HOW HELLO KITTY COMMODIFIES THE CUTE, COOL AND CAMP

'Consumutopia' versus 'Control' in Japan

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Abstract
As asked about Hello Kitty, respondents judged those interested in this 'character good' within a framework of freedom/self-autonomy versus coercion/compulsion. The former is associated with what may be termed 'consumutopia' (a counter-presence to mundane reality fueled by late capitalism, pop culture industry, consumerism), while the latter is connected to 'control', a critical view of self/collective relations that also comments on Japanese ethno-identity. Hello Kitty also demonstrates the need to focus not just on different tastes within a society, but also on ambiguous and diverse attitudes within the same individual. Such diversity allows Sanrio, Hello Kitty's maker, to link within one individual different modes of self-presentation, chronologically corresponding to girlhood ('cute'), female adolescence ('cool'), and womanhood ('camp'). Thus, as people mature, appeals to nostalgia encourage a reconnection with the past by buying products united by one leitmotif; same commodity, same individual, different ages/tastes/styles/desires.

Key Words • coercion/freedom • 'consumutopia' • Japan • nostalgia • self-presentation

In Japan, Mickey Mouse is being pursued by a cat. By many accounts she is an even more innocent, innocuous, and cute creature. She goes by the name of Hello Kitty. Currently, this kitten queen of cuteness with tiny eyes and a large, marshmallow-shaped head seems to pop up...
everywhere in Japan. At the risk of sounding conspiratorial, Hello Kitty is not as innocent as she appears, and it is her very innocuousness that conceals her power. Her efficacy, influence, and impact derive from her plainness, simplicity, and artlessness – a contagion of consumerism grounded in her looks of sincerity, openness, and innocence. Her quietude generates dynamism, a feverish activity of consumption spun from a placid disposition that lacks even a smile. Indeed, some attribute Hello Kitty’s distinctive charm to the simplicity of her visage, referred to as ‘Zen cuteness’ [Fox, 1998]. As one woman put it, ‘Her expressionless face [muhyō] is unexpectedly cute.’

Hello Kitty comes to life at the nexus between the drive for capital accumulation of a corporation, a daily aesthetic of cuteness and campiness [an artificiality of manner or appearance, appreciated for its humor or triteness], and the consumerist desires of individuals. In Japanese, her name is pronounced harōkiti or sometimes kitt-chan (‘chan’ is a diminutive), and written in Roman letters – to add a foreign, exotic flavor – or in the angular syllabary of Japanese [katakana] rather than the cursive syllabary [hiragana], since the former highlights its novelty. Hello Kitty is the best known product of Sanrio, a Tokyo-based company founded in 1960 by Tsuji Shintarō. Sanrio’s profits are enormous, totaling ¥120 billion in 1998 [Aoki, 1997; ‘Kitty bankbook’, 1998; Saito, 1998]. In 1999, that equals approximately one billion US dollars (US $1.00 = ¥120).

Like other items of material culture, Hello Kitty has a useful lesson: how purchasing and collecting practices establish a discourse about matters apparently unrelated to the commodity consumed, i.e. respondents frequently judged those interested in Hello Kitty within a framework of unhindered/freedom/self-autonomy versus coercion/control/compulsion. For my purposes, the former set of terms is associated with what I call ‘consumutopia’, while the latter, as we shall see, are connected to ‘control’, a less positive, more critical view of social relations. I will order my arguments, then, within a framework of consumutopia and control. I first investigate certain aspects of ‘consumutopia’, a sort of counter-presence to mundane reality fueled by late capitalism, pop culture industry, and consumerist desire. Then, I examine what individuals have to say about Hello Kitty, which, in addition to being a stuffed doll, appears in many other forms, including countless images and icons.

Before proceeding, a few words about other lessons Hello Kitty has for us concerning the vagaries of fashion. She teaches us the need to focus not just on different tastes within a certain ‘society’ (however this term may be defined), but also on diverse attitudes within the same individual. Such intra-subjective diversity is expressed, at least in the case of Hello Kitty, in two ways. The first is visible across generations. Through its marketing of Hello Kitty, Sanrio has made a concentrated
effort to tie together within a single individual different modes of self-presentation that chronologically correspond to girlhood, female adolescence, and womanhood: 'cute', 'cool', and 'camp'. That is, as an individual matures, appeals to nostalgia encourage a reconnection with the past by buying certain products united by one leitmotif; same commodity, same individual, different ages/tastes/styles/desires. Obviously, such a strategy may reap enormous profits.

A second type of intra-subjective diversity concerns ambivalent ideas held by the same individual about an item of pop culture synchronically (rather than chronologically). A notable number of individuals pointed out to me that though they do not really care for Hello Kitty, they feel they must act as if they do and 'take advantage of a ride [binjō, i.e. an opportunity]' in order to fit in. Thus, from a company's perspective, successfully pushing trendy products in the market does not require full participation or commitment from aficionados. But it does require partial participation, i.e. 'everyone is doing it, so I should, too'. Indeed, many of those who were critical of Hello Kitty would possess [or wear] her goods. Not a few exchanges with respondents went like this: 'So, since you dislike her so much, you don't buy any of her products, right?' Answer: 'Well, I don't like her, but perhaps I like her a little. I do have a Hello Kitty key chain and stationery'.

