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## Beyond the mainstream versus extreme dichotomy: a cyclical perspective on extreme sports

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Extreme sports have received a growing interest in the last decade (Dean 2012 [*Young Consumers* 13 (1): 62–73. doi:10.1108/17473611211203948]). Researchers have examined extreme sports in relation to mainstream sports at both the individual level (e.g. Brymer 2005 [*Journal of Emergency Medicine* 28 (1): 63–68. doi:10.1016/j.jemermed.2004.07.008]; Brymer and Schweitzer 2013a [*Journal of Health Psychology* 18: 477–487], 2013b [*Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 14: 865–873]) and by using a social perspective (Balint 1987 [*Thrills and Regressions*. London: Karnac Books. <http://www.ebrary.com>]; Honea 2013 [*The Journal of Popular Culture* 46: 1253–1275. doi:10.1111/jpcu.12087]; Pearson 1979 [*International Review of Sport Sociology* 14: 51–60]). This article explores characteristics of both extreme and mainstream sports to suggest that they are related and stem from one another. The main features of extreme sports emerge from social and psychological theories. Five characteristics that exist on a continuum between extreme and mainstream are discussed: the relation with injury and death, the rationale for participation, the relation with performance, and the connection with other cultures and with the natural world. The cyclical effect of extreme sports or how after becoming mainstream an extreme sport tries to return to its origins is introduced. Future research avenues are suggested.

### Extreme and mainstream sports

The classification of a sport often varies depending on who participates and how the media portrays the sport. Commercialization of the big four sports in the USA and soccer worldwide has generally set the social norm for what is considered to be a sport. These sports are commonly labelled ‘mainstream sports’ and are characterized by a large number of participants and spectators, along with a widespread media coverage (Greenhalgh et al. 2011). Mainstream sports usually emphasize competition under strict rules, whereas extreme sports allow more freedom and have less stress on competition. Despite having less media exposure, the popularity associated with extreme sports is on the rise and it has been reported to be the second favourite televised sport with boys after football (Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles [1999] as cited in Messmer, Dunbar, and Hunt 2000). There have always been marginal athletes who have attempted to create extreme sports that lead to names such as downhill ice cross, parkour, wingsuits, trike racing, downhill mountain biking, ice climbing, airplane races, and freestyle motocross. Extreme sports are usually characterized by their differences with their mainstream counterparts (e.g. Kellett and Russell 2009). The goal of this article is to investigate a different approach on extreme sports by suggesting that both extreme and mainstream sports are not separated but are related and stem from one another. After defining what is considered an extreme sport, social and psychological theories are presented. The main characteristics of extreme sports

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are then developed with an emphasis on how they also apply to mainstream sports. Finally, this article concludes with the cyclical effect of extreme sports or how after becoming mainstream an extreme sport tries to return to its origins.

### **Definitions**

Mainstream sports are commonly associated with the most popular sports. Their characteristics include having 'large fan bases, broad appeal, and widespread media coverage' (Greenhalgh et al. 2011, 42) and they are typically commercialized in nature (Honea 2013). On the other hand, extreme sports have been described as independent marginal activities controlled and directed by the participants themselves (Honea 2013). Specifically, extreme sport has been defined as 'an independent leisure activity where the most likely outcome of a mismanaged mistake or accident is death' (Brymer 2005, 70). 'Independent leisure activity' and 'death' are two important features that usually separate extreme from mainstream sports. The dangers associated with extreme sports are extensively present, especially from the perspective of the uninitiated. Extreme sports are also defined in part by their rejection of commercialism (Donnelly 2006). It is generally observed that extreme sports are independent in that they are usually not part of a governmental body such as a league or federation. The independence also relates to how the sport is organized: it is often an individual sport played in an unusual setting and under fewer constraints (rules) than mainstream sports. This includes not having a formal leader who is capable of passing down knowledge about the sport. Finally, independence is closely related to a core feature of extreme sports: freedom. This search for freedom has been shown to be a defining characteristic of extreme sports and is a value frequently reported by the participants themselves (Brymer and Schweitzer 2013a). Extensive danger, organizational independence, and the search for freedom are core characteristics that appear to differentiate extreme and mainstream sports. These features have emerged from both social and psychological approaches. The next section will briefly summarize these approaches.

