

Thrill Ride Enthusiasts: Perspectives from the United States and South Africa

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Amusement parks by design create a family-focused environment which provides the consumer with unique products and services. The first amusement park ever built was Bakken, located in Copenhagen. Built in 1583, the park continues to operate today (7). Following the success of Bakken, other parks were soon built throughout Europe. These parks were known for having certain products, primarily music and games. However, these amusement parks soon became outdated in the 1600s when Russia built the world's first roller coaster (7). As technology has enhanced and consumers demand more thrilling rides, coasters have gradually become bigger, faster, and taller. These coasters are so enjoyed by modern consumers that individuals will travel great distances, pay significant entrance fees, and wait in long lines just to ride the latest coaster. The people in this consumer segment are called thrill-ride enthusiasts.

To develop a well-rounded, extensive portrait of the thrill ride enthusiast in South Africa, research began with the understanding of the American consumer. As a more accessible consumer segment to study, researching the American consumer created a general background of the thrill ride enthusiast and allowed for comparisons to be made between the consumer segments in both markets. Methods for this research included post-positivist research and secondary data analysis. Post-positivist research was used to observe the consumer at Busch Gardens Williamsburg. A thorough understanding of the consumer was developed by spending time among the segment, waiting in line, riding the rides, and walking around the park. Interviews were also collected, though apathy towards participation limited this method of data collection. Photographs and video clips were taken to capture visual depictions of the thrill ride enthusiast in America. To supplement the post-positivist research, secondary data analysis was also used. This portion of the research included information from both Busch Garden's Williamsburg and Ratanga Junction's, the theme park studied in South Africa, websites. Also, an abstract from a market research report was used to compare the trends found using the post-positivist research to trends presented by the report. The extensive data of the market report also introduced new trends in the American consumer that were not as evident when using the post-positivist methods. Other sources were used to collect general data about the thrill ride enthusiast and the theme park market to develop a well-rounded portrait of the consumer in South Africa. A general history of both parks was also collected, which helped develop an understanding of the original targeting strategies of the park and the typical consumer segment of each park.

Ratanga Junction is located at Century City in Cape Town, South Africa. It opened in 1998 and offers more than 30 attraction rides, ranging from kiddie and family rides to the thrill rides guaranteed to satisfy adrenaline junkies (6). Ratanga Junction is most known for its ride called "The Cobra", which is a looping coaster that catapults its riders from a height of 32m along 780m of track at up to four times the force of gravity and at speeds of close to 100km per hour (6). Ratanga Junction is also known for offering a large and unique variety of opportunities for corporate team building, incentive functions and events. Private function venues are also available. Ratanga can host a wide variety of events, ranging in size from 60 to 7,000 guests (6). Many corporations meet at Ratanga because of this convenience. Ratanga is also known for its exotic bird shows and its extravagant dance performances. It is stationed very closely to a shopping center with hundreds of restaurants and shops which makes it a prime location for tourists (6).

Voted the most beautiful theme parks in the USA, Busch Garden's parks were first developed as marketing places for Anheuser-Busch and featured hospitality houses with samples of Anheuser-Busch products (8). They also included stables that housed many of the company's Clydesdale horses, which have been associated with Anheuser-Busch since 1933. Through time, rides and attractions were added to the parks, and the parks were eventually developed into full theme parks while still promoting Anheuser-Busch (8). There are two theme parks located in the United States and one planned in Dubai. Today, there are parks in both Williamsburg, Virginia and in Tampa, Florida. The Williamsburg park is home to more than 50 rides and attractions, including Griffon, the world's tallest and first floorless dive coaster. A new Sesame-Street themed area features four new kid orientated rides and shows that will delight the young and the young at heart (8).

