

Sticky Icky CHAT

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In this article, Smith uses CHAT to analyze The Gum Wall from her hometown. She demonstrates how the wall actually acts like a text in the ways that it uses gum to communicate different messages to different people.

“The world is but a canvas to our imagination”
Henry David Thoreau

Ever since I was little, the White Hen (now known as 7-Eleven) around the corner from my house was my second home. All of the workers knew my mom and I and basically watched me grow up. They even slipped us a free donut or Slurpee every now and then . . . but that’s not the point of this. I just wanted to show you how much this store meant to me and maybe brag about the free stuff part. The point of this 7-Eleven is its outside wall. This wall was not just a wall; it was known as *dun dun dun* . . . The Gum Wall. The Gum Wall, as you may have guessed, is covered in gum. Kids would pay a visit to the wall daily making sure to mark their territory, and eventually it became a sticky, colorful work of art. The wall was the number one whacky thing us neighborhood kids liked to keep up on. It has been there for as long as I can remember, probably since I was five years old. Unfortunately, today I cannot say the same. No one has kept up on the tradition over the years; now all that’s left is a line of black little bumps in the middle. There might be a clear reason as to why this is. The wall was at its finest in around 2004. During that time, there weren’t as many electronics to distract kids

from playing outside. Kids today don't appreciate these small imaginative ideas, like creating a gum wall, as much as we used to. It's pretty sad to think about, but there is definitely some truth to that. One way I can attempt to bring this wall of gum back to life is to write about it and analyze if there is more meaning to it than just a wall of kids' spit. I can now also apply all the wonderful CHAT terms I have learned over the semester. After reading this article I hope you come to realize that a text can be much more than just words on a paper.

How Is the Gum Wall Related to CHAT?

I know what you're thinking, "CHAT is all about analyzing texts. What does a wall full of gum have to do with that? There's no text involved." At first, I thought the same thing. **CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory)**, as the ISU writing program uses it, is a set of terms used to study literate activity, which, to most of us, means texts. However, with a little inspiration from my teacher, I concluded that a text does not have to include words. All it has to do is communicate a point. Through my CHAT analysis, I will hopefully show you that there is more to this wall than just a sticky, gross mess.

To dive into my CHAT rant, I will begin with the term representation. Imagine you were a kid, around 2004, standing in front of the gum wall. What would make you want to add something to the wall? Would you feel like you were part of something? Making something? Or would you just think, "Someone should really clean that." **Representation** deals with how writers (in this case, people using gum as a communication tool) understand and think about what they are producing.



Figure 1: Side view of the wall before it was cleaned.

Connecting to representation is the idea of reception. **Reception** is how the audience uses the text. In another words, what action did the audience perform as a result of inspiration from the text? For example, if they like the text, they will respond to it in a positive way, or vice versa. In my example of the gum wall, viewers could have many different types of reception. For one, they can choose to participate in it themselves. If the audience thinks the wall looks cool enough, they might want to be a part of it and stick their own gum to it. Some people may even want to take a picture of it. On the other hand, they might despise it so much that it influences them to clean it up or order someone to do it for them (if they have that authority). This whole article is a huge example of reception; I saw something that interested me, so I chose to write about it. Reception is all about what the audience does in response to the text. Some may get confused about the difference between reception and representation. Again, reception is the action the audience takes due to their curiosity of the text. Representation usually refers to the way people involved in composing a text understand, think about, and maybe plan their writing. A great example of representation and reception working hand-in-hand can be seen in Figure 1. The creator of this work of art had to first think about how he wanted to propose to his girlfriend and what he wanted it to look like; this is an example of representation. After visualizing his plan, he strategically placed each piece of gum to make a sign that would read, “WILL YOU MARRY ME NIKKI J.” His planning and composing are all part of representation. The girlfriend’s response of the message can also be seen as reception. After she reads it, she’ll either react negatively and say no, or say yes with a big smile and a happy dance. I mean you’d have to be heartless to say no to that masterpiece, but that’s just me.



Figure 2: A marriage proposal.

Representation and reception are both connected to socialization. **Socialization** is a term that focuses on the ways that humans, and ideas, and traditions and texts all interact. Some of you may only see this gum wall as an ugly mess, but I see it as a form of communication. The wall is a form of graffiti. I think of it as a way for people to tag themselves. In other words, it's another way to write "I was here." Think about when the second piece of gum went up; it's like saying, "Hey, I saw your piece, so I put mine up too." This reminds me of middle school when writing messages to people on desks was the big thing, at least where I live. At the beginning of the week I'd write "hi" on my desk and by the end there would be a whole conversation between me and the anonymous person that sits in the same spot during other class periods. I think people did it because they liked the anonymity of it. It's just like the gum wall. This anonymity influences people's participation; there can't be any consequences if you can't identify who did it.

