

# The Role of Sport Psychology Services for Elite Sports Athletes The Case of Azerbaijan

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the role of sport psychology services for athletes in Azerbaijan, and examines the factors shaping the current state of psychological support within the country's sports industry. The study investigates the limited adoption of these services, highlighting key challenges such as the scarcity of skilled sports psychologists, a lack of awareness regarding the benefits of psychological support, and the social stigma associated with athletes seeking such assistance. These factors collectively hinder the development and effectiveness of sports psychology services in Azerbaijan. By addressing these issues, the research offers valuable insights for sports federations and organizations, aiming to promote the successful implementation of psychological support systems and enhance athletes' performance and well-being. The findings highlight the importance of expanding access to qualified professionals, fostering awareness about the value of psychological support, and challenging societal norms that discourage athletes from seeking help. The paper concludes by advocating a comprehensive framework to integrate sports psychology services into Azerbaijan's sports industry, thereby contributing to the overall development and success of its athletes.

**Keywords:** sport psychology, psychological support services, elite athletes, social stigma, Azerbaijan

## INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic world of elite sports, the significance of sport psychology services has become increasingly evident, prompting an exploration of their pivotal role in enhancing the performance and well-being of athletes. According to the preliminary survey conducted as a part of this research with local athletes in Baku, mainly from elite sports like archery, shooting, and volleyball, it has been discovered that there is a big demand for sports psychology consultancy (SPC) in Azerbaijan. However, based on the responses of athletes from various sports fields, it has been revealed that not every federation is able to provide quality psychology services or any service at all. Based on the feedback of athletes, there is a need for consultation with an expert, although there is no opportunity to receive such service.

The mental and psychological preparation for athletes is necessary as they represent their country

in the international arena. The previous research depicts the psychological challenges athletes face and hardships in finding experienced psychologists reputation (Anderson et al., 2004; Neumann et al., 2024). Thus, in order to successfully compete in sports competitions, access to high-quality psychological support is one of the most important factors (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009, pp.430). In the long run, a lack of such psychological support can have a detrimental effect on an athlete's sports career (Schmid, 2005, pp.85).

The aim of this research is to illustrate the importance of psychology services in sports and present it as a framework to be implemented by sports federations responsible for local sports. This research delves into the specific case of Azerbaijan, shedding light on the application and impact of sport psychology services for elite sports athletes in this distinctive context.

The following research question aims to explore the factors behind the absence of effective psychological support services in the sports industry in Azerbaijan, the impact of these factors on athletes' attitudes toward sport psychology, and the reasons for limited use of sport psychology services:

What factors contribute to the absence of effective psychological support services in the elite sports industry in Azerbaijan?

The conceptual framework of this paper includes the concepts related to sports psychology services, factors affecting mental state of athletes, and attributes of a sports psychologist, which are the following:

A lack of skilled sports psychologists is defined as the absence of professionals in the field of sports psychology who possess the necessary skills, expertise, and qualifications to provide high-quality psychological support to athletes (Schmid, 2005).

Unawareness of the advantages of psychological support services is defined as a lack of knowledge, understanding, or recognition among individuals about the benefits and positive outcomes that can be derived from utilizing psychological support services (Anderson et al., 2004).

Labeling athletes who use the assistance of a sports psychologist as having psychological problems (stigma) is defined as the act of attaching negative judgments and assumptions to athletes who seek sports psychologists' consultancy and perceiving them as having mental or emotional issues or weaknesses (Martin et al., 2002).

The literature review provides an in-depth analysis of various factors influencing the utilization and effectiveness of sports psychology services in the sports industry globally with a focus on Azerbaijan. It touches upon the impact of mental health issues on athletes' performance, factors measuring the effectiveness of sports psychologists, and the role of stigma and subjective norms in athlete perception. Moreover, it explores the awareness gap and misconceptions surrounding sport psychology services in federations.

Especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, the mental health of elite athletes has become an emerging issue with prioritization on mental health (Tachiy, 2024). In order to determine the elements linked to the effectiveness of a sports psychologist, Orlick and Partington (1987) used a more formal approach by interviewing Canadian Olympic coaches and athletes about their experiences collaborating with sports psychologists. The researchers found that an effective sports psychologist has good interpersonal

skills, and flexibility, is hard-working, and is eager to learn about the sport. On the other hand, an ineffective SPC (sport psychology consultant) is unable to provide timely support, does not provide proper feedback, and is not sport-specific. In applied work with athletes and coaches, a sports psychologist should have several years of experience and a good reputation with athletes, coaches, and national Olympic officials (Birrer et al., 2021, pp.3). Additionally, the successful psychologist model by McCann (2008) involves SPCs having strong teamwork and collaboration skills. As the major development and exposure to real-world practices of sports psychologists occur during their education period, it is necessary to start working with clients. As Tod et al., (2009) found, years of experience correlate with a psychologist's problem-solving skills where individuals who have worked with more clients are more confident and expert. In addition, Tod and Bond (2010, p. 40) suggest that effective sports psychologists are people who tend to be more client-driven than problem-oriented. The research further indicates that effective SPCs should be more of a facilitator than providing advice, less structured and controlling, long-term focused and flexible.

