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RESEARCH NOTE

The Philippine *Ukay-Ukay* Culture as Sustainable Fashion

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Wang et al. (2019) proposed a sustainable fashion index model that aims to measure the sustainability of fashion companies. The model is interesting because of its underlying theory, which provides necessary dimensions and variables that make the fashion industry and its activities sustainable. This paper aims to employ these dimensions and variables as theoretical concepts to evaluate the sustainability of Philippine *ukay-ukay* culture. *Ukay-ukay* is a term used both for the act of shopping by digging up piles of used or pre-loved clothes until one makes a good find. It also refers to retailers of secondhand clothes and accessories in the Philippines. The sustainable fashion theory posits that for fashion to be sustainable, it must strive to achieve and balance specific economic, environmental, cultural, and social objectives. As part of the three fashion business models, what then are the relationship of the *ukay-ukay* to these other models, the fast fashion and luxury fashion models, and how does it fare in terms of sustainability. Through theoretical analysis of *ukay-ukay's* quality and value, customers and relationships, processes, expressions and meanings, and legalities and charities, this paper found that *ukay-ukay* can actually be an alternative model for sustainable fashion with certain limitations.

Keywords: *ukay-ukay*, sustainable fashion, slow fashion, fast fashion, secondhand clothes

JEL Classifications**:** L67, Q56

Fashion designers and brands all over the world feature their latest collections in *Fashion Week*. The most famous of these events are the "Big Four," namely, Milan, Paris, New York, and London. Runways in the Big Four showcase the newest designs for the media and possible buyers and retailers. These shows also influence and spark global fashion trends as "name brands," or well-known clothing companies, are the ones usually featured in such affairs. The clothes and accessories sold by these name brands could go up to thousands of dollars. Though, a person on the street can barely afford an Oscar de la Renta, a Gucci, or a Louis Vitton. These luxury brands are quite expensive, and a person who owns such will keep them forever if they can. Alternatively, if they let go of them, they resell these items for a hefty price or pass them on to others.

In the Philippines, although Fashion Weeks are held twice a year, most brands featured are fast fashion brands or brands by more affordable

retailers. Clothes do not go up to a thousand dollars, but a few thousand pesos or even less. Some of these brands include SM Department Store, H&M, Bench, Avon Fashion, and Human. These are known as fast fashion brands or brands that offer "low cost and flexibility in design, quality, delivery and speed to market" (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010, p. 165). Also known as "throwaway" fashion, fast fashion was a response to the changes in the industry in the past three decades, such as the fading of mass production, fashion seasons, and restructuring of production operations.

Although most revenue is generated in China, in 2019 alone, revenue in the fashion segment amounts to US$ 229M with an annual growth rate of 9.9% in the Philippines (Statista, n.d.). Due to Filipino's mall culture and entry into the market by huge but more affordable name brands such as Uniqlo, H&M, Zara, and Forever 21, fashion has come to be such a huge industry in the Philippines. Considering this, it is quite unsurprising that the Philippines also has a huge secondhand clothing trade.

For more than 50 years, secondhand clothing has already been sold in the country. The *halukay* or *ukay-ukay* culture was born out of the desire for "good quality, unique design, fashionable, same as brand new" clothing without the hefty price tag (Isla, 2013, p. 231). Philippine consumers have the choice of wearing secondhand luxury brands that were not mass-produced or firsthand fast fashion brands that are a dime a dozen (or even firsthand luxury brands that could break the bank).

Incidentally, the difference between the choices mentioned does not only impact the consumers' perceived image of themselves or their savings account. Each type of fashion choice has a cost, the more expensive of which is the cost of fast fashion. The preference for more affordable, easily-produced clothing contributes to unsustainable fashion, and there are quite a few controversies that may arise with it from unjust working spaces to detriments to the environment.

This paper aims to look into the *ukay-ukay* business model of fashion, and how it relates to other business models, such as the fast fashion and luxury fashion models. Finally, it determines whether it is sustainable using the sustainable fashion theory, which is the basis of the sustainable fashion index model proposed by Wang et al. (2019).

