

Adolescent Risk-Taking Behaviour in Context of Identity Formation

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Abstract: *Adolescence is the period when youth begins to experiment with risky behaviours. It has been consistently established that in comparison to other life phases, the adolescent years are marked by a heightened tendency for recklessness, thrill-seeking, and risk-taking behavior. Identity development is an important predictor of high-risk behavior, as individual personality and behavioral traits are importantly associated with high-risk behavior. A coherent sense of identity helps to organize and give meaning to one's experiences and to guide one's decisions and behaviors, whereas a fragmented, confused, or poorly structured sense of identity may render one especially susceptible to external events. The current research aims to study the risk-taking behaviours of Indian adolescents in the context of their identity development. For this purpose, Adolescent Risk Taking Questionnaire (2000) and Identity Styles Inventory by Berzonsky (1997) were used to study the association between adolescent risk-taking behaviour with identity styles. Participants (N=620 adolescents (310 boys & and 310 girls); M (age) =16.01 years) were selected from the city based schools from Punjab. Pearson Product-moment correlation and stepwise multiple regression analysis were applied to see the correlation between risky behaviours and identity styles and t-test was used to see the gender differences. The result of the present research indicated that the risk-taking behaviours in adolescents are inversely correlated with the of Informational, Normative identity styles, while positively correlated with the Diffuse identity style. The current paper would be helpful in examining and predicting the phenomenon of risk-taking behaviour in adolescent and thus, be of value to the relevant stakeholders.*

Keywords: Adolescents, risk-taking behaviours in adolescence, Identity development, personality and behavioural traits, identity styles,

1. Background

Adolescence is a transitional period between childhood and adulthood when the adolescent grapples with the question "Who am I?". Adolescents must develop their fundamental social and professional identities, or they remain confused about the roles they should play as adults. This age includes the biological changes of puberty, the need for greater independence, self-indulgence, and normative experimentation (Wall, 2022). Adolescence is the stage of life where individuals take the most risks (Tapert & Ebershon-Shumate, 2022). Adolescence is marked by hormonal upsurge, development of cognitive abilities, an increased awareness of sexuality, redefinition of parent-child relationship, identity crisis, struggles for autonomy, and greater orientation towards the peer group. A number of health risk behaviours begin in adolescence that affect health both at the time and in later years. All these changes during this time of life increase the growing adolescence's propensity towards embracing lifestyles and behaviours can threaten their own well-being, but the health and safety of others too (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2020). Behaviours that raise a person's chance of contracting an illness, being hurt, or becoming disabled in the future are known as risky behaviours (Belihu, 2022).

Although, there are many behaviours that might be considered risky, Agrawal, Patel, & Agarwal, (2016) have identified six health risk behaviours as being particularly salient for the development of optimal health. These six risk behaviours include: (a) Behaviours that contribute to unintentional injuries and violence; (b) Tobacco use; (c) Alcohol and other drug use; (d) Sexual behaviours that contribute to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases; (e) Unhealthy dietary behaviours; and (f) Physical inactivity.

Adolescent Health-risk Behaviours

Adolescence, which spans the ages of 11 to 21, is a time marked by a number of transformations, including the onset of puberty and changes in peer and parent relationships, education, and cognitive and emotional development. An increase in risk-taking behaviors, such as those connected to reckless driving, drug abuse, unprotected sexual behavior, eating disorders, criminality, homicidal and suicidal thoughts and actions, and risky sports, is another feature of this time frame. Since these behaviors are typically voluntary, their results are unpredictable, and they may have unfavorable effects, they are classified as dangerous. Bhatt and Sandhu (2017) the inclination to participate in actions that endanger or damage a person's bodily or mental well-being is known as risk-taking. Behaviors that include physical dangers are particularly referred to as "risk-taking" (e.g., drinking and driving). It has been suggested that taking risks is a taught behavior, a developmental process, and a personality trait (Zinn, 2019). According to Sharma and Kaur (2019), it is commonly described as "behaviors that are associated with some probability of undesirable results. Risk-taking as a personality trait can be understood as a factor that varies depending on personality traits, and as a developmental phenomenon, the willingness to take risks has been linked to negative outcomes such as egocentrism in cognitive development (Shende & Kadam, 2024; Elkind, 1978). Developmental view suggests that risk-taking cannot be defined in isolation from an individual's developmental context. According to the developmental perspective, taking risks is normal and adaptive for a person's healthy psychological development (Crandon et al., 2022). It's also seen as a strategy for navigating adolescent developmental tasks like autonomy and exploration. A risky behaviour provides the adolescent an opportunity to fully evaluate the consequences of that behaviour, as suggested by the normal/adaptive perspective. Early developmental theorists,

