

2024

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**The Nightmare Before (Spirit)
Christmas: Social Media Reacts to
Spirit Halloween Stores
Transitioning to Christmas in 2024**



**School of
Communication
and Media**

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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.



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Overview and Study Focus

Spirit Halloween represents a compelling retail strategy that reflects a peculiar space in popular culture. With more than 1,500 stores now, Spirit Halloween initially opened in San Francisco, California, in 1983 in strip malls and traditional malls to sell Halloween costumes and decorations (Miller, 2024). From August to November, Spirit Halloween appears in the form of a seasonal pop-up store. Specifically, Spirit Halloween is known to utilize failed retail spaces. This has found memetic placement in the tapestry of popular culture. Spirit sells spooky Halloween items that frequently reference the “undead” such as zombies and vampires. Their retail approach curiously mimics this imagery with “dead” spaces brought back to life with the annual arrival of Spirit Halloween. It occupies an unusual placement whereby the celebration of a season morbidly co-mingles with the death of an old retail outlet. This combination has, unsurprisingly, invited memetic utilization of the chain. A failing business or sports team eliminated from the playoffs or postseason contention can easily have its image overlaid with a “Spirit Halloween” banner to denote failure.

While arguably a derisive appropriation of the brand, the result has been strong organic reach for Spirit Halloween in the online space. That success was leveraged into significant successes for Spirit Halloween as a cultural touchstone. Looking at the company’s recent history, search activity reflects this success.



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Method

To examine how social media users have conversed about topics related to Spirit Halloween, this study used Brandwatch to collect social media discussions. Brandwatch was utilized as a social listening tool to understand the sentiment, perceptions, trends, and reactions of social media users' conversations pertaining to Spirit Halloween across various social media platforms, such as X, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Reddit, etc.

After an initial online search on popular terms favored by social media users in their online discussions related to the topic of pumpkin spice, this study utilized key words and phrases such as "spirit Halloween" and #spiritHalloween to create a search query for data collection. Particularly, the month of October, period between October 1 and October 28, 2024 was chosen to observe conversations leading up to Halloween. Understanding the shifts in social media users' conversation volumes, sentiments, and key topics can provide valuable insights on how social media users have embraced Spirit Halloween during the Halloween season. Second, this study will be publicly released as a celebration of Halloween on October 31, 2024.



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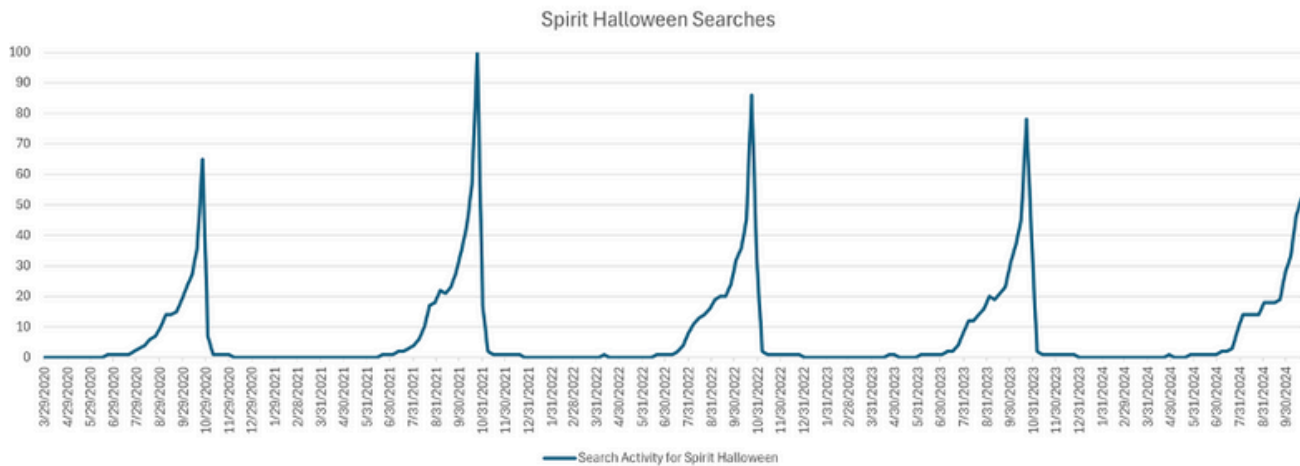
The search query on Brandwatch yielded a total of 61k social conversations from 47k unique social posts from October 1 to October 28, 2024. We found that 71% of social media discussions about Spirit Halloween took place on X (formerly known as Twitter) followed by much smaller volumes represented in YouTube as well as Facebook.

