



Olfactory Influence on Social Trust: Examining the Role of Scent in Perception

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Abstract

Olfactory cues can influence affective processing and social evaluation, yet their role in judgments of interpersonal trust remains comparatively underexplored, particularly in Filipino samples. This study examined whether ambient scent conditions influence perceived trustworthiness when individuals evaluate unfamiliar faces. A quantitative between-subjects experimental design involved 30 undergraduate criminology students aged 18 to 25 years. Participants were assigned in equal numbers to pleasant (lavender), neutral (distilled water), or unpleasant (vinegar) olfactory conditions. They viewed 20 standardized neutral facial images from the Chicago Face Database and rated each face on a seven-point trustworthiness scale. Participant-level trustworthiness scores were analyzed using one-way analysis of variance. The analysis indicated a significant difference in trustworthiness ratings across scent conditions, $F(2, 27) = 8.23$, $p = .002$, partial eta squared = .38. The pleasant condition produced higher trustworthiness ratings than the neutral and unpleasant conditions, whereas the latter two conditions did not differ significantly. The findings suggest that ambient olfactory context can contribute to judgments of unfamiliar faces, consistent with research on multisensory person perception and scent-related trust. The study provides preliminary experimental evidence from a Filipino undergraduate sample and supports replication using larger samples, stronger manipulation checks, and direct measures of the psychological mechanisms linking olfactory context with social evaluation.

Keywords: *ambient scent, olfactory perception, social trust, trustworthiness judgment, multisensory perception, social cognition*

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1. Introduction

Trust is a central component of social interaction because it affects cooperation, communication, relationship formation, and decisions about whether another person should be approached, relied upon, or avoided. Judgments of trustworthiness can arise rapidly from facial appearance even when information about a person's actual behavior or intentions is limited (Todorov et al., 2009). Such judgments are not necessarily accurate indicators of character, but they are psychologically consequential because they shape first impressions and subsequent social responses.

Although facial appearance is a prominent source of information in person perception, social evaluation is not exclusively visual. Human perception integrates information across sensory channels, and olfactory cues can contribute to affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses in social contexts (de Groot et al., 2017; Hofer et al., 2020). Reviews of olfaction and face processing further indicate that odors can influence how faces are categorized and evaluated, including dimensions related to attractiveness, emotion, dominance, and trustworthiness (Damon et al., 2021; Syrjänen et al., 2021).

The pleasantness of an odor may be especially relevant to trust-related judgments. Sellaro et al. (2015) found that exposure to lavender increased interpersonal trust in a behavioral trust game relative to peppermint and a no-aroma control. Lobmaier et al. (2020) likewise showed that people transferred more resources to odor donors whose body odors they perceived as pleasant. In another experimental program, van Nieuwenburg et al. (2019) demonstrated that a masked odorant could increase interpersonal trust and also examined trustworthiness ratings of faces under olfactory exposure. Collectively, these findings suggest that olfactory context can influence both behavioral trust and perceptual judgments related to trustworthiness.

Ambient scent is conceptually distinct from body odor. Body odors may contain socially relevant biological information, whereas ambient scents are environmental cues that need not originate from the person being evaluated. Nevertheless, ambient scent can alter mood, comfort, attention, and the multisensory character of an environment (Spence, 2021a). Crossmodal research also shows that fragrances, malodors, and other olfactory

stimuli can influence person perception by becoming part of the broader context in which visual information is interpreted (Spence, 2021b). Thus, an environmental odor unrelated to a target face may still bias evaluation of that face.

The Philippine setting provides a useful context for extending this literature. Research on Philippine odor vocabulary indicates that olfaction is represented through a rich set of culturally situated lexical concepts across local languages (Cruz, 2022). A pilot study of Filipino perfume use also found that fragrance use was linked with pleasantness, mood, self-presentation, and grooming-related purposes (Miranda et al., 2024). These studies establish local cultural and behavioral relevance of scent, but they do not directly test whether experimentally manipulated ambient odors influence judgments of unfamiliar faces.

The present study therefore focused on a narrower experimental question: whether the same type of standardized facial stimuli would receive different trustworthiness ratings under pleasant, neutral, and unpleasant olfactory conditions. The study does not assume that scent determines whether a person is objectively trustworthy. Rather, it examines whether ambient scent constitutes one contextual factor that can shift a perceptual judgment when visual information is held constant.

