

Sensing the World: Social Sensorium in the Chemical Use of Selected Youth in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This study uses the interpretive approach in looking into the everyday chemical use of the youth in a port city of the Philippines. It is an attempt at “sensing the world,” of these youth. Herein, the senses become the “lens” through which their social lives could be understood. This study explored the youth’s sensorial experience from chemical use and hopes to provide the reader a glimpse of such chemical sensorium.

Keywords: Anthropology of the senses, chemical use, Philippines, youth, sociality of chemical use

Howes (2005) believes that “...humans are social beings, and just as human nature itself is a product of culture, so is the human sensorium” (p.3). Synnott (1993) proposes that human beings use their senses in varied ways and, thus, live in different “sensory worlds” (p.151). Hence, the sensory experience is not just a matter of taste, smell, sight, sound, and touch. It is never solely in a natural state. It is, in fact, shaped by culture (Howes, 2003). Conversely, the senses mediate experience. While individual perceptions are recognized, these are also embedded within a larger social/sensorial order or cultural setting. Classen (1997) contends that sensory perception is both cultural and physical. Looking into culture and the senses among the Anlo-Ewe people in Africa, Geurts (2002) saw how much different their sensorium was from that of their Western counterpart, particularly in giving emphasis to balance as part of their own sensory world. In contrast, the Western world has been characterized as privileging the sense of sight over that of hearing, smell, taste, and touch (Howes, 2005a; Howes, 2005b; Synnott, 1993; Classen, 1993; van Ede, 2009; Manalansan, 2006).

Notions of the “other” have been viewed in light of differences in sensory perceptions or interpretations of sensory stimuli. In her work among Filipina domestic helpers in Hong Kong, Law (2005) shows how congregating in Central on Sundays had been

essential to these women. The sounds, sights, smells, tastes, and feelings created by being around fellow Filipinos transformed Central Hong Kong into little Manila. Such sensory experiences in Central Hong Kong had been essential to these Filipinas because it gave them a sense of safety even as they negotiated the politics of labor migration and identities. Similarly, Manalansan (2006) shows how smells have characterized the liminality of what he referred to as the “smelly immigrant” in his study of Asian migrants in New York.

In the local moral world of young men and women in a port city on Luzon island in the Philippines, sensorial experiences are important as they deal with the people in their environment. They define the ways in which these young people interact with other people on both the personal and work levels. Their sensorial experiences reflect the social values and meanings, which show how one ought to live in their social world.

This study explored the importance of chemicals in the lives of the youth. During a focus group discussion (FGD) on chemical products they use for beauty, vitality, and health, one informant said, “*Hindi ako pwede mabuhay na wala ang mga ginagamit ko na produkto sa katawan*” (I cannot live without the products I use on my body). When asked if there were any constraints that prevented them from buying these products, a female informant said, “*Kung gusto, may paraan; kung ayaw, maraming dahilan*” (If one wants something done, one finds ways to do it. Otherwise, one has so many reasons for not doing it). Two FGD participants answered, “*...kung tamad ka..., hindi ka talaga makakabili pero kung matiyaga ka... may nilaga*” (If you are lazy you will not be able to buy, but if you persevere you can). Another FGD participant added, “*Hindi ko pa po naranasan na wala niyan*” (I have not yet experienced not having those products). Apparently, it has been a habit for most of the 10 young women informants to apply, imbibe, and spray various chemical concoctions. Such was the importance of these products in their lives.

Interestingly, chemical use among some young women and men was permeated with references to sensory experience. This group used chemicals *para hindi mamaho* (so they won't smell bad), *maganda tingnan* (look nice), *mabango* (smell good), *makinis, hindi dry* (smooth, not dry), *makintab ang buhok* (shiny hair), *panghaplos* (to touch), *pang-alis ng sakit ng katawan* (to ease the body pains). Thus, chemical use appeases their senses, highlighting what is appealing and eliminating what is disgusting. Doing so gives these informants the confidence to face the world and interact with other people as they live out their daily activities.

The discourse on chemical use may depict consumers as victims of these products' false promises of enhancing beauty and promoting vitality and sexuality among its users (Featherstone, 2007; Bordo, 1993). This study shows that while, on one hand, this may be the case, within the local moral world of the youth in the port city where this study was conducted, use of such chemicals can also be enabling, particularly, in the context of sociality. While such duality of meanings is recognized, this paper focuses on the latter, mainly to provide a contextualized understanding of the sensory experiences derived from chemical use and how such chemicals play an important role in the social lives of the youth.

This study was part of a broader project led by the University of Amsterdam covering port cities in the Philippines and Indonesia. Port cities were chosen because their seemingly "porous borders" allow the flow of goods and people from various points of the country and the world. This particular city in Philippines serves as a gateway to a tourist spot in the country that foreign and local tourists frequent. Such mobility has allowed the influx of many chemicals into the city and into the awareness and, eventually, their use by the people in the study site. Moreover, this study focused on self-identified "heterosexual" young men and women. (The broader project covered other genders.)

