



Sex and risk in young women's tourist experiences: Context, likelihood, and consequences



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Understanding sexual risk-taking based on context, likelihood, and consequences.
- Identification of tourist experiences conducive to sexual risk-taking.
- Assessment of touristic factors facilitating sexual risk-taking.
- Evaluation of sexual activities perceived as risky for tourists.
- Clarification of rewards sought from sexual risk-taking in tourism.

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ABSTRACT

This study offers an empirical application of the tripartite model of context, likelihood, and consequences for understanding risk in tourism among young women engaging in sexual risk-taking. Data, collected via an online survey ($N = 853$; mean age of 23.5 years), were analyzed using descriptive statistics, independent and paired samples *t*-tests, and exploratory factor analysis. The women identified eight to nine days long, rest and relaxation, sightseeing, and backpacking tourist experiences in tropical destinations and European countries as the ultimate settings for sex with a steady and casual sexual partner. In assessing the likelihood of engaging in sexual risk-taking, a distinct difference between reported moderate personal propensity and a higher evaluation of people's general proclivity was identified. Expected consequences were classified into three motivational/reward factors: Anonymous Experimentation, Safe Thrills and Empowerment, and Fun and Less Inhibition. Theoretical insights regarding sexual risk-taking in tourism and implications for related health promotion programs are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Scholarly attention directed at the roles of risk perceptions and the health-related consequences associated with tourist behavior has been growing (e.g., Lepp & Gibson, 2008; Seabra, Dolnicar, Abrantes, & Kastenholtz, 2013), and sexual risk-taking in tourism is one such phenomenon garnering this increased attention. Understanding people's perceptions of and motivations for sexual

risk-taking in tourism, as well as the characteristics of touristic social environments as contexts for sexual risks, is important since traveling has been found to increase the incidences of sexually risky behaviors among young adults, while our knowledge about such practices in tourism contexts is rather limited (Berdychevsky & Gibson, 2015; Briggs & Tutenges, 2014; Qvarnström & Oscarsson, 2014).

Risk can be understood according to the framework suggested by Elms (1998) and adapted to tourism by Ryan (2003) as involving three major components: context, likelihood, and consequences. With respect to context, Ryan emphasizes the uniqueness of tourism environments where the tourist as a “dis-placed person” feels “out of context” and becomes psychologically predisposed toward risk-taking, hedonistic behaviors, and abandoning routine

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responsibilities (p. 56). Indeed, it has been proposed that the social atmosphere in many types of tourist experiences is conducive to sexual risk-taking, serving as a liminoid sanctuary and cathartic break (Lett, 1983; Ryan & Hall, 2001; Ryan & Kinder, 1996; Shields, 1990), a heterotopia and contra-normative setting (Andriotis, 2010; Apostolopoulos, Sönmez, & Yu, 2002), and an anonymous scene offering a sense of situational disinhibition and a perceived license for thrills (Eiser & Ford, 1995; Wickens, 1997).

Tourism contexts can be understood as a peculiar combination of people's perceptions of activity, space, and time wherein activities fall on a continuum between recreational and non-recreational, spaces range from home contexts to out-of-home contexts—regardless of the geographical distance between them—and time spans an axis of leisure and free time vs. non-leisure and non-free time (Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2003). In this sense, leisure-based (as a function of activity and time) and anonymous (at least partially a function of space) tourist experiences have been found to be the most conducive to women's sexual experimentation and indulgence with both steady and casual sexual partners (Berdychevsky, Poria, & Uriely, 2013). Particular touristic contexts such as spring breaks, party tourism environments, and backpacking trips have been analyzed in the literature as hedonistic zones of exception offering an intoxicating cocktail of excess, substance abuse, and sexual transgression (Diken & Laustsen, 2004; Kelly, Hughes, & Bellis, 2014; Lewis, Patrick, Mittmann, & Kaysen, 2014; Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, & Oppermann, 2003). To explain sexual transgression in touristic contexts, researchers have employed ideas of perceived anonymity, temporary freedom from norms and constraints in a liminoid tourism environment, alcohol and drug consumption, notions of space and privacy, and the perception of time as being compressed into a moment of “here and now” (Berdychevsky, Poria, & Uriely, 2010; Briggs, Tutenges, Armitage, & Panchev, 2011; Pritchard & Morgan, 2006; Ryan & Martin, 2001; Thomas, 2000, 2005).

Likelihood, the second factor in the triadic risk model (Elms, 1998; Ryan, 2003), refers to the technical probability component and even more importantly to the subjective perceptual component as a social-psychological construct, where tourists exercise choice and decide to take risks to gain benefits if the perceived rewards of risk-taking outweigh the costs and the likelihood and magnitude of loss. The aforementioned disinhibiting characteristics of certain tourist experiences increase the probability of an individual's propensity for sexual experimentation, risk-taking, and transgression vis-à-vis everyday life (Berdychevsky & Gibson, 2015; Bloor et al., 2000; Briggs & Tutenges, 2014; Clift & Forrest, 2000). However, the specific sexual activities perceived as risky in tourism, as well as the likelihood of risk associated with them, remain unclarified. Furthermore, the way having had an actual experience with a given sexual activity in tourism affects a person's risk perceptions associated with that activity has yet to be explored.

