

2023

#PumpkinSpice Report

On the 20th Anniversary of its Pumpkin Spice Latte, Starbucks Still Dominates the Social Media Conversation Around the Polarizing Fall Cultural Phenomenon



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Researchers



Dr. Jin-A Choi

Assistant Professor, School of Communication and Media

Dr. Choi received her PhD from the Stan Richards School of Advertising and Public Relations at the University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Choi's scholarship focuses on target advertising celebrity/social media influencer endorsements, digital advertising, text mining, and data analytics. Her research has been published in journals such as Journal of Global Marketing, Communication Studies, and others. Dr. Choi teaches a variety of undergraduate and graduate courses such as Social Media Analytics, Influencers and Opinion Leaders and Integrated Communications.



Dr. Yi Luo

Associate Professor, School of Communication and Media

Dr. Luo has conducted research in the areas of organizational change, sensemaking, leadership, social media and communication management, activism, organizational justice, and global public relations. Dr. Luo received her Ph.D in Communication from the University of Maryland, College Park. Dr. Luo's research has been published or accepted to be published in Public Relations Review, Journal of Public Relations Research, among many more. Dr. Luo teaches a variety of courses in organizational communication and public relations such as Cases and Campaigns, Communication Theories, Communication Research, Global Public Relations, Public Relations Ethics, New Media Applications in Organizations, and Digital Production.



Dr. Bond Benton

Associate Professor, School of Communication and Media

Dr. Benton's doctorate is from the University of Vienna with his dissertation focusing on the influence of culture on meaning. A particular focus of Dr. Benton's research is the interaction of media, branding, and cross-cultural communication as it relates to the values and decisions of constituencies. Dr. Benton's essays and research articles have appeared in journals and anthologies including The Journal of E-Learning and Digital Media, Public Relations Tactics, and many more. His first book, The Challenge of Working for Americans: Perspectives of an International Workforce, was released in 2014.



Keith Green

Coordinator of Strategic Communications, School of Communication and Media

Green is a two-time graduate of Temple University, where he earned a B.A. in Journalism and M.Ed. in Sports Administration. Over more than three decades, his career includes executive positions at the Philadelphia 76ers, NASCAR, and Guinness World Records, where he was a creative driving force around promotional, public relations and community outreach efforts for those companies and their clients and corporate partners. In his current role at Montclair State, he also leads Hawk Communications, a student-run firm that allows its practitioners to gain hands-on experience in PR, promotional and social media tactics. He also oversees the operations for the Joetta DiBella and Fred C. Sautter III Center for Strategic Communication.

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Overview and Study Focus

The mix of cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, allspice, and cloves has produced a magical combination that changed the world. Like Einstein or Col. Sanders, a powerful formula was found in the right combination of elements- in this case pumpkin spice. It might be assumed that pumpkin spice has a history and tradition dating back well into previous centuries, but pumpkin spice is a relatively new construct. Nosowitz (2022) contends the pumpkin spice trend was largely created by Starbucks' introduction of the famous pumpkin spice latte in 2003. Company lore from Starbucks suggests a similar "EUREKA!" moment to that experienced by great inventors and thinkers throughout history.

On an early spring day in 2003, the team gathered in the "Liquid Lab," a secure research and development space on the 7th floor of Starbucks headquarters in Seattle. Members of the team brought in kitschy fall decorations and pumpkin pies and began to explore ideas. They would sample a forkful of pumpkin pie followed by a sip of hot espresso – teasing out which flavors from the pie best complemented the coffee. For the next three months, the team refined the recipe, handcrafted with espresso, pumpkin spice sauce, and steamed milk – topped off with whipped cream and a dash of pumpkin pie topping. In a taste test alongside the chocolate and caramel beverages, pumpkin was the clear winner (Starbucks Stories, 2023).

