Why has Halloween infiltrated Australian culture?

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Halloween appears to have infiltrated Australian culture, and according to a University of Adelaide researcher, the reason for its increasing popularity could run much deeper than Americanisation.

Ten years ago the average Australian wouldn't think of trick-or-treating or hosting a Halloween party but in recent years Halloween merchandise is readily available in most supermarkets and dressing up on 31 October has become the norm.

PhD candidate in the University of Adelaide's School of Humanities, Carly Osborn, says while the ever growing popularity of Halloween is another example of American culture seeping into Australia, this move could also be an indication that Australians are now more anxious about death and violence.

"In modern Australia, death is a subject to be avoided and glossed over. We use words like 'passed away' to soften its impact and our memorials are performed in tidy funeral homes surrounded by flowers," says Ms Osborn. "Yet Halloween is a chance to invert order, to look death in the face and vent any built-up anxieties."

"Historically, we need rituals like Halloween, termed carnivalesque ceremonies, when communal bonds are breaking down in a community and when there is an increased threat of violence.

"Recent tensions in Australia around immigration and hostility towards

'others', makes our social stability weaker," she says. "And rituals like Halloween help us re-establish stability, or at least the illusion of stability."

Ms Osborn says carnivalesque festivals have featured across numerous cultures throughout history, providing societies with an outlet in which they can address and release tension.

"In carnivalesque festivals, tensions are put on display, indulged in, and celebrated while the festival lasts. But the conclusion of the festival marks an absolute return to the old order," she says.

"Historical examples include festivals which encouraged usually forbidden behaviour such as slaves whipping their masters, men dressing up as women, citizens shouting obscenities in the streets and animals dressed up as royalty.

"Halloween has a strong carnivalesque tendency: good becomes bad, bad becomes good; 'evil' things like witches, zombies and ghosts become desirable playmates; children may indulge in trickster behaviour; emotions like fear and disgust are part of the fun; and most crucially, everything related to death and dying becomes welcomed rather than taboo," she says.

Ms Osborn is writing her PhD on ritual violence in literature and is influenced by the works of theorist René Girard.

Provided by University of Adelaide