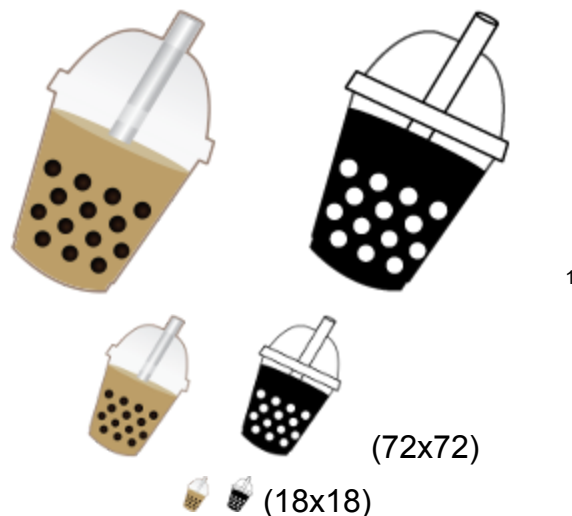


Proposal for New RGI Bubble Tea Emoji

Submitted by *Timothy Deng, Sujay Khandekar, Ranjitha Kumar, Yiyang Lu*

Date: September 2, 2018



Abstract

This proposal requests the addition of an emoji to represent CUP OF BUBBLE TEA, also known as PEARL MILK TEA or BOBA. Bubble tea is a popular drink that is both visually distinct and significant enough that it has a whole class of retail establishments specifically devoted to selling it worldwide. We propose this emoji as a ZWJ of the 🍵 (Teacup Without Handle), 🥛 (Glass of Milk), and ● code points (Medium Black Circle).

Introduction

Bubble tea — also known as boba or pearl milk tea — was introduced in Taiwan over three decades ago. Its original formulation was a mixture of hot black tea, small tapioca pearls, and sweeteners. Many variations developed in the following years, with most being cold rather than hot drinks. In addition, the small tapioca pearls have evolved into larger balls that required the use of the distinctive wide straws.

¹ Design credit: Yiyang Lu

The “boba” and “pearls” referenced are the sticky, chewy tapioca balls — a product actually derived from South American cassava root and brought to Taiwan by the Portuguese.²

A common misconception is that the tapioca pearls are the “bubbles.” In fact, bubble tea can have many types of add-ins such as agar-based fruit jellies, pudding, or as is recently popular, salted cheese. The titular “bubbles” are actually from the milk froth when the drink is shaken to mix the ingredients.

Bubble tea is one of the few beverages — like beer and coffee — that have been elevated to the point of having entire line of small businesses dedicated to it.

Identification

CLDR short name: “bubble tea”

CLDR keywords: “pearl milk tea,” “bubble milk tea,” “boba tea,” “milk tea,” “boba”

Code Points: 🍹 (U+1F375) + ZWJ (U+200D) + 🥤 (U+1F95B) + ZWJ (U+200D) + ●(U+26AB)

Name Origin

In Taiwan, it is more common for people to refer to bubble tea as pearl milk tea (zhēn zhū nǎi chá, 珍珠奶茶) because originally small 1/12” tapioca pearls were used. It was only when one tea shop owner—in an attempt to make his tea stand out—decided to use larger tapioca balls and chose a more provocative name, “boba,” to represent the difference. In Chinese, the word boba, 波霸, is a combination of the character of “波” (pronunciation: bō) and the character “霸” (pronunciation: bà). It is a Cantonese slang, for “big breasts,” “buxom lady,” a more literal translation could be “dominatrix of breasts,” connoting the image of a busty woman. The word “波” in Mandarin Chinese means wave or surge, and in Cantonese slang can have the extended meaning of bubble or ball. Whereas the word “霸” in Mandarin Chinese can mean an overlord or a dominating person, which, when found together, When used to describe the drink, the characters (bō bà nǎi chá, 波霸奶茶) directly translate to boba milk tea, and loosely to bubble milk tea. This translation is commonly used by English speakers and refers to the variant with 1/4” tapioca pearls.