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particularly Erikson (1968) have defined the period of adolescence as one presenting the crisis of identity versus role confusion, in which adolescents must determine who they are, combining self-understanding and social roles into a coherent identity. The term identity crisis describes the temporary confusion and instability that adolescents experience while struggling with alternatives and choices. As per Erikson's (1968) view, successful identity development is represented as a preponderance of identity synthesis over identity confusion.

Identity involves a relatively sustainable sense of self-unity. In Zabihi et al., (2019) opinion, adolescence is the identity exploration period such that the identity indicates mental health and the conflict between identity and identity confusion is a sign of a healthy personality. According to Ryan & Soenens (2020), adolescents need to comprehend that they are unique from others even though they share qualities with them, which is another reason they acquire identities. They believe that different persons have distinct identity styles and behave differently while coping with identity problems and processing associated information. Based on the identity styles approach, Berzonsky (1989, 1990) proposed three identity styles: informational, normative, and diffuse-avoidant. These Identity styles are defined as the cognitive-social strategies a person uses to process, organize, apply, and modify their own information. In informational identity style, the adolescent is actively seeking and evaluating information, look for multiple solutions of a problem by exploring alternatives before committing to one alternative. The next style is the normative style in which the individual grows by conforming to the expectations of society and family and commits to authority, the adolescent also bases his/her values on his/her expectations of the most prominent people in his/her life and mainly defines themselves with characteristics such as "my family," "my religion," and "my ethnicity." Finally, the diffuse/avoidant style is one in which the adolescent postpones confrontation with identities as long as possible and tends to emphasize his/her contingent social aspects such as "my reputation," "my popularity," and "my impression on others." These three identity styles are strongly related to the adolescent adaptation (zabihi et.al, 2019).

Identity development and risk behaviors

Adolescents' identity development is a potential moderator of the relationship between control and engagement in risky behaviours. The development of personal identity, meaning an overarching set of culturally-accepted, self-relevant values, beliefs and future goals (Archer & Waterman, 1990) initiates in early adolescence and remains a salient psychosocial task throughout the teen and emerging adult years.

Studies demonstrate a relation between identity development and risky behaviours in adolescence. Consistent with conformity research, teens that are both low in identity exploration and commitment (i.e., identity diffused) tend to engage in the most substance abuse, reckless behaviour, thrill-seeking and risky behaviours as compared to teens with more developed identities (i.e., those who had engaged in identity exploration and/or commitment). Adolescents who have begun to develop their identities by exploring and/or

committing to personal identity choices may be less likely to engage in peer-initiated substance abuse because these behaviors may interfere with life goals and be inconsistent with burgeoning personal life choices. On the other hand, without a set of personally-relevant values, beliefs and goals to direct life choices, teens who have yet to begin constructing a personal identity may acquiesce to others more readily and may make poor or uncalculated life decisions (Dumas & Wolfe, 2012).

