

A Study of Factors Influencing Purchasing Decisions and
the Logic of Consumption of Hello Kitty of Thai Consumers

การศึกษาปัจจัยที่มีอิทธิพลต่อการตัดสินใจซื้อและ
ตรรกวิทยาแห่งการบริโภคเฮลโล คิตตี้ของผู้บริโภคชาวไทย

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Abstract

This research aims to study factors that influence Thai consumer group's decision to purchase Hello Kitty products. There are 2 sample groups of consumers: fan club and general consumers. Data were collected and analyzed from in-depth interviews and discussion with the logic of consumption concept. The results revealed that 2 groups of consumers were affected by the logic of exchange value the most, followed by the logic of use value. The logic of symbolic exchange value and the logic of sign value respectively.

Keywords: Hello Kitty, Logic of Consumption, Consumer Decision

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์ เพื่อศึกษาองค์ประกอบที่ส่งผลต่อการตัดสินใจซื้อสินค้าเฮลโล คิตตี้ของผู้บริโภคชาวไทย ซึ่งประกอบด้วยกลุ่มผู้บริโภคที่เป็นแฟนคลับและผู้บริโภคทั่วไปของเฮลโล คิตตี้ โดยรวบรวมข้อมูลจากการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึก นำมาวิเคราะห์และอภิปรายร่วมกับแนวคิดตรรกวิทยาแห่งการบริโภค ผลการวิจัยพบว่า ผู้บริโภคทั้ง 2 กลุ่ม ได้รับอิทธิพลจากตรรกะของมูลค่าการแลกเปลี่ยนมากที่สุด รองลงมา คือตรรกะของมูลค่าการใช้ ตรรกะของมูลค่าแลกเปลี่ยนเชิงสัญลักษณ์ และตรรกะของมูลค่าสัญญาตามลำดับ

คำสำคัญ: เฮลโล คิตตี้ ตรรกวิทยาแห่งการบริโภค การตัดสินใจซื้อ

Introduction

In 2019, Hello Kitty or Kitty White returned to the top of Sanrio Character ranking with 1,647,073 votes (Nippon, 2019). It can show how Kitty is famous among Sanrio's consumers. In 1974, Shintaro Tsuji, the Sanrio Company's president and founder, had a concept to create a trade character to increase the value of products, and then Hello Kitty was created (Sanrio, 2014). Sanrio Company has gained each year around 795 million dollars from Hello Kitty, one of the most popular licensing characters (Fitzpatrick, 2014). In the standard's interview with Yuko Yamaguchi, the 3rd generation designer of Hello Kitty, said that Hello Kitty began working with brands in 2000 for the reason that all brands preferred and wanted to work with the Hello Kitty character (Sukkhong, 2019).

Therefore in 2014, Forbes Magazine ranked him at 45 from 50 wealthiest Japanese people. (Forbes, 2014). Forbes magazine declared that Hello Kitty is one of the best-selling licensed entertainment products ever ("Top-Selling Licensed", 2011) because more than 50,000 products of Hello Kitty were manufactured and distributed into 70 countries around the world as service and consumer products. The total value was as high as 7 billion dollars (Fitzpatrick, 2014).

In addition to the popularity of Hello Kitty in terms of economy, on the cultural front, Hello Kitty also plays an important role in representing Japan's cultural industry, such as the children's ambassador for UNICEF in 1983 (Okazaki, 2014), the ambassador of Japan to welcome Chinese and Hong Kong tourists in 2000 (The Associated Press, 2014), the Japanese pavilion expo ambassador in Milan, Italy in 2015 (Talon, 2015), and Hello Kitty is going to be Japan cultural ambassador to Osaka to be the host of World Expo 2025. (Mofa, 2017) This meets the needs of Japan in pushing kawaii culture (cuteness culture) by using the cuteness of Hello Kitty characters. Kitty is a weapon in the presentation for foreigners to open their minds and accept Japanese culture easily (Puanperm, 2017).

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Hello Kitty is also known and loved by consumers around the world. It can be seen that various brands buy Hello Kitty licenses to create many different products, for example, toys in the McDonald's Happy Meal. It was so popular that there was a fight over buying Hello Kitty products in Taiwan (Ko, 2003) and Singapore (Wai-ming, 2001) during 1999-2000.

