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SCHOOL OF ADVANCED STUDIES OF ROMANIAN
ACADEMY
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOLOGY
"CONSTANTIN RĂDULESCU-MOTRU"

DOCTORAL THESIS SUMMARY

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS INVOLVED IN RISK BEHAVIORS
IN ROMANIAN STUDENTS

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2024

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INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization reported that in 2019, worldwide, one person in 8 suffered from mental disorders at a clinical level, the most common being anxiety and depression (WHO, 2022). Students are a category exposed to the risk of developing high levels of depression, anxiety and stress (McDougall et al., 2019; Bryan, Baker, & Tou, 2017; Tutino, Shaughnessy, & Ouimet, 2018), but without limiting the risk to them (Rada, 2020).

The study of the relationships between psychological factors and risk behaviours appears very rarely in the specialised literature, focusing more on medical aspects, related to the disease (Guruprasad, Ramakrishnan and Shah, 2015). The present PhD thesis fills this gap

and addresses the personality dimensions involved in problem drinking and risky sexual behaviour.

Long-term monitoring by decision-making institutions such as the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (European Center for Disease Prevention and Control, 2019) showed that the population is still poorly educated and informed. The conclusions of the studies in this thesis can contribute to the development of interventions in which the psychological factors involved in the behaviours are also taken into account.

Irrational alcohol consumption and unprotected sex lead to long-term effects on personal health, and the costs of medical services to treat them are a burden on society. In Romania, the amounts spent on the mental health of the population increased from 67.96 million Euros in 2011 up to 209.43 million Euros in 2019 (Statista, 2023), the increase being considerably accentuated in the last 3 reported years. Finding the causes of possible psychological imbalances that generate potentially risky behaviours and preventing their development are ways to reduce these costs. This doctoral thesis considers precisely these causal factors and personality mediators involved in health risk behaviours.

The paper aimed to go beyond the limits of previous research and considered all the previously mentioned concepts: personality, depression, anxiety, stress, coping strategies, problematic alcohol use and risky sexual behaviour.

Researching the psychological factors involved in risky behaviours in young students, aged between 18 and 31, can provide information on behavioural trends in adolescence, the age they have just passed, and data on which to constitute likely future behaviours. At the same time, based on the conclusions obtained, there is the possibility of mass intervention, through training and counseling activities.

The UNICEF report (2022) on the mental health of Romanian children and adolescents states that before the SarsCov-2 virus pandemic, half of the number of mental disorders were registered before the age of 15, over 70% have been triggered at the beginning of adulthood, and approximately 9% of the population under 18 calls on mental health services annually. The results of the study of *coping strategies in relation to personality traits*, obtained within the studies of this doctoral thesis, can propose adaptive and resilient ways of behaviour, to suggest directions for individual psychotherapeutic approaches, but also for mass educational policies.

Knowing the emotional states, behavioural dimensions of coping, personality traits involved in problematic alcohol consumption and risky sexual behaviour obtained in the studies

carried out in this doctoral thesis, prevention and education programs based on evidence from the field of psychology can be carried out. The identified data will provide indicators related to the way emotions are expressed and how risky behaviours were formed in earlier ages, middle adolescence (13-15 years) and late adolescence (16-18 years).

In the documentation stage prior to the studies included in the current work, more than 742 publications (original studies and literature reviews) were analysed considering depression, anxiety and stress as psychological factors. The COVID-19 pandemic brought changes in the socio-historical and epidemiological context that determined the adaptation of research tools and the addition of knowledge directions, starting from March 2020. Psychological factors were measured and related to risk behaviours regarding alcohol consumption and sexual activity. Risk behaviours were selected for the 18-31 age range and adjacent ranges.

The first stage of the research consisted of the collection of quantitative data, from over 800 students and masters students, based on a set of questionnaires, containing demographic data, economic and family aspects, as well as three sections on (a) relationships, sexual behaviour and sexuality; (b) alcohol consumption; (c) physical activity and standardized psychological assessment tools.

Later, an autobiographical guide titled Life Story was used to deepen the information regarding alcohol consumption, sexual life and physical activity.

PART I (THEORETICAL) CURRENT STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

1. PERSONALITY

Personality is the totality of the person-shaped by multiple forces such as hereditary and constitutional tendencies, physical maturation, early education, culturally conditioned values and roles, significant experiences and relationships, or identification with significant individuals and groups (APA, 2018). *Behavioural theories* view personality as the result of the interaction between the individual and the environment, studying observable and quantifiable behaviours (Bishop et al., 2016). All behaviourist theories tended to explain and determine learning, constituting the basis of today's educational sciences and didactic strategies (Mălăiaș, 2020). *Trait theories of personality* claim that the individual is made up of a defined set of predisposition attributes called traits, which are stable over the long term. Between adolescent and adult personality traits there are differences in both the structure and dynamics of evolution (Soto and Tackett, 2015). Psychological research on the influence of students' personality traits

has been limited, both in Europe (Gkatsa, 2023; Bakker and de Vreese, 2016) and in Romania (Vodă and Florea, 2019). Very rarely have studies addressed relationships between personality traits and other psychological concepts, such as affectivity (Giacolini and Sabatello, 2019).