The review of literature presents some very interesting areas to explore in order to understand risk-taking behaviours of adolescents. It is especially relevant in exploring the psychosocial developmental tasks of identity and autonomy for adolescent development within the Indian context as Indians live in a collectivist society where individuals set aside personal goals for the good of the whole. In addition, Punjab is on the verge of a drug epidemic, with the majority involved (Amardeep, 2022). Punjab youth have been engaged in a high proportion of different types of negative risk behaviour since childhood. Reports also show drug addiction even among adolescents (Singh & Singh, 2023; Sandhu, 2015). According to one study, the prevalence of violence, alcohol and drug use, and sexual behavior is high, ultimately leading to health and social problems, affecting the younger generation (Ahmed et al., 2020). A significant number of studies have shown that adolescents with stable identities tend to be safe from a variety of dangerous behaviors, including illegal drug use, alcohol use, and unsafe sexual behavior. On the contrary, adolescents who are vulnerable to indulge in delinquent behaviour are those who experience stress in making meaningful commitments and struggle to achieve their personal goals (Vadivel et al., 2023). According to Morsünbül (2013), in the study of the relationship between risk-taking and identity status in adolescents, risk-taking behaviour was best predicted by foreclosure identity status. It was followed by diffusion, achievement, and then moratorium identity status. The results of the study revealed that lowered risk-taking behaviour was seen in those who make commitments (i.e., achievement and foreclosure) than in those who lack commitments (i.e., moratorium and diffusion).

Purpose and Significance

A substantial amount of research has received attention for behaviors exhibited by adolescents that have potential danger or even fatal consequences for them. It has been consistently established that in comparison to other life phases, the adolescent years are marked by a heightened tendency for recklessness, thrill-seeking, and risk-taking behavior. Statistics associated with adolescent engagement in risk-taking behaviors reveal that adolescents drive faster in comparison to adults, have the highest occurrence of sexually transmitted diseases, have the highest prevalence of self-reported drug use, and indulge in a large portion of crimes. Also it is seen that poor identity development has repercussions for and engagement in risk-taking behaviours. Adolescents with low identity exploration and commitment (i.e., identity diffused) have been found to be more inclined to engage in substance abuse in comparison to teenagers having more developed identities (i.e., those who had engaged in identity exploration and/or commitment). Identity development operates as a buffer between peer group pressure

and adolescents' engagement in risk-taking behaviours. This work aims to study the risk-taking behaviour of Indian adolescents in context of their identity development.

Hypotheses

- 1) Informational and Normative and identity styles would inversely contribute to risk-taking behaviours.
- 2) Identity diffusion would contribute positively towards risk-taking behaviours in adolescents.
- 3) Adolescent boys will be high on risk-taking behavior as compared to adolescent girls.

2. Methodology

Participants

A total sample consisted of adolescents aged 13-18 years from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, including both males and females. A stratified random sampling method was used to ensure representation across different demographic groups. The final sample size of 620 participants (310 males and 310 females) was determined based on power analysis to ensure sufficient statistical power for detecting significant effects.

The 620 teenage participants in the sample, 310 of whom were male and 310 of whom were female, who attended different schools in Punjab, India. Initially, a list of Punjab's twenty-two districts was created. Using the fishbowl technique, six districts (or around 25% of the total) were chosen at random. Eight schools, or 25% of all schools, were once again chosen at random using the fishbowl method after a list of public and private institutions that supported middle-class socioeconomic status in the districts that were chosen at random was created. The average age of the male sample was 16.15 years, with a standard deviation of 0.54, and the average age of the female sample was 16.1 years, with a standard deviation of 0.45.

The average age of the male and female samples was 16.15 years and 16.1 years, respectively, with a standard deviation of 0.54 and 0.45, respectively. Before distributing the scales, prior consent was obtained. Due to the fact that only people who were eager to participate in the study and were available in the classes were chosen for the sample, selection was accidental. The following groups were then formed from the sample: Samples of girls ($n = 310$) and boys ($n = 310$). Adolescents from intact homes were paired with other intact family members. The Institutional Ethical Committee (IEC) of Punjabi University in Patiala, relevant authorities, and the participants gave the researcher permission to approach the sample in advance.

