

# The Sachet Economy in the Philippines: Protecting the Environment and Sociocultural Fabric of Life

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## ABSTRACT

The sachet economy is a largely unknown phenomenon impacting the lives of millions of low-income consumers throughout the Global South. The current literature regarding this marketing strategy is limited to analyses of its economic efficacy and environmental consequences. This qualitative study fills the gap by examining the sociocultural impacts and nuances of the sachet economy, from the perspectives of Filipino consumers and store owners, themselves. Findings illustrate the importance of eight key themes underlying the sociocultural causes, consequences and future of the sachet economy. This study is imperative to the process of mitigating the environmental consequences of chronic sachet use, without uprooting the lives of Filipinos, but improving them.

## INTRODUCTION

The “sachet economy” is a marketing strategy employed by multinational corporations to infiltrate even the most impoverished of households in countries of the Global South, such as the Philippines (Sy-Changco et al., 2011). Companies offer essential, brand-name goods such as shampoo and laundry detergent in smaller volumes through single-use plastic packages, known as sachets. Small, plastic packaging enables low prices, making them accessible to Filipinos who cannot afford to buy brand-name goods in larger volumes (Ang & Sy-Changco, 2007). Currently, changes need to be made to the sachet economy in order to alleviate its large contributions to plastic pollution in the Philippines. Sixty billion sachets are used in the Philippines annually, amounting to ten percent of all waste in the country (GAIA, 2019; Paler et al., 2019). This unique study examines the social and cultural implications of the sachet economy, as described by the personal accounts of Filipinos, themselves. Given the dire need for improvements, it is essential to consult the general masses of Filipino consumers for whom potential changes, for the sake of the environment or economy, will prove to be the most detrimental. This study’s goal is to reveal underlying and covert patterns within the viewpoints of Filipinos to act as a guide for stakeholders implementing solutions to the sachet economy’s effects on the environment and community members.

## METHODS

### Participants

This qualitative study was conducted virtually with 25 participants who identified as Filipino sachet-consumers and sari-sari store owners, residing in the province of Negros Occidental. Of the 25 participants, 6 were sari-sari store owners and/or worked closely within sari-sari stores, and 19 were simply sachet-consumers. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 47 years old, with the large majority (84%) ranging in age from 20-28 years old.

### Procedure

The study was conducted through two forms of qualitative data collection: participatory action research in the form of Photovoice study, and semi-structured interviews. The Photovoice portion involved giving participants prompts and questions to guide them in taking photographs which illustrated the prevalence of sachets in their lives. Participants were then interviewed twice to discuss photos taken and their overall relationship with sachets.



Fig. 1: Photo of waste taken by participant Fig. 2: Photo of sachets taken by participant Fig. 3: Photo of sachets taken by participant

## RESULTS

There were eight primary recurring themes extrapolated from semi-structured interviews: budgets, intergenerational learning, self-image, familiarity, attitude, waste management, education, and incremental change. In the following, I describe the latter seven themes, as the theme of budgets has already been discussed similarly in previous literature.

Intergenerational learning	Self-image	Familiarity	Attitude	Waste management/ Incremental change	Education
The use of sachets is learned from previous generations. Older generations are difficult to influence in changing their ways because of the Filipino culture of respect, and younger generations feel like they cannot make change because they are overlooked for their youth.	Personal care sachet products are used to maintain one's self-image, and prevent judgment from others, given social standards and expectations in the Philippines.	Certain sachet products are used because of Filipino consumers' familiarity with them, and how they are an essential part of their routine(s). A primary example of this is coffee sachets.	The key to changing how sachets are used and waste is handled is by changing the attitudes of Filipinos, themselves and increasing discipline.	The sachet economy, itself, does not need to change, but how pollution and waste is handled. These changes need to be made incrementally, rather than in drastic steps.	Education and environmental awareness is the key to improving the way sachets are used and pollution is handled.

## CONCLUSION

Through this study, I have outlined a unique roadmap revealing the covert systems underlying the obstacles to improving the sachet economy, and how they are concealed by common norms, rituals and customs. From this, immense changes that accommodate Filipinos’ experiences can begin conception. I have shown how consulting and understanding Filipinos, themselves, is key to implementing solutions to the sachet economy. More research is necessary to further underscore the potentially groundbreaking links between each of these core themes to create a web of understanding which will allow for effective improvements to the sachet economy, conceptualized by Filipinos, for Filipinos.

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