As for the third factor in the model, that of consequences, people's perceptions of the ramifications associated with sexual risk-taking in tourism may be distorted due to the general attitude of disinhibition and tolerance toward sexual permissiveness and transgressions of social norms in some tourist destinations, with such tendencies being reflected in social myths and marketing slogans, such as, “What happens in Daytona/Tenerife/Vegas, stays in Daytona/Tenerife/Vegas” (Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, & Mewhinney, 1998; Thomas, 2005; Yeoman, 2008). Ryan (2003), in his understanding of risk in tourism, also argues that consequences refer not only to loss, but also to expected motivating rewards such as excitement, adrenalin, and the potential contribution to a sense of wellbeing. That is, such rewards are typically psychological in nature. Female solo travel, for example, being socially constructed as a potentially risky practice, may be experienced by women

themselves as rewarding, empowering, and emancipating (Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Obenour, 2005). More specifically with regards to sexual behavior, women's daring experimentation is sometimes perceived as resistance to and/or inversion of sexual roles and is interpreted by them as a source of empowerment, maturity, self-exploration, and transformation (Berdychevsky, Gibson, & Poria, 2013, 2014).

Any in-depth sociological understanding of sexual behavior and risk-taking requires contextualizing sexual comportment with respect to gender and life course perspectives (Carpenter, 2010; Carpenter & DeLamater, 2012). Gender is an essential issue in the study of sexual behavior in tourism, highlighting the continued need for gender-sensitive research (Berdychevsky, Poria, et al., 2013). When considering the role of gender in sexual risk-taking, sexual double standards result in harsher and more restrictive conditions for women (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Eaton & Rose, 2011; McCabe, Tanner, & Heiman, 2010), whereas anonymous, liminoid tourist environments might offer women less restrictive settings for sexual experimentation, risk-taking, and existentially authentic sexual expression while also potentially acting as sites of resistance to gendered stereotypes of appropriate sexual behavior (Berdychevsky, Gibson, & Poria, 2013; Falconer, 2011; Poria, 2006; Ragsdale, Difranceisco, & Pinkerton, 2006; Thomas, 2005). Indeed, researchers argue that certain tourist experiences (e.g., spring breaks or sun-lust beach vacations) characterized by anonymity, freedom from everyday norms and responsibilities, and the sense of placelessness, timelessness, and situational disinhibition, combined with more permissive norms and vacation-related sexual attitudes, render sexual double standards less relevant and encourage (or even license) sexual permissiveness in the scripts for both genders (Eiser & Ford, 1995; Maticka-Tyndale & Herold, 1997; Mewhinney, Herold, & Maticka-Tyndale, 1995; Wickens, 1997).

In addition to gender, life course stage has been linked to risk-taking in tourism (Gibson & Yiannakis, 2002). Of importance to this study is the assertion that early adulthood is the peak era for thrill-seeking and risk-taking in tourism since the adventurousness, avoidance of commitments, experimentation, and sense of immortality characterizing this life stage facilitate risk-taking and contribute to a perceptual downplaying of the risks involved (Gibson, 1996; Gibson & Yiannakis, 2002). Various forms of sexual risk-taking are prevalent in adolescence and young adulthood, including inconsistent condom use, first intercourse at an early age, multiple sexual partners, and the combination of sex with alcohol and/or drugs (Bradshaw, Kahn, & Saville, 2010; Brookmeyer & Henrich, 2009; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008; Wade & Heldman, 2012). Considering the aforementioned proclivity for risk-taking in early adulthood, the recorded evidence of increased incidence of sexually risky behaviors during this life stage, and the disinhibiting potential of some touristic environments, research and public health education efforts should target young adults' sexual behavior in tourism contexts (Bellis, Hughes, Thomson, & Bennett, 2004; Qvarnström & Oscarsson, 2014). Moreover, gender-specific sexual health campaigns should be crafted to appeal to young women for whom tourist experiences often turn into opportunities for sexual exploration and discovery unavailable at home (Ragsdale et al., 2006).

Sexual risk-taking has been inconsistently defined in various studies as researchers include different sets of sexual activities under the umbrella of “risk-taking.” One potential explanation might be that sexual risk-taking is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, including physical, sexual health, social, mental, emotional, and cultural aspects (Berdychevsky & Gibson, 2015). To introduce some clarity, however, it is important to investigate the scope of activities perceived as risky in tourism inductively. For this purpose, it is also important to approach sex broadly and

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