

EMOTIONAL STABILITY AND AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR AMONG ROMANIAN FOOTBALL PLAYERS

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Abstract. *The study of personality has gained increasing significance, with scientific insights now presented through a complex, multifactorial model. In contexts such as performance, leisure activities, and health-related sports, personality acts as a mediating factor that connects cognitive and emotional skills to a range of behavioural outcomes, including aggressive behaviour. The primary objective of this study is to explore the relationship between emotional stability as a personality trait and aggressive behaviour among Romanian soccer players. Data was collected from a sample of 60 soccer players (N = 60), divided into two groups. One group comprised professional footballers playing in regional or national competitions, while the other group consisted of local amateur players practicing football in their spare time. The information in the study is quantitative and based on data collected from two questionnaires: the Five-Factor Personality Inventory (FFPI), and the Romanian adaptation of the Makarowski Aggression Questionnaire. A positive correlation was identified between the Emotional Stability and Assertiveness scales. Furthermore, a comprehensive data analysis revealed a significant difference in the Foul Play scale based on the athletes' age. These findings offer important insights into the interplay between emotional stability and aggressive behaviour among football players, providing valuable implications for player development strategies and the management of aggressive behaviour in sports. However, further research is necessary to deepen the understanding of these relationships.*

Keywords: *emotional stability; aggressive behaviour; football players; personality; assertiveness.*

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Introduction

The study of personality has gained increasing importance in recent years, with the quality level of the scientific explanations already presented in a multifactorial and complex model (González-Hernández et al., 2023). Regardless of whether we are talking about performance, leisure, or health-related sports, personality acts as a mediating factor that connects cognitive and

emotional skills to various types of behaviours (González-Hernández et al., 2023), including aggressive behaviour (Greitemeyer, 2022).

In sports psychology, the assessment of personality primarily focuses on the relationship between personality traits, participation in sports activities, and sports performance (Steca et al., 2018). Information about the athlete's personality is crucial for coaches and specialists working closely with athletes individually, because that information allows training to be tailored in ways that are most oriented, beneficial and appropriate. A poor understanding of athletes' personality traits by coaches can negatively impact development, potentially leading to a negative impact, to inefficiency or superficiality in fulfilling tasks (Piepiora, 2021).

The influence of personality is twofold, stemming from the distinction between its direct and indirect effects on an athlete's behaviour. Personality can make a direct impact on sporting actions, suggesting that personality traits have a strong relationship with sports performance. Indirectly, personality influences an individual's sporting performance by shaping other relevant factors, such as resilience and motivation, which ultimately affect sports outcomes (Shuai et al., 2023).

Several studies have explored the relationship between personality traits and sports success, highlighting the complexity of these associations and the numerous variables involved (Steca et al., 2018). Findings indicate that athletes scoring higher on the conscientiousness scale tend to adopt more effective training techniques and strategies (Castanier, Le Scanff, & Woodman, 2010). Additionally, these athletes not only perform better, but also engage in fewer reckless behaviours (Merritt & Tharp, 2013). Furthermore, personality traits significantly influence athletes' decision-making processes (Allen & Laborde, 2014).

Most research on personality in sports is based on the analysis of a 5-factor personality model (Costa & McCrae, 1992). In the study conducted by Piepiora and Piepiora (2021), a description of personality profiles and the determinants of success in sports activity, in relation to the Big Five personality model has been made.

Recognizing the personality traits of football players is crucial for coaches and other professionals, as it enables them to accurately assess athletes' strengths accurately and deploy them in appropriate situations. Furthermore, by gaining insight into the personalities of players, coaches can better understand how to manage and influence athletes' attitudes and responses during competitive activities (Mirzaei et al., 2013).

Understanding an athlete's personality is vital for coaches and other specialists involved in their training. This knowledge enables a more tailored and effective training approach. Without a solid grasp of the athlete's personality traits, coaches may inadvertently hinder an athlete's growth, resulting in inefficiencies or lack of depth in task execution (Piepiora, 2021).

The heightened competitiveness in contemporary sports underscores the significant stress associated with athletic competitions, stemming from the complexity of athletic tasks, and the weight of responsibility athletes bear during events. This pressure is compounded by time constraints and the intense nature of competition (Petrovska et al., 2021). Prolonged exposure to these stressful conditions can lead to a range of negative emotions in athletes, including anxiety, nervousness, and tension, which may manifest behaviourally as aggression. It is important to note

that aggression is a personality trait characterized by a propensity to exhibit aggressive behaviours frequently (Makarowski, 2013).