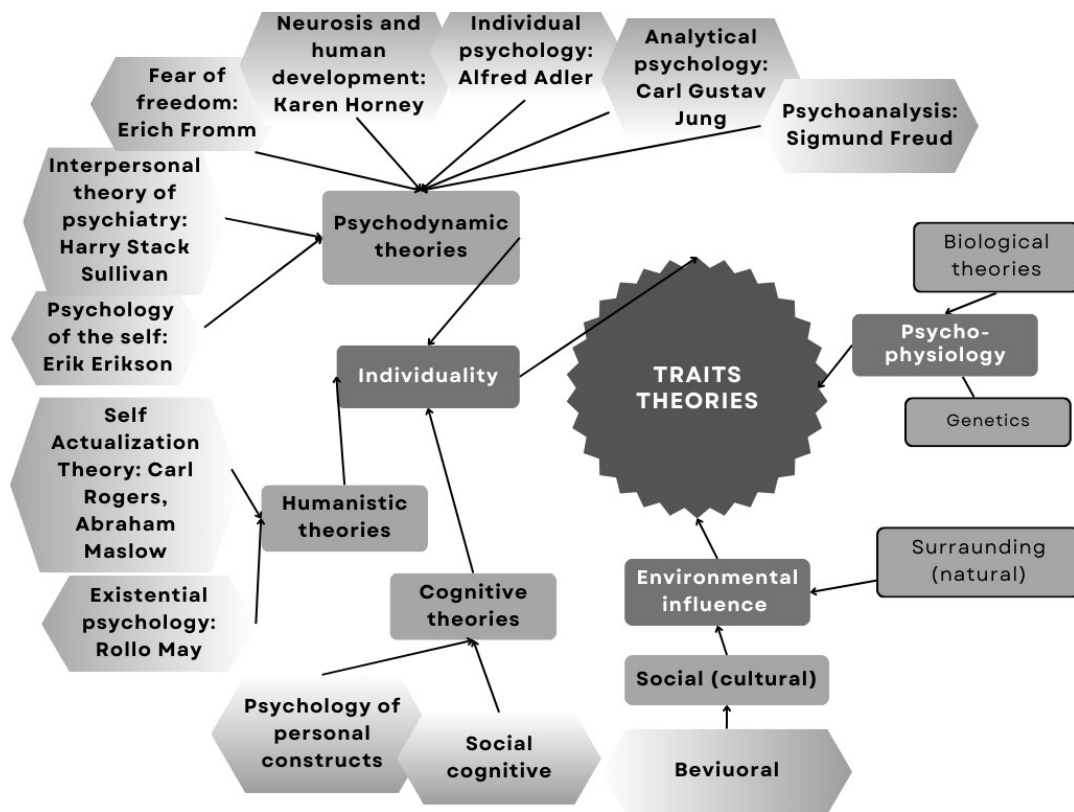


Figure 1. The integrative trend of personality trait theories

Cognitive-Behavioural theory (CBT) was constituted by the association of cognitive structuralism with behaviourist efficiency, resulting in quantifiable therapeutic objectives and measurable results (Popa, Sava and David, 2018). *Positive psychology* focuses its utility towards the development of effective ways to improve well-being, increase resilience and prevent negative pathological states (Szentágotai-Tătar and David, 2017). *Systemic psychology (family psychology)* focuses on understanding individuals in the context of their relationships and social systems in which they find themselves. Systemic interventions are increasingly valued for youth (Balkin et al. 2023).

Self- and other-risk behaviours of youth find both causality and predictability in earlier age stages (Taubman–Ben–Ari & Skvirsky, 2019; Samadypoor & Kord Tamini, 2016). They

are influenced both by individual personality traits and by the contexts, the systems in which children and adolescents develop (Gullone and Moore, 2000).

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

The mental well-being of people is a condition for the normal development of life as important as physical health. Students are a social category exposed to stress, anxiety and depression (McDougall et al., 2019), and this can generate aggressive behaviours (Davis et al., 2012). There is a scientific concern for the relationships between risk behaviours and personality traits or psychological factors (Ngo et al., 2018), but less for the relationships between risk behaviours and psychological components.

In this thesis, anxiety, depression and stress, defined according to DSM V (American Psychiatric Association, 2016, p. 155-189; p. 265) were analysed in relation to risk behaviours for the health of young people, namely: problematic alcohol consumption and behaviour sexually at risk. The figure below schematically shows the relationships of risk behaviours with anxiety, depression and stress.

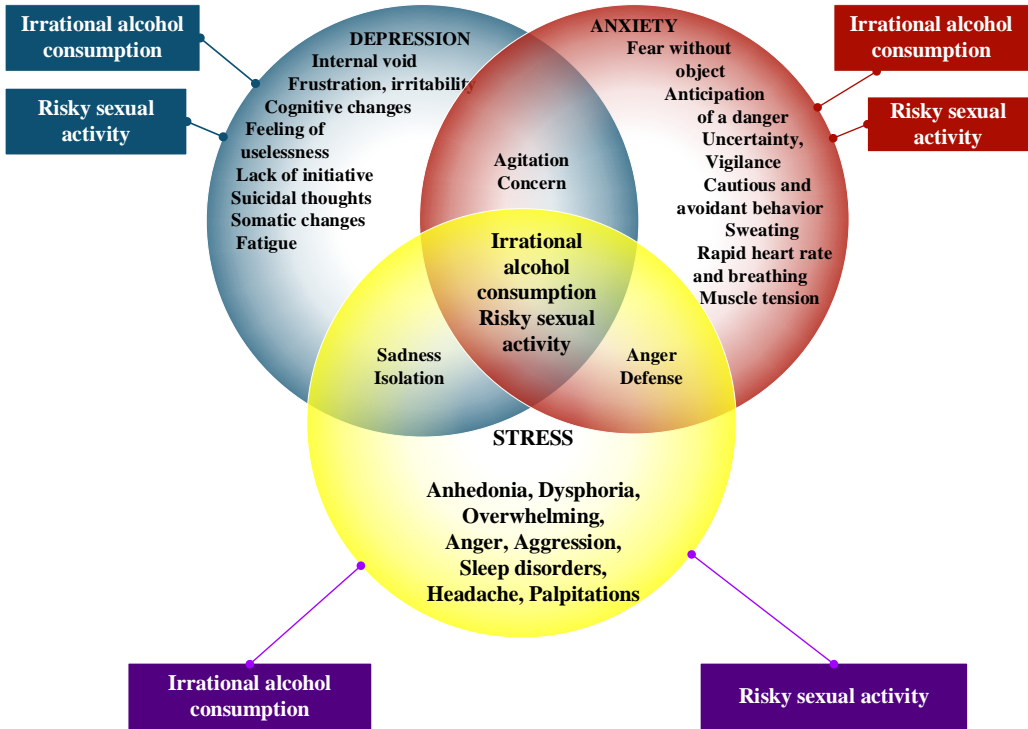


Figure 2. Relationships between psychological factors and risk behaviors

Problematic alcohol consumption is one of the factors with a very high negative influence on the social group and the community (Looby et al., 2019). There is a linear relationship between daily alcohol consumption and increased risk of engaging in harmful sexual behaviours. The 2019 report of the World Health Organization stated that Romania does not have a written national policy on alcohol consumption (WHO, 2019) and no monitoring system regarding this behaviour, although it was in 7th place among European countries and 9th in the world with 12.6 litres of annual alcohol consumption per capita (WHO, 2018). Regarding risky sexual behavior, the research is less and their strategies differ widely. The prevalence and transmission of HIV/AIDS and syphilis continue to be of concern to the authorities.

