

PROFILE

CSUF Faculty and Student Involved in Research Examining Black Barbie's Effect on Self-Image

By Lois Elfman

The history of the iconic Barbie doll, which made her debut in 1959, is complex. Although Barbie had some Black friends dating back to the 1960s, the first Black Barbie doll didn't debut until 1980.



Courtesy of CSUF

Dr. Amirah Saafir, an assistant professor at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), designed a study examining Black girls' thoughts on race, body type and hair while interacting with various Barbie dolls. A tenure-track professor in child and adolescent studies, Saafir also serves as a research consultant for mainstream projects, which enable her to disseminate her academic work to a wider audience.

"Black Barbie"

Among Saafir's projects was the Netflix documentary "Black Barbie," which tells the story of the first Black Barbie in three chapters: the Black women who oversaw the doll's development, how it resonated and what that means to children. Saafir appears in chapter three, "Future of Black Barbie: Center of Her Own Story."

"As a kid, all of my Barbies were Black," says Saafir. "The reason for that was because my mother, when she was growing up didn't have any Black dolls, and it had a negative impact on her. She wanted to make sure that me and my two sisters had Black dolls to play with. One impact that Black Barbie had on me as a kid is it normalized to me that Barbies and dolls could be Black and they could look like me. That reaffirmed the positive messaging I received as a kid about being Black."

Inspired by Kenneth and Mamie Clark's doll test of the 1940s, in which researchers asked children questions about Black and white dolls, Saafir designed a modern day version. Focus groups of children were shown dolls with different hair, skin color, body type and occupation and were asked how they felt about each doll.

"In the 'Black Barbie' documentary with the kids we had playing with the dolls, one thing they commented on is the similarity between themselves and the dolls," Saafir says. "We hear girls saying, 'She's pretty and she has locs just like me' or 'she has brown skin like me.' They're able to think about themselves in relation to the dolls and receive that affirmation but also think about the differences between themselves and the dolls."

Although not in the film, Saafir says multiple times during the study kids were debating the ethnicity of the dolls

because they were trying to figure out the relationship between skin tone and a dolls' ethnicity or race. This serves as an example of how dolls can be a context for them to start to understand what these differences mean.

"The kids had these really insightful things to say," notes Saafir. "The production team came back to me and asked me to put together a panel of experts to discuss what we saw in the footage. We had a sociologist, a school principal, a child psychologist and a developmental psychologist who focused on Black girls, and we all had a conversation about some of the things that came up in the focus groups facilitated by me. That's featured in the documentary."

Promoting Research

CSUF students participated in the Black Barbie study as part of a program at Cal State Fullerton called BUSCAR (Bolstering Black Undergraduate Student Creative Activities and Research), which is specifically geared towards providing research opportunities to Black students on campus.

Among the undergraduate students was Amirah Kambe, a public health major. Like Saafir, she had several Barbies as a child, but few were Black. This was Kambe's first experience with a major research project, particularly one that goes beyond survey data.

"I thought it would be interesting to talk about hair," Kambe says. "With the data and even without it, Barbie has sort of become a role model and a symbol for perfection, which I'm not sure is a good thing. When they talk about Barbie, they usually mean like Malibu Barbie, who has an hourglass figure, long straight hair and looks a certain way. That can have negative influences on how girls feel about themselves and their hair."

This project widened Kambe's understanding of what research entails. She learned about qualitative data and doing analysis. There is an element of storytelling and the material provides a broader context. She presented at a research symposium at CSUF and all the presenters received dolls.

"It changed my perception of what research can look like," says Kambe, who is feeling more motivated to apply to graduate school. "Before I did it, I had never really considered that being a researcher is something I could do. ... Now that I've done it, it doesn't feel daunting in the way it did before."


Continuing the Conversation

Since "Black Barbie" was released, Saafir has hosted screenings, appeared on podcasts and had conversations about talking to children about race. She is eager to take on more opportunities in this vein because she appreciates taking her research beyond the traditional research space.