In sports, aggression is often linked to athletes' failure during competitions. This aspect causes a series of emotional changes, such as impulsivity, irritability, or difficulty in self-control (Deng, Cao & Tang, 2022). The reactions of other competitors, spectators, or fans to various incentives can also represent aggressive opposition. Moreover, referee decisions, dominance by an opponent, or any actions or gestures of the opponent can increase the aggressiveness of the athlete (Mahorkh & Ayoub, 2012).

Aggression is defined as behaviour intended to harm another individual who does not wish to be hurt (Baron & Richardson, 1994). Broadly, aggression serves as a mechanism through which an individual or group asserts power. It is also considered a defence mechanism against perceived threats, being one of the fundamental human characteristics that helps survival (Austerman, 2017).

Pain or suffering inflicted on other athletes is often a primary goal. Thus, the purpose of the reactive aggression (which arises from a high level of aggression) is to harm the opponent, sometimes so badly that the respective athlete can no longer continue to play and must be removed from the game. Body language, verbal language communication, and other signs can be considered means by which aggressive behaviours can be expressed in sports (Gumusgul & Acet, 2016). In addition, aggression encompasses actions directed at opposing athletes or even referees, with the intent to annoy, humiliate, or even physically injure them (İkizler & Karagozolu, 1997).

In sports, however, aggression is considered necessary, as competitors consent to compete against each other (Bazli et al., 2021). Taking into consideration the inherently competitive nature of sports, it can be argued that sports are already aggressive, as athletes strive to defeat their opponents during the competition, and achieve victory. Looking from another perspective, we can observe the fact that sports activities are governed by strict rules and regulations, with aggressive acts exceeding the limits subject to control and penalties (Gencheva, 2015).

An increasing volume of research has analysed aggressive behaviour in sports, particularly focusing on the reasons behind such behaviour (Stephens & Kavanagh, 2003; Stephens et al., 1997; Stephens, 2000, 2001, 2004). Aggression has always been present in human psychology, rooted in the social nature of human beings (Daly & Wilson, 2022). Aggression causes considerable suffering among the victims.

A lower aggressiveness was found in senior players compared to younger players (Lazarević, 1981), reinforcing the idea that aggression in team sports decreases with age (Tušak, 1997). Although research into personality has advanced in recent years, little is known on how different personality traits contribute to aggressive or unethical behaviour in sports (Allen & Laborde, 2014).

Methodology

Research goal

The purpose of the study was to highlight the connection between athletes' personality traits and to examine aggression levels among football players, with a particular focus on age-related differences.

Hypotheses

H1: There is a strong correlation between emotional stability and assertiveness (as personality traits) among athletes.

H2: There is a significant difference between the level of foul play of the participants, according to age.

Participants

The sample for the present study consists of athletes engaged in organized sport. The participant group includes 60 male football players (N = 60) with Romanian citizenship and an average age of 21.95 years. These individuals are football players of clubs competing in the Romanian football championships. Athletes are structured in smaller groups by age (aged over 21), and young players (under 21).

Instruments

The Five-Factor Personality Inventory (FFPI), developed by Hendriks et al. (1999) is a personality inventory created at the University of Groningen in The Netherlands. The instrument has been adapted and calibrated for the Romanian population and is integrated into the Cognitrom Assessment System. Its application has been conducted in collaboration with the Scientific Research Laboratory in Psychological Evaluation and Intervention at the Ovidius University of Constanța.

This instrument evaluates five main dimensions of personality, as follows: Extraversion (E), Agreeableness (A), Conscientiousness (C), Emotional Stability (S), Autonomy (D). The questionnaire contains one hundred items, consisting of concrete and short sentences. Each of the five scales includes twenty questions corresponding to a specific personality characteristic. There are five response options, ranging from "I agree the least" to "I agree very much" on a 1-5 Likert scale.

The Makarowski Aggression Questionnaire is used to measure the 3 factors of aggression: (1) go-ahead/ persistence, (2) violent/foul play, and (3) assertiveness.

Go-ahead refers to an unrelenting determination to achieve a goal, despite many obstacles. It describes people who "get what they want," sometimes regardless of the cost.

