

# THE IMPACT OF EXTREME SPORTS ON THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY: A SHORT INTRODUCTION

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**Abstract:** *Extreme sports (ES) have developed and won the interest of individuals to practice and watch, all over the world. The need to build personal identity, to live one's own experiences, to look for stimulating emotions were the mechanisms for creating and disseminating motor action "differently". Also, a series of societal changes have contributed to changes in social models, value systems, behaviors of social actors. The media was an important vector. The impact of ES targets a series of socio-cultural, economic and political influences, psycho-physical, with both positive and negative consequences. The borderline lifestyle, appreciating the quality of life, a strong identity is features of the new social actor who practices ES.*

**Key words:** *extreme sports, social actors, socio-cultural influences, economic and political impact.*

## 1. Introduction

In the present study, we have identified a series of analysis directions to outline the complex issue of extreme sports. We propose to bring into the discussion a series of arguments supporting the impact exercised by these sports on both the individual and the community/society. Consequently, some information is

supported by the previous studies identified, while other represents points of view that may become future directions of study.

## 2. Extreme sports – conceptual delimitations

Research concerning extreme sports has also focused on defining it [5], [7], [11],

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[13], [27], [32, 33]. The diversity and heterogeneity of the classification criteria of these activities proved to be difficult. In a rather eclectic attempt – without claiming to be exhaustive – we may identify several essential elements.

Also known as action sports, adventures sports, alternative sports, postmodern and post-industrial sports, whiz sports, urban sports, free sports, lifestyle sports, marginal sports [9] – extreme sports represent the independent, nonconventional motor activities, carried out in an unaltered natural setting using specialised equipment, involving a high degree of danger, from a low risk of injury to major risk of death; executions are characterised by creativity, freedom, and uniqueness. Execution techniques have a high level of spontaneity, spectacular character, originality, and novelty. In addition, these sports are usually practiced as leisure activities, involving competition with oneself, without competing to others, thus orienting performance towards attaining a higher level of execution and emotion control in the extreme situation. Whereas practicing involves participation in sports competitions organised by amateurs and professionals, extreme sports – unlike traditional ones – are characterised by the absence of arbitration and actions rules. Given that they are carried out in natural settings, in far-away locations, in variable weather and land conditions, these sports assume defying the laws of gravitation and of nature; practitioners show a high level of defiance for personal safety. Despite this challenge – related to the control of human limits –, extreme sports

involve minimal initiation in practicing; reaching perfection is related to the frequency of experiences lived in that spot by an individual. Most of these sports are individual, but group versions may also exist.

### 2.1. Typology of extreme sports

In the attempt to include within one typology all forms of extreme sports practice; the scientific literature identified 3 great categories:

- aerial - bungee-jumping, base-jumping, planoism, skydiving, paragliding, hang gliding, kiting, gliding, BASE (an acronym that includes several types of jumps: Buildings, Antennas, Spans, Earth) etc.;
- nautical - surfing, windsurfing, wakeboarding, scubadiving, canioning, rafting, kayaking, barefooting, waterfall kayak etc.;
- and terrestrial, as well as underground - extreme sports on wheels and with engines, extreme sports on snow and ice - mountaineering and climbing, caving, paintball, zorbing, street luge, ice cross, freestyle skiing, BMX, motocross, half-pipe, etc.

The existence of several pieces of equipment and of the devices necessary for practice, of the motorised devices, we may identify combined extreme sports: for example, kiteboarding on water, sand, snow, parasailing, hot air balloon flight, flying wingsuit, helium balloon flight, as well as sports practiced in the natural setting and other ones accessible to the

urban setting, requiring constructions imitating nature (for instance, parkour).

### 3. Historical evolution

Historically speaking, extreme sports start being practiced either after World War II in North America, especially the USA, as well as countries with high quality of life standards. They are specific to young people, to teenagers especially, in order to escape daily life which may become boring and uninteresting, thus infusing a level of danger, out of the need to refuse to adhere to the authorities imposed by their groups and cultures. The first such sports were skateboarding, roller-skating, and BMX, where using metal structures, practiced their tricks in urban spaces and on cliff edges, listening to punk music ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)). Whereas in the 60s, the lack of the disinterest for extreme sports determines, for instance, the withdrawal of snowboards from the market for lack of buyers, the boom for these sports is represented by the 80s, given the emergence of cable television.

The last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is characterised by increased diversity, by more and more interest given to practicing, watching or viewing, media exposure, and the choice of various commercial brands of investing and sponsoring competitions in diverse branches and locations. Hence, in 1995 they organised the first Summer *X Games*, – the equivalent of the Olympic Games – while in 1997 the winter games, broadcasted annually from that year by the American television network ESPN.

