

## **IB3260: Buyer Behaviour Assignment**

*Essay, 12 CATS, 2500 words*

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Chosen Topic: ***“CAN HELLO KITTY CONTINUE TO RULE THE WORLD?”***

Based on Melinda Varley press article, *Brand Strategy*, February 2009, Issue 229, P32-36

(Attached Document)



**“ALL THE WORK CONTAINED WITHIN IS MY OWN  
UNAIDED EFFORT AND CONFORMS TO THE  
UNIVERSITY’S GUIDELINES ON PLAGIARISM”**

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**2623 Words**

Over the last few years, “Japanese manga, anime, fashion, and other pop culture has taken the world by storm”<sup>1</sup>: Astro Boy, Sakura, Pucca and many other famous Japanese brands have rushed into the Asian, the European and the North American fashion markets; but one of them, more than the others, seems to have a particular success and give rise to a real consumption fever: Sanrio’s mascot called Hello Kitty. Celebrating its 35 years of existence in 2009, Hello Kitty is not only a simple cute, innocuous cat face but also a very lucrative one, known as the “\$1 billion”<sup>2</sup> lifestyle brand. Both these global, contagious and money-making aspects make what some observers named the “pink globalization”<sup>3</sup> an interesting phenomena to analyze from the consumer behaviour point of view. In order to elucidate the key elements of Hello Kitty’s appeal to the whole world’s consumers, we will try to identify the different attributes, steps and then influences which lead people to purchase a Hello Kitty product, despite their dissimilar intentions or devotion levels for the brand. To end, we will also try to discriminate how Sanrio is reinforcing its customers’ positive attitudes and involvement, creating a stronger relationship with them, making them committed, loyal or even obsessed with the brand as time goes, and because of this, ensuring its jeopardized sustainability.

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As stated previously, the first phase of our analysis will focus on Hello Kitty’s brand’s attributes, and their interaction with customers from exposure to attitude build-up. To do so, let’s address these three main questions: what in Hello Kitty’s character’s intrinsic design, features and merchandising make of it a peculiar icon? What is its extrinsic message, how is it interpreted, what values is it promoting? As a result, what can we say about customers’ motivations when purchasing Hello Kitty’s products; what needs, wants or desires are they filling?

One of the most amazing facts about Hello Kitty is that this brand is advertising itself: being “ubiquitous” and easily accessible<sup>4</sup> provides it a great exposure; that’s why understanding what stimuli it is delivering and how they are attracting and sticking people’s attention is so important. By having a broadly diversified range of products with her head, Hello Kitty has become a multi-sensory brand. It has an unusual look through its cartoon figure image: white, simple, cute, without any

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<sup>1</sup> [http://web-japan.org/trends/09\\_culture/pop090827.html](http://web-japan.org/trends/09_culture/pop090827.html)

<sup>2</sup> M. Varley, 2009

<sup>3</sup> C.R. Yano, 2009

<sup>4</sup> B.J. Mc Veigh, 2000

mouth, only wearing a ribbon and being dressed with colourful cloths. It has a sound, funny and easy to remember thank to its animated series, the theme of which is saying “Hello Kitty, play with us today. We’ll laugh and sing on this lovely sunny day. All your friends are waiting for you, ready to run and play. Everyone will gather round, this is what they’ll say. When we see your friendly smile, you brighten up our day. Oh hello, Hello kitty, hello dear friend. Your smile is pretty like a flower that’s in bloom. Love is in your heart, it sings a happy tune. Hello, Hello Kitty, play with us today.”<sup>5</sup> And then, it also has a sweet taste associated with the Hello Kitty confectionery; a nice smell associated with the Hello Kitty fragrances and perfumes or still, a soft touch, the one of its plush’s texture. Highly exploited by Sanrio’s creative and attractive merchandising, the combination of these stimuli allows them to make the consumer’s experience of the brand more intense and to differentiate it from its competitors<sup>6</sup>, whereas the consumer is sometimes not aware of the attention he is paying involuntarily to them, learning and increasing its cognition about the brand.