As mentioned, Hello Kitty has been successful in attracting consumers to turn to love and consume a lot of Hello Kitty character products. They can transfer love from generation to generation such as the marketing strategy in the 90s; marketers began pushing her as a symbol of retro cool, which was key in helping embed her in the cultural subconscious. All the 70s and 80s kids who became adults could in turn buy her merchandise for their children, recycling her appeal with each successive generation (Gates, 2018).

Hello Kitty is as popular in Thailand as in any other country. For example, in 2007 the Royal Thai Police initiated the idea of punishing police for minor misconduct, such as being late or parking at a prohibited parking area. Which the punishment is wearing a pink hello Kitty armband on top of a normal uniform with the concept of embarrassing punishment for the cuteness of Hello Kitty that is controversial with the image of the police (Mydans, 2007). In addition to being used for meaning, Hello Kitty in Thailand is also used for marketing, such as, in 2015, Prima Gold International Co., Ltd. was the first and only licensee from Sanrio in Thailand. In the form of 99.9% 3D gold jewelry, it has produced 2 new special edition products as a limited edition special edition that is "Hello Kitty Cute Kimono" and "Hello Kitty Cherries Pinku", each set consists of earrings and pendants, prices start at 14,000 – 19,000 baht each. This will be well received by the fans and those who love "Hello Kitty" as well as before. And in the past year, Ramathibodi Foundation collaborated with Hello Kitty to produce special charity souvenirs "Travel Kitty", with all proceeds going to help patients and purchase medical equipment. This collection has been popular and well-received by many consumers. (Ramathibodi Foundation, 2022)

The year 2022 is the year to celebrate the 48th anniversary for Hello Kitty. She is the best example to study how to shift Kawaii Culture into capital. From red ribbon on the left ear, round-face, 3 whiskers, 3 dots for eyes and nose and even no mouth. Hello Kitty can show cuteness expression to catch up hearts of many people.

Therefore, looking at the popularity and high spending per year of consumers to buy Hello Kitty products, the researcher aims to study the reasons why Thai consumers decide to buy Hello Kitty products and factors based on the concept of the logic of consumption that affects the

decision-making among consumers' insights on this research topic. And hope that this research will help fulfill to apply this logic of consumption with other characters created by Thai people in the context of creative industries and can take a lesson from the purchasing reason of Hello Kitty among Thai people as an opportunity to character's marketing and innovate creative industries of Thailand in the future.

Research Objective

To study factors that influence Thai consumer groups' decision to purchase Hello Kitty products and analyzed them based on the concept of the logic of consumption.

Review Literature

This research examines the reasons for purchasing Hello Kitty products and analyzes them with the logic of consumption. The literature review consists of two concepts as follows;

1. Evaluation of Alternatives from Philip Kotler's purchase decision-making model (Kotler, 2003), which states that the methods consumers use to evaluate alternatives may be to evaluate by comparing information about the properties of each product and selecting to make a purchase decision from a variety of brands to only one brand. It may depend on the popular belief in that brand or it may depend on the experience of consumers in the past and the circumstances of the decision, including the choices available. There have ideas for consideration to help evaluate each option to make it easier to make decisions.

1.1 The attributes and benefits are to consider the benefits that will be received and the properties of the product what they can do or how capable they are and whether it's relevant to the customer's want or not.

1.2 The degree of Importance it mainly considers the important attributes of the product rather than the visible salient attributes. Consumers place different levels of importance on product characteristics according to their needs.

1.3 The brand beliefs are the consideration of trust in the brand, the product, or the brand image that consumers have ever seen and learned from past experiences. Consumers form a set of brand beliefs about each aspect of the brand. Brand beliefs influence consumers' assessment of choices.

1.4 The utility function is to evaluate how satisfied are consumers with each brand. In selecting a brand, consumers set the desired product utility first and then compare the desired product utility with brands.

1.5 The evaluation procedure is another method that takes several factors for decision-making, such as satisfaction, trust in the brand, and the product's features are considered for comparison. Then find out which brand gets the most evaluation points before making the final purchase decision.

2. The logic of consumption concept that was created by Jean Baudrillard (Kaewthep & Hinwimarn, 2010), the consumerism thinker and criticizer in the post-industrial period. From Baudrillard's point of view, when post-modern capitalism happened, the products barter system did not only have an exchange between materials and materials or between materials and money. There is more than that; they have extra product functions like "Symbolic Exchange". This kind of exchange added culture to the value of products. Thus, the objective of purchasing products is not only for the benefit of use. It also includes seeking what consumers need or desire from the product besides usability. For instance, if the primary purpose of drinking coffee is to keep oneself awaken; he/she can buy a cup of coffee from anywhere or any coffee shop without a brand. Still now the appearances and images are more important for consumers that was called "sign," as shown in the below diagram.