Three Fashion Business Models

The Fast Fashion Business Model

Consumer fashion behavior has changed throughout the years. They are more demanding and discerning, they demand retailers to produce fashion quickly when they need it, and they demand convenient, quick, or fast fashion. In particular, Generation Y prefers cheaper clothes that are of lesser quality vis-a-vis older generations that prefer more expensive but higher quality clothes. Although previous fashion companies focused on their product, competition has forced them to convert into being buyer-driven. This means advancements in alliances with suppliers in different markets and recalibrated infrastructure to promote reduced lead times while maintaining low production costs (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). For example, fast fashion companies such as Zara delivers their collection to stores in two weeks; Forever 21 does so in six weeks, and H & M in eight weeks (Buzzo & Abreu, 2019, p. 7).

Fast fashion has grown 9.7% per year over the last five years, defeating the 6.8% increase in traditional apparel companies (Tan, 2016). The unexpected rise of fast fashion is attributed to the millennial who can be described as someone who is part of "a generation raised to shop" (Bain, 2015). Most of them see shopping as a form of entertainment, or perhaps, a show of "luxury." Furthermore, people who shop fast fashion tend to buy clothes even if they do not need such items if only to stay trendy. Rapid production of clothing is an effect of the constantly changing styles that makes it difficult for many teenagers to resist shopping and fit into the current fashion trends (Tan, 2016). Just to give an idea, in a survey, one-third of the respondents claimed that, on average, clothes get old after wearing them only thrice (Buzzo & Abreu, 2019, p. 2).

Fast fashion is largely supported by the belief that consumers buy in large quantities and dispose of the clothing after some time (Jung & Jin, 2016). Hereafter, the phenomena of sourcing manufacturing and processes in the fashion apparel industry to offshore places with low labor costs became a trend, thereby resulting in a substantial cost advantage. In actuality, the impression of cost savings by subcontracting manufacturing to low wage nations turned out to be misleading as the savings sometimes were low compared to the cost of uselessness, compulsory mark-downs, and inventory carrying costs.

There is so much waste with fast fashion compared to buying one item that is of high quality; one purchases more items that are of low quality. The old low-quality merchandise is then disposed of immediately, considering the affordability of new low-quality pieces of clothing (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010, p. 170). Fast fashion satisfies people's constant need for new things due to its mass production and low prices, making it affordable and convenient to purchase. It continues to be widely produced and purchased in today's society despite unsustainability (Joy et al., 2012).

Why is fast fashion unsustainable? Some reasons include unethical working conditions and prevalent capitalism that manifest into economic injustice; environmental impact due to the use of chemical dyes and non-durable textile, therefore, worsening the condition of garments being thrown into landfills; and overconsumption brought about by the industry's seasonal mass production (Mukherjee, 2013; Warren, 2000). Most clothes are also made with plastic fibers (Buzzo & Abreu, 2019, p. 7).

The Slow Fashion and Luxury Fashion Business Models

Slow fashion is concerned with quality and the process of making clothing. Although more expensive, it can withstand the test of time. With the bigger amount of effort and time spent on manufacturing, the producers enhance the quality of the product, making it more durable. Consumers are expected to buy less but at a higher quality. Fast fashion is largely dependent on volume and budget; whereas in slow fashion, the manufacturing and consumption are up purchasing the value of the clothing produced (Jung & Jin, 2016).

Inspired by the "slow food" movement vis-a-vis the fast-food movement, slow fashion promotes "innovations, multifunctional and timeless design, reuse of textile materials and services based on alternative strategies such as leasing (or leasing) of fashionable garments and accessories" (Buzzo & Abreu, 2019, p. 2). As most consumers may not have substantive knowledge of slow fashion, they still purchase from fast fashion brands. With old clothes being rapidly replaced by new ones, this opens the issue of how problematic the fast fashion industry is. Consumers who have firm environmental beliefs are more likely to perceive slow fashion and sustainable apparel positively. Moreover, individuals who showed strong environmental values are the ones who are perceived as environmentalists. The problem is that most people do not have a deeper understanding of slow fashion, its alternatives, and sustainable apparel.

Slow fashion products are not necessarily luxury fashion products. Besides the high price and fine quality and craftsmanship of luxury items, they bring history and heritage. Specifically, these unique products are made by "elaborate craft ateliers" who hail from "generations of artisans." Similarly, environmental effects are not much of the consumer's concern when they buy these luxury items because "most ateliers are attached to big fashion houses located in major fashion cities, such as Paris and Milan" (Joy et al., 2012, p. 287). Ironically, luxury fashion is not necessarily sustainable fashion. "Gold" fashion or luxury fashion is not necessarily "green" fashion. However, as luxury clothing highly influences trends, it can pave the way for eco-friendly or sustainable fashion (Joy et al., 2012, pp. 289–290).

