

## CAREFREE BOUNDARIES

– A DISCUSSION ON “FUN” V.S. “SAFETY”

David Cheng

“Nothing good happens in the world by being happy and cozy,” said the famous free solo climber, Alex Honnold in a 2021 interview (Harrell). Free soloing—climbing without any protective measures such as ropes—is one of the most dangerous sports ever attempted by man. Honnold is known for his pronounced achievement of topping Yosemite National Park’s El Capitan summit with free soloing, which was an unprecedented and almost impossible task. During multiple interviews done on various platforms, Honnold has always mentioned that when free soloing, every moment counts. Even though most people do not seek pleasure and fun in such extreme ways as Honnold, he still thinks activities with high risks are quite beneficial: “Such activities like a lot others may seem reckless and crazy, but you can’t have a long career unless you spend a tremendous amount of time thinking about risk and minimizing it to ensure your own safety” (Harrell).

Risk-takers and excitement-seekers are quite common these days, especially with the prevalence and popularity of extreme sports like freediving, highlining, and paraskiing. And yet, what is the reason why people would enthusiastically seek such risky experiences when they simply could have enjoyed their peace instead? By comparison, which is more important: safety or fun?

In these extreme sports, one can frequently hear talk about appreciating life more, which makes these activities quite addictive for their participants. This increase in appreciation fits the definition of self-actualization in the widely recognized theory of the Hierarchy of Needs developed by American psychologist Abraham Maslow. In this hierarchy, it is theorized that humans should fulfill each step, starting with the most basic needs, in order to reach the next level. In ascending order, these levels are as follows: physiological needs (the biological requirements for human survival), safety needs

(protection, stability, freedom from fear), love and belonging (interpersonal relationships that motivate behavior), esteem (dignity and respect), and finally, self-actualisation (seeking growth and peak experiences) (McLeod, “Maslow”). Based on what the hierarchy illustrates, one can develop the argument that safety is comparatively more important than fun due to the fact that the former provides the foundation for the latter. However, the concepts of safety and fun don’t have to be opposites, and it is possible and quite desirable that they co-exist with some form of safety as a premise.

Safety is generally defined by Merriam-Webster as the “condition of being safe from undergoing or causing hurt, injury, or loss.” This definition may be interpreted to mean one should be free from both physical harm and also psychological and emotional harm in order to be considered safe. Therefore, only when the combination of being safe and feeling safe is present (Preisler), can one fulfill the safety requirements in Maslow’s hierarchy. This demonstrates that, only when safety exists first, can fun also be present. Even when physical safety is not entirely ensured, one should still feel safe or have psychological or emotional support in order to experience fun. Take Honnold the free solo climber again as an example. In an interview, he said, “The idea of falling to my death is insurmountable...If I can’t get past that fear then I probably shouldn’t be up there” (Sharma). Despite the physical dangers that are clearly present when solo climbing, Honnold emphasizes how important his psychological security and emotional readiness are in such an extreme sport. He proves that his ability to still have fun in such dangerous conditions is only possible because of the satisfaction of mental safety needs. He knows, for example, that he has the support of his friends and family and that they are ready, as is he, to face whatever may happen; by reminding himself of this, Honnold solidifies for himself that he is ready and has

little to worry about. Just like Honnold, most risk-takers and people in general who have fun are either psychologically secure, physically secure, or both. Circling back to Maslow's hierarchy itself, basic needs of physical, mental, or emotional safety must be satisfied before more advanced, fun-aligned needs can be acquired.

With safety as the basis for fun built, this essay would like to explore the concept of fun itself: what is "fun", what makes things "fun", and how does "fun" link to safety? According to Oxford Languages, "fun" can either indicate amusement, light-hearted pleasure or un-serious activities that are meant to be enjoyed. In other words, putting amusement aside, fun is synonymous with "nonchalant", "carefree", and "relaxed." And yet, what brings that "light-heartedness" into fun? Why are the strings intertwined between "relaxation" and "pleasure?" This question may be answered by the Liberating-Engagement Theory of Consumer Fun by Dr. Travis Tae Oh and Dr. Micheal Tuan Pham. This is a psychological theory that aims to uncover the underlying psychology of how fun arises (Tae Oh, Pham). And in *Psychology Today*, Dr. Travis Tae Oh explains this theory as the combination of hedonic engagement and the sense of liberation, or "a temporary release from various internalized and externally imposed restrictions, such as work obligations, parenting, schoolwork" (Tae Oh). This feeling of liberation is where the sense of "light-heartedness" comes in—within Dr. Tae Oh's research, the theme of "letting loose" was a recurring topic as to what fun really means" (Tae Oh). In his research, he uses past covid restrictions, particularly masks, as an example. As Dr. Tae Oh put it, these protective measures were "enforced behavioral limitations" (Tae Oh). These limitations, both behavioral and psychological, are the reason why people felt free when the covid restrictions were lifted—people were liberated. The no-longer-required social distancing gave people psychological relief and also mental safety of the release from pressure. But, according to the theory, the sense of liberation alone is not enough to give people "fun"; hedonic engagement is also required (Tae Oh).