In addition, according to Sharp and Hodge (2014) and Sadler et al. (2024), the friendliness level of a sports psychologist was among the elements deemed necessary for an SPC. Besides, the research suggests that preferred psychologists are the ones with whom athletes feel comfortable while consulting, as one client states, "... my psychologist has a natural way of putting people at ease, it's just his manner" (Sharp & Hodge, 2014). They further argue that a sports psychologist needed to be perceived as approachable yet non-intrusive. Moreover, Lubker (2008) claims that clear boundaries should be set between athletes and psychologists while maintaining friendship bonds. Additionally, psychologists should maintain clear and professional identity (Prior, Papathomas & Rind, 2025). The case of Azerbaijan is similar to those of other countries, since a sports psychologist should create an approachable positive image in the minds of athletes which is critical for establishing trust.

Athletes' gender differences have an impact on their attitude towards utilizing sports psychologist services. As Martin et al. state (2011), female athletes are more prone to receiving sports psychology consulting than their male counterparts. The research by Yambor and Connelly (1991) supports this claim by explaining the male athletes' need to preserve their "macho" image and avoid discussing

psychological problems. The societal belief for males to accept pain and suffer in silence has led to avoiding vulnerability and as a result, not needing a psychologist (Curry & Strauss, 1994). On the other hand, Gorczynski et al. (2024) found out that female athletes do not link their psychological hardships with their gender identity, and are therefore more willing to consult with a sports psychologist. Compared to male athletes, females do not mind conveying their emotions and do not fear being labeled as “weak” (Anderson et al., 2004). Considering the fact that masculinity is an aspect that is valued by males in Azerbaijan and the country’s culture has an impact on gender roles, these issues are important in understanding accepting the help of a sports psychologists.

One of the widely-used models regarding athlete perception of sport psychology is the Sport Psychology Attitudes-Revised (SPA-R) questionnaire, devised by Martin et al. (2002) and which is based on four dimensions. The Stigma Tolerance factor measures other people labeling athletes who use the assistance of a sports psychologist as having psychological problems. The stigma of consulting with a sports psychologist is implied to have a negative effect on an athlete’s reputation (Anderson et al., 2004, p. 271). Furthermore, the subjective norms of athletes should be kept in mind while encouraging the use of sports psychology services. For example, according to Martin et al. (1997), where athletes believe their coach would not approve of them benefiting from an SPC and view them as “weak”, the usage of a sports psychologist would be low. This issue is prevalent among the athletes in Azerbaijan where athletes are concerned about the way they are being perceived by the people around them.

There is a visible gap in using sports psychology services in various organizations and federations (Anderson et al., 2004). Although sports psychologists have a vast role in aiding coaches and staff, there is still not enough awareness of the importance of offering sports psychology services (Martin, Wrisberg, Beitel, and Lounsbury, 1997; Ravizza, 1990). According to Sadler et al., (2024) the role of sport psychologists has greatly transformed from individual services to a greater focus on systemic and organizational factors. As Fletcher and Wagstaff (2009) claim, senior management expects athletes to practice psychological development by themselves, ignoring the help of a psychologist. The study by Ravizza (1990) discovered that athletes and coaches who do not have enough information on sports psychology are likely to confuse using

SPC with a psychiatrist, who is solely responsible for mental issues. Moreover, research by Neumann et al. (2024) suggests that although there is sufficient information regarding the role of psychological services on elite athletes in developed countries, much less is revealed for the developing countries. In Azerbaijan, as a developing country, the sports federations and coaches are unaware of, and reluctant to benefit from, sports psychologist services.

A comprehensive review of the existing literature reveals a growing body of research on the global application of sport psychology services, yet there is a notable lack of studies focused on the unique landscape of Azerbaijan. This literature review seeks to address this gap by examining the current state of knowledge regarding the utilization and effectiveness of sport psychology services in the Azerbaijani context, providing a foundation for the subsequent exploration in this research. Moreover, although there are numerous models measuring athletes’ attitudes to sports psychology services, there are fewer resources on models evaluating SPC and coaches’ views on sports psychology services, both at the global level and specifically in Azerbaijan.

Hence, the findings of this research will help to raise awareness among sports organizations and coaches on the importance of sports psychology services for athletes. Moreover, athletes will be more informed and encouraged to benefit from sport psychologist services to be more motivated and achieve success in competitions.

## METHODOLOGY

To carry out the research, this study employs primary data sources involving survey and interview methods. Further, the research is conducted by using the deductive and positivist methods. The paper utilizes mixed-method research design as there are both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis process. The choice of mixed methods is appropriate for this study as it allows for a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. By combining qualitative and quantitative data, multiple perspectives can be analyzed. The qualitative data from interviews provides more in-depth analysis of the topic under investigation as well as context for survey results, while the quantitative data provides a broader insight into athlete perceptions.

Quantitative data is gathered through a survey in Azerbaijani language sent to athletes that includes both multiple-choice and open-ended questions, collected during November–December 2023.

As the participants are from numerous sports fields, survey method is more suitable to analyze diverse athlete responses. In addition, qualitative data will be collected through face-to-face interviews with coaches and psychologists which will provide detailed information about the experiences and perceptions of these professionals about the effectiveness of psychological services in Azerbaijan. A questionnaire, referred to and changed accordingly on the previous research by Orlick and Partington (1987) and Anderson et al. (2004) will be presented to athletes that will contain multiple choice and open-ended questions. Further, a five-point Likert-scale design for survey questions, will be utilized to measure certain factors. The sample group will be made up of athletes who compete at international and Olympic level representing Azerbaijan, as these individuals compete at the highest athletic level, with more pressure and expectations. The sample group of coaches will be the mentors of the international and Olympics champions due to their high level of experience and background. The sample group of psychologists will be those employed at sports federations, which matches the scope of this research. The survey data on Google Forms will be analyzed via percentages, bar, and pie charts. Qualitative data is analyzed with the help of coded variables.

