



# Surfing: an avenue for socially acceptable risk-taking, satisfying needs for sensation seeking and experience seeking<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Whether the personality characteristics of sensation seeking and openness to experience and participation motives differ between participants in the high-risk sport of surfing ( $n=41$ ) and participants in a low-risk sport (golf;  $n=44$ ) was investigated. Multivariate analysis indicated that surfers are characterised by higher levels of sensation seeking, as measured by the Sensation Seeking Scale-V (Zuckerman, 1983) and Openness to Experience, as measured by the NEO-Personality Inventory Revised (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Surfers also demonstrated higher levels of Intrinsic Motivation, measured by the Sports Motivation Scale (Pelletier et al., 1995) than golfers, while both groups demonstrated similar levels of Extrinsic Motivation. These results suggest that personality factors, together with types of participation motives, may be useful in discriminating between participants in low- and high-risk sports, which in turn could be used to promote surfing as a positive risk-taking pursuit.

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## 1. Introduction

What attracts particular individuals to take up a sporting activity is relevant to understanding the adoption of, and persistence with, a given sport. Among the many factors that may influence sport participation, individual personality characteristics and motives for participation have been identified as important variables. Research has found that participants in high-risk sports score

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higher on sensation seeking than low-risk sport participants, suggesting risk-taking may be a personality characteristic associated with participation in high-risk sports. Zuckerman (1983) has classified sports on a risk continuum, where risk is classified by consequence (e.g. injury, mental harm and punishment) and is a function of objective and subjective appraisal. Sports such as skydiving are placed on the risk end of this continuum where both serious injury and fatality are possible consequences of participation. Golf is an example of the low-risk end of the continuum where the possibility of injury is present, yet low, and fatalities are rare. Surfing involves both the potential for serious injury as well as acute danger (including fatality) and is categorised as high-risk (Rowland, Franken, & Harrison, 1986; Zuckerman, 1989).

Since surfing involves high levels of risk, it may attract individuals with sensation seeking tendencies. Sensation seeking is defined as: “the need for varied, novel and complex sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experience” (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 10). Sensation seeking has been highlighted as a specific need that may be fulfilled by participation in certain sports, including hang-gliding (Wagner & Houlihan, 1994), telemark skiing (Trafton, Thomas, & Meyers, 1997) and mountain climbing (Cronin, 1990), which suggests that surfing may also provide an avenue for satisfying a sensation seeking need.

The most widely used scale for measuring sensation seeking is the Sensation Seeking Scale—V (SSS-V) (Zuckerman, 1983), which assesses four aspects of sensation seeking: Thrill and Adventure Seeking (TAS), Experience Seeking (ES), Disinhibition (DIS), and Boredom Susceptibility (BS). Comparisons have revealed significant positive relationships between high-risk sport and both specific subscale and Total Sensation Seeking scores obtained using the SSS-V. Freixanet (1991) compared participants in high-risk sports (experienced mountain climbers, mountaineers, water skiers, motorcyclists and scuba divers) with a control group not participating in any risk taking sport. All participants of high-risk sports scored significantly higher than the control group on TAS, ES and Total Sensation Seeking (TotSS). Similarly, hang-gliders have been found to score significantly higher than a control group of golfers on all four subscales of the SSS-V and Total Sensation Seeking (Wagner & Houlihan, 1994), while Jack and Ronan (1998) found similar patterns of differences in a diverse group of sports participants. Schroth (1995) found that athletes of both genders scored higher on sensation seeking as measured by the SSS-V compared with their non-athlete counterparts. However, while female athletes scored higher than female non-athletes, both groups of males (athletes and non-athletes) scored higher on sensation seeking than their female counterparts. In addition, sensation seeking scores were higher for participants in contact sports (rugby and lacrosse) compared with individuals engaging in non-contact sports (rowing and soccer). Overall, athletes had higher scores on total sensation seeking and the thrill and adventure seeking, disinhibition and boredom susceptibility subscales compared with non-athletes.

While positive relationships between high-risk sport participation and sensation seeking tendencies have been observed, Zuckerman (1992) stresses that risk taking is not an essential motivation for sensation seeking behaviour. This was demonstrated by Heyman and Rose (1980) who investigated level of sensation seeking tendencies and depth of scuba dive in a group of low and high sensation seeking student divers. High sensation seekers appeared to prefer the greater opportunity of visual exploration in shallow water, supporting the suggestion that sensation seekers do not take risks for the sake of risk alone—there has to be some kind of novel experience to justify the risk. Therefore, exposure to risk is not the only reason for sport participation in

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