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>> GCSU SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

GCSU psych faculty conjure explains why dolls are creepy



With lifeless eyes and frozen smiles, dolls sit inside homes just waiting for someone — anyone — to come play with them.

For children, dolls are that constant companion, always ready to sit down for a tea party

or provide security at bedtime. Adults, though, often find dolls with their unchanging expressions unsettling.

Faculty members in the Georgia College & State University Department of Psychological Science say a

few factors play into why some people think dolls are creepy.

Dr. Kristina Dandy, who teaches psychology of learning and behavioral statistics, says fear of dolls is a classic example of classical conditioning, with Hollywood horror films

bearing some responsibility.

"We see dolls put into situations that are scary and then we associate the doll with that scary situation, making us fear those dolls," said

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Dandy. "The interesting thing about classical conditioning is it may not just be that doll. Generalization occurs, so that fear can then extend to other dolls and other situations."

Knife-wielding Chucky slashed his way onto the silver screen in 1988's "Child's Play," all while Cabbage Patch mania was sweeping the nation. More recently, a macabre version of the haunted Annabelle doll has been featured in "The Conjuring" film franchise, most recently in September.

There lies the doll disconnect between children and adults. Kids not exposed to those R-rated movies believe there's nothing to fear, while adults have seen examples of the opposite being true.

It all comes down to the most basic of human instincts — survival.

"Is a doll actually going to hurt you? No, but if you respond like it will, you know for sure you won't get hurt," Dandy added. "It is evolutionarily to our benefit that we learn via classical conditioning because it often keeps us safe."

A trip down into the uncanny valley

Associate professor of psychology Dr. Stephanie Jett says screenwriters who choose dolls as their film subjects may be tapping into a phenomenon known as the uncanny valley.



ANNA GAY LEAVITT/GCSU

The library's collection of dolls dates back to the mid-1930s. They served as a sewing project for home economics students around that time.

As explained in a 2023 *Psychology Today* article, the uncanny valley hypothesis states that artificial characters and objects that are almost, but not fully, human-like "will trigger a deep sense of unease."

The term "uncanny valley" originates from a 1970 article published by Japanese robotics professor Masahiro Mori, who said humans would show positive feelings toward a human-like robot up to a certain realism point. Mori coined the phenomenon "bukimi no tani gensh," later translated to English as "uncanny valley."

Think of the uncanny valley

effect on a graph with humanness of an object on the horizontal axis and affinity for the object on the vertical. As the humanness rises to around 70%, peoples' affinity and comfort increase as well. At around 80% though, affinity bottoms out. When approaching 90 to 100% humanness, affinity spikes again, forming a "valley" on the graph.

"Our brains recognize dolls as something familiar and comforting, but there's also a prickle somewhere deep and evolutionary that screams the potential for danger because something is off and we can't

quite put our finger on it," said Jett. "It's the same reason people think AI deep fakes and anthropomorphic robots are creepy. They look like a human and our brain wants to think humans are safe, but they aren't human and that weirds us out."

Dolls on campus

Georgia College has its own brood of dolls some might describe as creepy. Tucked away in the Ina Dillard Russell Library's Special Collection are dolls whose origins date back nearly a century. They stand around a foot tall, all with the same piercing blue

eyes, rouged cheeks and heart-shaped lipstick. Some show cracks in their porcelain faces while others are missing heads altogether.

While their looks and perpetual stares may be somewhat unnerving, their backstory is decidedly less creepy.

Library Gallery and Archives Assistant Jordyn Street said the dolls were subjects of hands-on learning experiences for home economics students during the mid-1930s when the university was still the Georgia State College for Women. The students were tasked with sewing uniforms to reflect those worn by their Georgia Normal & Industrial College forebears around the turn of the 20th century. The dolls were miniature mannequins for the project, and the library maintains them as a relic of GCSU history.

Want to overcome your fear of dolls this Halloween season? Visit Special Collections on the second floor of the library. Georgia College psych professor Dr. Whitney Heppner says choosing fear may lead to healing.

"Experiencing fear in ways that you choose, calibrated to your own fear barometer, actually reduces peoples' anxiety," she said. "People experience the physiological bump then come back down and feel better after that experience. Some research suggests that it is helpful because it allows people to sort of rehearse being scared and overcoming it."

— Courtesy of GCSU's Gil Pound