

Move Over Pumpkin Spice? Caramel Apple Challenges Fall's Signature Flavor in 2026

Social media analysis finds pumpkin spice still dominant

By Dr. Jin-A Choi, Dr. Bond Benton, & Dr. Yi Luo

The arrival of autumn has become closely tied to seasonal flavor culture. Starbucks brought back Pumpkin Spice season on August 25, 2026, one day after launching its “Back to Basic” campaign, while McDonald’s had already introduced Caramel Apple Pie Iced Latte and Frappé beverages on August 18. The timing raised a timely question: after years of pumpkin spice dominance, could caramel apple become the next defining flavor of fall?

The question is plausible because apples already carry strong associations with fall through cider, pies, orchards and seasonal gatherings. [Datassential](#) data cited in the source material indicate that 87% of consumers love or like apples, compared with 59% for pumpkin and 47% for pumpkin spice. Yet broad consumer affinity does not necessarily translate into online cultural momentum.

This report compares pumpkin spice and caramel apple using 2026 Brandwatch social listening, X data and Google Trends. The findings point to a clear outcome: pumpkin spice has lost some of its earlier volume, but caramel apple has not displaced it. While caramel apple product launches are attracting news coverage; pumpkin spice still owns the deeper social shorthand for fall.

The “New” 2026 Fall Flavor - Caramel Apple

McDonald’s made an unusually direct seasonal move in 2026. It introduced Caramel Apple Pie Iced Latte and Frappé beverages a week before Starbucks’ Pumpkin Spice Latte return and, according to the supplied draft, removed pumpkin drinks from its menu for the first time in a decade. Other brands also leaned into apple-forward fall offerings, including Starbucks’ Chaider, Krispy Kreme’s Apple Crisp Latte, 7 Brew’s Caramel Apple Pie Macchiato and Drizzled Apple Frozen Chiller, Scooter’s Coffee’s caramel apple offerings, and Philz Coffee’s Apple Cinnamon Cold Brew.

Starbucks, however, did not retreat from pumpkin spice. Its August 24 “Back to Basic” campaign used self-deprecating humor around the PSL’s “basic” cultural identity and featured Martha Stewart and Belmont Cameli. The supplied research notes that the commercial generated 332,000 likes and 186,000 shares. Starbucks later announced a Peanuts collaboration tied to the 60th anniversary of “It’s the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown,” extending pumpkin into nostalgia and merchandise as well as beverages. Starbucks is also withholding their popular Apple Crisp drink until October 9, 2026, most likely to give PSL its own moment. Dunkin’ likewise continued its pumpkin-spice marketing with another celebrity-led “spice” campaign.

**** Thanks to our undergraduate student, Grace Velazquez, for her help with background research*

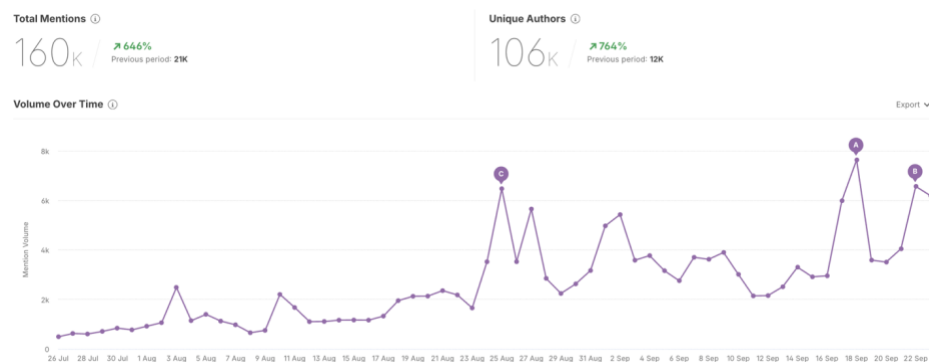
Caramel apple entered fall 2026 with genuine brand support and media attention, but it faces an uncontested competitor that has accumulated more than two decades of seasonal meaning to Americans. What does the social mediasphere have to say about the two flavors?

Method

To examine how the public discussed pumpkin spice versus caramel apple in 2026, the research used Brandwatch social listening to analyze sentiment, perceptions, trends and reactions. Pumpkin-spice queries included “PSL,” “#PSL,” “pumpkin spice,” and “pumpkin spice latte.” Caramel-apple queries began with “Caramel Apple Pie” and “Caramel Apple”; because that search returned relatively little discussion, “apple flavor,” “apple crisp,” and “apple cider” were added. More than 60 stop words were used to reduce irrelevant results.

