



Betel Nut Consumption: Exploring Perceptions of Young Farmers in Natubleng, Buguias, Benguet, Philippines

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Abstract

This ethnographic study explored the perspectives of young farmers regarding betel nut chewing. This study examines the perspectives of young farmers on betel nut chewing and explores the social factors that motivate this practice. The research reveals that betel nut chewing is not simply a habit for pleasure rather it is a habit to manifest shared beliefs and perceptions. It also serves as a means of asserting one's social identity based on the socially constructed meaning they attach to it. The habit is revealed to be a representation of masculinity among young farmers. Moreover, betel nut chewing becomes a fulcrum of socialization among young farmers. However, the study also reveals that betel nut chewing causes some issues, leading young farmers to adopt measures such as proper oral hygiene and the use of star anise (*Illicium verum*) to mask bad smells. The research concludes that betel nut chewing is a complex practice driven by the beliefs and social implications attached into the habit.

Introduction

Betel nut chewing is a common habit not only in the Philippines but also in South and South East Asia, East Africa, and the Western Pacific. It is globally used among many sections of society in East Africa, Far East Asia, India and the Pacific (Nelson & Heischouer, 1999). It is thought that the practice originated in Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaysia (Norton, 1998).

At present, it is the fourth most commonly used psychoactive substance in the world after caffeine, alcohol and nicotine (Warnakulasuriya et al., 2015). The betel nut is chewed as a stimulating masticatory by 5% of the world's population making it more popular than chewing gum (Staples & Bevacqua, 2006). It was widely consumed by all age groups (Garg et al., 2014).

In the Philippines particularly in the Cordillera region, betel nut chewing has been a long tradition among the different ethnolinguistic groups in the region and other highland regions in the Philippines (Lavapie-Gonzales, 2017). The major ingredients are the betel nut and betel leaf and lime wrapped together and are chewed as a whole or individually (World Health Organization, 2012). Hence, the betel nut chew is masticated until it produces bloody red spit. People also tend to add other "condiments" to their betel nut chewing. While some chewers prefer chewing the betel nut and betel leaf with lime, older people and some adults in the region add tobacco which can be more addicting (Wanderein, 2019).

Betel nut chewers across the globe claimed that they gain benefits from it. Based on the study conducted by Anand et al. (2014), the reasons for using betel nuts include achieving euphoria, combating fatigue, increasing salivation, attaining satiation, and even seeking relief from toothaches. In line with the dental condition, research was conducted in Papua New Guinea with the aim of studying the difference of prevalence of dental caries (tooth decay) between betel nut chewers and non-chewers. Based on the study of Howden (1984), it was evidently observed that non-chewers have apparently higher dental caries than chewers. Statistically, findings showed that betel nut chewers have the prevalence of dental caries with 23% while non-chewers showed considerably and statistically significantly greater at 49%. Therefore, it can actually benefit the chewer in reducing the risk of having tooth decay.

In Madang Province, Papua New Guinea, pregnant women were commonly seen chewing betel nuts. Senn et al. (2009) found out that the principal reasons for pregnant women to chew were to prevent morning sickness (28%), to prevent having a smelly mouth (26%), it has become a habit of chewing (20%), and being addicted to betel nut chewing (10%). The use of betel nut is also associated with both immediate and long term physiological effects such as heightened awareness, hot sensation and most importantly, a relaxed and happy feeling (WHO, 2012). Strickland (2002) added that the widespread use of betel nut is attributed to its relaxant properties.

Aside from the physiological myths, it can also be noted that humans are meaning-makers thus, the practice of betel nut chewing can possibly have attached significant social meanings. For many groups, it can be anchored to their culture. This was proven by Ahuja and Ahuja (2011) that to the Malay culture, betel leaves and betel nuts are regarded as auspicious symbols of hospitality and denote a moral, social and legal commitment. It was also supported by Staples & Bevacqua (2006) that the purposes of betel nuts are often culturally or socially ritualized.

