
**ROLE OF BETEL NUT CHEWING IN BUILDING RELATIONSHIP
AMONG ADULT ILOCANOS IN DER-AN, DIFFUN, QUIRINO**

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ABSTRACT

Betel nut chewing functions as a social mechanism that fosters relationship-building by enabling individuals to interact within their community. This study analyzed how betel nut chewing contributes to the development of relationships among Ilocano chewers. Using a phenomenological approach, nine adult Ilocano betel nut chewers were interviewed through structured, face-to-face interviews. The analysis revealed three key themes: establishing trust, serving as a replacement for cigarette use, and sharing adapted culture. Informants described how betel nut chewing establishes trust, serves as an alternative to other vices, and facilitates communication through the sharing of tradition. The findings demonstrate that betel nut chewing influences social behavior, providing opportunities for interaction, knowledge exchange, and the formation of friendships. Ultimately, the practice extends beyond being a personal habit or vice, functioning as a cultural and social activity that strengthens bonds and contributes to community cohesion.

KEYWORDS: Qualitative, Betel Nut, Ilocanos, Relationships, Shared culture.

INTRODUCTION

Betel nut (*Areca catechu*) chewing functions as a social mechanism that fosters relationship-building and community interaction. Despite its well-documented health risks, the practice of chewing betel nut with betel leaf remains prevalent across many countries, serving as a cultural bridge that strengthens bonds among individuals. Within social and cultural contexts, betel nut symbolizes hospitality and is often offered during gatherings to promote goodwill and connection. However, habitual chewing of “*momma*”—a term used by the Ifugao and Igorot peoples to describe betel nut chewing with betel leaf—has been linked to serious health consequences, including oral cancer, addiction, and digestive and cardiovascular complications. This tension between cultural benefits and health risks underscores the significance of studying the practice, particularly given its widespread acceptance and increasing prevalence through social influence.

According to Rao et al. (2022), many chewers find it difficult to stop because of betel nut’s central role in their social lives. It is commonly used in social gatherings and as a gesture of hospitality, reinforcing interpersonal relationships. Alarmingly, the rise in adolescent participation highlights the normalization of carcinogen intake, with long-term implications for public health. The cultural adaptation of betel nut chewing, while contributing to social cohesion, simultaneously perpetuates health risks, making it a complex phenomenon worthy of deeper exploration.

Previous studies, such as those by Brucato et al. (2025), Itaki and Taufu (2024), and Waqatakirewa et al. (2022), have examined the origins, effects, and cultural roles of betel nut chewing. However, no published research has specifically analyzed how this practice contributes to relationship-building among Ilocano individuals. This gap presents an opportunity to investigate the social dimensions of betel nut chewing within the Ilocano community. By conducting interviews and observations, this study seeks to uncover the positive relational effects of the practice, particularly its role in fostering social development and cultural continuity.

Ultimately, this research aims to examine betel nut chewing not only as a cultural tradition but also as a relational practice that strengthens community ties. The findings are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of how “*momma*” functions in Ilocano society, balancing its cultural significance with its health implications. To ensure clarity and readability, artificial intelligence tools were employed solely for grammar refinement, while

the generation of ideas, interpretations, and analyses remained the responsibility of the researchers.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Attachment Theory, developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (1969), which emphasizes the importance of emotional bonds and social connections in human relationships (Mcleod, 2025). The theory posits that attachment is formed and learned through interactions, and that experiences from infancy to adulthood shape the quality of relationships across the lifespan. Within this framework, interpersonal connections are understood as essential mechanisms for social cohesion and relational development.

Applying Bowlby and Ainsworth's theory to the present study, the practice of betel nut chewing among Ilocanos can be viewed as a relational interaction that fosters attachment and emotional bonding. The act of sharing "momma" serves not only as a cultural tradition but also as a symbolic gesture of hospitality and connection, reinforcing interpersonal ties within the community. For instance, Rahman and Umar (2024) documented how betel nut chewing in Kan Village, Kao District, North Halmahera Regency—locally referred to as "Kao Islam"—has historically functioned as a sacred tradition that promotes unity and strengthens relationships among residents. Their findings highlight how chewing practices, passed down from colonial times, continue to shape daily interactions and communal bonds, particularly during social visits and gatherings.