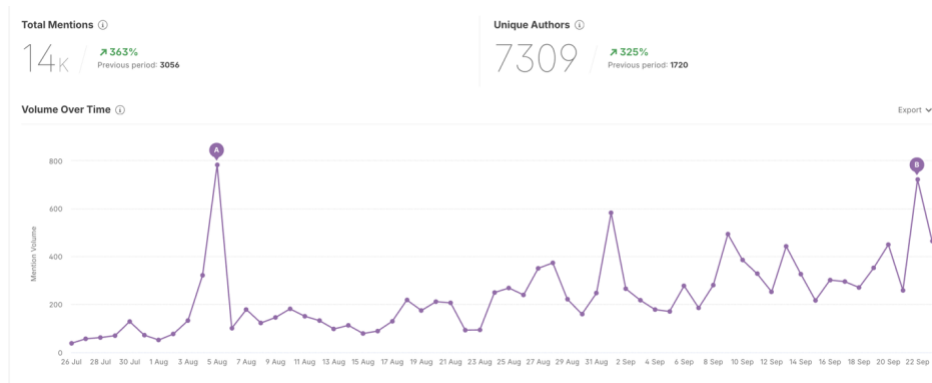
Across the two-month period from July 26 through September 23, 2026, more than 160,000 pumpkin-spice-related data points were collected from social media sources including X, Reddit and Facebook, representing 106,000 unique users.

Graph 1. 2026 Brandwatch volume over time for pumpkin spice conversations



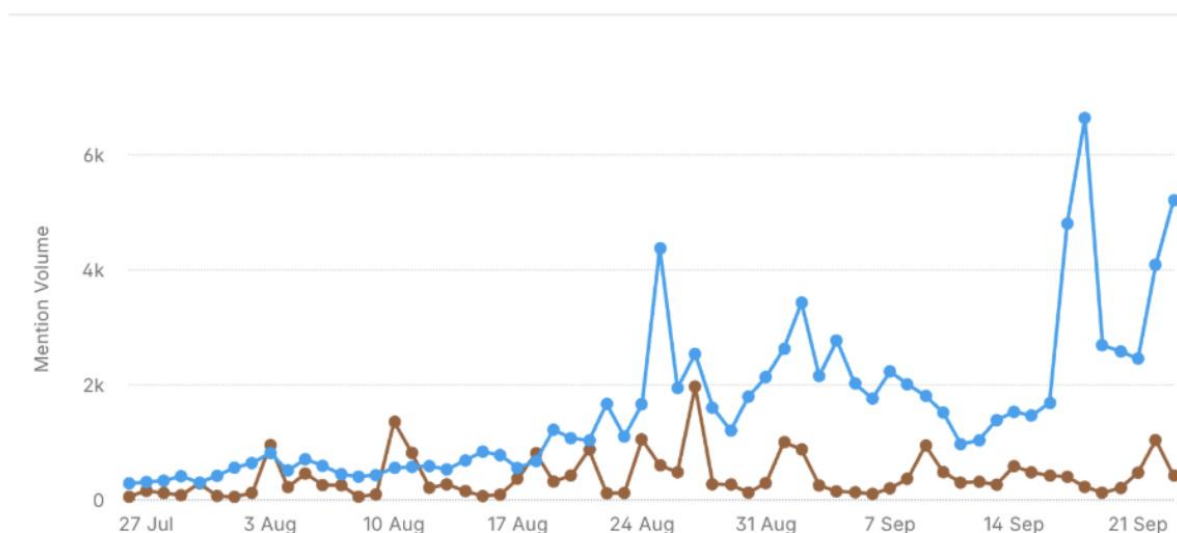
In the same period, caramel apple produced about 14,000 data points and roughly 7,000 unique contributors.