Most would agree that there is often a disconnect between media reports, mass communication hype, and a general belief about the large role played by a pop culture fad and what many individuals actually think. The idea that media can magnify a phenomenon out of proportion is not terribly insightful and is certainly not a novel point, but I hope to draw attention to the way in which an icon/product of popular culture/industry such as Hello Kitty teaches us how the purchasing and collecting practices of a group of people, refracted through the mass media (TV, newspapers, comics) and reflected off the surfaces of public space (advertising copy, signs, interiors of post offices, etc.), manufacture a massive field of desire [e.g. pursuit of being cute, cool, feminine, in-group status, nostalgia]. But this field of desire contains sentiments that are ambiguous, and items such as Hello Kitty seem to indicate that we need to take into account how different levels of devotion vary within the same individual.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF 'CONSUMUTOPIA'

The literature on postmodernist conceptions of 'Utopia' is too extensive to treat here, but Falk's exegesis will suffice:

There is no human culture without mythical visions of a state devoid of any lack, of the Paradise Lost or the Kingdom of Heaven to come. These Utopias located in indefinite Otherness (μ-topos), the models of the Good World, are
primarily negations of the existing reality – either as simple inversions of scarce life, the carnivalesque 'Land of Cockaygne' characterized by abundance and endless pleasure, or as elaborated depictions of Perfect Order in which well-being, virtue and justice are finally realized. (1994: 129-30)

Unlike ancient and mythological conceptions, the 'good state of being' in modern times is associated with Enlightenment projects (specifically, the idea of progress) and located in the 'attainable temporal world':

But what is really new in the pursuit of happiness of modern (consumer) society is that the Utopian project is reduced in scale to the individual, into a modern mode of self building aiming at completion within the boundaries of one’s own self and one’s own life, and that this is done primarily by means of goods as the building blocks. (Falk, 1994: 130, emphasis in original)

If we define 'Utopia' as a condition, place, or situation of social or political perfection, we can describe 'consumutopia' as a joint endeavor between capitalist producers and product consumers to establish sites, practices, or spaces of 'perfect consumption'. These sites, practices, or spaces are idealized and fantasized, thereby making consumutopia a state/place in which individuals cheerfully consume and a happy fit between steadfast supply and desirous demand occurs. Certain developments of modernity, such as mass society, mass culture, markets and marketing strategies, the culture industry, and modern communication technologies, are prerequisites of a consumutopia. However, we should note that particular historical trajectories, cultural contexts, and social conditions shape consumutopias. Of course, being an ideal condition, situation, or place, there is no actual consumutopia. However, there are definitely serious attempts toward constructing one, and needless to say, Hello Kitty is not the only character turned into a line of products that illustrates the workings of consumutopia (though her commercial success certainly exemplifies consumutopia).

What are the traits of consumutopia? There are many ways to answer this question depending on the particular consumutopia in question, but for my present purposes I list five: (1) unifying leitmotif; (2) accessibility; (3) ubiquity; (4) projectability; and (5) contagious desire. Below I explicate and illustrate these traits with examples from the consumutopia of Hello Kitty.

(1) **UNIFYING LEITMOTIF**

Perhaps the most basic trait of consumutopia is the production of an endless variety of products - different shapes and colors, diverse functions, and numerous designs - that nevertheless possess some unifying
theme, emblem or motif. Of course, it can be quite profitable for a business if it can successfully market an array of products that rides a unifying leitmotif. Here it should be noted a unifying leitmotif resonates deeply with the bourgeois obsession with rationalization and order, i.e. matching the motifs, colors, and shapes of one's possessions, effects, and environment.

Hello Kitty exemplifies a unifying leitmotif, and seems to be an example of Sanrio's determination to 'paint' a vast number of daily goods with images rather than just merely manufacturing similar knick-knacks. As one woman explained it, 'Though her face [Hello Kitty's] is always the same, she has many goods of various styles (bariēshon no sutairu no gudzu) that just make me want to collect them all'. By one count, there are 15,000 Hello Kitty products (Herskovitz, 1999).\(^5\) Sanrio receives 3 percent in royalties every time a company sells a product bearing a Sanrio character (Yamazaki, 1999), and one-third of its profits comes from licensing fees (Ono, 1998).\(^7\) From Sanrio's perspective, then, Hello Kitty has good reason to appear on and in stickers, coffee mugs, glasses, calculators, blankets, notebooks, phone cards, cameras, pocketbooks, watches, towels,
pillows, toothbrushes, lunch boxes, pens, pencils, garbage pails, golf bags, boxer shorts, safes, luggage, scooters, and at Dai-Ichi Kangyō Bank, bankbooks and cash cards. There are Hello Kitty-shaped toys, handbags, and appliances such as telephones and televisions. A section in a typical shopping catalogue is called ‘Hello Kitty’s Happy Life’ and advertises spatulas, sets of dishes, pans, pots, bowls and cups, a tea kettle, coffee maker, shaved ice machine, hair dryer, cookie mold, toaster, toaster oven (the latter two cook Hello Kitty’s image onto bread or other foods), and waffle maker (which makes Hello Kitty-shaped waffles). Daihatsu Motor Co. even manufactures the ‘Hello Kitty car’, a small, white passenger vehicle with ‘Hello Kitty wheel covers’ and a choice of pink or blue ‘Hello Kitty seats’. Hello Kitty also appears on packages of local specialties across the country, such as Nagahama Ramen of Kyūshū and Yatsushashi sweets of Kyoto (‘Cat Icon has Merchandisers Clawing in Big Revenues’, 1998).