OBJECTIVES

This study looked into the sensory experience of chemical use among young women and men in a port city in the Philippines and attempted to define the social meanings that shape such experience. Chemicals in this study refer to preparations an individual ingests or applies to any part of his or her body to enhance beauty, vitality, and sexuality.

More specifically, this study aimed to:

1. identify the chemical products used by young men and women to manage their moods, beauty, vitality, and sexuality;
2. show how the uses of these products, including off-label uses, are described in the context of sensory experiences; and
3. describe the social contexts and meanings in which the uses of these chemical products are embedded.

METHODOLOGY

Data were gathered mainly through in-depth interviews of young men and women aged 18-24 years old in a port city in the Philippines. Questions asked during the interviews included identifying commercial products used for beauty, vitality, and sexuality; the reasons for using them; and what they mean to the informants. The questions made no specific reference to any of the senses. Sensory references emanated from the informants themselves. The informants were interviewed individually. This meant several field visits by the researchers, which took one to two months to complete. Self-disclosure on the use of illegal drugs by the young men was observed. Such self-disclosure was validated by corroborating narratives of the other young men who were interviewed. Follow-up questions were asked to probe and further validate their stories.

An FGD among 10 female respondents, aged 18-25 years old, was also done. It was done to elicit more information to support the data gathered through the interviews. Body mapping was done as part of the interview: the respondents plotted the areas of the body on which they used chemicals. An illustration of the female body was shown to the female participants. The participants said they enjoyed the body mapping activity. By the end of the activity, the participants' postings practically covered the body figures on the tarpaulin. This showed how much areas of the body are applied with chemicals by the women in the FGD. All the data gathering methods used (i.e., in-depth interviews, FGD, and body mapping) validated the data obtained from each method.



Figure 1. Body Mapping. Photo is the author's own.

In the course of data collection the researcher tried on herself some of the soaps and lotions that the informants said they used. This was her attempt to better understand the sensory experiences reported by the informants.

Data were organized and analyzed using NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis computer software package designed for working with rich text-based information. NVIVO allows the user to classify, sort, and arrange information to discover relationships. After the thematic nodes were identified, the interview and FGD transcripts were encoded into the computer program. The nodes grouped the data on various sensory experiences of the informants, namely, touch/feel, sight, smell, taste, and hearing. The data were analyzed for the social and cultural meanings of the chemical use.

Ethical considerations in the conduct of the study included securing the informed consent of the informants as well as providing them tokens of appreciation for their time and participation in the research. The project staff assured the informants that their anonymity would be maintained: all identifying information would be left out of the report. The informants were also told that they may withdraw at any point of the interview.

The interpretive perspective was used in analyzing data. In Clifford Geertz's (1973) words, "*The concept of culture...is essentially a semiotic one...that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be...an interpretive one in search of meaning*" (p. 5). In this study, the social discourse on sensory perceptions within the context of chemical use and the various layers of meanings these conveyed within the local moral world of the respondents were the object of inquiry and analysis. As such, a thick description of the said phenomenon is presented. The senses were the "lens" through which such analysis was done. Further analysis of chemical use in relation to the senses and sociality uses the concepts of the various forms of capital as outlined in Bourdieu's work (1986). Chemical use, according to this study's informants, is not only appealing to the senses but is also a valuable tool to manage a meaningful social life.

CHEMICAL USE AMONG YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN

The study's informants were 26 young women and 25 young men, aged 17-24 years old. They were students and call center agents, a few were sex workers, and others were unemployed at the time of the study; about half of the men were vendors and tricycle drivers. At least five of the women were first-time pregnant mothers. Except for the call center agents, all lived within a compound near the

port and most knew each other. All informants were from the same province. Only the call center agents had fixed incomes. The other informants were daily earners, whose incomes highly varied, depending on various factors such as the weather and availability of clients. Altogether, the informants' monthly income ranged from PhP3,000 to PhP20,000.

All informants claimed to buy and use various chemicals to enhance their beauty, vitality, and sexuality. They had been using chemicals for various purposes all their lives as far back as they could remember. When they were children, they had taken multivitamin preparations and medicines, and had used soap, shampoo, powder, and scent.

They learned about the chemicals from advertisements on magazines, television, and billboards. The promised effects (e.g., transformation) in the advertisements had been a major consideration for the informants' brand consumption, especially when endorsed by a favorite celebrity. Featherstone (2007) calls this the "consumption of dreams." Aside from advertisements, peers were also a common source of information. Most of the women mentioned that they compared experiences with chemical use among their friends. Most claimed to be quite experimental, eagerly trying out new products. All said that chemical use was an integral part of their everyday lives. Even when cash strapped, they would still allocate some amount for these chemical products.