In the Philippines, particularly in the Cordillera, the betel nut together with the betel leaf and slaked lime were carried mostly by men to be shared with their acquaintances which serve as an important sign of socialization. Kalinga

people in ancient times regarded betel nut as a symbol of a true warrior, making it an integral part of a warrior's celebration (Bulwayan et al., 2023). Chewing betel nut also expresses meaning beyond being mere habit. The significance of chewing betel nut is manifested in the Kalinga epic, *Ullalim* where it shows that the practice of betel nut chewing as a gesture of friendship and camaraderie (Bulwayan et al., 2023).

Several studies also were conducted to investigate the issues related to betel nut chewing across borders. For instance, Chen et al. (2021) and Anand et al. (2014) states that based on their findings, chewing betel nuts on a habitual basis is known to be deleterious to human health. In fact, this can cause a lot of oral problems and worst, oral cancer. Alkaloids found in betel nuts are considered to be the main source of carcinogens (Shah et al., 2012). In a similar study conducted by Garg et al. (2014), long term consumption can cause hypothyroidism, prostate hyperplasia, infertility and Vitamin D deficiency. Shafique et al. (2012) found out that betel nut consumption is associated with diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and oropharyngeal and esophageal cancers.

This study aims to explore the multifaceted nature of betel nut chewing among young farmers in Natubleng, Buguias, Benguet. It looked into the reasons and beliefs of young farmers related to betel nut chewing. It also explores the social meanings attached by young farmers to betel nut chewing. Further, it will also show the issues experienced by the young farmers with betel nut chewing.

Methodology

Social constructivist theorists commonly hold the view that engaging in betel nut chewing carries a social significance beyond the reasons and beliefs attached to it. This can be viewed from Bourdieu's (1979) as cited by Sulkunen (1982), the reasons behind a habit are therefore not just a matter of individual personal preference, but are also by the larger social meanings attached to it. The engagement in the betel nut chewing can be deduced from the reasons and beliefs and the social meanings they attached to it. With continuous mastication of the betel nut, there are possible issues encountered. In psychology, if a person



encounters issues or challenges, they employ adaptive mechanisms. According to Chowdburly (2021), mechanisms are sets of adaptive tools either thoughts, emotions or actions, that are proactively administered towards addressing challenges or issues.

The schematic diagram (Figure 1) was used to illustrate the primary ideas explored in the investigation of betel nut chewing among young farmers. The young farmers have their reasons and beliefs about the benefits of betel nut chewing and the social meanings they attach to it. This motivates them to indulge in betel nut chewing. Along with this relationship, as the young farmers continuously partake in this habit, they consistently enjoy the perceived benefits of it. This is represented by the arrow going back to the first box. However, with continuous mastication, they may encounter issues related to this habit. Consequently, they endeavored to address these issues of betel nut chewing by adopting adaptive measures.

This study is purely qualitative. It particularly takes an ethnographic approach to understand the dynamics in betel nut chewing through exploring the reasons and beliefs, and social meanings and expressions of young farmers towards betel nut chewing. The issues and the respective mechanisms they experienced as posed by the habit were also explored.

Purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting the respondents for this study. This sampling method is used to select participants based on the following specific characteristics: (a) farmers aging from 15-25 years old, (b) had been farming for at least a year, and (c) who had been partaking in the chewing of betel nut.

The research was carried out in Natubleng which is primarily an agricultural community in Buguias, Benguet. Natubleng is one of the barangays of the municipality of Buguias. It is located at a distance of approximately 63 kilometers from Baguio City and can be reached in about 2 hours.

The data was collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and observation. The data collected was transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Moreover, in order for the researcher to further understand

