Despite competition from cheaper tablet computers such as Amazon.com Inc.'s Kindle Fire, the iPad remains the most popular tablet computer. Apple Inc. has sold more than 55 million iPads since its debut in 2010.

Apple's latest iPad drew die-hard fans to stores in the U.S. and nine other countries Friday, many of whom lined up for hours to be among the first to buy one.

The third version of the iPad went on sale at 8 a.m. local time, with 25 other countries getting it a week later.

The new model, at prices starting at $499 in the U.S., comes with a faster processor, a much sharper screen and an improved camera, though the changes aren't as big as the upgrade to the iPad 2.

About 450 people lined up outside Apple's Ginza store in downtown Tokyo. Some had spent the night sleeping outside the store.

In London, Dipak Varsani, 21, got in line at 1 a.m. Thursday and said he was drawn by the new device's better screen.

"You've got clearer movies and clearer games," he said. "I use it as a multimedia device."

In Hong Kong, a steady stream of buyers picked up their new devices at preset times at the city's sole Apple store after entering an online lottery.

The system, which required buyers to have local ID cards, also helped thwart visitors from mainland China -- Apple's fastest growing market -- who have a reputation for scooping up Apple gadgets to get them earlier and avoid sales tax at home. A release date in China has not

yet been announced.

Kelvin Tsui, a 26-year-old hospital worker in Hong Kong, was allowed to buy two and planned to sell the second to make money.

Two years after the debut of the first iPad, the device's launch has become the second-biggest "gadget event" of the year, after the annual iPhone release. Customers could have ordered iPads ahead of time to arrive at home Friday, but many came out in person for the atmosphere.

"People always stop to talk to us," Harry Barrington-Mountford, 22, said in London. "I am exhausted though, I have only had about 45 minutes of sleep."

Christos Pavlides got in line at a downtown Philadelphia store at 10 p.m. Thursday to be the first to get one.

He already owns the two previous iPad models and several iPhones and figures the new iPad was next.

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For some customers, standing in line was the only chance to get a new iPad on Friday. Apple quickly ran out of supplies it set aside for advance orders. The company was telling customers Thursday to expect a two- to three-week wait for orders placed through its online stores. Some buyers feared even longer waits.