

Understanding the Motives of High-Risk Leisure Participants: A Case of Mt. Everest Mountaineers

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Participation in high-risk leisure activities has increased dramatically over the years despite the number of risks and dangers the activities present during participation. Mountaineering is considered as one of the most popular activities of high-risk leisure activities. However, there is a lack of research investigating the motives of mountaineers who trek/ climb difficult mountain ranges risking their health. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the motives of mountaineers who trek/climb the Mt. Everest Base Camp for leisure. The total number of 4 participants who completed 'Mt. Everest Base Camp and Kala Pattar' program was recruited in Kathmandu, Nepal, and an in-depth interview was conducted to collect data. To analyze the data, a line-by-line analysis was performed to establish emergent themes. Then, a thematic analysis was conducted using these themes as the basis. The findings indicated that the reasons the participants engage in mountaineering in difficult mountain ranges were generally to feel an accomplishment. On the other hand, the primary motive for joining the Mt. Everest Base Camp program was affect regulation, which is an escape strategy from emotional difficulties and/or stresses from daily life.

Key words: motive; high-risk leisure; mountaineering; Mt. Everest; interview

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Introduction

According to Barlow, Woodman, and Hardy (2013), humans have always been evolved around high-risk activities starting at birth by taking the first step with a risk of falling. As humans grow up, they get involved with risky behaviors constantly, such as riding a bicycle for the first time knowing there is a chance of falling and trying to learn swimming knowing there is a risk of drowning. Barlow et al. (2013) claim that many people in fact “crave danger, excitement, and risk” (p.458). In this sense, it can be argued that it is humans’ nature that many people participate in a high-risk sport and/or physical activities, such as sky diving, bungee jumping, and winter mountain climbing, to satisfy their craving for danger, excitement, and risk.

Research suggests that participation in high-risk leisure activities has steadily increased over the years despite the risk of serious injury or even death (Llewellyn & Sanchez, 2008). This phenomenon is witnessed all around the world, but it is even more evident in the Western world (Turner, McClure, & Pirozzo, 2004). Of the high-risk leisure activities, mountaineering that involves trekking difficult routes and/or summiting the highest peaks of the most dangerous mountain ranges is considered a popular one. In fact, mountaineering is classified as a high-risk leisure sport as it entails a certain level of danger and unpredictability (Ewert & Hollenhorst, 1989; Jack & Ronan, 1998). The Himalayas, particularly Mt. Everest, is a frequently selected destination among experienced mountaineers. The number of visitors to the Mt. Everest region for trekking greatly increased ever since Nepal’s civil war ended in 2006 doubling the number to 35,000 visitors per year compared to the one before 2006 (Douglas, 2013). The number of trekkers has increased even more dramatically in recent years, and now it is estimated that approximately 40,000 people trek the south side of Everest Base Camp trek alone every year.

Climbing and/or trekking those high mountain ranges have many risks involved including death. Previous studies support that the Himalayas are very dangerous to climb and the death rate is the highest among all the mountain ranges in the world (Ortner, 1999). Although trekking involves less risk than climbing, the danger is still prevalent. This is particularly true when we discuss the Mt. Everest region. According to Burstscher, Philadelphia, Nachbauer, and Kikar (1995), the death rates among Mt. Everest trekkers are five times higher than the death rates of trekking mountains in England and Wales. Although not as severe as death, mountaineers also experience other negative health consequences from the activity as well. For example, in the study of 283 trekkers participating in the Everest Base Camp trek, Murdoch (1995) discovered that 57% of the participants developed acute mountain sickness, and 87% of the total participant experienced some sickness that involved coryza,

cough, sore throat, and diarrhea. In addition, Yang and Sanjay (2016) reported that trekkers to Mt. Everest Base Camp went through a great level of fear and emotional distress when they experienced physical illness despite the fact that they initially viewed those risks as something to admire and even celebrate when it is encountered by others.

Previous studies suggest that those who choose to get involved with high-risk leisure activities are usually well aware of the dangers they present. Especially, those who climb and/or trek Mt. Everest are very well equipped with the knowledge on the negative physical and mental consequences it may bring by participating in the activity. For example, Yang and Sanjay (2016), in their field study, found that trekkers who trekked to the Mt. Everest Base Camp acknowledged and assumed the risks associated with their activity. Then, what makes people want to engage in high-risk activities despite the high level of danger it presents? Why do people still want to trek/climb Mt. Everest when there is a high level of risk for the activity? The following section discusses motives commonly found among high-risk leisure participants.