The preliminary survey was conducted among 36 athletes from the fields of shooting, judo, ping pong, volleyball, and Greco-Roman wrestling, aimed at illuminating the existing situation regarding effective psychology services in the Azerbaijan sports industry as of October 2023. Five questions were asked in Azerbaijani language, regarding the existing sports psychology services in Azerbaijan, and athletes' degree of utilizing them. From the analysis of preliminary survey results, it has been revealed that more than 60 percent of athletes have access to psychological services in the federations to which they belong. Although 58 percent of respondents have required the services of a sports psychologist, more than half have never used psychological services provided by their federation. Moreover, more than 70 percent of athletes were unsatisfied with the current psychological services provided. Among the main measures for the effectiveness of provided psychological services, respondents mentioned victories in competitions and effective training sessions.

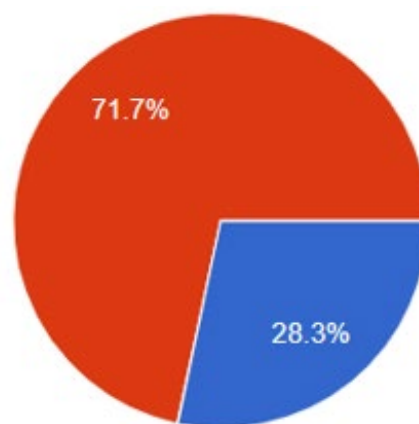
## KEY FINDINGS

This research paper has been prepared to research to what extent psychological services are

efficient in the sports industry in Azerbaijan. To identify psychological services' availability for athletes, and sports psychologists' approach to this issue, the research conducted includes a survey and interviews. The survey questions were designed for athletes, as the vast number of the recipients of the psychological services makes it unsuitable for individual interviews, while the interview questions were prepared for sports psychologists and coaches. The survey questions relate to the challenges that sports industries of developed countries already confronted and tried to resolve in ways which have proven to be effective, and thus might be implemented in Azerbaijan.

Orlick and Partington (1987) argue that an effective sports psychologist should possess good interpersonal skills, flexibility, be hard-working, and be eager to learn about the sport. The study conducted by Ravizza (1990) found that athletes and coaches who do not have sufficient knowledge of sports psychology are likely to confuse using SPC with a psychiatrist, who solely deals with mental issues. Based on the research mentioned above, this study has three main directions: what are the indicators of skilled psychologists; to what extent are athletes aware of psychological services in sports federations; and what impact does society have on the athletes who use sports psychologist services. The survey results start by explaining the responses regarding the quality of sports psychologist services provided in Azerbaijan, followed by skilled psychologists, then the awareness level regarding the benefits of psychology services, and any stigma.

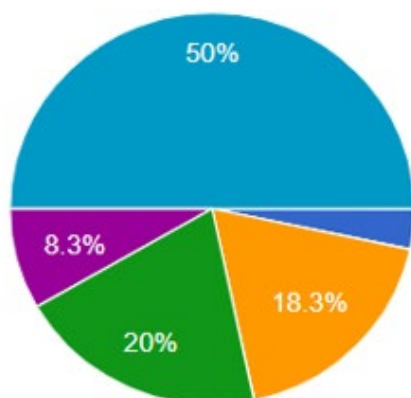
## 2.1 QUALITY OF SPORTS PSYCHOLOGIST SERVICES PROVIDED IN AZERBAIJAN



**Pie chart 1. Gender Percentage**

Sports psychology services have proven to be effective especially at the national Olympic levels (Birrer et al., 2021, p.3). The successful psychologist model includes individuals who are exposed to numerous clients and demonstrate a professional approach (McCann, 2008). This survey was held among athletes from different sports fields. The main questions were multiple choice, however, others were open-ended and served to gather athletes' individual opinions about the topic. Survey participants numbered 60 athletes who belonged to different sports federations and were distinguished from each other by age, gender, experience, etc. Among the participants, 15 respondents were pistol shooters, 7 were archers, 12 play table tennis, 8 compete in Greco-Roman wrestling, 5 compete in wrestling, 8 compete in judo, 2 play basketball, 1 respondent plays volleyball, 1 plays football, 1 competes in taekwondo, 1 competes in MMA and grappling, and 1 competes in kickboxing. According to the survey, the participants' gender proportion was 71.7 percent male and 28.3 percent female, giving 2.5 times more male than female participants. The age range of the athletes was from 16 years to 35 years and above. According to the age groups 16–20, 21–25, 31–5, and above 35 the ratio was 50 percent, 30 percent, 13.3 percent, and 6.7 percent, respectively. According to the survey, it is clear that the main athletes are young. As mentioned above, the diversification of sports fields athletes participate in can be seen at first glance. In accordance with the purpose of the survey the participants were from the elite sports fields.

This research was conducted as part of a course assignment in Research Methods.