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<http://www.laweekly.com/restaurants/how-boba-became-an-integral-part-of-asian-american-culture-in-los-angeles-7819797>

Images

License: Free to use in the context of this proposal.

A zip file is provided with images of size 72x72 in color and black & white. Larger sizes and 18x18 sizes shown at the beginning of the proposal.

Selection Factors Inclusion

Compatibility:

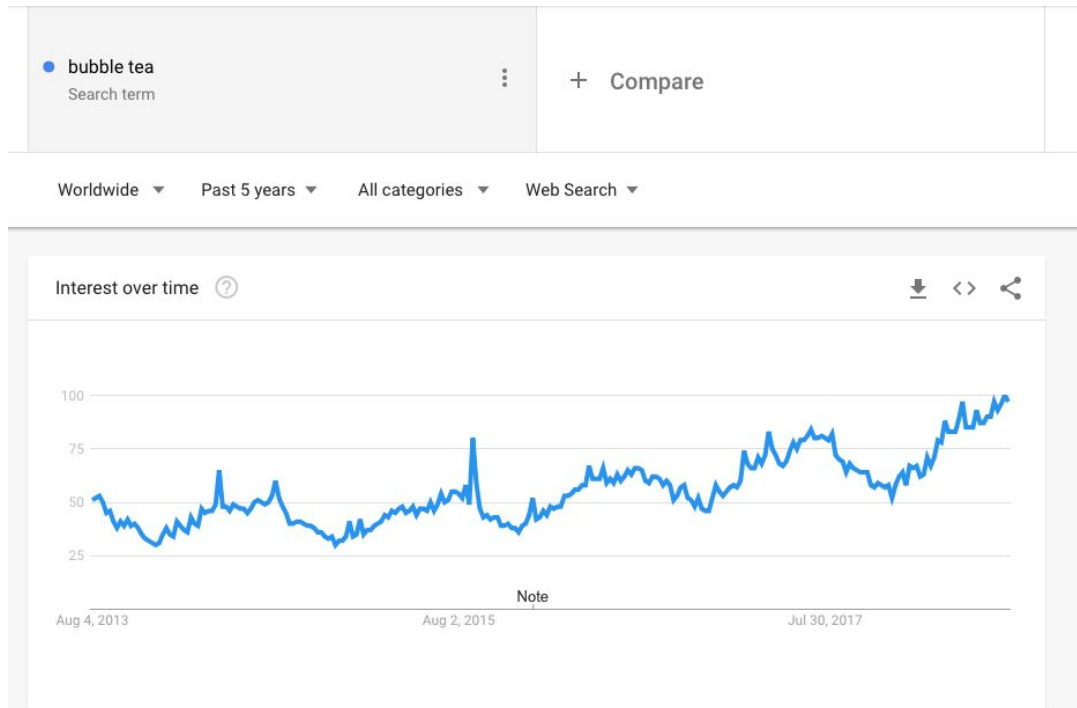
There are many requests for a bubble tea emoji, as will be demonstrated in this document. However, no known service currently has this emoji in production. This proposal takes backwards compatibility into account; by using the ZWJ, a system that fails to provide a bubble tea emoji can simply render its components. That sequence is already a popular emoji shorthand for the drink.

