

Perfume Chowk and the Smelling Class

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The slogan of Perfume Chowk is *Khushbu Sab Keh Liye* (perfume for everyone). Perfume Chowk is actually not even a *chowk*[¶] but a small stall that sells counterfeit perfumes[#]. Located in Gulistan-e-Johar, it has slowly claimed its place as one of Karachi's well-known landmarks, after a series of struggles that include being burned and robbed. Perfume Chowk's purported mission is to make perfume available to everyone but the fact that these are counterfeit perfumes sold cheaply on the roadside points to the class dimension of this mission. In Karachi, the secretion of body odour is intimately related to an inability to either escape heat or to the performance of corporeal labor, and cheap perfumes enable the consumer to hide their own smell.

I rely on ethnographic research that I conducted with the sellers at Perfume Chowk to argue that perfume is an indirect but potent heat-counteracting mechanism. It enables entry and movement in spaces where professionalism, cleanliness, and good behaviour demand minimal interaction with heat, which is usually achieved through the use of air-conditioning. Perfume usage then indicates an olfactory dimension to class segregation. Not only do spaces frequented by the upper classes smell a particular way, they also demand a similar olfactory profile from those who participate in them. Everyday identification of class position is first done by the nose—you smell class before you see it.

Perfume Chowk first piqued my interest because of its advertising. Around 2004, five years after the business started, wall chalkings for Perfume Chowk began appearing underneath flyovers, on curbsides, on shop shutters, above piles of trash, on benches under trees proudly claiming: Perfume Chowk - *Khushbu Sab Keh Liye*. This wall chalking was ubiquitous and it attracted attention. Within a short period of time casual conversations in various circles in the city included some collective wonder about what Perfume Chowk was and why it seemed to be written everywhere. By now this fascination has resulted in multiple news reports,¹ profiles on television,² YouTube interviews,³ and even a television serial based on Perfume Chowk that aired on Hum TV.⁴ According to Mursaleen Sherwani, the owner and founder of Perfume Chowk, this marketing began as a protest against his stall being burned down by those seeking *bhatta* (extortion money). In a 2009 interview with BBC Urdu he said, 'My wall chalking was not a publicity campaign. It was a protest against the powers which burned my stall ten times in ten years. If I had paid the hawker fee to Cantonment Board Faisal and my stall was legal, why

[¶] Junction.

[#] The chowk takes its name after the stall.



Wall chowking of Perfume Chowk.

should I pay *bhatta*?[¶] Every night around 2am after closing the stall, Sherwani would get on his bike, spray paint in hand, and paint the walls of the city with Perfume Chowk's iconic branding.

What began as a protest eventually turned into a successful marketing campaign that is now worthy of being taught in universities. Perfume Chowk's success can be attributed to the sense of wonder infused with guerilla marketing that operates outside the conventions of corporate brand marketing. The domain of wall chalking is often utilised by sellers of miraculous cures for bodies that are too fat or too thin, for reproductive organs that fail, or for dietary systems that handle glucose badly, and the very political parties Sherwani tussled against. Perfume Chowk's take on this kind of marketing imbues the product with a moral, rights-based claim. To say 'perfume for everyone' is to speak of something that everyone *should* have, something that is a need and not a luxury. A claim for an inherent right to have something often follows a logic of it being integral to life itself, such as 'water for everyone' because one cannot survive without water.