Foul play in sports refers to behaviours that hinder the activities of others, often lacking a sense of fair play. Specifically, aggressiveness means preventing other individuals from performing a certain action, for example, pushing an opponent onto the field, grabbing their uniform, etc.

Assertiveness involved the ability to receive and communicate criticism, compliments, and other opinions. If an athlete is assertive, he may tell other athletes or the coach something he does not agree with, even if it threatens his place in the team (Makarowski et al., 2021).

Procedure

The two questionnaires were administered to football players both in person, at their sports training bases, and online via social networks, where it was impossible to travel to the sports bases. To facilitate online data collection from the participants, a Google Form was created and distributed through various social networks (WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram).

Before completing the questionnaires, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the authors, and the research methodology. They were also informed on the confidentiality of their responses and provided with contact information for any inquiries. The research was carried out between October and December 2023 at several football clubs in Constanța County. The time required to complete the questionnaires was approximately 10 minutes for each participant. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study, according to the terms of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Results

H1: There is a strong correlation between emotional stability as a personality trait and assertiveness among athletes.

The mean values for assertiveness and emotional stability are presented in Table 1. Table 2 contains only the significant correlations highlighted between the examined personality traits.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics - assertiveness and emotional stability*

		Statistic	Std. Error
Assertiveness	Mean	17,40	,515
	Variance	15,939	
	Std. Deviation	3,992	
Emotional Stability	Mean	74,82	1,374
	Variance	113,237	
	Std. Deviation	10,641	

Table 2. Spearman Correlation – results regarding Assertiveness and Emotional Stability

			Assertiveness	Emotional Stability
Spearman's rho	Assertiveness	r	1,000	,320
		p	.	,013
		N	60	60
	Emotional Stability	r	,320*	1,000
		p	,013	.
		N	60	60

From the analysis of Table 2, we can observe a positive correlation between the level of emotional stability and the level of assertiveness among the athletes, with a significance threshold ($r = 0.320$, $p = 0.013$), which means that athletes with higher level of emotional stability tend to exhibit greater assertiveness, which results in athletes with higher level of emotional stability who tend to be less impulsive and not likely to respond aggressively to challenges from other athletes. If the level of emotional stability decreases, the level of assertiveness of athletes also decreases, and athletes tend to have impulsive and aggressive behaviours.

H2: There is a significant difference in the level of foul play among participants based on age.

The mean values for the foul play scale, categorized by age, are presented in Table 3. Table 4 contains only the significant differences observed in the case of the three factors of aggression.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics – foul play factor

			Statistic	Std. Error
Foul Play	Young Football Players	Mean	12,86	,656
		Variance	15,067	
		Std. Deviation	3,882	
	More experienced Football Players	Mean	10,36	,798
		Variance	15,907	
		Std. Deviation	3,988	

Table 4. *Independent Samples t-Test*

		F	Sig.	t	df	p	MD	SE	95% CI		
										Lower	Upper
Foul play	Equal variances assumed	,073	,787	2,429	58	.018	2,497	1.028	,439	4,555	
	Equal variances not assumed			2,418	50.987	.019	2,497	1.033	,424	4,571	

Note: MD: Mean Difference; SE Std. Error Difference.

From the analysis of Table 4, it is evident that there is a significant difference in terms of foul play according to the athletes' age (Levene test, $p > 0.05$) at the significance threshold ($p = 0.018$). This shows that age impacts the level of violent play exhibited by athletes, which means that younger athletes display significantly more violent behaviours compared to older athletes.

Discussions and Conclusion

The findings of his study align with those of Mirzaei et al. (2013), who identify athletes displaying symptoms of neuroticism - such as anxiety, depression, aggression, anger, and selfishness - as exhibiting low emotional and behavioural stability. Furthermore, emotionally and behaviourally unstable athletes are more vulnerable to various pressures, which can manifest in anger, aggression, and ultimately poor performance in their sport.

Also, it is widely recognized that a crucial aspect of athlete's development involves managing the stress that arises during the journey toward peak performance (Côté, 1999). Athletes need to cultivate the ability to self-regulate their emotions and behaviours as they navigate their paths in sports development (Rutherford, 2021).