The *Halukay /Ukay-Ukay* Business Model

A famous television ad once featured a woman making a pun about her purchased clothes, that they were from the U.K., the *UKay-UKay.* "Ukay" is from the term "halukay," which means to dig up (Locsin, 2007). Shopping is done by digging up piles of clothes until one makes a good find. An "ukay" in turn is then a find or the article bought. In Baguio, for example, huge piles of secondhand clothes are on the streets, and shoppers gladly dig through or do the *halukay* in search of the perfect *ukay*. The *ukay-ukay*, however, when contrasted against the luxury and fast fashion business models, is quite non-traditional. Profit is made from other people's discarded clothing, and turnover is not based on seasons nor catwalk trends. Such trade can actually be traced to centuries back.

In the late 1800s to the early 1900s, religious and NGO groups in the United States and the United Kingdom collected clothes and other household goods from more affluent people to sell to the needy at lower prices. The Salvation Army and the Red Cross were some of these. Through these thrift shops, unwanted goods were given second lives. In contrast, Filipino secondhand retail stores were not patterned after their Western counterparts. They were not put up by religious groups nor targeted towards the needy. Their goods were also not donated or collected but rather "bought" from suppliers from Hong Kong, Europe, the United States, Australia, and Japan (Locsin, 2007).

The most famous *ukay-ukay* stock suppliers would be from Hong Kong. Filipino *ukay-ukay* businesses would get their stocks through warehouses, ship them to the Philippines through *balikbayan* boxes, and sell them themselves or through other retailers. These boxes usually end up in Baguio, where the secondhand retail trade thrives in the country. Sometimes, the Hong Kong suppliers identify these boxes per their contents as Class A, B, or C. "Class A refers to all quality and brand name goods. Class B boxes may contain a mix of quality and so-so items. Class C boxes contain the 'not so-good' items… In *ukay-ukay* parlance, brand name items are called 'signature' or 'branded'" (Locsin, 2007). Whether Class A, B, or C, all the contents of the boxes get sold to retailers. Class C boxes, on the other hand, have their contents sifted through by the hierarchy of retailers wherein those who do not have formal stalls end up with the items of less quality at prices ranging from Php5.00 to Php50.00 per item. Easily, a buyer could end up with an old branded shirt at Php20.00, and this could already be a 300% markup for the seller.

When a consumer is faced with the choice of purchasing a secondhand signature product at Php20.00 versus a fake authentic quality product at Php150.00 versus another fast-fashion product that mimics a luxury brand at Php500.00, why should the consumer choose the *ukay*? If sustainable fashion is one consideration for purchase, would the *ukay-ukay* be even considered? Given that these items are all secondhand items, the question now arises as to whether *ukay-ukay* fashion is eco-friendly fashion.

Sustainable Fashion Theory as a Framework

When Wang et al. (2019) developed a sustainable fashion index model with the goal of measuring the sustainability of companies in the fashion industry, they used a sustainable fashion theory as the basis. First, there has to be a clear-cut definition of sustainability, which is basically the balancing of various present and future needs economically, socially, culturally, and environmentally. The needs of tomorrow's generation should not be sacrificed for today's generation. It is important to note that sustainability is not limited merely to environmental sustainability but rather includes economic, cultural, and social sustainability as well. For example, more than just the use of eco-friendly garments that are renewable, economic and social needs should also be met, and these include social attributes such as "job security, fair wages, and professional quality of life" of workers in the fashion industry (Buzzo & Abreu, 2019, p. 7) and economic attributes such as "price and promotion advantages" for customers (Wang et al., 2019).

The sustainable fashion theory posits that for fashion to be sustainable, it must strive to achieve and balance specific economic, environmental, cultural, and social objectives. Beginning with economic objectives, a fashion company must strive for company profitability, which includes "price, quality, promotion, management quality and service systems" (Wang et al., 2019). Fashion products being sold should be of high quality alongside other added values such as customer service in order for consumers to "perceive sustained profitability" (Wang et al., 2019). French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard, would define such objective as the consummation of a sign-value or the fashion commodity's relevance to the consumer (Kellner, 1994, p. 125). When the buyer purchases the piece of clothing, he or she is not merely purchasing the commodity itself but the sign value attached to it as well. The sign value can be attributed to its management and service systems, and this may include promotions such as advertising, mass media, and other cultural productions in relation to that piece of clothing. Thus, the "perceived" sustained profitability. Consequently, the value equity, brand equity, and relationship equity all contribute to the perceived qualities, values, and expectations of sustainability.