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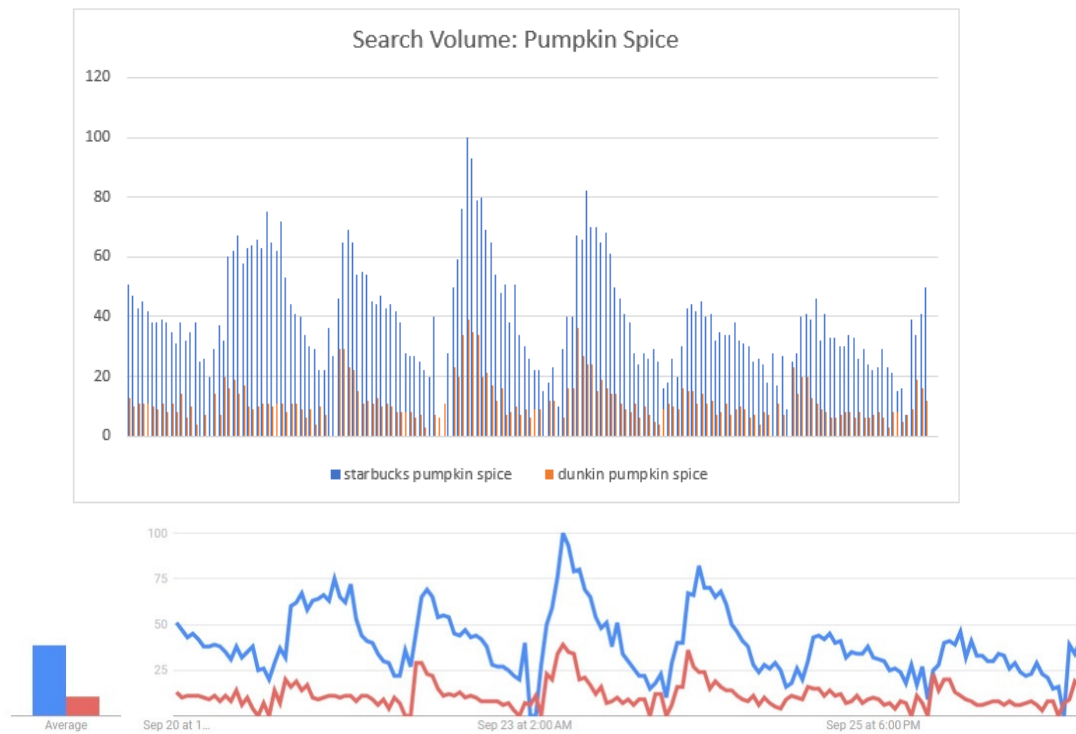
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That moment of genesis has had enormous implications not only for Starbucks, but to the fabric of popular culture. Research suggests that “the business of the ‘pumpkin flavor’ itself is worth over \$802 million, per data from NielsenIQ” (DiPalma, 2023). Like many cultural phenomena, pumpkin spice has spawned communities of fierce supporters and ardent detractors. It is that evolving and contested social space of pumpkin spice that makes it particularly relevant to evaluate in terms of its presentation and reaction in social media (Choi, Benton, and Luo, 2022; Hagy, 2023).

With the twentieth anniversary of the pumpkin spice latte, an assessment of current online reaction to the theme is particularly appropriate. General findings suggest that, as a brand, Starbucks remains as the unchallenged king of social media discussion of pumpkin spice. Analysis of search data on Google Trends, for example, indicates that Starbucks remains comfortable ahead of pumpkin spice competitor Dunkin’.