3. COPING MECHANISMS

Coping strategies, are conscious responses to experienced negative events (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), give strength to people in interaction with stress, giving them a sense of control. Effective cognitive coping techniques can reduce both the intensity and duration of reactions to difficult situations, mitigating the impact of stressors on mental and even physical health (Pătru et al., 2022). Cognitive coping involves identifying and evaluating solutions to problems, improving problem-solving skills by generating alternative perspectives and adopting a constructive mental attitude. The emotional regulation produced by cognitive coping facilitates the modulation of emotional responses to stressors (Extremiera et al., 2019). Engaging in cognitive coping strategies promotes resilience, the ability to recover from adversity. Resilient individuals demonstrate better coping strategies and better outcomes in the face of academic stress (Chugh and Srivastava, 2024).

In current research, the distinction is made between emotional and behavioural strategies, and where research results have been significant other distinctions are used. *Cognitive-emotional coping* refers only to the thoughts that a person develops after experiencing a negative situation (Garnefski, Kraaij, & Spinhoven, 2010). Cognitive-emotional coping strategies have the role of regulating emotional responses to disturbing events, through reasoning. Centred on the problematic situation, *behavioural coping strategies* are considered forms of manifest resolution of situations that cause suffering. The study of students' strategic coping mechanisms has been a topic of interest in educational psychology and related fields

over the past decade. Research results indicate that problem-focused strategies are effective in reducing stress as well as improving academic performance (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 2007).

The studies in the present paper focus on the relationship between students' coping methods and their personality traits. The COVID-19 pandemic has created unique stressors and challenges for students (Rus et al., 2022). With the shift to distance learning, they had to adapt their coping strategies to manage the challenges of online education (Weygandt et al., 2021).

PART II – (PRACTICAL) INVESTIGATIVE STUDIES ON COPING STRATEGIES,
DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, STRESS, PERSONALITY TRAITS INVOLVED IN PROBLEM
ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION AND RISK SEXUAL BEHAVIOR AFTER THE OUTBREAK
OF THE SARSCOV-2 VIRUS PANDEMIC IN STUDENTS

METHODOLOGY

General goal: identification of psychological factors involved in risky behaviours among Romanian students. Specifically, anxiety, depression, stress, personality traits, and coping mechanisms were explored in correlation with problematic alcohol use and risky sexual behaviour. The sample was made up of over 800 students and master's students aged between 18 and 31, from Romanian universities, of which 75.5% were female. The data were collected between June 2020 and November 2021, during the restrictions imposed by the SARS-Cov-2 virus pandemic.

Ethical standards

Respondents gave their written consent to participate. The research was conducted following the Helsinki Declaration on respect for human rights. The study complied with national and European standards for participant information and data processing at each stage of the research. On 03.12.2019, approval was obtained from the Ethics Commission of the "Constantin Rădulescu-Motru" Institute of Philosophy and Psychology, within the Romanian Academy (certificate no. 136/11.11.2020).

Statistical methods

After verifying the validity of the answers, the data were manually entered into the statistical analysis software SPSS 27. Descriptive data were generated about the sample included in the study and the way the participants answered, then comparative analyses were run for the answer categories of each variable.

Data were analysed for normality by bivariate Pearson correlation analyses, for parametric data and Spearman correlations where appropriate. Analyses of the significance of variance between response categories were performed (ANOVA, Levene's Test, and t-Test). Association between variables was tested by linear logistic regression models and multivariate multilinear regressions, including the extensive MATRIX procedure for SPSS version 3.3 (Hayes, 2022).

To process the information from the Life Story, the first stage of analysis was the descriptive one using the statistical software SPSS 20/22 and the Excel software from the Microsoft Office package. In the second stage, all valid answers were entered into the trial version of the NVivo content analysis software (March 2020 version).

1. Study 1: COPING STRATEGIES, DEPRESSION, ANXIETY AND STRESS IN STUDENTS FROM ROMANIA, AFTER THE OUTBREAK OF THE SARSCOV-2 VIRUS PANDEMIC

Research hypotheses

- I1. During the period of restrictions, the choice of maladaptive and passive coping strategies prevails;
- I2. there are statistically significant relationships between the values of psychological factors: stress, anxiety and depression on the one hand and preferred coping methods on the other;
- I3. there are statistically significant relationships between the types of emotional coping and behavioural coping adopted.

Assessment tools.

Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scales (Lovibond, & Lovibond, 1995), DASS – 21R, Cognitive-Emotional Coping Assessment Questionnaire (CERQ), Strategic Approaches to Coping Scale (SACS), and variables from the omnibus questionnaire sections.

Data were collected between May 10 and July 11, 2020, the first wave of the pandemic, and included 210 respondents aged 19 to 25. ANOVA, Levene's test, t-test and Pearson's test were used. The results showed the normality of the score distribution. In the mediation analysis process, the MATRIX procedure for SPSS version 3.3 was run (Hayes, 2022).

