

## **RISK HABITS AMONG ITALIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: SENSATION SEEKING AND SEXUAL RISK-TAKING BEHAVIOURS <sup>1</sup>**

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### **1. Introduction**

Abuse of alcohol and tobacco and use of illegal drugs are common during adolescence. Indeed, a behaviour may be risky when it appears in combination with other behaviours (Vasilenko et al., 2015). Having multiple risk habits at the same time increases the risk a sexually transmitted disease. During young ages, the risk habits are generally linked with sexual risk-taking behaviours (Castilla et al., 1999; Kipping et al., 2012; Pirani, Matera, 2020). There is wide evidence that these risk habits may be associated to risk behaviours in sexual life and led to risk taking profile and to trait of personality (Ellickson et al., 2001; Stueve, O'Donnell, 2005).

Generally speaking, sexual risk behaviours, i.e. unprotected sexual intercourse, casual sex, etc., can lead to a number of negative consequences, including damage to young couple relationships, family conflicts, financial concerns, damage to social reputations, health problems, and legal disputes. However, the two most addressed outcomes are unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS.

Many scientific studies show that the habit of risk behaviours during adolescence and youth can be often maintained even during adulthood. Risk behaviours at young ages have not only short-term consequences on health, but also along the life-course, especially in relation to development of diseases and wrong lifestyles (Connell et al., 2009). These behaviours significantly affect the state of health and psychophysical well-being at both adult ages and at old ages (Dembo et al., 1992).

We aim at exploring the patterns of relationships among risk habits, in particular the sex related ones, among Italian young people, in order to identify different risk profiles of individuals, according to their characteristics, attitudes and behaviours.

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<sup>1</sup> This work is the result of a close collaboration between the authors. As for this version, sections 1 and 2 has been written by Antonietta Bisceglia; sections 3 and 4 has been written by Giuseppe Gabrielli and Giancarlo Ragozini; section 5 by Anna Paterno.

## 2. Theoretical background

Risk taking attitude can be an expression of personality trait, denoted as sensation seeking (SS). This is an individual's inclination to engage in risky and emotional behaviours in order to obtain new and exciting sensations and experiences (Dunlop, Romer, 2010). SS is "the tendency to prefer exciting, optimal, and novel levels of stimulation or arousal" (Kalichman et al., 1994: 386). Zuckerman (1979) defined four dimensions of SS. *Thrill and Adventure Seeking* is "the desire to engage in sports or other activities involving speed or danger". *Experience Seeking* is a measure of "the seeking of new experiences through the mind and senses, and through an unconventional, non-conforming life-style". *Boredom Susceptibility* assesses "the dislike of repetition of experience, routine work, predictable dull or boring people, and restlessness when things are boring". *Disinhibition* measures "the desire to find release through social disinhibition, drinking, going to parties and having a variety of sexual partners".

It is necessary to adopt a multidimensional approach aimed at analyzing how the different levels of different sexual risk-taking behaviours (SRB) are associated (Potard et al., 2019). Hoyle et al. (2000) considered three attitudes among the SRB: unsafe sex, multiple partners, and high risk intercourse.

Several factors can influence independently or interactively SS and SRB especially during the adolescents (Spitalnick et al., 2007; Pirani, Matera, 2020). Different studies showed a not univocal gender-role in SS and SRB: some of them outlined no differences among men and women (Hendershot et al., 2007), while others showed that men have an higher propensity in SS and SRB (Gaither, Sellbom, 2003). SS and SRB have also unclear patterns among homosexuals and heterosexuals (Doll et al., 1991; Zuckerman, Neeb, 1980): both studies tend to exclude any difference, even though they are focused only on males and they are not intended as comparative studies. On the contrary, the religiosity is one of the factors that in literature appear more often to protect an individual from risky behaviours (Zuckerman, Neeb, 1980; Ameri et al., 2017), because it disciplines moral and sets social rules (Yonker et al., 2012). If we consider the negative scholastic experiences, the school dropout, instead, is considered a risk factor for SRB (Flisher et al., 1995), especially related to the outcomes of unintended pregnancies. Parental monitoring and family characteristics are very important when examining SS and SRB among adolescents (Huebner et al., 2003). With respect to SS attitude studies are mainly focused on the use of drugs. Parental monitoring is considered a mediator factor on SS with respect to possible negative outcomes related to the drug abuse.