### **Theoretical approaches**

In American culture, some extreme sports are deemed rebellious and dangerous (e.g. BASE jumping, freestyle motocross). The origin of this attitude has been developed within the social identity theory (Hogg 2006). The main point in this theory is that people want to enhance the self-image of the group in which they belong (i.e. in group), and that this can be accomplished by holding prejudices against groups whom they do not associate with (i.e. out group). Thus, people who belong to the mainstream sports group may try to find negative aspects of extreme sports in order to enhance their own group image (Bogardus 2012). By attempting to maintain the core characteristics of mainstream sports, this group is following the model described by functionalist theory. According to the functionalist perspective, extreme sports can be considered dysfunctional because they bring social change by introducing new sports (Carrington 2013). An alternate assumption of the functionalist perspective is that extreme sports are necessary for society to thrive. For example, airplane races push the boundaries of avionics and the extreme nature of the sport promotes innovation and knowledge to improve the society as a whole. Hence, it may be more appropriate to envision extreme sports as being both dysfunctional and functional. From this perspective, one could argue that there would be a cycle where extreme sports bring social change until they become beneficial and accepted into society (mainstream), and as a result new extreme sports are created to repeat the process. This cyclical effect of

extreme sports becoming mainstream, then leading to the creation of new extreme sports, will be discussed in more depth later in this article.

Along with social perspectives, psychological theories have also been used to account for extreme sport participation. Psychological theories are centred on the person and help explain an individual's motivation to escape the commercialization of the mainstream sports and seek excitement through alternative forms. As mentioned by Brymer and Schweitzer (2013b), a large majority of research on extreme sports focuses on danger and deviance. These researches are grounded in three main approaches: the type T theory, the psychoanalysis theory, and the sensation seeking theory (Breivik 1996; Hunt 1996; Self et al. 2007). Type T theory explains participation in extreme sports 'as the realization of a deviant personality trait' (Self et al. 2007). This deviant personality trait is the thrill-seeking tendency for which extreme sports are considered a positive physical outlet. The psychoanalytic approach suggests that participants in extreme sports have pathological and narcissistic tendencies where they rationalize unacceptable behaviours and overestimate their abilities (Hunt 1996). Sensation seeking theory, on the other hand, argues that athletes in extreme sports are motivated by experiencing unique sensations and search for new thrills to alleviate their boredom (Breivik 1996). A common aspect in these psychological theories is that extreme sport athletes have personality traits that predict participation in risky activities. This could help explain why some athletes deviate from mainstream sports to seek more extreme sensations by creating new sports. Danger, deviance, and sensation seeking are common perspectives used to describe extreme sports, yet some authors (e.g. Brymer and Schweitzer 2013b) suggest a more holistic approach to include positive outcomes. Motivations in extreme sport are larger than traditional images of risk-taking and adrenaline; they also include an exploration of fundamental human values such as humility and courage (Brymer and Oades 2009). Allusion to such values is often made in the sports media and among extreme sports athletes, and from that perspective extreme sports are not that different from the mainstream ones.

### **A continuum perspective between extreme and mainstream sports**

This section explores how extreme and mainstream sports could be considered as related by sharing five features which vary on a continuum. These features are the relation with injury and death, the rationale for participation, the relation with performance, and the connection with other cultures and with the natural world. These characteristics are discussed as they vary along the continuum between extreme and mainstream. For example, when characteristics become limited or expanded, the sport could either shift towards becoming more extreme or more mainstream. The shifting on the continuum, in turn, leads to a continuity between similar activities which are considered extreme or mainstream sports.