Results

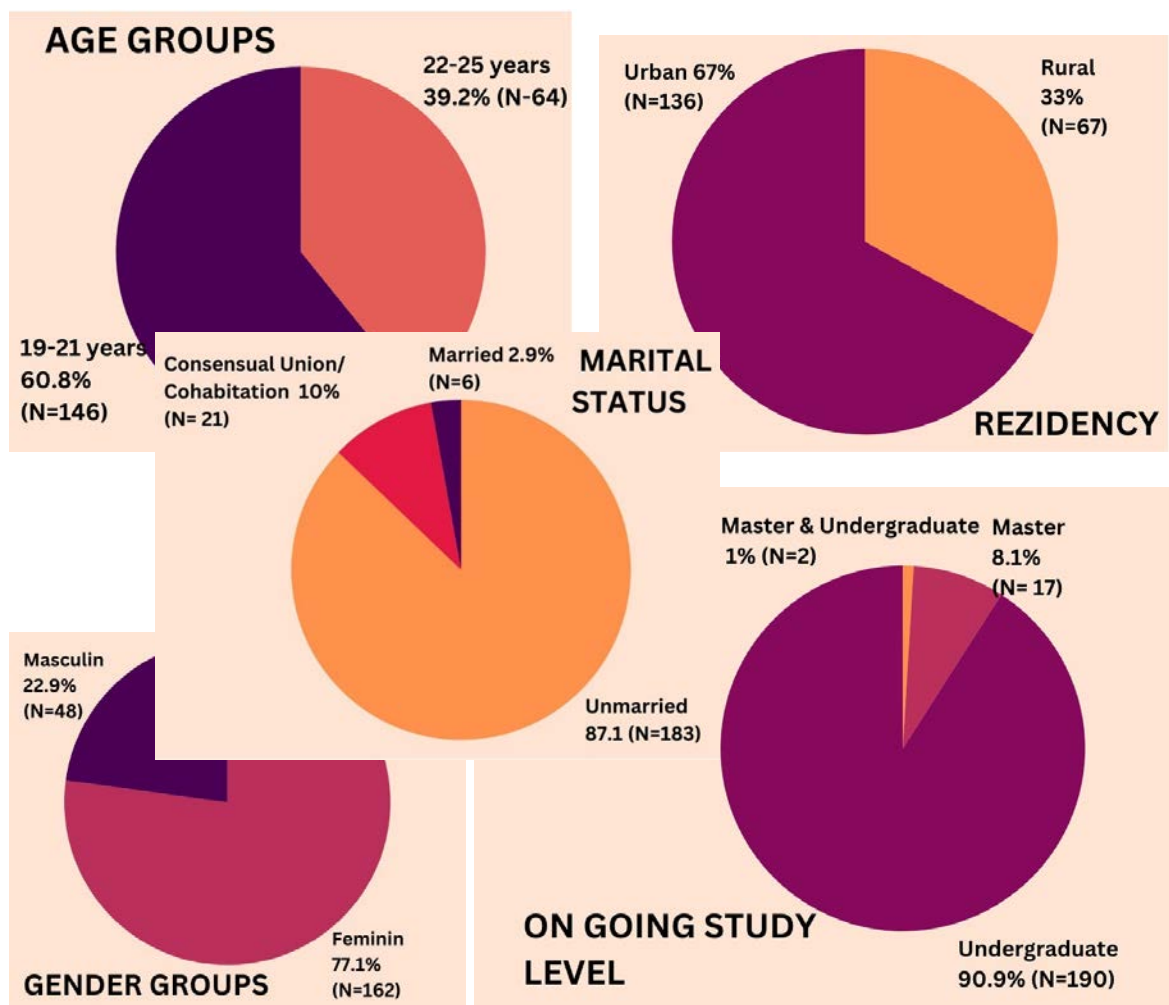


Figure 3. Distribution of participants by age, gender, marital status, residence and level of education

Social support was sought by most respondents. The maladaptive cognitive-emotional coping strategies *Self-blame*, *Catastrophizing*, and *Other-blame* correlated positively with *Avoidance*. Stress, anxiety and depression, in the initial stage of the pandemic, correlated positively with all maladaptive cognitive-emotional coping subscales, thus highlighting the increase in stress level according to the increase in the activation of maladaptive reasoning. *Avoidance*, and strategic-behavioral coping, correlated significantly positively with depression, anxiety and stress. *Antisocial action* was significantly positively correlated with anxiety and stress, revealing a reciprocal influence.

Table 1. *Bivariate Correlations of Depression, Stress, and Anxiety with Preferred Behavioral Coping Modalities (SACS)*

		DASS Depression	DASS Stress	DASS Anxiety
Self Blame	Pearson Correlation	.25**	.26**	.28**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
Acceptance	Pearson Correlation	.07	-.00	.06
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.296	.943	.377
Rumination	Pearson Correlation	.23**	.19**	.24**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.005	.000
Positive refocus	Pearson Correlation	-.16*	-.19**	-.18**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.020	.004	.009
Planning refocus	Pearson Correlation	-.04	-.07	.00
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.516	.287	.974
Positive reevaluation	Pearson Correlation	-.07	-.11	-.08
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.280	.107	.238
Putting it into perspective	Pearson Correlation	-.03	-.07	-.03
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.638	.257	.633
Catastrophizing	Pearson Correlation	.28**	.26**	.27**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
Blaming others	Pearson Correlation	.14*	.14*	.14*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.033	.032	.040

Discussions

The research objectives were achieved.

Depending on the age of the participants, there were few differences between the 19-21 year old category and the 22-25 year old category, the scores recorded for the types of coping being similar between the two age groups. For *social relations* and *seeking social support*, younger respondents recorded lower minimum scores. These results show the tendency towards autonomy and independence of young people upon entering university studies and the possible development of collaboration, cooperation and socialization skills at the next age stage.

According to the gender variable, male subjects activated more types of coping, often from the field of active coping, and female respondents activated fewer coping strategies, often passive.

Relationships between preferred coping methods and values of psychological factors: stress, anxiety and depression. The results of the current study confirm those of the instrument

validation study conducted by Garnefski, Kraaij, and Spinhoven (2010). *Assertive action*, by mediating depression, is a significant negative predictor of *Catastrophe*. *Assertive action*, through stress, is also a significant negative predictor of *Rumination* (Figure 4).

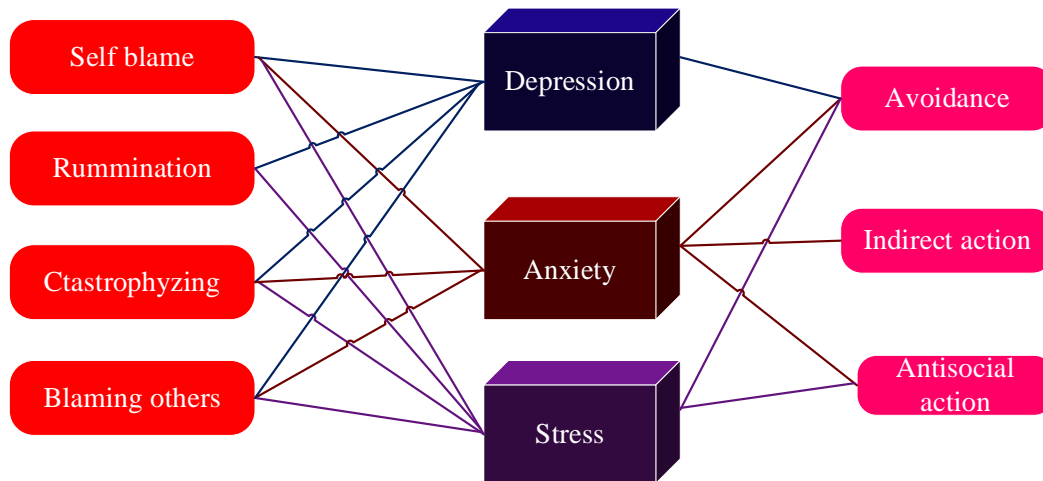


Figure 4. Positive (direct) correlations between psychological factors anxiety, depression, stress and preferred coping strategies

Relationships between behavioural coping strategies and types of cognitive-emotional coping. Both the Cognitive-Emotional Coping Questionnaire (CERQ) and the Strategic Coping Approach Scale (SACS) generated Cronbach coefficients with good and very good internal consistency, similar to the results obtained by Budău, Albu (2010) and Perțe (2010) when validating the instruments on the Romanian population.