Figure 1

Schematic Diagram of the Study

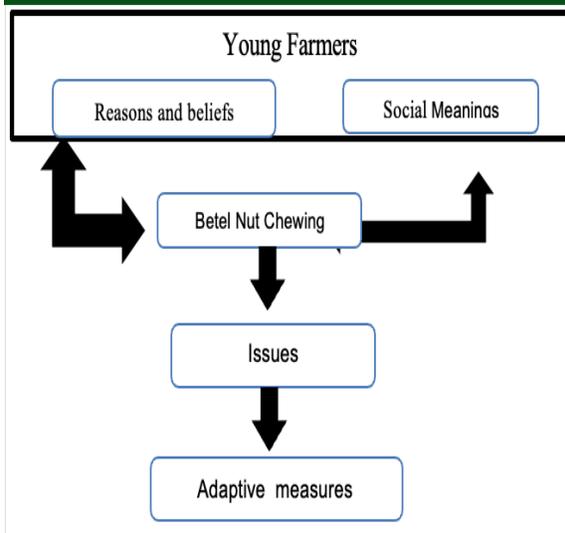


Table 1

The Profile of the Respondents from Natubleng, Buguias, Benguet

Pseudonyms	Age	Years of Farming	Years of Chewing Betel Nut
Jose	16	1	2
John	17	2	3
Tom	16	1	1
Rey	18	2	5
Ron	20	1	4
Dave	25	4	8
Ralph	18	2	4
Leo	19	3	5

the dynamics behind the habit, various fieldworks were conducted.

Ethical considerations were considered throughout the study. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained before the commencement of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity was also ensured, and the data collected will be stored securely.



Results and Discussion

Farming Narratives in Relation to Betel Nut Chewing

In Natubleng, the shift from subsistence to commercial farming has created a higher demand for labor, particularly during the harvest season. Teenagers are being mobilized as young farmers to fill this labor gap and work long hours to meet the demands of the farming process. Many young farmers help their parents to cultivate their farm to catch-up with the farming process. There is pressure to grow more crops and hit market prices on time, as failing to do so can lead to losses and indebtedness due to rising input costs.

The agrarian lifestyle of these young farmers has been observed to be intertwined with the habit of betel nut chewing. Young farmers have been observed to be simultaneously tilling the land while masticating betel nut within the day. According to these young farmers, they chew thrice or more within the day. Sometimes, another set of chew is prepared and masticated just after a chew. For them, betel nut chewing serves various purposes and not merely just a habit for entertainment.

Cold Climate

According to Meteoblue (2023), the municipality of Buguias experienced an average temperature of 19°C from May to September and can drop to 15°C during night time. While intense cold is experienced from October to February with an average temperature of 14°C but can drop to approximately 7°C. From March to April, it experienced an average temperature of 16°C.

The locality's temperature makes it more difficult for the young farmers to comfortably function. The young farmers experience numb hands and knees due to the cold temperature making it difficult for them to hold their grab hoes or climb the hill to transport fertilizers to their farms. Thus, to combat the low temperature, the young farmers resort to betel nut chewing since they believe that it helps them increase their body temperature and will keep them warm. In fact, they masticate betel nuts even just after their morning coffee.

"Kaman pumudot ngamin di i-nga asi din awak. Mabalin ay wat manbado si naiing ingpis ay sweater. Medyo narigat mankutkuti gamin no napuskol di bado. (The warming effect starts from my ears and my body follows. With the feeling of warmth brought by chewing, I can wear a sweatshirt instead of thicker jacket which makes it easier for me to move and work)."

To keep warm, the young farmers prefer wearing thinner sweaters and chewing betel nuts, as they feel thicker jackets limit their movement. The young farmers claimed that when they masticate betel nuts, they feel warm so they can work early in the morning which enables them to finish more tasks in a day. During land preparation for planting, they explained that they can carry fertilizers at dawn, and distribute and incorporate it in each plot before the sun rises.

Accordingly, the young farmers also resort to chewing betel nuts for them to stay warm while attending to their crops particularly during the watering process. During the dry season, they need to stay in the gardens overnight to monitor and adjust their sprinkler irrigation, and betel nut chewing was said to help keep their body warm. Moreover, it also helps them to stay awake. They said that if they are unable to endure the cold in monitoring irrigation, they will miss their scheduled watering time and have to wait for their next turn to have access to irrigation. As a result, missing irrigation schedules can lead to crop wilting and a reduction in the expected yield.

This common narrative affirms Wanderein's (2019) conclusion that chewing betel nut keeps the body warm given the region's cool climate. As the betel nut is being chewed, it releases an arecoline content which has a beneficial effect on blood circulation that leads to increase in body temperature (Chen et al., 2021). Through the thermoregulatory effect of masticating betel nut, young farmers can comfortably work during cold weather.

