



Phenomenology of young women's sexual risk-taking in tourism



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Phenomenology of women's sexual risk-taking in tourism.
- Sexual risk-taking in tourism is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon.
- Physical and cultural dimensions related to the geography of fear and sexual terrorism.
- Social dimension associated with sexual double standards as a form of control.
- Emotional and mental dimensions interwoven with internalized self-surveillance.

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ABSTRACT

Tourist experiences have been conceptualized as heterotopias, and liminoid contra-normative settings offering a license for thrills, situational disinhibition, and sexual experimentation. The purpose of this study was to explore the links between tourism and young women's sexual behavior, focusing on their perceptions of sexual risk-taking in tourism and its consequences. Transcendental phenomenology was implemented to grasp the uniqueness of the individual experiences and assess the universal meanings of the phenomenon, proceeding through the stages of epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. The findings of fifteen in-depth interviews reveal that women's sexual risk-taking in tourism is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon involving physical, sexual health, social, emotional, mental/self-perceptual, cultural, and legal aspects. Clarifying the dimensions of sexual risk-taking in tourism and its consequences benefits the literature in terms of shedding light on an under-researched topic and provides information for health education/intervention programs aimed at addressing sexual risk behaviors in tourism.

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1. Introduction

Sex and tourism historically go hand in hand (Hart & Hawkes, 2000; Littlewood, 2002) as “tourism, romance, love, and sex have been cozy bedfellows for a long time” (Bauer & McKercher, 2003, p. xiii). Considering that the Four S's — sun, sea, sand, and sex — became hallmarks signifying the essence of tourist experiences in the 1980s and 1990s, both in popular culture and in the academic literature (Crick, 1989), sex cannot be ignored as a component of tourist experiences (Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Hall, 2001). Yet for many

years researchers neglected the link between sexual activity and the socio-psychological contexts in which this activity occurs. The perception of sex as an unserious or indecent topic of study and the difficulties associated with researching such a sensitive topic may explain the lack of research on sexual behavior in general and tourism in particular (Poria & Carr, 2010).

Nevertheless, tourism has been conceptualized as a liminoid sphere characterized by a sense of anonymity and transition, an absence of everyday status distinctions and *communitas*, and fewer behavioral restrictions, including those involving sexual behavior (Lett, 1983; Ryan & Martin, 2001; Turner, 1974). According to Littlewood (2002), tourism is characterized by the supremacy of the senses, the primacy of enjoyment and a “coded promise of sexual adventure” (p. 210), which might be related to different patterns of sexual behavior in tourism vis-à-vis everyday life. Black (2000) suggested that the sexual behavior of an individual might

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alter during tourist experiences, as one of the social influences on behavior (i.e., location) is shifted. Finally, some scholars provide empirical evidence suggesting that tourist contexts constitute unique social arenas influencing sexual behavior and encouraging sexual risk-taking (SRT) (Andriotis, 2010; Apostolopoulos, Sönmez, & Yu, 2002; Eiser & Ford, 1995; Thomas, 2005).

The success of any endeavor to address SRT in tourism is conditioned on understanding people's subjective definitions of sexual risk behavior in tourism. Thus, people's subjective perceptions of SRT in tourism and its consequences require investigation. Considering the social atmosphere that makes people feel "out of space," "out of time" and "out of mind" (Pritchard & Morgan, 2006), people's perceptions of risk and its consequences might become distorted during their tourist experiences. Indeed, the topic of SRT in tourism studies should not be trivialized as SRT during vacations may cause serious mental and physical health consequences that follow people into their everyday lives.

Furthermore, while existing discussions of the consequences of SRT in tourism typically revolve around sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) (Bloor et al., 2000; Clift & Forrest, 2000; Hart & Hawkes, 2000), potential physical, mental, social, and emotional consequences can be more diverse. For instance, Zuckerman (2007) opened his chapter on sex and sensation seeking with the statement that safe sex outside a committed relationship is an oxymoron, and suggested considering not only physical, but also psychological risks such as fear of losing reputation and/or feeling used among women and fear of inadequate performance and/or commitment among men.

Therefore, a broader and context-specific understanding of SRT is warranted, leading to the adoption of a broad definition of SRT in this study. While most of the literature on SRT in tourism has focused on behavioral aspects (e.g., sex with a stranger or sex without a condom) and their physical and epidemiological health consequences, this study considered psychological and sociological risks associated with sex as well, both in steady and casual relationships. Nonetheless, despite the variety of risks associated with SRT in tourism, this topic remains under-researched. It was therefore the purpose of the present study to address this paucity by investigating the links between tourism, risk-taking, and sexual behavior, considering the role of gender relations and life course stage. This study, then, explored the phenomenon of SRT in tourism examining young women's subjective perspectives on what constitutes SRT in tourism and its potential consequences.