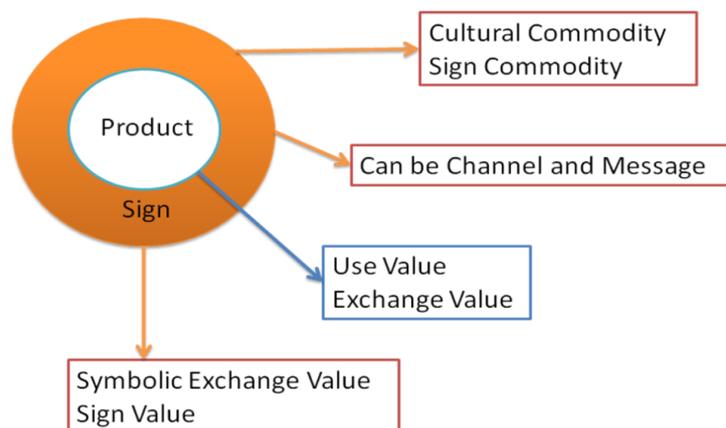


Figure 1 Diagram presenting the concept adapted from semiological consuming theory by Jean Baudrillard

Source: Kaewthep and Hinwimarn (2010)

This diagram explains Baudrillard's concept. It can be seen that the product's core is for "Use Value" or "Exchange Value" only. And it is surrounded by sign, that is, abstract meanings. It is called a "Cultural" or "Sign" commodity, which has an effect on consumers' hearts and mind. So, the Cultural commodity in the sense of Baudrillard's is not the same as a consumer commodity that has the aim of using only.

In addition, the cultural commodity can be both a channel and a message from producer to consumer. From the above example, a cup of coffee is not only in the meaning of drink but can be a tool for cultural promotion. For instance, a cup of coffee from Starbucks can show the origin of the country that the coffee beans came from. The cup's pattern and design can show the country's uniqueness. For people who collected Starbucks cups, it can be the exclusive meaning for consumers.

In Hello Kitty assets example, when people use a cup, it has a physical value but this value is declining after usage. It calls the logic of use and the logic of exchange value. But it's not the same with the Hello Kitty cup or tumbler as it has more value than physical aspects or utilities. The Hello Kitty cup can create more value and pride for the owner which corresponds to Baudrillard's explanation of the logic of symbolic exchange value and the logic of sign value. These values are significant values in the consumer's mind. Hence, consumers do not consume only the product's utility, but, they also consume the meaning (sign) that is related to and reconstructed with the product.

In Baudrillard's book, *The System of Objects*, he explained and discussed signs that are the connection in Post-modern times between humans and the cultural commodity or the sign commodity in consumption (Kaewthep & Hinwimarn, 2010). The details are as follows.

According to Baudrillard, in the relationship between people and objects we should realize that the objects are not produced for consumption or use only, but they have meaning for us and people can create meaning for objects.

As for the concept of the logic of consumption by Baudrillard, there are 4 levels in the relationship between people and objects, as follows (Kaewthep & Hinwimarn, 2010).

1. The logic of use value or the logic of utility/practical operation

It means the relationship that people consume objects for utility as tools. This logic tells us the main purpose of products that can really use or encounter the consumer's physical needs. In this place, Hello Kitty products can also be basic consumer products like paper with a pattern of Hello Kitty being used for writing and tissue with Hello Kitty print being used as toiletry.

2. The Logic of exchange value or the logic of equivalence

It means the relationship between objects as a medium and people. A product is used for human transactions or the exchange of an agreement object to become the value of money. This logic is based on trader and consumer satisfaction. As Hello Kitty products or services are purchased, the value of exchange comes from production cost, manufacturing cost, rental cost, salespersons wages cost, etc. Consumers should weigh for worthiness between the products and services and the money that they paid in the exchange process.

