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AAD 550 Transmedia Field Guide

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Transmedia Field Guide Proposal: Pumpkin Spice Phenomena

Autumn is a time for changing leaves, changing weather, rain boots and umbrellas, college football, and Pumpkin Spice everything. It seems that there has been an influx of the American Pumpkin Spice interest over the last decade, and it is only gaining momentum. Every returning autumn season brings with it a new plethora of Pumpkin Spice products. Soaps, lotions, candles, fragrance room sprays, countless food and grocery products have flood the market from Labor Day until Thanksgiving.

With the start of the autumn season, we as an American consumer-based culture are bombarded by the Pumpkin Spice Phenomena, not only in our grocery stores, but in our social media, Internet Memes, YouTube videos, magazines, online publications, as well as television and radio broadcasts. In a general consensus, the Pumpkin Spice Phenomena has bifurcated our culture into two groups: those who love all things Pumpkin Spice, and those who can’t wait for the fad to pass.

Who is to take credit, or rather, who is to blame for this outpouring of all things pumpkin spice? One of the major staples to the Pumpkin Spice diet is the Pumpkin Spice Latte, and the latte staple in the American consumer market is Starbucks. Starbucks News has stated the first Pumpkin Spice Latte was developed in early 2003 in a focus group that was set on creating an autumn drink that would capitalize on the season (Starbucks Newsroom, 2014). At the time, they were unaware at the cultural craze that would follow. Seasonal drinks were nothing new for the Starbucks Corporation, with previous developments such as the Peppermint Mocha, and the Eggnog Latte. However, once the drink was released, it gained instant popularity (Starbucks Newsroom, 2014).  Today, within the Starbucks Company, the Pumpkin Spice Latte is referred to by its own acronym of PSL. It can be found during the fall season as its own marketing development. Window clings, coffee sleeves, as well as the chalkboard art found at any Starbucks store are laden with the PSL.

As a marketing strategy to profit on the Starbucks PSL, one can find a personified PSL on Twitter. The @TheRealPSL made its debut this year on social media on August 4, and is a rather adorable persona of the beloved seasonal drink. @TheRealPSL’s initial social media purpose was to serve as a marketing tool to engage followers to participate in games and challenges through the hashtag #spotthespice. Followers who had completed the tasks were given a password that they could show or say to a barista at their neighborhood Starbucks, which would then in turn, “unlock” the early release of the PSL for that particular store. Participants that unlocked the early release would then be the earlier-than-normal release of the seasonal drink (Starbucks Newsroom, 2014).  Currently, @TheRealPSL’s Twitter engagement focuses on the further personification of the season’s beloved drink. Decked out in orange sunglasses and a generous topping of whipped cream, the PSL has developed its own entity, as if it has become a creature with its own thoughts, feelings, and of course, social media following. As of October 24, 2014, @TheRealPSL has a staggering Twitter following of 95,766 followers (Twitter, 2014).

Beyond the Starbucks PSL cult following, the entire Pumpkin Spice Phenomena undoubtedly gained significant notoriety during the past decade, and has encouraged other manufacturers to jump on the bandwagon. A simple trip to the grocery store yields in an overabundance of Pumpkin Spice everything, which has led to the development of some questionable or unusual products (Trader Joe’s even offers Pumpkin Spice Pumpkin Seeds). In 2012, Pringles developed three For-A-Limited-Time-Only flavors of White Chocolate Peppermint, Cinnamon & Sugar, and, you guessed it, Pumpkin Pie Spice. These holiday flavors were met with mixed review. While some opinions were positive for the new flavors, others were genuinely disgusted. Charisa Madarang, writer for the online publication FoodBeast writes, “This is why (most people) shouldn't mess with a good thing” (Madarang, 2012). The question begs to be asked: has the Pumpkin Spice Phenomena gone too far?

Other products that one would normally never associate with Pumpkin Spice have infiltrated the market to a dizzying degree. A general Google search will yield in an impressive list of nationally distributed and readily accessible products.  Wrigley’s Extra Chewing Gum, Jamba Juice Smoothies, Hershey’s Kisses, CoffeeMate coffee flavoring, M&M’s, Burnette’s Vodka, Oreos, ProAction whey protein powder, Cedars hummus, Chiobani Greek yogurt, and countless others have all profited from this cultural fad. This is not even taking into consideration the amount of regional products that can be found on a local basis. Our own University isn’t even safe from the Pumpkin Spice Phenomena, hosting Pumpkin Spice muffins, cookies, and donuts at various campus cafe locations. However, the overabundance has also lead to a strong resistance against the seasonal flavor from the other side of the spectrum.

The Pumpkin Spice Phenomena has inadvertently created its own counter culture. The PSL has become a symbol for one of our current culture’s whipping boys, or should I say, whipping *girls*? The term Basic Bitch has started to gain its place amongst our youth popular culture to describe a young white woman, who sports leggings or yoga pants with Uggs boots, a Northface jacket, who is preoccupied with Instagram and all things autumn, including her coveted PSL.  She is uninterested in anything beyond her immediate reach, and is content with the common. She is simple, she is boring, and she is basic. Anne Helen Peterson, writer and staff member for the online publication BuzzFeed, writes, “‘Basic’ is, at bottom, a stereotype. And like all stereotypes, we fling it at others in order to distance ourselves from them” (BuzzFeed, 2014).  These stereotypes are an unfortunate downside to this infiltrating culture. For many, the Pumpkin Spice Phenomena is showing no signs of slowing down. And for the other half of the population, the season cannot pass quickly enough.

Online Related References:

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@TheRealPSL, Twitter

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Collection of Internet Memes

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