

Roller coasters prove a primal need in humans

By Brooke Hobson

Friday 15 Jan 2016 9:50 a.m.

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There's a psychological reason behind why humans like being strapped in and go flying from zero to 100km/h in seconds on a roller coaster, one researcher says.

It's a psychological need, Queensland University of Technology researcher Malcolm Burt says, where we get an adrenaline rush without being in danger.

This is called a "hands on" form of release and from this Mr Burt has coined the term "Amusement-Industrial Complex".

People have an emotional need for roller coasters and the feeling of controlled fear they provide.

Mr Burt's research sent him on a roller coaster-seeking adventure around the world from the US to Asia to investigate why they exist. He spoke to park managers, sociologists, psychologists and roller coaster enthusiasts to find out why we basically pay to be scared.

"It's quite expensive to get into a theme park and then you can line up for several hours for a 60-second ride to nowhere. What does this say about us as a society?"

"It very quickly became obvious that roller coasters exist because we have a strong psychological need for them, and of course they make a lot of money for theme park owners."

Mr Burt says while the world has changed enormously from a biological perspective, humans have remained the same.

"We aren't at immediate risk every day any more - we actually live in a fairly lazy, consumerist society, but we still need a way to stay in touch with our primal selves," he says.

Roller coasters also "democratise thrill seeking" by offering a genuine release without having to say, climb Mt Everest, as often we don't have the time, money or skills for these types of activities.

"But we can easily head to the theme park and scare ourselves senseless, as

the biology of the thrill you get from a scary coaster and that of the peak experience when climbing a mountain is almost identical."

It seems roller coasters are still as popular as ever with nearly 300 built around the world between 2011 and 2013. Mr Burt says this shows people are still keen to re-connect with their "primal" selves.

Combined, the world's theme parks attract several hundred million visitors every year and parks in the US alone bring in roughly \$12 billion a year in revenue, he says.

"We are driven to consume these thrills, because that is what is promoted to us as a thrill in multiple forms in the media - if you want a thrill, you go to a theme park," he says.

"And then of course you need to buy the shirt and photo to prove you were brave enough for the thrill, post it on social media and encourage the process of making these rides out to be daring thrills, when in fact they are incredibly safe."

Mr Burt will begin a PhD this year which will result in an online video series, asking the question what the future of themes parks is.

His documentary *Signature Attraction* about his findings can be viewed here.