

# INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS AS CORRELATES AND PREDICTORS OF ADOLESCENT GAMBLING

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Adolescents are at risk groups to develop problematic gambling, which over time and intensification can develop into pathological gambling with numerous and harmful psychosocial consequences. Today, significant emphasis is placed on individual characteristics and personality traits as factors that influence and contribute to the development or maintenance of gambling.

**Objective:** To gain insight into the relationship between individual characteristics (personality traits) and adolescent gambling. **Subjects and methods:** A total of 402 participants (197 males and 204 females), the average age of 17 ( $M= 17.41$ ,  $SD= 0.59$ ), participated in the research. Data were collected by filling out questionnaires, in the schools that participants attend in Mostar, in which the Gambling Activities Questionnaire, Canadian Adolescent Gambling Questionnaire, Excitement Seeking Scale, Emotional Competence Questionnaire (UEK-15), Emotional Empathy Questionnaire and IPIP-50 were applied.

**Results:** Significant differences in the intensity of gambling and harmful psychosocial consequences were determined with regard to gender. On average, male adolescents gamble more intensively and report more harmful psychosocial consequences of gambling compared to female adolescents. A significant correlation between emotional competence, empathy, conscientiousness, agreeableness, sensation seeking and the intensity of gambling of male adolescents and a significant correlation between sensation seeking and the intensity of gambling of female adolescents was determined. Male adolescents, who are more prone to seeking sensations, have a lower level of empathy, conscientiousness, agreeableness and emotional competence, on average gamble more and more intensively, as do female adolescents with a more pronounced sensation seeking. Significant predictors of male adolescents' gambling are sensation seeking and empathy, and female adolescents' sensation seeking, while a significant predictor that contributes to explaining the psychosocial consequences of gambling in both gender is also sensation seeking.

**Conclusion:** significant contributions of personality traits and individual characteristics in the explanation of adolescent gambling are confirmed.

**Keywords:** personality traits, adolescent gambling, predictors, correlates.

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## INTRODUCTION

Problem gambling is an individual's need to gamble constantly, despite the harmful consequences that gambling has on life (1), characterized by difficulties in limiting money and time invested in gambling (2, 3). Problem gamblers manifest behaviors that seriously impair the functioning of the individual, they have a reduced ability to control gambling, disrupted daily functioning, the need for increasingly intense gambling with larger amounts of money to experience the desired excitement, and they withdraw socially (3, 4). Research continuously confirms that gambling leads to harmful psychosocial consequences for some players, especially among young people who represent a vulnerable group, where the term problem gambling is more often used to avoid stigmatization and labeling (5). According to the DSM-IV, pathological gambling is characterized as a permanent or periodic loss of control over gambling and is categorized into impulse control disorders not classified elsewhere (1, 3, 4). In the DSM-V, the diagnosis of pathological gambling was reclassified to the group of addictions not related to a psychoactive substance and defined as persistent and recurrent gambling that leads to clinically significant impairment, characterized, among others, by restlessness and irritability while trying to reduce or stop gambling, repeated unsuccessful attempts to control, reduce or stop gambling, compensating for lost money, lying to conceal the extent of involvement in gambling, etc. (6). Pathological gambling is more common

in men, it mostly appears in adolescence and between the ages of 40 and 50 (7). Adolescent gambling differs from adult gambling due to the developmental specifics of age. Changes in the part of the brain that is in charge of social and emotional functioning result in an increased tendency of risk-taking and an increased need for reward (8), which makes young people especially susceptible to gambling with regard to the reward element. Developmental characteristics such as increased sensation seeking, egocentrism, feelings of invincibility and invulnerability increase the likelihood of developing risky behaviors. Previous research has largely established the significant role of individual personality traits in gambling and other addictive and risky activities (9,10), and the personality traits and constructs of interest in this research will be briefly explained below.