Expected Usage Level:

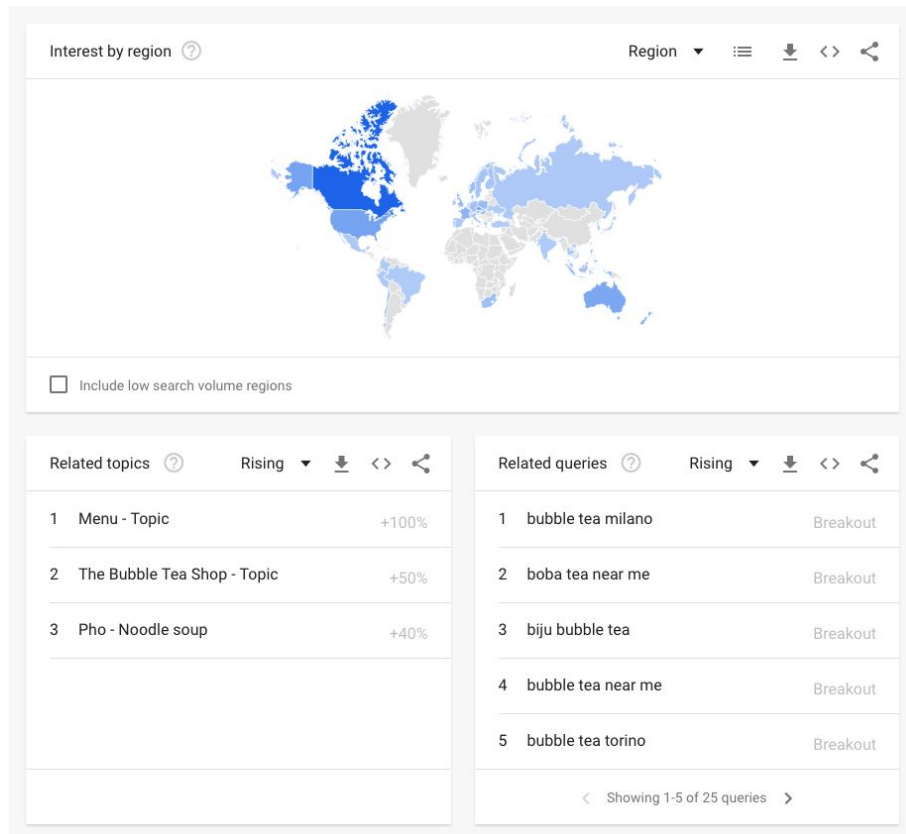
Frequency:

We expect the usage of the bubble tea emoji to be medium to high, and more importantly, to increase over time.

In Google Trends, the usage of “bubble tea” over the past five years has been consistently active around the world. To add, the search terms are often for businesses that sell bubble tea.



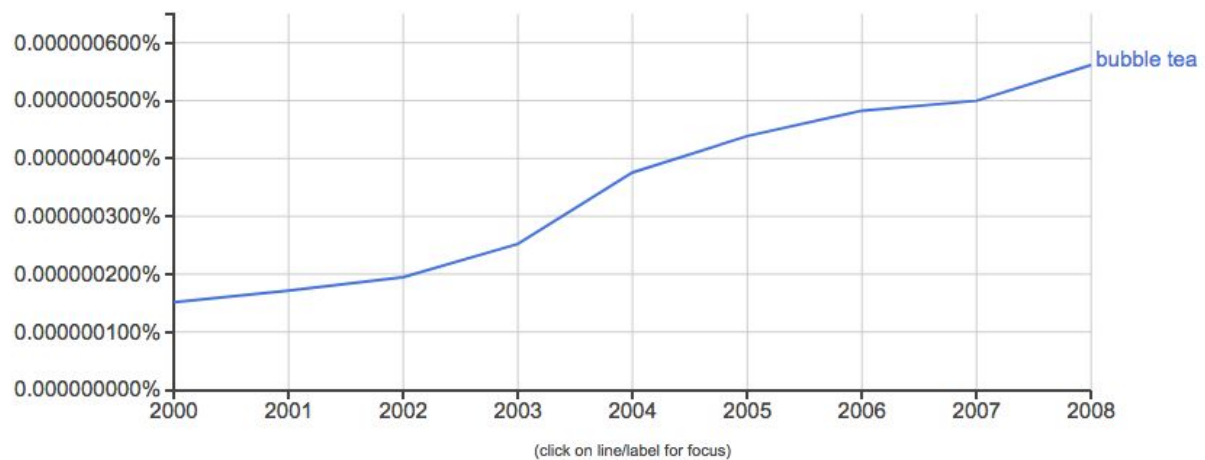
In addition, you can see from Google Ngram viewer that the cultural resonance of bubble tea in the 21st century.