3. Measures

Adolescent Risk Behavior Questionnaire (ARQ) - Gullone, Moore, Moss, & Boyd (2000)

The ARQ is a comprehensive questionnaire to assess health risk behavior and exploratory risk behaviour, designed for use with adolescents. It has two sub parts that are scored discretely: (1) a 22-item questionnaire that assess the frequency of risk behaviors and (2) a 22-item risk attitude questionnaire that assess the perception of risk involved with every behavior of adolescent. Item responses are assigned on

a five-point Likert-type scale. From each questionnaire, a total score and four factor scores are computed. The four factor scores are namely; Thrill-seeking Risk (e.g., bungee jumping, entering a competition, inline skating), Rebellious Risk (e.g., underage drinking, smoking, staying out late), Reckless Risk (e.g., speeding, drinking and driving, stealing cars) and Anti-Social Risk (e.g., cheating, teasing others). The internal consistency reliability of the total score for the belief and behavior sections are estimated as .97 and .99 respectively. The internal consistency reliabilities for the sub-scales are estimated as 0.8 for each subscale, with the exception of the anti-social scale for which the reliability vary between .66 to .79 subjected to age and gender.

Identity Styles Inventory-R (ISI-R) Berzonsky (1997)

The socio-cognitive perspective of Berzonsky (2004) postulates stylistic differences in how individuals process and deal with identity relevant information and issues. Berzonsky (1992) developed the identity style inventory (ISI)-R to assess the extent to which individuals use the three stylistic orientations, viz., information style, normative style & diffuse-avoidant style. The ISI-R also includes a subscale designed to assess the strength of identity commitment (Berzonsky, 1992). The items are also designed to tap the processing of identity relevant information in general (e.g., values, goals, standards, beliefs, and personal problems) and independent of a specific identity domain. The ISI includes 40-items (e.g., "I've always had purpose in my life; I was brought up to know what to strive for ,"). There are 11 items assessing Information-Oriented, 9 items evaluating the Normative-Oriented, 10 items assessing Commitment and 10 items assessing the Diffuse/Avoidant-Oriented. Items are rated on a 5-point likert scale, varying from "Not at all like me" to "Very much like me". Scoring for some items is reversed. For each subscale, the Alpha coefficients are .70 for Informational, .76 for Diffuse/Avoidant, .64 for Normative and .71 for Commitment.

4. Procedure

The present study was aimed to see the correlations between adolescents risk-taking behaviour with identity formation and perceived environmental systems among adolescence in Punjab. For this purpose, 620 adolescents in the age range of 13–18 years were selected from various schools in Punjab. The present investigation started first with obtaining permission to carry out the research work from the authorities concerned. Permission was sought from principals and teachers to request their permission to approach the students to take part in the current research. Further, a brief psychological workshop of approximately thirty minutes was conducted with the subjects to get acquainted with them and develop a rapport. Participants were requested to fill the required information for the test. Administration of tests was planned in two sessions on two consecutive days and adequate resting time was also given between the administration of two tests. This was done to overcome the effects of fatigue, interference or monotony. In the first session, after conducting the workshop, and giving a break of ten minutes, Adolescent Risk Behavior Questionnaire (ARQ) was administered and it took almost 40 minutes to be completed. In the second phase (on the second day), the same group of students was given the Identity Styles Inventory and it took around 40 minutes for it

to be completed. Scoring of the tests was done strictly according to the instructions/ scoring key provided in the manuals of the tests used. The data were analysed using: (a) Pearson-product moment correlation (b) Step-wise multiple regression (c) t-test. The data were analysed using SPSS version IBM 22.

5. Analysis

Pearson’s Product Moment Correlation and stepwise multiple regression were computed to study the relationship of risk-taking behaviours with various identity styles and t-test was used to see the gender differences.

6. Results and Discussion

Table 1: Showing the mean and SD of the participants on Adolescent Risk Questionnaire and Identity Styles Inventory.

Variables	Mean	SD
Risk-taking Behavior	52.16	12.02
Informational Identity Style	40.00	7.16
Normative Identity Style	37.73	6.83
Diffuse-avoidant Identity Style	34.71	7.97

Table 1 shows the means, SDs of scores on Risk-taking Behavior and Identity Styles Scale. The mean and SD for Risk-taking behavior are 52.16 and 12.02 and for Informational Identity styles the mean and SD are 40.0 and

7.16 and for Normative and Diffuse-avoidant Identity Styles the means are 37.73 and 34.71 and SD are 6.83 & 7.97 respectively.