As with any method, the post-positivist and secondary data analysis presented both limitations and benefits in researching the thrill ride enthusiast. First, the post-positivist methods could only be used to create a portrait of the American consumer, as it was impossible to travel to South Africa to conduct research. Also, while the post-positivist research allowed for detailed experiences which helped develop the portrait of the consumer, as purely a primary source it limited the understanding of the general trends of thrill ride enthusiasts. Thus, using secondary data analysis supplemented the primary accounts of the thrill ride enthusiast and provided history and general trends of the consumer. However, the impact of the secondary data analysis, particularly the informative market research report, was restricted by the cost of purchasing the report. As it required a payment of around 3,000 dollars, only the publicly available abstract could be used. Even so, the secondary data provided the background necessary to fully understand the consumers viewed during the post positivist research. It was only by using both methods that a well-developed portrait of the South African thrill ride enthusiast emerged.

From the moment of arrival at Busch Gardens Williamsburg, the focus of the park appears to center on the thrill ride enthusiast. As one enters the park, one of the largest thrill rides looms over the entrance, and the screams of its riders are heard from the parking lot. Riding the tram to the park entrance, an audio recording informs the visitors of the thrilling rides that await them, including the speeds and heights of the drops for each ride at the park. The focus on thrill rides is prominent also on the website of the park, which tells its visitors: "Breathtaking twists, turns, plunges and adrenaline-pumping g-force thrills - that's what you'll experience at Busch Gardens" (1). When researching other local theme parks, the prominent focus on the thrill rides begins to develop into a trend. The website for Paramount Kings Dominion, another Virginia theme park, boasts, "Our bragging rights begin with THE BEST roller coaster collection on the entire East Coast - we're talking 15 of the wildest scream machines you'll find anywhere!" (2). These parks also tend to compete to build the biggest, fastest, highest coaster. Busch Garden's newest coaster is the Griffon, which plunges its passengers down 205 feet at a terrifying angle of 90 degrees (1). Kings Dominion's latest addition is the Intimidator 305, now the tallest and fastest thrill ride on the East Coast, with heights over 300 feet and speeds over 90 miles per hour (2). As a consumer, the thrill ride enthusiast seems to be on a constant search for bigger and better rides, which results in the obvious focus of the parks to continue to build new rides. This theme is supported by the World Market Report for the amusement park industry which found in 2007 that the biggest incentive to visit theme parks was physical thrill rides (3). As a consumer segment, the thrill ride enthusiast can be characterized as constantly seeking the bigger, faster, more thrilling attraction.

Demographically, the thrill ride enthusiast widely varies. As thrill rides are considered the main incentive to visit theme parks, most visitors of these parks can be considered thrill ride enthusiasts, and thus data about park attendance can be used to develop the demographic of this consumer. From the post-positivist research, thrill ride enthusiasts ranged in age from young children to middle age consumers, though height restrictions can limit the youngest thrill ride consumers. Thrill ride enthusiasts experience the rides both in groups and alone. Often the most serious consumer of thrill ride consumer rides alone however, taking advantage of the “single riders” line which often moves more quickly. Also, single riders may be the one member of a family that enjoys thrill rides. While families are the most common attendees of amusement parks (3), rarely is there a whole family in line for a thrill ride. Groups of thrill ride enthusiasts are often in their teens. Teenage girls are the largest segment of this consumer group (3). There is little focus on status among thrill ride enthusiasts. The dress of most of the consumers is very casual, with the emphasis primarily on comfort. These consumers want to be able to comfortably and easily spend a day at the theme park and do not seem focused on their appearance. However, higher-earning consumers can distinguish themselves by purchasing tickets that allow them to bypass waiting in line (3).