**Pie chart 2. Athletes Satisfaction**

Shooting, judo, ping pong, volleyball, wrestling, and Greco-Roman wrestling sport athletes were the main participants in this survey. The

athletes' experience varied in the range from one year to over 10 years. The experience indicators were as follows: 5% of the athletes have 1 year, 15% of the athletes have 2–3 years, 10% of athletes have 4–5 years, 33.3% of the athletes have 6–10 years and 36.7% of the athletes have more than 10 years' experience. It is clear that among the survey respondents, athletes with more than 10 years of experience athletes accounted for first place. According to athletes' responses, it is obvious that 40% of the athletes are provided with sports psychologists by the sports federation, however, 41.7% of the athletes have been deprived of such opportunities. In addition, 18.3% of the athletes are uninformed about psychologist services in their federation. Although the sports federations provide sports psychologist services, only 18.3% of the athletes benefit from the service. Moreover, 81.7% of athletes refuse to use sports federation psychologist services. The main reasons athletes refuse to benefit from these services are as follows: they do not feel that psychologist services are necessary; sports psychologist services are unavailable in sports federations; coaches provide psychological support; lack of time to allocate for a psychologist; and sports psychologists being unskilled. According to the poll, 5% of athletes meet with a sports psychologist several times per week, 10% meet multiple times per month, and 60% meet multiple times per year. Furthermore, only 15.7% and 11.7% of athletes consult a sport psychologist before or after sports events, accordingly. The quality and efficiency of psychological services vary according to the degree the athletes were satisfied with the psychologist's services. Half of the athletes emphasize that they have never consulted a sports psychologist. The remaining athletes state that 3.3% are not completely satisfied, 18.3% neutral, 20% satisfied and 8.3% are entirely satisfied. The athletes claim that it is necessary to address the psychological services before a competition, after a competition, during training, during injury time, and in other cases. Regarding the times when athletes consult with a sports psychologist, 63.3% are before and after competitions, 18.3% during injury time, 15% during training time, and the rest for the other cases. Furthermore, according to the athletes' responses, 45 percent and 31.7 percent of the athletes benefited and partially benefited, respectively from sports psychological services. However, 23.3 percent of athletes did not benefit from a psychologist's services. Considering the interviews, the coaches argue that when a coach feels that the quality of training and the

athlete's physical readiness do not match the indicators, or when words and thoughts do not align, especially during the tense preparation process for competitions, conflicts are inevitable. In minor conflicts, an athlete may even quit training altogether. In such situations, the role of a psychologist is invaluable. During competitions, athletes are not in the same psychological and physiological states. It is crucial to conduct psychological work for both technical and physical preparations, just as it is for brain readiness. Psychologists claim that an athlete who is physically and technically weaker may still emerge victorious during a competition by utilizing different strategies. However, an athlete with weak willpower and a compromised psychology will not be able to take a single step forward.

## 2.2 SKILLED PSYCHOLOGIST

According to previous research by Orlick and Partington (1987), an effective sports psychologist has good interpersonal skills, and flexibility, is hard-working, and is eager to learn about sport. Moreover, an effective sports psychologist should have several years of experience and a good reputation with athletes, coaches, and national Olympic officials (Birrer et al., 2021, pp.3).

One of the main directions of the survey was to research and learn what a skilled psychologist should be like. Accordingly, the survey demonstrates that, in the perception of athletes, skilled psychologists have to possess specific knowledge and skills. The athletes rated the requisite skill features according to a five-point Likert scale where 1 means "completely agree", and 5 denotes "completely disagree". To a survey statement that an effective psychologist needs to be sincere, athletes fluctuated on the response scale: one answered "1", while 27 answered "5". Among the 60 athletes, 42 athletes' responses were positive, while 10 athletes' responses were negative; 7 athletes demonstrated neutral responses. To the assertion that an effective psychologist requires experience in the field of sports, the athletes' reactions were as follows: 39 athletes had positive responses, 10 athletes had negative responses, and 11 athletes had neutral responses. The athletes' responses to the claim an effective psychologist requires the ability to work in a team, varies between 8 on completely disagree and 19 completely agree. The positive responses received 38 votes, the negative responses received 12, and the neutral responses received 10 votes. Another statement in the survey is that an effective

psychologist should provide the right advice and guidance. Athletes' responses to this claim were as follows: 44 athletes positive, 11 athletes negative, and 5 athletes had neutral responses. As the interviews suggest, psychologists should possess strong analytical skills, empathy, an unwavering willingness to help, respect for the beliefs of the community members they work with, and should eliminate past traumas within themselves. They should be spiritually pure, with a clear mission and goals, excellent communication skills, confidentiality, optimism, courage, compassion, a sense of humor, and without stereotypes. Additionally, they should have self-regulation mechanisms, and be adaptable to any environment, becoming a successful individual tailored to every person (from personal communication with a sport psychologist, 12 December 2023). To the claim that an effective psychologist needs to be confidential and reliable, 43 athletes were positive, 5 athletes neutral, and 12 athletes were negative. The last feature of the skilled sports psychologist is that to be effective a psychologist requires higher education in the field of sports psychology. Further, according to interviews, psychologists and coaches state that when discussing professionalism in effective psychology, having fundamental knowledge and obtaining advanced education in the field are the primary requirements (from personal communication with a sport psychologist, 12 December 2023). Also, an effective sports psychologist must be knowledgeable in theory, physiology, and partially in medicine. In the survey, according to athletes' positive responses, effective sports psychologists are required to be sincere, have experience in the sports field, have the ability to be a team player, provide the right advice and guidance, and be confident and reliable. Moreover, psychologists suggest that it is more beneficial for sports psychologists to be involved in a particular sport themselves. Psychologists with a background in sports careers have emphasized that they have a greater impact on athletes. A psychologist who does not understand what pain is cannot provide proper emotional support to an athlete in challenging situations.