A primary reported feature of extreme sports is the relation participants have with injury or death (Le Breton 2000). Injuries are of great concern in both mainstream and extreme sports, even if extreme sports' athletes appear to be more at risk. However, limited data cannot conclude if there are more injuries in extreme sports than in mainstream sports. It is apparent that there is much more that could significantly go wrong which is why life insurance companies classify extreme sport participation for higher premiums, additional surcharges, or denial of coverage (Lifeinsurance 2012). Some authors have examined the symbolic meaning of playing with death in extreme sports. For example, Le Breton (2000) noted the paradox that the more intense the suffering of the participant, the more personal significance the achievement has. This paradox is also present in

mainstream sports, where success can only be attained after years of intense training. Risk can also generate enough personal satisfaction for the participant to resist the temptation to give up. The sensations generated by the activity override the perceived risk and the athlete is continually pushing his or her limits. Extreme sports participants have been typically considered high in risk-taking (e.g. Breivik 1996; Levenson 1990), but Albert (1999) also found risk to be a constituent of more mainstream sports such as cycling. Using data from interviews with racing cyclists, cycling publication, and Internet sources, Albert reported that cyclists perceive risk-taking and the occurrence of injury as being part of their sport. Risk of injury is thus present in both mainstream and extreme sports, the consequences of a mismanaged risk are only more likely to lead to serious consequences for extreme sport participants (Brymer 2005). Thus, on the continuum, activities that result in a higher risk of injury and death are more likely to be classified as 'extreme'.

A second defining characteristic of extreme sports is the aspect of 'independent leisure activity' (Brymer 2005). This independence in the practice of the sport can also be described as freedom. Previous studies have found that extreme sports athletes consider their participation to reflect a desire to free themselves from the rules and limitations imposed by the society (Yakutchik 1995). Bower (1995) built on this idea and suggested that athletes in extreme sports are 'looking for a sense of excitement and challenge that is missing from their everyday lives' (21), which suggests a willingness to escape from boredom and routine. Athletes in extreme sports describe their participation in the activity as a way to free themselves from everyday life and enter an independent environment with no social and economic constraints (Shoham, Rose, and Kahle 2000). Along the same lines, some authors describe the participation in extreme sport as an 'aesthetic liberation of life' (Midol and Broyer 1995, 209) that transgresses traditional rules and obligations imposed by societal norms. Even if mainstream sports might not share the transgression aspect, it seems that sport participation in general is a way to enter a new environment and temporarily free oneself from the everyday life constraints. From a continuum perspective, it seems that freedom is more closely related to extreme sports, while constraints and rules are associated with mainstream sports in which organizations regulate the activity (Pearson 1979).

A third characteristic frequently reported in extreme sports participation is the relation athletes have with performance. Extreme sports participants do not typically emphasize competition (i.e. winning or losing) but are more interested in seeking sensations and trying new 'tricks' (Thorpe 2009). In a study with skydivers, Willig (2008) reported the following quote: You know, it's the performance-based bit where you are linking up with other people, achieving things, breaking records and achieving the goal that you set out to achieve, that really interests me, and when you jump on your own, there's nothing to judge your personal performance by. (696) This quote highlights an achievement goal orientation on the task rather than on the ego (Nicholls 1984, 1989) and emphasizes the relative lack of interest in competitions and comparisons. Other quotes in Willig's study confirm the focus on the own standards rather than the willingness to defeat an opponent. Along this task-ego continuum, it seems that extreme sports athletes are closer to the task extremity, whereas a combination of task and ego orientations has been reported in more mainstream sports (e.g. Eisenbarth and Petlichkoff 2012).

Another relevant aspect that characterizes athletes in extreme sports is their connection with diverse cultures. The inspiration for new exciting sports often comes from societies that are considered 'exotic' (Laviolette 2007). Exotic cultures often engage in risky behaviour as part of hunting expeditions or rites of passage (Laviolette 2007), and some individuals are eager to understand and even partake in their customs. The Dangerous

Sports Club, in the 1970s, went one step further by creating the extreme sport of bungee jumping after viewing the Pentecost Islands earth dive rituals. Another example is the legacy of mixed martial arts (MMA) in the USA which uses different fighting techniques from around the world (e.g. judo, karate, and wrestling). A more extreme version of MMA exists in Senegal where participants wrestle inside a ring until one athlete is thrown on the ground. The Senegal wrestlers do not have regulations on their fighting techniques and are allowed to use any means necessary even if it could lead to death. When the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) started in the USA, a similar no restriction of fighting technique was used until the commercialization of the sport led to more restricted rules. UFC has now a large media coverage and this example highlights how an extreme sport can undergo modifications to become more mainstream.

