

Hello Kitty: A Brand Made of Cuteness

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Keywords: Hello Kitty / Sanrio / female marketing

Abstract

In 1974 Sanrio Co. Ltd. introduced a character named Hello Kitty, who since then has had a large impact on young girls and women throughout the world. The character began in Japan, where Sanrio Co. Ltd. is based, but is very popular in America as well. In Japan “kawaii”, or the cute aspect, influences the way consumers view Hello Kitty. Children in Japan enjoy the small aspects of the character whereas women like the innocence of Hello Kitty and the character brings out their nurturing nature. In America, women are drawn to Hello Kitty for different reasons, such as the youthful appeal of the character and the large availability of the products. Young girls in America are drawn to Hello Kitty’s appearance and colors. The simplicity of Hello Kitty’s design enables consumers to project their emotions onto the character and in turn Hello Kitty can reflect anyone’s personality. The consumer is really what makes Hello Kitty a successful character. It is difficult to say if Hello Kitty will continue to be popular in years to come, however the marketing of ‘cute’ is sure to persevere.

Hello, Hello Kitty

Hello Kitty is a highly recognizable character known throughout the world. A white kitten with two small black eyes, an orange nose, no mouth and a pink bow on her left ear, Hello Kitty has become a symbol of cuteness. In Japan, this cuteness is called “kawaii”, and it is part of the culture (Bremner). In America, this cuteness is part of our obsession with youth. Hello Kitty is not just a trend; after 36 years the little kitten is still appearing on a range of products ("Sanrio Company," 2009). Hello Kitty appeals to the young and innocent, as well as women who are attracted to the young and cute appeal.

Hello History

Hello Kitty is part of Sanrio Co., Ltd., a company based in Tokyo, Japan. In 1960, Shintaro Tsuji founded the company as Yamanshi Center Co. with the idea to create character merchandise for gift giving ("Sanrio Company," 2009). Tsuji wanted to bring smiles to people’s faces, which sparked the company’s principle of “small gift, big smile”, which the company still uses today (“Company Information”). The first character to be introduced was a strawberry, taking advantage of the hit “Strawberry Fields Forever” by the Beatles; the company was inspired to expand into the United States ("Sanrio Company," 2009). The company’s first retail store was introduced in San Francisco, California. After opening their first store in the United States, Yamanshi Center Co. decided to open a store in the country where the company had its

roots: Japan ("Sanrio Company," 2009). In 1971 the shop opened in the country's capital Tokyo. Then, in 1973 the company made the decision to change their name to Sanrio Company, Ltd. The next year the company introduced three new characters, Patty, Jimmy and Hello Kitty ("Sanrio Company," 2009). This last character was soon to become a global phenomenon.

The success of Hello Kitty was so large that each year the character's products represented half of the company's sales ("Sanrio Company," 2009). The company then began to license their most popular character in 1976. The increasing demand in the United States propelled Sanrio Co. Ltd., to open up a subsidiary in California called Sanrio, Inc. ("Sanrio Company," 2009). Even with the continued popularity of Hello Kitty, the company still continued to create new characters, however none of them have become quite as popular as Hello Kitty. Throughout the 1980's and 1990's, the company continued to expand internationally to Europe, Latin America, and other Asian countries. Back home in Japan, the brand continued to be so successful that Sanrio Co., Ltd. opened two theme parks based on the company's characters ("Sanrio Company," 2009).

Hello Kitty continued to thrive in the United States during the new millennium, but back in Japan the demand was not as great. The company was experiencing hard times due to the lack of desire for their product as well as bad investing. As a result, the company created an advertising department in an attempt to raise sales ("Sanrio Company," 2009). The company also created a Global Consumer Products division to form better opportunities to engage in business endeavors such as co-branding, new product development and more licensing agreements ("Sanrio Company," 2010). The strategy was successful in promoting growth and today there are over 4,000 stores that carry the Sanrio brand just in the western hemisphere ("Company Information"). Sanrio is constantly adding new products to the mix, and has over 50,000 products available to their customers ("Sanrio Company," 2010). The company has created an empire on a character of cuteness.