3. The logic of symbolic exchange value or the logic of ambivalence

It means the product has a connotation meaning that goes along with the object. The object or product becomes a meaningful symbol for consumers and they can use this meaning of the symbol to exchange or communicate with others. This logic can be the existing meaning or can be the meaning that attaches to the product or cultural product itself. The product has been given a reconstructed meaning by the place (it can be country or culture) where the product is produced and sold. For instance, the Sanrio Company's philosophy is "Small gift, big smiles" and the consumers buy Hello Kitty products for the people that they love and hope that all Hello Kitty products can make the one who receives happy like the motto of the company.

4. The logic of sign value or the logic of difference

It emerges from the normal status of the product that people consume that turned out to be a sign. People create differences between the meanings of products in the same category. People do not consume objects only for their tangible meaning but also consume the symbols attached to the object. This form of consumption tends to be consumed indefinitely because consumers are attached to the meaning, not demand. The more a product has a specific meaning or is different from other products, the more valuable the product is. The value here may vary according to the individual, society, culture, or class that creates meaning together. The logic of sign value is matched with Hello Kitty products since this logic explains that signs can add more value to products in terms of price and meaning. Hello Kitty is one of the signs for many people that show

up for status or self-identity. For example, when a normal keychain has Hello Kitty design on it, the price is increased, and the position and the pride of the people who own this keychain are changed because Hello Kitty is a special character.

An individual's decision-making process for purchasing a product or service begins with desire, learning, perception, and attitude. Buying behavior reflects the personality and lifestyles of consumers which are influenced by both internal and external factors such as family, friends, society, and culture, including marketing stimuli. Purchasing decisions for Hello Kitty products are based on Jean Baudrillard's theory of semiology and consumption of signs (Kaewthep & Hinwimarn, 2010). Hello Kitty products are the same as regular products but they are special since they add value that meets the needs of consumers. This concept is also consistent with Maria's article about the decision to buy Hello Kitty products due to the special aspect attached to the product "...This is in part because the merchandise is the context; the Hello Kitty merchandise came first, much of it in the form of toys. And because toys are to play with, they are partly empty vessels for you to fill with your own ideas, stories, and desires..." (Bustillos, 2014). In summary, Hello Kitty is more than just a product because consumers add more value to Hello Kitty.

Methodology

This research is qualitative. There is an in-depth interview to explore the behavior of consumers, or "why they decided to purchase Hello Kitty products" and to discussion of all the received information on the logic of the consumption concept. The details are as follows;

1. In-depth interviews were conducted with 2 groups of consumer representatives, selected according to sample selection criteria, to understand the deciding factors for buying Hello Kitty products and why they think so, analyzed information from in-depth interviews and discussions by using the concept of logic of consumption. The reason for choosing an in-depth interview is to inquire and discuss details with the key informants without any guidance from other people. Due to asking about reasons and preferences for Hello Kitty is a personal experience, respondents will likely have different reasons for each person.

2. The consumer key informants for in-depth interviews about purchasing decisions were selected by purposive sampling first and then used snowball sampling for searching the next interviewees. And they were separated into 2 groups with different attitudes toward Hello Kitty. They are a total of 36 people, a group of 18 fans of Hello Kitty and a group of 18 general consumers of

Hello Kitty products. Fans mean people who claim themselves as fan clubs, like and collect Hello Kitty products in more than 100 pieces. The general consumer means those who have a neutral attitude towards Kitty but consumes the product by buying or giving Hello Kitty products to someone, or someone buys the products for them.

3. The time: for interviewing the target group in the research is 2 - 1.30 hours per person because the interviewees need time to answer questions in detail without blocking ideas. The interview tools include consent and disclosure forms interview forms audio recordings and a camera.

Research Results and Conclusion

1. For Hello Kitty fans

From in-depth interview, there are six factors, in order, that most influence consumers' decision to purchase Hello Kitty products. First, 18 people are the liking in that they appreciate colors, shapes, patterns, and cuteness such as one of Hello Kitty fan said "It depends on whether I like it or not. My focus is on cuteness". As for daily necessities, they prefer the kitty-shaped ones for the prices are not different from other products. This is in line with the research of Natthakritta who said that motivation influences consumers' decision to purchase Hello Kitty products in Bangkok at the level of statistical significance of 0.05 because consumers will have a choice in what they provide maximum utility or create maximum satisfaction (Nakniyom, 2017).

