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The Role of Emotional Intelligence and Perceived Coach Support in Sport Motivation Among Adolescent Athletes

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ABSTRACT

Background: Sport motivation plays a crucial role in adolescents' long-term participation in sport and psychological wellbeing. Emotional intelligence (EI) and perceived coach support are considered important psychological resources. However, their contribution to autonomous and controlled sport motivation among adolescent athletes remains insufficiently explored. Therefore, this study aimed to examine how EI and perceived coach support predict different types of sport motivation among adolescent athletes.

Methods: A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 276 adolescent athletes. Participants completed the Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale, the Sport Motivation Scale II (SMS-II), and a questionnaire assessing perceived coach support.

Results: EI and coach support were positively associated with each other and with both autonomous and controlled motivation. Hierarchical regression analysis showed that both EI and perceived coach support significantly predicted autonomous and controlled motivation, EI demonstrating the stronger predictive effect. Gender also significantly and negatively predicted both forms of motivation.

Conclusions: EI and perceived coach support are important predictors of both autonomous and controlled sport motivation among adolescent athletes. Therefore, interventions aimed at strengthening sport motivation should address both athletes' emotional competencies and the supportive role of coaches.

Keywords: Emotional competence, autonomous motivation, controlled motivation, coach–athlete relationship, youth athletes

1. INTRODUCTION

Considering the developmental challenges of adolescence, an increasing number of studies emphasise the importance of organised sport as a significant factor in promoting multidimensional development. Recent meta-analyses have shown that participation in sport contributes to improvements in both physical health (e.g. reduced body fat, improved physical health, and increased levels of physical activity) (Bengtsson et al., 2025) and psychological health and wellbeing, including higher self-esteem, greater life satisfaction, and a reduced risk of mental health problems such as depressive symptoms, stress, and anxiety (Wade et al., 2026). Regular participation in sport has also been associated with positive social outcomes, including better interpersonal skills, prosocial behaviour, and a stronger sense of belonging (Wade et al., 2026). Therefore, the

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well-established multidimensional benefits of sport highlight the importance of further investigating the factors that determine adolescents' sport motivation.

Athletes' motivation is determined by both internal and external factors. These factors, in turn, predict sport performance, engagement, persistence, and wellbeing by fostering either intrinsic or/and extrinsic motivation. Research has demonstrated that personal factors such as personal goals, enjoyment, self-determination, self-efficacy, self-confidence, and resilience/mental toughness exert a stronger and more enduring influence on intrinsic motivation and sport performance, thereby promoting long-term commitment and continuous improvement (Alkasasbeh & Akroush, 2025; Peris-Delcampo et al., 2024). In contrast, external factors, including financial rewards, recognition, and social pressure, generally lead to extrinsic motivation, which is associated with short-term benefits but lacks sustained long-term influence (Alkasasbeh & Akroush, 2025). Given the complexity of the motivational structure, it is important to investigate two determinants of sport motivation that are frequently highlighted in the literature: perceived coach support and athletes' emotional intelligence (EI).

Rees and Hardy (2000), while emphasising the importance of social support for athletes, distinguished four forms of social support: emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible support. These forms of support help athletes cope with emotional distress, the consequences of injuries, manage stress more effectively, and adapt to the challenges associated with sport participation. One of the most important sources of such support within the sporting environment is the coach, whose emotional support, understanding, constructive feedback, and recognition of athletes' efforts create the conditions for athletes to feel safe and supported (Alkasasbeh & Akroush, 2025; Gillet et al., 2010). Rees and Freeman (2007) distinguished two forms of social support: perceived support and received support. Perceived support is defined as an athlete's belief that emotional, informational, or other forms of support from the coach will be available when needed, whereas received support refers to the specific supportive actions provided by the coach that the athlete has actually experienced in a particular situation. The authors emphasised that perceived support constitutes a more stable psychological resource, influencing how athletes appraise challenging situations and their ability to cope with them. Perceived coach support has been associated with greater self-confidence and better sport adaptation, and it may operate through psychological or cognitive pathways, whereby individuals with high levels of perceived support are less likely to appraise events as stressful than those with low levels of perceived support (Rees & Freeman, 2007). Furthermore, supportive coach–athlete relationships and the social support provided by coaches have been shown to contribute to athletes' psychological wellbeing (Simons & Bird, 2023). In addition, coach support, expressed through constructive feedback, encouragement, and emotional availability, has been associated with higher levels of athlete motivation and sustained engagement in sport participation (Keegan et al., 2009). In contrast, controlling coaching behaviours have been linked to greater psychological pressure, burnout, less adaptive motivational processes, and poorer sport performance (Barcza-Renner et al., 2016).

