacy inherent in the product.

Several previous studies have highlighted the role of social media in strengthening sustainable brand image among Gen Z. Content created by brands and consumers has been shown to influence purchase intent and positive attitudes towards sustainable products (SpringerOpen, 2025). On the other hand, a study in Consumer Culture Theory confirms that fashion consumption is closely related to the formation of identity and community membership (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2021). However, studies that specifically link brand sustainability perceptions, social influence, identity expression, and social currency in streetwear are still very limited, especially in an empirical context with Generation Z as the main respondents.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to empirically analyze how the perception of brand sustainability, social influence, and identity expression contribute to the formation of a sustainable streetwear brand social currency among Gen Z. In addition, this study also examines the mediating role of identity expression in strengthening the relationship between brand sustainability perception and consumer social legitimacy. Thus, this study not only explains

the key factors, but also outlines the mechanisms underlying the formation of social value in sustainable fashion consumption.

Theoretically, this study expands the literature on sustainable brand management and young consumer behavior. By integrating the perspective of Consumer Culture Theory and social legitimacy theory, this study highlights that sustainability is not only an environmental aspect, but also an instrument that shapes social status and identity among consumers. This research is expected to enrich the study of social currency with a new context, namely sustainable streetwear, which was previously rarely explored.

In practical terms, the research findings can be leveraged by streetwear marketers to design communication strategies that are more authentic and relevant to the Gen Z community. By placing sustainability as a symbol of social status, sustainable streetwear brands can establish a stronger position in the competitive global fashion industry.

## **THEORETICAL REVIEW**

### ***Fashion Sustainability and Industry Urgency***

Recent literature confirms the ecological burden of the fashion industry at critical points of the value chain ranging from fiber production, dyeing processes, to consumption that triggers textile waste, water consumption, and carbon emissions on a large scale (Niinimäki et al., 2020). The pressure of the transition to more responsible production and consumption is increasing as cross-agency initiatives to accelerate a sustainable fashion economy (Geneva Environment Network, 2024). This evidence positions sustainability not just as a trend, but as a strategic prerequisite for the sustainability of the industry and brand legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders.

### ***Generation Z: Values, Intentions, and the Value-Action Gap***

Generation Z is often portrayed as pro-sustainability, willing to pay more, and choose brands according to ethical values, but still show a value-action gap in purchasing practices, especially in fast fashion (Djafarova & Fouts, 2022). Recent studies identified barriers to pricing behavior, accessibility, and social dynamics – which make sustainable preferences not necessarily converted into actions (First Insight, 2024; Fast Fashion Review, 2024). On the other hand, the push towards reuse and resale shows an alternative channel driven by Gen Z, although reducing total consumption remains an unresolved issue (Vogue Business, 2023).

### ***Streetwear as a Culture and Medium of Identity***

Streetwear is understood as a cultural terrain that negotiates style, community membership, and symbolic differentiation. Within the framework of Consumer Culture Theory, fashion consumption becomes the practice of identity formation and community membership, in which brand meanings are constructed collectively (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2021). For Gen Z, streetwear offers a canvas of self-expression that blends aesthetics, values, and social affiliations; The inclusion of sustainability claims adds layers of moral legitimacy

and cultural status without eliminating symbolic functions (Han et al., 2021; Luthra et al., 2024).

### ***Brand Sustainability Perceptions and Consumer Preferences***

Sustainability perception has been shown to increase perceived quality, perceived value, and purchase intent in clothing categories, thus reinforcing the relevance of sustainability communication strategies at the brand level (Zhang et al., 2024). In Gen Z, the dimensions of online experience, engagement, and brand trust interact with sustainability orientation to drive purchase intent, demonstrating the importance of digital touchpoints and credible evidence of green practices (Grubor et al., 2024). Thus, brand sustainability perception works as a key antecedent that needs to be articulated through a consistent and verifiable message.