Moreover, these apparently “harmless” stimuli are carrying much more sense and affective impact than they seem to. All of them are signs the customer perceives and interprets consciously or unconsciously as a message in order to attach a meaning to them, referring to their own beliefs and the values the brand vehicles. In Hello Kitty’s case, for example, the absence of mouth and the design’s simplicity will be interpreted, most of the time as a way to identify with it and project personal feelings onto it<sup>7</sup>, inspiring intimacy and security. In the same way and according to Shintaro Tsuji (Hello Kitty’s creator), its ribbon is a sign of trust and comradeship: “a ribbon is something that joins people together, so it means friendship”<sup>8</sup>. All the colours Hello Kitty wears are also associated with purity or sophistication (white), love and femininity (pink), serenity and calm (pale blue), warmth (red), luxury (purple) or glamour (black)<sup>9</sup>. Hello Kitty’s song, previously quoted, confirms these dimensions, with many references to positive, joyful situations and terms: “lovely sunny day”, “friendly smile”, “love is in your heart”... To end, an important point to highlight is the

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmx4eX6SO48&feature=related>

<sup>6</sup> Flynn, 2005

<sup>7</sup> B.J. Mc Veigh, 2000

<sup>8</sup> Extract from “*Friendly face behind the kitty*”, By Robin Harding in Tokyo, 1 March 2010, Financial Times

<sup>9</sup> Evans, Jamal and Foxall, 2009

brand appeal to nostalgia and how it incites people to reconnect with their childhood through the idea of sweetness and innocence.

Once these values and a personal meaning have been attached to the brand and its products, the customer is reaching the “conation” point, building up an attitude toward them and developing some motivations to purchase it, filling a need, a want or a desire and restoring its internal equilibrium or homeostasis. Buying a Hello Kitty product comes close to the concept of “symbolic consumption”<sup>10</sup> If we follow Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs as an explicative model for Hello Kitty’s consumption, for example, buying Hello Kitty’s products and using them in a public or in a private sphere would address psychological and social needs : their buyers would look for security, happiness, love, self respect, inner and outer harmony, pleasure, social recognition...Buying Hello Kitty, in other words would allow them to reconcile their actual self and their ideal self by introducing in their daily life a way to escape it for a little while, making it easier to put up with. That’s precisely what Mc Veigh is calling Hello Kitty’s “unifying leitmotif”, and “consumutopia”.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, Hello Kitty’s strength is that while addressing these universal needs, it also follows the fashion trends, evolves and offers different levels of adoption for its different target segments in “a concentrated effort to tie together within a single individual different modes of self-presentation that chronologically corresponds to girlhood, female adolescence and womanhood.”<sup>12</sup>

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Being made clearer the brand’s means and attributes having an effect on the consumers’ attitudes; it appears meanwhile insufficient to explain consumers’ behaviour and involvement toward its products in their wholeness. Indeed, customers are influenced by some other environmental and personal factors such as demographics and psychographics, social groups, or cultures and subcultures. From this point, what can we say about the main influences leading to the purchase or rejection of Hello Kitty’s products by customers: who are Hello Kitty’s consumers? What or who are they influenced by? Do cultural aspects have an influence on Hello Kitty’s globalized consumption, how and why?