Sensational seeking

Sensation seeking is defined as “a trait defined by the seeking of varied, novel, complex, and intense sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social, legal, and financial risks for the sake of such experience (Zuckerman, 1994, p.27). Sensation seeking is viewed as an aspect of personality an individual possesses (Llewellyn & Sanchez, 2008). According to the sensation seeking theory, people with a high level of sensation seeking perceive the risk of risky situations lower than what it actually is whereas those with a low level of sensation seeking perceive the risk higher than the actual risky situations (Rosenbloom, 2003; Zuckerman, 1994). In addition, those individuals with a high level of sensation seeking look for high-risk activities that will enable them to experience a feeling of physiological arousal (Zuckerman, 1994).

Traditionally, sensation seeking has been the most dominant theory used by the majority of researchers who study people’s high-risk behaviors to explain why certain people actively seek and engage in high-risk leisure activities. As a matter of fact, previous research has demonstrated a positive relationship between the sensation seeking personality trait and participation in high-risk sports, such as mountaineering (Breivik, 1996), skydiving (Hymbaugh & Garrett, 1974), scuba diving (Cass, 2009), and rock climbing (Robinson, 1985). For a long time, many researchers believed that people who are frequently engaged in a high-risk leisure activity are a homogeneous group with a common motive of sensation seeking even though they may have different performance characteristics and different

level of risks they are willing to undertake (Della, Bassi, & Massimini, 2003; Llewellyn & Sanchez, 2008; Zuckerman, 2007).

However, recently, researchers have argued that sensation seeking itself is inadequate in explaining why people engage in such high-risk leisure activities (Llewellyn & Sanchez, 2008). Llewellyn and Sanchez (2008) stated, “sensation seeking theory does not adequately account for the full range of motives mentioned by risk takers themselves for participating in high-risk activities (particularly a sense of accomplishment and mastery)” (p.414). As a result, the researcher began to investigate other motives for such high risk-seeking behaviors.

Mastery and accomplishment

The desire for mastery and accomplishment, along with sensation seeking, has been suggested as a key motive among high-risk leisure participants (Llewellyn, Asghar, Sanchez & Jones, 2008). Mastery and accomplishment motive can be well explained by the self-efficacy theory. Self-efficacy is defined as an individual’s “belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p.3). People with a high level of self-efficacy tend to set more challenging goals, exert more effort, and endure risk and adversity better than those with a low level of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Previous research supports that self-efficacy is a strong predictor for task and accomplishment motive of people who participate in high-risk leisure activities, and together with sensation seeking, task and accomplishment was the main motive for high-risk sport participation (Ewert, 2001; Slanger & Rudenstam, 1997).

Affect regulation

Some researchers suggested that people are motivated to participate in high-risk leisure activities to cope with emotional difficulties (Barlow, Woodman, & Hardy, 2013; Jones et al., 2015). That is, people chose to be engaged in high-risk behaviors to regulate their negative emotions. In this case, “individuals may engage in risk-taking behaviors as a means of regulating their negative affect by escaping self-awareness” (Castanier, Scaff, & Woodman, 2010, p.732). By using the escape strategy, people with emotional difficulties are able to turn their attention away from their ill-being (Taylor & Hamilton, 1997). As a result, high-risk leisure activity serves the role of mitigating the negative affect an individual experiences in life by focusing on the risk they encounter during the participation in the activities.

This notion has been supported in previous studies. For example, Castanier et al. (2010) found

that negative affectivity and escape self-awareness strategy were strong predictors for risk-taking behaviors among high-risk sport participants. Similarly, Barlow et al. (2013) revealed that emotion regulation needs were significantly associated with risk-taking behaviors among the participants of skydiving and mountaineering.

Although there is some research conducted up to date to understand the motives of high-risk leisure participation, the studies are still very limited. In particular, very little research has been conducted on a mountaineering setting. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the motives of mountaineers who trek/climb the Mt. Everest region for leisure. The intention is to have a deeper understanding of those high-risk leisure participants' reasons for taking such high risk by having an in-depth interview.

Methods

Participants

The participants for this research included 4 experienced mountaineers who participated in the 'Everest Base Camp and Kala Pattar' trekking program in December 2019. This 14-15 day program is offered by many trekking agencies in Kathmandu, Nepal and many mountaineers arrive from all over the world to join the program. Two participants were from the United States, 1 participant was from England, and 1 participant came from Egypt. The age range of the participants was 32 to 45, and the average age was 37.2. Of the participants, 3 of them were males and 1 of them was female. The participants have trekked/ climbed various mountains in the past that include K2, Mt. Washington, and Mt. Chimborazo. The average years of experience in mountaineering were 6.7 years. Although all the participants had extensive experience in mountaineering, it was their first time to trek the Mt. Everest region.

