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Halloween 2023: It's A Barbie World!

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Center for Strategic Communication

School of
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and Media

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By: Dr. Jin-A Choi, Dr. Yi Luo, Dr. Bond Benton, Keith Green

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Researchers

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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

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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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Introduction

Halloween and Costumes

Halloween and its social/economic significance.

Costumes are reflective of popular culture interest.

From trick-or-treating, Jack-o'-lanterns, haunted houses, horror movies to dressing in pop culture inspired costumes, Halloween is celebrated annually on October 31 in the United States. Originating in Europe, Halloween (or "All Hallows Eve" for All Saints Day) was brought to America by immigrants in the 19th century (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). To scare off the spirits of the dead that returned to harm crops and people of the physical world, people would dress as ghosts and devils. The tradition has since evolved to that of costumes which reflects popular culture such as movie characters and popular celebrities.

According to the National Retail Federation, total spending on Halloween costumes is expected to reach a breaking record of $4.1 billion this year. Of those celebrating Halloween, 69% plan to buy costumes in 2023 and spend up to $108.24, making this the highest in the NRF survey's history. Exceeding pre-pandemic spending, Halloween spending itself will reach a record of $12.2 billion (National Retail Federation, n.d.). With even pets being dressed up for Halloween, costumes are an important factor driving consumerism during this holiday.

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Accordingly, much attention is focused on the "best costumes" of the year when it comes to the realm of Halloween festivities. Notably, for 2023, Google Trends offered the most popular costumes ranking through their "frightgeist," highlighting key Halloween costume trends powered by searches. According to this frightgeist, Barbie is the most popular costume of the year for Americans.

It seems that Barbie has successfully made a return in 2023, prevailing again at the pinnacle of popular culture. Barbie and Halloween go hand in hand as they have both historically served as major drivers of consumerism in America. Costumes are not only a significant economic engine during the Halloween season, but a reflection of important social and cultural phenomena. Therefore, online interest for Barbie costumes as well as social media conversations will be examined for Halloween 2023.

Barbie Movie

Introduced on March 9, 1959 at the American Toy Fair in New York as an early rebel against the domesticity among the lives of baby-boom mothers (de Vincentiis et al., 2016), this perennial pop culture icon has been celebrated in a plethora of magazines, books, news, and fan fictions targeted at children and adults (Tulinski, 2017). Despite being criticized for her unrealistic body image (Rice et al., 2016), gender stereotype (Sherman & Zurbiggen, 2014), or a symbol of privilege (M'charek, 2010), Barbie represents a source of inspirational play (Sills, 2019) and a means to female empowerment (Saha, 2016). Especially, as an adult doll with a profession (fashion model) and active social life, Barbie's distinct appeal shines through her unabashed boldness in disrupting the gender barriers associated with dolls, pursuing activities traditionally prohibited in young women, exploring life possibilities outside the confines of domesticity, and seeking a life of adventure conventionally related to males.

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Hailed as the highest box office turnout post the pandemic year, the Barbie movie has captured the hearts of its global fans. Strikingly, the expansive marketing initiatives for this film has pushed the movie to become a cultural touchstone (Rubin, 2023). Fans across the world were not only captivated by the pink utopia presented in the movie but also bonded over their love for the color of Barbie pink (Lewis, 2023). Encapsulated in pink, Barbie epitomizes a dreamland that stimulates feelings of nostalgia, joy, and imagination, fulfilling individuals' desire to escape. Mattel, the parent company of Barbie, and Warner Bros. through 100 or more brand collaborations (del Barco, 2023), has relentlessly swept the world with a blitz of Barbie-themed merchandises, such as Barbie dreamhouse rentals, Barbie gaming consoles, Barbie pasta, Barbie pink suitcases, Barbie apparels, bright fuchsia Xbox, Barbie boat cruise, pink burger, etc. Staggering surge for online sales of Barbie-themed products affirms the impressive upswing of online consumers' interest in Barbie. For example, Amazon sales record shows the remarkable spikes for Barbie Corvette (2,373% increase), Barbie dreamhouse (2,109% increase), Barbie fashion case (168% increase), Barbie camper (40% increase), and Margot Robbie as Barbie (100% increase) (Hart, 2023).