Adolescent Risk-taking Questionnaire (ARQ) and Identity style inventory (ISI3)

Table no. 2 showing the Pearson Product-moment correlation between Adolescent Risk Questionnaire and Identity Style Inventory.

Variables	Informational identity style	Normative identity style	Diffuse-avoidant identity style
Risk Taking	-.34**	-.46**	.52**

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The table no. 2 reveals that the Risk-taking Behavior are inversely related to Informational Identity Style and Normative Identity Style. The value of the coefficient of correlation indicates that there is a negative and significant correlation between Risk-taking Behavior and Identity Styles namely, Informational ($r=-.34, p<0.01$), Normative ($r=-.46, p<0.01$). The table also shows that a positive correlation was found between Risk-taking Behavior with Diffuse-avoidant Identity Style ($r=.52, p<0.01$). These results affirm the hypothesis.

It is evident from the results that informational, normative and commitment identity style contributes inversely to risk-taking behaviours, while identity diffusion contributes positively to risk-taking behaviours, thereby supporting the hypothesis of the study.

Table no.3 Summary of Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for Risk-taking Behaviours in relation to Identity Styles.

Criterion	Model	R	R2	SE of estimation	R2 Change	F	Df	β	t
Risk- taking behavior	DAIS	.52	.27	10.30	.27	226.13	1/618	.52**	15.03
	NIS	.64	.41	9.24	.14	150.17	1/617	-.38**	12.55
	IDS	.65	.42	9.17	.010	11.06	1/616	-.18**	3.32

- a. Predictors: (constant), Diffuse-Avoidant Identity Style
- b. Predictors: (constant), Diffuse-Avoidant Identity Style, Normative Identity Style
- c. Predictors: (constant), Diffuse-Avoidant Identity Style, Normative Identity Style, Informational Identity Style

For Risk-taking Behavior Diffuse avoidant identity style is the strongest predictor ($\beta =.52, p<0.01$) which positively accounted for 27% of the unique variance in it. A negative contribution of Normative Identity Style ($\beta=-.38, p<0.01$) and Informational Identity Style ($\beta=-.18, p<0.01$) was also observed accounting for 14% and 1% of the variance.

A considerable amount of researches have indicated that adolescents with stable identity tend to be safe from different risk behaviours like illicit drug use, alcohol use, and unsafe sexual behaviour. On the contrary, adolescents who are vulnerable to indulge in delinquent behaviour are those who experience stress in making meaningful commitments and struggle to achieve their personal goals (Bahmani & Makvandi, 2021).

Zahracar et al., (2021) studied the relationship between risk-taking and identity styles in adolescents. The results of this study showed that risk-taking behaviour were inversely correlated to informational and normative identity style while diffuse avoidant identity style was positively correlated. The results of the study revealed that lowered risk-taking behaviour was seen in those who make

commitment (i.e., informational and normative) than those who lack in making commitment (i.e., diffuse avoidant style).

Zabihi et al., (2019), found the association of high risk behaviour and their relationship with their identity styles. The result of this study indicated that the scores of informational, normative, and identity commitment styles had a negative correlation with the scores of high-risk behaviors in adolescents. In other words, there was an inverse relationship between these three identity styles and the occurrence of high-risk behaviors, while the scores of diffuse-avoidant style were positively correlated with the scores of high-risk behaviors.

A further study by Bogarts et al., (2023) on adolescent’s confusion about ones’ self or a lack of a consolidated sense of identity can be detrimental to adolescent adjustment, well-being, and healthy transition to adulthood. For Erikson (1983), adolescents have to form a clear sense of who one is as a person and how they wish to behave in the world. When that process is successful, individuals are likely to avoid major risk-taking, but for individuals who have a more

diffused state of identity, there may be an association with several types of health risk behaviours (Burieva & Kamilova 2022). Individuals with a clear sense of who they are and where they are going in their lives are more likely to feel positive, engage in enjoyable and caring relationships with other people, and are less likely to be distressed, worried, and engage in behaviours that are harmful to themselves or to others. On the other hand, a confused sense of identity is found to be associated with externalizing symptoms, risk-taking behaviors, and illicit drug use (Branch, 2023).