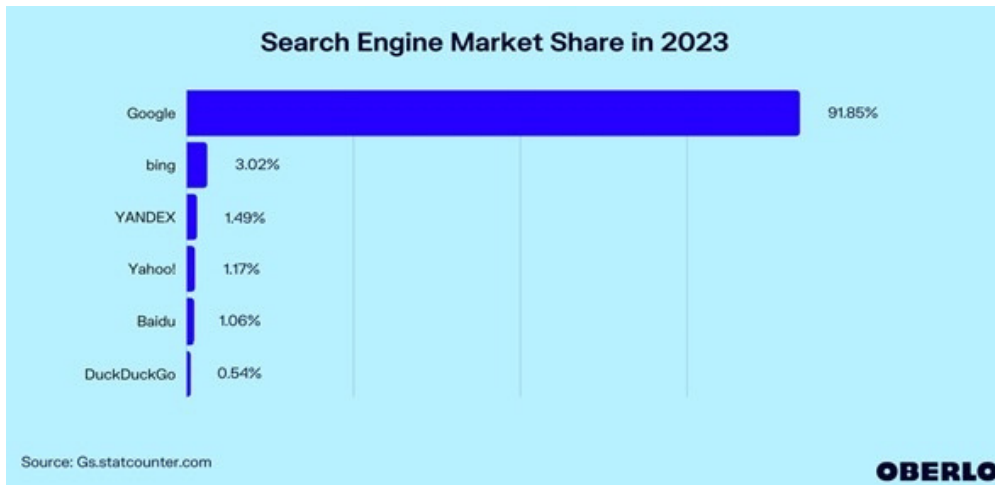


SOURCE: Google Trends



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Google Trends has been found to forecast emerging interests in a specific time period as searches tend to forecast behavior and attitudes (Silva et al., 2019). Increasing Trends Analysis about relevance stresses the fact that Google accounts for over 90% of all online search activity (Gaubys, 2023).



Yet all may not be well in the beige nirvana of pumpkin spice. Hagy (2023) notes that “...unit sales have been on the decline for the past two years, data from NielsenIQ viewed by Fortune shows. In the same year-long period ended in July, unit sales decreased 1.5% year over year, after flatlining the year before.” Social media analysis continues to show robust online interest in pumpkin spice; however, this study will also identify how there may be growing fatigue about pumpkin spice online. That fatigue is manifested in sentiment of disgust and, in many cases, outright mockery and meme creation about the omnipresent spice collection. From condoms to bathroom tissue to an erotic novel called “Seduced by the Pumpkin Spice Latte” (Cloves, n.d.), two decades of pumpkin spice has generated a (pumpkin spice scented) potpourri of cultural constructions and schisms. To understand how all of this continues to play out in the social media space, this study will first explain the methodological approaches used in data collected for this study. It will then identify emerging themes, sentiment, and outcomes in social media as they relate to pumpkin spice. Finally, key findings and implications will be identified.

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To explore how social media users have discussed topics related to pumpkin spice, researchers employed artificial intelligence (AI)-driven social media analytics tool, Brandwatch, to collect data in the forms of social conversations. Brandwatch is a leading analytics tool to derive social intelligence regarding consumer insights, influencer marketing, competitor analysis, reputation monitoring, and benchmark studies. Essentially, Brandwatch was utilized as a social listening tool to understand the sentiment, perceptions, trends, and reactions of social media users' conversations pertaining to pumpkin spice on X.

A series of key words and phrases related to pumpkin spice were adopted to build a search query on Brandwatch for data collection. After conducting a preliminary online search on popular terms favored by social media users in their online discussions related to the topic of pumpkin spice, researchers used key words and phrases such as “pumpkin spice,” “pumpkin spice latte,” and “PSL” to create the search query for the period of August 27 to September 25, 2023. Our choice of the time period relied on two factors. First, the first day of Fall falls on September 23, 2023. It is meaningful to compare the changes among social media users' volume of conversations, sentiment, and main topics. Second, we attempted to launch this study to celebrate the National Pumpkin Spice Day on October 1, 2023.

It turned out that X (formerly known as Twitter) emerged as the main platform for such social conversations. The analytics results, thus, were derived from posts on X. In total, 21k of posts with 16k of unique posts from X were yielded from our search query. The general volume of posts seemed to fluctuate with the changing weather. Unsurprisingly, the 1st day of September, the start of fall month, witnessed a spike of conversations on X, fueled by the anticipation of various pumpkin spice products. This increase of social discussions appeared to wane down during the first two weeks of September. In the absence of plausible explanations, this decline speculatively might have been associated with the hot temperature in most regions during that time period.