Graph 2. 2026 Brandwatch volume over time for caramel apple conversations

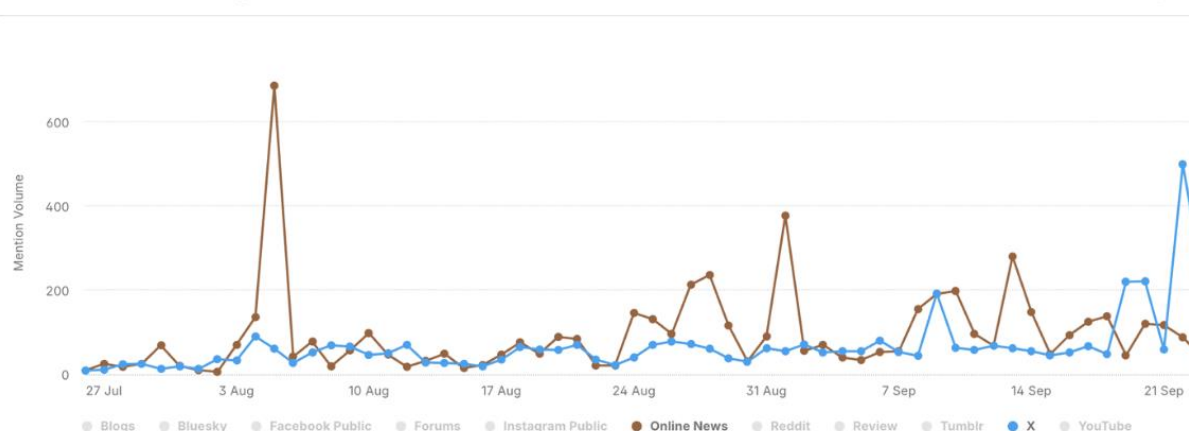


The source mix also differed: pumpkin spice conversation came primarily from social media, while 40% of caramel-apple conversation originated from online news. Content-source activity over time illustrates pumpkin spice’s social-media-led conversation.

Graph 3. 2026 Brandwatch Content Sources for pumpkin spice



Graph 4. 2026 Brandwatch Content Sources for Caramel Apple



The 2026 analysis is placed in the context of the Center’s annual pumpkin spice research. The supplied materials report approximately 209,000 conversations in 2024 and show that overall pumpkin-spice conversation remains below earlier peaks. X data provides a second view, allowing a direct comparison of posting behavior and engagement around the two flavor concepts.

Google trends analysis is a tool that evaluates the popularity of search queries on Google and YouTube across various regions and times. The normalized data displays scores that are scaled from 0 to 100 to show relative popularity for the search query. Therefore 0 implies no public interest or searches for the search query while 100 implies peak popularity of the search query of

Graph 5. Google Trend Analysis for Pumpkin Spice v. Caramel Apple 2022-2026

[illegible]

Brandwatch word cloud: Pumpkin Spice

That symbolic reach is the competitive advantage caramel apple has not yet replicated. Pumpkin spice has become a cultural cue: saying “PSL season” is effectively a way of saying fall.