1.1. SRT in the context of sexual double standards and life stage

Gender organizes most aspects of sexual behavior since men and women may adopt various socially sanctioned patterns of sexual behavior, and may experience and understand the same sexual activity differently (McCabe, Tanner, & Heiman, 2010). Sexual double standards are particularly restrictive for women compared to men, setting gender-specific standards of allowable sexual permissiveness (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Eaton & Rose, 2011; Jonason & Fisher, 2009; Muehlenhard, Peterson, Karwoski, Bryan, & Lee, 2003). Since sexual double standards persist, women are expected to be sexually available, but not active. Thus, men and women may have different motivations for SRT and various degrees of different risks and benefits associated with sexual activities (Bradshaw, Kahn, & Saville, 2010; Wade & Heldman, 2012).

This asymmetry grants men more opportunities for autonomy, pleasure, and sexual self-determination compared to women (Blanc, 2001). However, egalitarian sexual attitudes may be associated with increased sexual satisfaction (Muehlenhard et al., 2003). Crawford and Popp (2003) discussed the detrimental effects of heterosexual sexual double standards on women's

wellbeing, emphasizing both physical and psychological consequences. Specifically, sexual double standards discourage women from negotiating safer sex, at least during the first sexual encounter, leading women to face an ambivalent choice between the risks associated with unprotected sex and risks associated with potential negative judgments from their sexual partners (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Higgins & Browne, 2008).

The combination of sexual behavior between tourists and the influence of gender relations and stereotypes has received little attention (Berdychevsky, Poria, & Uriely, 2010), even in one of the most recent edited collections on sexual issues in the fields of tourism and leisure (Carr & Poria, 2010). Yet gender relations are pivotal to understanding tourist experiences (Gibson, 2001) and their influence becomes even more crucial when the research focus is on tourists' sexual behavior, since sex has been historically subject to a range of taboos, prejudices, silence, and gendered double standards (Foucault, 1976). Although attempts have been made to distinguish between sex tourism and the female version of romance tourism (Herold, Garcia, & DeMoya, 2001; Pruitt & LaFont, 1995), as well as to shed light on certain aspects of women's sexual behavior and risk-taking in tourism (Ragsdale, Diffrancheksko, & Pinkerton, 2006; Thomas, 2000, 2005), there is still a need for an investigation of non-commercial SRT in tourism and its potential links to gender relations.

Moreover, Elsrud (2001) called for gender-sensitive research of risk in tourism as it is related to narrating identity, and women, being caught between opportunity and tradition, have to negotiate conflicting ideals. Namely, on the one hand, risk-taking in tourism can be an emancipatory practice associated with feeling like a strong, powerful, self-reliant, and exciting person. On the other hand, the risk and adventure narrative of travel has been historically considered as a masculine domain welcoming men and excluding women (Elsrud, 2001). Therefore, gender is an important variable for consideration in any investigation of SRT in tourism. This assumption informs the choice to focus in this study on women's SRT in tourism, considering the effects of sexual double standards and anonymous tourist environments (Eiser & Ford, 1995; Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, & Oppermann, 2003; Mewhinney, Herold, & Maticka-Tyndale, 1995).

Likewise, of importance to this study is Gibson's (1996) argument that the early adulthood stage (17–45 years), especially the novice phase (17–33 years), are the peak eras for thrill-seeking and risk-taking in tourism. Adventurousness, avoidance of commitments, experimentation, and sense of immortality characterizing the transition into early adulthood complement and facilitate risk-taking in tourism (Gibson, 1996). Additionally, the lack of commitments associated with freedom to take risks and feelings of immortality contribute to a perceptual downplaying of the risks involved. These assumptions, as well as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC, 2008) argument that adolescent SRT is a public health priority, have informed the choice to focus in this study on young women's SRT in tourism in late adolescence and early adulthood.

1.2. Women's sexual behavior in tourism

Tourism scholars argue that the distinctive features of touristic time and space may influence a person's sexual behavior, since people leave behind some of their social baggage when they travel (McKercher & Bauer, 2003). Tourism has been conceptualized as a liminoid phenomenon (Lett, 1983; Selänniemi, 2003) and a heterotopia (Andriotis, 2010) allowing for situational disinhibition (Eiser & Ford, 1995) and expression of existential authenticity through sexual behavior (Poria, 2006). Therefore, tourism offers a special social reality affecting people's sexual behavior (Apostolopoulos et al., 2002; Black, 2000).

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