Scores for the *Self-Blame* and *Other-Blame* scales were moderately positively skewed ($ES = 0.343$ in males and $ES = 0.191$ in females). At the time of data collection, the participants had a fairly low tendency to blame themselves or others, probably influenced by the international situation of uncertainty and the possible association of the COVID-19 pandemic with a phenomenon over which man has no control.

The sample was relatively homogeneous, with a higher degree of homogeneity for the male group (CV between 7.14 and 15.42) but less for female respondents (CV between 9.23 and 16.06). Increasing the number of participants could reduce the variation in the data, thus increasing the predictability of the information on the student or youth population.

Students used cognitive coping strategies such as *Planning Refocusing* more often, but less *Positive Refocusing*. *Catastrophizing* was one of the least chosen coping methods.

The highest mean scores were recorded on the emotional coping subscales of Positive reappraisal and Refocusing on planning, both subscales being classified as forms of adaptive coping (CERQ). Within the strategic approach to coping scale (SACS), the highest scores were recorded for *assertive action*, the representative subscale for active behavioural coping. Higher scores were recorded for all pro-social behavioural subscales. The result is similar to other studies (Logel et al., 2021).

Conclusions

All working hypotheses have been confirmed.

Looking at the *students' choice of coping strategies, during the restrictions period*, it was identified that the students in the studied sample from Romania chose effective coping methods during the onset of the pandemic to keep the levels of stress, anxiety and depression at elevated levels only slightly, even if under ordinary conditions they could be considered maladaptive and passive.

The *existence of statistically significant relationships between the values of the psychological factors stress, anxiety and depression on the one hand and the preferred coping methods on the other* was also confirmed, the stress perceived by the students in the analysed sample, in the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic correlating positively with all maladaptive cognitive-emotional coping subscales, as well as anxiety and depression. Avoidance and antisocial action correlated significantly positively with depression, anxiety and stress.

The *existence of statistically significant relationships between the types of emotional coping and those of behavioural coping* adopted was confirmed, except for rumination, all cognitive-emotional coping strategies considered maladaptive (*Self-blame, Catastrophizing and Blaming others*) correlated positively with *Avoidance*. Regardless of the types of cognitive-emotional coping adopted, students sought *Social Support* as a strategic coping approach.

It is recommended to develop programs to reduce symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress in students, deeper and long-term effects could be generated by the introduction into the personal development curriculum, starting at younger ages (puberty, adolescence). Skills training programs should encompass the development of healthy behavioural self-activation strategies and aim for their automaticity over time through practice.

Personal contributions

Two coping measurement scales were used, and through rigorous and deep statistical analyses, the influence of each coping mechanism on the levels of depression, anxiety and stress was highlighted. The reciprocal influences between cognitive-emotional, strategic-behavioral coping mechanisms and the level of depression, anxiety and stress were clearly specified. It should be noted how the pandemic context changed some mechanisms considered maladaptive into adaptive ones. Thus, the search for social support as well as avoidance were natural adaptation mechanisms in the circumstances of the beginning of the state of emergency caused by the epidemiological situation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Study 2: EMOTIONS, COPING AND PERSONALITY TRAITS INVOLVED IN ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

The research hypothesis

assumed that emotional states, behavioural dimensions of coping, personality traits, age and gender can be significant predictors of alcohol consumption.

Assessment tools.

Short version of the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scales (Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995), DASS– 21R, Strategic Coping Approach Scale (SCAS, Budău and Albu, 2010), Freiburg Personality Inventory (FPI-R) (Fahrenberg, Hampel and Selg, 2015), the AUDIT test (Babor et al., 2001). The individual scores of each item were aggregated into a global quantitative indicator.

The relationship between the hypothesized determinants was described by linear regression models. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 26 (IBM, 2020) and STATA 17 (SataCorp, 2021). In the first regression model, emotional states and coping were analyzed in relation to alcohol consumption. In the second regression model, personality traits were analyzed in relation to alcohol consumption. In each of the two models, age and gender were additionally entered as independent variables. Spearman and Mann-Whitney U tests were also used.

The sample included 677 students aged between 18 and 31 years, the data being collected between June 2020 and November 2021.

Results

The highest proportion of severe and extremely severe scores were observed for anxiety (32.8%) and depression (24.6%).

After removing missing data, the first regression model included 673 observations and indicated 5 predictors explaining approximately 15% of the variance in alcohol consumption ($R^2 = 0.147$, $F(5,667) = 22.93$, $p < .01$). Age and *Prudent Action* (SCAS) had a decreasing effect on the alcohol consumption score. Anxiety, Antisocial Action, and gender had an effect of increasing the alcohol consumption score.

After removing missing data, the second model included 667 observations and indicated that gender and 6 personality traits were found to have a significant relationship with alcohol consumption ($R^2 = 0.190$, $F(7,659) = 22.10$, $p < .01$). Among these personality traits, *Health Concerns*, *Life Satisfaction*, *Social Orientation*, and *Inhibitedness* had a decreasing effect on the alcohol consumption score, while *Aggressiveness* and *Somatic Complaints* exerted an opposite effect. In both models, male subjects reported higher alcohol consumption than female subjects. All VIF values were below the reference value of 10, indicating the absence of autocorrelations. Robust regression indicated that age was not a significant variable in the first model and that the personality traits health problems and social orientation were not significant variables in the second model.

As a result of forced isolation during successive waves of the pandemic, more than half of the students participating in the current study were affected by moderate to extremely severe depression or anxiety. The prevalence of problematic alcohol consumption in the sample of Romanian students was low: Dangerous and Extremely Dangerous (2.3) and Medium Risk (10.2). The present study found that an early onset of alcohol consumption increased the risk of problem drinking during the pandemic.