Related to social objectives, consumers become emotionally invested in products that symbolize social superiority and responsibility (Wang et al., 2019). The perceived personal identity that is an effect of purchasing ethical brands could be another sign value. Is profit the main objective of these fashion companies? Or do they allocate their resources to other purposes? Do they make charitable contributions, work on corporate reputations, or hold employee trainings?

Though a company produces sustainable fashion, it does not necessarily mean ethical fashion. Ethical fashion is fashion with conscience that presupposes the process of "manufacturing, consumption, fashion design and trading" are all "ethical" (Haug & Busch, 2016, p. 4). Incidentally, "ethical refers to the positive impact of (1) a designer, (2) a consumer choice or (3) a method of production as experienced by workers, consumers, animals, society and the environment"

(Haug & Busch, 2016, p. 5). Ethical fashion also deals with critical outlooks on gender and body representations. On the contrary, the sustainable fashion index model focuses more on the fashion company's commitment to sustainability and making sustainable choices available to the consumers rather than the ethical choices made by the consumers themselves.

With regard to environmental objectives, a fashion company must adopt the eco-efficiency approach, which seeks to cut the waste produced by the industry. This means that recycling and the use of "green" materials are encouraged. Specifically, sustainable fashion must "use recycled products/ packaging, reduce waste, curb energy use, and use new technology product designs in environmentally-friendly ways" (Wang et al., 2019, p. 2). Expanding on this, fashion companies must avoid harmful materials that could damage the environment, thereby using natural, sustainable fabrics instead. One byword that can contain these objectives is "eco-fashion"— "environmental, ecological . . . ethical, organic, and inclusive (universal) fashion design" (Haug & Busch 2016, p. 5). Cultural objectives, on the other hand, involve the protection of cultural and environmental ideas and the cultural diversity of products (Wang et al., 2019)

The notion of "development" is usually related to environmental annihilation and valued social attributes; therefore, the term sustainability is used rather than sustainable development. The sustainability of fashion depends on the improvement of costs and the alignment of sustainable fashion alternatives (Mukherjee, 2013). A socially-responsible apparel and textile business has three conceptual scopes: "an orientation encompassing the environment . . . a philosophy that balances ethics/ morality with profitability, (and) a desire for outcomes that positively affect . . . the world and its people" (Dickson & Eckman 2006, p. 188).

The Sustainability of *Ukay-Ukay* Fashion

The sign value that comes with luxury brands is definitely higher than that of fast fashion brands. Those who cannot afford expensive items see luxury fashion as exclusive. Although beautiful and artistic, they can only aspire for it and dream about it. With fast fashion, their dreams of luxury come alive. The fast fashion alternative that mimics luxury fashion is a pragmatic way to achieve their dreams of luxury (Joy et al., 2012, p. 286). As the adage goes, "aesthetics trump ethics" (Joy et al., 2012, p. 286). If they can own the luxury brand itself, despite being secondhand or pre-loved, why own the luxury brand item through *ukay-ukay*?

Some Filipinos buy from the *ukay-ukay* because it is a way for them to be able to be stylish and up-to-date with fashion, and "own" signature items without breaking the bank. Incidentally, one can even "pretend to have bought these items from designer houses" (Locsin, 2007, p. 378). Accordingly, some people even make up stories that they have "a mother, an aunt, a sibling or a cousin living abroad, who chanced upon the goods in a bargain" (Locsin, 2007, p. 378).

When someone patronizes the *ukay-ukay* stores and stalls, one cannot help but wonder whether *ukay-ukay* is sustainable fashion. Considering that the goods are acquired and not produced, how does its sustainability fare with other business models? Technically, most *ukay-ukay* clothes are recycled clothes (except for those items that still have tags). If these products were not re-sold, they would go straight to waste. People make a profit through other people's trash. Being recycled is supposedly a qualification for eco-fashion. However, is the *ukay-ukay* sustainable fashion according to the sustainable fashion theory? If *ukay-ukay* fashion is sustainable fashion, then why would one not prefer to purchase such clothing? Also, how can one be encouraged to patronize the *ukay-ukay*?