### ***Social Currency: Concepts, Dimensions, and Mechanisms***

The concept of social currency describes the social value that individuals gain when sharing, using, or associating with a brand – including conversations, advocacy, information, affiliations, utility, and identity (Frontiers Psychology, 2021). Systematic reviews over the past decade show that social currencies are closely related to loyalty, trust, and sharing behaviors in social networks, as well as operating through mechanisms of social exchange and collective self-esteem strengthening (Pereira et al., 2023). In the context of sustainable streetwear, social currency allows consumers to gain recognition as "conscious tastemakers" in their communities – bridging the gap between ethical values and identity performance.

### ***Social Influence, Online Media, and Community***

Content exposure from brands and users reinforces sustainable purchase intent through subjective norms, peer endorsement, and legitimacy cues (Djafarova & Foots, 2022). Heterogeneous networks increase opportunities for sharing and accepting ideas that enrich collective self-esteem, thereby magnifying the effect of social currency on behavior (Frontiers Psychology, 2021). In the fashion category, sustainable marketing strategies that navigate the contradictions – between aesthetics, authentic narratives, and evidence of green practices are more effective at activating community participation and earned media (Kumar et al., 2024).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Types and Approaches to Research***

This study uses a quantitative approach with non-experimental, descriptive-correlational, and hypothesis verification. Thus, this study aims to examine the relationship between latent variables of brand sustainability perception, social influence, identity expression, and social currency through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) surveys and analyses using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach, as often applied in consumer behavior and brand management studies (Hair et al., 2022).

### ***Population and Sampling Techniques***

The research population consists of members of Generation Z (born between 1995–2012) in Indonesia covering the areas of Jakarta, Bandung, Surabaya who are actively using and interested in sustainable streetwear products. The sampling technique used was non-probability purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria: 18–28 years old, having purchased or wearing streetwear that claims sustainability, and connected to social media platforms or online fashion communities. A target sample of 250 respondents was considered statistically adequate for the SEM-PLS analysis (Hair et al., 2022) as well as the minimum number that is often recommended for Quantitative Consumer Community research (Kumar et al., 2024).

### ***Data Collection Techniques and Instruments***

The data collection instrument in this study uses an online structured questionnaire containing several measurement scales to assess the latent variables of the research. The brand sustainability perception variable is adapted from (Zhang et al., 2024) and includes three main dimensions, namely green quality, transparency, and trust. The social influence variable is designed based on subjective norm theory as well as contemporary research (Djafarova & Fouts, 2022). The identity expression variables were taken and modified from streetwear and consumer identity research (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2021). Meanwhile, the social currency variable was developed based on studies (Pereira et al., 2023) and (Frontiers in Psychology, 2021) that reflect the dimensions of status, affiliation, and brand advocacy. Before use, the questionnaire was pre-tested through a pre-test on 30 respondents to ensure the clarity of the questions and initial reliability. Furthermore, content validation was carried out by a panel of experts, as well as testing construct validity and reliability using indicators such as outer loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) through SEM-PLS analysis (Hair et al., 2022).

### ***Research Implementation Procedure***

The procedure for implementing this research began with the design of a questionnaire in Indonesian and English that was validated by experts, then a pre-test was carried out on 30 respondents to identify and correct problematic items. Once revised, the questionnaire is distributed online through social media, the fashion community, and online survey platforms such as Google Forms over a period of 3–4 weeks. The collected data is then selected through a screening process to ensure that there are no duplicates, incompleteness, or outlier data. Next, an initial analysis was carried out using SmartPLS or WarpPLS software to test the validity and reliability of the instrument. The final stage involves testing the structural model by analyzing the direct relationship and mediating effects with identity expression as a mediator variable as well as estimating the significance of the pathway using the bootstrapping technique with 5,000 samples as recommended by (Hair et al., 2022).