The first Perfume Chowk stall is located at an intersection in Block 18, Gulistan-e-Johar, a middle class area filled with ill-maintained apartment complexes and bustling with roadside vendors selling beverages, food, shoes, clothing, and mechanical services. Over time, Perfume Chowk has grown into a thriving business empire with three brick-and-mortar shops and two stalls spread across the middle to lower-middle-income areas of Pehelwan Goth, Gulzar-e-Hijri, and Gulistan-e-Johar. In addition, Perfume Chowk also offers home-delivery services using either its own riders for nearby areas or courier companies to deliver as far as Quetta or Dera Ismail Khan. Though the business has expanded, most of the fieldwork for this essay was conducted at the first Perfume Chowk stall that has officially become the name of the street intersection and the area as a whole. 'Even on official National Identity Cards this area is now known as Perfume Chowk,' Sherwani told me. Throughout this essay, whenever I refer to Perfume Chowk, I refer to this first stall. The shop is an open 9 feet by 6 feet wooden kiosk with one entry point and one large window through which the customers are facilitated. It is located on the footpath under a Peepal tree surrounded by a number of other hawkers who all attribute their success to some extent to Perfume Chowk. After all, 'prior to Perfume Chowk there was nothing here. This entire area was a garbage dump overgrown with wild plantation,' a nearby newspaper seller told me. In addition to being a shop, Perfume Chowk also operates as a bus stop with commuters using the stall's stools as they wait for their rides. My fieldwork involved becoming a *shagird* (student) at Perfume Chowk.[#] While I was initially told to simply sit and observe, I eventually became one

[¶] *Bhatta* is the colloquial Urdu term for extortion money. At the time, the political party Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) had almost established a parallel state in Karachi that was funded by its extortion activities.⁵

[#] All workers at Perfume Chowk are referred to as students. This borrows from a general principle where anyone being taught a craft is referred to as a student and enters into a paternalistic teacher-student relationship.⁶



The Perfume Chowk stall.

of the sellers. While Perfume Chowk does receive some female customers, by and large, most of the fieldwork for this paper was with men; they were my teachers as well as the customers I interacted with.

The temporal rhythm of the entire area around Perfume Chowk is shaped by heat. The stall opens at midday, though it never really sees peak business until around 7pm. It closes around 1am. Most shops and stalls around Perfume Chowk also operate on similar timings and do most of their business late at night. 'Everything seems better and easier during the colder part of the day, doesn't it?' said Junaid, Sherwani's son. 'Who walks around during the heat of the day buying anything?'

Though Perfume Chowk was started by Sherwani and his name and face is synonymous with the business, over time his children and other workers have joined the business and it is often they who run the stall. The walls of the stall are lined with nearly 300 glass bottles with toppers colloquially known as 'canters,' likely an indigenisation of decanters, which the bottles resemble. Each canter is labeled in Urdu with both the name of the scent and its prices for 3, 6 and 12 millilitres of perfume. The scented oils are based on popular western brands like Dunhill Desire, Gucci Flora, and Ferrari Extreme as well as eastern scents like *Oud*, *Motia*, *Jannat ul Firdous*, *Janaan*, and *Ghilaf-e-Kaaba*. Perfume Chowk also sells spray perfumes which are created on site. The spray perfume is the same scented oil mixed with alcohol at a ratio of 3:2. The spray perfumes are much more expensive than the scented oils because of their quantity (30 and 60 millilitres) as well as the cost of alcohol colloquially known as T20. Most customers buy the scented oil.

When exposed to heat, perfumes lose their efficacy. As a result, owners of Perfume Chowk have to carefully regulate the quantity of perfume they can store at the shop. Too much and they risk reducing the quality of perfumes they sell. Too little and they risk not having products that the customers want. There is a constant monitoring required to ensure they can protect perfumes from the effects of heat. Perfume Chowk acquires the scented oils it sells ready-made from multiple importers. The owners of Perfume Chowk go every two to three days to the perfume market at Botal Gali to meet their suppliers. In small 60 ml bottles they acquire whatever stock is running low. While there is a makeshift warehouse that keeps changing from the Sherwani household to a rented house to their car, the owners of Perfume Chowk are careful not to buy too much inventory. In addition to the problem of olfactory inefficiency when exposed to heat, such a move also makes economic sense. In either case, a scented oil is a finicky object. If left open it'll evaporate, if unlabelled it'll get lost, if exposed to the heat it'll rot.

