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# Beyond a youthful behavior style – Age and sex differences in sensation seeking based on need theory

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## Abstract

Previous studies examining sex and age-related differences in sensation seeking have mainly focused on specific patterns of behaviour that can be described as a youthful behaviour style. In contrast, the present study assessed age and sex differences in sensation seeking using the need inventory of sensation seeking (NISS). This instrument measures sensation seeking without items which are descriptive of concrete behaviours. Data were collected in Germany from 2339 subjects aged 14–79 years; constituting a representative population sample of Germany. The results indicate that sensation seeking scores decline over the course of age, even when no age-related behaviors are itemized in measuring the construct. Significant sex-related differences were also observed, although, contrary to age, they only accounted for a small part of the variance in sensation seeking. © 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Sensation seeking; Need-theory; Sex- and age-differences; Representative population sample

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of sensation seeking can be traced back to the works of Zuckerman (1979) initially described sensation seeking as a “trait defined by the need for varied, novel and complex sensations

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and experience and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experience” (p. 10), though the definition of the concept has changed over time. In later years, Zuckerman (1994) went on to reject the definition of sensation seeking as a need and instead attempted to define it as a trait involving the “seeking of varied, complex, and intense sensations and experiences”. Currently, sensation seeking (SS) is explained by a model based on genetic, biochemical, psychophysiological and social factors (for a review see Roberti, 2004; Zuckerman, 1996). From almost the very beginning of SS-research up to the present day, the sensation seeking scale-form V (SSS-V) developed by Zuckerman, Eysenck, and Eysenck (1978) represents “the standard measure of the SS trait” (Ferrando & Chico, 2001, p. 1122). The SSS-V is a self-report inventory comprising a total score in addition to four factor-analytically derived subscales: thrill and adventure seeking (TAS), experience seeking (ES), disinhibition (Dis), and boredom susceptibility (BS).

## 2. Age and sex differences in sensation seeking

At present, age and sex differences in sensation seeking predominately rest on common sense considerations. Zuckerman postulated early on that sensation seeking relates to developmental phases, and is generally “lower in children, reaches a peak in adolescence and declines thereafter” (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 92).

To date, three studies have used the SSS-V to examine age and sex differences in sensation seeking in samples with a broad age range. The first comprehensive data on age differences was analyzed by Zuckerman et al. (1978). Total scores decreased from the youngest age group (16–19 years) to the oldest group (60 and older) in both sexes. Furthermore, sex-differences were significant in all age groups with males scoring higher than females. Yet decreasing values did not accompany rising age for all subscales. Higher scores for younger males were only found for TAS and Dis, whereas ES and BS appeared to be unaffected by age. These results were partially supported by Ball, Farnhill, and Wangeman (1984) in an Australian sample. The authors also found a significant decrease with age in total scores for both sexes. Contrary to Zuckerman et al. (1978) however, a significant age-by-sex interaction was observed, caused by the steeper decline for males aged 30–39 and subsequent slightly higher mean for females of the same age group.

The results of a German study conducted by Beauducel, Strobel, and Brocke (2003) and also including a wide age range ( $N = 1480$ , 16–59 years) seem to point in a similar direction. In analysing age differences, Beauducel et al. (2003) applied the same age group classification used by both, Zuckerman et al. (1978) and Ball et al. (1984). The study widely replicated the pattern of results yielded by Zuckerman et al. (1978). With the exception of the ES subscale, males generally scored higher than females. Furthermore, significant rank-order correlations indicated an age decrease in the scores of both sexes across the examined age range. The only exception was the subscale BS.

At first sight, the concurrence of the three studies using the SSS-V seems to provide strong evidence for age and sex differences in sensation seeking. However, the SSS-V has been the subject of much criticism over the course of the past few years (Arnett, 1994; Ferrando & Chico, 2001; Roth, 2003b). In the present context, the most critical points lie in the use of age-dependent items (e.g. “skiing”, “mountaineering”) and the inclusion of items descriptive of delinquent behaviour (e.g. the use of marijuana) or at least odd behaviour (e.g. “wild uninhibited parties”, “dressing in individual

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