The sustainability fashion theory enumerates the following factors in terms of sustainability: economic, environment, social, culture, perceived quality of sustainability, perceived value of sustainability, customer expectations of sustainability, customer complaints, and value/brand/relationship equity (Wang et al., 2019). One cannot answer the questions above unless it can be proven that *ukay-ukay* fashion is indeed sustainable fashion.

Quality and Value

One of the main reasons people buy *ukay-ukay* products is because one can get authentic designer items at crazy low prices. A bag by Comme des Garcon (CDG), for example, could cost up to $500 when bought in retail or online stores but can be bought for as low as Php25.00 in the *ukay-ukay* (Nitura, 2019). Product quality is questionable, given its secondhand nature is dependent on the consistency of stocks. As discussed earlier, items are boxed depending on their quality (or newness), thus classified into either A, B,

or C. It is imperative that strategies be employed by traders given their "lack of control over stock quality, fierce competition, changing tastes of consumers and shifting fashion trends" (Milgram, 2004). In terms of promotion, a poster with huge "sale" letters or "new stocks" or "new arrival" would be the only indication of such in the stores.

When someone buys from the *ukay-ukay*, they do not use or wear the items immediately. It is common knowledge that one should disinfect secondhand clothes before wearing them, either by soaking them in boiling water and detergent soap or dry cleaning (with chemicals). Bags and shoes, on the other hand, are restored. With bag restoration shops sprouting all over the country, *ukay* bags can indeed look good as new. Quality is indicated by the repairs or restoration needed for the products bought. Although the *ukay* business thrives, other businesses benefit from it as well. These include dry cleaning and restoration businesses.

Distribution is not only limited to the stalls or stores themselves. Sellers also utilize eBay.ph and pull out their merchandise from the physical stores when bids on the site give better prices. Items have more detailed descriptions, including serial numbers and certifications of authenticity (Locsin, 2007). In the advent of other sites, such as Carousel and Shoppee, common folk who do not have their own stalls for their secondhand goods can sell what they refer to as "pre-loved" items (which is a politically-correct way of terming "used" items). Customer satisfaction for these can be determined by the seller's rating, response rate, and other evaluation measures provided by the online selling sites. One question that can be asked is if the sustainability of these products is discussed by the customers and sellers.

Customers and Relationships

Most *ukay* stores sell at flexible prices as opposed to fixed prices; thus, customers can bargain or negotiate prices. According to Selcuk and Gokpinar (2018), however, fixed and flexible pricing schemes are dictated by customer preferences. For example, some customers do not like to haggle; thus, the fixed price prevails, but when consumers enjoy bargaining, the prices become flexible. Sometimes, flexible pricing comes at the very end when the customer buys clothes in bulk, and the seller decides to throw in a wholesale discount.

Incidentally, tourists have "stronger-than-average bargaining power" when they are "traveling with companions and obtaining travel information from friends and mass media" (Zhang et al., 2018). Considering that *ukay-ukay* shopping is part and parcel of local and tourist attractions in cities such as Davao (Pavo, 2019) or the *ukay* capital of the Philippines, Baguio, most shoppers Google *ukay-ukay* tips to get ahead on purchasing strategies and bargaining. There are even "shopping junkets" organized by more affluent Metro Manila shoppers (Milgram, 2004). Fashion magazines such as *Preview* and *Cosmopolitan PH*, and Youtube fashion bloggers have features on *ukay-ukay* experts, hauls, and unique finds. Potential customers use these as guides when they go on their hunt for bargains.

Ukay customers may be considered the weird bunch. As long as items are cheap or appear as unique but still-usable treasures, they purchase them. For example, in Tagaytay's Olivarez Plaza, people buy everything from baby clothes to sportswear to even "used" underwear! Unfortunately, a study by Valdez et al. (2014) revealed that customers encounter certain problems with shopping. There is "much effort needed in searching *ukay-ukay* goods" tops the chart. Other problems mentioned include damage and defect of products, annoying odor, too much time consumed, and the limited space of the shopping area (Valdez et al., 2014).

There are general attributes when it comes to clothing preferences of shoppers (be it in the *ukay-ukay* or the typical mall). They include quality condition, clothing brand, design and style of clothes, colors and color combinations, clothing material, market price of clothing, trendiness, packaging and arrangement, ambiance of location, and location background (Abueg, 2005). When it comes to keeping clientele, customer loyalty may be retained by *ukay* vendors, except when prices are Php10-20.00 lower compared to other sellers (FFE Life & Lifestyle Staff, 2014).