Objective of the Study

This study aimed to determine whether perceived trustworthiness ratings of unfamiliar standardized faces differed among undergraduate criminology students exposed to pleasant, neutral, and unpleasant ambient scent conditions.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Olfaction, Affect, and Social Cognition

Olfaction participates in social behavior through pathways that connect sensory information with affective and contextual processing. Human body odors can communicate information about emotional states, health, and individual characteristics, while learning and context influence how these chemical signals are interpreted (de Groot et al., 2017). Hofer et al. (2020) similarly reviewed evidence that other people's scents can affect emotion, cognition, impression formation, stress responses, and relationship processes. These findings position smell as a meaningful component of the social environment rather than merely a background sensation.

Olfactory functioning is also relevant to general well-being and social interaction. Boesveldt and Parma (2021) emphasized that smell contributes not only to nutrition but also to social behavior and quality of life. This broader perspective is important because olfactory cues can influence social experience through several routes, including emotion, memory, familiarity, avoidance, and approach. The likely mechanisms are therefore not reducible to a single direct pathway from odor to trust. Adjacent Philippine scholarship likewise treats trust and empathy as context-dependent social signals whose interpretation is shaped by cultural and experiential conditions, reinforcing the need to situate social evaluation within the perceiver's broader interpretive environment (Atento et al., 2025).

For the present study, the significance of this literature lies in the possibility that an experimentally introduced odor can alter the affective or perceptual context of a social judgment. An odor need not provide valid information about a target person to influence evaluation; it may instead modify the perceiver's state or the context within which the target is processed. Among Filipino late adolescents, peer influence has also been associated with personal-social competencies such as empathy, emotional regulation, and social awareness, illustrating that interpersonal responses vary with surrounding social conditions (Balut et al., 2026).

2.2 Odor Valence and Face Perception

Research on crossmodal perception provides direct evidence that odors can alter evaluations of faces. Damon et al. (2021) reviewed studies showing that human body odors interact with facial processing across relatively stable judgments such as identity, attractiveness, trustworthiness, and dominance, as well as more transient judgments of emotion. Their review supports a multisensory account of person perception in which visual and olfactory information can be integrated during social evaluation.

Syrjänen et al. (2021) reviewed 25 studies published between 1989 and 2020 on the effects of valenced odors on face perception and evaluation. Across this literature, odors were capable of shifting rated facial valence and arousal and influencing aspects of facial classification, although effects were not uniformly consistent across tasks and studies. The review is particularly relevant because it cautions against assuming a universal or mechanically linear odor effect. Instead, the impact of olfactory valence appears to depend on task, stimulus characteristics, and experimental context.

Spence (2021b) reached a similar conclusion in a broader review of crossmodal influences on person perception. Fragrances, ambient malodors, and body odors have all been shown to influence judgments of qualities such as attractiveness, age, affect, health, and personality-related characteristics. This body of work supports the hypothesis that olfactory information can become part of the contextual frame through which a face is interpreted.

2.3 Scent Pleasantness and Interpersonal Trust

The relationship between scent and trust has been investigated with both ambient fragrances and socially derived odors. Sellaro et al. (2015) exposed participants to lavender, peppermint, or no aroma while they completed a Trust Game. Participants exposed to lavender displayed higher interpersonal trust than those in the comparison conditions. Importantly, the authors did not find evidence that conscious pleasure or arousal ratings directly explained the observed difference, indicating that the mechanism cannot simply be assumed to be self-reported mood.

Lobmaier et al. (2020) approached the question from body odor rather than ambient fragrance. In a modified trust game, participants transferred more money to trustees whose body odors were rated as more pleasant. The study did not establish that pleasant-smelling people are objectively more trustworthy; instead, it demonstrated that perceived odor pleasantness can bias social allocation decisions. This distinction is critical for interpreting scent-related trust findings as effects on judgment rather than proof of actual trustworthiness.

Van Nieuwenburg et al. (2019) provided another direct test of olfactory effects on trust. Their experiments examined hexanal, a compound occurring in both body odors and lavender, including a masked condition in which the relevant odorant was not consciously identifiable. The researchers observed enhanced interpersonal trust under masked hexanal exposure and, in a second study, examined trustworthiness judgments of faces during odor exposure. These findings are especially close to the present experimental logic because they connect olfactory stimulation with both trust behavior and face-based trustworthiness evaluation. Beyond olfactory settings, Philippine evidence also shows that trust-related evaluations can contribute to consequential behavioral intentions: brand trust was identified as an important predictor of enrollment intention among college-bound learners exposed to social-media marketing (Espelita et al., 2026). An extended Theory of Planned Behavior study in Laguna likewise modeled investment decisions using attitudes, financial knowledge, risk tolerance, and government trust as contextual components, illustrating the analytical value of treating judgments as embedded within broader decision systems (Lantin-Magana et al., 2026).

