

Risk-Taking Behaviours in Context of Identity Formation among Adolescents

INDERPREET SANDHU*¹ AND VIKRAMJEET SINGH²

¹Assistant Professor and ²Research Scholar
Department of Psychology, Punjabi University, Patiala (Punjab) India

ABSTRACT

The present study examined the role of identity formation and risk-taking behavior in the adolescent population. The period of adolescence is widely recognized to be associated with heightened tendency for recklessness, thrill-seeking, and risk-taking behavior when compared to other life phases. Identity development has been reported to be an important predictor of high-risk behavior, as individual personality and behavioral traits are significantly 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 behaviors of adolescents in the context of their identity development. For this purpose, Adolescent Risk-taking Questionnaire (Gullone et al., 2000) and Identity Styles Inventory by Berzonsky (1997) were used to study the association between adolescent risk-taking behavior-with identity styles. Participants (N =620 adolescents (310 boys & and 310 girls); M (age) =16.01 years) were selected from city-based schools from Punjab, India. Pearson Product-moment correlation and stepwise multiple regression analysis were applied to see the correlation between risky behaviors and identity styles and t-test was used to see the gender differences. The results of the present research indicates that the risk-taking behaviors in adolescents are inversely correlated with informational and normative identity styles while are positively correlated with diffuse-avoidant identity style. The current research would be helpful in examining and predicting the phenomenon of risk-taking behavior in adolescent and thus be of value to the relevant stakeholders.

Key Words : Adolescents, High-risk behaviors, Identity styles

INTRODUCTION

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 personal identities, or they remain confused about the roles they should play as adults. This age includes the biological changes of puberty, as well as 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 and Ebersson-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 behaviors begin in adolescence that affect health both at the time and in later years. All these changes during this time not only increase the growing adolescent's propensity towards embracing lifestyles and behaviors that can threaten their own well-being, but also the health and safety of others as well (Sales and Irwin, 2009). Behaviors that raise a person's chance of contracting an illness, being hurt, or becoming disabled in the future are known as risky behaviors. Risk behaviors refer to actions that increase an individual's likelihood of developing a disease or sustaining injury or disability at some point in

the future (Rodriguez, 2012). Although, there are many behaviors that might be considered risky, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2006) has identified six health risk behaviors as being particularly salient for the development of optimal health. These six risk behaviors include: (a) Behaviors that contribute to unintentional injuries and violence; (b) Tobacco use; (c) Alcohol and other drug use; (d) Sexual behaviors that contribute to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases; (e) Unhealthy dietary behaviors; and (f) Physical inactivity.

Adolescent health-risk behaviors and identity formation:

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 is also seen as a strategy for navigating adolescent developmental tasks like autonomy and exploration. A risky behavior provides the adolescent an opportunity to fully evaluate the consequences of that behavior, according to the normal/adaptive perspective. Early developmental theorists, 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.

According to the normal/adaptive perspective, the experience of a risky behavior provides the adolescent an opportunity to truly assess the outcome of that behavior. In Erikson's (1968) view, successful identity development is represented as a preponderance of identity synthesis over identity confusion. Adolescents and young adults exhibit a greater propensity toward high-risk behaviors and a larger percentage of risk-taking than other age groups. Adolescents, in general, are either unaware of the serious repercussions of their high-risk behaviors or believe they are impervious to them. This kind of thinking encourages adolescents to engage in high-risk activities, even if these actions have an adverse effect on their quality of life not just during youth but also during later life. Remarkably, the introduction of one high-risk behavior—like drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes—

opens the door for the emergence of other high-risk habits, and the topic usually brings up the coexistence of many high-risk behaviors at the same time.

Identity involves a relatively sustainable sense of self-unity. Soenens, Berzonsky and Papini (2016) believed that identity acquisition is also a response to the need of young people to understand that they are distinct from others despite sharing characteristics with them. Adolescents act differently when they are dealing with identity struggles and process the related information with respect to their individual identity styles. One of the primary models of identity has been theorized by Berzonsky (1990) in his identity styles approach. Berzonsky (1990) defined identity styles as the cognitive-social methods adopted by an individual to process, organize, apply, and modify their own information and proposed three identity styles, namely, informational (information oriented), normative, and diffuse-avoidant styles. In informational identity style, the adolescent actively seeks and evaluates information, looks for multiple solutions of a problem by exploring alternatives before committing to one alternative. In the normative style, 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 himself/herself 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-taking behaviors:

Adolescents' identity development is a potential moderator for the relationship between control and engagement in risky behaviors. The development of personal identity, meaning an overarching set of culturally-accepted, self-relevant values, beliefs and future goals (Archer and 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 behaviors in adolescence. Consistent with conformity research, adolescents that are both low in identity exploration and commitment (*i.e.*,

identity diffusion) tend to engage in the most substance abuse, reckless behaviors, thrill-seeking and risky behaviors as compared to adolescents 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 are inconsistent with burgeoning personal life choices. On the other hand, without a set of personally-relevant values, beliefs and goals to direct life choices, adolescents who have yet to begin constructing a personal identity may acquiesce to others more readily and may make poor or uncalculated life decisions (Dumas, Ellis & Wolfe, 2012).