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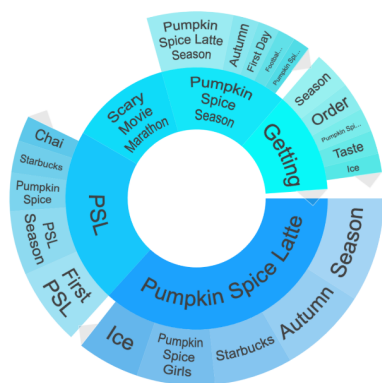
As a supplement to the data collected from Brandwatch, researchers conducted trends analyses on Google Trends using search terms consistent with the ones adopted in the search query from Brandwatch. Through search volumes conducted, Google Trends reveals the popularity of the targeted topics, which is a valuable tool to examine the changes in prominence for the selected topics from online users. Results from Google trends echoed the analytics results generated from Brandwatch. The following section discusses the results from Brandwatch analytics and Google Trend analyses.



Starbucks Leading the Pack

Strikingly, Starbucks has emerged as the most prominently mentioned brand in association with PSL. Starbucks lovers have posted funny memes and posts to unequivocally declare their craving for the brand’s pumpkin spice PSL, which were met with enthusiastic confirmation from other social media users on X. Such viral conversations surrounding pumpkin spice and Starbucks have created lively social interactions as well as dynamic and organic brand engagement for Starbucks.

[Topic Clusters]



This is significant as according to Nielson, \$802.5 million worth of pumpkin spice products were sold in 2022, up 42% from sales in 2019. Additionally, Walmart’s website returns 1,000 results related to “pumpkin spice” products (Durbin, 2023). Pumpkin spice is a highly saturated market, but Starbucks still stands tall and strong, leading the pack in pumpkin-spice coffee drinks.

Google Trends analyses showed that the top related query for “pumpkin spice latte” was “pumpkin chai latte.” This is the drink Starbucks debuted for their 2023 fall menu in light of their 20th PSL anniversary (Lucas, 2023). Among the top 25 related search queries, 20% mentioned a variation of “pumpkin spice chai latte starbucks” while 32% of the search queries included the brand “starbucks” such as “starbucks drinks,” “grande pumpkin spice latte,” and “starbucks menu.”

Among the related queries for Starbucks’ coined term “PSL,” which stands for pumpkin spice latte, 44% mention Starbucks directly (i.e. “starbucks psl,” “psl season starbucks”).

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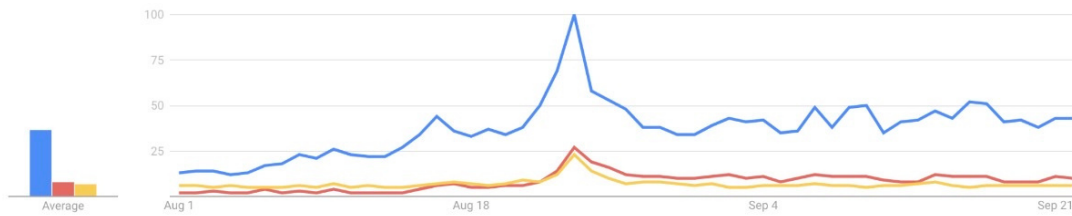


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Most notably, and as seen in the 100% spike in interest in “pumpkin spice latte” on August 24, 2023, 28% of the searches were inquiries about the return of PSL to Starbucks in 2023 (i.e. “when is psl coming back,” “psl at starbucks 2023,” “psl season starbucks.” “starbucks psl release date 2023”). As PSL has become a household name, one of the trending queries regarded the meaning of PSL (12%, i.e. “psl meaning tiktok,” “psl meaning slang”).