While you could theoretically walk up to the shop and demand a perfume by name, this is not how it usually works here. Generally, customers arrive in search of a perfume without a



The Perfume Chowk peepal tree.



Canter of Gucci Guilty with the price for 3, 6, and 12 ml.

clear sense of what they want: 'Please give us a good scent'. It is difficult to describe a scent accurately, as descriptors in the olfactory world cannot pinpoint one smell within hundreds. Sellers at Perfume Chowk often recommend that customers either bring a labelled bottle previously bought from Perfume Chowk or a sample through which they can guess what the customer needs. Scents exist at the edge of the realm of linguistic communication here.

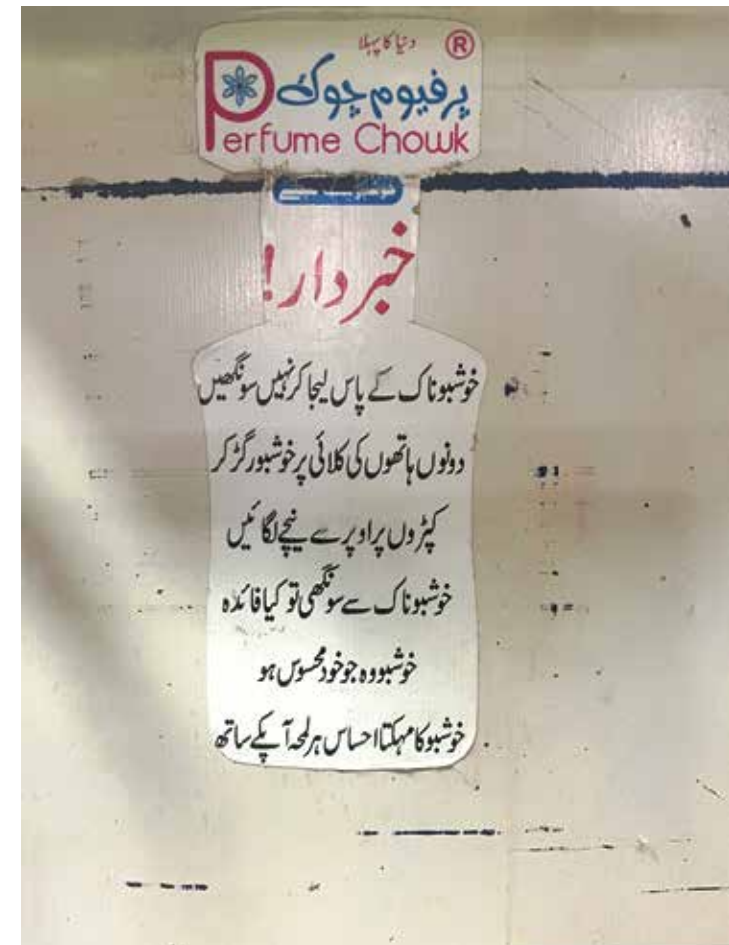
One way that sellers navigate this difficulty is by asking for the name of the customer and offering a smell based on it. Names, they insist, have effects. Deciphering a name can provide insights into personality, and therefore the scent that will suit them. In effect, the process resembles that of a healer ascertaining inner realities based on external information such as palms, faces, saliva, astrological signs, and names. When I started my apprenticeship, I was told that 'over time, this skill develops and you'll be able to identify the right smell for the customer. It is learned with experience. We cannot teach you this skill!'

Despite the difficulty of communicating smells in language, the sellers at Perfume Chowk do make some attempts. If the customer does not like the first scent offered to them based on their name, the sellers ask the customer to find some fault with it, '*Koi keera nikalo*: do you prefer a lighter scent, a stronger, sweeter or sharper smell?' Often a very basic direction provided by the customer leads to trying out more scents and eventually arriving at the right one by trial and error.

