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Pumpkin Spice and Everything Nice? An Assessment of Social Media Mentions of Pumpkin Spice

Jin-A Choi

Montclair State University, choij@mail.montclair.edu

Bond Benton

Montclair State University, bentonb@mail.montclair.edu

Yi Luo

Montclair State University, luoy@mail.montclair.edu

Harlan Cruz

Montclair State University

Paulette Gando-Duenas

Montclair State University

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Authors

Jin-A Choi, Bond Benton, Yi Luo, Harlan Cruz, Paulette Gando-Duenas, Jennifer Russo, Therese Sheridan, and Rayanne Yamout

2022

Pumpkin Spice Report

Joetta Di Bella and Fred C. Sautter III

Center for
Strategic
Communication



Pumpkin Spice and Everything Nice? An Assessment of Social Media Mentions of Pumpkin Spice.

**By: Dr. Jin-A Choi, Dr. Bond Benton, Dr. Yi Luo,
and graduate students Harlen Cruz, Paulette Gando-Duenas,
Jennifer Russo, Therese Sheridan, and Rayane Yamout**



Table of Contents

Authors 2

Graduate Students 3

Conceptual Review 4

Research Focus & Methods 5

Results 6

References 7





Researchers



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*, *Cases in Public Relations Strategy*, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, *The Journal of Applied Security Studies*, and *Studies in Communication Sciences*. His first book, *The Challenge of Working for Americans: Perspectives of an International Workforce*, was released in 2014.



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 Relation 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 numerous conference proceedings, book chapters, and appears in journals such as *Journal of Global Marketing*, *Communication Studies*, and *Journal of Media Psychology* among 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*, *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *Journal of Applied Communication*, *New Media and Public Relations*, *Global Media Journal*, and *Asian Journal of Communication*. 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*.

Joetta Di Bella and Fred C. Sautter III

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Strategic
Communication**





Graduate Students



Harlen Cruz



Paulette Gando-Duenas



Jennifer Russo



Therese Sheridan



Rayane Yamout

Joetta Di Bella and Fred C. Sautter III

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Communication**



Conceptual Review

Pumpkin spice may only be a mix of a blend of cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, allspice, and cloves, but it has become an enduring staple of the transition to autumn for both consumers and brands. Commonly attributed to the 2003 introduction of “Pumpkin Spice Latte” by the Starbucks company (Nosowitz, 2022), the flavor and market utilization of pumpkin spice branding has been enduring in terms of culture and consumption. Identification of the impetus for pumpkin spice to become a staple of seasonal transition can be explained by a range of consumer motivations. Millennial preferences appear to be a significant driving factor towards pumpkin spice enthusiasm (Hoffower, 2021). The introduction of the pumpkin spice latte would correspond to the time period where millennials were emerging as a consumer group. The ability to consume brands like Starbucks that had a less developed market space than the brands of their parents made enjoying Starbucks simultaneously a marker of millennial ascension to consumer status while also

indicating their individuality from previous generations of consumers. The time bound nature of pumpkin spice also provides a “fear of missing out” (FOMO) moment for enthusiasts as the flavor is available for only a limited amount of time. The FOMO effect on consumer behavior is profound, leading to purchases driven by the perceived time bound nature of pumpkin spice availability. Notably, research on the psychological effects of the smell/taste aspects of pumpkin spice indicates that the additional sensory dimension of the trend leads to associative feelings of nostalgia and warmth (Rosen, 2021). Interestingly, cultural scholars have argued that the sensory construction of pumpkin spice has contextually gendered its consumption as feminine (Powell & Engelhardt, 2015).

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Conceptual Review

Cumulatively, pumpkin spice has a unique cultural space enhanced by the emergence of specific demographics, supported by sensory aspects of the trend, driven by nostalgia, and fostered by the illusion of scarcity from its time-bound availability. Although some have argued that there is a fad dimension to the phenomena that ensures it will inevitably fade (Wiedemann, 2015), trend analysis suggests that enthusiasm for pumpkin spice continues largely unabated—with interest levels remaining quite high every autumn.

Some analysts are even forecasting trend growth in 2022 with a feeling of lost shared cultural connection during the COVID-19 pandemic and the desire to participate in communal consumption linked to previous experiences (Hoffower, 2021). As the consumption of baked goods, coffee, and gatherings related to the fall season were denied to many during the COVID-19 pandemic, the essential element of human connections that are associated with certain consumption behaviors are now top-of-mind for many people (Bauer & Mills, 2021).

With pumpkin spice nostalgically linked to such behaviors, it is unsurprising that growth in an already established trend may be a part of 2022.