Finally, another facet of extreme sports is the importance of the athletes' connection to the natural world (Brymer and Gray 2009). Extreme sports such as windsurfing, mountain biking, kayaking, cliff jumping, rock climbing, and skydiving all involve a connection with the nature. As seen in the case of bungee jumping, the origins of some extreme sports are based on nature-inspired rituals. A study on extreme sports participants has shown that they see nature as an extension of the self and humanity rather than something to conquer and master (Brymer and Gray 2009). Brymer and Gray also found that nature is not seen as a foe but rather as a partner with whom participants can fulfil their intrinsic motivations. On the extreme end of the continuum, those who connect with the natural world value intense experiences; this connection is lost as the sport focuses on conquering nature which is more indicative of mainstream commodity and consumption (Wheaton 2007).

The five characteristics commonly attributed to extreme sports could then also be seen in mainstream sports. More media coverage and some modifications in the rules can easily transform a sport and move it along a continuum from extreme to mainstream. The next section will expand on this idea and introduce the cyclical perspective.

### **A cycle between extreme and mainstream sports**

The adventurous and extreme nature of sports from around the globe has been appealing to people, even during the nineteenth century when British colonists began to globalize sport. Many of the mainstream sports we enjoy today started with Britain taking radical ideas in sport from around the world and creating games such as soccer (Markovits 2010). Modern globalization and technical advances have allowed for a new cycle of extreme sports to emerge and possibly take over the mainstream sports. Sports such as snowboarding and mountain biking, which were once considered extreme, are now part of mainstream sports with their large number of participants and commercial features. Society is responsible for creating the language as to what is considered mainstream sports. As Markovits (2010) mentioned, 'One could go even further and argue that these very sports languages, which were, after all, creations of a specific time and space, and are thus random, need not persevere forever' (507). Those who create new extreme sports might be hindered by the preconceived languages of mainstream sports, although new sports may begin to gain more attention due to the inherent characteristics that make them appealing (Markovits 2010). Snowboarding is a good illustration of this process, now considered a mainstream sport after enduring resistance from the popular sport of skiing (Heino 2000).

As they become more popular, there is a natural process for extreme sports to become more mainstream. As Delaney and Madigan (2009) mentioned, 'the longer any sport is in existence, the more likely it is to become standardized and commercialized; many extreme sports have been unable to escape this inevitability' (53). An example of a modern

tradition sport is the rise of British soccer which could have been considered an extreme sport due to the aggressive, disorganized, and impulsive nature of the game. Originally, it was considered ‘mob football’ and usually was a contest between entire towns with vague rules. In some cases, there were a limitless number of participants and the objective was to get the ball to the target by any necessary means without slaying down others. Soccer did not become standardized until the nineteenth century when it was integrated into the school system (FIFA, n.d.). Today, the best examples of extreme sports becoming part of the mainstream are the inclusion of activities such as snowboarding and bicycle motocross (BMX) in the Olympic Games (Honea 2013).

In 1995, ESPN launched the X Games which gathered together for the first time several extreme sports in the same place. Marginal sports such as skateboard and freestyle BMX were then suddenly exposed to the general public with several hours of live coverage. Two years later, the winter X Games were created and the popularity of this event is constantly growing. Along with this increasing popularity, these extreme sports attract more sponsors and this commercialization movement accelerates the assimilation of these sports as part of the mainstream (Crissey 1999). However, some sports have experienced a movement to propagate new extreme sports and return commercialized extreme sports back to their roots. A good example is skydiving, which will be developed in the next section. Some extreme sports could then be considered as moving through a cycle between becoming part of the mainstream culture and then attempting to remove themselves from that culture to return to an extreme status. This movement can be presented as a cyclical process, as depicted in Figure 1.