One can partake of the boons of Hello Kitty consumutopia without alerting others to one’s dedication. Many Hello Kitty products for women – dresses, skirts, hats, etc. – look quite ordinary except for an inconspicuous Hello Kitty image placed somewhere on them, perhaps indicating the ambiguous feelings some individuals have toward Hello Kitty. This is true for a line called ‘Super Hello Kitty’ that features clothing and items that only have small Hello Kitty emblems (men’s ties, socks, shoes, sandals, wallets, sunglasses, pens, pocketbooks, etc.).

Other clothes for women are less shy about their origins in Hello Kitty consumutopia. For example, the backside of bikinis and halter tops have Hello Kitty’s image boldly printed on them. Even ‘traditional’ clothes such as kimonos are adorned with Hello Kitty’s image.

Sometimes there is a deeper level than a unifying leitmotif that an array of products shares, a sort of fundamental aesthetic of the everyday, and in the case of Hello Kitty products this would be kawaii (cuteness). I have investigated elsewhere how in Japan ‘cuteness’ operates symbolically as a daily aesthetic and qualifies as a standard attribute, rather than as a mere fad (McVeigh, 1996, 1997a, forthcoming; see also Kinsella, 1995, 1997; Masubuchi, 1994). Therefore, Hello Kitty embodies and makes visible the trafficking in socio-semantics legitimated by a key aesthetic experience, and each representation of Hello Kitty acts as a transmitter that reflects, refracts, and reverberates a host of complex messages about affection and authority, harmony and hierarchy, and admiration and attachment.

Sanrio uses cuteness as its company’s marketing motif, though it is always on the lookout for more specific manifestations and variations of this theme and attempts to follow fashion trends (for example, kawaii can sometimes be glossed as ‘cool’). Thus, Yamaguchi Yōko, a Sanrio employee who has been in charge of Hello Kitty since 1980, goes to Harajuku, a shopping and hang-out mecca in Tokyo for the younger
generation, and talks to young girls in order to discover their interests. In 1995 she learned that high school students were opting for clothes that were cuter and more feminine. Kitty's ribbon was colored and replaced with a flower in some cases' (Masuda, 1998).

Here I would like to suggest that another fundamental aesthetic characterizes products such as Hello Kitty: campiness. I will have more to say about this aesthetic later as it relates to expressions of femininity, but here it suffices to say that such campiness resonates with the theatricalized ambience of much of Japanese social life (McVeigh, 1997b).

It must be stressed that not all women like Hello Kitty or things cute (I can still remember the slightly embarrassed face of the female bank teller as she asked me which kind of Hello Kitty bankbook I wanted). Some characterize women who purchase Hello Kitty objects as 'wanting to be kids forever'; 'not wanting to grow up'; or 'emotionally undeveloped'. But we must choose our adjectives carefully, because women who collect Hello Kitty articles are not necessarily interested in things cute, but rather have a predisposition towards what is better described as camp, and this campiness, for older female Hello-Kitty aficionados, is tied to a type of femininity that highlights cultural desirables such as sincerity, kindness (yasashisa), and sensitivity to the feelings of others (omoiyari), the latter being a norm heavily emphasized in different spheres (see Lebra, 1984; McVeigh, 1997b, 1998). What we have is not immaturity, naiveté, or regression, but theatricalized innocence, accessorized cheerfulness, and affected youthfulness. According to one social psychologist, 'Owning things with cartoon characters on them shows one's childlike nature. . . . It is proof of one's youthfulness, which is now considered a positive attribute' (Yamazaki, 1999). And for many women, Hello Kitty is a celebration not of childishness but of the childlike, a hope that in spite of a gloomy, harried, and harassing world in which they are forced to outmaneuver others, they are still light-hearted, spirited, buoyant, and ingenuous. Hello Kitty allows an individual to express a direct emotional impact in a social world that usually privileges indirect messages and circumlocution. Hello Kitty is for those who want to believe that in their hearts of hearts they are innocent, and that ironically, despite the campiness of Hello Kitty, artlessness will win over artifice and the actual over the artificial.

(2) Ubiquity

If products can be seen and sold everywhere, both consumers and producers view their respective positions as advantageous. Or if the perception that a product is everywhere can be successfully manufactured, then at least the producers can benefit from profits generated by novelty (see (5) 'Contagious Desire' later). There are different degrees of
ubiquity, and for a variety of practical reasons not all products obtain the magical status of omnipresence. But Hello Kitty comes close. From a company's point of view, Hello Kitty is an ideal product since it crosses generational lines; for young girls it is 'cute', for teenagers it is 'cool' (kûru or torn)l), and for women in their twenties and older it is best described as camp. She is everywhere, and her omnipresence—which cannot be understood without appreciating Japan's powerful and ubiquitous daily aesthetic of cuteness (kawaiisä) —exemplifies the notion of simulacrum, i.e. copies of copies of the same commodified image with no apparent original (Baudrillard, 1983).

Bill Hensley, Sanrio's marketing manager in southern San Francisco, explained that 'We're the leader in the retail-first strategy of creating characters to be on products'. 'Retail first' means having characters debut on products, rather than using characters who start their lives in books, comics strips, cartoons, or films and then move onto products. Thus, 'Sanrio's characters begin their existence right off as retail products, without the benefit of prior celebrity' (Fox, 1998).

Though she is in stiff competition from other creatures (e.g. Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, Doraemon, Pingu, Moomin), as of this writing Hello Kitty is the most popular and best known character in Japan's commercial and consumerist landscape. She can be seen in spaces both private (personal possession) and public (displayed in stores and post offices), and of course, she appears in countless avatars in objects of material culture.

Hello Kitty is ubiquitous in other senses. As already noted, Hello Kitty and her products are popular not just among young girls, but also among women of all ages.