### 3. Data and methods

We examine data from the Sexual and Emotional LiFe of Youths (SELFY) survey, which was carried out in 2017 in 28 Italian universities with the aim of drawing an updated picture of sexual and emotional attitudes and behaviours among almost 8,000 (20% of the total) young Italian university students, attending undergraduate courses in economics and statistics in Italian state universities (Minello et al., 2020; Dalla-Zuanna, Vignoli, 2021). Data are weighted to make them representative of this group of university students at the national level.

The main limitation is that we are not dealing with a representative sample of the whole youth population. Nonetheless, a sample comprised of university students has many advantages: mainly, a high number of respondents who are well disposed towards filling in a relatively long, although not complex, questionnaire. Within this group, there exists relevant heterogeneity regarding both sexuality and affective behaviours, which makes university students relevant subjects of research (Berntson et al., 2014; Stinson, 2010; Weeden, Sabini, 2007).

In our analyses, we defined two different score scales of SS and of SRB. We excluded from the analysis students that had missing information on the variables that in the following we use for the construction of the two scales. All sampled students (N=7,841) are considered when analysing SS, while we restricted the sample to 6,068 young people who have had at least one full sexual intercourse when analysing SRB.

Although the questionnaire was not built to measure the SS, there were the necessary items to measure two dimensions defined so far by Zuckerman (1979), namely: experience seeking and disinhibition. We make use of the following 12 items to obtain a final scale of SS: reading sex magazine, watching pornographic DVDs, go clubbing, go into a sexy shop, having exchanged in sexting, have seen a striptease, visit to porno sites, drunkenness, ever used ecstasy, ever used marijuana, high speed driving, self-pleasuring.

As for SRB, we exploit the following items to measure the three attitudes proposed by Hoyle et al. (2000): level risk of the contraceptive method used during first sexual relationship and the level risk of the contraceptive method used during last sexual encounter for the unsafe sex, the number of sexual partner for the tendency of having multiple partners, and having paid for sex, having sexual intercourse with a person when you're with another, unsafe sex with non-stable partner (sex without condom) for the high risk intercourses.

Aiming at obtaining behavioural profiles, we adopt the so-called tandem analysis in order to find the profiles that consists in a sequential two-step analysis (Lebart, 1994), i.e. first, we first analyse by a Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) the association among the selected categorical variables of SS and SRB along with other variables able to define individual profiles, and after we use a hierarchical clustering

algorithm on the derived factorial scores. Because the two scales clearly contributed in defining profile, we tested the one-dimensionality of SS and SRB scales through the Cronbach's Alpha procedure. In the end, we estimated linear regression models, that assume as dependent variables the two SS and SRB scales defined so far, and observed three groups of factors associated to them, namely: individual characteristics and experiences, family characteristics and relations with parents, and individual perception and self-confidence.

According to the literature, we considered the following individual characteristics: gender, religion, sexual identity, negative scholastic experience, the first sexual experience. The second group of factors included the variables concerning parental monitoring and parenting style. Last, a number of individual perception and self-confidence are included in the models. Our findings provide mixed support for the role of both set of variables in high scores of SS and in the prediction of high SRB.

#### **4. Results**

Looking at the variation in the between-group and within-group inertia, as well as at the dendrogram (here not shown for space reasons), results highlight the presence of eight different target groups (or clusters) in terms of risk taking propensity and behaviours. Considering the selected characteristic items, it is possible to order these clusters according to a continuum scale, where at one hand we find groups characterized by high risk-taking behaviours, and on the other hand, we find groups with low levels of risk behaviours.

More specifically, in the first cluster (7.2% of the sample) there are the young "sensation seekers". This personality trait manifests itself in a variety of risky behaviours. In literature, the sensation seeker are characterized by the generalized tendency to seek varied, novel, complex, and intense sensations and experiences and the willingness to take risks for the sake of such experiences (Zuckerman, 2007). They do not show awareness about their risky behaviours.

In the second group (17.7% of the sample) there are the young "sensation seekers who are vulnerable to pornography". This group characterized by the vulnerability to pornography and an explicit denial of religion. Furthermore, they have a more correct level of information about sexual behaviour at risk of HIV, and an awareness of risks of their sexual personal life. In this group, there is a significant correlation between the indicators of used pornography and sexual risk behaviours. Although this young people are aware of the preventive efficacy of condoms, even though most of them do not use any protection on a consistent basis.