As you may remember, in the previous mention of the definition of fun, amusement was left out. Now, hedonic engagement would bring amusement back in. "Hedonic engagement features active involvement and immersion into an activity that is intended for enjoyment" (Tae Oh). The question that should follow is: what actually engages people? This question can be answered by Vygotsky's theory of proximal development. This theory, in brief, states that engagement can only occur when the activity in question is close to the ability range of the participant. If the activity is within their range, it may result in boredom; if too far above their ability range, the activity can lead to desperation, self-doubt, and possibly panic (McLeod: "Vygotsky"). Escape rooms, for instance, would only be recognized as fun when they are challenging but not impossible; otherwise, they might be too scary or difficult, beyond what people are willing to do. The idea of engagement is exactly why many people intend to seek fun in the process of doing things; rather than merely focusing on the result, which does not necessarily produce "fun," people look for that engagement in the process itself. Also, as the zone of proximal development proves, the factor of engagement in fun guarantees the emotional safety of "I can do it", along with the physical ability to complete the task itself (McLeod: "Vygotsky").

Now, according to the theory of liberation-engagement, the last step before having fun is to combine the two factors together. Let's take the example of someone wanting to go on a hike in the wilderness. First, they would need to be liberated from pressure and then engaged in something they find satisfying and proximally challenging. This person should first be liberated from the stress of socializing in daily life and then, must engage in something exciting, challenging, or even slightly risky like trying out a new path or camping in the wilderness. As one may infer from the zone of proximal development theory, fun usually comes with a slight challenge, which can be working up the courage to go to unfamiliar territory on the hike or actually organizing the trip itself. It is commonly agreed that when an individual stays somewhere and does nothing, he or

she would get bored and unhappy no matter how safe the location is. So why not get out and have some fun that involves a challenge? According to the research organization SINTEF, such risks or challenges would make one's brain "smarter" and relatively more active due to the positive responses of the chemicals the brain secretes during conditions of enjoyment, seriousness, and playfulness from controlled risk-taking (SINTEF). As behavioral analyst and SINTEF researcher Dagfinn Moe said, "All the positive brain chemicals respond under such conditions, promoting growth factors that contribute to the development of the robust neural networks that form the basis of our physical and mental skills. The point here is that if you're going to take risks, you have to have the required skills. And these have to be learned. Sadly, many fail during this learning process—with tragic consequences" (SINTEF).

Just like Moe said, managing the risks while having fun is tremendously important. Because of this necessity, safety should be the basis and premise to having fun, thus making it comparatively more important than fun itself. Naturally, people have different standards for and understandings of what fun is, but no matter how one might define fun, safety should always precede it in some form—either the common and easily understood physical safety, or the rather complex and varying psychological security if the former is not established. Whatever the form, safety is not a repelling concept to fun; rather, they supplement each other. What matters most is to wisely mitigate the risks while having fun through ways like planning before doing, checking for possible risks, taking equipment to resolve danger, etc. These seemingly tedious acts may prevent many accidents and ensure one's safety while having fun. Manage safety well, follow where your passion lies, and have fun.

#### Works Cited

- Harrell, Eben. "Life's Work: An Interview with Alex Honnold." *Harvard Business Review*, 15 April 2021, [www.hbr.org/2021/05/lifes-work-an-interview-with-alex-honnold](http://www.hbr.org/2021/05/lifes-work-an-interview-with-alex-honnold). McLeod, Saul. "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs." Canada College, 21 May 2018, [www.canadacollege.edu/dreamers/docs/Maslows-Hierarchy-of-Needs.pdf](http://www.canadacollege.edu/dreamers/docs/Maslows-Hierarchy-of-Needs.pdf). McLeod, Saul. "Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Scaffolding." *Simply Psychology*, 14 May 2023, [www.simplypsychology.org/zone-of-proximaldevelopment.html](http://www.simplypsychology.org/zone-of-proximaldevelopment.html). Oh, Travis Tae, and Micheal Tuan Pham. "A Liberating-Engagement Theory of Consumer Fun." *Oxford Academic: Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 49, no. 1, June 2022, [www.academic.oup.com/jcr/article/49/1/46/6358728](http://www.academic.oup.com/jcr/article/49/1/46/6358728). Oh, Travis Tae. "What Is the Underlying Psychology of Having Fun?" *Psychology Today*, 29 June 2021, [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-pursuit-fun/202106/whatis-the-underlying-psychology-having-fun](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-pursuit-fun/202106/whatis-the-underlying-psychology-having-fun). Preisler, Jeanne. "Being Safe vs. Feeling Safe." *Fostering Perspectives*, May 2013, [www.fosteringperspectives.org/fpv17n2/psychological-safety.html](http://www.fosteringperspectives.org/fpv17n2/psychological-safety.html). Sharma, Shivam. "'Idea of Falling to My Death Is Insurmountable': Free Climbing Icon, Alex Honnold Once Explained How Accepting 'the End' Is Part of the Job." *Essentially Sports*, 13 December 2022, [www.essentiallysports.com/us-sportsnews-olympic-news-free-climbing-news-idea-of-falling-to-my-death-is-insurmountable-free-climbing-icon-alex-honnold-once-explained-how-accepting-the-end-is-part-of-the-job/](http://www.essentiallysports.com/us-sportsnews-olympic-news-free-climbing-news-idea-of-falling-to-my-death-is-insurmountable-free-climbing-icon-alex-honnold-once-explained-how-accepting-the-end-is-part-of-the-job/). SINTEF. "Risk-Takers Are Smarter, According to a New Study." *ScienceDaily*, 30 November 2015, [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/11/151130113545.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/11/151130113545.htm).