Reuse, Recycle, Refashion

In terms of environmental sustainability, which is the core of the sustainable fashion theory, although most products being sold are reused considering their pre-loved nature, not all products are recycled. Recycling presupposes that the clothes are already considered as waste. Ukay-ukay clothes are technically reused, meaning nothing else is done to them besides

cleaning and washing (except of course for those that need restoration and repair). In Europe, the recycling of clothes and textiles may take more toll on the environment. For example, clothes have to be shredded and downcycled, utilizing various mechanical, chemical, and thermal processes (Filho et al., 2019). The process of recycling clothes needs to be evaluated for sustainability as well. Furthermore, certain textiles cannot be reprocessed. Incidentally, a design strategy known as "Design for Cyclability" requires that garments be selected and clothes be designed with its potential for recycling (Filho et al., 2019). One other problem encountered by recycling is that there is "limited demand for recycled textiles…(because) many recycled textile wastes are unsuitable for multiple recirculation and use" (Filho et al., 2019). In terms of packaging, *ukays* have no packaging when they arrive in the country, except their boxes. When sold, they are put in plastic bags, which are not recyclable.

Although it is a given that *ukays* are not necessarily recycled clothes, they are reused products without the need to undergo various processes that may have harmful environmental effects. Obviously, most *ukays* are not designed with recycling potential in mind, but they have lengthened clothing life cycles because, rather than being a part of textile waste after the first use, they become part of the retail trade after discardment. What happens to the secondhand piece of clothing when their owners want to throw them away? Interestingly, these items can actually be resold again for third lives. Famous *ukay-ukay* queen Shaira Luna has an actual closet sale wherein she resells her *ukay* finds. Selling her pre-loved (raised to the power of two) clothes is a way to "recycle, reuse, and rotate items when we can" (Sison, 2017, par. 2).

Besides reusing and recycling, refashioning is another way to manage waste in the clothing trade. Refashioning is "defined as remaking used clothes into new ones," and it "is gaining attention because it is a higher form of reusing which focuses on value added recovery" (Sugiura, 2019, p. 1). In Kyoto, Japan, for example, kimonos were re-dyed in the 1920s to the 1960s to reuse and refashion clothing proactively (Sugiura, 2019). In the Philippines, Denuo, an online brand that was founded by Monica Vivar, upcycles *ukay-ukay* items. Termed as "reclaimed clothing," the fashion collection is composed of garments about to be disposed and are "recirculated into the retail cycle" (Sison, 2018). Denuo is sourced from various *ukay-ukay* shops, garage sales, and other pre-loved sources, then revived or refashioned for reselling.

Expression and Meaning

One reason patrons love the *ukay-ukay* is that items sold are original and unique; they complement the buyer's style. *Ukays* encourage experimentation, and mix and matching of pieces that allows one to reinvent his or her style over and over again. Consequently, one can also upgrade, redesign, or upcycle *ukays.* Upcycling is a way to update secondhand finds while upholding one's self-expression (Pascual, 2018). Besides the Denuo brand, other more creative entrepreneurs have also gone into the up-cycling business. Likha is a Cebu-based collection, created by one of the grand champions of the Green Fashion Revolution design contest, composed of redesigned *ukays* made more stylish and trendy (Gocotano, 2018).

The cultural sustainability of the *ukay* also lies in its appeal to various diverse groups. Cordillera women, for example, make use of "local-to-global practices of consumption and trade… in the contingent and compromised space between market demand and the cultural intimacy and expectations of family, community, and customary practice" (Milgram, 2004, p. 199). Redesigning and manipulating goods, either by consumers or designers, is a way to express themselves and send messages. Mixing and matching pre-loved branded clothes from the West with local garments is a way to demonstrate Filipinos' "agency and ability to expropriate, as well as to appropriate" (Milgram, 2004, p.199).

The *ukay-ukay* is also an excellent source of ideas and material for arts and crafts. In 2018, an "'Ukay-ukay' protest installation at ManilART 2018" (2018) exhibit using ceramics "scavenged from ukay/thrift/ garage sale/surplus stores" (par. 2).