2.4 Ambient Scent and the Filipino Context

Ambient scent research extends beyond interpersonal chemistry to the design of environments. Spence (2021a) reviewed the use of ambient scent in passenger transport and described functional uses that include masking malodor, creating signature scents, and shaping perceived comfort or experience. Although transportation differs from a laboratory face-rating task, this literature demonstrates that ambient odor can influence perception, mood, and behavior even when it is not attached to a particular person.

Within the Philippine context, Cruz (2022) documented odor-related lexical patterns across 25 Philippine languages, illustrating the cultural embeddedness of olfactory concepts. Miranda et al. (2024), in a pilot study of Filipino designer and luxury perfume users, found that fragrance use was connected with pleasantness, mood, self-esteem, and personal presentation. These local sources do not establish a causal relationship between scent and trustworthiness, but they support the relevance of studying olfaction within Filipino social experience rather than assuming that scent effects observed elsewhere necessarily generalize unchanged. Philippine research in higher education marketing likewise indicates that trust and credibility are culturally embedded within community narratives and identity-relevant value systems, suggesting that evaluative judgments may depend partly on the social meanings surrounding a stimulus (Atento & Espelita, 2025). At the organizational level, the Mercury Drug case similarly identifies brand trust and regulatory credibility as enduring strategic assets in a Philippine consumer setting, providing an adjacent example of how trust can be shaped by accumulated contextual and reputational cues (Atento & Atento, 2025).

2.5 Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature collectively indicates that olfactory cues can affect social cognition and that odor valence can alter face perception under some conditions (Damon et al., 2021; Spence, 2021b; Syrjänen et al., 2021). Experimental studies also show that lavender, masked odorants, and pleasant body odors can influence trust-related judgments or behavior (Lobmaier et al., 2020; Sellaro et al., 2015; van Nieuwenburg et al., 2019). At the same time, these effects are context-sensitive, and existing evidence does not justify treating odor as a deterministic cause of social trust. More broadly, Philippine behavioral research shows that perceptions can relate to some forms of subsequent behavior without translating uniformly across all behavioral outcomes; monetary-policy awareness and perceptions, for example, predicted saving and investment but not spending (Espelita et al., 2025).

Two gaps motivate the present study. First, much interpersonal olfaction research concerns body odor or specific chemosensory compounds rather than simple environmental exposures to pleasant, neutral, and unpleasant scents. Second, the available Philippine literature is primarily cultural or consumer-oriented and does not directly examine facial trustworthiness under controlled olfactory conditions (Cruz, 2022; Miranda et al., 2024). The present study responds to these gaps by testing whether ambient scent condition is associated with differences in trustworthiness ratings of standardized unfamiliar faces among Filipino undergraduate participants.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study used a quantitative between-subjects experimental design to examine whether ambient olfactory condition influenced perceived trustworthiness of unfamiliar faces. The independent variable was scent condition with three levels: pleasant, neutral, and unpleasant. The dependent variable was each participant's overall trustworthiness score derived from ratings of standardized facial stimuli. Each participant was exposed to only one scent condition to avoid carryover and adaptation effects that could result from sequential exposure to multiple odors.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The participants were 30 undergraduate criminology students from First City Providential College, aged 18 to 25 years and representing mixed gender and different year levels. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling based on availability and willingness to participate. Inclusion criteria required normal self-reported olfactory function, no respiratory illness at the time of testing, and normal or corrected-to-normal vision. The participants were allocated equally across the three experimental conditions, with 10 participants in each condition.

3.3 Instruments and Experimental Stimuli

The visual component of the task consisted of 20 standardized neutral facial images obtained from the Chicago Face Database (Ma et al., 2015). Participants rated each face using a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all trustworthy) to 7 (very trustworthy). An overall trustworthiness score was computed at the participant level by averaging the ratings across the 20 faces.

The olfactory manipulation consisted of lavender for the pleasant condition, distilled water for the neutral condition, and vinegar for the unpleasant condition. The approved experimental protocol specified diffuser-based scent delivery under controlled room conditions. Participants also completed manipulation-check items concerning whether a smell was noticed, its perceived pleasantness or unpleasantness, and its perceived strength. The task and questionnaire underwent pilot testing for clarity and comprehensibility before the main data collection.