There are even studies attesting increased interest for practicing extreme sports compared to traditional sports as competitive sports, as well as to leisure sports [39], [47]. Furthermore, several extreme sports were introduced in the schedule of the Summer Olympic Games – mountain biking on 1996, surfing, climbing, skateboarding in 2021 - and of the Winter Games - freestyle skiing in 1992, snowboarding in 1998. It may be stated that in the past two decades, this sports niche has bloomed into an international industry.

**3.1. Extreme sports in Romania** are relatively little known and practiced; they entered the market massively after the 1989 Revolution. During the Communist regime, egocentrism was discouraged and even sanctioned, extreme sports included. After 1989, access to information, to equipment, freedom to travel favoured an increase in the interest for various extreme sports, mostly outdoors and in all geographical areas, given the great natural diversity of our country. Nonetheless, access to these sports is in relation to social stratification, to the choice of sports, locations, practicing frequency; investments in necessary equipment are related to higher socio-professional and cultural categories [34].

Whereas lesser known and implemented than in other East-European countries with a tourist potential, the concept of sports tourism –extreme sports included –emerged in Romania, too, which entailed the enforcement of a series of local and regional strategies valorising the tourist potential of various geographical

regions, starting from the best-known ones, coveted by tourists [35], [41]. Geographical and cultural advantages are presented, even for the development of adventure tourism, which has led to a higher number of foreign tourists. In the past 20 years, institutions organising extreme sports in the nature were founded (given the demand and the diversification of supply). Moreover, in the mountainous and seaside areas and in the rivers, in the urban settings (especially the capital and the big cities), but also in rural areas targeted by adventure-seeking tourists, several sporting competitions have been organised, even at international level.

**4. The development of extreme sports** may be explained through a series of **causes**: the existence of a long period of peace world wide, following World War II; the globalisation process; the reduction of working hours and the increase in leisure and financial budgets; the evolution of technology – from creating equipment and devices necessary for practice, to intelligent clothing monitoring several physiological parameters [36]; an increase in the number of highly qualified persons; the emergence of computer science civilisation (persons may connect instantaneously, regardless of borders and time zone, 24/7, through websites, social media, cable TV); a change in the system of values at the level of certain societies and at global level—the individual-society balance shifted, with a focus on the individual.

## **5. The Consequences of Extreme Sports Development**

They pot may be identified at both individual and society level. The connotations of these effects may be both positive and negative. Thus, through a synthetic presentation, we will try to point out the influences determining the practice of extreme sports, upon structuring them by various directions:

- ✓ *Impact at individual level from a physiological perspective and in terms of building the personality.* Especially at the beginning, research has focused on arguing for the negative effects depending on several variables, (gender, age, sports, etc) at physical level: high risk-taking levels produce lesions and even death [16, 24, 26, 37], sleep disturbances [28], but also pathological personality disorders (narcissism, anxiety, neuroticism, addictions), corelated with compulsive and deviant behaviours (pathological abuse and addiction to drugs, alcohol, sport) [2], [14, 15], [29], [38]. Recent studies have focused on the benefits on physical performance, mental health, and personality traits, on emotion management – courage, humility, fear [7, 8], [10], [27], [40], [46], physical, emotional, and mental freedom [9], psychological recovery and emotional well-being [3], [25] even among people suffering from hyperkinetic disorders (ADHD) [42], self-control and stress management, self-knowledge and self-achievement [12], [21], [23], [31, 32].

✓ *Socio-cultural impact.* The change in the individual-society balance concerned a shift from ethnocentrism to egocentrism, which is also visible in the sports field. Extrinsic rewards for the athletes and their countries, the mindset of victory at all costs, the honour of representing the country in competitions, the valorisation of the group / community to the detriment of individuals, the adherence to predetermined systems of values and norms, and the team work represent the core ideas of ethnocentrism, specific to the modern era in sports.

Postmodernism in sports is characterised by a highlighting of social actors' ego, especially young people, who display an increasing rate of risk-assuming attitudes; they are creative and they have initiative; they defy authorities and the boring daily life in general. The lack of space in crowded urban territories has determined them to find different locations for motor manifestation; thus, extreme sports take place in unusual and unexpected remote areas. Increased interest for uncommon activities to stand out, adherence to one's own rules, not to those imposed (nonconformism, personal undertaking of power, risk addiction) are the features defining the new social actor, aiming at enforcing a new system of intrinsic rewards – living new experiences, obtaining a great level of satisfaction, stimulating emotions, living creative and edifying experiences, constructing personal and social identity in an ensemble of positive social interactions with the others, but mostly with the

environment. Reconnection to nature, pro-nature stances, ecological and sustainable view of the areas for practicing extreme sports [4], [6], [25] may represent another direction worth considering. Recent studies highlight a series of benefits in what concerns the relations with the others and with the natural environment and positive attitudes and balancing by promoting well-being, integrity, and health through various sports, including through extreme sports practiced during free time, also involving the city/community/state when they are in competition [7, 8, 9], [17], [32], [46].