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<sup>10</sup> Evans, Jamal and Foxall, 2009

<sup>11</sup> B.J. Mc Veigh, 2000

<sup>12</sup> B.J. Mc Veigh, 2000

Hello Kitty's target segments are numerous and varied, from children to adults, who are now at the heart of the brand's marketing strategy because of the general "post baby boom" birth rate decline. Young girls, teenagers, young women, mothers and grandmothers, as well as young men: all of them are considered as potential customers; whatever their social background is, thanks to the wide price range of Hello Kitty's products. In terms of generational cohorts, X generation members, with most of the time a traditional lifestyle, are more expected to buy Hello Kitty products for their children, as a way to offer them what they were dreaming about when they were children themselves without being able to afford it or what they grew up with and make them remember their childhood (case of family/intergenerational influence). Inversely, Y generation members, with most of the time a contemporary lifestyle, are expected to buy Hello Kitty's products for themselves considering them as expression, self-branding means, particularly when it comes to luxury products like jewelleries. In this direction, the recent raise of the "girl power" is also one of the most important leverages to take into account when it comes to the Hello Kitty mania.

"Cute", "Cool" and "Camp" are the three qualifiers employed by Mc Veigh to describe what Hello Kitty "commodifies"<sup>13</sup>, depending on age categories ("cute" for children, "cool" for teenagers and "camp" for young women and men). These qualifiers could also be related to different "tribes": associative and aspirational reference groups, causing a "contagious desire"<sup>14</sup> mixing normative and identity influences, conformity and independence thanks to Hello Kitty products' broad diversification: "the rich variety of Hello kitty goods allows (young girls) to have a feeling of solidarity while being able to let others have a peek at their individuality".

So, Hello Kitty's consumers are noticeably influenced by different parameters such as their generation, family or peers; but a capital source of influence remains that we have to look at: the cultural one. As a global brand, the commercialized Hello Kitty products are exactly the same all around the world, without any distinction. In fact, an attempt has been made to produce some "culturally" customized Hello Kitty products and turned into a flop. How comes that a Japanese product has so much success at the same time in its native country and all over the world without any change? Hello Kitty's origins are not so well defined; in fact her "identity card"

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<sup>13</sup> B.J. Mc Veigh, 2000

<sup>14</sup> B.J. Mc Veigh, 2000

stipulates that she is living in London, even if its owners and manufacturers are definitely Japanese. To add, it could have been inspired by a German character. One of the potential explanations, from that point, could be that Japanese and Asian people like it because it is European and conversely that European people like it because it is Japanese and produced in Asia. But that would let the North American market out of the "Hello Kitty field of desire"<sup>15</sup>. The more likely explanation would be the "reciprocal nature of cultural change"<sup>16</sup>, that is to say that as long as Japanese people migrated around the world, they adopted their foster country's habits while their foster country's citizens adopted their Japanese habits (reverse acculturation process). However, the consumption patterns remain different in the Western (individualistic) and Non-Western (collectivist) countries: European or American Hello Kitty consumers are buying this brand's products for themselves, as an egoist pleasure, as a way to feel special, original, free from their societies' standards whereas Asian Hello Kitty consumers and particularly the Japanese ones are buying Hello Kitty in order to feel connected with their society "spirit": "Many pointed out that though they do not care much for Hello Kitty, they felt they must pretend they do. If not, they become anxious and only feel at ease after they go along with the trend [---] Japanese do not like to be conspicuous"<sup>17</sup>. These observations imply a different level of involvement of the consumers depending on their belonging group.

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Being told what Hello Kitty's attributes are, and described the different influences which can push consumers to purchase or reject the brand's products, or define their level of devotion, remains now to explore the way Sanrio is reinforcing its customers' memory length or positive attitudes and behaviours, from a situational involvement to an enduring one, creating a stronger relationship with them, driving them committed or "attached"<sup>18</sup>, loyal, even obsessed with the brand as time goes, and because of this, ensuring its jeopardized sustainability.

According to Roberto Lanzi (president of Sanrio EMEA), "Sanrio never advertises any aspect of the brand"<sup>19</sup>, nonetheless, the company is using some other means to

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<sup>15</sup> B.J. Mc Veigh, 2000

<sup>16</sup> Evans, Jamal and Foxall, 2009

<sup>17</sup> B.J. Mc Veigh, 2000

<sup>18</sup> C.W. Park, D.J. MacInnis, J.Priester, 2006

<sup>19</sup> Extract from "Can Hello kitty continue to rule the world?", Melinda Varley press article, *Brand Strategy*, February 2009, Issue 229, P32-36

invent and fabricate a marketing environment in favour of its brand, making it “alive” and developing both classical/associationist and operant/ instrumental conditioning among its customers, starting with its corporate discourse and reputation . Here are the main ones.