### ***Data Analysis Techniques***

The data analysis in this study was carried out through two main stages. First, the measurement model evaluation which aims to assess the quality of research instruments, includes a construct validity test of both convergent validity through the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value, and discriminant validity through the Fornell-Larcker and Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) criteria as well as a reliability test using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. Second, structural model evaluation is used to test the relationship between latent variables through path coefficients, t-statistical values for significance, R<sup>2</sup> values to measure the predictive strength of the model, and f<sup>2</sup> to assess effect size. The mediation test was carried out with a bootstrapping procedure using 5,000 samples to ensure the stability of the estimate. The entire analysis was performed with the help of the latest version of SmartPLS software, in accordance with best practices in modeling variance-based structural equations (Hair et al., 2023; Sarstedt et al., 2022; Henseler, 2021).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Characteristics of Respondents***

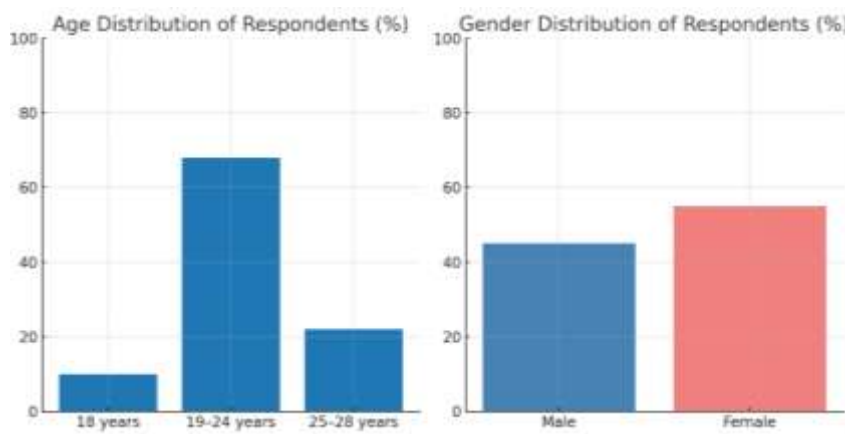
A total of 250 Generation Z respondents participated in the online survey that was the basis of this research. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling techniques with the criteria of knowing, using, or buying sustainable streetwear products, in accordance with the research objectives that focused on understanding the mechanism of social currency formation. The results of the demographic analysis showed that the age distribution of respondents was relatively homogeneous with the dominance of the 19–24 years group (68%), followed by the 25–28 years group (22%), and the remaining 18 years (10%). This distribution is relevant because the age range represents the most active segment of Generation Z in interacting with fashion trends and social media, making it the main market for sustainable streetwear.

In terms of gender, this study involved 55% women and 45% men. This proportion shows relatively balanced participation, although women are slightly more dominant. These findings are important given that differences in style preferences and consumption motivations between men and women can influence how sustainability values and identities are expressed through streetwear. Women generally emphasize the aesthetic and symbolic aspects, while men tend to prioritize functionality and social status displayed through clothing.

In addition, respondents' experiences in using sustainable streetwear products also vary. As many as 72% of respondents admitted that they have bought or used sustainable streetwear products at least once in the past year, while the other 28% have only tried to go through friends or communities without making a direct purchase. This fact shows that although the majority of Gen Z has been involved in sustainable streetwear consumption, there are still some groups that have gained more exposure indirectly. This indicates that there is market potential that has not been fully exploited, where consumers who are only exposed through the community can be directed to become actual consumers with the right communication strategy.

**Table 1. Respondents' Characteristics**

Characteristics	Category	Percentage
<b>Age</b>	18 years	10%
	19-24 years	68%
	25-28 years	22%
<b>Gender</b>	Male	45%
	Female	55%
<b>Streetwear Experience</b>	Ever purchased	72%
	Never purchased	28%



**Figure 1. Respondents' Distribution by Age and Gender**

### *Evaluation of Measurement Models*

The initial stage of analysis using SmartPLS focuses on the evaluation of the measurement model. This evaluation is carried out to ensure that the indicators used on each latent variable are able to measure the construct properly. The results of the analysis showed that all indicators in the variables of brand sustainability perception, social influence, identity expression, and social currency had an outer loading value greater than 0.70, so it can be concluded that each indicator is strongly correlated with the measured construct. An outer loading value above 0.70 confirms convergent validity, meaning that these indicators really measure the same concept according to their constructs.