The sexual activity of both above-mentioned groups extends to multiple partners, casual and unsafe sex. They show also the significant propensity to conduct other risk behaviours like the abuse of alcohol and drugs as well as tobacco.

The third cluster (17.7% of the sample) is composed by “reticent” young people with a sexual active life. This group answered negatively to almost all questions on the deviant behaviours and on their sexual habits. They are all heterosexual males and enough informed about the risk of HIV and STD, but take risks in sexual life.

In the fourth cluster (23.4% of the sample), there are young people with a sexual active life, very informed about the sexual risks and mostly responsible in their sexual life. They know that the correct and consistent use of condoms is a highly effective means of reducing the risk of sexual transmission of HIV and other STDs as well as unintended pregnancy.

Cluster five (15.9% of the sample) includes heterosexual young girls with active and prudent sex life. They know sexual risks and sexually transmitted diseases. They have no risk experiences for health motivations, and know that limiting sexual activity to a single, uninfected partner is another highly effective mean of managing the risks associated with sexual activity.

Cluster six (5.9% of the sample) is made up of young people worried about HIV. They are highly spooked about sexually transmitted diseases and HIV. For these reasons, they use the condom as prevention method of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

Interviewees with inactive sexual life are included in the last two clusters (respectively 3.3% and 19.5% of the sample). The two groups differ by the gender composition. The cluster seven is mostly composed of males, while, cluster eight is mainly made up of females.

Cluster analysis shows the presence of the latent factors and also a certain degree of one-dimensionality. For this reason, we proceed to define and test the two scales of SS and SRB. We report in Table 1 and 2 the Cronbach's Alphas, also considering the item deletion. The values obtained are quite satisfying for both scales (0.734 for the SS and 0.624 for SRT) denoting an adequate level of one-dimensionality. Considering the variations in the alpha values when the item is deleted, all the items used to measure the two scales are necessary.

The scores of the two scales can be used within a linear regression framework that showed interesting results on individual characteristics and experiences that are associated to SS and SRB (Table 3). Males and young people who had early sexual debut had a greater propensity to SS and SRB. SS and SRB are positively associated to young people: who declared to be homosexual or bisexual; who had both coercive sexual relations and disease after one sexual experience; who experienced failed at school; and who did not accept school-related rules. Those who are fully satisfied of their physical appearance are also more positively associated in having SRB than the others.

**Table 1** - *Scale of Sensation Seeking by selected items. Cronbach's Alpha.*

| Item  | Cronbach's Alpha<br>if Item Deleted |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| Reading sex magazine (in the last 12 month)         | .722                                |
| Watching a pornographic Dvds (in the last 12 month) | .717                                |
| Go Clubbing (at present time)                       | .731                                |
| Go into a sexy shop (in the last 12 month)          | .718                                |
| Having exchanged in sexting (in the last 12 month)  | .689                                |
| Have seen a striptease (in the last 12 month)       | .717                                |
| Visit to porno sites (in the last 12 month)         | .677                                |
| Drunkenness – (at present time)                     | .694                                |
| Ever used ecstasy- (at present time)                | .727                                |
| Ever used marijuana - (at present time)             | .700                                |
| High speed driving- (at present time)               | .707                                |
| Self pleasuring (at present time)                   | .691                                |
| <i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>                             | <i>.734</i>                         |

Source: our elaboration on SELFY data, 2017.

**Table 2** - *Scale of Sexual Risk-Taking Behaviours by selected items. Cronbach's Alpha.*

| Item   | Cronbach's Alpha<br>if Item Deleted |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| Level risk of the contraceptive method used during first sexual relation | .579                                |
| Number of sex partner  | .527                                |
| Level risk of the contraceptive method used during last sexual encounter | .540                                |
| Having for sex   | .593                                |
| Having sexual intercourse with a person when you're with another         | .548                                |
| Unsafe sex with non-stable partner (sex without condom)                  | .476                                |
| <i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>  | <i>.624</i>                         |

Source: our elaboration on SELFY data, 2017.