Hello Japan

Hello Kitty originated in Japan, where the citizens are one of the main consumers of the products. Not only are the citizens avid customers, but their culture also embraces the character. "Kawaii" is composed of several different components that make up 'cute'. Being very small, innocent, young, dependent, round, pastel in color and animal-like create the cuteness that is essential to the Japanese culture (Yano 57). Belson and Bremner describe how these positive meanings of "kawaii" are what Hello Kitty embodies (15). "Kawaii" attracts people of all ages. The young are especially attracted to this, particularly the aspect of objects being very small. Yano discusses how Hello Kitty is tiny, "the weight of three apples" to be exact, and also appears on very small products such as pens, band-aids, and miniature toys (See Figure 1) (57). These small items appeal to young Japanese girls because they can easily be carried anywhere and are easily held by small hands. The children relate this small, rounded character to being safe and nice, which makes for a comforting belonging in a mostly strict society (Belson and Bremner 174).



Figure 1: Hello Kitty Merchandise.
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Hello Kitty products reach an older market through “kawaii” as well. “Kawaii” demonstrates both gender roles and social roles within Japanese culture. Women are especially affected by “kawaii” (Bremner). Japan is a country with some of the lowest birthrates, so mothering skills are not being used as commonly as in other countries. Hello Kitty gives these women something to take care of (Garger). Garger states, “Psychologists believe that cuteness is a function of resemblance to human infants, to whom we’re programmed to respond sympathetically because of their helplessness.” The kitten seems vulnerable and needy. She has no mouth to speak about anything and she is also adorable, small and round (Garger). Belson and Bremner explain how Hello Kitty has a warm image that makes the owner feel the need to hold the simple, non-threatening and supportive kitten (173). Hello Kitty becomes a substitute child to nurture and help grow, even if that growth is only in more purchases of the character.

Not only do Japanese women want to be mothers, but they want their innocence back as well (Garger). Hello Kitty lets these women retreat into a child-like state-of-mind to escape from the strict, regulated and self-controlled adult life they live day to day. Japan has a “tightly structured society” that is more hierarchical than America’s society (Carte and Fox 115). Businesswomen in Japan have to work harder than men in order to establish a credible image (Carte and Fox 115). Also, in Japan early childhood is a time of freedom, which they never again experience once they reach school age (Garger). This association of freedom and happiness with childhood is a large explanation why innocence and “kawaii” is so important to the Japanese.

Hello America

Even though Hello Kitty originated in Japan, she is also a very popular character in our own society. American society is very focused on staying young and creating an idealized life for

oneself. Many Americans associate getting old with negatives such as becoming physically frail, less attractive and lacking previous abilities (Papalia et al. 17). The media spreads stereotypes that the elderly are incompetent, unproductive and cranky. Papalia, Sterns, Feldman and Camp describe how these stereotypes promote ageism, which is “prejudice or discrimination, usually against older persons, based on age”; this is prominent in our society due to fear of growing older (17). Women embrace the sensation of Hello Kitty to feel young again. Many women grew up with the cute character and she returns them to their younger life and brings back memories of childhood. Emily Funicello, 18, and collector of the brand for eight years states, “Since I started liking Hello Kitty at a young age I still have that same feeling when I see her products. There are Hello Kitty products for little kids all the way up to adults, so rather than growing out of her, people can continue to relate to her.” Hello Kitty can make women continue to feel youthful. Sanrio recognizes the desire from these women and in return has created products such as toasters, waffle irons, hair-dryers, purses and clothing (McVeigh 230).