## 2.3 LEVEL OF AWARENESS OF PSYCHOLOGIST SERVICES

Although sports psychologists have an important role in helping coaches and staff, there is still a lack of awareness on the importance of offering sports psychology services (Martin, Wrisberg, Beitel, and Lounsbury, 1997; Ravizza, 1990). As senior

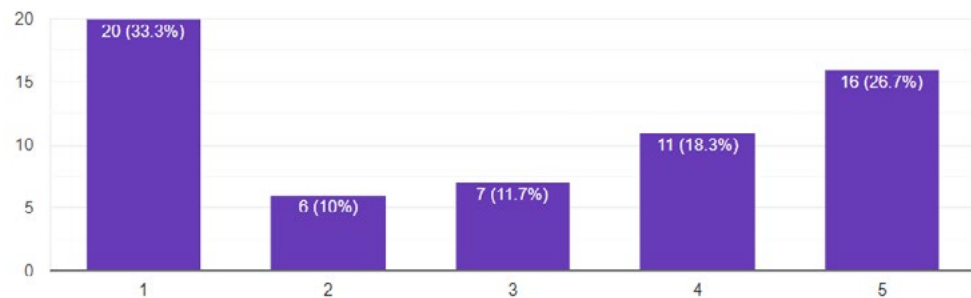


management expects athletes to deal with their psychological development by themselves, the importance of sports psychology services is ignored.

In addition, the survey researched the extent of athletes' awareness of the benefits of psychological services. The athletes responded to this question according to an assessment point scale of 1 to 5, with the range of "entirely unaware" and "completely aware" of the sport psychologist's services. Responses reveal that, while 26.7% of the athletes

are completely aware of the psychological services, 33.3% of the athletes are unaware. Based on the interview, psychologists claim that around 60–70% of athletes or coaches are unaware, or do not recognize the importance and benefits, of sports psychology. While the main reason for the lack of awareness is the weak promotion by psychologists, on the other hand, it may also be due to the failure of federation representatives to guide athletes properly (from personal communication with a coach, 12 December 2023).

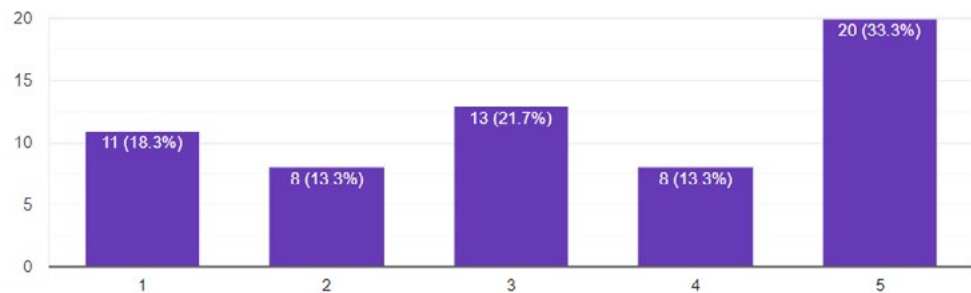
Bar chart 1. Unawareness of Psychologist services



Moreover, the research looks for the answer to the claim that unawareness of the importance of psychology in sports leads to the lack of effective psychological services. The athletes responded

to this question according to an assessment point Likert scale of 1 to 5 with a range of "entirely agree" and "completely disagree" with the statement.

Bar chart 2. Importance of awareness of Psychologist services



Responses demonstrate that 23.3% of the athletes completely agree that unawareness of the importance of psychology in sports leads to the lack of effective psychological services. However, 18.3% of the athletes disagree with this claim. Psychologists claim that they should establish a dialogue with all federations through their representatives, first explaining the importance of psychology to federation leadership, then to coaches, and finally to athletes. Organizing meetings with successful athletes who have experienced the benefits of psychological services, and conducting workshops and other activities can help raise awareness (from

personal communication with a sport psychologist, 12 December 2023).

## 2.4 STIGMA

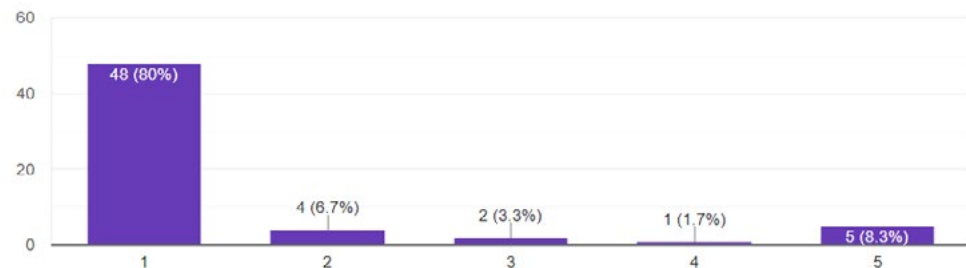
The Stigma Tolerance factor of Sport Psychology Attitudes-Revised (SPA-R) questionnaire measures other people labeling athletes who use the assistance of a sports psychologist as having psychological problems (Martin et al., 2002). The stigma of using SPC services is often proven to have a negative effect on an athlete's reputation (Anderson et al., 2004, pp. 271). Also, the subjective norms

of athletes should be considered while encouraging the use of sports psychology services.