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Research Focus and Methods

With that in mind, evaluating pumpkin spice's space in terms of activities in social media is an important area of investigation for researchers and consumer brands. To that end, this analysis explores current social media and internet search activity related to the term "pumpkin spice." Analysis was done using the data analysis software tool Keyhole for social media listening. Keyhole is a social media data reporting platform that measures real time and historical data of what is posted in social media allowing for quantification of trends and themes in content along with aggregation of trend and theme recurrence on platforms. This analysis allowed researchers to examine a range of constructs, including frequency of content posted on platforms related to pumpkin spice and overall sentiment of the collected posts. Specially, sentiment analysis utilizing machine learning such as that offered by the Keyhole platform offers "a structured, systematic, and unbiased procedure for information modeling" (Tano et al., 2022).

Particularly, this sentiment analysis allowed researchers to better understand whether people expressed positive, negative, or neutral feelings about pumpkin spice in their posts on social media, a means of understanding whether consumers "like" or "dislike" the flavor profile and its associated brand proposition. Therefore, this project not only evaluates the scope of the pumpkin spice trend but also the reaction the trend generates. To assess the current social media context of pumpkin spice, researchers collected Twitter and Instagram data through Keyhole using a targeted range of search terms and hashtags (e.g., #pumpkinspice, Pumpkin Spice Latte, etc.) for the period of September 11 to September 25, 2022. This resulted in a total of 18,462 posts for this study. Using Keyhole's sentiment analysis tools, these posts were coded either "positive," "negative," or "neutral." After this initial statistical assessment was conducted,

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Research Focus and Methods

the team of trained researchers then collectively and manually evaluated this automated coding process to ensure messages weren't mislabeled or calculated due to message nuance, ensuring individual messages were not miscategorized. This combination of automated sentiment analysis and human quality control ensured a reliable analysis of collected social media posts that best captured the feelings and sentiments of posts on social media.

In addition to this extensive data collection and sentiment analysis, a Google Trends analysis was conducted for the search term "pumpkin spice." Google Trends focuses on creation of a data point that is divided by the total searches for a specific topic in a time range to represent and compare relative popularity of the specified search term. The "resulting numbers are then scaled on a range of 0 to 100 based on a topic's proportion to all searches on all topics" ("FAQ about

Google Trends Data" n.d.). Cumulatively, the data was collected and analyzed with the intent of assessing sentiment, popularity, longevity, and the potential implications of the pumpkin spice trend. In performing this separate analysis, we were able to provide additional context to the relative rise (or fall) of the popularity of pumpkin spice based on Internet search activity.

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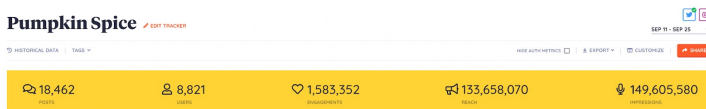
Results

Content themes across Twitter and Instagram suggested a range of terms related to the experiential and associative dimensions of pumpkin spice. A generated word cloud from 18,462 posts indicates the following:



Gender of those posting about pumpkin spice was relatively evenly distributed with male identifying users accounting for 52% of posts and female identifying users accounting for 48% posts.

Reach and impressions created by the posts based on Keyhole analysis suggests substantial traction for interaction about the term.



Data from the period suggests general positive sentiment towards pumpkin spice and surprisingly little negative sentiment. The overall sentiment analysis of the nearly 20,000 collected social posts presents a clear and consistent story. Specifically, 55% of posts (10,291) were positive, while only 8% of posts (1,578) were negative. The remaining 37% (6,899) were neutral, the vast majority of those largely promotional posts. Therefore, our analysis suggests that overall sentiment expressed on social media was overwhelmingly positive, and we found little of the negative counter or backlash that one might have expected given the ubiquity of pumpkin spice products and consumer based messaging around this seasonal industry. In other words, while we assumed pumpkin spice and its associated hashtags to be largely polarizing, particularly in the often dogmatic landscape of social media, we instead found relatively little of that divide. More bluntly put, according to our



Results

analysis of social media content, people appear to truly love pumpkin spice, and very few openly hate it.

We also discovered, not surprisingly, that many corporations, including a large number of small and mid-sized enterprises, utilize “pumpkin spice” in their social messaging. This appears to be linked to the concept of trendjacking which is the attempt to align a culturally relevant conversation to a specific product or service (Le Vine, 2022). In other words, particularly given the overwhelmingly positive sentiment related to pumpkin spice, companies are using this phrase and associated positive emotion to enhance sentiments about their own business, product, and otherwise. This likely relates to the large number of social media posts categorized as “neutral,” many of which are promotional in nature. Surprisingly, pumpkin spice was also linked to philanthropic and charitable activity on social media, with nearly 2% of all collected and evaluated posts linked to social causes

such as dog adoption shelters leveraging the trend. As such, pumpkin spice is far more than a flavor; it is a construct that brands, products, and even social causes use to positively activate their consumer base.