Sanrio began researching designs aimed at the adult consumers about 10 years ago when demographers began talking about the shrinking of Japan's younger generation. One reason for the spread of character-based products is the meticulously-laid business strategies of the companies producing them. (Yamazaki, 1999)
Sanrio's homework paid off, and sales of Hello Kitty items 'more than doubled in the past three years' among female office workers and housewives (Masuda, 1998). But Hello Kitty has received some help in the popular media, whose style of reporting on such matters often borders on a type of boosterism for capitalist consumerism. Supposedly she became very popular among female office workers and housewives when entertainment idol Kahara Tomomi [now 24 years old] announced her fascination with the kitten character on television. An endorsement from 46-year-old singer Koyanagi Rumiko, who displayed her Hello Kitty products on TV, also increased sales (Ono, 1998).

Though Hello Kitty is more popular among girls, young women, female teenagers, and mothers, some young men do buy her products, and there are plans to target males for the next line of Hello Kitty products (Hello Kitty has recently been seen accompanied by a male counterpart called Dear Daniel who is also a cat).

Hello Kitty’s powers of transformation are so powerful that she can take on different incarnations. For example, there is Mermaid Kitty (Mameido no kiti), Bee Kitty (Hachi no kiti), and Koala Kitty (Koara no kiti). The latter is known as a 'transforming stuffed animal' (henshin niquirreli), i.e. a stuffed animal disguised as another stuffed animal (cute, so cute, it self-duplicates). There is also Hello Kitty Angel and a totally white Kitty that rides a unicorn.

(3) Accessibility

Products that are ubiquitous, needless to say, are everywhere to be seen, are easily obtainable, can be conveniently bought, and have, of course, a better chance of satisfying a consumer’s desires and generating profits.

Hello Kitty makes regular appearances (along with other Sanrio characters) at Sanrio Pyunorando (or if in Roman letters, Sanrio Puroland) and other amusement parks. She is in fact everywhere, and some companies have adopted her to attract attention: on the cover of the catalogue for services at the Takano Yuri Beauty Clinic she wears a pink dress and says 'Hello Kitty has become a softened Day Spa character'. A karaoke lounge has adopted the Hello Kitty theme to boost business:

Each of the lounge’s 11 rooms boasts a different version of Sanrio Co.’s cat character. Pictures of Hello Kitty in Chinese dress, as an angel flying through the heavens, or clad in a kimono, have schoolgirls and young office ladies squealing with delight [and] devoted lovers of the icon are treated to more images on the video screen between songs, and the bathrooms feature Kitty toilet paper and towels. ('Cat Icon has Merchandisers Clawing in Big Revenues', 1998)

Hello Kitty’s very presence, then, is a force to be reckoned with; her
appearance on countless surfaces a mighty enforcement of a daily
aesthetic of cuteness and campiness; her occupancy of public space an
ascendancy of the commercial; her residence in stores, banks, and post
offices (where she is used to advertise services) a state-sanctioned
operation of modern economics.

Accessibility is aided through publications such as Kitty Goods Col-
lection (1999), which advertises itself as the ‘newest Kitty catalogue’
(saishin kitī katarogu). This catalogue promotes and discusses the latest
Little Kitty’s goods (Kitī-chan no gudzu). Sometimes discussions in the
catalogue are quite detailed; one feature compares the small differences
between Japanese-made and American-made versions of Hello Kitty.
Kitty Goods Collection (1999) also provides the names, addresses, and
phone numbers of overseas stores that carry Hello Kitty items.

(4) Projectability
Imagine a product on which an individual can project his or her wishes,
fantasies and pleasures. If properly marketed, such a product could be
quite profitable. Now consider Hello Kitty, whose appearance is sim-
pclicity itself: three dots for eyes and a nose, no mouth, three lines for
whiskers on either side of her face, and a huge forehead that grants her
a decidedly infantile appearance.8 ‘Her big head and little body makes
her funny’, according to one young woman. Near her left ear she dons
a pink or red ribbon or sometimes a flower. Such a lack of embellish-
ment provides carte blanche for whatever an individual feels, and it is
this very imprecision, indeterminateness, and vagueness that works to
the advantage of the business concerns behind Hello Kitty: her plainness
characterizes her as a cryptic symbol waiting to be interpreted and filled
in with meanings. Thus, she functions as a mirror that reflects whatever
image, desire or fantasy an individual brings to it. Her mood is ambigu-
ous; neither happy, sad nor agitated, thus ready to absorb and reflect
back to her admirers whatever they are feeling on a certain day. Sanrio
spokesperson Yoneyama Kazuhide explains that Hello Kitty’s mouthless
countenance is part of her appeal: ‘Without the mouth, it is easier for
the person looking at Hello Kitty to project their feelings onto the
character. . . The person can be happy or sad together with Hello Kitty’
(Herskovitz, 1999). Such projectability applies to other characters:
‘Sanrio believes that because its characters are not tied into a definitive
story line or movie plot, children can project their own feelings and emo-
tions onto the characters’ (Fox, 1998). Characters hopefully develop a life
of their own. Indeed, there are books written to help one understand the
‘inner heart of characters’ (kyaraku to no naisin).