The last direction of the survey is the impact of society on the athletes who use sports psychologist services. Based on the athletes' responses 6.7% agree that society impacts the athletes who consult the psychologist services, while 35% of athletes are uninformed about this impact. However, 58.3% of the athletes disagree with society's impact on the athletes. To the statement of "having fear of being recognized as an individual with psychological problems if I use a psychological service", the survey uses an assessment point scale of 1 to 5 with a range of "entirely agree" and "completely disagree". Based on the interview, psychologists and coaches emphasize that previously, athletes were more hesitant to

seek psychological services, and the fear of being misunderstood externally was a common concern. The source of these fears was often attributed to ignorance. Nowadays, through television, media, social networks, the advocacy of prominent figures, etc., these stereotypes are being broken (from personal communication with a coach, 12 December 2023). As interviews claim, currently, the younger generation of more progressive and understanding athletes (in sports like football, taekwondo, wrestling, shooting, etc.) choose to take collaborative steps with a psychologist when they are sure of the psychologist's confidentiality. Demonstrating understanding and providing solutions are characteristics specific to athletes worthy of success (from personal communication with a sport psychologist, 12 December 2023).

Bar chart 3. Stigma



Responses illustrate that 8.3% of the respondents completely agree that athletes have a fear of being recognized as individuals with psychological problems. Nonetheless, 80% of the athletes completely disagree with this statement.

Furthermore, the interview respondents added that the adaptation process for young athletes, especially females, coming from regions to big cities, is considered challenging. It used to be a more significant issue for families living in closed frameworks to accept their children growing up as athletes in a different environment, let alone hearing that they attend psychologist sessions. Anyone who heard that their son or daughter sought help from a psychologist would react in a peculiar way. Today, members of the sports community worldwide who understand the importance of psychologists truly recognize the necessity of the matter.

In conclusion, the athletes' responses reveal that sports psychologist services are not sufficient in sports federations, not all athletes are aware of the benefits of psychological services, and society's impact on the athletes who address psychologist services is not powerful.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this survey provide significant insights into the availability and efficiency of psychological services in the sports field in Azerbaijan. The results shed light on several factors that affect the current state of psychological support for athletes. While foundational studies such as Anderson et al. (2004), Ravizza (1990), and Tod and Bond (2010) laid the groundwork for understanding the importance of sports psychology, newer studies (Sadler et.al, (2024), Prior, Papatthomas & Rhind (2025), Neumann et al. (2024)) provide fresh perspectives on implementation challenges, especially in developing countries.

One key finding of this study is the gap in psychological services within sports federations. The data implies that only 40% of the athletes reported the availability of a sports psychologist by the federations they represent. This low percentage indicates a lack of support for mental well-being in the federations. The remaining 41.7% of athletes who did not have access to these opportunities, and the 18.3% who were uninformed about psychologist services, stress the need for increased awareness and taking action for the mental health needs of athletes.



The findings support the claims by Anderson et al., (2004) and Neumann et al. (2024) of the existence of a gap in using sports psychology services in federations. It is necessary for sports organizations to comprehend the key role that psychological services play in helping athletes' performance and well-being. Allocating resources and establishing mental well-being programs for psychological services might be useful for ensuring that athletes have basic access to psychological services in every federation.

Furthermore, the survey findings demonstrate that a significant proportion of athletes refused to utilize the sports federation psychologist services. The reasons shown by athletes provide a direction for several critical factors. Firstly, some athletes stated that psychological services were not among the necessary issues to consider for their competitions, implying a potential lack of understanding regarding the benefits of mental support in the sports field. This matter encourages the need to raise awareness among athletes about the positive results of psychological services on performance and psychological well-being.

Additionally, among the reasons for athletes' refusal to utilize sports psychology services was the unavailability of sports psychologists within the federations. The lack of attention to employing a skilled sports psychologist was shown to be one of the reasons for not benefiting from mental support services. As Orlick and Partington (1987) previously suggested, employing a sports psychologist had always been a critical issue. In addition, the sports psychology field in Azerbaijan is rather new, thus it will take a significant amount of time for the field to develop. Moreover, considering the issues regarding sport psychology services in developing countries, the findings support the ideas by Neumann et al. (2024) that it is significantly different and more challenging in developing countries than in developed ones. Thus, it is vital for sports organizations to understand the importance of having skilled professionals who can provide specialized and accurate support to athletes. Federations should make sure that athletes have access to a psychological service anytime they need it.

Besides the findings above, the survey revealed that some athletes preferred relying on coaches' mental support instead of consulting with a sports psychologist, as in the research of Ravizza (1990). This case provides a direction to educate coaches regarding recognizing the psychological barriers athletes might face, and teach them to direct athletes to

seek mental support from professionals when needed. A healthy collaboration between sports psychologists and coaches can further enhance the effectiveness of psychological support services in the country. However, recent data from Tachiya (2024) suggests that after the COVID pandemic, there is a slow but noticeable shift in how athletes view mental support, especially when federations proactively promote awareness campaigns.

Among the athletes not benefiting from the services of a sports psychologist was the issue of time constraints. The busy training and competition schedules of athletes do not often create a possibility to consult with mental health professionals. Therefore, sports organizations should work on integrating psychological support into the athletes' daily routine training and competition schedules. Undoubtedly, a one-size-fits-all approach would not address all the psychological challenges faced by athletes, therefore, personalized interventions might contribute to enhancing the quality and effectiveness of offered psychological services. This claim also appears in the findings of Tod and Bond (2010, p. 40), calling for a structured regime that integrates mental support to athletes. Also, the findings support research by Prior, Papathomas & Rind (2025), that the established identity of psychologists contributes to their effectiveness.