Prior to this study, Saafir already had an interest in studying contextual factors that impact the identity development

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complete their degree programs amidst the uncertainty.

Mukherjee underscores the need for vigilance, advising students to consider factors like social media presence and tattoos that could influence their residency status under the new policy. 

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of Black children and adolescents. Her previous research had been in the school context—looking at the diversity of a school population and what kinds of curriculum there was that would help kids think about their identity.

“I’m now thinking of Black Barbie as a contextual feature that influences identity development,” Saafir says. “The more we see the value in diversity, the more we know that we need even more. The kids in our study were noticing that too.”

In some ways Black Barbies affirm girls’ self-image, but girls also notice the positioning of those dolls in relation to the other dolls in stores and on television. That provides context about the positioning of Black girls in the broader society.

“I teach a class on how culture and ethnicity impact development for children of all backgrounds,” says Saafir. Many of the students in that course are aspiring teachers. “When we think about things like culturally relevant pedagogy or tools that can be used in the classroom ... it’s been cool to talk about Black Barbie from the vantage point of thinking about the kinds of books, toys and representations that we can be including in curriculum that represent the backgrounds of the kids that my students will be working with.” 

RESILIENCE

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from historically marginalized backgrounds?

How are you engaging local and state communities, particularly in contentious or polarized environments?

Audit your support structures. Examine whether affinity groups, counseling services, bias reporting systems, and faculty development opportunities are robust, well-resourced, and used. Empower them to continue to boldly serve your university community in the same ways you identified a need when these committees were created. You may need to shift some language, but the work and the outcomes must continue.

Rebuild local partnerships. If your campus is facing community tension, summer is the time to quietly and intentionally reestablish relationships—with local schools, faith groups, civic organizations, and others who share mutual stakes in your institution’s health.

Institutional Memory and Succession: Are We Preserving What We’ve Learned and Preparing for What’s Next?

The pressures of this moment can lead us to operate in survival mode. But resilience includes thinking beyond

any one leader or administration. Institutions must build systems that can outlast the individuals who steward them.

What institutional knowledge—about navigating political pressure, sustaining DEI work, or leading through uncertainty—is at risk of being lost?


Is there a clear succession plan, not just for senior roles, but for mission-critical work?

Document the hard-earned lessons. Host a debrief or create a shared resource where this year’s key learnings are captured—what worked, what didn’t, and what should be preserved.

Invest in leadership development. Use the quieter summer months to identify and support emerging leaders at all levels. Resilience depends on having a deep bench, not just a charismatic front.

Move Forward with Boldness and Intentionality

Leadership in this era of higher education demands more than operational excellence—it demands courage, clarity, and foresight. By conducting an institutional resilience audit this summer, we can better understand not only where we stand, but how we might stand stronger, together.

As we look toward the fall, let’s position our institutions not just to survive the current political moment, but to emerge from it with our values intact and our communities empowered. 

INTERVIEW

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to learn it! Then I did a small group instructional feedback technique (GIFT) with the students, and I totally expected a few students to have on their big stickie sheets that they didn’t like that. Simmons University students tend to be a bit higher in anxiety than some other campuses. I think often students come to a women’s focused institution looking for, you know ...

RW: That kind of safety? that makes sense.

SRC: Yes. And so I thought we’d get some students who were upset that they were essentially forced to participate. But not a single one disliked this professor’s handling of the discussion—they all loved it. They all mentioned it on their list of things that were enhancing their learning. None of them mentioned it as detracting from their learning. So, I think that that practice of cold calling often gets maligned, but I think can be really wonderful.

But I can’t do it! I’m so shy. I watched the Spanish instructor do it to such good effect. I was like, I should do this. I’ve seen Jim do it. I’ve read his arguments. I know that there’s certain students in my class who want to participate, but maybe need that invitation. Yes! But I just can’t.

Sarah Silverman has written a lot about access friction and accessibility, about the tension between instructors’ and students’ accessibility needs. I don’t warm call because it doesn’t fit with my personality, but I do do a lot of activities involving movement, a lot of small group work, a lot of creative things like that, that I think are really great for