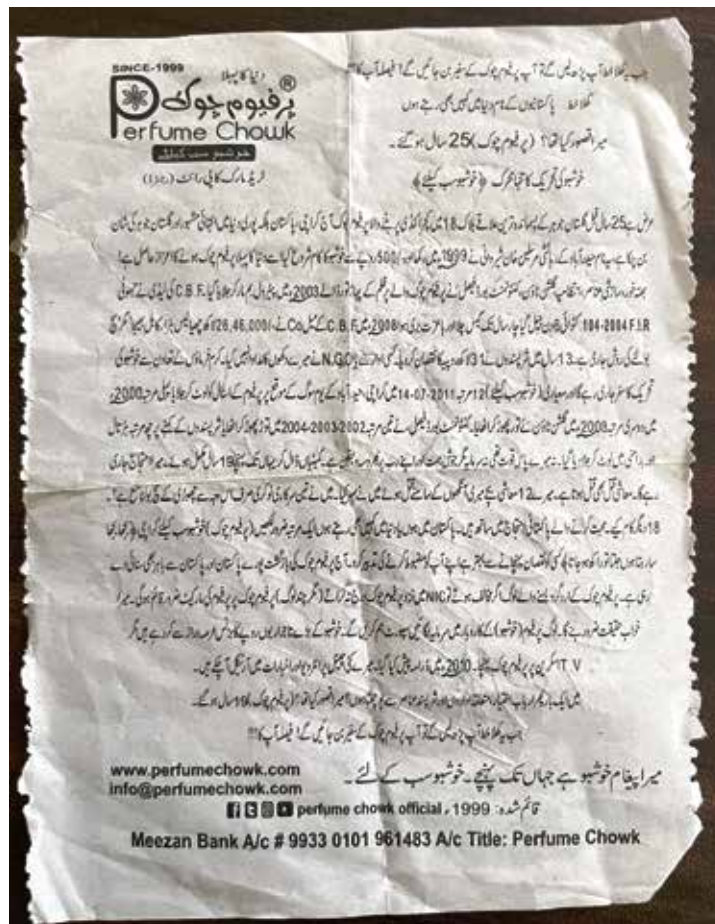
The difficulties of operating in the olfactory market do not end here. The sense of smell is especially prone to being overstimulated and sellers often remark that they themselves no longer smell anything. Buyers at Perfume Chowk are explicitly instructed by the sellers not to smell the scents directly and this instruction is also placed prominently just behind the counter. For the sellers of Perfume Chowk, it is crucial that customers *feel* rather than *smell* the scents offered to them. Beyond issues of overwhelming the olfactory system, sellers argue that a scent that has to be consciously smelt has no purpose. If it has to be sought out, it has not done its job.

When a perfume has been selected, the shopkeeper carefully pours it into the appropriately sized bottle, puts on a topper, and labels it. Once the bottle is ready, sellers will ask for the customer's name, phone number, and residential location to fill out a receipt. No sales at Perfume Chowk are made without a receipt. Sherwani and his sons maintain a record of every sale they make. They have compiled a non-digital database of customers over the past 25 years. In addition to facilitating a 'gift' system as they call it—Rs. 250 worth of perfume for every Rs.1000 spent—the data also helps Perfume Chowk reach out to former customers with new products. When Perfume Chowk sends out an advertisement via text message, it reaches nearly 22,000 phones.

Arriving at Perfume Chowk means arriving in a world with its own rules and understandings. Many customers get frustrated by the multiple demands sellers make of them. 'You guys have



Guidelines for applying the scent that draw a distinction between smelling and feeling.



Manifesto printed at the back of the receipt.

an entire science of your own! I do not get it!" said one customer as he left frustrated when asked to apply the scents in a particular way. A number of customers leave when asked to divulge their address or phone number for the receipt. 'I do not want the receipt. I am from MI [Military Intelligence]. You cannot collect my phone number,' an angry customer said. 'There is no compulsion here. If you do not want to tell us your number, you don't have to buy from us. We just can't sell without a number,' responded the shopkeeper. Sellers at Perfume Chowk, including myself, are instructed to let customers walk if they refuse to provide information for the receipt. Not only are sellers told to ensure there is a receipt, they also have to remind the customers to read it. The back of the receipt features an open letter that outlines the history of Perfume Chowk and its struggles, and details of a bank account, alongside a plea to support a cause that has been so violently and frequently disturbed. Perfume Chowk is not just a shop. It imagines itself as part of a larger mission, which is to provide 'perfume for everyone.' This mission is part of all Perfume Chowk branding and is featured on every single bottle that they sell.