Second, 15 people are interested in the product price. When fans have their income or must take care of families they seem to buy fewer Kitty goods forasmuch they value their money more or they want to save money for other necessities for families. Fan of Hello Kitty gave her reason to support that, "Money is a factor. Now I have family and I have to think more carefully". However, there are still some fans who buy Kitty products when their income is higher than in the past. But sometimes price doesn't matter if a Hello Kitty product is a fan's real wish or a rare collectible.

Third, 9 people are caring about the necessity or the rationale for purchasing or using the product. Some fans said they took this reason as an adult "I don't buy them every month, it would end up by leaving it dusted in my room", one of consumer said. When they were a child, they just want to buy all the Kitty products that they like regardless of the price and how they are used.

Fourth, 6 people have received the peer effect. Some fans admit that friends have a strong influence on their desire for Hello Kitty products if their friends show them products. They will also look for the product and buy it, like “When my friends buy a Kitty product, I want to buy one too”.

Fifth, 5 people would like the rarity of the kitty or limited edition items. This encourages fans to want more products because not everyone can have them. They will feel proud when they own it. Hello Kitty fan supports that “I found that the things I bought, everyone has them too. So I started to collect rare things. Not the same with others”.

The last factor is buying Hello Kitty as a gift for a friend who also likes Hello Kitty too. In this aspect, only one fan stated this factor. It seems that other fans think to buy the product mainly for themselves.

Moreover, most Kitty fans buy them for collection. They collect rare items such as imported Hello Kitty Doll Limited Edition or items with pictures of original Kitty from second-hand stores. Some fans buy 2 pieces of the same product, one for use and one for collection.

2. For general consumers

It was found that the main factor influencing their purchase decision was buying the item as a gift. 13 people had to determine whether the product was suitable for the recipient. By considering the recipient's personality, the style of Hello Kitty that the recipient likes, and thinking of the cuteness and style of Hello Kitty products. “I would consider if this girl could be the type that likes Kitty products and I buy it for her happiness” is the reason to support by one of the general consumers.

The next most significant factors are price, material, and packaging 12 people, and 10 people would like functionality. Consumers consider these issues together to ensure that their purchase of Hello Kitty products is reasonable. One general consumer said, “I compare the price and product design. If both are of the same weight, I might buy it”.

4 general consumers purchase products for themselves forasmuch most of them are not in favor of Kitty. The reason is “if I like it with the appearances, the price is not much of a problem”.

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After considering all factors that affect the purchasing decisions of both groups of consumers combined, it was found that the factors that influenced the greatest to the least (based on being a Hello Kitty product) were as follows;

- 1) Reasonable price and material: 27 people focus on reasonable price and material.
- 2) How useful the product will be after purchase: 19 people rated how useful the product will be after purchase.
- 3) Buy as a gift: 14 people focused on buying as gifts.
- 4) Liked the product: 12 people liked the product.
- 5) Peer Influence, collecting, and goods rarity: 5 people are influenced by friends, 3 people aim on collecting, and 2 people on goods rarity.

The difference between Kitty fans and general consumers is that Kitty fans buy products based on personal preferences and reasons. Usually, they don't purchase it as a gift. On the other hand, ordinary consumers pay more attention to the logic and necessity of the product. They often buy kitty products as gifts.

The interview results were analyzed with the logic of consumption

When Hello Kitty becomes an image on many products and consumers can touch it. Such goods are called a "sign commodity" or a "cultural commodity" for they are more meaningful to consumers than general goods. Cuteness is the most reason that customers buy Hello Kitty products. We can describe the reasons of research results that fans and general consumers decided to buy Hello Kitty products by using the Baudrillard "logic of consumption" concept (Kaewthep & Hinwiman, 2010) as in the picture below.

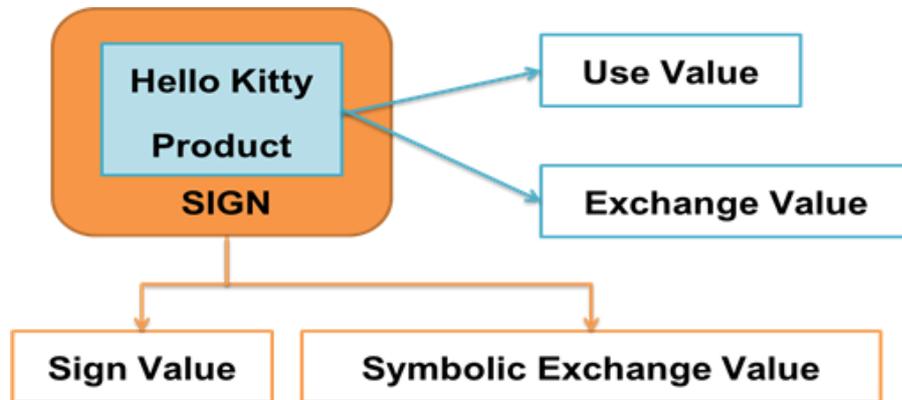


Figure: Hello Kitty products explained by Baudrillard’s concept of “logic of consumption”

