

# Are American Gen Zers still chewing gum?

REPORT | Jun 20, 2022

Once known as a symbol of rebellion and bravado, conventional chewing gum may be losing its cool as Gen Zers have other things to worry about – climate change, their mental health, and returning to IRL socializing. How can brands who sell gum make themselves relevant to these modern-day needs?

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**LOCATIONS:**  
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## EXPERTS

Caron Proschan

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- 01** Gum is no longer the cultural symbol that it used to be, but gum brands still have an opportunity to stay relevant by catering to Gen Zers' needs
- 02** Gen Z consumer behavior is shaped by pressing climate concerns and their interest in holistic wellbeing amid a youth mental health crisis
- 03** Post-pandemic, youth want to ease their social anxiety with fresh breath as they get ready to mix and mingle in-person

## DATA

- 42% of gum consumers say they chew it to feel relaxed
- 76% of Gen Zers say climate change is one of their biggest societal concerns, with 37% saying it's their top concern
- 57% of Americans have also become much more aware of their own bad breath thanks to face masking during the pandemic

## SCOPE

For decades, gum has been a symbol of youth rebellion and swagger, popularized in cult classic films like *The Breakfast Club* and *Grease*, where over 100,000 pieces of gum were reportedly chewed on set. [1] For young women, gum was a feminist stand against the idea that chewing gum was unladylike. But in the words of the iconic Bob Dylan – who even referenced chewing gum in his 1965 track 'Subterranean Homesick Blues' – the times, they are a-changin'. No longer a sign of young bravado, it seems as though gum could be losing its cultural appeal among Gen Zers – a decline that was only made worse by the pandemic, which threatened to officially pop chewing gum's precarious popularity bubble.

In 2020, gum sales decreased by 14% worldwide over the previous year. [1] As people stayed at home, masked and socially distanced, bad breath just wasn't much of a concern. With 79% of Americans increasing their online shopping during COVID-19, fewer people were impulsively buying a pack of gum in the grocery store check-out line. At the same time, hardly anyone was traveling – problematic for gum sales as 75% of gum consumption happens on the road. [2][3] However, as the world now un.masks and reopens to social interaction, there has been some indication that gum sales are picking up again – Americans purchased nearly 15 million more packs of gum in May compared to January 2021. [4][3] According to gum giants Hershey, Mars Wrigley, as well as Trident and Dentyne producer, Mondelez International, maintaining consumer interest is key to continuing the upward trend – and as Gen Zers account for nearly 50% of all chewing gum consumption, youth interests remain central to chewing gum's success. [5][4]

“How can gum lose its cool so badly when you’ve got oat, pea, and potato milk that are much more fun? Let’s give gum a makeover,” says Malak Ben Hmeda, founder of the trendy natural and plastic-free gum brand [OH MY GUM!](#) [6] Naturally healthy, stress-relieving, and sustainable ingredients are important for an eco-conscious generation who cares about their mental and physical health, and therefore key to gum’s makeover – 76% of Gen Zers say climate change is one of their biggest societal concerns, with 37% saying it’s their top concern. [7] At the same time, the pandemic drove rates of anxiety up by 25% worldwide, with youth disproportionately impacted over older groups. [8] “We are continuously working on new innovations, ranging from taste to new flavors to more sustainable packaging, which is what will keep us top of mind for Gen Zers,” says Caron Proschan, founder and CEO of popular natural and sustainable gum company, [Simply](#). [9] Beyond health and climate-forward product innovations, gum brands like Extra are [targeting Gen Zers](#) through social media and influencer partnerships with Love Island’s Shaughna Phillips and Olivia Attwood in an attempt to make gum hip again. But will these efforts to court young consumers pay off? How can brands make themselves relevant to the needs of Gen Zers and propel the ultimate chewing gum comeback?