Legality and Charity

Social sustainability dictates that businesses should uphold their corporate reputation and make charitable contributions. Although *ukay-ukay* businesses thrive in the country (assuming their stocks come from overseas), these are actually illegal by virtue of the Philippines' Republic Act No. 4563, which prohibits the "commercial importation of textile articles commonly known as used clothing and rags" (Republic Act No. 4563 of 1966, par. 1). In 1966, this was enacted to "safeguard the health of the people and maintain the

dignity of the nation" (Republic Act No. 4653 of 1966, par. 1). Despite the justification, RA 4653 is criticized as anti-consumer and anti-business as it hinders the start-up and maintenance of *ukay-ukays*, the creation of jobs, and potential retail sector investments (Guilas, 2017).

In 2014, the Philippine congress proposed House Bill No. 4055 to repeal the aforementioned law and legalize the importation of secondhand or used clothing and rags. There are three reasons as to why this bill was pushed: 1) as garments enter the country illegally, potential taxes are lost; 2) *ukay-ukay* businesses actually provide lucrative jobs to thousands of people; and 3) the Philippines' Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) actually requests for the "smuggled" used clothing to be donated to typhoon victims when calamities strike. The bill also includes provisions for taxation of imported garments. The government can earn up to Php700 million ($14 million) in taxes annually with the repealment of RA 4653 (Gavilan, 2017).

Unfortunately, the bill was not enacted into law. People who buy from *ukay-ukay* are technically patronizing illegal businesses (assuming secondhand clothes being sold are imported) as if they are purchasing smuggled goods. Furthermore, there is also an ethical question in relation to the secondhand clothing trade (Ladrido, 2018). Although influencers and socialites (who are mostly from the middle classes) celebrate their Php500 *ukay* loot, they are actually raising the values and prices of these items, making them unattainable to those who are actually in need of cheaper alternatives. Furthermore, although shopping junkets were discussed earlier, the concept of slum tourism presupposes that the more affluent visit disadvantaged places for their novelty (Rolfes, 2010). In this case, *ukay-ukay* visits may sometimes appear as "slumming" for wealthy tourists searching for old, disposed Louis Vitton's or Fendi's in poorer areas (Valdez et al., 2014).

Similarly, the used clothes might have been intended as donations/charitable contributions to the less fortunate or calamity-stricken—but they are being sold instead. In fact, "all beggars in the country would have been clothed already—like fashion models at that" (Ladrido, 2018, par.12) if people did not see the money that can be made from the business. The inexpensiveness and functionality of the *ukay* commodities are two-pronged. Although they fulfill the "clothing needs of the poor," they also become "desired and actively pursued across class and space" (Milgram, 2004, p. 198).

Perceived and Overall Sustainability

People from different social classes buy from *ukay-ukay.* The lower classes buy for affordability and the higher classes for condition and style (Valdez et al., 2014). The uniqueness of the products are expected and what customers actually look for. When one searches for goods in the *ukay*, one expects to find both low and high-quality goods in the mix. One also expects that the items might have damages because they are indeed secondhand garments. In terms of the long-lastingness of the goods, which may indicate its reusability, one perceives the signature brands as having more sustainable quality. Customers know what to expect versus what to perceive when it comes to *ukay-ukay* shops. What differentiates the *ukay* from other retailers of fast or slow fashion is single-minded brand equity.

In terms of relationship equity, loyalty and trust can be built if salespeople are more stable. As most *ukay-ukays* do not necessarily have permits nor personnel benefits, the repealment of RA 4653 promises a more employee-driven business model. Although *ukay* sellers supposedly import secondhand clothing illegally, they have managed to tailor their businesses for their livelihood while personalizing constructions of their local identities. By using streets as sites for customer relations, Baguio City vendors "center previously marginalized practices to assert their place as legitimate actors in arenas of public power that have largely excluded them from privileges" (Milgram, 2012 p. 201). Davao City vendors, particularly those from the Roxas Night Market, at the same time, have considered their selling spaces as part of their journey towards fulfillment and well-being (Pavo, 2019). To solve the legalities and ethical implications of the business, certain organizations such as the Fashion Revolution's push for the revision of the law, studies on impact assessments, and the restriction/ zoning of actual *ukay* stores to monitor the influx and volume of imports (Garcia, 2019).