Conversely, we observed lower significant levels of SS among those young people who consider religion as important (the same is not significant for SRB). When considering family characteristics and relations with parents, young people who had divorced parents or who had negative relationships with their parents (more significantly with mother than with father) had a greater propensity to SS and SRB. As well, more liberal and permissive parental behaviours (that allow their children to return late at home or to live sexual intimacy at home) are positively associated to SS and SRB. Individual perception and self-confidence are related to sexuality. SS significantly increases for those who live the body very intensely.

**Table 3 - Determinants of Sensation Seeking (SS) and Sexual Risk Behaviours (SRB).**  
 Linear regression models. Coefficients and p-values.

| Variables   | Categories       | SS     |        | SRB    |        |
|---|------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
|   |                  | coef.  | p-val. | coef.  | p-val. |
| Gender (ref. Boy)   | Girl             | -0.313 | ***    | -0.100 | ***    |
| Age at interview (ref. less than 21 years old)  | 21 yrs. old +    | -0.004 |        | 0.100  | ***    |
| Age at first sexual intercourse<br>(ref. No experience)   | <16              | 0.137  | ***    | ---    |        |
|   | 16               | 0.103  | ***    | -0.136 | ***    |
|   | 17               | 0.082  | ***    | -0.198 | ***    |
|   | 18               | 0.071  | ***    | -0.249 | ***    |
| Dimension of Municipality (ref. <20 thou.)  | >18              | 0.063  | ***    | -0.309 | ***    |
|   | 20-100 thou.     | 0.011  | *      | 0.004  |        |
|   | 100 thou. +      | 0.003  |        | 0.025  | *      |
| Are you omosexual or bisexual? (ref. No)  | Yes              | 0.093  | ***    | 0.174  | ***    |
| Failed at school (ref. No)  | Yes              | 0.014  |        | 0.076  | ***    |
| Follow the rules at school (ref. No)  | Yes              | 0.068  | ***    | 0.071  | ***    |
| Is religion important for you? (ref. No)  | Yes              | -0.042 | ***    | -0.018 |        |
| Are you satisfied with your physical<br>appearance? (ref. No)   | Almost yes       | -0.010 | *      | 0.010  |        |
|   | Definitely yes   | -0.003 | *      | 0.052  | ***    |
| Have you had sexual experiences against<br>your will? (ref. No)   | Yes              | 0.106  | ***    | 0.192  | ***    |
| Have you had diseases after one sexual<br>experience? (ref. No)   | Yes              | 0.071  | ***    | 0.183  | ***    |
| Have at least one brother (ref. No)   | Yes              | 0.010  | *      | 0.004  |        |
| Have at least one sister (ref. No)  | Yes              | 0.008  |        | 0.030  | **     |
| Divorced parents (ref. No)  | Yes              | 0.015  | **     | 0.040  | **     |
| Type of relation with father (ref. OK)  | Deceased         | 0.002  |        | 0.049  |        |
|   | Negative         | 0.004  |        | 0.061  | ***    |
|   | Positive         | -0.013 | **     | 0.013  |        |
| Type of relation with mother (ref. OK)  | Deceased         | 0.050  |        | 0.191  | **     |
|   | Negative         | 0.042  | ***    | 0.098  | ***    |
|   | Positive         | -0.015 | **     | 0.019  |        |
| Do your parents allow you to return late at<br>home at 16-18 years old? (ref. No)                             | Sometimes        | 0.031  | ***    | 0.026  | *      |
|   | Often            | 0.074  | ***    | 0.065  | ***    |
| Do your parents allow you to live sexual<br>intim. at home at 16-18 years old? (ref. No)                      | Sometimes        | 0.010  |        | 0.007  |        |
|   | Often            | 0.057  | ***    | 0.027  | *      |
| Are you agree with the following sentences?<br>To live the body very intensely<br>(ref. Definitely not agree) | Almost not agree | 0.008  |        | 0.081  | *      |
|   | No position      | -0.016 |        | -0.019 |        |
|   | Almost agree     | 0.031  | ***    | -0.028 | ***    |
|   | Definitely       | 0.099  | ***    | 0.076  | ***    |

(continues)

Legend: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ 

Source: our elaboration on SELFY data, 2017.