Source: Kaewthep and Hinwimarn (2010)

Based on the results of all consumer interviews, the reasons behind the purchase decision can be explained by Baudrillard's concept as follows:

1) Logic of use value and logic of exchange value

The consumption meaning of Hello Kitty products as commodities or products can annotate by using the use value or the logic of utility / practical operation. It emphasizes whether the product satisfies the consumer's basic need according to the logic of exchange value. It is the use of money in exchange for consumer satisfaction that the consumption of goods can be summarized into the logic of use value and the logic of exchange value as follows;

The logic of exchange value: price and reasonableness were the top reasons for purchasing decisions (25 people: 13 Kitty fans and 12 general consumers). Fans valued the price more. In this regard, we see that the fans are very fond of Kitty and have bought a lot of products according to the necessity and budget matter. As for the general consumers, they buy Hello Kitty products as a gift and to consider whether the product price is appropriate or not.

Logic of use value :The factor of necessity and utility is the least important (17 people: from 8 fans and 9 ordinary consumers), for they must ensure that they get something that is productive and worth the price.

However, there are exceptions. In case the product is a rare item or something they are highly coveted, fans would not hesitate to pay for it. Raw materials and packaging are also

ones of consideration choices, but it also depends on where the products sell. Most consumers believe that licensed products have better quality and image.

2) Logic of symbolic exchange value and logic of sign value

Hello Kitty products' consumption as symbols can be clarified by the logic of the symbolic exchange value. This means that the thing becomes a significant symbol and its meaning can be exchanged and communicated to others, such as between consumers with other people. The second, concept that can be explained is the logic of sign value. The product is consumed by wanting differentiation from others and adding value to individual products. The consumers, who choose Hello Kitty products, may purchase Hello Kitty because Hello Kitty can symbolize cuteness for them. For example, if using a normal pen, nothing stands out; but if using a Hello Kitty pen, the pen will be cuter in the eyes of the user and other people who adore it.

The in-depth interview revealed the logic of symbolic exchange value and the logic of sign value as the consumption points as follows;

Logic of symbolic exchange value: This is the third most important reason driving purchasing decision of 14 general consumers. Gift or souvenir purchases are the main reason for the symbolic exchange value, while 8 fans give a worth for the sign values and purchased because of influence from people around.

Logic of sign value: This is the second most important thing for 18 fans and 5 ordinary consumers. The reason was that the Hello Kitty merchandise was so cute that they wanted to own it and decided to buy it. They pay attention to "Hello Kitty uniqueness" because it is essential to their feelings. This is in line with Kanjana's research, which states that cartoons characters were put into different products to access the customers through cartoon characters association. Cartoon characters were used to establish the place to add a story as a center to access to customers through cartoon characters (Chunkul, 2017).

The conclusion from all consumer interviews is that the logic of exchange value can be used to describe consumers of Hello Kitty products better than other types of logic. However, the logic of sign value and the logic of symbolic exchange value are also important when consumers have the decision to buy Hello Kitty products. The logic of value matters the least. This presents that price, satisfaction, and exchange value are more significant than product usability.

Findings from this research will be part of an example of the reasons and information behind the buying decision for character products from consumers that manufacturers can take advantage of learning cases and bring it to create a character that makes people love binding and valuable. Because of the current situation, character, especially character licensing is part of the creative industry, also known as soft power, which can bring huge amounts of income into the country.

Suggestion

There are 2 suggestions, first for the next study this research model should be studied with other character products. The finding may reveal what logic of consumption is the main aspect of a consumer's decision for purchasing the products and be compared to find patterns that enable consumers to make purchasing decisions. This will affect the elements in character design products to be successful in character marketing in the future. Second, can bring the character that is in demand in the market to create their brand or support each other in expanding the consumer market. And last, the next study should add the topic of consumers' digital decisions. It has the most valuable nowadays.

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