The Big Five personality model is one of the most famous descriptive models used to study personality traits and represents a hierarchical organization of personality traits in terms of five basic dimensions. Extraversion refers to the quantity and intensity of interpersonal interactions, the level of activity, seeking experiences, positive emotionality, warmth and dominance (11). Agreeableness represents the quality of interpersonal interactions and the degree of harmony in relationships with other people. Conscientiousness refers to the degree of respect for another person when making decisions and the characteristics that are manifested in the social control of impulses and when performing certain tasks (12). Neuroticism describes the

features of an individual's emotional response to stimuli from the environment and contains facets of calmness, relaxation and poise (12). Openness to experience indicates openness to intellectual and artistic challenges, active imagination, need for change and orientation to feelings (11). Adolescents involved in problem gambling achieve higher scores on the scales of irritability, extraversion and anxiety, and lower scores on the scales of adjustment and self-discipline (13, 14). Greater gambling risk correlates with higher neuroticism and lower agreeableness and conscientiousness (15). Adolescents with serious gambling problems are less conscientious, agreeable and cooperative than those without gambling problems, and adolescents with low to moderately serious psychosocial consequences of gambling are somewhat more extroverted and less emotionally stable than those without gambling problems (16). As the main risk factors for the development of harmful consequences of gambling, the authors cite negative effects and traits associated with the inability to inhibit. Sensation seeking is a dimension of personality characterized by the need to seek new, diverse, layered and intense stimuli from the environment, manifests itself in various forms of the need for mental and physical stimulation, and includes a certain level of risk in the physical, social and financial areas, most often due to the experiences themselves (17). A moderate amount of change in the environment is desirable due to adaptive significance, but excessive excitement-seeking can threaten the survival of the individual. Most people are somewhere between the mentioned

extremes - they do not have such a pronounced need for excitement, but they are not so dependent on security and predictability either. The negative consequences of a high need for excitement are delinquent individuals prone to crime and rejecting social rules, who are more impulsive and aggressive, score higher on the psychoticism scale and are prone to all kinds of addictions (18, 19). Gambling is highly associated with thrill-seeking, i.e. experiences that have elements of risk (20). In the study by Powell et al., the tendency to take risks was positively correlated with the degree of involvement in gambling activities and was primarily a characteristic of males (15).

Empathy is an emotional response that arises from the emotional state and conditions of another person and is consistent with their situation or emotional state (21). It is a multidimensional construct with significant cognitive and affective components (22) and is considered a regulator of several different interpersonally important behaviors.

The construct of emotional intelligence is described as the ability to understand personal emotions and the emotions of other people, distinguish between feelings and correctly label emotions, use emotional information as a guideline for thinking and behavior (23) and as the effective management of one's own and other people's emotions and the ability to solve problems that arise in emotional context (24). Emotional intelligence is described as a set of four abilities: (1) the ability to accurately perceive, evaluate, and express emotions, (2) the ability to access and/or invoke feelings when they facilitate

thinking, (3) the ability to understand emotions including general knowledge about emotions, and (4) the ability to regulate emotions for emotional and intellectual growth (24). The risk of developing an addiction is closely related to the degree to which a person has developed emotional and social skills. Improving emotional intelligence helps in achieving the goals of primary prevention, that is, resisting young people from experimenting with addictive substances and finding healthy alternatives and better coping skills. Preventive programs increasingly include elements related to emotional competence because many studies have shown that the inability to regulate emotions is more common in those with lower emotional intelligence and that it represents a risk factor for the development of problem gambling (25) and addictive behaviors (26). This research aimed to gain insight into the connection between gender, personality traits and adolescent gambling, as well as to examine the contribution of individual variables (sensation seeking, emotional competence, empathy and personality traits) to the explanation of the intensity of gambling and the severity of harmful psychosocial consequences associated with gambling among high school students.