The results of this survey aimed at clarifying the claims set forth by the hypothesis. The first variable, the lack of skilled psychologists in the sports field of Azerbaijan was tested by statements measuring the characteristics of an effective sports psychologist. The respondents proposed their opinions on the effectiveness of professionals, which raised doubts about the quality of the existing psychological services. According to the answers, athletes view effective sports psychologists as individuals who are sincere, and confidential, can provide accurate direction and advice, have previous experience in the field, possess teamwork skills, and have an educational background in the field of sports psychology. These set qualities by athletes confirm the findings by Birrer et al., (2021), Sharp and Hodge (2014), and McCann (2008), and assist in ensuring that psychologists meet the criteria for being effective professionals that address the demands of athletes. Regarding athletes' responses, there is a lack of skilled sports psychologists in the country which contributes to the unavailability of effective psychological services in the sports field.

The second variable tested by the hypothesis was the awareness of the availability of sports

psychology services. As discussed above, a significant proportion of athletes and coaches lack a basic understanding of the role and benefits of sports psychologists, which contributes to the lack of effective psychology services in Azerbaijan. The findings support that, like other countries, the issue of unawareness of the benefits of consulting an SPC is prevalent (Anderson et al, 2004; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Sadler et al. 2024). The findings show that, while 26.7% of the athletes were completely aware of the psychological services, a significant portion of 33.3% remained unaware. As numerous athletes were uninformed about the advantages of sports psychology services, it is no surprise that utilizing the help of a sports psychologist is not that popular. Additionally, 23.3% of the survey participants completely agreed that a lack of awareness hinders the provision of effective psychological services. As the survey responses suggest, athletes believe that the unawareness of the benefits of sports psychology services is one of the factors behind the lack of effective sports psychologists in the country. Hence, sports federations should aim at promoting the benefits of consulting with a sports psychologist and raising awareness among athletes and coaches on the issue.

The last variable tested by the hypothesis is the social stigma of and labeling athletes who use the assistance of a sports psychologist as having psychological problems. The results of the survey imply that most of the athletes who utilized the services of a sports psychologist were not known by society as individuals who had psychological issues. Although this is a significantly good indicator, the majority of survey-takers did not use the services at all, or consult with a qualified sports psychologist. The findings agree with the research of Martin et al. (1997) that subjective norms still affect the usage of sports psychology services, yet there is gradual acceptance of consulting with an SPC as a typical behavior of athletes. Moreover, the findings are consistent with the research by Neumann et al. (2024) as there is willingness to consult a sport psychologist but discomfort in facing stigma in developing countries.

Regarding athlete gender differences, the previous studies suggested that female athletes are more open to receiving help from sports psychologists compared to their counterparts (Martin et al., 2011, Gorczynski et al., 2024). This survey once again confirms that women are slightly more inclined to utilize sports psychology services, yet there is significant proportion of male athletes that also consult with an SPC.

The responses from local coaches and psychologists once again confirm that effective sports psychologists need to have years of professional experience and need to be in the sports field for a long time. Instead of recent graduates and individuals who do not have an educational background in sports psychology, coaches prefer skilled psychologists with adequate education and experience. This once again confirms previous research by Tod and Bond (2010) and Birrer et al., (2021) by emphasizing the importance of years of experience and education. Regarding sports psychologists fulfilling their obligations, psychologists and coaches agree that, although there is growing importance of sports psychology services in Azerbaijan, the speed of development is very gradual, and the interest is rather low. Moreover, both coaches and sports psychologists believe that social stigma toward athletes who use sports psychology services exists, especially towards females. This finding is rather an interesting addition to previous claims by Martin et al. (2011) and Connelly (1991) of the gender differences in seeking psychological help due to the culture of Azerbaijani people, as society expects females to marry instead of pursuing a sports career. Nevertheless, the interviews confirm that there is social pressure, especially from family members of athletes who consult with sports psychologists. In these cases, coaches choose to alleviate the situation by talking directly to the family members of athletes. Additionally, like in other countries (Anderson et al., 2004; Sadler et al. (2024)), in Azerbaijan the unawareness of the benefits of consulting SPC is high, and raising awareness should start from the federations in the first place. Besides, coaches have an important role in affecting the psychological well-being of athletes, as in many sports fields there are no effective psychologists or any psychologists at all, thus coaches play the role of a sports psychologist. Overall, the results of interviews enhance previous research that SPCs play a vital role in shaping the mental health of athletes (Ravizza, 1990).

In conclusion, the survey findings discover the existence of a significant gap in the psychological services of the sports industry in Azerbaijan. The results call for the need to implement systemic improvements to ensure athletes' access to high-quality psychological services. The measures involve increasing awareness among athletes and coaches, enhancing the availability of sports psychologists within federations, and focusing on the employment of effective sports psychologists. By concentrating on the mentioned factors above, the sports industry

in Azerbaijan would create an environment that accommodates the mental well-being of athletes and helps to improve their performance rate and overall development.

Future research could explore more the specific challenges faced by athletes in the access of psychological services, potential barriers to implementing effective psychological services inside federations, and measure the long-term implications of integrating mental health support in the sports industry of Azerbaijan.