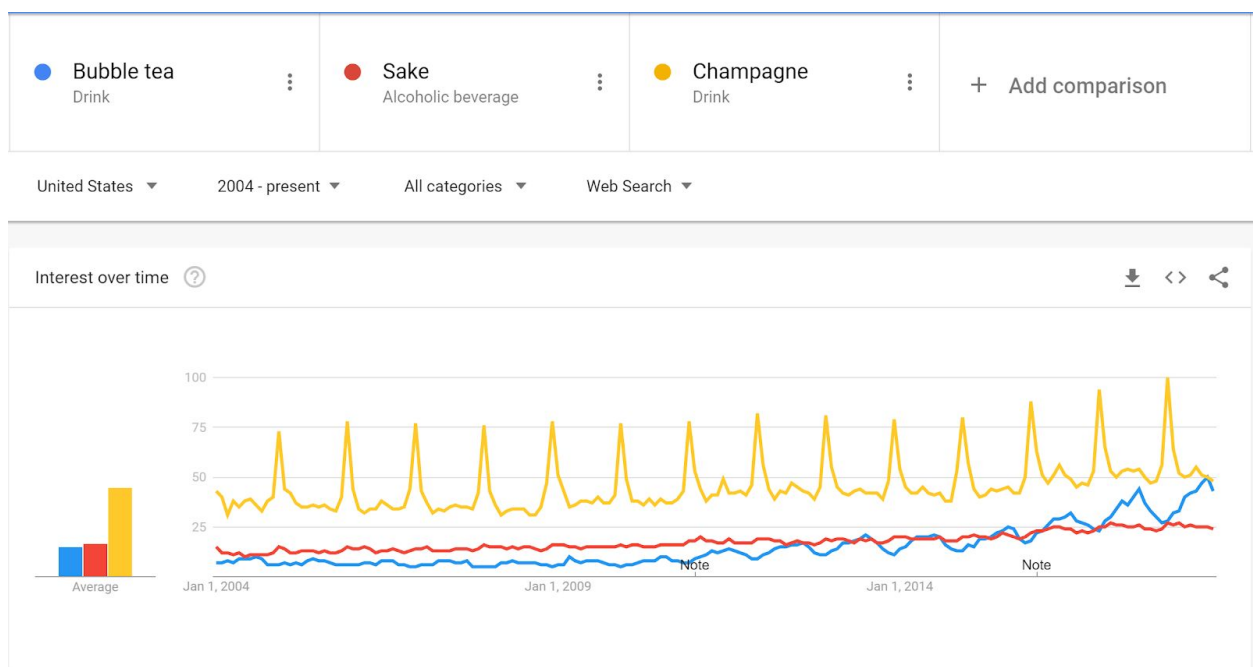
Google Books Ngram Viewer

Graph these comma-separated phrases: ☐ case-insensitive

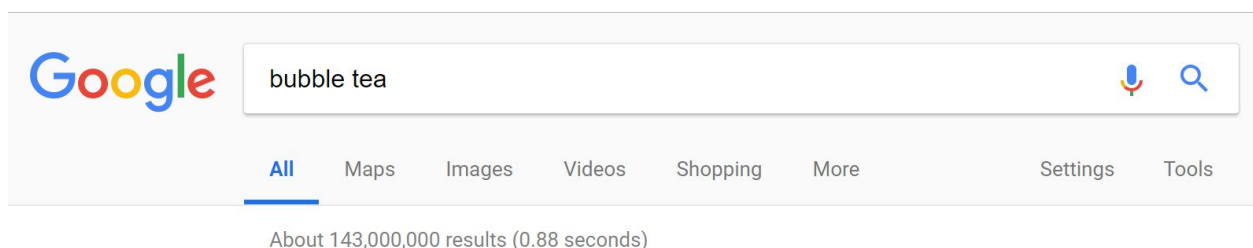
between and from the corpus with smoothing of [Search lots of books](#)