Young farmers believed that chewing betel nuts provides them with warmth, which they claimed to have helped them work longer hours from early morning until dusk. As a result, they feel that they can accomplish more agricultural tasks in a day and keep up with the demands of the farming process.



Betel Nut Chew: Re-energizing and Keeping us Occupied

Betel nut is also chewed during breaks in agricultural works especially during *kumboy*. The term *kumboy*, comes from the word *convoy* which refers to the transportation of produce from the garden to the road. This entails carrying substantial loads of vegetables on their head or shoulders with the use of baskets. In Natubleng, *kumboy* is challenging due to the steep terrain. The task of repeatedly climbing up and down the mountain to load the vegetables feels exhausting for the young farmers. To break this, they turn to chewing *momma* which they believe helps them relax and feel more energized ready for another load. "No manbubunag ta yan mayat di man-momomma. Adi riknaen di buway (When I'm carrying loads of baskets up the hill during *kumboy*, chewing helps me avoid feeling exhausted)."

Not just during rest time, betel nut chewing is also observed even when they are carrying baskets. They believe that chewing betel nut keeps their mouth moist which in turn reduces their thirst. When they drink a lot of water to quench their thirst, they feel their bodies are heavy so they prefer to chew betel nut instead.

After bringing a load of produce to the truck, the young farmers chew their betel nut while waiting for their baskets to be emptied. They claimed that it helps them re-energize to carry the remaining harvested crops until everything is loaded. When they chew betel nuts, they shared to have felt for a long period of time and be energized to carry another basket.

Furthermore, the betel nut chewing is believed to shorten their required rest period after carrying heavy loads of crops. Through betel nut chewing, they claimed that it re-energizes them faster and alleviates their fatigue. They are able to continue carrying the baskets without needing to take as many breaks. This accelerates the loading process as it allows the product to be delivered to the trading post earlier. This is particularly beneficial since the trading post is two hours away from the locality. Moreover, some crops, such as radish, become discolored if left for a day or two. By delivering the produce earlier, it can be disposed of on time, avoiding spoilage and ensuring the quality of the crops.

Betel nut chewing becomes part of the usual daily farm tasks of young farmers in Natubleng such as tilling the land in preparation for planting. This requires them to exert an intense amount of force to break and loosen the soil. With these kinds of physically demanding tasks, the young farmers take breaks to rest and recuperate. Oftentimes, they revealed that they turn to betel nut chewing as a way to revitalize themselves more quickly from exhaustion. They believed that it provides a burst of energy which is necessary for productivity even during long hours of work. Hence, as they believe that it relaxes them, the possibility is that they will continuously chew (Hussain et al., 2018).

The relaxing and energizing effect of betel nut chewing can be attributed to tannins found in betel nut, which have been shown to have a relaxing effect which may contribute to the feeling of relaxation and the energizing experienced by the betel nut chewers (Chen et al., 2021). Tannins are secondary metabolites solely obtained from natural or plant sources like woods, barks, leaves or fruits which have an astringent taste (Hassanpour et al., 2011). This tannin is responsible for the bitter taste of the betel nut chew.

Moreover, the labor-intensive farming condition also makes the young farmers experience isolation. The fact that they have to catch up with the farming process, they no longer have time to spare to help in working in others' gardens except during harvest season. And also, they don't even have much time to converse with each other except only during *kumboy* sessions which allows them to gather. This leads them to work alone in their garden. When the young farmers work alone for long periods of time, they experience boredom and loneliness. For the young farmers to ward off their feelings, they resort to chewing betel nuts. They feel that it provides them with a sense of entertainment since they claim that when their mouth is busy, they don't feel the need for a companion to talk with. In addition, they sensed that they became more focused and absorbed in their task.

The young farmers found out that chewing betel nuts helps them to accomplish more tasks. This is because betel nut chewing can create a sense of timelessness for them. The young farmers claimed that they do not bother to constantly check the time when they're too



engrossed chewing betel nut while working. The sense of productivity and efficiency can be of great help in accomplishing farming tasks.