The focus on feeling scents rather than smelling them allows an entry point into understanding what makes perfume important enough to be positioned as a right. While Bourdieu's framework of habitus accounts for social cues around dressing, speaking, bodily movement, cosmology, and social views it does not explicitly address smell.⁷ Bourdieu put forward the concept of habitus, i.e. the notion that all social interactions have preordained social rules that dictate how people interact. Social cues around dressing, speaking, physical movement, and social views can collectively be referred to as dispositions and each kind of space demands its own bodily disposition.

By insisting that customers feel the scent they apply, sellers at Perfume Chowk demonstrate an understanding that smell is a constituent part of the overall disposition of customers.⁸ It surrounds them and becomes a part of who they are. Many customers loyal to a particular scent speak of that scent becoming a part of their identity. In an exchange with the sales staff, a customer named Ahmad⁹ described his relationship with the Hugo Boss scent in the following exchange:

Ahmad: I have been using Hugo Boss for nearly eight years now. Everyone from the guard to the cleaner knows I am coming when they smell this perfume. I have 25 bottles of the same perfume. I don't even smell it anymore but everyone else smells it.

Seller: This smell has become a part of your identity now.

Ahmad: Yes, my smell enters the room before I do.

⁹ All names of customers have been changed to maintain anonymity.

Smell envelops everyone and its management—either through application of scents or through various regimes of cleanliness—is a constitutive part of playing what Bourdieu calls the social game. Just as particular clothing visually indexes one's social position, smell is its more visceral counterpart. As opposed to other senses, 'odor information is relayed directly to the limbic system, a brain region typically associated with memory and emotional processes.'⁹ This is perhaps why smells are so intrinsically related to social processes utilising emotions, such as fear and disgust to produce marginalisation,[¶] and smelling the wrong way can result in social censure.¹⁰ Imagine a well-dressed man who smells of sweat, or a mosque-goer smelling of alcohol. A foul smell can alter our positive associations with a place, such as a fine dining establishment that smells like human excrement or a dinner party which smells of sewage. To smell bad is to be outside the domain of acceptability. To smell bad is to be morally flawed.

Rizwan, whose work in marketing requires him going from shop to shop to introduce shopkeepers to his company's products, came to the stall and asked for a 'strong scent.' The demand for strong smell simultaneously refers to two different qualities: the intensity of the smell, i.e. how 'strongly' it can be smelt by those immediately around you, and also how long the smell would last. When I asked Rizwan why he wanted a strong scent he said, 'My entire work is outside in the heat. I'm sweating all day and dealing with customers. It's important to make a good impression. I hate showing up to meetings feeling dirty.' The demand for a strong scent is as ubiquitous at Perfume Chowk as is citing heat and sweat as the primary reasons for the use of perfumes. Another customer, a day laborer who came with a friend, demanded a strong smell with the following reasoning: 'He works outside in the sun all day. The smell of sweat settles into the clothes (*kaproun mai bas jaati hai*). Please give us a strong scent that lasts all day.'

Humans are warm-blooded and have to regulate their temperature. Turning on an air conditioner, putting on a blanket, showering, and hydrating are all examples of actions to regulate one's temperature. Similarly, sweating is a biological technique designed to regulate temperature automatically, and there will be more and more of it as the city heats up. Sellers at Perfume Chowk are keenly aware of the particularities of sweat. They distinguish between different levels of acidity (*tezabiyat*) in sweat, with higher levels associated with stronger smell. While one seller told me that strong smelling sweat should be treated with an intense scent, another argued that doing so would merely produce a toxic mix that would ultimately smell even worse. What is nevertheless unanimously agreed upon is that perfume is one of the key mechanisms through which customers hide the effects of the body's thermoregulation.