It is also clear that beyond the highly expected ubiquity of major food brands commonly associated with pumpkin spice (e.g., Starbucks and Dunkin were two of the most frequently mentioned brands in our analysis), pumpkin spice has increased ubiquity across product categories, going far beyond food. One frequently discussed brand was the e-commerce site Etsy. Some of the highlighted products included earrings, dog bandannas, candles, and sweatshirts. Other frequently linked shopping sites included eBay and Amazon. From our analysis, pumpkin spice has gone far beyond drinks and food, and companies have recognized the relative positive sentiment associated with the concept. Much like holidays such as Christmas and July 4 provide positive consumer branding opportunities, it’s clear that the fall tradition of pumpkin spice may offer similar

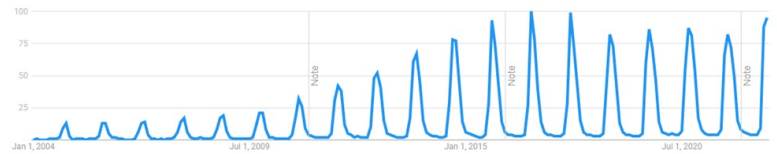
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Results

impact.

Our Google Trend analysis also shows the broad interest in pumpkin spice derived from internet searches related to the term. Examining Google searches dating from 2004 to present, there has been a continued and steady increase in interest in pumpkin spice that peaked initially in 2017. However, the rate of searches this year (2022) exceeds that high-water mark, reinforcing our assessment that pumpkin spice remains as popular as ever and that any recoil in that trendline has likely reversed this fall consumer season. Whether this relates to the increase in consumer engagement in a post-Covid economic environment or whether there remain other reasons for a highly engaged and renewed interest in pumpkin spice is up for debate. Regardless of the confluence of reasons for this largely positive interest and engagement, it's clear that people are more interested in pumpkin spice than ever, and they largely like what they see.



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Conclusions and Further Exploration

The collected data informs a number of previous evaluations of pumpkin spice in both the market and culture. Contrary to common beliefs of a highly divided and perhaps weary consumer public, these results suggest that pumpkin spice is not only more relevant and popular than ever, but also that consumers perceive it quite positively. We have seen a very small percentage of negative discourse around pumpkin spice online, and the construct extends far beyond food and beverage into more general consumer products and social causes. Pumpkin spice may be particularly relevant to millennial consumers, as they represent a significant portion of social media users (“Social Media Fact Sheet” 2021). There may also be a pronounced FOMO (fear of missing out) relationship to pumpkin spice, as the topic has a clear time bound peak of interest annually. In other words, the realization that pumpkin spice is a limited brand offering that will not last into winter may be related to its pronounced and reliable spike in interest

and its overwhelming positive sentiment. As that period is the fall, the sensory dimension of pumpkin spice as a concept is reflected in posted social media language that is evocative of autumn and the festivities associated with the season (“autumn,” “Halloween,” “fall decor,” etc.). While pumpkin spice serves an economic function for businesses, it is clear from the analyzed language that pumpkin spice is a source of deeper physiological and psychological connection. The gendered nature of that connection appears to be at odds with the genders of people posting about pumpkin spice, with data suggesting men post more frequently about it in social media. Finally, projections of continued annual interest in pumpkin spice were validated in the data collected. In fact, Google Trends results show that current search levels for pumpkin spice are likely to meet or eclipse the previous high points of 2016 and 2017. In other words, the data analysis strongly indicates that autumnal pumpkin spice is both here and

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Conclusions and Further Exploration

to stay. With that in mind, this study suggests further areas that merit continued exploration.

Initially, should 2022 continue to yield high levels of positive pumpkin spice interest, it will be important to assess whether that interest is indicative of a longer-term trend or if it is unique to the peculiarities of *this* fall. Specifically, analysts have noted a post-pandemic impulse dubbed “revenge” consumption (Whitmore, 2021). Denied specific consumption opportunities during the pandemic, some consumers are acutely focused on attempting to “catch up” with what was missed (Firshein, 2021). It will be important to assess whether growth in positive interest towards pumpkin spice endures or if this year’s potential surge was the result of pent-up demand for the communal experience of sharing pumpkin spice treats. Researchers should also examine the boundaries of pumpkin spice across product sectors. We were surprised to see the extent of pumpkin spice branded product conversation, far beyond

traditional food and drink. Those in the consumer space would benefit from understanding the breadth of the pumpkin spice utility to enhance positive sentiment. In other words, it is simply a flavor profile or something much greater. Finally, social media analysis shows no indication of annual pumpkin spice interest dissipating. Going forward, researchers should explore the extent to which pumpkin spice interest becomes a fully accepted ritualized cultural behavior. Seasonal events typically have culturally identified markers that extend their impact, from turkey at Thanksgiving to chocolate on Valentine’s Day. Trends suggest that pumpkin spice may be attaining a similar cultural longevity related to the fall season, something that could vastly impact and drive consumer behavior and corporate strategy. Investigation of such cultural phenomena suggested by the enduring nature of pumpkin spice is warranted.

Joetta Di Bella and Fred C. Sautter III

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