Conclusion: Updating Perspectives on *Ukay-ukay* Fashion

Although the world is concerned with redesigning or refashioning fast fashion brands into becoming

sustainable, the Philippines has somewhat perfected the recycling and upcycling of throwaway or even luxury fashion. Given the *ukay-ukay* lifestyle, some Filipinos have updated their own fashion senses through ownership of "name brands" or signature clothes. The upside of that is that even fast fashion brands (such as H&M or Zara) are sometimes considered as "luxury" fashion clothes themselves in the *ukay-ukay*, thus turning into slow fashion in the process. Although a person-on-the-street will never be able to afford an Oscar de la Renta, Gucci, or a Louis Vitton, the *ukay-ukay* gives hope to the meager buyer and, at the same time, gives second or third lives to these goods when resold over and over again.

The Philippines has a huge secondhand clothing trade, and, for more than fifty years, secondhand clothing has been part and parcel of the consumer psyche. The *halukay* or *ukay-ukay* culture is a way to meld quality and style while maintaining one's unique fashion sense—and keeping in tune with sustainability as well. The environmental cost of *ukay-ukay* fashion is low, but it plays out well in the cultural, economic, and social sustainability fashion theory. (At least for some cultures!)

The *ukay-ukay* profits through low prices and relative quality. The perceived value of the products is attached to the "signatureness" of the commodities. What may be lacking is the proper promotion of the pieces of clothing considering its heritage and history. New cultural productions, which include blogs, magazine features, *ukay* challenges, and YouTube tips and tutorials, contribute to the *ukay-ukay's* sustained profitability.

One question that may be asked is that if a fast and slow/luxury fashion company is not sustainable according to the sustainable fashion index, how then does this affect the sustainability of the *ukay-ukay* if a non-sustainable product is being sold there*?* If the *ukay-ukay* item is not a Stella McCartney nor an Eileen Fisher, then is the *ukay-ukay* sustainable at all? Suffice to say, the sustainability of the *ukay-ukay* is dependent on the continuous revamping of fast and slow/luxury fashion companies towards improving their own sustainabilities. Although this paper aimed to investigate the dimensions and variables that constitute *ukay-ukay* fashion's possible sustainability, it concludes that it can actually be an alternative model for sustainable fashion but with certain limitations.

Although the fast and slow/luxury fashion companies seek to combine sustainability and addressing consumers' desires simultaneously, their actions and decisions, though small steps or full transformations, impact highly on the fashion industry. One must not forget about other business models such as the *ukay-ukay* that contribute to the changes that benefit the environment. Although the search continues for more sustainable fashion, one must not limit oneself to traditional fashion business models and also consider looking into the *halukay* culture.

Postscript: *Ukay-ukay* Sustainability During the Pandemic

In 2020, the novel coronavirus pandemic shocked the entire world and affected the fashion industries. With lockdowns and quarantines in effect and social distancing and sanitation measures as part of protocols, potential shoppers, be it in *ukay-ukay* stalls or luxury shops, may not be able to physically purchase clothes. Some *ukay-ukay* stalls were also shut down in some areas as such items are considered to be non-essential goods. The fashion landscape has changed as well because there is no urgent need to be updated with fashion trends, considering that majority of the people have nowhere to go and are encouraged to work-from-home. A new question then arises as to whether the *ukay-ukay* remains to be sustainable, according to the sustainable fashion theory, in times of a global health crisis.

Economically, *ukay-ukay* online finds will still be less expensive than luxury brands even during a virus outbreak. In the National Capital Region, although online shopping portals were suspended for a short period of time, such were restored into business after a few weeks. The same seller-buyer relationship dynamics and flexible pricing schemes would dictate customer satisfaction. Again, assuming people would be interested in purchasing non-essential items such as clothing or accessories during a pandemic, the same customers would be loyal to their online *ukay-ukay* vendors.

One interesting *ukay-ukay*-influenced trend is the online reselling of pre-loved items of Filipino celebrities such as luxury bags, helmets, clothes, and accessories to raise funds for COVID-19 efforts. These goods are considered sustainably safe during the pandemic as opposed to fresh illegal imports

from neighboring countries. Considering that most businesses and various sectors are revamping their models to adjust to the health crisis, the *ukay-ukay* model should adapt as well by looking at ways to sell and acquire goods through alternative means such as online portals, applications, or even bartering!

Consequently, although the fashion companies are suffering from the effects of the pandemic on their sales, this could be a good time to reimagine sustainability along with the changing consumer desires outbreak and post-outbreak. As the *ukay-ukay* is still highly dependent on existing fashion companies for their merchandise, the changes they employ in their business models would still have effects on the *ukay-ukay's* sustainability, COVID-19 or not.

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