[Graph: Starbucks launch of PSL, August 24, 2023]



SOURCE: Google Trends

Although Starbucks still dominated search queries related to “pumpkin spice,” a few other brands were mentioned as well. Wendy’s release of their new pumpkin spice frosty drink garnered attention online with 8% of queries mentioning Wendy’s frosties. Dunkin also appeared in the related search query (4%), as well as an Oregon based coffee chain, Dutch Bros (4%). Nonetheless, in terms of brands, people were most interested about Starbucks’ fall drinks (28%), especially eager to find out “does starbucks have pumpkin spice yet?”

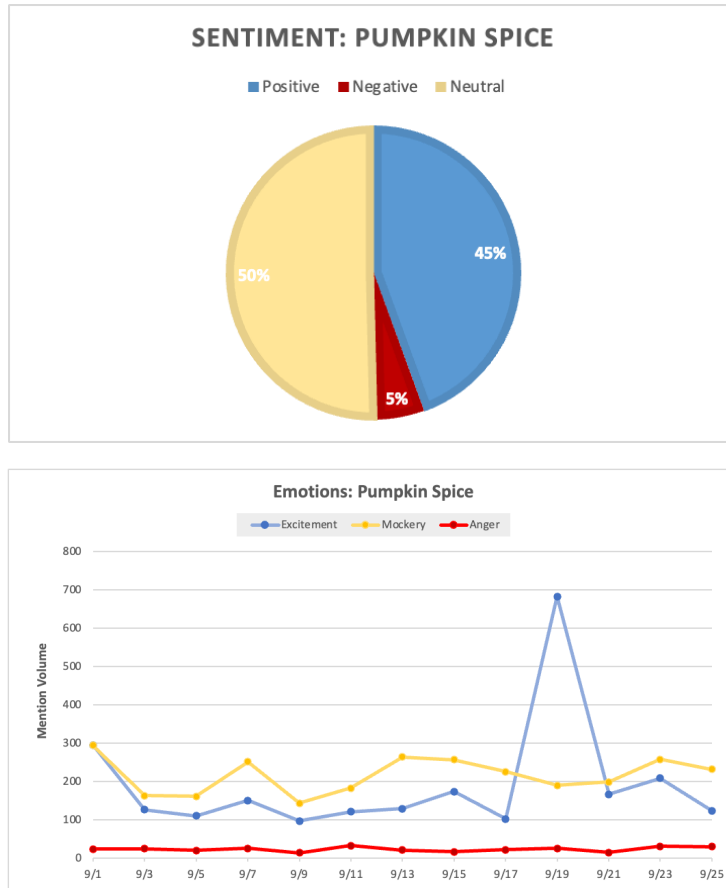
Other trending topics included non branded, generic pumpkin spice products such as “pumpkin spice desserts,” “pumpkin spice cinnamon rolls,” etc., as well as “pumpkins spice latte price,” “calories in a pumpkin spice latte,” “how to make a pumpkin spice latte,”

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Despite the release of a star studded commercial featuring actor Ben Afflek and rapper Ice Spice (Dunkin, 2023) to debut their new Ice Spice MUNCHKINS drink, a blend of pumpkin munchkins and frozen Dunkin' Coffee, Dunkin was not able to surpass the king of the pumpkin spice drinks, Starbucks.

Sentiment



As revealed in our social media analytics results, emotions toward pumpkin spice continue to appear largely positive. The Sentiment Graph indicated that excitement has emerged as a predominantly positive feeling among social media users. Particularly, consumers expressed strong excitement for pumpkin spiced products, such as pumpkin spice latte, pumpkin spice frosty, pumpkin spice candles, pumpkin spice pastries.



Furthermore, such excitement is also shown through social media users' anticipation to participate in Halloween-related activities, such as visiting haunted houses, creating fun Halloween decorations, baking pumpkin spice flavored cookies/pastries, and socializing with friends for the holiday.