### Skydiving as an illustration of the cyclical process

As with traditional sports, it is not realistic to provide a common analysis for all extreme sports. As a consequence, skydiving will be used as an example to illustrate the cyclical process. Skydiving emerged in the early twentieth century when performers parachute jumped during air shows (Poynter and Turoff 2007). This new sport reached an extreme status by meeting the core characteristics of eminent danger, lack of overruling organization, and the search for freedom. Moving into the next stage of the cycle, skydiving started to become mainstream due to a rise in popularity when returning soldiers from the Second World War wanted to continue the thrill of jumping out of airplanes. As the demand



Figure 1. Visual representation of the cyclical process from extreme sports to mainstream sports.

for skydiving increased, organizations were developed to teach skydiving for the general population (Poynter and Turoff 2007). These organizations started to set rules about proper parachute rigging and taught consistent techniques to decrease the risk of injury. For example, the organization that oversees skydiving in the USA is the United States Parachute Association (USPA). The USPA has a set of basic safety requirements and techniques that are taught by certified coaches (Poynter and Turoff 2007). Skydiving became also more popular due to technological advances that allowed the sport to become more accessible (Barrows, Mills, and Kassing 2005). The parachutes became lighter and allowed for slower, more controlled falls, providing a broader appeal for newcomers, especially women who were more comfortable with lighter parachutes (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993). Additionally, freedom was reduced by the introduction of USPA hosted competitions that constrain skydiving athletes to focus on selected challenges. Ciomaga (2013) explains that rules allow for the game to be safe and fair but take away from the athlete's autonomy as seen in the skydiving competitions. Even if skydiving does not enjoy a media coverage as large as some mainstream sports, the combination of commercialization, accessibility, broad appeal, and loss of freedom makes skydiving eligible for being part of the mainstream sports.

With the increase in popularity, the third stage of the cycle began when some athletes pushed to regain the extreme status of the sport. Wingsuit pioneers began their push around the same time when skydiving organizations were becoming established. The first wingsuit dives began in 1912 through 1961 (Abrams 2003), while skydiving became organized in the 1930s (Poynter and Turoff 2007). Variations of skydiving such as BASE jumping and wingsuit diving (or a combination of both) introduced new dangers, were not part of an organization, and provided new freedom for the participants. Specifically, the danger is particularly salient in BASE jumping due to the absence of the reserve parachute and wingsuit divers flying extremely close to the ground at high speeds. Weed (2003) also revealed that during the emergence of wingsuit diving, 96% of people died trying to develop a safe suit. It was not until 1998 when the first modern wingsuit was created that safer dives and the commercialization of the sport were possible (Weed 2003).

The cycle appears to already be repeating itself due to the increased popularity of wingsuit diving and BASE jumping. Within the last decade, there is evidence that wingsuit diving could be categorized as a mainstream sport in a near future. Manufacturers set guidelines for new safer wingsuits that are available for the public to purchase (UPSA 2008). The USPA has detailed information for coaches and students in preparation for a wingsuit first flight course. Other organizations worldwide are creating competitions and rules that will limit freedom for both BASE jumping and wingsuit diving (e.g. ProBASE World Cup). As the cycle continues, new extreme aerial diving sports are already emerging. The sport could evolve to reach new heights such as when Felix Baumgartner dove from the stratosphere (128,100 feet) in 2012. Other examples include dives into volcanoes, diving out of one plane to land in another flying plane, and throwing one's parachute out of plane while diving to catch it. These small, yet extreme steps, could possibly change the sport for years to come.

## Conclusion

Previous research on the dynamics of extreme sports typically examines its specific characteristics as compared to mainstream sport (Mawson 2002; Zhu and Yu 2002). This article is grounded in a more holistic approach to suggest that both mainstream and extreme sports can be classified along a continuum. Several key characteristics commonly



attributed to extreme sports are also shared by mainstream sports. The example of skydiving was used to introduce a new perspective to suggest a cyclical process of extreme sports towards mainstream ones, and back again to marginality. Future research should further investigate this cyclical thesis. In particular, other sports should be analysed to examine the potentiality of a generalization across different sports. Limitations should also be investigated, specifically as it relates to the categorization of a sport as part of the mainstream. The cyclical perspective offers a new framework for studying extreme sports as they relate to mainstream sports. It is hoped that this new perspective will contribute to the expansion of the knowledge base in extreme sports.

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