Data collection procedure

The current study was conducted using a qualitative research method, in particular, an in-depth interview. The interviews took place from January 1 to 3 in 2020. In order to collect data, the mountaineers were recruited through a local mountaineering agency that provided the 'Everest Base Camp and Kala Pattar' trekking program located in Katmandu, Nepal. The participants were recruited before the departure, and they agreed to participate in the in-depth interview upon arrival. In the process of recruiting the participants, the purpose of the study along with the participant's involvement and their

rights as participants were explained. The consent form, which includes the mentioned information, was given to the participants and each point was explained in detail. The participants' permission for recording the interview was also asked. They were informed that permitting recording was completely voluntary.

Once the participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study, they were interviewed by the primary researcher. A semi-structured interview technique was used in the process. A series of questions about the participants' experience in trekking the Mt. Everest Base Camp and other dangerous mountains they have climbed in the past (i.e., their motives) were asked. The questions were developed by the researchers based on Jones et al.'s (2015) questions used in their study. The examples of questions include: "Can you explain what motivates you to climb mountains that involve high risk?", "Can you explain how your motives for climbing those mountains involving high risk are different from climbing the ones involving low risk?", "What are the motives for trekking Mt. Everest?", and "Are the motives for trekking Mt. Everest different from any other climbing you have done in the past?". A set of questions were prepared, but depending on the participants' responses, some follow up questions were asked to get more detailed and in-depth information. The one-time interview duration was between 40 minutes to 1 hour for each participant.

Data analysis

After the interviews, the responses of the interviews were transcribed using the recordings. In order to establish emergent themes that would be the basis of a thematic analysis, a line-by-line analysis was conducted as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researchers individually reviewed the data transcriptions. Equal attention to each response in the data was given in the coding process to ensure the trustworthiness of the process (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). Once the coding process was completed considering the exact phrases within the text and/or using the interpreted meaning of the text, themes were developed inductively within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through the rigid process, prominent themes were identified.

Results

The interview process explored the participants' motives for engaging in high-risk leisure activities including trekking to Mt. Everest Base Camp. The data analysis revealed that there are some common motives found among the participants. When it came to the motives for climbing/ trekking mountains that involve high risk, the most common theme that emerged was an accomplishment. All the participants viewed themselves as having extensive experience in mountaineering, and with an abundant

amount of experience, they seemed to focus on the feelings of achievement when they trek/summit the difficult mountains. In particular, all the participants mentioned that they run into many difficulties when they are on multiple days/weeks trekking, and when they overcome those hardships; they feel a great sense of accomplishment. As a result, this becomes a major drive for them to keep engaging in mountaineering.

One interesting point is that the participants' motives shifted from task mastery to accomplishment as they became more experts in mountaineering. In fact, three participants mentioned that their motive has changed as they became more experienced. For example, one participant stated,

When I first started mountaineering, my focus was on mastering the skills. I love nature and mountains particularly have always attracted me the most. Initially, my goal was set for being at the summit of the mountains to enjoy the views and sceneries from the place not everybody could get to. So, my mountaineering was about learning skills on how to trek/ climb to get to the top. But, now it is a bit different. I've mastered some of those skills. But I know there are still always challenges on the way when you are involved in serious trekking for weeks. There are so many uncertainties you come across on the way, and you may not finish your trek depending on the risk. So, my motive for each attempt has changed now. Now I do it for the feelings of accomplishment. The feelings you experience when you get to the top is more than rewarding. (Participant 2).

Results also indicated that their primary motives when they climb/trek mountains involving high-risk are different from when they climb/trek mountains with low risk. The common theme that emerged for mountaineering low-risk mountains included fun, enjoyment, excitement, and spending time with family and friends. All four participants frequently engaged in mountaineering throughout the year. Whereas they plan the high-risk mountaineering trip far in advance, in some cases up to 1 year in advance preparing physically and mentally, they all said that they participate in low-risk mountaineering in a more spontaneous matter without much plan. It was found that the participants usually go for low-risk mountaineering with family and/friends; as a result, their motive was focused more on having fun and enjoyment with the ones who they are with.

