

There's a turn of phrase most of us have used at some point in time - *I hate to burst your bubble*- but in the case of gum, that's exactly what's happened. For decades, chewing gum was a symbol of rebellion, synonymous with youthful angst, bestowing the chewer with an aura of boldness, bravado and sex appeal. Rockstars masticated on stage and high-schoolers in teen movies chewed with an attitude. My generation can recall eidetically the scene from *Breakfast Club* (1985) where Molly Ringwald snaps her gum in defiance, or in *Grease* (1978) when Frenchy blows big pink balloons to aphrodisiac effect (the cast reportedly got through 10,000 pieces of gum on set!)



Chewing for chewing's sake has a long history. Ancient Greeks munched bark, while the Mayans and Aztecs chewed chicle, a resin from the Mexican sapodilla tree that arrived in New York in the 19th century. It was the Americans who found a way to sell the sticky stuff, and in 1950 manufacturers swapped chicle for synthetic rubber and plastic which were cheaper. They also introduced sugar-free gum.

Few products are as pointless as chewing gum, so marketers had to get creative. The success of the product was by tying to a challenge to authority. Stigma was part of the appeal, and chewing gum was a subtle way to undermine your elders. Young women were told that gum was unladylike and chewing in school became a symbol of rebelliousness. By the 1940s, Hollywood stars were making gum hip the world over and the pop culture boom of the 1970s consolidated that image. In 2004 a piece of gum spat out by Britney Spears was auctioned on eBay for \$14k. Today however, Gen Z just doesn't see the appeal of chewing plastic and gum has had a bad pandemic. With mouths covered by masks, dates delayed and clubbing cancelled, sales of gum fell by 14% in 2020 over the previous year. This trend is a continuation of a terminal decline in gum sales that began over a decade ago. The question then is why has gum come unstuck?

Some reckon smartphones are responsible -people have something else to distract them at the supermarket checkout instead of buying gum on impulse. Others blame the rise of alternative breath fresheners (I'm a fan of Listerine Mint Strips), or the trend to healthier eating and organic foods. In an age when veganism is on the rise and sustainability became a selling point, gum seems anachronistic and retro. Chewing on plastic simply doesn't appeal to youngsters who scrutinize product labels for artificial ingredients. It used to be cool not to care, but now the opposite is true.

"Big Gum" -Wrigley's and Cadbury- now face competition from eco-friendly, plastic-free alternatives pitched at disillusioned chewers. A number of new brands including [Simply Gum](#) and [True Gum](#) (started by Millennials) go back to the roots of chewing: the core ingredient in these new products is chicle and so far the bio-degradable brands are selling well. Back in 2008 Warren Buffet's company Berkshire Hathaway paid USD \$23 Billion to acquire Wrigley's, which still accounts for one in three sticks of gum American's pop into their mouths, but with sales in steady decline and competition from upstarts, the news is definitely something for him to chew over.

Be safe, be well!

Martin  
1-519-546-5088