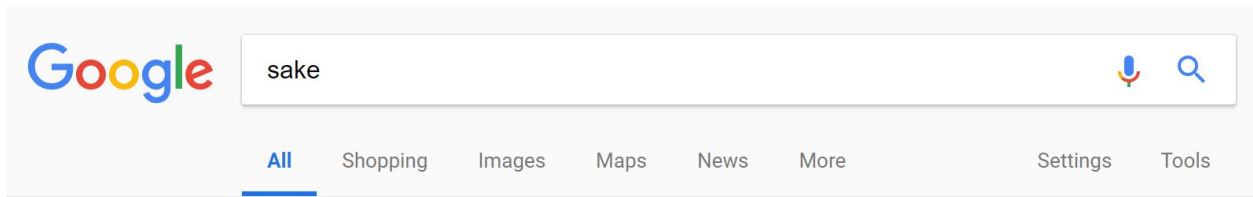


In addition, we expect usage of the bubble tea emoji to be high not only in Taiwan, where the drink originates, but in other countries too. Consider another existing emoji from the drink category, one that has specific origins from an East Asian country but has since exploded in popularity worldwide: 🍷 (Sake Bottle and Cup). In Taiwan, the search term “bubble tea” eclipsed “sake” years ago. This trend is also visible in other countries like Canada and the United States with significant East Asian immigrant communities, as shown below. In the United States, we can also compare the search interest of champagne (🍾) to bubble tea. It’s consistently popular through the past couple of decades, and its popularity peaks during special occasions, most likely New Years. But its growth has stagnated, and we can see that recently, bubble tea is surpassing champagne’s popularity on the average, non-special-occasion day.

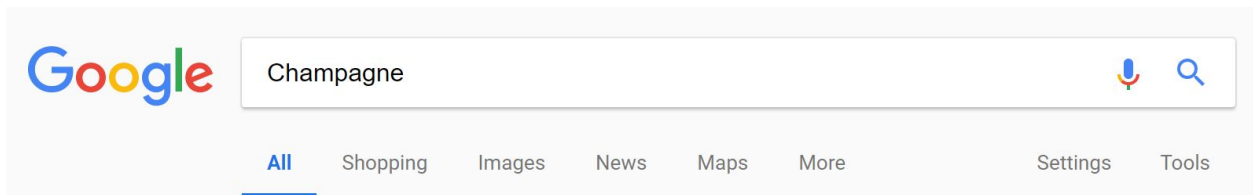


Search result returns on major platforms are also comparable. For example, on Google, the number of results for bubble tea are close to sake and fewer than more established drinks that are emojis, like champagne.



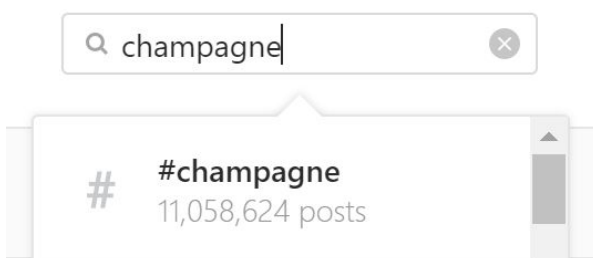
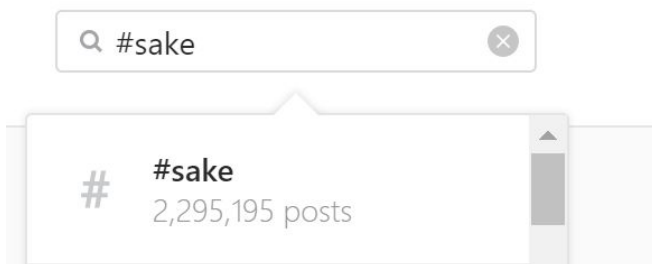
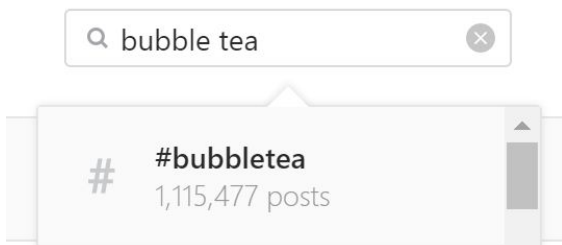