Furthermore, the results of the reliability test showed that Cronbach's alpha value for all constructs was above 0.80, while the composite reliability (CR) value was also consistent above 0.80. This confirms that the internal consistency between the items in each construct is excellent, so the instrument can be relied upon for measurement. In addition, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value for each construct is higher than 0.50, which indicates that more than 50% of the indicator's variance can be explained by the construct in question. This condition reinforces the validity of the convergence and confirms that the research instrument has met the recommended statistical standards.

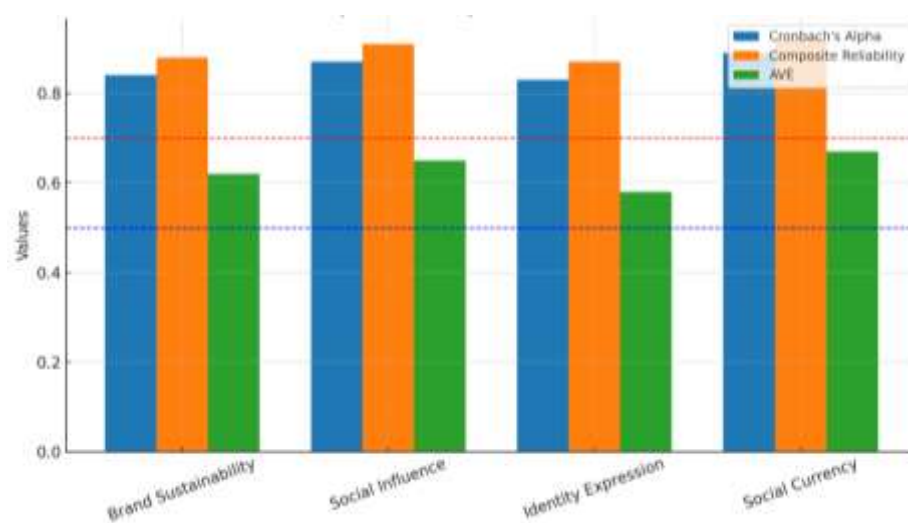
At the discriminant validity testing stage, the Fornell-Larcker Criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) methods were used. The results of the analysis showed that the square root value of AVE for each construct was higher than the correlation between constructs, according to the Fornell-Larcker criteria. Meanwhile, the HTMT value is below 0.90, so it can be concluded that each construct is able to be clearly distinguished from the others. Thus, the research instrument used has met the requirements for discriminant validity, making it suitable for use in structural model analysis.

Overall, the results of the evaluation of this measurement model show that the research instruments used in measuring the perception of brand sustainability, social influence, identity expression, and social currency are reliable and valid. These results provide a solid basis for continuing the analysis to the next stage, namely structural model evaluation, to test the relationships between latent variables as formulated in the conceptual framework of the study.

**Table 2. Results of Measurement Model Evaluation**

Construct	Outer Loadings ( $\geq 0.70$ )	Cronbach's Alpha ( $\geq 0.70$ )	Composite Reliability ( $\geq 0.70$ )	AVE ( $\geq 0.50$ )
Brand Sustainability Perception	0.72 – 0.85	0.84	0.88	0.62
Social Influence	0.74 – 0.88	0.87	0.91	0.65
Identity Expression	0.71 – 0.82	0.83	0.87	0.58
Social Currency	0.76 – 0.89	0.89	0.92	0.67

Here is a graph of the Reliability and Validity Indicators of Constructs that displays the values of Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and AVE for each construct. The red (0.70) and blue (0.50) dotted lines are used as threshold boundaries:



**Figure 2. Reliability and Validity Indicators of Constructs**

**Structural Model Evaluation**

After the research instrument is declared reliable and valid at the evaluation stage of the measurement model, the next step is to test the structural model to see the strength of the relationship between latent variables. This analysis was carried out using the bootstrapping method of 5,000 samples to obtain a stable estimate of the significance of the path coefficient. The test results showed that brand sustainability perception had a positive and significant influence on social currency with a path coefficient values of  $\beta = 0.42$ ,  $t = 6.15$ , and  $p < 0.001$ . This indicates that the higher Gen Z's perception of the sustainability aspect of a streetwear brand, the greater the social value they get from using the product.