Regarding emotions, a study conducted by Vast et al. (2010) highlights the influence of both positive and negative emotions during sports activities. Their findings demonstrate that positive emotions such as excitement and happiness differ considerably from negative emotions in their impact on attention and performance focus. Specifically, enthusiasm and happiness were found to be more closely linked to enhanced concentration than anxiety, mania, or depression. Furthermore, these effects are amplified by the intensity of emotions; higher levels of happiness and excitement corresponded with performance-related focus, automatic movements, and a perceived enhancement in performance and concentration. Conversely, heightened anxiety was associated with more rigid and controlled movements. Summing up, the study suggests that emotional intensity plays a crucial role in shaping the way in which emotions affect attention, indicating that arousal and happiness foster more positive attentional focus, while anxiety detracts from it.

Additionally, a study conducted by Rani (2019) demonstrates a strong positive correlation between an athlete's self-efficacy and their level of assertiveness. Contact sports provide a highly stimulating experience but require significant physical and mental resilience from the athletes. A high degree of physical and mental resilience is essential to confront opponents directly, which also carries the inherent risk of injury and pain (Witkowski & Piepiora, 2018).

After analysing and processing the data, it is confirmed that there is a significant difference in violent/foul play based on the age of athletes. Specifically, as athletes mature, their engagement in violent gameplay tends to decrease. The literature emphasizes that high-level adult athletes exhibit greater emotional stability compared to juvenile players, while also demonstrating increased responsibility (Pelegrín-Muñoz et al., 2013). Younger athletes (aged 16-20) displayed more aggressive and unsportsmanlike behaviour than their older counterparts, aged 21-25 and 26-30.

Younger athletes often exhibit maladaptive emotional profiles, characterized by lower levels of dominance, emotional stability, self-awareness, self-esteem, efficiency, self-confidence, tolerance, research skills, and flexibility. Additionally, changes in competitive levels may further contribute to a less favourable profile for these young athletes. Factors such as experience, maturity, and adaptation, which typically improve with age, are essential in addressing these issues (Pelegrín-Muñoz et al., 2013).

Bredemeier and Shields (1994) suggest that sports create a social context rife with moral dilemmas. Individuals often do not rely on shared moral principles when making decisions, largely due to varying stages of moral judgment. Kohlberg's cognitive developmental theory (1969) asserts that human development is closely tied to age. The interplay between maturation and knowledge is influenced by education and experience (Piaget, 1932, 1965; Kohlberg & Kramer, 1969).

The study conducted by Fossmo (2006) found that age influences an athlete's motivation to participate in sports, as well as their experience of flow and identity. Additionally, it was established that age serves as the most reliable predictor of self-competence, self-control, and the balance between skills and challenges.

The study by Romand and collaborators (2009) found that older players were more likely to adopt motives aligned with higher moral stages, suggesting that sports socialization fosters advanced moral behaviours over time. Research shows that older athletes can effectively differentiate between tolerable and intolerable behaviours. Their experience also allows them to critically evaluate actions aimed at controlling aggression (Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2020).

Generally, we observe that certain personality characteristics, such as emotional stability, are associated with different approaches to sports activities. These findings underscore the importance of considering psychological factors in sports training and management, suggesting that managing these traits can contribute to enhancing athletes' performance and experience in various competitive domains. In the current study, emotional stability appears to influence the assertiveness level of athletes. Athletes with higher emotional stability tend to be less impulsive and express their opinions more constructively, without resorting to aggressive or hostile behaviour. Moreover, as the athletes' age increases, there is a trend towards a decrease in dangerous play, with fewer violent actions during sports games. This finding may be particularly relevant for

developing effective behaviour management strategies in sports, especially for young and inexperienced players, by promoting a safer and more respectful competitive environment for all participants.

However, a limitation of the present study refers to the lack of other methods of investigation, such as the observation and eventual recording of people's behaviours during competitions. Moreover, the use of structured interviews could offer a deeper understanding of the association between different personality traits. The study also did not consider the impact of players' positions on the field, which could potentially affect the research findings. Future studies should analyse variables over a longer period, both before and after competitions, possibly with more instruments to capture a broader range of analysis. For example, the research of Mahrokh and Ayoub (2012) explored aggression levels by taking into consideration the athletes' position on the field.

Furthermore, involving additional participants in the study, such as coaches, physical trainers, etc., could provide greater clarity to the study, contributing with data from their observations or completing a structured interview.

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Data Availability Statement: Data can be made available upon request to the contact author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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