

Women's sexual risk-taking focus of new study

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Relaxing beach vacations are perfect for sexual experimentation with a steady partner, while group tours and sightseeing trips are the ultimate contexts for casual sex with acquaintances or strangers, women said in a new survey.

More than 850 U.S. women, ranging in age from 18 to 50, participated in the online survey, which asked about specific tourist activities, destinations and atmospheres that women believed to be highly conducive to sexual risk-taking.

Participants also rated 23 sexual practices or situations on their perceived degree of risk, such as having unprotected sex with a regular partner or stranger, or becoming intimate while under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Researchers Liza Berdychevsky of the University of Illinois and Heather Gibson of the University of Florida sought to identify the particular contexts that trigger women's sexual risk-taking when vacationing, as well as women's perceptions, motivations and likelihood of indulging in these experiences. A paper about their study appears online in the journal *Tourism Management*.

The uniqueness of tourist destinations, especially those with permissive, party-oriented social atmospheres, promote an altered sense of reality that condones sexual experimentation and exploration while minimizing perceptions of risk and long-term consequences, Berdychevsky and

Gibson found in two prior studies.

High alcohol consumption was the primary facilitator of risky sex, women reported in the current study. It provided them with "liquid courage" and "a psychological excuse" to transcend their usual sexual boundaries or taboos for experiences they were curious about, but reluctant to try in their everyday lives, Berdychevsky said.

Other behaviors, such as wearing revealing clothing and feeling more sexually confident, along with feeling disconnected from everyday life and social expectations, also encourage sexual risk-taking, women said.

"Perhaps in everyday life we are so overscheduled and disciplined that once we find ourselves in a situation where there is no schedule and no social control, and the only time we have to keep in mind is the departure of our plane, it releases us from many of our psychological barriers and inhibitions," said Berdychevsky, a professor of recreation, sport and tourism at Illinois.

Sexual experimentation and conquests were vacation "musts" for some women, providing erotic thrills, a sense of empowerment and bragging rights when they returned home.

Anonymity, along with opportunities for acting out sexual fantasies that were off-limits at home, perceptions of being free from negative judgment and fun seeking were women's primary motivating factors. However, some women said that risk in itself was a significant motivator.

Women who had previously engaged in risky [sexual activities](#) as tourists tended to perceive these behaviors and situations as less dangerous than did their peers who lacked such experience, the researchers found.

"While women rated a variety of sexual activities as risky during tourism, unprotected penetrative sex was consistently perceived as involving the highest degree of risk," Berdychevsky said. "Some women also tended to underestimate the risks involved in non-penetrative sexual activities and to overestimate the degree of protection offered by latex barriers."

Understanding the specific types and characteristics of tourist experiences that facilitate sexual risk taking, as well as people's perceptions and motivations for engaging in these behaviors, is essential to developing effective sexual health education campaigns addressing these kinds of behaviors, Berdychevsky and Gibson said.

"The fact that women have tendencies to underestimate the risks involved in non-penetrative sexual activities, overestimate the protection of condoms and attribute sexual risk-taking to alcohol consumption are factors that sexual health information campaigns might want to address," Berdychevsky said.

While accompanying a study-abroad group to Australia in June, Gibson snapped a photo of a poster in the Sydney airport that reminded international tourists to practice safe sex to prevent HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

"The fact that we're seeing this message in the Sydney airport, but not in the U.S., suggests that the U.S. is lagging behind in promoting awareness of the consequences of sexual exploration in some tourist environments, which studies indicate pose increased risks to sexual health," Berdychevsky said. "Once we agree there's a need for these awareness programs, the challenge will be prioritizing the audiences to be reached and constructing effective messages."

"Identifying women's risk perceptions, motivations and the rewards

sought through these behaviors in touristic contexts, as we did in this study, is an important step if we want to try and tailor [sexual health education](#) messages to specific demographic groups," Berdychevsky said.

More information: *Tourism Management*. [DOI: 10.1016/j.tourman.2015.04.009](#)

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