Another consequence refers to a multiplication of extreme sports, of the number of practitioners and spectators, as well as of their mean age. The popularity of sports and of extreme sports events and the dissemination to various corners of the world, including through the possibility of watching them online in real time, 24/7, on websites, using social media, on specialised TV channels [1] determined an interest from potential investors, from the media, from the local communities (even by hiring persons from other fields to help attaining the goals of extreme sports practitioners – for instance, Sherpa for mountain climbing the very high peaks). The emergence of professional athletes, the increase in the number of competitions, a better image of the sports events is correlated with a greater intention from participants and spectators to travel, as well as from potential investors, sponsors of the sports events in question [22, 31]. Tomczak & Chodala (2002) [43] argued that extreme sports could represent a form of training

for other professions such as the military field, i.e., aircraft pilots who train by practicing various extreme sports.

The massive investments and the industries interested made it possible to constitute professions and institutions with extreme sports as field of activity: TV networks, written press, journalists, extreme sports organisers, specialised brands, etc. [18]. In addition, technological progress (specialised devices and equipment necessary for practicing them, sailing, recording, and monitoring equipment in different natural conditions – land, weather, etc) made it possible to enforce what this niche sport entails.

✓ *Economic and political impact* refers to: increased interest for organising extreme sports events, introduction of prizes and development of local-host communities for these events – local infrastructure, sports facilities [6], [31] involving an increase in sports tourism, in both practitioners and spectators [19], [22, 23], [39]; an increase in the interest for advertising from the part of certain international – but also local and national – brands, thus determining increased consumerism and corporate interest through the emergence of a huge industry [11], [18], [30]; correlation of sports tourism with other activities such as ecologic, rural, medical etc, tourism; (re)vitalisation of places / communities; investments in equipment [44].

All these events may be possible if legislative changes are reproduced at both national and international level: - adopting

laws and regulations to facilitate the management and control of sports events [22], [45], the territorial mobility and the medical insurance for athletes and spectators. Moreover, the exponential increase in popularity and media exposure have led to the inclusion of certain sports in the schedule of Summer and Winter Olympic Games, thus acknowledging the fame and prestige of these sports at international level.

## 6. Conclusions

Societal changes have produced changes at individual level, in terms of both activity and personal and social development. The interests of the new social actor determined alterations at the level of society as a whole, most of the times with help from the media.

Even in their capacity as spectators, individuals practicing extreme sports adopt an edgy lifestyle, thus appraising the quality of life and the values placing them in an area of self-knowledge and self-development.

Practiced especially by young people and for a while now by older adults, extreme sports shape their personality, identity, specific lifestyle, in harmony with the natural environment. Whereas 30-40 years ago, extreme sports were practiced mainly by young people on a self-seeking mission, the current trend is for individuals older than 30 and even aged up to 70 – both men and women – embarking on such adventures. This stands to suggest a change in attitudes and behaviours, by adopting and practicing the munder various forms and

frequencies, and in ever more unexpected settings.

The interest of an increasing diversity of people for practicing and watching such sports has also augmented the investment potential of industries in this niche (media, beverages industry, clothing, sports equipment, technology, tourism, etc).

There are also negative consequences associated to the practice of extreme sports – exaggerated egocentrism, personality disorders, limits overcome until death, overwhelming costs, accentuation of social inequalities, deviant behaviours, violence, drug or alcohol consumption, etc. However, more and more studies focus on highlighting the positive aspects in the personal development of each practitioner (well-being, self-improvement, emotion regulation, satisfaction), and mostly in relation to their communities / societies of origin or those where they practice these sports or sporting events (a lifestyle in harmony with the nature and with the self, community wealth, positive relationship with the nature, etc).

Whereas we have tried to cover the entire topic of extreme sports, we are persuaded that we have not managed to consult the entire literature on the matter. In addition, it was difficult to identify certain studies related to these niche sports in the Romanian. Future studies may be initiated with the purpose of covering the particularities of both the practitioners and the diversity of sports to be developed in our country, thus providing the possibility of comparative analyses.

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