Social Meanings Attached to Betel Nut Chewing

Social constructivists argue that individuals construct meanings behind habits they are doing and these meanings were shared to other individuals through social interaction. Mehan (1981) argues that social interaction influences the perception of an individual. So, the socially constructed meanings and representations of the betel nut chewing habit were passed from one individual to another, and these meanings were adopted resulting in similar perceptions. Betel nut chewing is not an exception to this meaning. In fact, chewers continuously chew because of the shared perception and the social meanings of chewers attached to this habit.

Moreover, betel nut chewing also becomes a material for social interaction among young farmers. As the young farmers seek for group acceptance, they turn to share the same habit as their co-farmers have.

Being Taraki: Chewing and Masculinity

Masculinity is a social construct, and in some way, provides a normative standard to which men can aspire and against which individual men can assess their own identities (Connell, 1987; McVittie et al., 2017). It is an integral part of young farmers. Masculinity, especially in an agricultural community, is a depiction of man's prowess and image. For the young farmers in Natubleng, chewing betel nut is a way to uplift their feeling of masculinity which helps them boost their confidence. In the case of young farmers, betel nut chewing is a way to assert such an image thus, young farmers take this opportunity so they engage themselves to betel nut chewing. In fact, according to Moe et al. (2016), betel nut is perceived to be manly, stylish and attractive. With all these perceptions attached to betel nut, young farmers engage in chewing to realize the suave and dashing image and to make them feel more confident. Since betel nut chewing is perceived to be a symbol of a "manly" image, it encourages the young farmers more to partake in this habit for them to assert this masculine image among their co-farmers. In addition, since betel nut chewing also signifies

being attractive and stylish, this makes it more appealing for the young farmers to indulge in this habit to improve their appeal to future partners.

Moreover, they feel that they look more *taraki* when partaking in betel nut chewing. The concept of *taraki* refers to a person who is cool, trendy or attractive. In the case of the young farmers, they can be *taraki* when they chew betel nut. A spittle (spitting bottle) for betel nut juice is an essential accessory to accompany the usual denim jacket and denim jeans to complete the *taraki* image (Mckay & Perez, 2017). Young farmers feel that having their spittle placed on their pockets completes the look they want which is to realize the image of *taraki*. Being *taraki* for the young farmers allows them to feel confident and capable compared to their co-farmers.

The urge to assert a strong manly image provokes them to engage in chewing betel nut. Through asserting this masculinity, one's image can no longer be the 'boy' within their peers. In addition, chewing betel nut is a test of one's masculinity. The young farmers explained that not everyone can take the bitter taste of the betel nut chew. Thus, those who chew means "stronger" and "resilient" than those who do not. When the young farmers chewed for the very first time, they described that the taste was bitter and they experienced dizziness. This is also the experiences of some of their colleagues which makes them hesitate to chew again. Therefore, the young farmers who are able to take the bitter taste of the betel nut chew were strong enough to make it a habit.

In addition, young farmers believe that chewing is a sign of maturity and in contrast not chewing implies immaturity. Being considered a man is a significant milestone that they are striving to achieve. When the young farmers feel that when they are immature, they are relegated to the role of an errand boy, which implies that they are not taken seriously and are expected to perform menial tasks. This can be frustrating for them as they desire to be treated as responsible and capable individuals.

Further, during *kantyan*, those who were not into betel nut chewing always becomes the center of *kantyan*. A *kantyan* is a teasing activity typically performed by farmers wherein, individuals tease each other about various topics, including topics that may be considered



inappropriate or taboo (Batani, 2016). Those young farmers who do not participate in the chewing betel nut often become the target of *kantyanan*. As the teasing escalates, the young farmers feel humiliated and uncomfortable with the situation. In some instance, an experience shared by a participant in which he was teased of being “weak” because of not chewing betel nut. In fact, he claimed that he is called “gay” for not able to partake from the habit. The most humiliating part is when accordingly, his colleagues chimed in laughter after these remarks. This experience of the participant led him to partake in this habit.