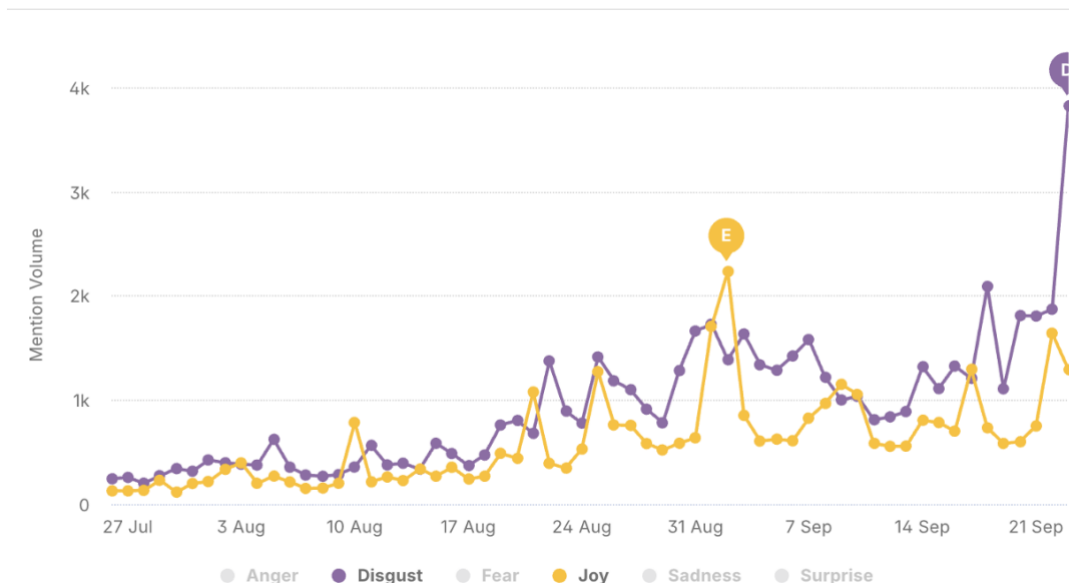
Brandwatch word cloud: Caramel Apple

Conversely, the word cloud for caramel apple has “pumpkin” at the center with a related but different competing food category, apple cider donuts. Caramel apple alone has yet to dominate a conversation without being jointly discussed alongside pumpkin spice, fall, and apple cider donuts.

Sentiment and Meaning: Joy Meets Disgust

The dominating emotions for those who wrote about pumpkin spice showed strong joy and disgust. Disgust often appears alongside sarcasm and commentary about the price or perceived excess of seasonal products. Its critics participate in mockery, memes and complaints of how the world becomes pumpkin spice dominated during the fall season. At nearly \$14 a cup, the expensive pumpkin spiced drinks are criticized for no longer being just beverages but an aesthetic fall lovers strive to achieve.

However, people are just as joyous. Joy reflects affection for the ritual of PSL season. People wait for fall to arrive on a hot August day when Starbucks releases their much anticipated PSL line for a limited time. This tension between lovers and haters of pumpkin spice echoes prior annual findings: pumpkin spice is simultaneously consumed, celebrated and mocked.

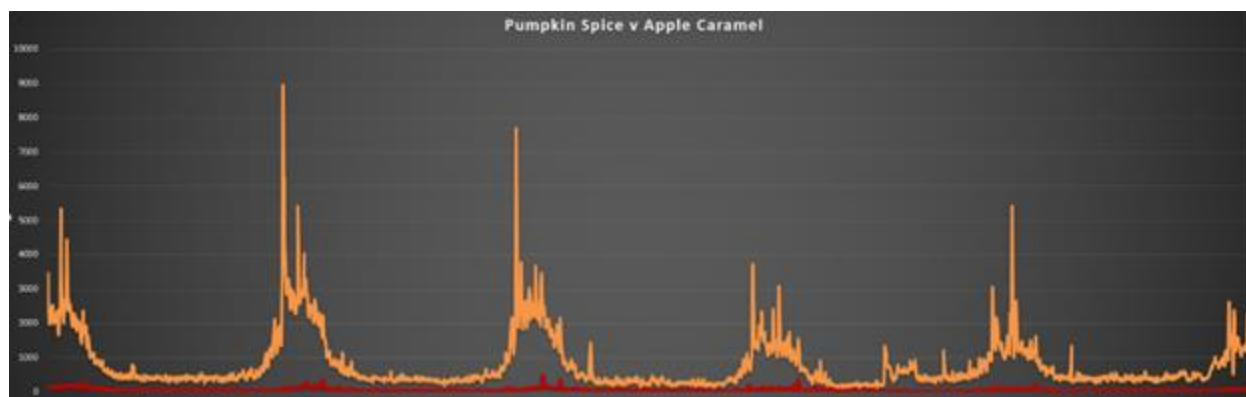


Emotions: Pumpkin spice

Caramel Apple: Product Momentum, Limited Social Conversation

Caramel apple’s 2026 story is strikingly different. Brandwatch captured about 14,000 mentions and 7,309 unique authors in the supplied analysis. Although brands and news outlets devoted attention to apple-flavored fall launches, the discussion did not produce a comparable grassroots social conversation. Forty percent of the caramel-apple source mix came from online news, highlighting the degree to which the topic was being covered rather than organically discussed.

The X data makes the contrast even sharper. Over a seven-day period in the third week of September, “caramel apple” generated 556 posts, 321,116 total impressions and 7,005,839 potential impressions from 507 contributors. The supplied research notes that the limited posts receiving likes and shares focused mostly on recipes, nutrition and product mentions, with relatively little traction.