A Google Trend Analysis conducted to assess online search activity related to Spirit Halloween. A key feature of Google Trends analysis is that it allows for identification of items of interest for internet users (Nghiem et al., 2016). These analyses are “normalized to the highest volume of searches for that term over the time period being studied. This index ranges from 0 to 100, with 100 recorded on the date that saw the highest relative search volume activity for that term” (Arora et al., 2019, p. 338). Search interest in a specific topic has reliably forecast social media posts and actions related to that topic (McCarthy, 2010).

Results indicate that Spirit Halloween reached its cultural zenith in terms of search in the period immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic. This is unsurprising as the want to connect and experience a shared event like Halloween was likely salient in this period. The years since, however, indicated a continuous decline in search activity. While spikes tend to happen each autumn culminating in a high point at the end of October, declines in recent years have been pronounced. 2021’s high point was followed by a 15% decrease in 2022 and another 8% decrease the year after. Current 2024 search data suggests activity could be as much as 40% lower than the brand’s high point.

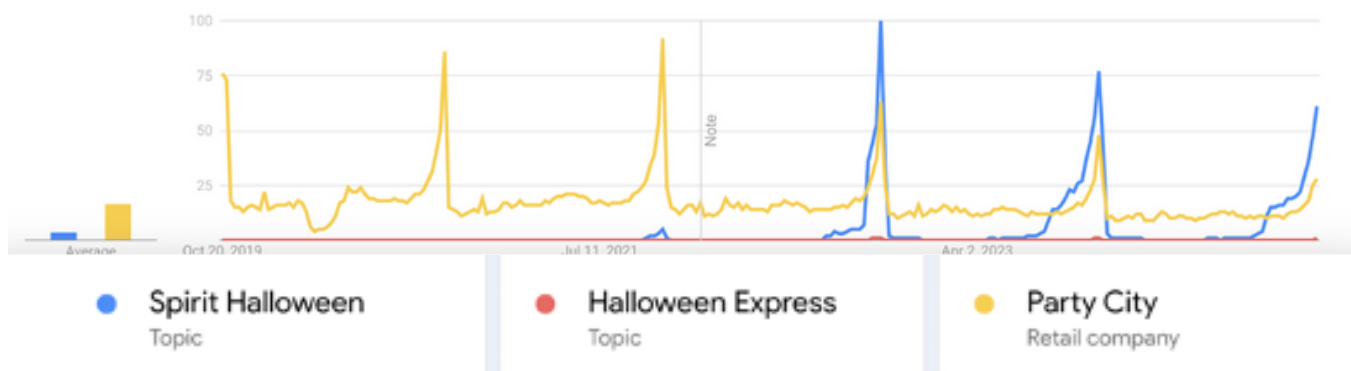


Method



Despite the overall decline in Spirit Halloween searches, the decline is not only for Spirit Halloween. Rather, Spirit Halloween has been leading the searches on Google since October 2022, overturning the popularity and dominance of Party City as the preferred Halloween store by an astonishing margin of more than 30%. It is evident that the Spirit Halloween stores have won over the Halloween season.

Interest over time ?



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Results

A favorite among Halloween enthusiasts, the social media chat volume regarding Spirit Halloween surged to reach 61K from October 1 to October 28, 2024. Twitter prevailed over other social platforms in online chats about Spirit Halloween, accounting for 71%. The people who discussed Spirit Halloween on social media were 57% males and 43% females. The store remains a go-to destination for Halloween enthusiasts, providing a diverse selection of items to suit different tastes and trends.

Spirit Halloween expands to Spirit Christmas

The volume of posts peaked on October 8, with almost 10k mentions coinciding with Spirit Halloween's announcement of Spirit Christmas Stores. In addition to opening a record number of Spirit Halloween locations in 2024, the announcement of the addition of new Christmas themed stores attracted much attention on social media. With only 10 stores to be launched primarily in the U.S. northeast region, discussion of anticipated seasonal décor as well as photos and meet-and-greets with Spirit Christmas's very own Santa Clause filled social media conversations.