The *Cautious Action* coping mechanism and high scores on the *Life Satisfaction* scale had the effect of decreasing the alcohol consumption score. The results of the study revealed that the score for alcohol consumption decreased in the context of the pandemic. This cautious strategy kept young people away from problem drinking. The robust linear regression model indicated that Anxiety, *Antisocial Action*, *Aggressiveness*, and *Somatic Complaints* caused an increase in alcohol consumption scores.

Discussions

It is possible that students majoring in psychology, medicine, social work, and biology, of which this sample was primarily composed, possess better coping skills and stress reduction techniques compared to those majoring in other fields. Similar findings regarding alcohol use were found in psychosocial medical students during the pandemic (Adler, 2022) as well as pre-pandemic (Ontaneda Aguilar et al., 2022).

In the context of the pandemic, Avoidance was a useful rather than a maladaptive mechanism, withdrawal and engagement in alternative activities had a protective influence.

Subjects who had high *Life Satisfaction* scores had a lower risk of problem drinking, which is consistent with the findings of Dymecka et al. (2021). Health-related resilience, sense of coherence, and life satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic were important resources for coping with difficult circumstances, he points out thus showing the relationship between the sense of coherence and life satisfaction. According to the authors of the FPI-R Personality Inventory, the *Life Satisfaction* and *Achievement Orientation* scales correlate, suggesting that ambitious, conscientious, and success-oriented individuals have a lower risk of engaging in excessive alcohol consumption. The present study shows that young people with high life satisfaction who approached the pandemic in a relaxed manner were not exposed to excessive alcohol consumption.

Health concerns and support provided through virtual social networks led to the development of feelings of mutual help, but isolation, restrictions or uncertainty generated increased violence at individual and collective levels (West et al., 2023).

High scores on the *Aggressiveness* scale were associated with high scores on alcohol consumption. People who get angry easily, are choleric, labile, have low self-control or show dominant reactive behaviours with a tendency to assert themselves, present a higher risk of problematic alcohol consumption. Education for self-control and balanced behaviours is required. All the more so as most acts of aggression manifest themselves against the backdrop of alcohol consumption. Probably this world experience brings into question a reconfiguration of social psychology, namely the Social Psychology of Aggression (Krahé, 2020). High scores on *Somatic Complaints* were associated with high scores on alcohol consumption. The stress experienced during the pandemic was manifested by an increase in affective and somatic complaints (Chernetsova et al., 2022).

The results regarding increased levels of alcohol consumption in those scoring high on *Aggressiveness* and *Somatic Complaints* are consistent with those found by Di Stefano et al. (2022), namely that during the pandemic, the mental health of people with dysfunctional tendencies at the level of personality traits was affected to a greater extent than that of those with balanced, positive personality traits. Emotionally stable students who do not exercise control over their emotions showed a lower risk of problem drinking during the pandemic. Those who reported anxiety were at risk for problematic alcohol use. Using the coping mechanism *Antisocial action*, also increased the risk of alcohol consumption.

Conclusions

The hypothesis that *emotional states, behavioural dimensions of coping, personality traits, age and gender can be significant predictors of problematic alcohol consumption* was confirmed. Early onset of drinking was associated with increased subsequent risk of problematic alcohol use. Male respondents reported higher alcohol consumption compared to females.

Psychological states of stress, depression and anxiety (especially), *Antisocial Action* and high scores on the *Aggressiveness* and *Somatic Complaints* personality dimensions were found as risk factors for alcohol consumption. *Assertive Action*, *Cautious Action*, and high *Life Satisfaction* (FPI-R) scores acted as protective factors.

The results suggest interventions for early education to develop self-control and behavioural balance, with methods to acquire and adopt healthy stress control mechanisms by avoiding alcohol consumption. The study advocates educating young people towards *Assertive Action* and *Prudent Action* and promoting positive, achievement-oriented life attitudes. The educational approach must emphasize the formation and development of personality dimensions that are protective factors such as life satisfaction, achievement orientation, social orientation and the formation of skills to keep excitability and emotionality under control.

Personal contributions

Until the issue of this thesis, no study has been identified that uses such a complex personality assessment tool as the Freiburger questionnaire, which measures 12 personality dimensions, in relation to problematic alcohol consumption. The study brings to the surface the concept of honesty, hypercriticism and perfectionism on the part of parents generates in children the feeling of not being good enough regardless of their actions, which can develop anxiety towards failure and consequently the risk of alcohol consumption for relaxation.

3. Study 3: CORRELATIONS BETWEEN PERSONALITY FACTORS AND RISK SEXUAL BEHAVIORS

The objectives of the research were:

1. exploring the relationships between risky sexual behaviours and socio-demographic characteristics in a sample of Romanian students;
2. identifying the relationships between risky sexual behaviour and personality factors in Romanian students.

Assessment instruments were the Freiburg Personality Inventory (FPI-R) (Fahrenberg, Hampel, & Selg, 2001) and specific items from the omnibus questionnaire. The items about sexual activity included: age of first sexual contact, protection at first sexual contact, number of sexual partners until completion, infection with sexually transmitted diseases, how long they knew the partner with whom they had first sexual contact, sexual relations with multiple partners, anal and oral sex, unknown partners, risky locations. Based on the response to these items (N = 10 items), a composite score was calculated for each participant and was used as an indicator of sexual risk behaviour (SRB). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient obtained was .771, which indicated that the items are homogeneous, the correlations between them and the entire scale being between .35 and .68.

The sample was made up of 677 students and master's students attending Romanian universities in the 2019-2020, 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 academic years, aged between 18 and 31. The data was collected between June 2020 and November 2021, during the period of restrictions to limit and prevent the spread of COVID-19, when most university courses were conducted online.

The preliminary analysis of the data allowed the identification of descriptive indicators for the variables included in the analysis. Differences in means of risky sexual behaviors between different categories of respondents were tested using the t-Test and One-Way Anova. Spearman correlations in association with personality factors and multivariate linear regressions were run.

Results.

Risky sexual behaviour was obtained through five indicators measured by 10 items related to sexual activity, measured on a 3-point Likert scale, generating a new numeric composite variable, whose values were calculated as the average of the responses (min = 0 , max = 2, m = 0.33, SD = 0.23). The minimum score was obtained by 52 respondents who were

sexually active but who reported never engaging in any of the risky sexual behaviours included in the analysis. Boys scored statistically significantly higher number of sexual partners and risky sexual behaviour – total score (CSR).

