Men score higher than women on measures of sensation-seeking, defined as a willingness to engage in novel or intense activities. This sex difference has been explained in terms of evolved psychological mechanisms or culturally transmitted social norms. We investigated whether sex differences in sensation-seeking have changed over recent years by conducting a meta-analysis of studies using Zuckerman’s Sensation Seeking Scale, version V (SSS-V). We found that sex differences in total SSS-V scores have remained stable across years, as have sex differences in Disinhibition and Boredom Susceptibility. In contrast, the sex difference in Thrill and Adventure Seeking has declined, possibly due to changes in social norms or out-dated questions on this sub-scale. Our results support the view that men and women differ in their propensity to report sensation-seeking characteristics, while behavioural manifestations of sensation-seeking vary over time. Sex differences in sensation-seeking could reflect genetically influenced predispositions interacting with socially transmitted information.
Results

Our literature search (see Methods) retrieved 72 articles with appropriate data on sensation-seeking published between 1978 and 2012, and the total number of effect sizes was 323.

Weighted effect sizes. Men scored higher than women on total SSS-V (d = 0.46; Figure 1). Effect size did not correlate with the study’s inverse variance (tau-b = -0.041, n.s.), and the funnel plot was symmetric, indicating that our dataset did not suffer from publication bias (see Figure S2 in the Supplementary Information for funnel plots and tests for each subscale). Men also scored higher than women on TAS (d = 0.42), and Dis (d = 0.46), which both showed moderate sex differences. Men scored higher on BS, although this difference was smaller (d = 0.35). ES showed no sex difference (d = 0.04; Table 1).

Changes in effect size over time. Sex differences in total SSS-V scores have not diminished across time (β = -0.002, SE = 0.002, n.s.; Figure 2). In contrast, the sex difference in TAS has become significantly smaller (β = -0.005, SE = 0.002, p = 0.02, Beta = -0.28, R² = 0.08; Figure 3a). The size of the sex difference has reduced by more than a third in the last 35 years (our maximum likelihood model gives d values of 0.48 for 1978 and 0.28 for 2013). The diminishing sex difference in TAS results from a reduction in men’s scores across time: the slope of the regression line was significant and negative for male scores (B = -0.034, SE = 0.009, p < .001, Beta = -0.43, R² = 0.18), while the slope for women’s scores did not differ from zero (B = -0.017, SE = 0.011, n.s.). None of the other subscales showed evidence of a change in effect size with study year (Dis: β = -0.001, SE = 0.003, n.s.; BS: β = -0.001, SE = 0.003, n.s.; ES: β = -0.003, SE = 0.003, n.s.; Figure 3b–d) (Section 3 of the Supplementary Information and Figure S1 show scores over time for all subscales).

Discussion

The results of our analyses show that sex differences on Zuckerman’s Sensation Seeking Scale, version V, have generally not declined over the past 35 years. The mean effect size for the sex difference in total SSS-V scores was moderate and stable across the years of study (1978–2012). Sex differences in BS and Dis were small to medium and were also stable across time, while a sex difference in ES, which assesses openness to experiences that do not entail physical or social risk, has been consistently absent. However, the sex difference in TAS scores has diminished significantly over the years of study, due to a decrease in men’s scores. Overall, these findings support the view that males and females differ in their average propensity to report sensation-seeking characteristics, while interest in specific sensation-seeking activities may vary according to changing circumstances.

Our finding that the sex difference in TAS scores has become smaller over recent years supports the argument that cultural factors can affect self-reported traits. Previous meta-analyses have reported that sex differences in other personality traits have also diminished across time6,25. The reduction in the sex difference in TAS scores could result from changes in socialisation patterns that have led to physically adventurous activities becoming less ‘male-typed’, with male and female scores thus becoming more similar in recent years. This interpretation is consistent with evidence that participation in college sports is becoming more gender balanced across time in response to concerted efforts to encourage female sports participation26. However, our analyses show that the pattern of results is not due to an increase in female TAS scores across time, but rather a decline in male scores. Women could be showing a greater willingness to engage in thrill and adventure seeking relative to men over time, while changes in absolute scores are being influenced by other factors, such as average fitness levels.

Alternatively, the reduction in the sex difference could result from specific questions on the TAS subscale becoming out-dated; for example, several of the challenging physical activities used in the questionnaire (e.g., skiing) may no longer be viewed as novel or intense2, which could result in male and female scores converging towards a floor effect. Our pattern of results is consistent with participants reporting lower interest in engaging in activities that are no longer considered exciting or that participants have already tried. From our analyses, however, we cannot determine whether the declining sex difference in TAS scores is more likely to result from

Table 1 | Effect sizes (d), 95% confidence intervals, sample sizes, number of male and female participants (N), and heterogeneity (Q) for total SSS-V scores and each sub-scale

| Scale | d     | 95% CI  | Samples | N(Men) | N(Women) | Heterogeneity (Q) |
|-------|-------|---------|---------|--------|----------|--------------------|
| Total | 0.46  | 0.41/0.51 | 67      | 7425   | 9511     | 53.73              |
| TAS   | 0.42  | 0.37/0.46 | 68      | 7729   | 10356    | 63.47              |
| Dis   | 0.46  | 0.41/0.52 | 67      | 7740   | 10155    | 54.19              |
| BS    | 0.35  | 0.30/0.40 | 61      | 7162   | 9567     | 51.80              |
| ES    | 0.04  | -0.02/0.09 | 60      | 6952   | 9280     | 59.83              |

Figure 1 | Effect sizes (d) by sample size for Total SSS-V scores. Solid line = weighted mean effect size; dashed lines = 95% confidence intervals for mean effect size.
out-dated questions or from changes in socialisation patterns. In addition, out-dated items could arguably have led to both male and female scores increasing over time, if participants are more willing to report interest in engaging in activities that are familiar. Future research could examine the effects of redesigning the TAS sub-scale with up-to-date extreme sports activities, or researchers could use alternative measures (e.g., Impulsive Sensation Seeking Scale\textsuperscript{21}). Revised sensation-seeking scales could also ask participants whether they are interested in experiencing some of the physical measures associated with risky activities, such as high heart rate and breathlessness, rather than refer to specific activities.