Most of the informants, both men and women, indicated that they spent a sizeable portion of their income on chemicals. However, they could not recall the amount they spent, not even an approximate because they said they did not compute for such expenses. In the case of the students, they would sometimes spend a portion of their allowance on chemicals, but, mostly, they would include these among the grocery items that their parents buy for the family.

Price was the primary consideration for brand choices. Most informants were familiar with high-end international brands, which they saw on TV commercials and magazine advertisements; however, they patronized the lower-end chemical products sold off grocery shelves and the neighborhood *sari-sari* (variety) stores. They bought these products "*tingi*" (small proportions or numbers) or in sachets rather than in big bottles or containers. They said that doing so enabled them to stretch their money because buying in sachets does not entail a big cash out for one just one item. Medicines were also bought per piece rather than by "*banig*" (blister pack) or bulk.

On the other hand, many of the women in the FGD said that if price was not a factor, they would be willing to try the pricier imported brands as they perceived these to be more effective than the local brands. In the end, however, it was their experience with a particular brand that would determine their brand choice. The concept of *hiyang* was mentioned in this context. *Hiyang* is an individual's specific reaction to a particular product or brand. It is highly individualized so that what may have worked wonderfully for one may be a totally disastrous experience for another. Therefore, referrals for particular brands were sometimes taken with caution. Side effects are part of the *hiyang* experience. During the FGD, one woman mentioned that she was not *hiyang* with a particular brand of lotion because it did not make her skin soft and she did not like its scent; whereas, another mentioned that she liked it and had been using it for some months. The informants did not mention any serious side effects from chemical use, except for a few complaints about itchiness. Just the same, brand preference and loyalty, particularly for shampoo, lotion, and body soap, was evident in the study.

CHEMICAL SENSORIUM IN THE LOCAL MORAL WORLD OF THE YOUTH IN A PORT CITY

Examining the chemical sensorium is an engagement with the world of the youth in the port city where this study was conducted. The youth revealed several layers of meanings in their use of the various chemical products. Apparently, the products had utilitarian and aesthetic functions. Moreover, the chemicals were associated with emotions. Off-label uses were not unusual. The acts of cleansing, perfuming, revitalizing, and beautifying the body are sensory experiences for the youth in this study. Below are their narratives.

To Touch/Feel

The female respondents felt that deodorants gave them "*malinis ang pakiramdam*" (clean feeling). One testified that her facial wash kept pimples away. Having a pimple-free face not only means a healthy skin but also a beautiful skin. Jokes about pimply faces abound. The female respondents used face powder to remove oil on the face. An oily face was not deemed attractive. Feminine wash was another popular product among the female respondents. They used it for hygiene: it cleaned well and gave the user a fresh feeling after. They used it because feminine wash was "*mas malamig gamitin...mas clean*" (cooler...cleaner) compared with soap. They believed feminine wash does not cause vaginal infections and any side effects.

Lotions were popular among both the women and the men. They used it mainly to prevent skin dryness: *“mas malambot ang balat at mas maputi”* (softer and whiter). They also use it for *“pampawala ng stress”* (relaxant). The informants took multivitamin products for various reasons: *“para tumangkad”* (to grow tall), *“para glowing skin para gumanda”* (for glowing skin – for beauty), *“para sumigla”* (for energy), *“para sa resistensya”* (for resistance against diseases), and *“pampataba o para lumaki ang katawan”* (to gain weight or for body building). It can be surmised from these responses that height, glowing skin, being energetic, resistance to diseases, and having a muscled or toned body are perceived as positive physical attributes of a person. Especially among children, body size was seen as a measure of health. A big child was perceived to be healthy. Multivitamin ads have capitalized on this prevailing notion, promoting appetite stimulants for children to prevent them from being *“lampayatot,”* a local term for being skinny, lacking energy, and being prone to stumble and fall.

Hair gel was particularly sought after by the men due to a popular hairstyle requiring strands of short hair to stand upright on top of the head. *“Pampatirik”* (makes hair stand) and *“pampatigas”* (hardens the strands so they stand) were the desired effects. Likewise, gel made hair good to touch. According to one of the men *“maganda hawakan kahit buhaghag”* (good to touch even if it is frizzy).

Using chemical products had an emotional effect on the users. For instance, using a deodorant made them feel *“parang fresh katalaga...kaya nga feeling fresh”* (fresh feeling). Feeling fresh, in turn, made them feel *“mas confident”* (more confident). One said she enjoyed using facial wash: *“kagandang gamitin...mag-eejoy ka ng ganyan-ganyan...mabula”* (good to use... you will enjoy doing this [scrubbing motion on the face]... sudsy). Feminine wash likewise had become a vital part of the daily bath among some of the women. One said, *“feeling ko ‘pag di ka gumamit ng feminine wash, di ka kumpleto”* (I felt incomplete whenever I do not use feminine wash). Hence, users feel *“mas confident”* (more confident).