Table 2. *Descriptive indicators of risky sexual behavior for girls and boys*

	Feminin (N = 395)		Masculin (N = 124)		Mean difference (t)	d Cohen
	M	SD	M	SD		
Age at first intercourse	17.79	1.63	17.07	2.10	-3.93***	0.38
Months number since knowing the first sexual partner	28.44	35.63	20.65	29.08	- 2.14*	0.23
Sexual partners number	2.56	2.44	4.61	5.30	5.73***	0.49
Risky Sexual Behaviour (total score)	.31	.21	.42	.26	5.19***	0.46

Note: * $p < 0,05$, *** $p < 0.001$, $N = 519$

The matrix of correlations and associations between personality factors (Freiburg) and risky sexual behaviour is in Table 3.

Table 3. *Intercorrelations matrix of the risk quotient items in sexual activity and the personality dimensions contained in the Freiburg Inventory*

	First intercourse age	First intercourse protection	Since knowing the partner	Partners number	Risky sex Total
Life satisfaction	-.011	-.037	.094*	.002	-.113**
Social Orientation	.054	.099*	.125**	-.067	-.068
Achievement orientation	.043	-.028	.003	.082	.049
Inhibitedness	.096*	.078	-.033	-.157**	-.074
Excitability	-.009	-.059	.008	-.058	.098*
Aggressiveness	-.086	-.103*	-.002	.079	.192**
Strain	.075	.042	.002	-.126**	.051
Somatic complaints	-.030	-.039	.057	-.059	.130**
Health concerns	.140**	.135**	.099*	-.088	-.157**
Frankness	-.099*	-.101*	.036	.042	.193**
Extraversion	-.081	-.004	.044	.113*	.125**
Emotionality	.016	.020	-.002	-.111*	.066

Note: * $p < 0,05$, *** $p < 0,001$

The data showed that 377 (64.9%) of the participants protected themselves at first sexual contact, most of them girls. The condom was the most chosen method of protection, reported more by girls, 208 (81.02%) girls and 60 (71.42%) boys at first sexual contact. The method of protection was unspecified by 26.2% of boys and 15.41% of girls.

Analysed independently, simple linear regressions showed that Life Satisfaction was a weak but significant negative predictor ($R^2 = .013$, $F(514) = 6.995$, $p \leq .01$, $\beta = -0.012$, $p \leq .01$); Excitability was a weak but significant positive predictor ($R^2 = .008$, $F(514) = 4.418$, $p \leq .05$, $\beta = -0.089$, $p \leq .05$); The somatic accusations scale was a positive predictor ($R^2 = .013$, $F(514) = 6.666$, $p \leq .01$, $\beta = -0.113$, $p \leq .01$), Extraversion was a positive predictor ($R^2 = .011$, $F(514) = 5.519$, $p \leq .05$, $\beta = -0.103$, $p \leq .05$).

Discussions

Contrary to the results of the study carried out by Rada (2014), the average age of first sexual contact in the studied sample was slightly older, similar to the average age of students from other cultures, for example, European ones (Baldus et al., 2023).

Aggression was a significant predictor of risky sexual behaviour. The composite score of risky sexual behaviours also correlated positively with high values of Aggressiveness, Excitability, Extraversion, Sincerity and Somatic Accusations. Concern for health problems was a protective factor against engaging in risky sexual behaviours. Respondents with high Aggressiveness are more likely not to have protected themselves at first sexual contact. The explanation may be their impulsivity and high reaction speed, the reduced capacity for behavioural self-control, especially in situations of sexual excitability. Participants with high Extraversion scores reported a greater number of sexual partners, also confirmed by previous research (Fernandez del Rio et al., 2019). Low Emotionality participants reported a greater number of sexual partners similar to results found by Caspi et al. (1997). The association between older age at first intercourse and high Inhibition scores, high Health Concerns and low Sincerity scores shows a tendency towards socially desirable responses, as Rada and Lungu (2023) also found.

Conclusions

Both research objectives of study 3 were achieved as follows.

Exploring the relationships between risky sexual behaviours and socio-demographic characteristics on a sample of Romanian students showed that the age at first sexual contact and the average duration of the relationship before first sexual contact increased slightly compared

to 2011-2012. The average number of sexual partners was higher than the international average, especially for girls. There was an increased rate of protection at first contact compared to the previous Romanian population and other contemporary communities. There is an increase in the level of sexual education and the autonomy of sexual behaviour. The weight was higher in boys regarding age of onset of sexual life, involvement in sexual acts with unknown partners, number of sexual partners and involvement in risky sexual acts.

Identifying the relationships between risky sexual behaviour and personality factors in Romanian students. Higher proportions of risk behaviours were recorded in participants with high scores on the scales: *Excitability*, *Aggressiveness*, *Extraversion* and *Somatic complaints*. Regarding *Somatic complaints*, the decrease in liability for somatic symptomatology and the increase in the ability to cope with daily demands could support the development of psychologically stronger young people, with a greater ability to manage risky situations and behaviours.

Aggressiveness was highlighted as a significant predictor, any intervention in this direction should consider learning and practising impulse control techniques in interpersonal relationships, especially for males. It is necessary to differentiate sex education according to gender and individual characteristics, sex education or personal development programs should include objectives on increasing self-control of emotions, empathy, awareness of one's own needs and the needs of others, rationalization and weighting of interpersonal conflict resolution through peaceful means.

Personal contribution to study three consists of exploring a sensitive topic such as sexual behaviour in a fairly large sample size, constructing a composite risk score for analysis, and using a multidimensional personality inventory.

4. Study 4: COMPARATIVE ROMANIAN-BULGARIAN QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE EDUCATION AND SEXUAL ACTIVITY OF STUDENTS BEFORE AND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The purpose of the research

Establishing relationships between characteristics of the onset of sex life, changes in sexual behaviour caused by restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic (maximum limitation of personal contact between people living in different housing, social distancing, restriction or ban on access to public places) and reactions to students' emotions.