Consumerism in America creates successful retail of Hello Kitty. Consumerism and materialism is what many Americans believe will create a happier way of living. Hello Kitty feeds this desire for women; Sanrio offers such a wide variety of products at different price points. The company also offers different versions of Hello Kitty, varying the character with slight changes such as a flower on her ear at times instead of a bow, or a change in the color of the bow (McVeigh 229-231). Heather Osgood, 45, professor at Drexel University and collector of the brand states, “Sanrio has put her in so many cute costumes and themes like biker girl and angel. Each new incarnation makes you want more merchandise.” The character is seen at many different stores and is easily accessible, being sold at individual boutiques with higher price points to large corporations such as Target Corporation with lower price points. Jordan Rubin, 20, and collector of the brand for about ten years states:

I used to think I had a fair amount of things, but when I see how many products there are out there, I feel like I really don't. There are products that reach areas that other brands haven't thought to. I don't know of any other character out there that has their own waffle maker or toaster. The diversity of the brand is what really works.

The easy accessibility coupled with the variety of products create a character that is easy to begin collecting. Consumers can purchase more and more of Hello Kitty products to continue feeling youthful and satisfied. McVeigh explains that there is an almost contagious aspect to Hello Kitty, those who have merchandise desire more and those who see others with it may want to purchase merchandise to be part of the fashion (235).

The children in America love Hello Kitty just as much or more than the women in their country. Younger girls in America are won over by the appearance of the character. Appearance is important in society and children see this in images on T.V. and during everyday shopping experiences. From the perfection of Barbie to mannequins with flawless bodies, even the youngest girls believe appearance is important. The feminine colors that are used in Hello Kitty products are very important to her appealing appearance. Tsuji said, “Red-oriented colors symbolize warmth, little girls, little animals and love, so is most suited for characters” (Belson and Bremner 69), and of course Hello Kitty's design uses both red and white to make a subconscious pink combination. Yuko Yamaguchi, who is in charge of Kitty's design stated,

“pink is the cutest color and has the most feeling. Pink makes you happy” (Belson and Bremner 69). These color combinations clearly make an impact on young American girls. Devon Caldes, 3, and already a collector of Hello Kitty, (Figure 2) explains why she likes the character, “(Hello Kitty) has a barrette and a shirt on and that make(s) her beautiful.” The appearance of the kitten is a large part of her attraction.



Figure 2: Devon Caldes with some of her Hello Kitty merchandise
Photo courtesy of Jennifer Caldes. All rights reserved.

Hello Everyone

Hello Kitty may have different appeal in different cultures, however one thing that is universal for the little kitten is her simple appearance. This simplicity is important to the popularity of Hello Kitty. Her plain look lets the individual project their emotions onto her. Hello Kitty’s lack of a mouth makes it easier to share in a person’s feelings, without a plastered on expression she can be happy or sad with her admirer (McVeigh 234). Belson and Bremner describe how she travels from one culture to the next, saying different things to each group of people (161). Hello Kitty is almost a mirror to the consumer; she is waiting to be filled by what her owner is made of and in turn reflect that (Belson and Bremner 179). The success of Hello Kitty lies in the fact that the consumer makes her a meaningful character (Palmer).

Hello, Goodbye?

It will be interesting to see if Hello Kitty will continue to be popular in the years to come. As Belson and Bremner state, “talk to some of (Tsuji’s) rivals around town and they openly wonder if Hello Kitty’s glory days are over unless there is a pretty dramatic rethink of the brand” (200). Hello Kitty appears on such a large quantity of merchandise that there are not many types of products remaining to be branded with the character. If there are no products left to market Hello Kitty on, will the brand die out? There may need to be a lot more variety in the Hello Kitty character to continue her success. Belson and Bremner declare:

It is difficult to say with any certainty whether a brand will be around 10 or 20 years from now, despite the best efforts of a company to keep the magic going. Far more certain, though, is the probability that cuteness will live on as an important aesthetic value and continue to be of keen interest to the marketing pros in Japan (and) the U.S. (202).

Hello Kitty may or may not live on, even though she has immense popularity today, but we can be certain ‘cute’ will continue to be a global phenomenon.

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