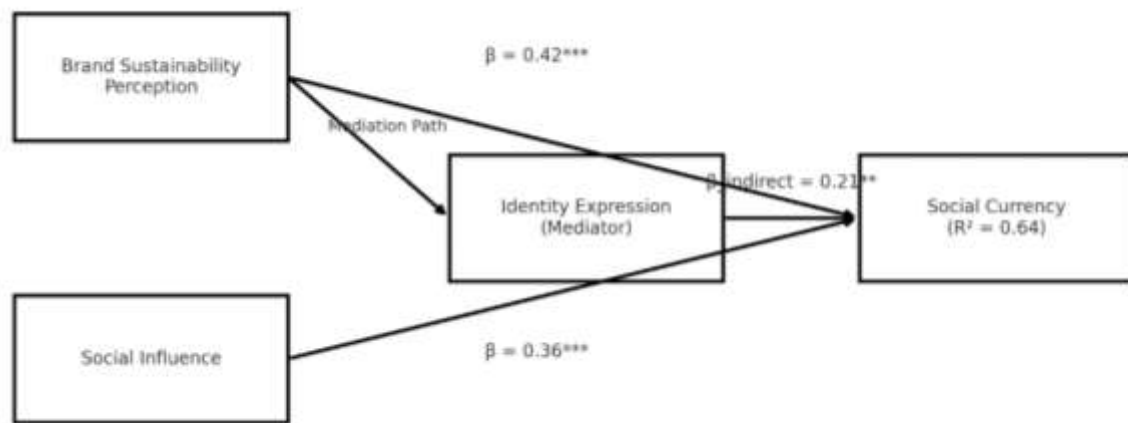
In addition, social influence has also been shown to be significant in increasing social currency ( $\beta = 0.36$ ,  $t = 5.74$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). These results confirm the important role of social interaction, both through peers, online communities, and public figures, in shaping the legitimacy and social status of sustainable streetwear use. In other words, streetwear serves not only as a fashion product, but also as a social symbol that is exchanged in the network of young consumers.

More interestingly, the results of the analysis showed that identity expression partially mediated the relationship between the perception of brand sustainability and social currency with indirect effect values  $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $t = 4.82$ , and  $p < 0.01$ . This means that the perception of sustainability not only has a direct effect on social values, but also works indirectly through the expression of identity displayed by consumers. Gen Z tends to use sustainable streetwear to reinforce their personal identity, whether in terms of style, ethical values, or community membership, thereby magnifying the social recognition they receive.

From the perspective of the model's predictive power, the  $R^2$  value for social currency is 0.64, which means that 64% of social currency variance can be explained by three main variables in this study, namely brand sustainability perception, social influence, and identity expression. This value is a strong category in the context of SEM-PLS, so it can be concluded that the research model has substantial predictive power for the phenomenon being studied.

**Table 3. Path Coefficients and Significance**

Relationship	Path Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	t-Statistic	p-Value	Result
Brand Sustainability Perception → Social Currency	0.42	6.15	<0.001	Significant
Social Influence → Social Currency	0.36	5.74	<0.001	Significant
Brand Sustainability Perception → Identity Expression (Mediation)	0.21	4.82	<0.01	Partial Mediation



**Figure 3. Structural Model Results**

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide a comprehensive overview of how brand sustainability perceptions, social influences, and identity expressions contribute to the formation of social currency in Generation Z in the context of sustainable streetwear consumption. Key findings show that perceptions of brand sustainability and social influence have a significant positive influence on social currency, while identity expression plays a role as a partial mediator that strengthens the relationship. Overall, the research model was able to explain 64% of the variance in social currency, confirming that a combination of ethical, social, and identity factors is an important determinant in sustainable fashion consumption behavior.

*First*, the finding that brand sustainability perceptions have a significant positive effect on social currency supports the theory of social legitimacy, in which consumers tend to attribute moral and ethical values to brands that are transparent and committed to sustainability. Generation Z as critical consumers not only see products from an aesthetic perspective, but also associate them with broader values such as environmental ethics and social responsibility (Wang & Zhou, 2023). These results reinforce research (Zhang et al., 2024) that confirms that perceptions of green quality, transparency, and sustainable brand trust drive loyalty as well as increase consumer social legitimacy. Thus, the sustainable use of streetwear is not only a form of consumption, but also a status symbol that reflects the ethical identity of the younger generation.