In a certain sense, projectability resonates with individuality. As is
well known, capitalist forces do not simply foist knick-knacks on the
masses, and we must give credit to the individual consumer who, after all, chooses to purchase certain incarnations of Hello Kitty but not others (or chooses not to buy Hello Kitty at all). Furthermore, a young girl does not buy a Hello Kitty doll for the same reasons that a mother buys a Hello Kitty toaster, and a teenager does not buy a Hello Kitty key chain for the same reasons that a middle-aged woman buys Hello Kitty bath towels. There is a considerable amount of individualistic (koseiteki) style and decision-making to collecting Hello Kitty products, and much of this individualistic style is expressed across generations. As one woman put it, the rich ‘variety’ (baraet) of Hello Kitty goods allows young girls to ‘have a feeling of solidarity (rentaikan) while being able to let others have a peek at their individuality (kosei)’ (cf. McVeigh, 1999).

(5) Contagious Desire

The last trait of consumutopia is the most intangible and thus difficult to describe and define. It concerns the assembling not of the product itself, but rather the manufacture of a generalized sentiment of desire, aspiration, longing, craving, even euphoria, for the product. Ideally, a corporation somehow initiates a craze, passion, and mania for its product, but usually such heightened interest, fixation, and excitement is very difficult to maintain for long. However, even if a certain ‘contagious sentiment’ can be manufactured (via peer groups, covetousness, effective advertising, etc.), some fetishization may result which produces a mystique.

The secret of administering a consumutopia is to maintain a delicate balance between a unifying leitmotif (a trait of consumutopia noted earlier) and product variety. Producers and manufacturers must try their hardest to keep at bay monotony, a sense of sameness, ennui, and satiation, while maintaining a unifying leitmotif of the product line. After all, the ultimate aim of corporations is not to satisfy the wants of consumers but to instill dissatisfaction and incite desire.

Besides manufacturing a vast line of goods, another way to spread sentiments of desire and demand is to spin a fantasy world around a product that consumers can enter. Thus, Hello Kitty has her own world. Her birthday is 1 November 1974 and she lives in London. She has the ‘weight of three apples’ and is characterized as akaru (cheerful, lively) and yōki (bright), two key themes found in Japanese pop
culture, advertising, everyday aesthetics, and idealized as an essential component of 'human relations' (ningen kankei). Not surprisingly, Hello Kitty likes 'small cute things, candy, stars, goldfish, etc.', and is described as 'A very energetic little girl. Kitty loves to play outdoors, in the park or forest. But you can also find her happily practicing on the piano or baking a cake, too!' She is a third grader who likes traveling, reading, eating, and making cookies, and has adventures at school. Hello Kitty has a family: papa (described as hardworking, dependable, absent-minded, with a sense of humor); mama (who is very kind and loving, takes care of her house, and is famous for her apple pie); grandpa (who is smart, paints, and likes to tell stories); and grandma (who likes to embroider in her rocking chair). Hello Kitty also has a twin sister, Mimi, who wears a yellow ribbon over her right ear to distinguish her from her sister.  

The special world of Hello Kitty is appreciated by aficionados. For instance, one woman in her early twenties explained that many people like Hello Kitty because she offers them a chance 'to get away from the harshness of reality' (genjitsu). They buy something cute (kawaii) like Hello Kitty and enter a world that is higenjitsu teki (unreal, fantastic). Fans and collectors of Hello Kitty are called 'Kittilers' (there are Hello Kitty fan clubs all over the world, see Herskovitz, 1999) and they seem ready to fulfill the dreams of Sanrio by engaging in a 'collecting that focuses on things that can be used every day' (Kitty Goods Collection, 1999). Kitty Goods Collection features 'super collectors' creation of space' (chō shūshūka kūkan sōzō); examples of children who have amassed mountains of Hello Kitty goods or people who have designed room-sized micro-consumutopias especially for their out-of-control Kitty collections.

Here it might be mentioned that Sanrio has a whole range of cute creatures and little critters that qualify as Hello Kitty's friends. They include: Bad Badtz Maru (a bad-attitude grinning penguin with spiked feathers); Chococat (a chocolate-colored cat); Keroppi (a sprite, goggle-eyed frog); Kuririn (a perky hamster); Monchichi (a monkey whose friend is Monta); Pinkuru Corisu (a pink female squirrel of royal heritage from Pinkuru Planet); Little Star Twins (Kiki and Lala, sisters from a star with mystical powers); My Melody (a mouse-like creature whose brother is named Rhythm); Picke Bicke (a mouse that imitates other animals and was born in Sanrio Puroland); Patty and Jimmy (children from Kansas); Pippo (a curious pig that likes to tell stories); Pochacco (a soccer-playing Golden Retriever puppy that likes pudding and has a friend called Muffin); Spottie Dottie (a female Dalmatian who is a fashion-expert and wears a large pink ribbon; her father was chief fire dog with the New York City fire department); Tuxedo Sam (a penguin from Antarctica that has two brothers, Tam and Ham, and was educated.
in England); Pekkle (an aquatically-challenged duck from Australia that wants to be a lifeguard).

If a corporation is lucky they will receive free advertising from those infected with contagious sentiment who have uses for a product line (or its representation) that is not directly connected to profit-making endeavors of the corporation. For instance, in order 'to make children happy', a farmer created a 20-m Hello Kitty image using 3000 colorful kale plants in Hyōgo Prefecture ('Veggie art', 1999). And in Tokyo, cab-driver Fukuoka Tōru, in order to appeal to women and children, 'has packed the interior of the car with goods bearing the Kitty character'. He wants them to enjoy their trip in his 'dream world'. Some high school girls in the area believe that they will receive good luck if they spot the 'Kitty taxi' ('Kitty kitsch draws fares to custom cab', 1999).

