**Japan's popular Hello Kitty gets a convention of her own**

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff

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LOS ANGELES —

At age 40, Hello Kitty has had an amazing career.

Stars, like Katy Perry and Lady Gaga, admire her. Images of Hello Kitty's adorable little self help to sell everything from motor oil to diamond necklaces. Hello Kitty has even joined up with baseball teams on super cute souvenirs.

This week, the first convention celebrating all things Hello Kitty will take place in Los Angeles. It is called, of course, Hello Kitty Con 2014.

“She is not just a commercial object,” said Christine Yano, a University of Hawaii professor who helped organize a new Hello Kitty museum exhibit. Titled “Hello! Exploring the Supercute World of Hello Kitty," the exhibit is bringing record crowds to the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. “We have to think of her as a phenomenon.”

**Kitty's Star May Be Fading**

But now, Hello Kitty may be in a mid-career slump.

For years, Hello Kitty ranked as Japan’s best-selling character, according to Character Databank, a company that lists the most popular characters in Japan based on sales. Hello Kitty now ranks third, behind No. 2 Mickey Mouse and No. 1 Anpanman, an anime superhero whose head is a jam-filled bun.

“I don’t think this can go on forever,” said Tom Looser, a professor at New York University. He said Hello Kitty is beginning to show her age.

Sanrio is the Japanese company that created Hello Kitty in 1974. Sanrio sells $8 billion worth of Hello Kitty and other characters each year, said Janet Hsu of Sanrio.

Companies pay Sanrio to use — or license — Hello Kitty's image on their products. Around the world, about 50,000 products feature the kitty, from lunch boxes to kitchen appliances and even a jet airplane. Sanrio says half of the sales at Sanrio stores are Hello Kitty merchandise.

But it seems the Tokyo company does not want to rely on Hello Kitty for so much of its sales.

**Fans Like Kitty's Simplicity**

In search of the next cute sensation, Sanrio designers have been busy creating new characters. None of them, though, comes close to Hello Kitty’s success.

Sanrio recently said it will launch a new products next year called Hello Kitty Men. The kitty's likeness will be printed on men's underwear and T-shirts.

Artists at Sanrio created Hello Kitty in 1974 in a design contest.

Some observers point to her simple design as the key to Kitty's popularity. Her face lacks a mouth, an expression and a personality. Fans can imagine whatever they want about her.

“Hello Kitty is almost like a perfect blank slate on which viewers can project their own emotions,” said Roland Kelts. He is the author of “Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Invaded the U.S.”

“If you had a lousy day … you come home to Hello Kitty on your sofa, and she sympathizes,” Kelts said. “On the other hand, if you got a raise or met someone and hit it off, Kitty feels good for you.”

**Kitty Buzz**

She became popular in the United States at about the same time Americans became interested in sushi, anime and all things Japanese. Some scholars consider her the No. 1 example of kawaii — the Japanese word for cuteness that has become a big part of popular culture in Japan.

Every so often, Sanrio tries to create buzz for the Kitty through events like the museum exhibition and Hello Kitty Con. The convention starts Oct. 30 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Demand has been so strong that the museum had to hire extra staff. Tickets have sold out for the four-day convention. The convention also features workshops on flower arranging, scrapbooking and creating Kitty-shaped snacks.

**They Love Her, They Love Her Not**

Like many high-profile celebrities, Hello Kitty has passionate critics.

Some slam her as a girl with no opinions who can never talk back. One blog is dedicated to the many unlikely objects on which the kitty shows up.

“There are some combinations that just should never go together,” the blogger wrote. These include men’s underwear and a chainsaw.

Inside the museum exhibit, longtime fan Gianfranco Ocampo brushes off the Kitty bashers. The 23-year-old art student said he collected Hello Kitty figurines as a kid. He also has attended Hello Kitty tea parties.

Davi Marchi, who is with Sanrio, can't exactly explain Hello Kitty's appeal.

“If I could explain it,” he said, “we would have 30 huge characters.”