## ‘GENERATION GRETA’ GOES GREEN

Dubbed ‘[generation Greta](#)’, environmental and social values matter a lot to Gen Zers. It’s not just lip service – they’re willing to act on it, with nearly a third saying they’ve done something in the past year to address climate change and some taking up [climate-related careers](#). [7] It’s no surprise that this generation’s eco values shape their consumer behavior, with over a third saying they’ve changed the products they buy and the way they shop because of climate change, and 64% willing to pay more for an environmentally sustainable product. [10][11] In fact, three-quarters of Gen Zers say that sustainability is more important to them than a brand name when making purchasing decisions. [12]

“Consumers are increasingly moving toward products that are healthier and more sustainable for the environment. Conventional gum companies have not kept up with changing consumer preferences,” says Proschan – something that may account for the simultaneous slump in gum sales and rise in smaller, alternative gum companies built around environmentalism and natural ingredients. [9] Alongside Simply, [True Gum](#) and [Nuud](#) are offering plant-based, sugar-free, and plastic-free gum – yes you heard that right, most conventional gum contains plastic – and [CHEWSY](#) has gone both biodegradable and vegan. These brands are appealing to the 65% of American Gen Zers who want a plant-forward diet and, as a cultural mark of the times, the 44% who say that being vegan is cooler than smoking. [13]

Gen Zers are also the generation most likely to take their eco concerns online, with 45% saying they’ve engaged in climate content through social media. Although 67% of them feel anger that not enough is being done to address the issue, 60% say that climate content on social media leaves them feeling confident about the ability to address climate change. [7] Natural gum brands like OH MY GUM! are appealing to Gen Zers by staving off eco-anxiety and positioning themselves as part of the climate solution. “I want it to be fun and lighthearted like, ‘look at this fun, sustainable option that happens to be vegan, sugar-free’, all of that,” says Ben Hmeda. “It’s cool to be green.” [6]



Natural gum brands like OH MY GUM! appeal to eco-conscious Gen Zers

Oh My Gum (2022)

## GUM FOR STRESS AND ANXIETY RELIEF

Young Americans are living through a mental health crisis. During COVID-19, Gen Zers reported the least positive life outlook, with 46% saying that their mental health worsened. [14][15] One in four said the pandemic made them feel more emotionally distressed, and they were four times more likely to report that they could have used more emotional support. [14]

Gen Zers also take a holistic approach to their wellbeing, with many seeking to improve their emotional and mental health through nutritious foods and beverages. [16] That's where gum comes in. Even before lockdown, 42% of gum consumers said their top reason for chewing gum was to feel relaxed. [17] As well as reducing the risk of periodontal diseases – as explained by the [@TheLondonDentist](#), who went viral on TikTok for sharing health benefits of gum – several [studies](#) show that gum is an effective and low-cost way to [lower stress and reduce anxiety](#), which is something functional chewing gum brands are tapping into.

[Run Gum's Calm](#) is infused with relaxing and anxiety-reducing ingredients like [Ashwagandha, GABA, and L-Theanine](#), while [Bach Rescue Plus Gum](#) offers stress-relief on the go. College students have long recognized that chewing gum improves memory and concentration during important exams – something that brain-boosting [Think Gum](#) has picked up on with its naturally caffeinated herbal ingredients. With nearly half of Americans having smoked marijuana and becoming more open-minded about [using it for relaxation](#), brands like [Kaya](#) are also seeing success in incorporating stress-relieving CBD in their gum. [18]



Run Gum's Calm is infused with relaxing and anxiety-reducing ingredients

Run Gum | Facebook (2020)

## SMELLING FRESH TO SOCIALIZE IRL

The pandemic made people much more aware of scent, after around 47% of people temporarily lost their sense of taste and smell while ill with COVID-19, and many others experienced [parosmia](#) – a scent distortion that makes previously pleasurable smells, like flowers or a romantic partner, seem terrible. [19] While it's unclear how many people experienced parosmia, the [COVID Parosmia Support Group](#) on Facebook has over 49,000 members. Thanks to mask-wearing, 57% of Americans have become attuned to their own bad breath. With people socializing again and social distancing rules a thing of the past, smelling fresh is becoming more of a major concern – 41% are worried that their bad breath will make them unattractive, and 36% are concerned that they won't be taken seriously because of it. These concerns are valid, as there's an actual bad breath problem in the US, with 35% of Americans saying they don't brush their teeth twice a day, and close to 10% don't even brush once daily. [20]