HELLO KITTY AND 'CONTROL'

Several recurrent themes appeared in discussions with individuals about Hello Kitty. These themes say more about what many Japanese think concerning individual freedom/societal constraints and how they view themselves as consumers of pop culture than Hello Kitty per se. Moreover, as indicated later, there is a fair amount of 'we-Japanese-are-this-way' self-stereotyping in what many had to say.

ACCOUNTING FOR THE POPULARITY OF HELLO KITTY

What was the response to the query 'why is Hello Kitty so popular?' Initially, among men and women in their twenties to forties, most engaged in circular reasoning: 'She is popular because many people like her'; 'She is popular because she is always on TV and in the media'. A majority responded that her popularity is due to her 'cuteness'. 'What, then, is "cute"?' I would ask. The usual answer would run along the lines of 'Hello Kitty's appearance'.

After cuteness, probably the most important reason cited to account for Hello Kitty's popularity is the feelings of nostalgia (natsukashī) she evokes. Nostalgia involves what McCracken calls 'displaced meaning', which 'consists in cultural meaning that has deliberately been removed from the daily life of a community and relocated in a distant cultural dynamism' (1988: 104). Individuals 'prefer to displace their ideals, removing them from the "here and now" to the relative safety of another time or place' (McCracken, 1988: 108). Certain objects of material culture come 'to concretize a much larger set of attitudes, relationships, and circumstances, all of which are summoned to memory and rehearsed in fantasy when the individual calls the object to mind' (McCracken, 1988: 110). Such objects 'become a bridge to displaced
meaning and an idealized version of life as it should be lived' (McCracken, 1988: 110). Here I should note that in Japan the role of ‘nostalgia advertisements’ (nosutarujī kōkoku) and ‘nostalgia products’ (nosutarujī shōhin) is explicitly recognized, and Hello Kitty has been around since 1974, so that her popularity can be at least partially accounted for by memories of women now in their twenties and thirties (cf. Herskovitz, 1999). The ‘nostalgia-ization’ of Hello Kitty for purposes of profit appears to start early in the individual’s life-cycle: ‘I remember once when I was very young I was made fun of when I brought a Hello Kitty lunch box to school. So, years later, I was very surprised to see my classmates collect Hello Kitty goods, even though at the time they were teenagers, about 16 or 17 years old’ (woman in her early twenties).

Hello Kitty is also closely associated with sentiments of ‘intimacy’, ‘familiarity’, and ‘friendship’ (shitashini). Other common terms that surfaced were ‘affection’ (aichaku), ‘sense of comradeship’ (nakama ishiki), ‘feeling of unity’ (jittai-kan), and ‘sense of security’ (anshinkan). I was told that her friendly facial expression ‘puts people at ease’. She ‘relaxes’ or ‘calms people down’ (nagomu). ‘She frees me from troublesome thoughts’. Others noted that she is a kara furu kyarakutā (colorful character) and that the ‘colors of Kitty goods have a warm feeling’. One young woman explained that ‘Sanrio uses colors that stand out, like pink and red. That’s why she’s attractive’.

‘Real’ Feelings toward Hello Kitty

What surprised me when discussing Hello Kitty with individuals was how few claimed they liked her (though some said they had no particular feelings one way or another). Indeed, most young adults I spoke with clearly claimed that they do not like her at all. Moreover, there was a good amount of cynicism and skepticism in what many had to say. According to one person, ‘I have my doubts that so many people can really like something so trite’. Some described Hello Kitty fans as ‘childish’ (kodomo-ppoi). ‘They look like children with their little toys’, quipped one woman in her mid-twenties. A young man explained that he likes Hello Kitty but does not like being told what to buy and felt unhappy with what he perceived as Sanrio’s profiteering. The theme of being forced to buy things – or maindo kontorōru (mind control), in the words of one young man – was a topic that repeatedly came up. ‘I resent being made a tāgetto (target) of corporations’. Another young woman said that ‘People buy the newest Little Kitty, and then again they have to buy another new Little Kitty. This is why I hate this system that makes us buy things one after another’. One young man stated that ‘Kitt-chan is cute and being so popular, I guess she’s cool. However, unlike walking yourself, it [her popularity] is like a train. You can only go along the
tracks to a place that's been decided. One female university student explained that Hello Kitty is 'too popular' (hayarisugiru) for her taste. Interestingly, the negative attitude toward Hello Kitty was often extended to criticism of a 'Japanese-like' (nihon teki) trait of group behavior, a 'follow-the-leader' propensity, and how Japanese blindly follow trends. The Hello Kitty boom, in many people's estimation, illustrates how overly sensitive Japanese are to the whims of fashion. Many pointed out that though they do not care much for Hello Kitty, they feel they must pretend they do. If not, they become fuan (anxious, insecure, uneasy) and only feel anshin (at ease) after they go along with the trend. Even if they don't like Hello Kitty, they don't want to be out of fashion. So they must buy her goods. They are also proud of all the different things they carry around with them. According to one young woman, 'If I see other people with certain things, then I don't want those things. However, if other people have something, many Japanese feel they have to get it for themselves.' A woman in her late twenties said that 'Japanese do not like to be conspicuous. If they stand out, they worry about being shunned by those around them. In such a country, if Kitty is popular, everyone runs off to buy her. Young people are especially sensitive to what's fashionable (ryūkō). Another woman said that buying Hello Kitty items provides a sense of solidarity (ren-taikan) and security (anshinkan) for young people since such purchases marks them as members of a group.