In terms of the motives for trekking Mt. Everest Base Camp and Kala Pattar, 3 of the 4 participants mentioned that they decided to do it to cope with some emotional challenges they were facing in life. In fact, they were going through some difficult times in their lives and therefore, they particularly chose a more difficult trek (i.e., Mr. Everest) to get their mind off from the stress and focus on

something else. That is, those participants selected a high-risk leisure activity as a stress relief/ stress coping strategy. As mentioned in the earlier section, many people who trek the Mt. Everest region experience minor to severe medical conditions. Especially, people who trek to Mt. Everest Base Camp, which is located at 17,900 feet (5,500m) altitude, do not make it to the camp and give up due to medical issues they experience. It is a very physically demanding experience; therefore people can only focus on living in the moment. One participant stated,

I have been suffering from depression and anxiety, and it has been getting worse. So, I needed something else to distract my mind. When you are trekking for a couple of weeks, you don't have much energy to focus on anything else. It is very physically draining. When you do the difficult trek like this, the physical risk is so great that the only thing you can think of is how you are going to survive. During my trek to Mt. Everest Base Camp, I suffered from many physical illnesses including high altitude sickness. During those times, I could not feel any symptoms of depression or anxiety because I had a bigger problem I had to get through. (Participant 4)

In this sense, the strongest motive for trekking Mt. Everest Base Camp among the majority of the participants was to escape from their daily concerns and to deal with the stress they have in their lives, which can be referred to as affect regulation.

As such, the majority of the participants' primary motive for trekking Mt. Everest Base Camp was different from the usual motives they have for mountaineering high-risk mountains. All the participants said that their primary motive for engaging in mountaineering with high-risk was for accomplishment. However, the motive for trekking Mt. Everest Base camp was not just for accomplishment, but mainly to escape from the difficult situation they are in for the moment. Because their motive was different from the past, those participants mentioned that they particularly chose a more physically challenging mountain.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to have a deeper understanding of why people engage in high-risk leisure activities focusing on the mountaineers who trek the Mt. Everest Base Camp and Kala Pattar program. The findings of the current study were somewhat consistent with the previous findings in the literature. In general, the participants' primary motive for participating in a high-risk leisure activity was accomplishment. According to Llewellyn et al. (2008), people who frequently engage in high-risk

behavior do so because of their feelings of accomplishment when they achieve highly set goals. Previous studies suggest that this can be explained by a high level of self-efficacy. People who strive for accomplishment tend to have high self-efficacy (Ewert, 2001; Slinger & Rudenstam, 1997). Consistent with the previous literature, the participants of the current study also high self-efficacy believing that they have the ability to achieve difficult goals they set for.

In addition, the results confirmed that people are involved in high-risk leisure activities as an affect regulation strategy. Recently, researchers suggested that people chose high-risk leisure activities to deal with emotional difficulties (Barlow et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2015). Although all the participants enjoyed high-risk leisure activities (i.e., mountaineering difficult mountains) for the motive of accomplishment, the majority of them particularly selected the Mt. Everest trek, which is known to be more dangerous, to deal with their stress and emotional difficulty they were facing. This shows that often high-risk activity participants engage in dangerous activities to escape from the reality and focus on something else (Taylor & Hamilton, 1997).

However, different from the previous literature, sensation seeking was not an important motive for the current study participants. Sensation seeking has been studied as a dominant motive for high-risk leisure activities in the past (Breivik, 1996; Cass, 2009; Hymbaugh & Garrett, 1974; Robinson, 2985). Yet, in this study, none of the participants seemed to participate in high-risk leisure activities for the sensation seeking purpose. This may be due to the fact that sensation seeking is more linked to a personality trait rather than a motive (Llewellyn & Sanchez, 2008). During the interview, the participants were not asked about their personality or anything describing their tendency for sensation seeking. Therefore, it is possible that the data the participants provided solely focused on clear motives.

The current study has several limitations. First of all, this study followed a qualitative research design and the sample size was small. Although the findings provide important insights on why people participate in mountaineering in difficult mountains and trek to Mt. Everest Base Camp, the findings cannot be generalized into a bigger setting. Future researchers should replicate this study with a larger sample to generalize the findings. Further, to verify the current findings, future research should be conducted using a quantitative research design using various motives identified in the past literature including the current study. In addition, this study focused on the participants who trek Mt. Everest Base Camp, therefore the results may not hold true for people who engage in high-risk leisure activities in general. Future researchers should conduct a similar study in different high-risk leisure activities other than mountaineering and compare how their motives are different from the mountaineering setting.

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