The smell obsession comes at a time when young people are eager, yet anxious, to meet in real life again. Just over half of Gen Zers reported regularly feeling lonely during the pandemic – much higher than other generations – which is known to contribute to feelings of anxiety, depression, and indicators of poor health. [21] Young people were also two times more anxious about the status of their relationships during COVID-19, rising to 2.4 times for Gen Zers, and around half said the pandemic made having fun, being happy, and having good romantic and platonic relationships harder. [22][23]

Now that the world is opening up, 60% of young people say they expect to feel social anxiety, yet at the same time, 49% say that they're excited and 45% say they're more open to creative ways of dating post-pandemic. [22] Brands like [EXTRA](#) are tapping into youth desires to smell fresh and socialize IRL through a video game to help youth re-enter society, simulating scenarios they are likely to encounter post lockdown, like kissing and shaking someone's hand. Playing on the long-standing connection between fresh breath and romantic connections, the brand also launched a social dating show called [The Extra Fit](#) on YouTube. "Gen Zers will use gum just by virtue of being out and about. Who doesn't want to stay fresh?" says Ben Hmeda. [6]



Nuud is offering plant-based, sugar-free, and plastic-free gum

Nuud Gum | Facebook (2021)

## INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

### CHEWS SUSTAINABILITY

Young people are concerned about the environment and they don't want to chew plastic anymore. "You can't tell people we're going to ban plastic straws, but then have people pay to chew on plastic," says Ben Hmeda. [6] What exactly are environmentally-minded youth looking for from brands? Over half (58%) of Gen Zers want brands to create more eco-friendly products, 57% want better packaging, and 51% expect sustainable business practices. [10] With that in mind, brands have an opportunity to ditch non-natural forms of gum and opt for plant-based alternatives, while also infusing their entire business practice with environmentalist values, akin to [The Humble Co.](#), [Glee Gum](#), and [Chicza](#). As 41% of Gen Zers and Yers think brands should educate consumers on how to be environmentally friendly, brands across sectors should be [creating digital content around sustainability](#) – like plant-based milk brand Silk, that launched an Earth Day campaign last year hosting eco-counselling sessions to turn young peoples' [anxiety into action](#). [10] Social media is an important space for these campaigns, as 61% of Gen Zers in the US use social media as their daily news source and tags like [#ForClimate](#) have over 533 million views. [24]

### ENHANCE GUM'S SOOTHING INGREDIENTS

"Gen Zers are interested in chewing gum that's high quality, natural, and made with better ingredients," says Proschan. [9] Studies show that the single act of chewing gum can relieve stress and anxiety, but brands also have an opportunity to enhance the make-up of gum by creating versions that are infused with calming and healthy ingredients – especially as 63% of consumers say they're paying more attention to ingredient lists, while 21% of shoppers avoid what they view as potentially harmful side effects of chemical-sounding ingredients. The majority of Gen Yers and Zers have expressed that their mental, medical, and physical wellbeing has grown in importance since the pandemic, and to manage their stress and anxiety, 30% of Americans are turning to dietary and nutritional changes. [25][26] That's why brands like [Neuro Gum](#) and CBD-infused [Endoca](#) are positioning themselves as a snack choice that boosts mental wellbeing, appealing to those

interested in taking a healthier approach to what they consume. “I hope we’re at the stage where sugar-free is not the best thing that people look for,” says Ben Hmeda. [6]

## COMMUNICATE SELF-CARE

Health-conscious Gen Zers are telling brands that it's no longer cool not to care. With 33% of Gen Zers saying they're very stressed compared to only 10% of Boomers, the opportunity for brands is to offer a self-care approach to gum, using communications and messaging to position it as a healthy snack choice relevant to the needs of today's youth. [16] As Gen Zers are least likely to seek traditional mental health treatment, many turn to TikTok or Reddit as their first step toward managing stress and anxiety instead, following therapists on Instagram like [@The.Holistic.Psychologist](#) or using health-related apps like [Calm](#). [15] Gum brands can situate themselves in this online mental wellness space by sharing their product's stress-relieving benefits – though ensuring the efficacy of scientifically-proven information is key to building consumer trust and avoiding wellness-washing. [27] Even without specific anti-anxiety ingredients, brands can still link their products with stress reduction through actions like adding mindfulness and relaxation tips on packaging and social platforms.





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