**Table 3** - (continues) *Determinants of Sensation Seeking (SS) and Sexual Risk Behaviour (SRB). Linear regression models. Coefficients and p-values.*

| Variables  | Categories       | SS     |        | SRB    |        |
|--|------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
|  |                  | coef.  | p-val. | coef.  | p-val. |
| Are you agree with the following sentences?                    |                  |        |        |        |        |
| To follow fashion<br>(ref. Definitely not agree)               | Almost not agree | -0.046 | ***    | -0.038 |        |
|  | No position      | 0.002  |        | -0.026 |        |
|  | Almost agree     | 0.013  | **     | 0.021  |        |
|  | Definitely agree | 0.042  | ***    | 0.026  |        |
| To live without purpose<br>(ref. Definitely not agree)         | Almost not agree | -0.069 | ***    | -0.054 | ***    |
|  | No position      | -0.033 | ***    | -0.030 | *      |
|  | Almost agree     | -0.013 |        | -0.034 | *      |
|  | Definitely agree | 0.010  |        | 0.001  | *      |
| It is not enough for me to live<br>(ref. Definitely not agree) | Almost not agree | 0.036  | ***    | 0.048  | **     |
|  | No position      | 0.007  |        | -0.011 |        |
|  | Almost agree     | -0.027 | ***    | -0.005 |        |
|  | Definitely agree | -0.020 | *      | 0.027  |        |
| Constant term  |                  | 1.456  | ***    | 1.214  | ***    |
| N  |                  | 7,841  |        | 6,068  |        |
| R-squared  |                  | 0.439  |        | 0.230  |        |

Legend: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Source: our elaboration on SELFY data, 2017.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Despite data present some limitations, mainly due to the characteristics of the sample (that includes only university students), the present paper has the advantage of trying to fill the existing gap, especially in the Italian research, on the related topic, by simultaneously examining co-occurrence of two different risky behaviours in a multidimensional perspective that includes individual, familiar and social behaviour, besides attitudes of youths. Moreover, the novelty of this study is that, despite the cross-sectional structure of data, we used, where applicable, retrospective information to preserve the casual effect between sexual and risks behaviours and their determinants.

Our analyses showed that Italian university students present very heterogeneous profiles on their risk habits. In this perspective, our descriptive analyses showed that the eight clusters of observed students offered a very nuanced perspective on their behaviors and risk taking propensity.

The analyses performed through a multidimensional approach showed that a wide range of factors are associated to SS and SRB. In particular, the role played by the individual characteristics about respondents and their families, also including a

number of individual perception and opinions, emerged. In other words, SS can have interactive effects on SRB, being an important factor in determining the habit to have risky sexual behaviour).

Both the descriptive analyses and the regression model showed that different behaviours characterize men with respect to women. Confirming previous researches, gender is configured as one of the most important determinant of attitudes and behaviors, as it translate in different notions of appropriate behaviors for men and women. Our findings outlined also that another important determinant of risk profiles are the familiar and institutional contexts (e.g. relationship with the mother and the observance of school rules). Lastly, it is notably the effects of having had sexual experiences against own will, that positively influences both SS and SRB.

These empirical evidences obtained should stimulate future research to further clarify mechanisms and causality patterns that affect attitudes and behaviours of youths. Among the others, scholars showed that sensation seeking is highly linked with performing sexual risk behaviours (Spitalnick et al., 2007). In other words, SS can have interactive effects on SRB, being an important factor in determining the habit to have risky sexual behaviour.

Furthermore, our study indicates that positive family relationships and parental monitoring should be enforced to reduce youth engaging in sexual and behavioral risk (Huang et al., 2011). On the other hand prevention and health-risk reduction programs should be realized to capitalize on the protective role of the school and/or university context against youth risk behaviours.

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## SUMMARY

### **Risk habits among Italian university students: sensation seeking and sexual risk-taking behaviours**

Using data coming from the survey on “Sexual and Emotional Life of Youths”, we aim at exploring the patterns of relationships among risk habits, in particular the sex related ones among Italian university students to identify different risk profiles by using a sequential two-step analysis. Results highlight the presence of eight different target groups of students in terms of risk habits. Among them, the 24.9% of students can be defined as “young sensation seekers” who have the highest risk habits. Conversely, the 22.8% of students have inactive sexual life. Subsequently, linear regression models defined those characteristics, attitudes and behaviours associated to these risk habits. School and sexual experiences as well as family characteristics and relations with parents result to be significantly associated to risk habits.

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