## **METHOD**

### Participants and procedure

A total of 402 high school seniors from the area of Mostar between the ages of 16 and 19 participated in the research ( $M=17.41$ ,  $SD= .598$ ),

of which 197 were males and 204 were females. Participation in the research was anonymous and voluntary. Filling out the questionnaire was done during class, it took about 45 minutes, and the questionnaires were administered in groups.

### Instruments of the study

The sociodemographic part had questions about characteristics such as gender, age and school of the participants.

The gambling activities questionnaire contained questions about the types and frequency of gambling activities (11 types), on which the participants checked the playing of a certain game and the frequency on a scale from "every day" to "once a year and less than that" (11). The obtained results were used in this research as a measure of the frequency and intensity of adolescent gambling.

The Canadian Adolescent Gambling Questionnaire (27) is the first instrument designed specifically to assess the level of severity of adolescent gambling problems. A part of the instrument, which contains 24 items divided into four factors: psychological, financial and social consequences of gambling and lack of control (the total result is a linear combination of the answers to the questions) was used in this study. A factor analysis using the method of principal components with varimax rotation was verified, however, the existence of a two-factor solution was not confirmed as in the Croatian research (15). The obtained factor structure is unidimensional, and the reliability of the instrument (Cronbach alpha) is high .95.

The Sensation Seeking Scale (18) is an instrument for measuring the level of sensation seeking, which consists of a total of 40 items with four subscales: (1) sensation seeking and adventure scale, (2) experience seeking scale, (3) scale disinhibition or disengagement and (4) boredom sensitivity scale. The reliability coefficient of .82 confirms the good psychometric properties of this scale.

The emotional competence questionnaire (28) examines individual differences in emotional competence on a total of 15 items with answers on a five-point scale. The scale is one-dimensional, and the reliability of the internal consistency type questionnaire is satisfactory and is .82 in the sample of students.

The scale of emotional empathy (21) represents a one-dimensional measure of the tendency to react emotionally caused by the emotional state of others, it contains 19 statements answered on a five-point scale and the reliability is high .91.

IPIP-50 is the Croatian version of the International Personality Item Pool scale for examining personality traits, which is based on the lexical approach to personality (29). The Big Five dimensions of personality are examined using 50 items (five-point scale) that measure extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness to experience. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients of the subscales are satisfactory and amount to .76 (extraversion), .80 (pleasantness), .73 (conscientiousness), .75 (neuroticism), and .70 (openness to experience).

#### Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis of the collected data was performed using the computer program for statistical data processing SPSS Statistics 25 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). The Shapiro-Wilk's test determined a statistically significant deviation of the obtained distributions from normal, and non-parametric tests were used in the analysis. Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to determine differences between data groups. The correlation between the results was verified by Spearman's correlation coefficient, and the contribution and predictive value of individual characteristics to the explanation of the variance of adolescent gambling behavior using multiple regression analysis.

## RESULTS

A descriptive analysis of the data shows that only 29.1% of adolescents did not gamble during their lifetime, while a high proportion of them participated in one or more gambling activities during their lifetime (70.9%). Significant differences were found in the intensity of gambling and the psychosocial consequences of gambling between males and females ( $U_1=10206.5$ ,  $p_1<0.001$ ,  $U_2=8901$ ,  $p_2= 0.001$ ). On average, male adolescents gamble significantly more and report more psychosocial consequences of this behavior.

The correlation of individual characteristics and gambling indicators was examined on a sub-sample of male and female adolescents with

regard to the gender difference in gambling activities. The intensity of male adolescent's gambling activities is related to empathy ( $r_s = -.222$ ,  $p < .001$ ), conscientiousness ( $r_s = -.305$ ,  $p < .001$ ), extraversion ( $r_s = .233$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and sensation seeking ( $r_s = .442$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while the psychosocial consequences of male adolescent's are significantly related to empathy ( $r_s = -.150$ ,  $p < .05$ ), conscientiousness ( $r_s = -.274$ ,  $p < .001$ ), agreeableness ( $r_s = -.154$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and sensation seeking ( $r_s = .333$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Sensation seeking is significantly related to the intensity of female gambling ( $r_s = .307$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and psychosocial

consequences ( $r_s = .273$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while other individual characteristics did not show a significant correlation with gambling indicators. The contribution of individual characteristics (empathy, emotional competence, conscientiousness, openness to experience, neuroticism, agreeableness, extraversion and sensation seeking) to the explanation of the intensity of gambling and the severity of the psychosocial consequences of gambling among adolescents was verified by multiple regression analysis on subsamples of male and female adolescents.