In this case, the act of betel nut chewing is utilized by young farmers as a means of protecting themselves from being the target of *kantyanan*. It allows them to become active participants in the exchange of *kantyanan* with co-farmers. Since they are already taken as part of *kantyanan* activity, the young farmers feel that they are able to achieve a certain power and they can demonstrate their wit and humor, effectively turning the tables on those who might have otherwise targeted them. By using betel nut chewing as a tool to engage in these playful banter, these young farmers are able to assert their social standing within the group as they demonstrate their own ability to challenge or defend themselves during these types of social interactions.

Group Belongingness and Socialization

Socialization is important for the young farmers since they don't have many chances to bond with their co-farmers because of the labor-demand of farming that led them to work alone most of the time. Hence, socialization seldomly happens so when given a chance, they grab it.

Young farmers who are not chewing betel nut experience the feelings of social exclusion and a sense of not belonging in the farmer's group. As their co-farmers chew during break time, they feel left out and ostracized especially when conversations revolve around experiences of chewing betel nuts. This lack of participation in such discussions can further exacerbate the feeling of being an outsider. One participant shared his personal experience of feeling left out before he started chewing betel nuts. He recounted being excluded from social gatherings

and discussions which made him feel isolated from his co-farmers. This feeling of isolation and exclusion motivated him to start chewing betel nut as a way to fit in and avoid feeling like an outsider. This affirms Hogg (2007) study on how individuals strongly identify with groups through having generic properties in certain contexts. In the case of the young farmers, for them to fully identify themselves with their co-farmers, they adopt the mastication of betel nut to share a common habit. Through this, the young farmers feel their inclusiveness to the group.

“No panag-iinana no kumboy yan wada di momma. Esana yan man-ipabela si momma na. Wat say kaman panagbobonding ya kankantyanan, isistorya kasjay.” (Every break during harvest season, there is betel nut chewing. It is the only time of telling stories or teasing with other farmers. In fact, it is only the time of bonding with each other).

Betel nut chewing can be utilized as a tool of socialization. It was revealed that young farmers together with the adult farmers gather when taking breaks during *kumboy*. During these breaks, each young farmer prepares a piece of betel nut and slaked lime wrapped in a betel leaf. As they take some moment to rest from the tiresome carrying of baskets, the young farmers together with the older farmers tell stories or engage in *kantyanan*. During this session, some of the topics centered on physical prowess showed in carrying baskets. This is also the reason why young farmers tried their best to match the physical efforts exhibited by the older farmers. Through exhibiting the same strength, the young farmers avoid being teased.

Kantyanan does not only always involve deliberately turning other's tables. In fact, it can also be a form of teasing just to castigate laughter. Through this, it enables the young farmers to participate in exchanges of teases that enables them to show their skills. In essence, betel nut chewing is a tool for these young farmers to show their social prowess among their co-farmers.

Betel nut chewing becomes a fulcrum of socialization. Through betel nut chewing, it gathers the young farmers together with the older ones to partake in the *kantyanan* and story-telling. It makes the *kantyanan* more engaging since some of the topics also involve practices and experiences related to betel nut chewing. Further, it is only the chance to socialize



with their co-farmers since they were not gathering often since most of the time, they focused on their own farms. During this socialization, distribution of roles is also observed. The process of betel nut preparation is often carried out by the young farmers who take on the responsibility of preparing the chew for their adult co-farmers. Although these young farmers are already considered as part of the social group, this act of preparing a chew is a sign of respect for the older farmers. In addition to this, sometimes the young farmers also prepare the chew for other farmers of the same age. This act of sharing betel nut symbolizes the bonds of friendship.

Betel nut chewing serves as a social lubricant that opens social interaction between the young farmers to other farmers. When young farmers bring their produce to the trading post, they often encounter unfamiliar farmers. Offering or receiving betel nuts is a polite way to initiate a conversation with them where through chewing together, it breaks down barriers and encourages friendly conversation. Most of the time, this also leads to spark a light-hearted teasing and banter which often results in laughter.