The review of literature presents exploration of different domains in order to understand the risk-taking behaviors 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 their personal goals for the good of the whole. 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. Conversely, adolescents who struggle to accomplish their personal goals and feel stressed when they have to make significant commitments are the ones who are more prone to engaging in delinquent activity. Morsünbül (2013) studied the relationship between risk-taking and identity status in adolescents and the results of the study showed that risk-taking behavior was best predicted by foreclosure identity status. The results of this study revealed that lowered risk-taking behavior was seen in those who make commitments (*i.e.*, achievement and foreclosure) than in those who lack in making 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 behaviors. Adolescents with low identity exploration and commitment (*i.e.*, diffuse-avoidant identity style) 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 behaviors. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to determine whether identity styles have any bearing on risk-taking behaviors in adolescents as well as the relationship between risk-taking behaviors and identity styles.

Hypotheses:

1. Informational and normative identity styles would be negatively correlated with risk-taking behaviors whereas diffuse-avoidant identity style would be positively associated with risk-taking behaviors.
2. Informational and normative identity styles would inversely contribute to risk-taking behaviors.
3. Diffuse-avoidant identity style would positively contribute towards risk-taking behaviors in adolescents.
4. Adolescent males will be high on risk-taking behaviors as compared to adolescent females.

METHODOLOGY

Sample:

The total sample for the current study consisted of 620 adolescent subjects (310 males and 310 females), age ranging between 13-18 years, belonging to various schools of Punjab (India). The participants were studying in grades 8-12.

Measures:

Following measures were used to assess risk-taking behavior and identity styles among adolescents:

Adolescent Risk-taking Questionnaire (ARQ) – Gullone *et al.* (2000):

The ARQ is a comprehensive questionnaire to assess health risk behavior and exploratory risk behaviors

in adolescents. It has two sub-parts that are scored discretely: (1) a 22-item questionnaire that assesses the frequency of risk behaviors and (2) a 22-item risk attitude questionnaire that assesses 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). For the current study, only the scores for the risk behaviors were included and used for statistical analysis.

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

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 and diffuse-avoidant style. The socio-cognitive perspective of Berzonsky (2004) postulates stylistic differences in how individuals process and deal with identity relevant information and issues. The items are 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-R 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.

Procedure:

A brief psychological workshop of approximately thirty minutes was conducted with the subjects to get acquainted with them and to develop a rapport before requesting them to fill the questionnaires. Administration

of the tests was planned in two sessions for two consecutive days so that they get adequate resting time. 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-taking 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 according to the instructions/ scoring key provided in the manuals of the tests used.

Obtained data were subjected to Pearson’s Product Moment Correlation and Stepwise Multiple Regression analyses. Further, to assess the gender differences in risk-taking behavior, t-test was applied. The data were analyzed using SPSS version IBM 22.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main objective of the current study was to assess the association of the risk-taking behavior in context of identity development among adolescents. To address this objective, correlational analysis was applied.

Table 1 reveals that negative relationship exists between risk-taking behavior, informational identity style (r= -.34, p < 0.01), and normative identity style (r= -.46, p < 0.01) in adolescents. A positive correlation was found between risk-taking behavior and diffuse-avoidant identity style (r= .52, p < 0.01).

The study’s findings showed that among adolescents, there was a positive association between diffuse-avoidant identity style and high-risk behaviors and a negative correlation between informative and normative identity styles and high-risk behaviors. In other words, adolescents with a diffuse-avoidant style were more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors. 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 commitments by exploring alternatives. Such a

Table 1 : Correlation Coefficient between Adolescent risk-taking behavior and Identity styles (N=620)

	Informational Identity Style	Normative Style	Identity	Diffuse-Avoidant Identity style
Risk-Taking Behavior	-.34**	-.46**		.52**

p<0.05 *p<0.01 **

person's attitudes and goals rigidly reflect those of their parents. This style 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 and Kinney, 2019), high self-esteem (Hsieh *et al.*, 2019), self-satisfaction and increased well-being (Berzonsky and Ciecuch, 2016). Normative style has been found to be associated with high degrees of self-esteem, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being (Vrangalova and Savin-Williams, 2011). Also, Zabihi *et al.* (2019) conducted a study on adolescent's identity development and sexual behavior and, reported a relationship between identity styles and risk-taking behavior; particularly, diffuse-avoidant identity style was found to be positively contributing with risky sexual behavior, and moderately contributing with identity normative style.