While the research sheds light on the role of sports psychology services for elite sports athletes in Azerbaijan, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that may impact the results of the findings. Firstly, there is a lack of previous research on the topic of sports psychology services in Azerbaijan. This limitation impacts the availability of relevant and recent literature specific to the country. Moreover, there might be the generalizability of results and further research needs to consider social, cultural, and other factors unique to the country. Additionally, the use of sports psychology services and availability of effective SPCs might be different for sports fields other than elite sports, therefore, further research might delve deeper into various sports fields in Azerbaijan.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research provides information on the significance of sports psychology services for elite sports athletes in Azerbaijan. Through the analysis of the current state of psychological support services in the sports industry, several factors contributing to the absence of effective services were identified. The findings indicate that the lack of skilled sports psychologists, lack of awareness of the advantages of psychological support services, and the labeling of athletes who seek assistance as having psychological problems, are major factors affecting the utilization of sports psychology services. The mentioned issues create obstacles for athletes in accessing mental support to enhance their performance and well-being. The paper stresses the importance of implementing a framework for sports federations in Azerbaijan that prioritizes the provision of high-quality sports psychology services, addresses the awareness gap, and challenges the social stigma associated with consulting with an SPC. Furthermore, the research emphasizes the need for sports psychologists to possess skills and knowledge, like interpersonal skills, friendliness,

and experience to effectively consult the athletes. By addressing these factors, effective sports psychology services would significantly improve the country, enhancing the well-being and performance of its elite sports athletes. It is crucial for sports federations, coaches, and management teams to comprehend the importance of psychological support in athletes' success and productivity. The research calls for increased awareness and collaboration among relevant stakeholders to ensure the provision of high-quality psychological services that meet the mental needs of elite sports athletes in the country.

Overall, this study acts as a foundation for future research with the aim of improving sports psychology services and contributing to the advancement of the sports industry in Azerbaijan.

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## APPENDIX

### Survey questions:

1. What is your gender?

Male

Female

2. What age group do you belong to:

16–20

21–25

26–30

31–35

35+

3. Which sports field you are competing in?

4. How long have you been participating in this sports field?

1 year

2–3 years

4–5 years

6–10 years

More than 10 years

5. Is there a sports psychologist in your sport federation?

Yes

No

I don't know

6. Have you ever used the sports psychologist services offered by your federation?

Yes

No

Not sure

7. If not, why you have never used this service?

8. If yes, how often do you meet a sports psychologist?

A few times a week

A few times a month

A few times a year

Before competitions

After competitions

9. If you have ever used, are the provided sports psychologist services satisfactory?

1 – Very unsatisfactory

2 – Unsatisfactory

3 – Neutral

4 – Satisfactory

5 – Very satisfactory

10. In which situations do you need sports psychology services? (tick all that apply)

Before competitions

After competitions

During injured period

During trainings

Other

11. Have you seen the benefits of sports psychology services in cases you have used it?

Yes

No

Partially

12. How do you see an effective sports psychologist: (1- Strongly disagree, 2 – Disagree, 3 – Neutral, 4 – Agree, 5 – Strongly Agree)
  1. An effective psychologist should be sincere.
  2. An effective psychologist should have a previous experience in sports industry.
  3. An effective psychologist should have teamwork skills.
  4. An effective psychologist should be able to give proper advice and direction.
  5. An effective psychologist should be confidential and reliable.
  6. An effective psychologist should have a higher education degree in the field of sports psychology.
13. How well are you aware of the benefits of sports psychology services?
  - 1 – Completely unaware
  - 2 – Unaware
  - 3 – Somehow aware
  - 4 – Aware
  - 5 – Completely aware
14. The lack of effective psychological services emerges from unawareness on the benefits of psychological services in sports industry.
  - 1 – Strongly Disagree
  - 2 – Disagree
  - 3 – Neutral
  - 4 – Agree
  - 5 – Strongly Agree
15. Have you ever been perceived as an individual having psychological issues for using psychological support services as an athlete?
 

Yes

No

Not sure
16. I feel labeled or judged for using psychological support services as an athlete.
  - 1 – Strongly Disagree
  - 2 – Disagree
  - 3 – Neutral
  - 4 – Agree
  - 5 – Strongly Agree
2. How important it is to have an experience in the sports psychology field to be an effective specialist and how well can sports psychologists in Azerbaijan can fulfill their obligations? (Exclusive question to psychologists)
3. Do athletes afraid of being recognized as someone with psychological problems contact you, and what measures do you take to prevent such situations?
4. To what extent there is unawareness on the benefits of psychological services in sports industry? What are the reasons and what measures could be taken to increase awareness about the benefits of psychological support services for athletes?
5. In your opinion, to what extent do the subjective norms in society affect the athletes' use of psychological services?
6. How do coaches affect the psychological well-being of athletes? Do you think coaches encourage athletes to use psychological services?
7. To what extent is a psychologist's role in an athlete's success?

*Preliminary survey questions:*

“Is there a sports psychologist in the federation you are a member of?” “As an athlete, is benefiting from psychologist services necessary?” “Have you ever used psychological services provided by your federation?” “Are you satisfied with the provided psychological services?” “How do you measure the effectiveness of provided psychological services?”

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*Interview questions:*

1. In your opinion, what knowledge, skills and qualifications should an effective sports psychologist possess?