Table 1. Results of multiple regression analysis with individual variables as predictors and gambling intensity as a criterion on the subsamples of male and female adolescents.

Predictors	Males (N=197)					Females (N=205)				
	R	R <sup>2</sup>	$\beta$	F	P	R	R <sup>2</sup>	B	F	P
	.452	.204		6.054	.000**	.439	.193		5.834	.000**
Sensation seeking			.215		.007*			.460		.000**
Agreeableness			-.028		.744			.045		.628
Extraversion			.152		.064			-.147		.052
Neuroticism			-.018		.801			.034		.634
Openness to experience			-.036		.634			-.069		.353
Conscientiousness			-.149		.058			.011		.894
Empathy			-.185		.028*			-.041		.647
Emotional competence			.030		.716			-.006		.940

p\* < .05, p\*\* < .001

The predictive value of sensation seeking and empathy for the intensity of male adolescents' gambling is significant. The sensation-seeking variable has a greater influence as a predictor - more pronounced sensation seeking in adolescents contributes to more intense gambling,

while adolescents who show a lower level of empathy are more likely to gamble more intensively. The results of the regression analysis on the sub-sample of females show that sensation seeking is a significant predictor of the intensity of gambling among girls.

Table 2. Results of the multiple regression analysis with individual variables as predictors and psychosocial consequences of gambling as a criterion on subsamples of male and female adolescents.

Predictors	Males (N=197)					Females (N=205)				
	R	R <sup>2</sup>	B	F	P	R	R <sup>2</sup>	B	F	p
	.399	.159		4.473	.000**	.315	.099		2.692	.000**
Sensation seeking			.196		.016*			.287		.001*
Agreeableness			-.080		.369			-.014		.886
Extraversion			.081		.334			-.062		.871
Neuroticism			-.088		.228			.073		.341
Openness to experience			-.048		.534			-.057		.469
Conscientiousness			-.134		.097			-.015		.863
Empathy			-.123		.155			.022		.815
Emotional competence			.061		.472			-.062		.477

p\* < .05

p\*\* < .001

For the intensity of the psychosocial consequences of gambling, the sensation-seeking variable proved to be a significant predictor. Male and female adolescents who have the above trait more pronounced had more harmful consequences of gambling activities.

## DISCUSSION

In this research, gender differences in gambling and the psychosocial consequences of adolescent gambling were determined. On average, male adolescents gamble significantly more and show more psychosocial consequences of gambling compared to females, which can be justified by the fact that young males are more impulsive, disinhibited, more extroverted, have a greater need for excitement and stimuli, are more competitive and more money-oriented than females (30 -32)

By examining the correlations, it was determined that male adolescents who report lower emotional intelligence, empathy, conscientiousness, agreeableness and a more pronounced sensation seeking and female adolescents with a more pronounced sensation-seeking trait gamble more intensively. Furthermore, sensation seeking and empathy were found to be significant predictors of gambling intensity in the sub-sample of male adolescents, and sensation seeking in the sub-sample of females. Since personality traits are stable traits, they are manifested in almost all areas of life, and their influence can also be seen in adolescent gambling. The association of personality traits that are included in the Big Five personality model (agreeableness and