The informants mentioned off-label uses of some products. In the FGD among women, several participants mentioned that they used toothpaste as a vaginal wash. They said the menthol in the toothpaste had a soothing effect on their genitals and they felt refreshed. They also use alcoholic beverages, particularly gin, to relieve toothaches. Gargling a glass of gin helped ease such pains. Such beverages eased the pains not only of the body, but also of the heart. The men particularly sought refuge in gin when broken-hearted. They also believed that gin was useful as a sedative. Drinking it close to bedtime gave them better sleep.

Asight to behold

Lotions were common among both women and men. Lotions with whitening properties were preferred. The informants used them because they were “*pampaglow ng skin, pampaganda*” (makes the skin glow and beautiful), and “*maganda sa balat*” (good for the skin). One female respondent said, “*kapag maitim ka at nag me-make-up ka, pangit tingnan*” (someone who is dark-skinned does not look good in make-up). More women than men used whitening products. These products were sought after because of their belief that equates beauty with skin fairness. As one female respondent said, “*feeling pangit pag maitim*” (I would feel unattractive if I were dark-skinned).

Aside from lotions, the informants also used astringents for their whitening effect. “*Maganda sa mata, maganda sa paningin ng tao*” (beautiful to look at by others) was how a couple of respondents described light skin. In this sense, beauty was not just for the individual but for the collective as well. What was *maganda sa tingin* was not limited to light-toned skin but to smooth, pimple-free skin as well. Hence, facial washes were equally popular, particularly the ones with the added bonus of skin whiteners.

Whiteners were also a major consideration in the other skin products bought by the respondents. For instance, some preferred underarm deodorants that not only controlled sweating and odor but also made the armpit whiter. The informants believed that some deodorants contained chemical components that darkened the armpit with prolonged use. They generally avoided these types of deodorants. Similarly, they preferred face powder with whiteners.

The informants also commonly use chemical products for the hair. They considered having clean, dandruff-free hair as beautiful and ideal, while dry, stringy hair like a broom was “*pangit*” (ugly). Moreover, to make hair “*makintab*” (shiny), soft, and straight, the informants, particularly the women, used hair polish. They found shiny hair beautiful because “*maganda tingnan sa buhok ang basa-basa*” (hair that looks wet looks nice).

Some of the women considered make-up as essential. One of them who worked as a sales staff in a store said, “*pag saleslady ka, pa-display-display ka. Kailangan doon [ng make-up] dahil sa mga customer, gusto mo maganda hitsura mo.*” (If you are a saleslady, you are on display. You need make-up so you will look good to your customers). Another female sales staff said, “*required kasi na magpapaganda ka sa*

mga tao... maayos ang mukha" (we are required to make ourselves beautiful for others...we have to look good).

Clear, smooth, light skin; smooth, shiny, clean hair; and a made-up face were the definitions of beauty for some of the youth in the study. By using the chemical products, they hoped to achieve just what these chemicals promised.

Sweet Smell of Living

Chemical use in the realm of smell appears to favor what is culturally perceived to be pleasant and sweet. Left unperfumed, the body is not seen as ideal since it emits what is found to be an unpleasant odor. One female respondents said she had been applying perfume because "*ayoko lang ng wala akong amoy*" (I do not like being without smell). "*Amoy maasim*" (sour smell) was not acceptable as a body scent." "*Lahat naman gusto ng mabango, di ba?*" (Everyone wants to smell good, right?), commented one male informant. All informants said they buy various chemicals to mask body smells and to smell good. These include deodorants, feminine wash (for the females), bath soaps, shampoos, toothpastes, lotions, and foot sprays.

The smell of these products seems to assume greater importance over their function, except for deodorants and perfumes whose main function are to make the body smell good. For instance, one female informant revealed that she used to apply treatment lotions to her hair, particularly one that contained coconut oil because it was "*maganda sa buhok*" (good for the hair). However, she found the product "*amoy niyog...hindi ganun kabango*" (smells like coconut... not that pleasant smelling), and so she stopped using the product. Another female informant mentioned, in reference to a lotion she was using, that "*di naman masyadong maganda sa skin pero mabango*" (it was not so good for the skin but it smelled good) and so she had remained loyal to this brand of lotion. Regarding toothpaste, all informants, both women and men, said they used it to freshen their breath: "*para di bad breath*" (so I will not have bad breath). Two men cited teeth stain removal and teeth whitener as additional reasons. None mentioned using toothpaste to prevent tooth decay. Similarly, one female informant said she was using a certain brand of bath soap because it smelled good even if "*hindi nakakaputi pero ginagamit ko pa rin, mabango e*" (it does not lighten my skin but I still use it because it makes me smell good).