¶ For historical examples of this process, see Rosenblum, "A Brief History of Jews and Garlic"; Kettler, *The Smell of Slavery*; Tullett, "Grease and Sweat"; Kapoor, "The Smells of Caste."

For Bourdieu, each habitus is associated with a particular class position and therefore matters of 'taste' mark out distinctions of class.¹¹ A 'developed taste' hints at access to a particular kind of social and cultural capital. At Perfume Chowk, customers from a somewhat higher class background indexed by their clothing, ways of speaking, mode of transportation, and lack of sweat marks show a preference for lighter smells. 'I don't like these strong smells like Poison. It feels weird to be laden with perfume like that,' said Ashfaq, an office worker. These kinds of customers are rare at Perfume Chowk. Most customers belong to the laboring class and show a preference for stronger scents. They often preface their interaction by outlining their jobs like laundry man, rickshaw driver, manual laborer, gardener, or bus driver, which means that they are constantly outdoors, feeling hot and smelling bad. That is why they need perfumes.

Other factors interact with heat in complex ways. When Afzal came to the shop, clear white sweat marks were visible on his maroon clothes, a result of sweat drying on his shirt and leaving behind bodily salts. He felt the scent that was offered and then became silent. 'What happened brother, you didn't like it?' the salesman asked. 'No, I am looking for a much stronger scent. This right here is my rickshaw, I'm out all day in all sorts of places with all sorts of people. People smoke inside it, some people fart,' he laughed a little. 'There's so much smoke in this city, so much dust. If the rickshaw smells bad, customers complain and refuse to sit inside.' What is true for the rickshaw is also true for people in general. Being 'outside in the sun' refers both to the effects of heat on the body but also exposure to pollution within the city.

The fact that Perfume Chowk sells scents in 3, 6 and 12 millilitre bottles allows individuals to buy small quantities of what is otherwise a very expensive commodity. Sherwani explains:

In the broader scheme of things, perfumes are quite an expensive commodity. Some of them sell for as much as Rs 5 lakhs a litre. This puts perfumes in the same category of products as silver or gold. Ninety percent of the public is poor. Only ten percent are millionaires and billionaires. They are not coming here anyways. I have built this for the poor. They buy small quantities but they keep buying.

Perfume Chowk's position on the footpath out in the open without any pretensions makes it accessible to everyone. According to Zafar, a *shagird* at Perfume Chowk, 'a guy riding a motorbike for forty minutes, sweating through his clothes, is not going to go into an air-conditioned, glass shop to buy an expensive perfume. *Logon ki phatt jaati hai*.[¶] We are on the footpath in the heat

¶ People are intimidated (to go into these shops).

like everyone else. Even those on bicycles stop here.' In Karachi, a city entirely dependent on individualised transportation, your mode of transportation indicates your status. It is assumed that those already buying in air-conditioned, glass shops will not in fact be buying at Perfume Chowk. Why would they sit on a plastic stool out in the sun to buy counterfeit perfumes when they can buy the original inside a sanitized, cooled shop? It is the creation of this kind of an imagined subset of the public through negation that is central to Perfume Chowk's mission, ethics, marketing, and brand image. It is for the public that is not inside air-conditioned, glass shops. Despite their poverty, argues Perfume Chowk, they still deserve perfumes because perfume is for everyone.