conscientiousness) with the intensity of gambling is in accordance with the research of MacLaren and associates (15), who realized that higher gambling risk correlates with lower agreeableness and conscientiousness, and Croatian research where it is found that adolescents with serious gambling problems are less conscientious and less agreeable than those without gambling problems and are less inclined to cooperate and tend to put their own needs first (16). It was found that individuals who are low on agreeableness gamble more intensively, which is in line with the conceptualization of the mentioned personality trait according to the five-factor model, which states that an unpleasant person is egocentric and competitive, and gambling certainly represents an activity in which a person puts his needs first and in which there is a certain competitive aspect. The basis of conscientiousness is self-discipline and self-control of behavior, which can also be manifested when engaging in gambling activities, which is in accordance with the results of this research, in which it was found that more conscientious adolescents engage in gambling less, and if they gamble, they do it with less intensity compared to their peers who are not as conscientious. Irresponsibility, on the other hand, in contrast to reliability, is a risk factor for the development of gambling, and those with more pronounced irresponsibility have more problems with gambling (20). In a Croatian study (20), irresponsibility was shown to be a significant correlate of the global measure of adolescent gambling risk.

The highest contribution to the explanation of the intensity of gambling is the sensation seeking of adolescents - those who are more inclined to sensation seeking are more inclined to gamble more intensively. Engaging in gambling activities provides a sense of excitement and adventure (33), and gambling characteristics such as fun, risk in the context of monetary investment and possible loss, and illegality are attractive to high sensation-seeking adolescents, especially given the youth's sensitivity to current gratification, reduced possibility of long-term planning, low ability to delay, wait and tolerate boredom (14). The obtained results can be explained by Zuckerman's optimal level of arousal theory, according to which adolescents who tend to seek sensation are chronically low-arousal persons and need more stimuli to reach the most efficient functioning. Such individuals will seek appropriate situations and experiences that will help them achieve and maintain an appropriate level of arousal given their high excitability threshold, and given that gambling often involves a high degree of sensory and mental stimulation, the likelihood that intense sensation-seekers and new experiences develop gambling problems (20).

Emotional competence and empathy are the last two correlates significantly related to the intensity of gambling among male adolescents in this study. Emotional competence affects the intensity of adolescent gambling, which is in line with several older studies (25). Namely, individuals who have higher levels of emotional intelligence better control their emotional states, which is

associated with more adequate regulation, improved mood and better impulse control (34), while individuals with low emotional intelligence have difficulties with impulse control and addiction disorders (25). This is by the integrative model of gambling called the Pathways Model (35), which singles out emotionally vulnerable gamblers characterized by anxiety, depression, a history of poor coping with stress, and poor coping skills. For this group, gambling represents a way of dealing with negative emotional states and a kind of escape from reality, which affects the further development and strengthening of this behavior.

When considering the construct of empathy, the fact that pathological gambling and other forms of addiction most often affect a wide social network is taken into account. It is estimated that the consequences of gambling affect eight to ten people around the individual with a gambling problem (15). Some authors (36) state that problem gamblers lack empathy, which is one of the main complaints of family members. Research shows that problem gamblers report a weaker sense of connectedness with their family compared to risky and social gamblers and those who do not gamble at all (20), and that family cohesion is negatively related to the degree of engagement in risky behaviors such as gambling. Furthermore, the development of empathy is often a central theme in the recovery process of addicts (36). Research on the construct of empathy within gambling activities is scarce, and the results obtained in this study are guidelines for future researchers to examine more closely the

relationship and influence of this individual variable, as well as possible moderator or mediator variables that may influence this relationship.

Examining the connection between individual characteristics and the expression of psychosocial consequences of youth gambling, similar results were found with the intensity of gambling, where the same characteristics, except emotional competence, were obtained as significant correlates of the expression of psychosocial consequences of youth gambling.