In this context, Attachment Theory provides a lens to understand how relational practices such as offering and sharing betel nut contribute to the development of trust, reciprocity, and emotional closeness. By situating betel nut chewing within this theoretical framework, the study underscores its role not merely as a cultural custom but as a relational practice that builds and sustains social connections among Ilocano individuals. This perspective allows the research to explore how everyday interactions rooted in tradition can foster meaningful attachments and strengthen community relationships.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative ethnographic research design to explore betel nut chewing as a cultural practice and its role in building social connections among Ilocanos.

Conducted in Der-an, Diffun, Quirino, informants were selected through snowball sampling based on identified criteria, with interviews carried out in participants' homes or other comfortable settings to ensure openness and authenticity.

Prior to participation, informants signed a written consent form outlining the study's objectives, confidentiality measures, risks and benefits, freedom to withdraw, and grievance procedures.

Data were gathered using a semi-structured interview protocol, which was validated by a panel of evaluators and received an overall rating of 3.83 (Very Much Valid). Formal permissions were secured from the principal, adviser, and barangay captain before data collection.

Thematic Analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (Naeem et al., 2023), was employed to identify recurring patterns and shared meanings, thereby providing deeper insights into betel nut chewing as a relational practice.

Throughout the study, confidentiality was strictly maintained, with informants' privacy protected and their perspectives respected and treated with dignity. Additionally, artificial intelligence tools were used solely for grammar refinement to ensure clarity and readability of the manuscript, but not for generating ideas, interpretations, or analysis, which remained the responsibility of the researchers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to present the findings on how betel nut chewing fosters interpersonal relationships within the community. To address the Statement of the Problem, the researchers identified three emergent themes: establishing trust, serving as a replacement for cigarette use, and sharing adapted knowledge. These themes were carefully analyzed, organized, and interpreted to ensure that the findings reflect the lived experiences of the participants and provide meaningful insights into the relational role of betel nut chewing.

Table 1: Effects of Betel Nut Chewing in Strengthening Relationships among Chewers.

Informant No.	Responses	Sub Themes	Themes
1	Can I have some momma, friend. Because I have momma here... You can have some.	To approach someone	Establishing Trust
9	Give and take	Give and Take	
4	Even if you don't	A way to know	

	know the person. He'll ask for momma, then you'll get to know each other.	someone	
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Table 1 shows the effects of betel nut chewing in strengthening relationships among chewers. The findings demonstrate that betel nut chewing serves as a relational practice among adult Ilocano chewers, functioning as a catalyst for social interaction and friendship. Informants consistently described the habit of chewing “momma” as a conversational bridge, with Informant 2 stating, *“If ever I don’t have momma, I’ll ask others for momma and that’s how we became friends.”* This illustrates how the act of sharing or requesting betel nut initiates connections, even between individuals who were previously unfamiliar with one another. Similar sentiments were echoed by Informants 1 and 7, reinforcing the idea that common practices can serve as foundations for interpersonal bonds.

This relational dynamic emphasized that friendship fosters belonging and generates positive psychological effects. When individuals feel accepted and connected, they experience a sense of being valued and respected. The data gathered in this study further explained that Ilocano chewers feel connected to fellow chewers through the shared habit of betel nut chewing. The practice thus becomes more than a cultural tradition—it evolves into a mechanism for building trust, establishing friendships, and reinforcing social cohesion.

Overall, the findings suggest that friendships are commonly built upon shared habits and interests, with betel nut chewing acting as a foundation for interaction and relationship-building. This highlights the cultural significance of “momma” not only as a traditional practice but also as a social tool that strengthens community ties and interpersonal relationships.

Table 2: Betel Nut Chewing Practices Observed among Ilocanos.