Research Questions

With the significance of Halloween, the popularity of Barbie, and the ubiquity of popular culture in the online space, this research will investigate the extent to which Barbie costumes are generating online activity, searches, and general interest in comparison to other potential costume choices. With that in mind, the following research questions are especially salient for this investigation.

RQ1: How popular was online interest in Barbie costumes for Halloween 2023?
RQ2: Did online interest in Barbie costumes outpace other costume themes for Halloween 2023?
RQ3: What additional topics and themes related to Barbie are noteworthy for Halloween 2023?

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Google Trends is an analytics tool for evaluating search trend activity. Search trends provide context for the extent to which publics are engaging with an item. These analyses have been found to not only indicate the extent of public interest in themes, but they have also been shown to be predictive of purchase behavior and trends in areas such as fashion (Silva et al., 2019). Particularly compelling is the fact that this analytics tool evaluates over 90% of all searches globally (Gaubys, 2023).

What is especially significant is that Google Trends allows for comparative evaluation on a topic over time with the opportunity to consider changes in search behavior (Nghiem et al., 2016). Search behavior is contextually important when looking at overall online behavior. As Araro et al. (2019) note:

…it is important to take account of the denominator when interpreting counts. Google Trends does this by expressing the absolute number of searches relative to the total number of searches in each location and at each time. The number of searches for each term… is then 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: 338).

Search volume has been found to be connected to specific actions and attitudes in publics. An increase in the volume of searches related to a topic has been found to correspond to action related to that topic (McCarthy, 2010).

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 With that in mind, a Trend Analysis was conducted on search activity related to "Barbie" and "Costume" from October 1 to October 24, 2023. For comparative evaluation, similar analyses were conducted on other potential costume choices along with how Barbie was stacking up against her partner/rival Ken.
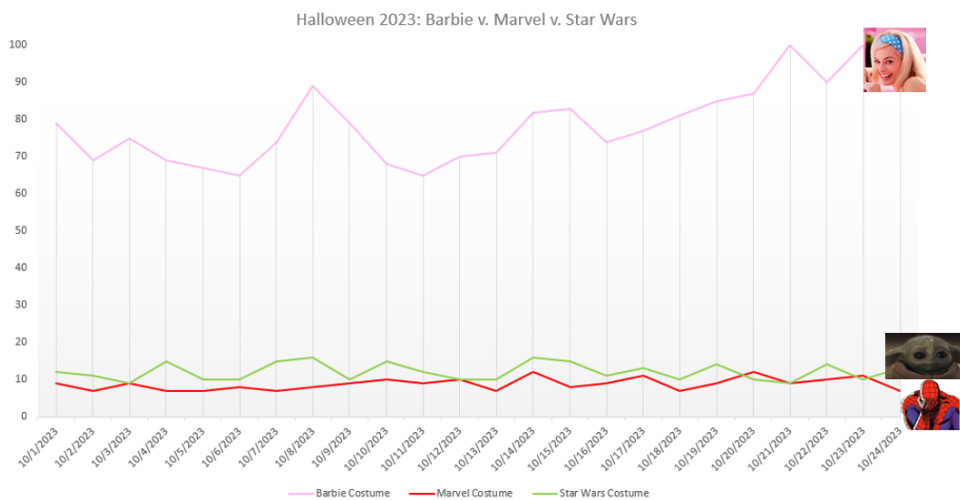
Additional context is provided by looking at how social media users have discussed themes such as Barbie, Halloween, and Costumes in the same period. Researchers employed the artificial intelligence (AI)-driven social media analytics tool, Brandwatch, to collect data in the form of social conversations. 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 about the themes of this study.