## CONCLUSION

On average, male adolescents gamble more intensively and report more psychosocial consequences of gambling compared to female adolescents. There is a significant connection between emotional competence, empathy, conscientiousness, agreeableness and sensation seeking with the intensity of gambling in male adolescents, as well as the connection between excitement seeking and the intensity of gambling in female adolescents. Male adolescents who are more prone to sensation seeking, have a lower level of empathy, conscientiousness, agreeableness and emotional competence, gamble more and more intensively, as do females with a more pronounced trait of sensation seeking. Significant predictors of gambling intensity in male adolescents are sensation seeking and empathy, and in females sensation seeking. The correlations of the mentioned variables with the psychosocial consequences of gambling in male

and female adolescents were also examined, and a correlation was established with sensation seeking, empathy, agreeableness and conscientiousness in male adolescents and sensation seeking in female adolescents. Male adolescents who achieve high scores on the sensation-seeking scale, low on empathy, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, report more psychosocial consequences of gambling, as do female adolescents with a more pronounced sensation-seeking trait. A significant predictor of the psychosocial consequences of gambling in male and female adolescents is sensation seeking. The results of this research confirm the significant contributions of personality traits and individual characteristics in explaining the variance of adolescent gambling, thus confirming the importance of a comprehensive approach to clarifying the emergence and maintenance of problematic adolescent gambling, as well as the importance of early identification and treatment of at-risk adolescents taking into account relevant factors.

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# INDIVIDUALNE KARAKTERISTIKE KAO KORELATI I PREDIKTORI KOCKANJA ADOLESCENATA

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## SAŽETAK

Uvod: Adolescenti predstavljaju rizičnu skupinu za razvoj problematičnog kockanja koje s vremenom i intenziviranjem može prerasti u patološko kockanje s brojnim i štetnim psihosocijalnim posljedicama. Danas se značajan naglasak stavlja na individualne karakteristike i osobine ličnosti kao faktore koji utječu i doprinose razvoju ili održavanju kockanja.

Cilj: Stjecanje uvida u odnos između individualnih karakteristika (crta ličnosti) i kockanja adolescenata.

Ispitanici i metode: U istraživanju je sudjelovalo 402 učenika (197 mladića i 204 djevojke) završnih razreda srednjih škola iz Mostara prosječne dobi od 17 godina ( $M= 17.41$ ,  $SD= .59$ ). Podaci su prikupljeni ispunjavanjem upitnika uživo, u školama koje pohađaju te su primijenjeni Upitnik kockarskih aktivnosti, Kanadski upitnik kockanja adolescenata, Skala traženja uzbuđenja, Upitnik emocionalne kompetentnosti (UEK-15), Upitnik emocionalne empatije i IPIP-50.

Rezultati: Utvrđene su značajne razlike u intenzitetu kockanja i štetnim psihosocijalnim posljedicama s obzirom na spol, mladići u prosjeku intenzivnije kockaju i izvještavaju o više štetnih psihosocijalnih posljedica kockanja u odnosu na djevojke. Utvrdila se značajna povezanost emocionalne kompetentnosti, empatije, savjesnosti, ugodnosti i traženja uzbuđenja s intenzitetom kockanja mladića i značajna povezanost traženja uzbuđenja s intenzitetom kockanja djevojaka. Mladići koji su skloniji traženju uzbuđenja, imaju nižu razinu empatije, savjesnosti, ugodnosti i emocionalne kompetentnosti u prosjeku više i intenzivnije kockaju kao i djevojke s izraženijom crtom traženja uzbuđenja. Kao značajni prediktori kockanja mladića se ističu osobina ličnosti traženje uzbuđenja i empatija, a kod djevojaka traženje uzbuđenja, dok je značajan prediktor koji doprinosi objašnjavanju psihosocijalnih posljedica kockanja mladića i djevojaka također osobina traženja uzbuđenja.

Zaključak: potvrđuju se značajni doprinosi osobina ličnosti i individualnih karakteristika u objašnjenju kockanja adolescenata.

**Ključne riječi:** osobine ličnosti, kockanje adolescenata, prediktori, korelati

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