Let's See What Happens When I Google "gum wall"

Here comes the research part. I searched up "gum wall" and got some pretty amazing results. It turns out there's a real famous one in an alleyway in Seattle. It's called the Market Theater Gum Wall. As you can see in the photos below, it's extremely huge and colorful. People went as far as shaping the gum into pictures and words. I love how people took this wall and made it their own. Apparently, the theater workers tried scraping off the gum after TWENTY YEARS due to an infestation of rats. "I just hope that the citizens of Seattle don't hate me for removing the gum wall," said Kelly Foster, general manager of Cascadian Building Maintenance, the contractor hired by Pike Place Market to take on the cleaning" (nypost). Even the people cleaning up the wall were sympathetic about the whole thing. However, after a whole three days of trying to end the wall of gum for good, they ended up receiving an even bigger response from the gum stickers in the first place. *Time Magazine* says, "On Saturday, a flash mob met to begin re-gumming the wall. The event turned into a show of support for Paris in the wake of Friday's attacks . . . the group used gum to create a peace sign with the Eiffel tower in the middle, replicating the image that went viral over the weekend" (Grossman). And the *New York Post* wrote, "Since then, the 'gum wall' has expanded beyond one wall and onto other walls of an alley, pipes and even the theater's box office window" (nypost). It's so cool how something so simple can turn into something so huge. Reception is evident here due to the huge response of people sticking their gum back on the wall. This wall started to mean something to people. It's interesting how they thought of shaping the gum to represent things. Looking at Figures 3 and 4, I can



Figure 3: Peace sign in the upper right-hand corner.

see the peace sign mentioned, some flowers, hearts, and smiley faces. This is a great example of how the gum wall is being “socialized.” The “text” of the gum wall is impacted by the actions the flash mob, but also by the group connecting in to the Paris shootings. People are not only sticking their gum to it out of boredom, but also communicating to others with it as well. As the article mentioned, they were responding to the attacks in Paris by making peace signs. This symbolized that no one was alone during this hard time. The gum wall has a sense of community.



Figure 4: A woman adds her piece to the collectio

The Public Responds

I found a bunch of interesting reviews on this magnificent wall from *Tripadvisor.com*. These reviews remind me of the term I introduced earlier, representation, because of the many different views and opinions of the sight. Once again representation is all about what the audience thinks about and how they might use a text. One unimpressed visitor stated, “Wow, I got to see gum on a wall. Stupid, disgusting, and honestly should be cleaned up. Once again I just don’t get Seattle anymore . . .” (TripAdvisor). This



Figure 5: A newly married couple poses in front of the colorful wall

man obviously thought the visit was a waste of time. Another visitor had a different perspective. She said, “To us it looked pretty cool! It’s amazing how anything can get turned into art or an attraction. If you can look beyond the yucky angle, you will be able to appreciate the art side to it. We liked the colors and the designs and people actually wrote stuff with gum! That’s fun!” (TripAdvisor). I love how she brought up the point about how anything can be turned into art. That is what I hope is going through your mind while reading this.

Feedback from My Interviews

After reading these reviews from online, I went ahead and started interviewing people around me. I showed them pictures of the wall, such as the ones above, and asked questions like, “What do you think when you see this? What would you do if you saw something like this or visited this exact wall?” Some of the people I interviewed were my English 101 classmates, random students around campus, high school students, visitors of the gum wall, teachers, and other adults. I added in gender and the students’ majors to see if there was any link between them, hoping to see some different answers between all the categories of people.

Eng 101 Classmates

1. “I would a take picture of it and put it on my Instagram. I’d definitely chew some gum and put it on the wall. I would also tell other people

about it. I wonder how it started in the first place and why people put it there” (female, Early Childhood Education).

2. “If I were chewing gum I would put some on there. The gum wall is pretty interesting” (male, Music Education).
3. “The bland brown brick background really brings out the colors of the chewed and spit out gum. Also, who’s gonna clean that?” (female, Arts Tech).
4. “It’s pretty creative. I would stick some on there too. It’s interactive, engaging, uniting, and artistic. It also incorporates abstract expressionism” (male, Photography).
5. “I would think it’s disgusting and push someone into it” (female, Political Science).

Among these students there were some similar answers. Most of the comments were positive. Looking at the comments from the Arts Tech and Photography majors, I saw more artistic point of views. This makes sense because having an artistic outlook is a big part of these majors. Focusing back on CHAT, I saw a lot of representation when each student stated what they thought of the wall. Some even wanted to join in. Turning thoughts into actions results in reception. I was disappointed no one from class used any of these CHAT terms.