As a consumer segment, the thrill ride enthusiast shares similar psychographic characteristics. Most importantly, all of these consumers are looking for a rush of adrenaline, which they often find as a coaster dives down a 300 foot drop. These consumers often try to push the boundaries, looking for bigger and better rides to fuel their need for adrenaline. These consumers can be either introverts or extroverts, with some screaming and laughing as they ride, sharing the experience with the other consumers, while others are quieter. In all cases, there appears to be a common bond among the avid consumers of thrill rides. Conversations often spark between strangers waiting in line, usually about the ride or others in the park. Also, the parks often sell t-shirts showing the various thrill rides available to the consumer as a tangible possession that signifies a person is a thrill ride enthusiast. Though the thrill ride enthusiast varies widely demographically, all of these consumers are united by their love of these attractions.

Once a portrait of the American consumer developed, secondary data analysis led to an understanding of the South African thrill ride enthusiast. In general, the South African consumer was very similar to the American. For data collection the primary theme park studied was Ratanga Junction in Cape Town. Similar to the American consumer, the most important incentive is the ability to provide an adrenaline-filled thrill. The Ratanga Junction website advertises its main coaster by asking, “if you think you can handle white knuckles and screaming your lungs out then the most challenging ride - the Cobra - was designed for you” (4). Like its American counterpart, the South African amusement park also appeals strongly to the family. On both the Busch Gardens and Ratanga Junction websites, dress codes were explained in part as an effort to maintain the family atmosphere of the park. Though entire families may not all be thrill ride enthusiasts, they are the most consistent visitors to theme parks. The world market report explained that families were the ones most likely to regularly spend on theme parks, even in times of recession (3). Thus, families can be considered one of the largest segments of the thrill ride enthusiast. One small difference between the two consumer groups is evident in the number of thrill rides located at Ratanga Junction. Unlike Busch Gardens, with its numerous high speed

coasters, Ratanga Junction only has one major thrill ride. This difference implies perhaps a slight shift in the wants of the South African consumer. While they too want to enjoy the adrenaline of the thrill ride, they may be looking for a more diverse experience. This is supported by the mission statement of the park, which promises to teach the visitors about South Africa's rich heritage, fauna and flora, marine life and industries like gold mining" (5). As a consumer, the South African thrill ride enthusiast seems to place less emphasis on solely the rides themselves.

The shift in emphasis in reaching the two consumer segments may be in part caused by a lack of funds in South Africa. As an emerging market, South Africa may not have the economic power to compete with the updates and additions occurring in American theme parks. Without the huge budgets like American parks, the South African parks cannot afford to constantly build bigger and faster thrill rides. Because it has a much larger budget, Busch Gardens can target the younger population of more extreme thrill ride enthusiasts with its fast and exceptionally large rides.

Busch Gardens parks targets its consumers mainly by advertising its extreme thrill rides. If the South African roller coasters cannot compare to the ones in America, how do South African theme parks compensate for this lack of thrill rides? They try to establish the influence of South African culture and the beauty of the lands around the park. The exotic bird shows and beautiful dance performances are two different ways that Ratanga Junction tries to appeal to the consumer. Because the South African theme parks do not offer the wide variety of intense thrill rides like the ones available at Busch Gardens, to still appeal to consumers, Ratanga Junction must offer other products or services. Thus the park has a greater focus on hosting large events and offering corporate team building events. Also, Ratanga Junction focuses more on the overall experience of the consumer while visiting the park instead of the few moments spent on the thrill ride.

South Africa clearly has a defined consumer segment of thrill ride enthusiasts. Though none of the major American theme parks have built in South Africa, there is a growing market which is attracting other countries. In 2009, a Chinese company announced it was planning to build a Disney-style park in Johannesburg (6). As new companies enter this market, it is crucial to understand the South African consumers of thrill rides. While like the American consumer South Africans are most interested in experiencing the thrill of the attractions, more focus must be placed on the overall experience that occurs at the park. Bigger and better rides will attract more of the serious thrill ride consumers, but overall success will rely on the structure of the park as a whole. Also, to ensure consistent attendance, marketing should be heavily oriented towards the family. The South African thrill ride enthusiast wants not only the adrenaline of the thrill ride, but a beautiful, educational, and diverse experience.

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