Results

Barbie surpasses Ken in online activity/interest

Halloween 2023: Barbie v. Ken
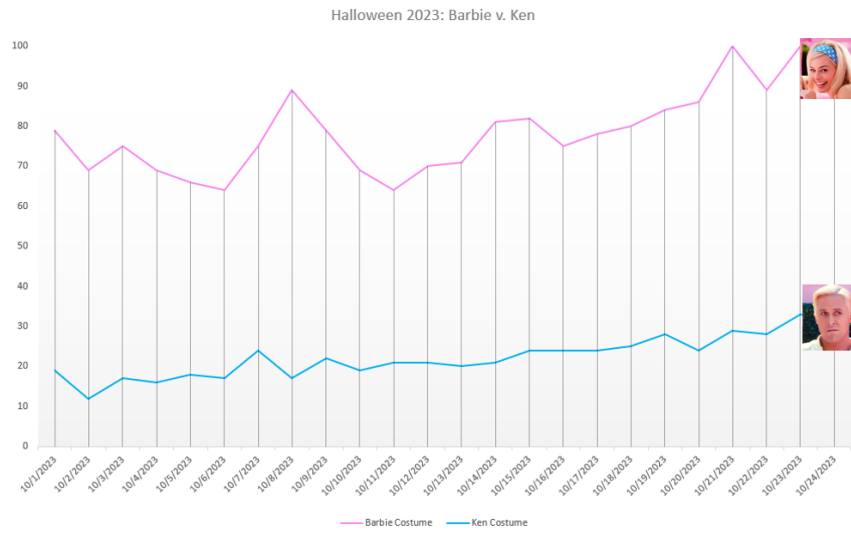
From October 1 to October 24, internet interest in Barbie costumes was 273.6% higher than activity for Ken costumes, according to the conducted Trends Analysis. As such results have been found to be predictive of purchasing intent and social behavior (Arora et al., 2019; McCarthy, 2010), data suggests that Halloween 2023 may mean quite a few Barbies will appear with a paltry number of Kens joining them. As was noted in Ryan Gosling's song in the film, "doesn't seem to matter what I do, I'm always number two."
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Barbie surpasses Marvel and Star Wars in online activity/interest

Halloween 2023: Barbie v. Marvel v. Star Wars

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From October 1 to October 24, internet interest in Barbie costumes was 787.5% higher than activity for Marvel costumes and 545.4% higher than activity for Star Wars costumes, as indicated by the Google Trends Analysis. Given the predictive effects of search interests on consumers' purchasing intent and social behavior (Arora et al., 2019; McCarthy, 2010), data from Google Trends implies that Halloween 2023 could potentially mean more pink with fewer lightsabers and superhero capes.

Results on Social Conversations about Barbie
With more than 277,000 social media conversations generated around Halloween during October 1 through October 25 2023, more than 30% of the conversations surround Halloween costumes. Of those conversations, more than 46,000 social media mentions discussing Barbie and Ken costumes were collected on Brandwatch specifically. The co-occurence "Barbie" and "popular Halloween costumes" among social conversations saw a steep 61% increase in October. Supporting Google's data as the most searched costume of the year, social conversations on Barbie and Ken costumes revolved around the anticipation of Barbie and Ken being the best costumes for Halloween 2023, from where to get Barbie costumes, deciding which Barbie to be (e.g., Cowgirl Barbie), and anticipating celebrity couples to dress up as Barbie+Ken (e.g., Taylor and Kelce).

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Social media users enthusiastically shared their intention to dress as Barbie or Ken. Users gushed about the excitement of creating a "pink utopia" for this Halloween, which was specifically associated with key words such as "ridiculously fun," "spirit," "family-friendly," "Barbieland," "neighborhood coordination," etc. With 48% of the conversation being contributed by males, there was excitement and sarcasm surrounding those dressing up as Kens. News outlets, brands, and events were keen to seize this opportunity to use Barbie and Ken as keywords and hashtags to jump aboard the hottest Halloween trend and enhance the visibility of their messages. Other related conversations discussed Margot Robbie (Barbie character in the movie, Barbie) as a Halloween icon as well as discussion of the SAG-AFTRA strike.

2023 is absolutely the year of Barbie with no escape of the Barbie-core movement sweeping across the globe. The smashing global box record of Greta Gerwig's blockbuster, Barbie, triggered an explosion in popularity for the brand. Results from our Google Trends and social listening analytics firmly attests that such Barbie mania gets intensified during this Halloween season. Strikingly, interest for Barbie has torpedoed all other traditionally favored Halloween costumes, such as princess, spider-man, witch, batman, fairy, vampire, ninja, etc. Especially, the association between pink and Barbie has been exponentially amplified through online searches and discussions on social channels. Conversations associated with Barbie costumes clearly dominated other talks pertaining to Halloween costumes on major social media platforms, as indicated by our data. Global and local retailers are eager to cash in on such unprecedented Barbie fever. The plethora of Barbie-themed merchandise provides room for everyone to embrace their inner Barbie!

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Thank You!

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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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