Hello Kitty Fans Lack a Self

Others went beyond the notion that Hello Kitty aficionados march too quickly to the beat of the drum and claimed that they actually lack a sense of self-worth. Many explained that individuals who like Hello Kitty lack their own identity (ai-iden-ti-ti); have lost their 'individuality' (kosei); need to acquire their 'own style' (jibun no sutairu or jibun-teki). These are people who have lost a sense of jūnin-to-iro (to each his/her own; literally, 'ten people, ten colors') and cannot obtain 'self-satisfaction' (jiko manzokun) on their own, and 'because they do not have self-identity [literally, self-likeness] (jibun-rashisa ga nai kara) must rely on superficial, silly, and immature props. According to one female student, Hello Kitty is a sign that 'Japanese are gradually becoming infantilized' (yōjika shite iru). They 'can't express themselves' (jibun o hyōgen dekinai; jiko hyōgen ga dekinai) without meaningless knick-knacks. One female university student was of the opinion that 'if we don't consider the individuality of each person and if we don't firmly have our individual consciousness (kosei no ishiki), then the number of mechanical people (hikai teki na ningen) will increase'. Some pointed out that this loss of self is particularly strong among Japan's youth. 'They have lost their ability (nōryoku) to do anything'. Another student said that 'It is the young people who
play but don’t study and can’t express themselves that are hurting Japan. Hello Kitty is just one example of this’. Some were particularly negative in their appraisal of Hello Kitty fans: ‘Because they are people who can’t express their own will [jibun no ishi o hyōgen dekinai], they are offensive, have a bad character, do stupid things, and can’t get along with others. So they try to confirm their own existence [jibun no sonzai o tashikameyō toshite iru] [through Hello Kitty]. Also, they can’t decide anything for themselves and have no common sense [jōshiki, i.e. ‘manners’].

In spite of the many individuals who linked the Hello Kitty boom to a loss of self and personal identity, there were a few that had an opposite view and told me that Hello Kitty actually represents an independent spirit which is seen in her enigmatic facial expression: ‘Little Kitty doesn’t have a smile and she acts on her own. She suits the people of modern times. I think that though modern people must face their superiors with an ingratiating smile [aisowarai], something that is hard to do, Little Kitty doesn’t exert herself doing such things, and she shows her true self’ [male university student]. Another male university student said that ‘She doesn’t follow group behavior’ [gurūpu kōdō], and acts on her own, so she really stands out [medatsu]. One individual saw a virtuous aspect to Hello Kitty as an art form unique to Japan: ‘Japan has lost its culture, like Nō and Kabuki, which are out of date and anyway are disappearing. But Hello Kitty is cute [kawaii], and though some people like her while others don’t, everyone buys her goods. This means that people have a strong sense of themselves and this is a good thing’. It might also be added that some saw the Hello Kitty boom [kitt-chan no bitmu] and the proliferation of Little Kitty goods [kitt-chan no gudzu] as a much-needed boost to Japan’s recession-plagued economy.

CONCLUSION: HELLO KITTY AS AN INDICATOR OF INDIVIDUAL/SOCIETY RELATIONS

Though respondents talked about Hello Kitty’s tangible, observable, and ‘cute’ attributes, many judged their peers’ interest in Hello Kitty as evidence of their lack of independence and autonomy. Too much devotion to Hello Kitty, then, indicates one has fallen prey to the power of society (specifically demonstrated by too much group behavior, fear of standing out, conformity, and loss of self). And for many individuals, there are too many people who are overly sensitive to fashion trends. But as someone who has lived in Japan for almost twelve years and taught in universities for eight years, I find these assertions that Japanese are afraid to be different and that a salient number of Japan’s young people readily conform to the whims of fads and fashion unconvincing. Certainly, in Japan group pressures are present [as in any society] and many people do follow the latest pop cultural developments, but
there are, of course, many spheres of social life in which Japanese do not conform and they do freely express themselves. The notion that they are easily bossed around by corporate culture smacks too much of a stereotype.

Why, then, (1) do individuals apparently believe that a large number of people are too group-oriented and have become slaves to corporate culture? And (2) why does an innocuous item of material culture prompt (as would, one imagines, other similar items of material culture) a rather pointed discussion about self/collectivity relations?

Any attempt to answer the first question readily rounds up the usual suspects of the media. But media hype can only partially account for such massive belief. I contend that the use of somewhat stereotypical ‘national character’ attributes to account for consumer behavior is noteworthy, e.g. Japanese purchase Hello Kitty goods because of their ‘group consciousness' (shūdan ishiki); they ‘conform too easily'; they have 'lost their identity' (shutaisei). Japan, after all, is a place where, to use the cliché, ‘the nail that sticks out gets hammered down’. Whether such clichés are true or not is, in a sense, beside the point for my present purposes. What is significant is how such beliefs, mobilized to account for some phenomenon, end up reinforcing descriptions and definitions of ethnocultural identity that are in themselves suspect.