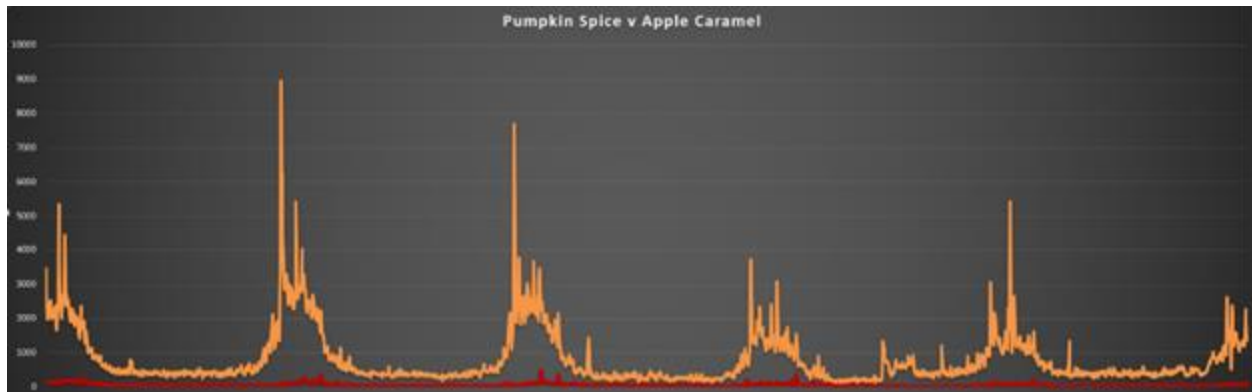


Caramel apple X activity is far smaller than pumpkin spice across comparable seasonal periods.

Longer-term X charts similarly show no discernible 2026 surge for caramel apple despite the brand and media hype. The category has familiar fall associations and broad flavor appeal, but the 2026 social data does not show a cultural handoff from pumpkin spice.

Head-to-Head: The Challenger Has Not Taken the Crown

The most direct comparison comes from the seven-day X reports at the start of fall 2026. Pumpkin spice generated 1,603.42% more posts than caramel apple. That gap is decisive because it measures actual conversation rather than the number of products launched or stories published.



Pumpkin spice and caramel apple show dramatically different levels of seasonal X conversation.

Google Trends in the supplied draft reaches the same directional conclusion. Across the five-year comparison, pumpkin spice produces large recurring seasonal peaks while caramel apple remains much lower. The 2026 pumpkin-spice peak is not evidence of renewed growth to earlier highs; paired with Brandwatch and X data, it instead shows continued seasonal dominance.

Conclusion

Move over pumpkin spice? Not yet. The 2026 data show a seasonal phenomenon that has cooled from its earlier peak but remains far ahead of its most visible challenger. Although the volume of pumpkin spice conversation is lower than in the early 2020s, data from X shows that conversation volume has remained relatively stable across the last three autumns and continues to generate millions of impressions at the start of fall.

Caramel apple has several ingredients for growth: strong consumer affinity for apples, familiar autumn associations, major-chain product innovation, and meaningful news coverage. What it does not yet have is the volume of organic social conversation, memetic familiarity, or established seasonal ritual as well as cultural identity that pumpkin spice has accumulated over time.

For marketers, the implications extend beyond selecting one fall flavor over another. The 2026 findings indicate an expanding and diversifying fall-flavor palette. Caramel apple is a useful and potentially durable addition to the fall portfolio, especially as brands seek alternatives to an overexposed pumpkin-spice category. But replacement is a much higher bar than product success.

Whether people are loving it, buying it, or making fun of it, the king of fall flavors –pumpkin spice– still owns fall.

References and Sources

Brandwatch social listening data supplied in “Move over Pumpkin Spice, it’s Caramel Apple for Fall 2026.” Observation period: July 26–September 23, 2026.

Choi, J. A., & Park, S. (2021). Infodemiological study on the use of face masks during Covid-19: Comparing US and Korea. *Društvena istraživanja*, 30(2), 359–378.

Dunkin’. 2026 pumpkin spice campaign announcement cited in source draft.

Food Institute. “Why Apple May Be Fall’s Safest Choice.” Consumer preference figures cited in source draft.

Food & Wine / YouGov. 2026 national coffee-chain ranking cited in source draft.

Montclair State University, Joetta Di Bella and Fred C. Sautter III Center for Strategic Communication. Annual pumpkin spice research, 2022–2026.

Starbucks. 2026 Peanuts x Starbucks fall merchandise collaboration announcement cited in source draft.

X social analytics supplied in “x data pumpkin 2026.” Seven-day and longitudinal comparisons of pumpkin spice and caramel apple.