The informants commonly used deodorants daily to make their bodies smell pleasant. Used to mask "body odor," this is one vital product that they could not

dispense with, especially for those who were employed. As one female informant shared, *“ayaw ko ng mabahong kilikili”* (I do not want my underarms to smell bad). *“Iwas pawis at amoy”* (avoid sweat and odor), added another.

Some of the women also used feminine wash for the following reasons: *“mabaho ‘pag wala”* (it smells bad if I don’t use feminine wash) and *“pampatanggal ng amoy ng dugo”* (to eliminate the smell of menstrual blood). They preferred feminine wash to bath soap because the former does not sting.

One male informant had been using a foot spray. This was so *“hindi mabaho ang paa pag-alis ng medyas”* (so my feet won’t smell bad when I remove my socks).

Most informants were using perfumes or body sprays regardless of the nature of their work: whether in an air-conditioned office as a call center agents or under the sun as vendors in the pier. It also did not matter whether the informant was male, female, or gay. Smelling good made them feel good, which, in turn, made them feel more confident to carry out their tasks for the day.

Hence, for the youth, they use chemical products to make their body smell good, fresh, and clean while or after carrying out their daily routine. Their day did not feel complete without perfuming their bodies from head to toe.

Taste

In the study, very few references to taste were made. Quite interestingly, the Tagalog word *“masarap”* (tasty or delicious) was used to describe both mouth taste and feeling. The few references to mouth taste in the study had to do with ingested chemicals such as over-the-counter multivitamins and herbal supplements, alcoholic drinks, and illegal drugs. In this study, “illegal drugs” refer to drugs that are banned or whose use is regulated by law. The off-label use of drugs is also considered illegal, particularly in certain cases because of these drugs’ perceived and actual side effects. The study’s informants referred to both alcoholic beverages and drugs as *“masarap”*. One male informant described the illegal drugs he was taking as *“napakasarap ‘nun [mas masarap] pa kaysa sa putaheng parang pinakaespesyal”* (it is so delicious [even more delicious] than the most special dish). The informants found vitamins and herbal supplements to be *“mapait”* (bitter); one female said she would always drink a glass of water after taking her multivitamins to remove the bitter taste left in her mouth. It seems that the youth’s experience with multivitamins supports the stereotypical description of the bitter pill. One could almost expect

the informants to say that the bitter taste of the vitamins was indicative of their potency and efficacy.

The study found that the individual experience among the youth as regards chemical use elicited particular emotions that were sensory in nature. The informants shared their experiences of touch, sight, smell, and taste in using various chemicals ranging from beauty products to drug preparations and other imbibed chemicals. While the informants viewed some experiences as positive, others were not pleasurable; yet, because of the perceived or expected effect of the chemicals, the informants continued to use them. Aside from providing individual sensory experience, the use of chemicals figured prominently in the social lives of the users. Such sociality of chemical use will be discussed in the following section.

SOCIAL SENSORIUM IN CHEMICAL USE AMONG THE YOUTH IN A PORT CITY

One could glean not only values and norms in the informants' use of the different chemicals, but also, in a broader sense, aspirations and contextualized meanings that shape behavior in the use of these chemicals. Apparent as well was the network of social relations important to the young people in the study, considering their present state of affairs. The experiences narrated by the informants, both individual and shared, provide a context-specific understanding of how it is to be a young person in the study site. Whyte and Van Der Geest (1988) point out the importance of looking at the contexts in which chemicals are used, noting that medicines and, as more broadly considered in the context of this paper, chemicals have culturally defined meanings as well as bio-chemical properties that are socially transacted. Also, the study provided a glimpse of the experiences of the youth as defined by the boundaries of class, race, and gender. The sociality of medicines and, in a broader context, chemicals has been recognized in light of the various meanings these take in the social relations of people and their implications on these social relations (Whyte, Van Der Geest, & Hardon, 2002; Whyte & van der Geest, 1988). Chemical use among the youth in the study had utilitarian and aesthetic meanings. These meanings will be discussed in the section on sociality. The social discourses that have shaped chemical use among the young informants are likewise presented below.

Cleanliness as a Norm

Feeling clean was part of the discourse on social sensorium of the young men and women in the study. In the FGD, one informant shared that keeping one's body neat and clean was one of the essential teachings they learned in school and at home when they were young; it is a cultural value that they had brought with them into young adulthood. When such advice comes from a dear and respected elderly relative like one's grandfather, it is taken to heart. Interestingly, the informants associated a light skin tone with cleanliness, thus, the desire for whitening products. A light skin tone is a clean canvas for further beautifying the face with make-up especially in the case of females and gays.