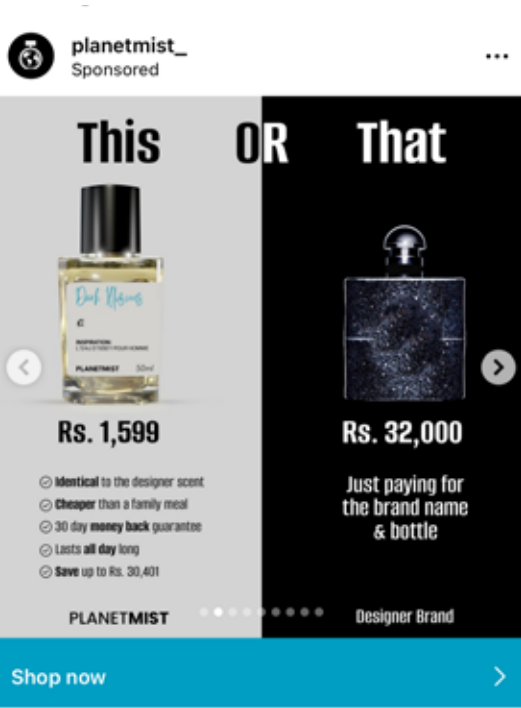
As Perfume Chowk lets you try the scent before you buy it, many customers come to the stall to simply apply the perfume and leave. One customer said, 'Perfumes are so expensive now, maybe I should just come in the morning and apply some scent before I go to the office.' A salesman replied, 'By all means, no one will refuse you.' Many people come to the stall before they head into an office, college, or any other indoor place which could be air-conditioned, where their smell would be obvious. Perhaps the role of perfumes in facilitating access to such spaces can best be captured by the story of a young man who came to the stall wearing nicely fitted dress pants and shirt with a tie and a file in his hand. Though he looked ready to go to the office he was obviously flustered: '*Jaani*[¶], I have an interview in a few minutes. This pant shirt is making me sweat from every pore. I smell like garbage. Please apply some perfume. I really need this job.' He received his dose of perfume and quickly rushed off on a *qingchi*[#]. Having to wear professional clothes that are ill-suited to the hot and humid environment of the city creates an increased need for perfumes. Smelling the wrong way can lead to subtle, but very consequential marginalization. As soon as the customer left, Zafar said to me, 'this is why I never wear pants and shirt. They make me feel so suffocated (*ghuttan hoti hai*)!'

There appears to be a burgeoning perfume market in Karachi, which could be connected to the slow but significant increase in temperature. Perfume Chowk receives a number of customers seeking supplies such as empty bottles or alcohol for starting their own perfume business. 'Everyone is getting into the perfume business these days,' explained my co-worker. There are at least five different perfume sellers apart from Perfume Chowk within a ten-minute walking distance. Nearly every major clothing brand within Pakistan now offers a perfume line. There is now also a growing list of online stores selling copies of designer brands.'

[¶] A term of endearment.

[#] A shared three-wheeled taxi ubiquitous in many neighborhoods of Karachi.

As heat increases in the city, it affects all aspects of social life. As my ethnographic study of Perfume Chowk suggests, we need to think more deeply about our alienation from our environment. Why is it that in a city where sweating is so profoundly necessary for survival, we have such a visceral reaction to it? Why is such shame attached to a natural bodily activity? What is needed is a deeper socio-historical investigation of our present attitudes. Building on Malcolm X's question 'Who taught you to hate the color of your skin?' I ask, who taught you to hate your sweating bodies?



Instagram ad for a Pakistani business selling perfumes.

Notes

1. Khan, "Scents of Perfume Chowk."
2. ARY Stories, *Story of Karachi Perfume Chowk* | ARY Stories.
3. Eat & Discover, dir. 2024. *Perfume Chowk Kiya Hay ??? Gulistan e Juhar Karachi*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfhijZVs5aY>.
4. Ehteshamuddin, *Perfume Chowk*.
5. Haq, "Rise of the MQM," 995; Khan, *Mohajir Militancy*, 42.
6. Anwar, "Ustaads, Shagirds."
7. Bourdieu, "Habitus."
8. Nash, "Social Explanation and Socialization."
9. Sullivan, et al. "Olfactory Memory Networks."
10. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.
11. Bourdieu, "Distinction."

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