Informant No.	Responses	Sub Themes	Themes
5	I stopped smoking.	Avoid Cigarette	Replacement for Cigarette
7	I can’t stand smoking anymore. Arnel is chewing momma before... So, I tried to chew momma... and it’s good.	Prevent Sickness	
8	The momma is like a cigarette, it's addictive. When there’s no momma, the mouth longs for it.	Momma is addictive	

Table 2 presents betel nut chewing practices observed among Ilocanos. The data reveal that betel nut chewing is often perceived by adult Ilocano chewers as a “replacement for cigarette use.” Several informants reported shifting from smoking to chewing, citing accessibility and personal choice. For instance, Informant 6 shared, *“I used to smoke, because we have momma plants, I quit smoking and replaced it with momma as my vice.”* Similarly, Informants 1 and 7 noted that they had either quit smoking or reduced their chewing habit voluntarily. These accounts highlight how betel nut chewing can serve as an alternative vice, substituting one habitual practice for another.

However, while respondents viewed betel nut as a substitute for cigarettes, both practices carry significant health risks. Itaki and Taufu (2024) identified betel quid as an independent factor contributing to cardiovascular disease, a finding consistent with Alhindal et al. (2025), who reported similar risks associated with cigarette smoking. Thus, although informants perceived chewing as a healthier or more socially acceptable alternative, the evidence suggests that both habits pose comparable dangers to cardiovascular health.

Despite these risks, betel nut chewing differs from cigarette smoking in its social dimension. Unlike smoking, chewing “momma” often facilitates conversation and strengthens interpersonal bonds among chewers. This relational aspect underscores the dual nature of the practice: while it may perpetuate health concerns, it simultaneously fosters social interaction and community connection. In this way, betel nut chewing functions not only as a substitute vice but also as a cultural mechanism for relationship-building.

Table 3: Ilocanos’ Contribution to the Practice of Chewing Betel Nut.

Informant No.	Responses	Sub Themes	Themes
5	If I know someone who doesn't have momma, I'll give him some momma.	Giving someone momma	Sharing Adapted Culture
4	If someone asks for some momma, when I have momma, I'll share it.	Sharing momma	
6	Sometimes when I chew momma, and there's a person who will approach out of nowhere to ask for some momma.	Initiating Interaction	

Table 3 illustrates the Ilocanos’ contribution to the practice of chewing betel nut. The findings indicate that betel nut chewing among Ilocanos is not only a personal habit but also a shared cultural practice that fosters communication and social connection. Informants

emphasized that sharing “momma” strengthens bonds, as illustrated by Informants 4 and 5, who noted that chewers often offer their betel nut to companions who do not have any. Informant 6 further explained, *“Sometimes when I chew momma and there is one person who will approach out of nowhere to ask for some momma,”* highlighting how the act of sharing can initiate friendships and build trust. These accounts demonstrate that betel nut chewing functions as a relational tool, enabling individuals to connect through shared tradition.

This dynamic resonates with Rachmad (2023), who argued that sharing extends beyond the transfer of knowledge or culture—it also involves interaction, trust, and collaboration. Within the Ilocano community, the willingness to share momma reflects acceptance and inclusivity, reinforcing the idea that cultural practices can serve as foundations for interpersonal relationships. The findings therefore suggest that betel nut chewing is widely accepted among Ilocanos not only as a cultural tradition but also as a means of establishing communication, initiating conversations, and fostering social bonds.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how betel nut chewing contributes to relationship-building among Ilocano chewers. The findings revealed three key themes: establishing trust, serving as a replacement for cigarette use, and sharing and preserving adapted culture. These themes highlight that betel nut chewing is more than a habitual practice—it functions as a social mechanism that enables individuals to approach fellow chewers, initiate conversations, and strengthen bonds through shared experiences.

The results demonstrate that betel nut chewing influences social behavior by fostering interaction, knowledge exchange, and familiarity among participants. The act of sharing momma creates opportunities for trust and reciprocity, allowing friendships to form even among strangers. Consequently, betel nut chewing evolves beyond its role as a vice, becoming a cultural and social activity that reinforces community ties and interpersonal relationships.

Therefore, betel nut chewing should be understood not only as a personal habit but also as a cultural practice that facilitates socialization and connection. Respecting this tradition acknowledges its role in Ilocano society as a means of starting conversations, sharing experiences, and creating friendships. Ultimately, the study underscores that betel nut chewing serves as both a cultural symbol and a relational practice, contributing to the social fabric of the community.

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