Moreover, cleanliness is something that is not just seen but felt as well. Some of the informants mentioned "feeling" clean, aside from "seeing clean." "Seeing" clean seemed to be for the benefit of other people. Whereas "feeling" clean seemed to be for their own benefit. They said that when they felt clean, they felt good or complete, too: "*para maganda sa mata ng tao, di ka madumi or marungis tingnan*" (to be presentable to other people, you are not dirty), "*para mukhang malinis at hindi mukhang haggard*" (so you will look clean, not haggard), "*pampalinis, pantanggal ng dumi*" (to clean and remove dirt), "*pampaputi, para malinis, hindi bad breath, kumintab ang ngipin*" (to whiten and clean the teeth and prevent bad breath, to make the teeth shine), "*sabi kasi ng lolo ko, dapat daw malinis 'yung hitsura ng mukha mo kasi kung nag-aapply ka ng trabaho, paano daw ako matanggap kung di presentable ang hitsura ko*" (my grandfather taught me to always keep my face clean especially when applying for a job; I will not get accepted if I don't look presentable), "*mas malinis tingnan ang maputi, mas attractive pag maputi*" (light skin looks cleaner, light skin is more attractive), "*maganda sa mata ng tao, di ka madumi...madungis tingnan*" (being clean is nice to look at), "*nagdeodorant ako kasi malinis sa pakiramdam*" (I use deodorant because it gives me a clean feeling), "*kasi feeling ko pag di ka gumagamit [ng feminine wash], di ka kumpleto, mas clean kasi*" (I do not feel complete whenever I do not use feminine wash; I feel clean when I do).

Chemical Beauty as Social Capital

The study's young informants felt the need to look presentable or beautiful to other people. Hence, they used chemicals that promise to do just that: "*Gusto ko maganda*" (I want to be beautiful), "*more attractive sa ibang tao, pampakinis, para attractive*" (I feel more attractive, my skin is smooth, so I can be attractive), "*kasi*

sobrang buhaghag ng hair ko, hiyang-hiya naman ako sa nagreklamo kaya nag-conditioner ako (I have frizzy hair, I am embarrassed to face people, they complain about my hair so I use conditioner). The importance of head hair is evident here. The fact that head hair is managed professionally in most cases points to its importance in the social context. Lawson (1999) said that head hair becomes a medium of significant statements about one's self and the society to which one belongs. Head hair, through various styles of wearing it, becomes symbols of power or rebellion. Advertisements entice people to emulate those who possess greater prestige in the society. Other responses from informants reflect the same discourse found in hair management: *"para maganda sa paningin ng iba"* (so I will look beautiful to other people), *"para kahit mataba ako, kung makinis naman ako, ok lang"* (even if I am fat, my skin is smooth so I am okay), *"minsan nagkakaamoy ang aking underarm, nahihiya akong itaas kasi maitim na nga tapos may amoy pa"* (sometimes my underarms smell and I feel embarrassed to put up my arms because my underarms smell and are dark).

The need to maintain a body that is pleasing to others was underscored in Hyde's (2006) reference to the "offensive body" as being offensive because of its smell. The informants, especially the females, cited their experience of gaining confidence in facing people: *"nakaka-add ng confidence"* (I have greater confidence), *"mas confident humarap sa ibang tao"* (I am more confident to face other people), *"mas confident ako na di ako mabaho"* (I am confident that I do not smell bad), *"feeling ko, mapangit ako 'pag di maputi"* (I feel ugly when my skin is dark), *"siyempre nakakahiya namang dumais sa ibang tao na mabaho ang buhok mo"* (it is embarrassing to get near other people if you have smelly hair), and *"confident ako na maganda ako"* (I am confident that I am beautiful). These responses show how vital physical appearance was in the informants' social lives. With the help of chemical use they had developed their social capital via a network of social relations that approves of them, perhaps, due to how they appeal to the senses.

Not looking presentable is a reason to feel embarrassed and to lose confidence. Hence, lotions to smoothen the skin, shampoo to make hair squeaky clean and leave it smelling nice, perfumes, soaps, and feminine wash are all essential items in the youth's beauty and confidence arsenal. These chemicals enable them to face the challenges of life with confidence, even when they have body flaws and imperfections. Social interaction necessitates looking good. Getting up close and personal with the public makes it essential to look good, smell good, which, in turn, make them feel good. It is not just what they see, smell, and feel about themselves that matter but how other people see, smell, and feel them. The sensoria are personal

and social as well. With the various chemicals in their beauty arsenal, young people are able to develop symbolic capital.