3.4 Procedure

Participants received information about the study and provided written informed consent before testing. Each participant was exposed to one assigned olfactory condition and then completed the face-rating task electronically through Google Forms. The same 20 facial stimuli, rating scale, and general procedure were used across conditions. Participants were not informed of the expected directional effect of the scent manipulation. Responses were recorded electronically and prepared for participant-level statistical analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize trustworthiness scores. A one-way independent-groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) tested whether mean trustworthiness ratings differed across the pleasant, neutral, and unpleasant scent conditions. Tukey post hoc comparisons were used to identify pairwise differences following the omnibus test. Partial eta squared was reported as an effect-size estimate. The consolidated article reports only the ANOVA statistics that were internally consistent across the formal analysis sections of the source manuscript; an unreconciled correlation result appearing elsewhere in the source paper was not retained as a formal finding.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and written informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participants were informed of their right to decline or discontinue participation without penalty. The experiment involved minimal foreseeable risk; the consent materials acknowledged possible mild discomfort associated with scent exposure, and participants could stop participation if discomfort occurred. Responses were de-identified for analysis and handled confidentially. The study protocol was reviewed and approved prior to implementation by the supervising Experimental Psychology instructor.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Effect of Ambient Scent Condition on Trustworthiness Ratings

A one-way ANOVA indicated a statistically significant difference in trustworthiness ratings across the three olfactory conditions, $F(2, 27) = 8.23$, $p = .002$, partial eta squared = .38. The source analysis reported that the pleasant lavender condition had the highest trustworthiness ratings, with $M = 4.92$ and $SD = 0.65$. Tukey post hoc comparisons indicated that the pleasant condition produced significantly higher ratings than both the neutral and unpleasant conditions, whereas the difference between the neutral and unpleasant conditions was not statistically significant.

Table 1. *Summary of the Effect of Ambient Scent Condition on Trustworthiness Ratings*

Analysis	Statistic	p	Effect size	Interpretation
Overall three-condition difference	$F(2, 27) = 8.23$	.002	partial $\eta^2 = .38$	Significant
Pleasant vs. neutral	Tukey post hoc	Significant	—	Pleasant higher
Pleasant vs. unpleasant	Tukey post hoc	Significant	—	Pleasant higher
Neutral vs. unpleasant	Tukey post hoc	Not significant	—	No reliable difference detected

Note. Exact Tukey-adjusted *p* values were not reported in the source statistical record.

The pattern indicates that olfactory context was associated with variation in social evaluation even though participants viewed the same type of standardized facial stimuli. The post hoc results are especially important because they do not support a simple descending sequence in which neutral scent produces intermediate trust and unpleasant scent produces the lowest trust. Instead, the clearest difference was the more favorable evaluation observed in the pleasant condition relative to both comparison conditions.

4.2 Discussion

The finding that the pleasant lavender condition produced higher trustworthiness ratings is consistent with prior evidence that scent can influence trust-related judgments. Sellaro et al. (2015) found greater interpersonal trust following lavender exposure in a Trust Game, while van Nieuwenburg et al. (2019) demonstrated that masked olfactory stimulation could enhance interpersonal trust and examined trustworthiness ratings of faces during odor exposure. Although the specific stimuli and tasks differ, these studies support the broader proposition that olfactory context can affect social evaluation.

The present findings are also compatible with multisensory accounts of face processing. Damon et al. (2021) described multiple ways in which body odors interact with facial perception, while Syrjänen et al. (2021) concluded from a review of 25 studies that valenced odors can influence facial evaluation and classification, although effects vary by experimental context. The current result therefore fits a literature in which faces are not evaluated in sensory isolation. Concurrent olfactory information can become part of the context within which visual social stimuli are processed.

One plausible interpretation is that a pleasant ambient scent creates a more favorable affective or perceptual context that carries over to otherwise neutral social stimuli. Spence (2021b) reviewed evidence that fragrances and malodors can influence person perception through crossmodal processes, while Spence (2021a) described broader effects of ambient scent on experience, mood, and behavior in designed environments. However, the present study did not directly measure mood, arousal, neural activity, or cognitive-control state. Consequently, affective priming, relaxation, and crossmodal integration remain plausible mechanisms rather than mechanisms demonstrated by the current data.