“Puroland” and the other brand’s amusement parks combined with the brand’s events (anniversaries...), although they spawn shortages, are seeking out customer’s desire to meet their favourite character personally and allocate some time to know it better, coming back home with unforgettable memories of this time and the urge to feel close to it again. The Hello Kitty maternity which opened one year ago in Taiwan serves the same cause: by “relieving the stress of childbirth for women”<sup>20</sup>, it leads women to associate their baby’s cuteness to Hello Kitty’s one. By investing public areas where people’s emotions are intense, Hello Kitty is naturally investing these people private spheres at the same time; sometimes taking advantage of its national ambassador status to do so.

Partnerships and co-branding are evenly used to create positive associative reflexes: Hello Kitty’s iPod limited edition, Hello Kitty’s Samsung laptop or mobile limited editions, Hello Kitty’s Dior limited products, and many others are there to make the brand automatically linked with modernity, luxury and scarcity, high tech images in people’s minds exactly as it works with celebrity endorsements. The fact that Mariah Carey, Paris Hilton or Lady Gaga officially support the brand voluntarily emphasizes again people’s infatuation for Hello Kitty, for free.

The last, but not least medium used by Sanrio to reinforce its customer’s involvement and spread its “community spirit” encouraging word-of-mouth, is its own online virtual universe: “Hello Kitty’s World”. A Hello Kitty fan can now live Hello Kitty’s life, play, and chat with other fans from all over the world, by only staring at his computer’s screen all day long. Of course, Hello Kitty’s world is integrated to Sanrio’s main website and closely linked to an online shop, to videos, blogs and other social networks, with the intention of invading the web, using buzzes and data-based, direct, viral marketing effectiveness and low cost while increasing its customers’ rate of retention through sense of belonging, sometimes obsession.

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<sup>20</sup> Extract from “Can Hello kitty continue to rule the world?”, Melinda Varley press article, *Brand Strategy*, February 2009, Issue 229, P32-36

In “*Brand Attachment: Construct, Consequences and Causes*”, C.W. Park, D.J. MacInnis, and J.Priester described the result of a successful “attachment-based commitment” to the brand as an increase of the “brand equity”, indicated by lower marketing costs, higher unit prices and more units sold thanks to an increased brand loyalty, a willingness to pay premium prices, a devaluation of alternatives and a reluctance to substitute the brand for another and a positive word-of-mouth. Today, even if Hello Kitty’s sales are decreasing in Japan, we can say that this is a point Sanrio managed to reach through a deep understanding of its consumers’ expectations and some accurate answers to these ones: “understanding the brand and its relevance in society is a good strategy”<sup>21</sup> and apparently a sustainable one.

To conclude this analysis, from my point-of-view and as a Hello Kitty and other Japanese brands occasional consumer, I found particularly interesting to try to find out which consumer behaviour concepts and models could be applied to this phenomena. That allowed me to make them clearer and more real to my eyes by questioning my own consumption uses and deciphering their mechanisms and deep reasons. For sure, I won’t buy any Hello Kitty or Japanese fashion product the same way anymore!

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<sup>21</sup> <sup>21</sup> Extract from “*Can Hello kitty continue to rule the world?*”, Melinda Varley press article, *Brand Strategy*, February 2009, Issue 229, P32-36

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➤ **Report**

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➤ **Websites and online videos (YouTube links)**

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➤ **Lecture Handouts**

- IB3260 : *Buyer Behaviour*, 2009-2010, Professor Qing Wang, Warwick Business School, UK