Developing Economic Capital from Chemical Use

Chemical products are important tools in developing not just symbolic capital but economic capital as well. For the informants in the study, these had been beneficial in their work. A female sales clerk, for instance, said that the beauty products she used were essential in her work, which involved dealing with customers. She felt more confident and bolder because she felt more attractive when she has her make-up on. Similar situations were reported in other cultural contexts (Demello, 2014). For the men in the study, illegal drugs boost their confidence, enabling them to do their job. As street vendors, competition was stiff and they had to be aggressive in making sales pitches. Drugs gave them the necessary “*tama*” (shot) to carry out this task successfully. This was not without problems, however; sleep did not come easy for some of them: “*nakakabigay ng mabilis madiskarte ng pera*” (it gives me ideas about how to earn money fast), “*nakakagilas sa katawan, pampagilas*” (it gives me energy and enthusiasm to work), “*pakiramdam ko’y akong pinakamagandang lalake sa lahat*” (I feel I am the most handsome man of all), “*pampasigla lamang sa pagtinda*” (it gives me energy to work), “*masigla, tamang sipag po*” (I am energetic, I have just the right motivation to work), “*palaging malakas ang loob mo*” (I always have inner strength), “*walang pagod*” (I don’t get tired), “*di ka mapapagod, pero pagdating sa gabi, di ka rinmakakatulog*” (I do not get tired but I could not sleep at night). However, not all drugs had the same effect on the men. Some made them feel “*tamad gumalaw*” (sluggish) and “*tulala*” (spaced out). These effects negatively affected their work; hence, they combined different drugs to regulate their moods and function normally both in work and during rest periods. Moreover, they resorted to alcohol to boost confidence: “*nakakapagpalakas ng loob*” (It gives me courage), “*mahiyain ako pero ‘pag may nainom, malakas ang loob*” (I am shy but once I imbibe alcohol I get the courage to engage in my tasks at work).

Chemical Sexuality

Another reported use of chemicals forenhancing sexuality. The women viewed make-up as enhancing their sex appeal and poise, two qualities that supposedly made them more sexually appealing to men. “*Napapansin ako*” (I get noticed), said one female informant. The men particular mentioned ingesting alcohol and illegal drugs for sexual prowess: “*matagal makipagsex, masasabayan mo ang babae*”, (the

sexual act can be prolonged; your timing matches that of your female sexual partner). One female respondent also mentioned that she regularly took multivitamins as recommended by the doctor; she believed this was “*nakakatulong sa fertility*” (enhances fertility).

Developing Social Relations through Chemical Use

The study also found that chemical use enhanced the informants' sociality. Among the men particularly, bonding with esteemed peers was further developed and deepened during drinking sessions. Thus, social drinking was not only acceptable but necessary: the men were able to develop a network of peers that became vital in job referrals and in providing moral support, which was helpful for the male informants' psychological well-being. The men in the study had unstable jobs; in the course of the interviews, they articulated feelings of low self-esteem and inadequacy in their choice of livelihood. Thus, through social drinking they were able to develop social capital.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The study showed that, indeed, sensory perceptions are social constructs, giving symbolic significance drawn from cultural meanings and values in the lives of the youth in the study. Moreover, chemical use by the informants was done within utilitarian, aesthetic, and social contexts, which were essential to their daily lives. The chemical products used were definitely useful as these served their purpose of providing a pleasant scent, an appealing look, or a smooth touch to the users. It is aesthetic in that the beauty products were used to beautify the users. Lastly, the sociality of chemical use contributed to approval from what could be a potentially cruel world, one that could demean and push to the margins those that do not conform to the standards of what are generally construed as appealing to the senses. The study shows some links between chemical use and the political economy of race, class, and gender. It is recommended that this perspective be investigated further in future research.

The preference for light skin was a dominant discourse in the study. This gains importance especially since the light skin discourse appears to be intertwined with discourses on race and political economy (Hunter, 2011; Charles, 2003). This study found that light skin, which was associated with beauty, was preferred because it helps expand the social capital, symbolic capital, and economic capital of those who

possessed it. Furthermore, references to light skin as “*malinis*” (clean) give the impression that dark skin is “*marumi*” (dirty). This association has bearing on the value attributed to light skin and those who possess it. Therefore, those who aspire to have light skin use whiteners to “remove” the dark, supposedly dirty skin tone. Such associations are reported elsewhere (Hunter, 2011; Li, Min, Belk, Kimura, & Bahl, 2008).