Accordingly, in the present study, perceived coach support is conceptualised as the athlete's belief that the coach will provide emotional support, understanding, and assistance when needed. While acknowledging the substantial contribution of the coach's role, it should also be recognised that, over recent decades, EI has become an important area of research in sport psychology, associated with athletes' emotional understanding, social adaptation, and psychological wellbeing. The importance of EI is particularly evident in the context of sport, which is characterised by heightened emotional demands, competition, and continuous evaluation, while simultaneously providing opportunities to apply EI abilities in practice (Laborde et al., 2016). Sport participation exposes individuals to a wide range of emotions associated with competition, success, failure, and performance evaluation, while also providing opportunities to learn how to recognise, regulate, and manage these emotions, as well as resolve interpersonal conflicts. In such situations, EI becomes an important factor that helps individuals manage their emotions, develop patience, and maintain positive relationships with significant others in their social environment, such as parents, coaches, and teammates (Kopp & Jekauc, 2018). Recent studies have demonstrated that higher levels of EI enable athletes to enhance cognitive processes, cope more effectively with setbacks, maintain motivation, and achieve better sport performance (Montenegro-Bonilla et al., 2024). Evidence also suggests that adolescents with higher levels of EI experience more positive emotions, regulate their emotions more effectively, and consequently demonstrate higher self-motivation and better relationships with

parents, coaches, and teachers (Trigueros et al., 2019). Thus, EI is an important factor not only for adolescents' emotional wellbeing but also for their relationships with adults in both sporting and educational settings. It is important to emphasise that neither EI nor sport motivation represents a stable or immutable personality characteristic. Research has shown that, particularly during childhood and adolescence, both motivation and EI may change depending on the social environment and educational conditions (Kotsou et al., 2018).

Despite the considerable body of research examining adolescents' sport motivation, EI, and the role of coaches in athletes' development, there remains a lack of multidimensional studies investigating how psychological and social constructs – EI and coach support – jointly influence athletes' motivational processes. However, it should also be recognised that adolescents' sport motivation may vary according to sociodemographic factors, such as age, gender, and type of sport (Hu et al., 2025; Portela-Pino et al., 2019), indicating that these variables are also important determinants to consider in scientific analyses. Therefore, the present study addresses two *research questions*: first, whether EI, sport motivation, and perceived coach support are associated; and second, what role EI and perceived coach support factors play in predicting adolescents' sport motivation after accounting for sociodemographic factors? Based on the theoretical considerations presented above, it is *hypothesised* that EI and perceived coach support positively predict autonomous motivation. Accordingly, *the aim* of this study was to examine how EI and perceived coach support predict different types of adolescents' sport motivation. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of these relationships, the study also considers sociodemographic factors (age, gender, and type of sport) that may influence adolescents' sport motivation.

2. METHODS

Study design

The study was conducted in 2026 in schools located in Kaunas City and Kaunas District, Lithuania. Invitations to participate were sent to 30 schools, of which 12 agreed to participate, 7 declined, and the remaining schools did not respond. Following approval from the participating schools, an online survey link and QR code were distributed to students in Grades 9–12 through class teachers and physical education teachers. As some participants were minors, parental consent was obtained prior to their participation. Students whose parents did not provide consent were not included in the survey. At the beginning of the questionnaire, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the anonymity and confidentiality of the collected data, and the voluntary nature of participation. Consequently, data from 276 participants were included in the final analyses. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Social Research Ethics Committee of the Lithuanian Sports University (Protocol No. SMTEK-1).

Participants

A quantitative research design employing convenience sampling was used in this study. The sample consisted of 276 adolescent athletes from Kaunas City and Kaunas District, Lithuania (age: $M = 16.67$, $SD = 1.02$), including 187 females and 89 males. The participants had an average sport experience of $M = 5.95$ years ($SD = 2.06$). Participants were also classified into two sport categories: team sports ($n = 149$) and individual sports ($n = 127$). Team sports included basketball ($n = 37$), volleyball ($n = 73$), handball ($n = 4$), and football ($n = 35$), whereas individual sports included swimming ($n = 48$), judo ($n = 5$), athletics ($n = 38$), gymnastics ($n = 9$), tennis ($n = 20$), sailing ($n = 4$), and figure skating ($n = 3$).

Data collection

Emotional intelligence. Participants' EI was assessed using the *Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale* (Schutte et al., 1998). The scale had previously been adapted for use in Lithuania by other researchers (Malinauskas et al., 2018). It consists of 33 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('Strongly disagree') to 5 ('Strongly agree'). A total EI score was calculated following the original scoring procedure (Schutte et al., 1998), with possible scores ranging from 33 to 165. Higher total scores indicate higher levels of EI.

Sport motivation. Sport motivation was assessed using the *Sport Motivation Scale II (SMS-II)* (Pelletier et al., 2012). The SMS-II is one of the most widely used instruments for assessing sport motivation and has also been adapted for use in Lithuania (Grajauskas & Razmaitė, 2017). The version used in the present study consists of 18 items assessing six types of motivation: intrinsic motivation, integrated regulation, identified regulation, introjected regulation, external regulation, and amotivation. Within the framework of Self-Determination Theory, these motivational regulations can be grouped into two

broader categories. Intrinsic motivation, integrated regulation, and identified regulation represent *autonomous motivation*, whereas introjected and external regulation represent *controlled motivation* (Jelínek et al., 2021). Amotivation remains a separate construct. These motivational categories constitute the focus of the present study. Participants responded to each item (e.g., *"I participate in sport because I enjoy discovering new ways to improve."*; *"I participate in sport because people who are important to me would be disappointed if I did not."*) using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('Does not correspond at all') to 7 ('Corresponds exactly').

