

## Celebrating Imperfections: How Mikey Schumacher Is Redefining the Plush Toy Industry

Personal flaws and struggles have never looked cuter until now.

**By Alexander Hernandez Gonzalez**

Growing up in the slopes of Aspen, Mikey Schumacher was an anxious kid who struggled with negative self-talk. To comfort himself from the harsh words, he found solace in a Curious George plush toy, which had a huge impact in Schumacher's childhood.

As Schumacher grew up, he kept in mind the times that the plush was there for him and the overall impact of how it constantly comforted him. Now, after learning about the science of plush toys' impact on people, Schumacher is ready to redefine how the public views them.



Transforming imperfections into superpowers, but cute's plush toys are a force to be reckoned with.

"I think we're facing a loneliness epidemic, especially Gen Z. It's a huge problem we're all facing," says Schumacher. "I thought plush toys would be a great way to discuss mental health and these issues that we're having."

While studying advertising at the University of Colorado Boulder, Schumacher designed toys and was bothered that the industry felt "generic" and "unintentional." After trying to address these issues in the market, Schumacher took his questions to the drawing board. While creating fun sketches and designs, he made his first signature character: Luna, an anxious moon bunny.

After graduating in May 2019, Schumacher took his talents and passion to the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business, where he graduated with a Master's Degree in Entrepreneurship and Innovation in May 2023.



Founder Mikey Schumacher created these adorable characters to show the true emotions many deal with.

"I just wanted to get a little bit more business education," says Schumacher. "It wasn't something that I had studied, and I was able to round out my education there."

A little over a year later, Schumacher was producing prototypes, showing new characters to family members and opening up the conversation about his personal struggles. Schumacher then realized the power of storytelling and being brutally honest with people.

What originated as a small project that only family members were aware of, but cute, a brand where flaws aren't hidden but featured, made its way to the 2025 USC New Venture Seed Competition. Out of 208 companies, but cute won the top prize of \$35,000 and received much support from mentors and judges alike.

Lloyd Greif, founder of the Lloyd Greif Center for Entrepreneurial Studies at Marshall, was a judge at the tournament and notes that the applicant pool is big and to rise to the top is "not an easy accomplishment." Greif says that but cute has excellent potential to be a "unicorn."

"Mikey identified a pretty interesting niche, and he's come at it multiple ways," Greif says. "He's not just talking about plush toys, he's talking about a whole universe, and I think that's extremely smart and insightful."

Marianne Szymanski, founder and president of TOY TIPS, worked as a LEGO sales representative at Toys R Us at the age of 23. After being asked by a woman what toy she should buy, Szymanski created TOY TIPS to research what toys are best for children during their development.

After years of researching and publishing with Toys R Us, Szymanski became a professor at the Greif Center. One day, she received an email from Schumacher and stayed in contact with him as he developed his company. After becoming his mentor, Szymanski grew excited to see but cute come to life, especially since she thinks the toy industry is missing a brand like but cute.

"Right now is a good time to talk about the importance of our emotional health," says Szymanski.



These plushies are ready to be your comfort toy in any situation.

"Introducing the thought process to younger children as a friend to make you feel that whatever your differences in life are just as unique as others. I think that is a real positive message."

Eric Quick, CEO of Caffree, has been involved in start-ups and big companies for over 15 years and has coached start-ups at the NVSC for the last three years. Quick says that Schumacher reached out for help before the 16 businesses made it to the final round. Knowing he needed help, Quick was ready to provide resources, guidance and structure during the journey.

Back in 2020, Quick won the NVSC competition and has continued to support the opportunity for young entrepreneurs like Schumacher. When it comes to being a mentor, Quick said that he finds it fun to coach founders like Schumacher and appreciate's the brand's "authentic story."

"It's not about them, it's about the biggest why and why they're doing it," Quick says. "Ultimately, the success of that is driven around their ability to say, 'I don't know all the answers. I don't have all the information. I need to continue to seek guidance and counsel to get there.'"

After months of social media posts, community building on Discord and announcing a Kickstarter campaign, Schumacher is preparing to release the imperfect world of Quirklandia (the world in which the plushies live in) to the real world. Officially launched on June 17, the campaign offers four signature character plushies available for purchase: Claude, a grumpy-crossiant crab; Dulce, a quirky cinnamon-roll bunny; Peeko, a chunky dragonfruit dragon; and Luna.

These core characters will not stand alone in Quirklandia, as but cute already has over 300 characters ready to take the world by storm, one unique but cute quality at a time. Schumacher knows that there will be many facets of but cute that people will connect with, but he wants imperfections to be celebrated and embraced.

"We all deal with a lot," Schumacher says. "If we can be a source of a little bit of joy and bring a smile to people's faces, that is the mission of but cute."