The second question is, admittedly, far more difficult to answer. But I offer a suggestion: there are certain social settings in which expressions of self are not always welcomed (e.g. exam-centered classrooms in middle and high school, factory floors, and offices). When individuals center a discussion about self/collectivity dynamics on a character from consumutopia perhaps it is because they perceive it to be a bit safer than doing so in educatio-examination and employment sites. It is not that serious discussions - concerning, for example, management/labor, state/individual, male/female relations - do not occur in schools and work places; they certainly do. The point is that borrowing characters from cartoon land to make one's case seems somewhat less threatening, and here I want to return to McCracken's notion of how certain items of material culture can displace meaning (1988). But here I do not mean the displacement of meaning in the temporal sense (Utopias of an idealized past or a fantastic future), but rather in spatial terms: the appropriation of Hello Kitty as a symbolic lightning rod that collects electrical currents from other territories of social life (e.g. socializing and laboring sites). Indeed, as an eminently cute icon of popular culture, Hello Kitty resonates powerfully with a tendency to aesthetically 'soften' controversial, sensitive, or troublesome issues (as well as warnings, street signs, and corporate images; see McVeigh, 1996, forthcoming). This phenomenon abounds in Japan. Some examples:
• In order to soften its image as a state institution whose mission is violence, Japan’s Self-Defense Forces give out stickers of infantilized, cute cartoon soldiers for recruiting purposes (it also uses the smiling faces of little girls and frolicking puppies in some of its recruiting posters). The two main imōji kyarakutā (image characters) of the Self-Defense Forces are Prince Pickles (Pikurusu ōji) and Little Parsley (Paseri-chan).14

• A 55-minute documentary about the Aum Shinrikyō trial (‘Kyōdo no Kamisama – Asahara Hōtei Manga’) has ‘cute cuddly images’. Journalist Yichiro Anzuma, the documentary’s creator, explained that by depicting the cult members (who were responsible for the Tokyo subway sarin attack and other murders) as cartoon characters, he ‘emphasizes the tragic fact that many innocent lives were taken by the cult’ (‘Documentary Animation: Aum Shinrikyō Trial’, 1998).

• At over 200 Sanrio outlets there are application forms for Dai-Ichi Kangyō Bank credit cards: ‘If the image of banks is forbidding, so is that of the item perhaps most frequently found in their vaults. Cash, after all, is typically described as “cold” and “hard”, not “warm” and “soft”’ (Bailey, 1999). Thus the need for Hello Kitty to convince people of the ‘softness’ of the banking industry.

• The mouse-like Pipo-chan, the mascot of the police, was recently seen in the form of individuals dressed as the character handing out pamphlets warning pedestrians about molesters (chikan) in Tokyo train stations.

• Residents of Katsushika Ward in Tokyo recently received a colorful flyer about traffic safety that details actual accident deaths using cartoon characters. From one corner of the flyer snarls Mamaru-kun – or if loosely translated, ‘Obedience Kid’ (i.e. obey traffic rules) – who can only be described as a deranged pink Bugs Bunny wearing a brown toupee.

Hello Kitty is more than just a representation expressing herself through various objects of material culture. She is an icon for the everyday, an idol for the masses, an image for modernity (i.e. capitalism, consumerism, state projects and programs), a symbol that allows meaning displacement, or ‘a kind of epistemological immunity for ideas’ (McCracken, 1988: 109). Hello Kitty teaches us that what we have in our daily life is not a stern Big Brother from the monolithic state office of propaganda demanding blind obedience, but rather countless little sisters – or more accurately in the case of Hello Kitty, little critters – dispatched by corporate culture who kindly persuade (but not necessarily convince us) to consume. There is no conspiracy here to control the masses through hedonistic consumption, but there is an ideology – or a set of ideologies to be more exact – of capital accumulation, profit-making, and expanding market share, all given a powerful aesthetic spin. As one young woman
said, 'I wonder what kind of thing will appear next. I'm waiting to see if it will be as popular as Kiti-chan.' Or as one young man sarcastically commented, 'I'm now looking forward to what kind of character will become popular next.'

Notes

1. Much of the information in this article was provided by 52 respondents, almost equally divided between men and women. Most were in their early twenties, though some were older. I am grateful to all these individuals for their time and insights.

2. Sanrio's operations are international. For instance, in the US there are about 150 'Sanrio Gift Gates' (company owned and operated) and 'Sanrio Surprises' (under license) (Fox, 1998).


5. As in other places, there is no monolithic, invariable, and undifferentiated mass culture. Among Japan's corporate circles there is recognition of differentiation (saika), meta-masses (chōtaishū), fragmented masses (bunshū), and micro-masses (shōshū) (see Ivy, 1993).

6. By another count, there are 4000 Hello Kitty products, half of which are aimed at adults (Ono, 1998).

7. Sanrio spends ¥1.5 billion annually on documenting and protecting its copyrights (Yamazaki, 1999).

8. Raz links cuteness with the most popular icon of global pop culture, Mickey Mouse, and 'neoton', 'a retention of youthful characteristics in the adult form.' Neotony 'is a blatant social display of dependency and docility' (1999: 172–6). There is a body of research that investigates the psychological effects of 'baby faces'. See McKelvie (1993). Also, cf. the theory that the features of pandas set off 'hedonic mechanisms' (Verhoven, 1987).

9. We must pay our respects to that dusty caveat that if everyone does it, therefore it must not be fashionable or faddish, though logic tell us that if only a few did something, it would not be regarded as fashionable [at least not on a mass scale]. In the words of an employee in charge of character licensing at an advertising agency, 'Consumers are operating under two conflicting emotions: they want to keep up with fashion trends and they also want to own things that other people don't have. These are the people that are drawn to character products' (Yamazaki, 1999).

10. Basic information about Hello Kitty's personal life can be found on the many web sites dedicated to her.

11. However, 'Recovery must be accomplished in such a way that displaced meaning is brought into the 'here and now' without having to take up all of the responsibilities of full residence' (McCracken, 1988: 109).

13. An anonymous reviewer suggested that I answer why group behavior seems so salient in Japan. However, an investigation of the origins or nature of the group model is beyond this article's purview.

14. I am grateful to Eyal Ben-Ari and Sabine Frühstück for pointing out this practice of Japan's Self-Defense Forces.

References