Research methods

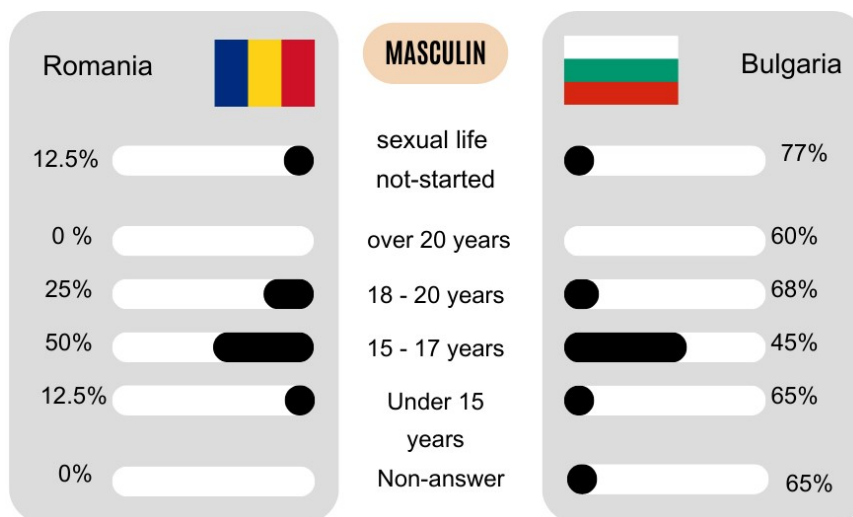
The study was carried out through the successive analysis of the contents of the responses to the self-applied qualitative tool Story of Life, but also by associating them with demographic data from the omnibus questionnaire. The current study was developed as a comparative exploration of the sex lives of Romanian and Bulgarian students before and after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The content of the life stories received from the students was analysed through the research questions: What is the average age regarding the beginning of one's sexual life? What emotions do you associate with the onset of sex life and with sexual activity in general? How was the sex education of the participants delivered and by whom? How have sexual behaviours changed in relation to the restrictions imposed by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and what were their emotional effects?

The statistical software SPSS 20/22 and Excel software from the Microsoft Office package, and the trial version of the content analysis software NVivo (version March 2020) were used, followed by the coding of the answers into keywords and later into themes, describing more general response categories.

The sample included 50 students from Romania and 52 from Bulgaria, aged between 19 and 24, who responded between October and December 2020.

Results



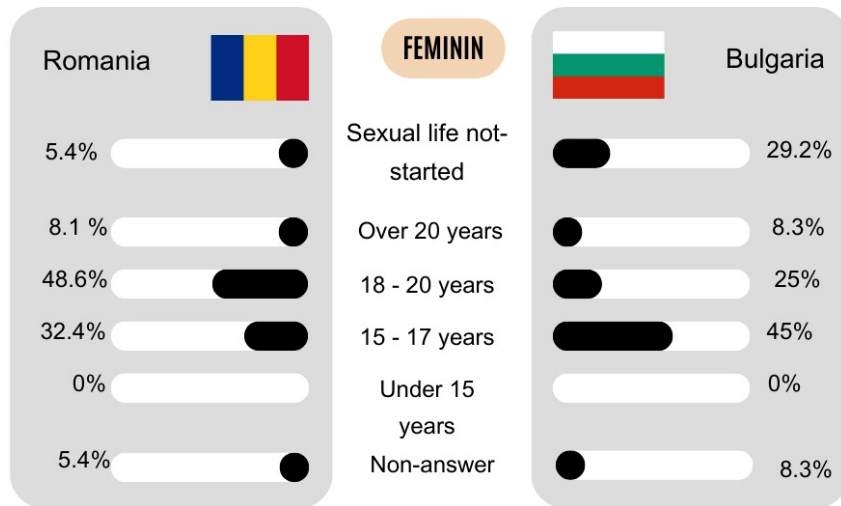


Figure 5. Participants distribution by age of onset of sexual life

At the time of data collection, the participants in the present study were enrolled in bachelor's (BA) or master's (MA) studies at several universities in Romania and Bulgaria. Figure 5 descriptively shows the sample, with the distribution of respondents according to the age of onset of sexual life.

Out of the total number of respondents, 11.7% declared that they had not yet started their sexual life, and 12.8% did not answer. The average age at the beginning of sexual life was over 18 years, with a majority of 39% between 15-17 years. Girls tended to answer questions about first intercourse using mostly terms representing emotional factors, and boys more often used measurable terms. Girls seem to be more emotionally attached to sexual partners, especially the first, compared to boys. Girls tended to be more emotionally involved in the relationship than in the sexual act.

Conclusions

The pandemic period only accentuated the previous sexual behavior traits, but there were no major changes reported by the participants.

Sex education needs were identified in both the Romanian and Bulgarian study groups. For an adequate curriculum, multidisciplinary teams of experts should work together, including at least: pedagogues, psychologists and doctors, taking into account the cultural, and educational specifics, the features of the national educational system, but also those of small communities. An integrated sex education is needed, carried out by experts in the field, not just by parents.

Personal contributions

A new and important result is brought about by the emotional perspective offered by this study on sexual behaviour. This aspect could be identified by making this tool called the Life Story, which allowed the subjects to describe the risk behaviours throughout the life stages from a cognitive, behavioural and emotional perspective. In addition, the study explored the sexual behaviour of a group of students, master's students from Bulgaria.

LIMITS

The limitations of the studies are summarized in the following.

The main limitation of the studies is that the measurement was done by self-report, the responses being sensitive to the effect of social desirability. The longitudinal research approach would produce superior results regarding the relationship between personality elements and youth risk behaviours, overcoming the limited value of a cross-sectional investigation.

The gender imbalance is another limitation of the present research, however, the volume of 677 subjects, aged between 18-31 years and the assessment with three laborious psychological instruments standardized on the Romanian population, from studies on problematic alcohol consumption and sexual behaviour risky, they can provide a solid general framework for public health policies.

By extending the study to other social groups of the same age, young people who do not pursue higher education, by including different nationalities and cultures in a similar study, valuable conclusions could be obtained to a wider extent.

Updating personality assessment scales could lead to a better understanding of the sensitivity of some personality dimensions in special longer-term contexts such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the data were collected in the immediate post-quarantine phase due to the COVID-19 pandemic, comparing the results with those of a sample that responded to the questionnaire after social interaction restrictions were lifted could lead to valuable additional information.

Because the sample consisted mostly of students enrolled in health promotion fields, and because messages from medical representatives emphasized the negative effects of alcohol on the immune system during the COVID-19 pandemic quarantine, it is likely that they had a better understanding of the danger of excessive alcohol consumption. alcohol. However, it

cannot be concluded that this precautionary response to stress was conscious and deliberate or was an automatic one.

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