The preference for light skin may be construed as a product of the Filipinos’ colonial past, wherein biosocial racial markers like the colonizers’ aquiline noses and fair skin have been idealized, whereas the features of the local population have been demeaned. It is important to note, however, that even among cultural groups in the Philippine pre-colonial past, light skin had been given importance. The *binukot* among the people in Central Panay in the Philippines illustrates this point (Abrera, 2008-2009). Discourses on race are implicated here, hence, the use of skin lightening products in various forms like soaps and lotions. Such racial boundaries in other sensory experiences had been illustrated elsewhere (Manalansan, 2006; Law, 2005). Law (2005) likewise narrates how Filipinas in Hong Kong congregating in Central on Sundays give off what some Hong Kong nationals call a “filthy stench” – probably from the Filipino food shared here. Law contends that this “stench” is perceived more in light of differences in cultural ideologies between Hong Kong nationals and the Filipino women rather than to actual odors and aromas. Hence, olfactory politics exist in Central, the space Law calls “Little Manila.”

Aspirations to have lighter skin like the mestiza beauty product endorsers in the adswere articulated by the informants of the study. Light skin was associated with the potential to land better-paying jobs and romantic partners, especially for the women. It is important to point out, however, that in some Asian countries like Japan, China, and Korea where the local population have generally light skin, chemical skin lighteners are still quite popular.

Gender differentials in the sensory experiences were marked only in the use of certain products, reflecting the preponderance of the use of these products by the men and women in the study. For instance, while both the men and women used skin-whitening products, the majority of those who had shared experiences in using them were women. Doing femininity can be a costly, as Duesterhaus, Grauerholz, Weichsel, and Guittar (2011) show in their article that examined the amount of money spent on goods and services on personal care. On the other hand, more men than women shared experiences in using alcohol and illegal drugs to enhance performance in work and sexual encounters. Also, while the men indicated the value of enhancing peer bonding through social drinking, none of the women

mentioned this. Hence, the use and meanings of drugs, whether legal or illegal, are seen to be mediated by contexts and relationships and, as Charles and Britto (2001) said, “constructed in the socio-cultural environment” (p. 467). Such constructions of the environment do not preclude gender. In effect, performing gender is seen in the use of chemicals in their everyday lives.

While health concerns were cited in the context of chemical use, these were always intertwined with beauty and vitality issues. For instance, toothpaste was used when brushing teeth to prevent bad breath and to achieve white, glowing teeth. These concerns were articulated in the same breath as the need to maintain healthy gums and cavity-free teeth. Bathing was for health and hygiene as well as to develop social capital by expanding the network of friends, symbolic capital by landing a job and being “*maappeal*” (with sex appeal), and economic capital by having a better job performance, which is expected to lead to more income.

This study showed that references to several senses were made in the experience with individual products. Moreover, the delineation between such sensory experiences is quite clear and distinct, enabling a separate discussion for each of the senses. On the other hand, this study also points out inter-sensory experiences, wherein a particular chemical product is perceived through various sensory pathways. This phenomenon was best expressed by one female informant who described her use of the bath soap thus: “*mabango siya talaga, gusto ko nga kainin ang sabon*” (it really smells sweet such that I want to eat it). In this instance, smell and taste are intertwined.

Sensory orientations were acquired through socialization via various media. Socialization occurred primarily through the family, as in the case of the female informant who picked up the value of personal cleanliness from her grandfather. On the other hand, the power of advertising could not be ignored. Sensory socialization through the mass media, particularly the ads, was articulated in this study. Advertisements proved to be powerful shapers of the informants’ perceptions of chemical use. This study supports what the literature say about the promises of youth and vitality in advertisements as victimizing women in particular and further subjugating them to the dominant male gaze (Bordo, 1993; Turner, 2008). On the other hand, the study provided evidence on what can be referred to as duality of meaning in the sensory experience of chemical use. While the literature report that women are viewed as “victims of external regulation, subjection, transformation and improvement of the female docile body through the exacting and normalizing discipline of make-up and dress” (Bordo, 1993, p. 309), this study shows how chemical

use can also be instrumental in providing the young women and men with confidence to meet the challenges of their everyday lives. Such contexts can be gleaned in how chemical use had been vital in the informants' relationships and in how they interacted with other actors within their worlds. For instance, maintaining smooth interpersonal relations was essential to them. They took special care so as not to offend even strangers, such as co-passengers in a jeepney. This was expressed in the care they took in washing their hair, brushing their teeth, and in deodorizing and perfuming their bodies. Essentially, they took care that they did not emit any odor that other people would find repulsive. They also believed that chemical use could help them land jobs they preferred or perform better in their jobs.

It is clear that the young men and women in this study believed the promises of the chemical products for they continued to buy them. Here, the chemical products' manufacturers are enjoined to be more ethical in their ad campaigns. Harping on dreams and aspirations sells products. This study shows that the youth were willing to part with hard-earned money for products that promise that one day their dreams and aspirations will come true. Knowing the chemicals they use gives one a sense of what their dreams and aspirations are.

The study points to the realization that culture-specific sensorial experiences are means through which members of a cultural group live out their daily lives in their local moral world. In a way, "sensing" their world is knowing their world.

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