*Second*, the finding that social influence influences social currency is in line with the theory of subjective norms put forward by Ajzen (1991) as well as recent research that shows the strong role of community, social media, and peer groups in shaping Generation Z's consumption decisions (Djafarova & Fouts, 2022). Streetwear as part of urban culture is often positioned in a social realm that emphasizes group recognition. Thus, the decision to purchase sustainable streetwear products is not only determined by individual preferences, but also by the social pressures and expectations that surround them (Grubor et al., 2024). This explains why social influence is a key factor in strengthening the legitimacy and social value inherent in a brand.

*Third*, the role of identity expression as a mediator shows that sustainable streetwear consumption is becoming an important means for Generation Z to express who they are and what values they embrace. This study found that perceptions of sustainability not only directly affect social values, but also work through identity formation mechanisms. This is consistent with Consumer Culture Theory which emphasizes that fashion products function as a medium of self-expression and a symbol of community membership (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2021). Thus, sustainable streetwear represents not only an ethical choice, but also a tool of self-expression that strengthens the social position of consumers in the eyes of their environment.

In addition to supporting the main hypothesis, the results of this study also make a theoretical contribution by integrating the dimensions of sustainability, social influence, and identity into the framework of social currency. Previous studies have mostly focused on the purchase intent aspect of sustainable products (Williams & Hodges, 2022; Pereira et al., 2023), while this study expands the understanding that brand sustainability can also be a source of status and social recognition. Thus, this study confirms that social currency can be a strategic indicator to understand the added value that consumers provide to sustainable fashion brands.

From a practical perspective, the results of this study provide implications for streetwear industry players in designing marketing strategies. The fact that sustainability can strengthen social currency shows that brands need to emphasize transparency, green quality, and ethical narratives in their communications. In addition, community-based strategies, collaborations with public figures, and the use of consumer-generated content can magnify a proven social influence on brand legitimacy. Furthermore, campaigns that provide space for consumers to express their identity through sustainable products will increase emotional attachment and long-term loyalty.

However, this study has a limitation, namely that the data is collected through online surveys that focus on respondents in big cities, so the results may be less representative of Generation Z in other areas. This study uses cross-sectional design, so it has not been able to capture the dynamics of changes in consumer behavior over time and other variables such as price, product design, or brand accessibility have not been included in the model, even though these factors can influence consumption decisions. Therefore, further research can expand the sample geographically, using longitudinal designs, and adding external variables to obtain a more comprehensive picture.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study reveals that the perception of brand sustainability and social influence are the main determinants in the formation of social currency in Generation Z of sustainable streetwear users in Indonesia. The results of the analysis show that the perception of sustainability contributes directly to the social legitimacy of consumers, while social influence strengthens the group's recognition of ethical fashion choices. Furthermore, the expression of identity proved to be a significant mediator, showing that sustainable streetwear is not

only seen as a fashion product, but also as a symbolic means of expressing social values and membership. The  $R^2$  value of 0.64 confirms that the research model has a strong predictive power for the social currency phenomenon in the context of sustainable fashion.

Theoretically, this research expands the study of sustainable brand management by integrating the perspective of social currency and consumer culture theory in the context of Generation Z, providing a new understanding that sustainability is not only an ethical issue but also an instrument for obtaining social status. In practical terms, these findings offer a strategic guide for the streetwear industry to design communication campaigns that emphasize sustainability while strengthening the brand's social value through community interaction, social media influence, and consumer identity expression.

### FURTHER STUDY

However, the limitations of the study lie in the use of online surveys with a coverage of respondents dominated by big cities, so they do not fully represent the geographical variation of Generation Z in Indonesia. Further research is suggested to expand the scope of the region, using longitudinal designs, as well as incorporating external variables such as price, design, and accessibility to gain a more comprehensive understanding.

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