Hence, it is also important to note from the narratives of the participants that *kantyan* is only the time when they socialize with their co-farmers. This is because they value each minute spending it on their farm. This reflects the case study conducted by Conelly (1996), the change from extensive to intensive cultivation forced the farmers to maximize human labor. Thus, for the young farmers, one technique is to maximize the hours of the day. In fact, they maximize their labor and time having no extra time to spare for socialization

Perceived as an Alternative Kit

According to the young farmers, betel nut chewing is not only a habitual practice but also serves as their alternative kit. They claimed that the condiments used in betel nuts can treat wounds and even relieve coughing.

The young farmers use the leaf when they are wounded. A participant revealed that when he accidentally wounded himself with a hoe, he pounded a leaf and used it to cover his wound since medical aid is not available. He believed that through this, the bleeding will stop. He claimed that this is effective to heal the wound faster.

In another instance, the young farmers claimed that the betel leaf is also used to relieve coughing and lowers down fever. Though, they explained that it requires a more complicated process. The betel leaf is heated up and tossed with coconut oil before applying it to the chest part. The young farmers claim that this widens the airways that helps them breathe easier. This may be supported by the study of Chauhan et al. (2016) that the relief is a result of chemical properties like arecoline, released through heating the betel leaf which relaxes the airways for easier breathing and suppresses coughing. In addition, they claimed that when the heated betel leaf is placed in the body when experiencing fever, it absorbs the heat which they claim helps in lowering body temperature.

Additionally, betel was also used to relieve toothache. A participant revealed that when he experiences a toothache, he chewed the nut alone. At first, it felt a little painful but eventually it brought relief since it numbed the gums. This is one of the common uses of the betel nut.

This experience can be associated with the study that the nut releases alkaloids that can provide pain relief by numbing the area, and tannins which have astringent properties that can reduce swelling and inflammation in the gums (Bhandare et al., 2010; Chauhan et al., 2016).

Moreover, the young farmers also use the betel nut alone for diarrhea. They explained the process where the betel nut is chewed or pounded to release the juice, the juice is then sipped and swallowed. The young farmers revealed that this relieved diarrhea and its symptoms.

Carrying a pack of betel nut has become convenient and functional for the young farmers. Not only does it sustain their habit, but it also serves as a ready alternative medicine for common conditions such as coughs, cuts and diarrhea.

The perception that these components were medicinal strengthens the engagement they have to betel nut chewing. The perspectives on health and health care are a sociocultural product (Lupton, 2000). Thus, in the case of the young farmers in Natubleng, the condiments of betel nut can become their alternative health remedies as they have proven its effectiveness.



Issues and Mechanisms to Betel Nut Chewing

Like other habits, betel nut chewing can also pose issues and challenges to the chewers. Challenges and issues may relate to physiological or social aspect. Several researchers reveal that physiological issues may range from oral health problems to the worst, cancer. Social issues may also arise from this habit.

As betel nut chewers, young farmers also have experienced issues related to this habit. Thus, they have their ways in mitigating the issues anchored to chewing.

Issues Related to Betel Nut Chewing

The World Health Organization classifies betel nut as a carcinogen (Talmage-Bowers, 2018). In line with this, it has a public plea to discourage the consumption of it because of the various health related issues linked to it. The young farmers also experienced some issues related to betel nut chewing.

One danger in betel nut chewing is associated with the inclusiveness of tobacco leaves. Some of the young farmers tried to add tobacco before in their own chew but they felt nauseated and dizzy. Tobacco contains various substances such as nicotine. The study conducted by the Department of Labor (United States) showed that the exposure to nicotine in tobacco leaves can cause nausea and dizziness (Occupational Safety and Health Administration, n.d.). For this reason, the young farmers removed it from their preparation.

Another health danger in betel nut chewing is related to lime used. The young farmers claimed that there is a need to thoroughly check a slaked lime sold before its purchase. Accordingly, there are actually two types of slaked lime sold in the market; the shell and the lime from limestone. Before, when the young farmers did not know yet about these two variants, they purchased the lime from limestone. With this, they experience mouth sores and blisters which makes it difficult for them to eat. Shell lime may also cause mouth sores, but the likelihood is lower as it only produces a heating sensation in their mouth.