About 143,000,000 results (0.80 seconds)

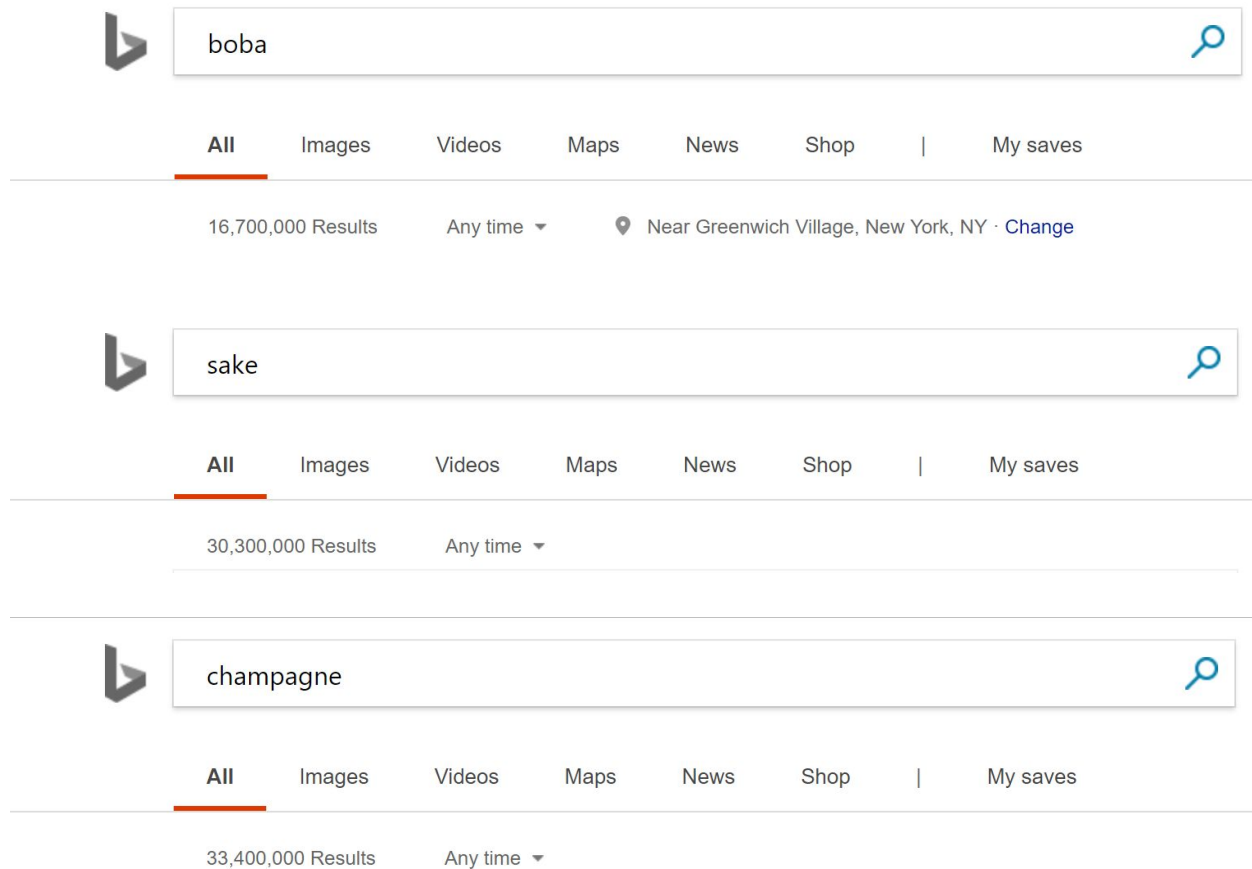


About 390,000,000 results (0.78 seconds)

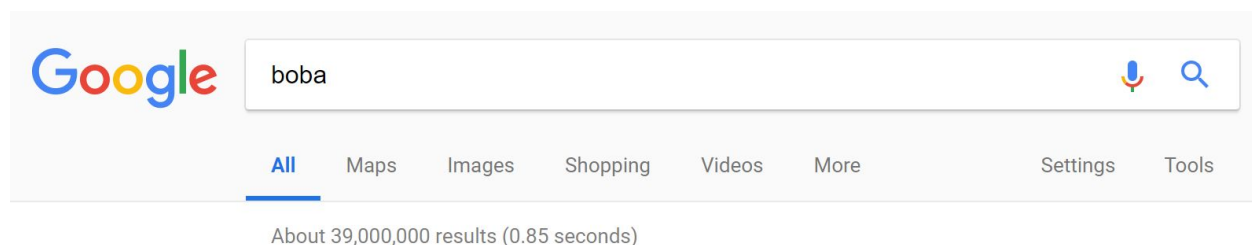
On Instagram:



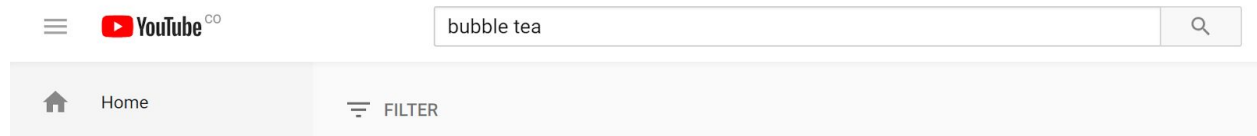
One important note is that bubble tea goes by many names, which means any search result considering only one of its names is bound to underreport. For example, the following Bing searches compare the term “boba” to sake and champagne:



In fact, if we return to Google, we will notice that the term “boba” also offers a small boost to search results.



YouTube results were intended to be included; however it appears as if YouTube no longer reports the number of results per search:



According to a news report by Allied Market Research, the global bubble tea market is valued at \$1,957 millions in 2016 and is projected to reach \$3,214 million by 2023.³ The black bubble tea segment is roughly 42% share of the entire market in 2016. The leaders in the market have a strong foothold as well. Vivi Bubble Tea has 45 shops in the US, Ten Ren Tea and Ginseng Company have 30 shops in the US, and the rising popularity of Boba Guys from San Francisco has garnered major press.⁴

Image Distinctiveness

Compared to other drinks in the emoji lexicon, there are no drinks that are similar to bubble tea, which contains the black tapioca balls and its signature thick straw.

Completeness

The milk bubble tea with black tapioca balls is the most common bubble tea drink and is recognizable due to that fact.




Frequently Requested

Users have requested bubble tea into the standard; however, they have often used combinations of emojis to describe the drink. From the data analysis in Opico, an app where emojis are used to describe experiences at businesses, the 🍵 emoji has been used 61 times to describe a tea-related experience at a location that serves bubble tea. Users explained that hot tea emoji was the most appropriate emoji to describe their bubble “tea,” but seldom did the user order a hot drink. The 🍵 emoji was used with the 🥛 or 🧋 emoji 10 times to specifically describe milk tea and five times with the 🍡 emoji to describe the tapioca pearls. More combinations such as 🍷🍵🥛 and 🍷🍵🧋 were used to describe particular flavorings of milk tea.

