



Lifestyle Home > Lifestyle > Living

- Focus
- Health
- Living
- Arts & Fashion
- Bookshelf
- Food
- Parenting
- Travel & Adventure
- Mind Our English

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Doll-iciously weird

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Ugly is the new cute for children's dolls.

GROWING up, most of us probably had that prized doll that we cuddled to sleep every night – it could have been a cute baby doll, a fluffy teddy bear or a lovely little princess.

Kids today, however, may prefer to be tucked in with a monster doll instead! Just take a look at the nearest shopping mall or toy store, and you are likely to see some decidedly non-traditional dolls being sold alongside the more conventional teddies and baby dolls.



Philip, by The Monster Factory

Anything from humanoid voodoo dolls to scarred, cross-eyed animals and oddly-shaped monsters are all eagerly snapped up. Even teenagers and adults can often be seen proudly displaying these kooky, odd-looking dolls, sometimes as desk ornaments or key-chains.

If all this is anything to go by, "ugly" could be the new cute. (By the way, the Oxford dictionary defines cute as "ugly but adorable".)

The appeal of these misshapen moppets may not be immediately apparent but to fans, it's obvious.

Dolls like these offer an alternative view of beauty. Instead of appreciating a doll for conventional reasons, these dolls clearly send a message that unconventional appearances can be attractive too.

Chew Kai Xin, marketing manager of Doodolls (their monster-like characters appear on plush toys as well as other lifestyle products), says it's definitely cool today to be quirky.

"Our fans get the idea that something others may consider strange, weird or not-so-pretty-looking can be seen as unique and extraordinary," she explains.

The Uglydoll plushes, now available in Malaysia, also apply this principle: according to their website, the dolls' creators wanted to create a universe where "ugly" meant unique and special. The makers combine traditionally "ugly" features with cute, and obviously, it works; the dolls

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are immensely popular worldwide, and even the United States' first daughter Sasha Obama has been spotted toting an Uglydoll.

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Quirky: The Doodolls characters are used in plush toys as well as other lifestyle products.

Of course, unconventional dolls are not an entirely new notion. Some of us may remember playing with scrappy Raggedy Ann dolls, the Picasso-esque Mr Potato Head, or the stumpy Troll dolls with their shock of neon hair. The past decade or so, however, has seen a boom in these kooky companions' popularity, thanks in part to animated movies like *Monsters, Inc.*, *Shrek* and *Lilo & Stitch*, all of which feature monster-like characters which are nevertheless loveable.

The increasing presence of anime movies featuring odd-looking characters (such as *Spirited Away* and *My Neighbour Totoro*) has also changed traditional perception of what is considered cute.

For parents, dolls like these provide more options. Unlike traditional dolls, most of them are not gender-specific – your son may sniff at a teddy bear, but may be thrilled with an ogre-like plush.



Mr Bends from The String Doll Gang.

And for families that are concerned about promoting race-specific toys (as most traditional dolls are predominantly Caucasian-looking), these quirky dolls offer a fun alternative. What's more, dolls like these can also teach children valuable lessons about inclusiveness and not judging appearances.

Perhaps, the biggest draw of these non-traditional dolls (particularly for teens and adults) is their individuality. Unlike mass-produced dolls that are a

dime a dozen, most of these oddballs are made to be different. As such, many people view these dolls as art or collectors' items.

When buying a Koonin Family Pet by Kamibashi, for example, you choose from a selection of shapes, but every doll is different because it is made from various scrap fabrics. The pets are even accompanied by a tag that gives their birthday, motto and a space for its name. The String Doll Gang (also by Kamibashi) is made in the same vein, featuring a multitude of handmade string characters that each have a special power.

"We like to think of Kamibashi dolls as unique pieces of art, as each one is handmade and no two are the same. Each is a creation in its own right," explains Gareth Ng of Life & Style Co, local distributors of Kamibashi products.

This emphasis on giving a doll its own personality can also be seen in Canadian manufacturer The Monster Factory's dolls (available at monsterfactory.net). Not only do they create wildly different monsters –

everything from blobs to aliens to indeterminate animals – but they also give each doll a story, like Andy who “never misses an opportunity to act out scenes from his favourite movie, in detail, with sound effects.”

It’s definitely time to let those lurking monsters out of the closet. They may be dolls, but they’re more than just child’s play!

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