For risk-taking behavior, diffuse-avoidant identity style emerged as the significant predictor ($\beta = .52$, $p < 0.01$) which positively accounted for 27% of variance in risk-taking behavior among adolescents. A negative contribution of normative identity style ($\beta = -.38$, $p < 0.01$) and informational identity style ($\beta = -.12$, $p < 0.01$) was also observed accounting for 14% and 1% of variance in the adolescent risk-taking behaviors (Table 2).

It is evident from the results of the current study that identity informational style contributes inversely to risk-taking behaviors, while diffuse-avoidant identity style contributes positively to risk-taking behaviors, thereby supporting the hypothesis of the study. Confusion about one's 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 behaviors (Burieva and 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 behaviors 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.

A considerable number of researches have indicated that adolescents with a stable sense of identity tend to be insulated from different risk behaviors like illicit drug use, alcohol use, and unsafe sexual behavior. Contrarily, adolescents who are vulnerable to indulge in delinquent behavior are those who experience more stress in making meaningful commitments and, struggle to achieve their personal goals (Bahmani and Makvandi, 2021). Similarly, Zahracar, Farokhi and Mardani Rad (2021) studied the relationship between risk-taking and identity styles in adolescents and the results of their study showed that risk-taking behaviors 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 behavior 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) studied the association of high-risk behavior and their relationship with the identity styles. The result of this study indicated that the scores of informational and normative identity styles had a negative correlation

Table 2 : Summary of Stepwise Multiple Regression analysis for Adolescent risk-taking behavior and Identity styles (N= 620)

Criterion	Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Standard Error Of Estimate	R Square Change	F	Df	β	T
Risk-taking behavior	DAIS	.52	.27	.26	10.30	.27	226.13	1/618	.52**	15.03
	NIS	.64	.41	.40	9.24	.14	150.17	1/617	-.38**	-12.55
	IIS	.65	.42	.41	9.17	.01	11.06	1/616	-.12**	-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										

$p < 0.05$ * $p < 0.01$ **

Table 3 : Means, Standard Deviation and t-Value for Risk-taking behavior among male and female adolescents

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

p<0.05*p<0.01**

with the scores of high-risk behaviors in adolescents. In other words, there was an inverse relationship between these two identity styles and the occurrence of high-risk behaviors, while the scores of diffuse-avoidant styles were positively correlated with the scores of high-risk behaviors.

To assess the hypothesis that there is significant difference in risk-taking behavior between male and female adolescents, an independent t-test was applied. 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). Findings indicated that male adolescents scored higher than female adolescents on risk-taking behaviors. This implies that there is a difference in adolescent’s risk-taking attitude with respect to gender and that male adolescents are more likely to have higher risk-taking attitude as compared to female adolescents (Table 3).

Consistent with these findings, Hanapi, Daud and Mansor (2019) also reported that male adolescents were more likely to engage in risk-taking attitude as compared to female adolescents. Borghans *et al.* (2009) also found that male adolescents were higher on risk-taking behaviors than female adolescents. A study on attachment and risk-taking showed that there was difference in attachment styles in accordance to risk-taking behavior and females had low scores in risk-taking than males (Satan and Kaplaner, 2022). Compared to females, males were more likely to indulge in sexual activity, use drugs, and take risks.

Implications:

The results of the current study are relevant in understanding the risk-taking behaviors of adolescents in context of their identity styles. The findings suggest that identity development may be an important construct to target in attempts to reduce adolescent negative risk-taking behaviors. The results of the study suggests that there was a negative correlation between informational and normative 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. Dumas, Ellis and Wolfe (2012) have demonstrated that teens’ identity construction can be modified in short-term in-class and after-school intervention programs. These researchers 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). Results demonstrated a significant impact on teens’ academic performance two years after the intervention, which was directly related to the degree to which intervention helped teens to develop future academic and career-based identity commitments and adopt strategies to achieve future identity-related goals. This type of identity-related interventions may be particularly promising for reducing adolescents’ engagement in risk behaviors, particularly in more dominating peer contexts. By helping adolescents to construct personal identities, which act as another strong frame of reference other than peer group norms for guiding actions and behaviors, adolescents 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. This study may contribute to and have practical applications as it provides information that can be used to develop prevention programs for adolescents. In conclusion, the current study throws light on the mechanism between of relationship between adolescent risk- taking behavior and identity and, a strong sense of identity can act as a buffer and potentially reduce negative risk-taking behavior in the adolescents.

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