Informational identity style represents actively considering identity alternatives and constructing a sense of identity by seeking out and evaluating self-relevant information before making decisions and forming commitments. Individuals in the informational identity style and normative identity style exhibits commitment by exploring alternatives. Such a person's attitudes and goals rigidly reflect those of their parents. This styles seems a secure status for adolescents who do prefer to explore various ideological and interpersonal domains of life relevant to their sense of self. Such adolescents are comfortable in accepting and imbibing parental and authority tutelage, and willingly adopt and conform to the values of the popular culture, thus, leaving a little scope for embarking on deviant life tracks. Identity informational style has been found to be associated with less anxiety and opposition to drug use (Berzonsky, 2019), high self-esteem (Hsieh et al, 2019)., self-satisfaction and increased well-being (Berzonsky, 2016). Later researches also suggest that normative style has been associated with high degrees of self-esteem, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2011).

A study done by Hosseini (2019) focused on adolescent's identity development and sexual behavior. A relationship was found between identity styles and risk-taking behavior; particularly, identity diffusion was found to be positively contributing with risky sexual behavior, and moderate contributing with identity normative style. It is evident from the results that identity informational style contributes inversely to risk-taking behaviours, while identity diffusion contributes positively to risk-taking behaviours, thereby supporting the hypothesis of the study.

Table 4.3: Analysis of the difference of Risk-taking Behavior with respect to males and females

		N	Mean	SD	t	p
Risk-taking Behaviour	Males	310	55.06	10.96	7.47	.01
	Females	310	48.39	11.23		

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

To assess the hypothesis that there is significant difference in risk-taking behavior between male and female teenagers, an independent t-test was used. Mean scores were obtained for male respondents ($M = 55.06$ $SD = 10.96$) and female adolescents ($M = 48.39$ $SD = 11.23$), with a significant result ($t = 7.47$, $p = .01$). The obtained difference between the mean scores of Males and Females with respect to risk-taking behaviour is significant at 0.05 Level. It can be seen from the mean values that, males have a higher mean value, which means males are more indulged in risk taking behaviour than females. This finding is supported by Mohd Nawi et al.

(2021) who in a study found that male adolescent is more likely to engage in risk-taking attitude as compared to female adolescents. A further study by Chawla & Sarkar, (2019) focused on risky behaviours among adolescents. The study revealed that the indulgence in substance use was found to be higher in males in comparison to females. It was found that in females the desire of indulging in substance use and sexual activity was low as compared to males. Males were higher in sexual activities, substance use and risk-taking behaviour than females.

7. Implications

The results are especially relevant in understanding the health-risk behaviour of adolescents. Our findings suggest that identity development may be an important construct to target in attempts to reduce adolescent negative risk-taking behaviors. Research suggests that there was a negative correlation between informational, normative, and identity commitment styles and high-risk behaviors and a positive correlation between diffuse-avoidant identity style and high-risk behaviors among adolescents. Thus, it may be fruitful to construct programs to educate families on how to promote healthy adolescent identity development. Likewise school- or community-based programs could teach identity facilitative techniques to help guide and support teens' identity construction.

On the basis of research finding, researcher and school counselors can have adopted an identity-based motivation framework in order to improve the academic performance of "at-risk" youth. Participants were encouraged to make academic and future-career related identity commitments and were given important tools, skills, and motivation for helping to attain and maintain identity commitments (e.g., identifying role models, creating timelines, brainstorming strategies to deal with identity-related conflicts). This type of identity-related interventions may be particularly promising for reducing teens' engagement in risk behaviors, particularly in more dominating peer contexts. By helping teens to construct personal identities, which act as another strong frame of reference other than peer group norms for guiding actions and behaviors, teens may be less likely to engage in behaviors that may conflict with their beliefs and values regarding who they are or that potentially interfere with personal life goals

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