The stable sex differences in self-reported Dis and BS are consistent with the hypothesis that males exhibit stronger predispositions to engage in uninhibited social interactions and avoid repetitive activities than females, and that such differences are not attributable solely to male and female gender roles. Previous meta-analyses have also reported evidence for sex differences in related personality traits; for example, on average, men score higher than women on measures of venturesomeness\textsuperscript{27}, while women score higher than men on harm-avoidance\textsuperscript{28}. A comprehensive meta-analysis of the impulsivity literature concluded that the evidence for sex differences in personality traits related to sensation-seeking is strongest for low-level, emotional processes, such as sensitivity to punishment, rather than specific, higher-level cognitive processes\textsuperscript{27}. We therefore suggest that sex differences in personality traits related to sensation-seeking and risk-taking might have domain-general emotional processes as their substrate.

Stable sex differences in Dis and BS could also be compatible with a socialisation perspective if the socially transmitted social norms and
stereotypes that promote sensation-seeking in males rather than females have remained stable across years. While critics have argued that this kind of scenario is unlikely, ‘social role theory’ provides a framework by which some social norms are more likely than others to emerge and to remain stable over time. This theory proposes that physical differences between the sexes, such as gestation and muscle mass, and early differences in infant temperament, increase the likelihood that females and males will adopt certain roles and behavioural characteristics. Norms relating to sex differences in sensation-seeking might persist if sex differences in other traits ‘feed into’ social norms that encourage males to challenge social conventions and discourage females from being open to potentially risky experiences. Cross-cultural studies could examine variation in self-reported sensation-seeking in relation to such norms; however, the SSS-V has been used in relatively few countries so far.

In summary, two ‘competing’ interpretations of sex differences in personality have commonly been pitted against each other in the literature: either males and females are differentially predisposed to exhibit particular personality traits, as a result of evolved psychological mechanisms; or males and females experience consistent social expectations across time periods that lead to the ‘channelling’ of socially learned behaviour. We have discussed here how data from self-report traits of adults do not enable a clear distinction between these two approaches. However, ‘evolutionary’ and ‘cultural’ explanations of sex differences should not be seen as alternative explanations, and researchers are increasingly attempting to integrate these levels of explanation. For example, social role theorists have acknowledged a role for genetically influenced traits, with cultural processes either amplifying or countering evolved predispositions. Similarly, evolutionary psychologists have called for more explicit recognition that cultural pressures can radically alter the cost-benefit analysis of certain behaviour patterns even when sex differences in predispositions exist. Ultimately, a greater understanding of sex differences in personality scores will be gained by acknowledging that selection pressures act on both genetic and cultural inheritance pathways and that the interactions between these pathways during an individual’s life-span results in observed sex differences in behaviour.

Methods

Literature review. We conducted an extensive literature review using the ISI Web of Science database with the search term ‘sensation seeking scale’ (resulting in 573 articles since 1978), supplemented by cross-referencing within the literature and manual searches of references list of relevant articles and books. Relevant studies were those containing total SSS-V scores for males and females, and/or scores on one or more SSS-V sub-scales: TAS, Dso, BS and ES. Studies were then excluded where i) the sample size was smaller than 10 individuals per sex, ii) participants were younger than 17 years old, or iii) data were from populations selected on the basis of pathological, criminal or addictive behaviour. The values required from each study were means and SDs, or any measure of effect size (including t statistic, F ratio or correlation), and age of participants was also recorded. For those studies that reported relevant data without giving enough information to calculate effect sizes, the corresponding author was contacted; twenty-five out of seventy-seven authors replied with usable data (including one unpublished dataset). The majority of samples were undergraduates or community samples where the mean age was under 25. We restricted our main analyses to these samples to avoid confounding study year with participant age (see Table S2 in the Supplementary Information for samples with older participants and for data on variance ratios).

Statistical analyses. For each dataset, we obtained the effect size Cohen’s d, defined as the difference between male and female means divided by the pooled standard deviation. We used a random-effects model to obtain maximum likelihood estimates of overall effect sizes using SPSS macros. A meta-regression was run with publication year as the predictor to examine change in effect sizes over time. We used the same method to examine whether scores for men and women have been changing over time. Tests for publication bias were conducted using a rank correlation between effect size and inverse variance and inspection of funnel plots. An alpha value of 0.05 was used throughout.

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Acknowledgements
Thanks to Anne Campbell, Kevin Laland and Sally Street for comments on the manuscript, and to all authors who responded to our data requests.

Author contributions
All authors contributed to developing the study concept and designing the study. Data collection was performed mainly by C.P.C. with assistance from D.C. and G.R.B. C.P.C. performed the data analysis and interpretation. C.P.C. and G.R.B. drafted the paper, and D.C. provided critical revisions. All authors approved the final version of the paper for submission.

Additional information
Supplementary information accompanies this paper at http://www.nature.com/scientificreports

Competing financial interests: The authors declare no competing financial interests.

How to cite this article: Cross, C.P., Cyrenne, D.-L.M. & Brown, G.R. Sex differences in sensation-seeking: a meta-analysis. Sci. Rep. 3, 2486; DOI:10.1038/srep02486 (2013).