In addition, another issue experienced by the young farmers is having bad breath which can be socially embarrassing. The chewed betel nut has

a strong and pungent odor that linger in their mouth even after the nut has been rinsed off. This was the case for young farmers who felt shy to engage in conversation with other people, particularly those who are non-chewers. The hesitation to chat with them is because of the unpleasant odor caused by the habit of chewing betel nuts. When they converse, they try to cover their mouth. Further, the continuous masticating of betel nuts also stained their teeth which makes them more shy to communicate with others.

Measures to Address Issues

The young farmers adapt measures to minimize issues related to betel nut chewing. First, the young farmers make sure to do proper oral hygiene. After chewing betel nuts, the young farmers rinse their mouths with water since they claim that it will get rid of any remaining residue. Along with rinsing, they also brush their teeth regularly to prevent further staining. It was also revealed that they use the husk of the betel nut to file their teeth and remove any build-up, which they perceived to prevent their teeth from further staining.

Second, despite following what they claimed as proper hygiene, the young farmers still experience deep-seated stains on their teeth that are noticeable when they smile. They acknowledge that a dentist can remove these stains but are hesitant to seek dental services as they believe it is a waste of money. Instead, they file their teeth with a knife or sandpaper to remove stains.

Third, the young farmers are aware that spitting, especially in public, is considered unpleasant by many people. As a result, they carry a designated spittle (spitting bottles) with them at all times. They make sure to keep the bottle concealed in the inner pockets of their denim jackets as a sign of respect towards others who may find spitting distasteful. Properly disposing of the spits is also important to the young farmers. They flush the contents down the drain and thoroughly wash the bottle before discarding it in the trash. By taking these measures, the young farmers show consideration for the feelings of those around them and maintain cleanliness and hygiene. Although, not all chewers have been so considerate to properly dispose of their spits as evident in the existence of the Barangay ordinance that prohibits Betel nut chewing in the public. In line with this, the



young farmers consider spits as a significant carrier of disease and are therefore more cautious in disposing of their spittle to reduce the risk of transmission. Proper spittle disposal is essential for young farmers to prevent the spread of disease to other individuals, particularly during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It is critical to note that young farmers remain considerate of their spits and take appropriate measures to ensure that they do not contribute to the spread of any disease.

Fourth, the young farmers conceal their bad breath through incorporating star anise in their betel nut chew. The star anise exudes a pleasant aroma that helps mask their bad breath. The aroma from the star anise makes it easy for them to converse with other people since they are no longer ashamed of possible bad breath.

Conclusions

After conducting an ethnographic study on young farmers and their perspectives on betel nut chewing, the research concludes that the practice cannot be simply reduced to individual needs. Rather, it is motivated by the social factors they attributed to the habit. The study found that betel nut chewing is not just a habit for pleasure, but it also helps the young farmers to assert their social standing as well as to function and accomplish their tasks even in cold temperatures. Additionally, it energizes and relaxes them from tiresome farm tasks, which continuously makes them motivated to indulge in the habit. The practice is highly valued as it represents their masculinity and assertion of being *taraki*, and it also serves as a social lubricant for socialization among the farmers.

However, the research also revealed that the young farmers experience some issues from betel nut chewing brought by the habit. The young farmers have adopted measures geared towards addressing the issues they are experiencing. This includes proper oral hygiene, such as rinsing the mouth after every chew and regular brushing of teeth. They also add star anise to mask the bad smell. Moreover, they use the husk of betel nut to file their teeth to remove build-up. Therefore, the study concludes that betel nut chewing among young farmers is a complex practice that is driven by both beliefs and social implications attached with betel nut chewing.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, there is a need for an in-depth experimental study to validate the physiological myths like warming and energizing myths of betel nut chewing. It is also an important factor to consider in making policies, the findings that betel nut chewing is not simply a source of pleasure rather it has a symbolic representation and certain purpose for young farmers. Further, it is encouraged for young farmers to reduce the frequency of their daily betel nut chew, limiting it to the essential moments like socialization or during *kumboy*.

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