The absence of a significant difference between the neutral and unpleasant conditions narrows the interpretation. It would be inaccurate to conclude that unpleasant scent necessarily reduces perceived trustworthiness. The observed pattern is better characterized as a positive shift associated with the pleasant condition. This resembles Sellaro et al. (2015), who found higher trust under lavender but did not find that peppermint reduced trust relative to control. Thus, scent effects may be asymmetric rather than a simple pleasant-to-unpleasant continuum.

The results also converge with research showing that odor pleasantness can influence social allocation decisions. Lobmaier et al. (2020) found that participants transferred more resources to individuals whose body odors they considered more pleasant. Yet their study also emphasized that pleasant odor does not establish that a person is objectively more trustworthy. The same interpretive boundary applies here. The present experiment measured facial trustworthiness attribution, not actual honesty, reliability, cooperation, or reciprocal behavior.

The Filipino context adds exploratory value but requires restraint. Cruz (2022) and Miranda et al. (2024) show that odor concepts and fragrance practices have meaningful local cultural and behavioral dimensions. Nevertheless, the present sample consisted of only 30 criminology students from one institution. It therefore cannot establish a general Filipino effect or determine whether cultural familiarity with specific scents modifies the result. Replication across institutions, age groups, occupations, and culturally familiar fragrance categories is necessary.

Finally, the effect size reported in the source analysis is substantial, but the small sample means that its magnitude should not be treated as a stable population estimate. The contribution of the study is more appropriately framed as preliminary experimental evidence that ambient olfactory context can shift social-perceptual judgments under controlled conditions. This conclusion is meaningful without extending the findings to consequential settings such as policing, hiring, education, or service encounters, none of which were directly measured.

5. Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

5.1 Conclusions

The study found a statistically significant difference in perceived trustworthiness ratings across pleasant, neutral, and unpleasant ambient scent conditions. Participants exposed to lavender provided higher trustworthiness ratings than participants in the neutral and unpleasant conditions, while the neutral and unpleasant conditions did not differ significantly. These findings indicate that ambient olfactory context can contribute to social perception even when the odor is unrelated to the person being evaluated.

The results should be interpreted as an effect on perceptual judgment rather than evidence that scent determines actual trustworthiness. The experiment assessed evaluations of standardized faces and did not measure honesty, cooperation, reliability, or other behavioral manifestations of trust. Within these boundaries, the study supports the view that first impressions are multisensory and can be shaped by environmental cues beyond facial appearance alone.

5.2 Recommendations

Future research should replicate the experiment with substantially larger and more heterogeneous samples so that the stability of the effect and its generalizability can be assessed. Multi-institution samples would be particularly useful for determining whether the result extends beyond one undergraduate program.

Subsequent studies should record and report manipulation checks systematically, including scent detectability, perceived intensity, pleasantness, familiarity, and possible irritation. These measures would help distinguish experimentally assigned odor category from the participant's subjective experience of the stimulus.

Researchers should compare more than one pleasant and unpleasant scent. Using several exemplars would help determine whether the observed pattern reflects general odor valence or characteristics specific to lavender and vinegar.

Future experiments should directly measure proposed mechanisms such as mood, affective valence, arousal, relaxation, and cognitive-control state. Mediation designs could then test whether these variables explain changes in facial trustworthiness judgment.

Behavioral measures of trust, such as validated trust-game paradigms, may be combined with facial ratings to determine whether perceptual shifts correspond to actual social decisions. Philippine replications may also examine culturally familiar fragrances while maintaining rigorous controls for intensity and familiarity.

5.3 Implications of the Study

Theoretically, the study contributes to multisensory accounts of social perception by demonstrating that visual judgments of unfamiliar faces can vary according to concurrent olfactory context. It also extends the distinction between person-derived odors and ambient environmental scents: social evaluation may be influenced not only by chemical information originating from a target person but also by unrelated sensory characteristics of the surrounding environment.

Methodologically, the study illustrates the value of standardized face databases for holding visual stimuli constant while manipulating a second sensory modality. It also underscores the importance of analyzing data at the appropriate experimental unit and of reporting manipulation checks, post hoc tests, and effect sizes consistently.

Practically, the findings suggest that environmental sensory cues may form part of the context in which first impressions are constructed. The evidence is not sufficient to recommend deliberate scent-based manipulation in consequential real-world settings. Its most defensible practical implication is awareness that apparently straightforward social judgments may be partly context-dependent and therefore should not be treated as direct measures of another person's actual trustworthiness.

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