Other Students

1. “I hope they had permission to do that” (female, English).
2. “I would take hella pics but I wouldn’t touch it. It looks cold though” (male, undeclared major).

People That Have Experienced the Gum Wall

1. “It was cool but nothing special, great photo ops” (female, Physical Therapy).
2. “It’s really nothing special in my opinion. It’s just a wall where people put their gum. It’s really pretty, though, and there’s gum friggin everywhere. I went to the theater there and watched the worst improv show ever” (female, Actuarial Science/Economics).

High School Students

1. “It’s so weird, you’re kind of drawn to it. I would probably buy some gum and add to it” (female, senior).
2. “Well it’s a little gross, but it’s pretty cool, like every couple leaves their mark on the wall, and it’s, like, oddly satisfying” (female, junior).
3. “I’d be confused, then look at it for a little, but then walk away” (male, sophomore).

Adults

1. “Ew, I wouldn’t want to touch that or participate in it. Why did people start doing that? How did the cascading participation start? How did it develop into this phenomenon?” (English 101 teacher).
2. “I would think of all of the people who have been in the very same spot as me. I would actually touch it, because it would be hardened and have a lot of interesting textures. I am not put-off by the fact that it is gum; it seems to transform into something completely new and different than chewed gum. It makes me think of childhood and the goofy, loopy drawings that kids make. These shapes and colors are similar to the shapes and colors I see in the gum wall” (Art 176 teacher).
3. “If I saw that in person, I would say that’s disgusting and leave. That’s a wall of disease” (friend’s mom).
4. “It’s a very creative idea. There’s lots of chewing involved. Will they clean it up? I’m glad that’s not my house. They could’ve made the whole wall into a design or picture like graffiti” (Grandma).

Discussion

I found the opinions were not very different between age groups. Also, gender did not play a role in the difference in answers. No one in my English class used specific CHAT terms like I initially predicted. Even though they didn’t mention any terms, little did they know, they used many of them. For example, when one girl said, “I would a take picture of it and put it on my Instagram” she exemplified the term socialization. By sharing it on social media she is creating an opportunity for conversation. Even the people that didn’t put much thought into their response demonstrated

CHAT concepts. For example, one student said, “I’d be confused, then look at for a little, but then walk away.” Even though there’s not much to take away from this person’s statement, they’re still using representation. A lot of people interviewed had mixed feelings about it, but almost all found interest in it in the end. I like how my art teacher mentioned that it reminds her of childhood. I think that’s why people are so into it; the bright colors and act of playing with gum brings them back to a much simpler, innocent time. These opinions show how the gum wall can be connected to a text. Readers can interpret a text in many different ways just like the people in my interviews had many different interpretations of the gum wall. The gum wall created feelings of confusion, disgust, and curiosity. A text can create all these same feelings.

Why Have You Been Reading About Gum for the Past Ten Minutes?

I chose to write about a gum wall because I wanted to take a different approach to CHAT than the rest of my classmates and people in the *GWRJ*. I wanted to find something that didn’t include any sort of writing to prove that a text could be something other than what people would assume. I wrote it to open people’s minds. This is a big concept I’ve learned from taking my English 101 class. Everything, including song lyrics, graffiti, bumper stickers . . . and even gum, has a deeper meaning and can be used as communication. Also, since no one ever thinks twice about a shriveled-up piece of gum, I thought it was kind of fun to take it so seriously. Lastly, I wanted a way to grab students’ attention while they’re aimlessly flipping through the journal during class. I want them to be intrigued about why the heck this is even in their English book.

So, let me remind you again why the heck this article fits in. Even though the people I interviewed didn’t always realize it, they were responding to and evaluating the gum wall as they would any other text. For example, they demonstrated the same emotions as they would when the plot changes in a book. They had many different opinions, analyses, and connections. The gum wall caused people to communicate just as they would about a text. Because this gum wall spurs communication and gets people thinking, it can be considered a text. Not only is this wall a text, it also gets people to use CHAT without even knowing it. For example, that girl that wanted to post a picture of the gum wall to Instagram was demonstrating socialization. What this shows is CHAT is just a way to give us terms to describe what we’re already doing when examining texts. You’re using CHAT right now as you read this. You have your own thoughts about the article (representation). If

you liked it, you might want to tell a friend to read it, or if you thought this whole thing was a dumb waste of time, you might want to rip up this page and throw it away. Whatever you decide to do with this text is an example of reception. Therefore, no matter how hard you try, you can never escape using the concepts of CHAT.

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