Users on Twitter have been consistent in their advocacy for a bubble tea emoji for years, though some tend to blame their device manufacturers:

³ <https://www.alliedmarketresearch.com/bubble-tea-market>

⁴ <https://la.eater.com/2018/5/17/17361548/boba-guys-los-angeles-expansion-culver-city>

	skye (*^▽^*) @_itsskye_ · 30 Sep 2017 when is apple gonna make a milk tea emoji	3
	Wesley Lo @wesleylo_p · 21 Jul 2017 There needs to be a boba milk tea emoji 🙄	3
	Kimberly Santos @mrskimsantos · 20 Jul 2017 A milk tea emoji needs to come into existence.	5
	martin @ruizmrtn · 30 Mar 2017 Milk tea emoji please	2
	ジャーラ @JirlaJemmers · 13 Dec 2016 So now there's finally a black heart emoji and avocado emoji ... still waiting for a milk tea one	6
	Margee Dawal 🌞 @geegeeboom · 1 Nov 2016 I wish they had a milk tea emoji	4
	Deyzz @young_deys · 24 Oct 2016 They should have a milk tea emoji 🙄	2

Selection Factors Exclusion

Overly Specific

Bubble Tea has become a widely recognized drink that has a variety of different combinations and flavors. The tea itself can have various flavors such as black, green, or white tea. The tapioca can be replaced with a variety of other chewy substitutes and toppings. Some cafes will try to blend different combinations of coffee, tea, or ice cream as different forms of the drink.

Open Ended

This emoji's recognizability in its most basic form is what allows it to be used in many open ended ways to describe any flavored milk tea drinks. While we suggest that the emoji include black tapioca pearls, as they are the most popular, "boba" entails any combination of teas, milks, and toppings, in the way that a generic "pizza" emoji is *technically* a specific dish, but encompasses dozens of variations.

Already Representable

The current emoji set does not allow for the specificity of a milk tea with tapioca. Other emojis such as 🍵 describe a different genre of hot tea drinks and 🥤 is too general to be used to describe specifically bubble tea.

Transient

The growing popularity of bubble tea has shown that there is a global demand for this style of drink, and its reach still has the potential to grow to more countries beyond North American, European, and Asian countries. The growing number of shops and businesses in the bubble tea industry further bolster this idea. Bubble tea is, in the grand scheme of things, a relatively new invention, but is by no means a recent fad. Its growth in popularity as demonstrated by Google Trends has been steady for the past decade and shows no indication of stopping.

Logos, brands, UI icons, signage, specific people, deities

Although many milk tea businesses may use a bubble tea emoji to represent their product, this particular item and artwork are not tied specifically to any one or business or brand. In addition, bubble tea is not part of any official signage and is not a specific person or deity.

Sort Location

Category: Food and Drink, drink

The bubble tea emoji should appear after ☐ (Cup with Straw). While it technically consists of milk and tea, it is specifically not a morning drink, nor is it served hot in the way coffee and tea are depicted. It is also not an alcoholic drink. The bubble tea emoji is most similar to "Cup with Straw."

Bios

Sujay Khandekar (khandek2@illinois.edu) is a new grad, software engineer, and emoji lover who wants to tell his friends with emojis that he's having bubble tea.

Timothy Deng (timdeng2324@gmail.com) is a student at the University of California San Diego, software engineer, and boba aficionado.

Ranjitha Kumar (ranjitha@illinois.edu) is an Assistant Professor of Computer Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and aspiring emoji ethnographer.

Yiying Lu ([@yiyinglu](https://twitter.com/yiyinglu)) is an award-winning Creative Director, a Bilingual Speaker, and Dumpling Connoisseur. Apart from creating the Boba emoji art, she is the artist of the official 🍡🍡🍡🍡 emojis and the [Twitter Fail Whale](#).