This particular sentiment is characterized by social media users' preference for pumpkin spice and fun entertainments associated with the Fall season and the upcoming holiday. Such excitement is reflected in the following posts: "I have an iced pumpkin spice latte waiting for me what a perfect way to start my Friday morning," "It's 7pm and I want a pumpkin spice latte is that unhinged or do I have a second fun lil drink of the day," or "Haunted houses, matching halloween pjs, scary movie marathon, pumpkin spice, hoodie, fair, me ASAP!!!"

Similarly, joyful conversations on social media about pumpkin spice revealed consumers' happiness about the return of pumpkin spice in the fall season and the variety of pumpkin spice products (e.g., body oil, candles, butter, cookies, drinks, tobacco, engagement rings, trash bags, etc.) available in the market. Merchants are keen to leverage consumers' positive sentiment (45%) to promote on social media various pumpkin spice themed merchandise.

Mixed emotions of mockery were also identified. Personal preferences aside, the public realizes that pumpkin spice has become a staple of the fall season. Although people complained about the fatigue experienced by the prevalence of pumpkin spice everything, everywhere, and the ridiculousness of its overhyped phenomenon, these emotions were expressed satirically. Especially, the never ending and newly emerging pumpkin spice related product offerings, such as pumpkin spice toilet paper, pumpkin spice spam, etc., have propelled social media users to sarcastically speculate the next pumpkin spice product that might come out, pumpkin spice condoms for example.



This affective identity display is reflected from some heavily retweeted posts, such as “We’re pumpkin spice girls 4 life.” “Pumpkin SPICE GIRLS latte 🍵.” “These are, The Pumpkin Spice Girls 🎃.” Such identity affiliation implies that pumpkin spice has evolved from a commercial product into a salient cultural symbol in American pop culture.

This affective identity attachment with pumpkin spice suggests a promising role for emotional branding (Magids et al., 2015), referring to brands’ attempt to connect with their consumers by provoking emotional connections in their brand messages to drive consumer behaviors. In this particular context, the shared meaning of and affective attachment with pumpkin spice provides the pumpkin spice girls a sense of community and solidarity, which in return reinforces their individual identity. The love of pumpkin spice carries a strong potential to serve as a powerful emotional motivator to forge a deeper brand identification among consumers.



Given that there were more than 154 million impressions within the 21,000+ data collected, just on X, it is with no doubt that pumpkin spice is atop America's mind again this fall 2023 season. Ranging from pumpkin spice cardigans and vodka infused pumpkin spice whipped cream to pumpkin Marlboro cigarettes, the fall season is still heavily saturated with pumpkin spice everythings. Similar to Joetta di Bella and Fred C. Sautter III Center for Strategic Communication's study last year on pumpkin spice (Choi, Benton, and Luo, 2022), positive anticipation and excitement for pumpkin spice continued, even achieving "meme status" social media. However, this year's study found that most social conversations surrounding brands focused largely on Starbucks despite Dunkin's aggressive marketing efforts. Pumpkin spice and Starbucks together may have reached its tipping point, a cultural ubiquity that drives consumerism every fall, just like a warm cup of hot chocolate for Christmas during cold winters.



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Thank You!

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School of Communication and Media

About the School of Communication and Media: Founded in 2012, the School of Communication and Media offers a range of dynamic programs in communication and media to a talented and diverse student population of over 1,800. Offering degrees in film and television, social media and public relations, advertising, journalism and digital media, sports communication, communication and media studies, animation and visual effects, and an MA in public and organizational relations, the School prepares the next generation of communication and media practitioners and leaders. The School houses award-winning student programs that include WMSC Radio, The Montclarion newspaper, Hawk Communications Agency, the Red Hawk Sports Network, Hawk+ OTT streaming platform, and News Lab, as well as the Center for Cooperative Media, which serves the public by working to grow and strengthen local journalism. Student projects and programs have recently received national recognition from PRSSA's Bateman Competition, an Edward R Murrow Award, several Marconi Award nominations, and a College Television Award from the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.

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