Spirit Halloween tries to expand its market by introducing Spirit Christmas, rebranding some stores for the holiday season and signaling a creative approach to holiday retail. By rebranding select locations, the chain aims to offer a diverse range of Christmas-themed products, decorations, and experiences, catering to customers seeking festive cheer beyond Halloween and thus broadening its seasonal audience. The transition from spooky to merry sentiments reflects an innovative and strategic shift to capture the holiday market.



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Results

Trending Topics ⓘ

Export ▾



Fading

Trending

Spirit Halloween and SNL Fake Ad Sketch

The second peak in social media conversation occurred on October 1, 2024 regarding ‘Saturday Night Live’s skit mocking Spirit Halloween and their limited occupation of abandoned stores during Halloween season with a post reading “when others leave, Spirit Halloween shows up #SNLPremiere.”



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Results



Spirit Halloween used this opportunity to attract further social media attention by getting back at ‘Saturday Night Life’ (SNL) by making their famous “Spirit Halloween meme,” which is an edited photo of a Spirit Halloween costume bag with mocking descriptions of the costume in question. Calling SNL an “Irrelevant 50-year-old show” with “dated references,” “unknown cast members,” and “shrinking ratings,” the meme was posted in response to SNL’s tweet amounting to nearly 4k mentions on social media on October 1, 2024.



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Creative brand collaborations

Spirit Halloween has collaborated with popular brands like Chipotle, Uber Eats, Warner Bros., and Anne and Cinnamon, to create unique costume lines, such as BEETLEJUICE, Deadpool, and meme-inspired outfits, offering fans fun options to embody their favorite personalities during the festive season.

Chipotle's partnership with Spirit Halloween marks the fast-food chain's first costume collection to engage its fans and Halloween enthusiasts. Driven by the memorable memes about costume ideas posted in the iconic Spirit Halloween bags, Chipotle offers its fans the dream of dressing up like your favorite Chipotle items. By partnering with Spirit Halloween, Chipotle brings to life an arrangement of quirky customs based on popular items (e.g., fork, napkin, water cup, and a to-go bag) from the restaurant chain, which prompted hyped social chats about enjoying Mexican food at Chipotle after visiting Spirit Halloween. This creative brand collaboration between Chipotle and Spirit Halloween sparks a playful, trendy twist to conventional Halloween attire, blending food and fun in a creative way.



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Results



David Howard Thornton as Art of the Clown

David Howard Thornton surprised Spirit Halloween customers as Art the Clown, creating buzz for the horror movie-- #Terrifier3. Social media discussions about the movie star spiked 100%. Art the Clown, portrayed by David Howard Thornton, surprised and delighted fans at his Spirit Halloween store. Fans and onlookers were captivated by this immersive experience, setting the stage for a thrilling continuation of the popular horror movie franchise. This unexpected and interactive experience between David and Spirit Halloween shoppers added a new dimension to the chain's engagement with its shoppers.



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Results

Amazon the competitor

Amazon surfaced as the competitor for a place to purchase Halloween costumes instead of the anticipated Party City or Halloween Express. Amazon Prime was mentioned as the preferred place to shop during flu season as well as to avoid long lines and crowds. Amazon was also identified as having more low-cost but higher quality options than Spirit Halloween. Amazon Prime also discussed their showing of “Spirit Halloween: The Movie.”



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Discussion

Fear and Joy Sentiment for Spirit Halloween

Fear was captured as the prevailing emotion for social media conversations surrounding Spirit Halloween. This is a flaw of natural language processing as words such as “terror,” “boo” and even the words “spirit” and “Halloween” themselves were detected as the emotion of fear instead of in context with the Halloween season. Therefore, when eliminating fear, joy was the dominant emotion expressed on social media surrounding Spirit Halloween. Thanks to the popularity of their memes, positive humor was spread through numerous costume meme variations on X. Excitement was also expressed and recognized a visit to Spirit Halloween as a routine for starting the fall season decorations. People also took to social media to share funny or unique costume discoveries while shopping at stores at Spirit Halloween.

Additionally, while overall negative sentiment was detected to be 4% higher than that of positive sentiments, negative sentiment consisted largely of mockery and sarcasm that was enabled by Spirit Halloween's memes, thus promoting Spirit Halloween as a brand even further.



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Thank You!

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About the School of Communication and Media: The School of Communication and Media offers a range of dynamic programs in communication and media to a talented and diverse student population of more than 2,000. 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 devoted to strategic communication, 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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