Perceived coach support. Perceived coach support was assessed using a five-item measure developed for the purposes of the present study based on previous research on coach social support (Coussens et al., 2024; Freeman et al., 2011). The items were designed to reflect the principal dimensions of coach social support identified in literature, namely emotional support, understanding, opportunity to open communication, and encouragement. The items were: *"My coach supports me in sport."*, *"I can talk to my coach when I experience difficulties during training or competitions."*, *"I feel that my coach understands my feelings related to sport."*, *"When needed, my coach provides me with advice regarding sport-related issues."*, and *"My coach always encourages me when I need it."* Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('Strongly disagree') to 5 ('Strongly agree'). The initial items were evaluated by two experts in sport psychology and sport pedagogy, and the wording was refined based on their recommendations. The questionnaire was subsequently pilot tested with 20 athletes, who reported no difficulties in understanding the items. The data were suitable for factor analysis (KMO = 0.849; Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: $\chi^2(6) = 864.646$, $p < .001$). Exploratory factor analysis yielded a single-factor solution (eigenvalue = 3.287), explaining 82.17% of the total variance. All items demonstrated very high factor loadings (0.899–0.920), with communalities ranging from 0.809 to 0.846. The scale also demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.927$). In the present study, perceived coach support was conceptualised as athletes' perceived emotional and interpersonal support provided by their coach, rather than as autonomy-supportive coaching behaviour.

Sociodemographic variables. Participants also provided sociodemographic information, including gender, age, sport discipline, and years of sport participation.

Data analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 31. First, the distribution of the data was examined by assessing skewness and kurtosis. The results indicated that skewness values were within the acceptable range (±1), whereas kurtosis values slightly exceeded the conventional thresholds. However, given the relatively large sample size, the distributions were considered sufficiently close to normal to justify the use of parametric statistical analyses (Curran et al., 1996). The internal consistency of the study measures was assessed using Cronbach's α coefficients. The factorial validity of the perceived coach support measure was evaluated using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Descriptive statistics were calculated for all study variables. Pearson's correlation was used to examine the relationships among the study variables. Hierarchical multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to examine the predictive effects of EI and perceived coach support on adolescents' sport motivation. Two separate regression models were estimated, with autonomous motivation and controlled motivation as the dependent variables. In each analysis, demographic variables (gender, age, and type of sport) were entered in the first step, whereas EI and perceived coach support were entered in the second step. Changes in explained variance (ΔR^2) were examined to determine the incremental contribution of EI and perceived coach support beyond the demographic variables.

3. RESULTS

Analysis of the descriptive statistics indicated that participants demonstrated a moderate level of EI ($M = 117.36$, $SD = 16.79$), whereas perceived coach support was rated above the scale midpoint ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.04$). Among the motivation dimensions, the highest mean score was observed for controlled motivation ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.67$), whereas the lowest mean score was found for amotivation ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.63$). The study measures demonstrated good internal consistency, with Cronbach's α coefficients of 0.91 for global EI, 0.92 for perceived coach support, 0.81 for autonomous motivation, 0.83 for controlled motivation, and 0.86 for amotivation. The distributions of the study variables were approximately normal. Skewness values ranged from −0.88 to 0.43, whereas kurtosis values ranged from 0.23 to 2.13 (Table 1).

Table 1. **Descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and normality indices for the study variables**

	M	SD	Cronbach's α	Skewness/kurtosis
EI	117.36	16.79	0.91	−0.88/2.13
Coach support	3.71	1.04	0.92	−0.82/0.23
Autonomous motivation	3.67	0.66	0.81	−0.82/0.86
Controlled motivation	3.79	0.67	0.83	−0.66/0.28
Amotivation	3.20	0.63	0.86	0.43/0.28

Note: EI – emotional intelligence.

Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the study variables. The results showed that EI was positively and weakly correlated with perceived coach support (r = 0.264, $p < 0.001$) and moderately correlated with both autonomous motivation ($r = 0.400$, $p < 0.001$) and controlled motivation ($r = 0.388$, $p < 0.001$). Perceived coach support was also positively and moderately associated with both autonomous motivation ($r = 0.385$, $p < 0.001$) and controlled motivation ($r = 0.402$, $p < 0.001$). No significant relationships were found between age or type of sport and the main study variables (Table 2).

Table 2. **Correlations between EI, perceived coach support, autonomous, controlled motivation, amotivation, type of sport, and age**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	–						
2. Type of sport	.133*						
3. EI	−.010	.003					
4. Coach support	−.117	−.011	.264**				
5. Autonomous motivation	−.026	−.103	.400**	.385**			
6. Controlled motivation	−.021	−.046	.388**	.402**	.841**		
7. Amotivation	−.068	−.096	.113	−.053	.384**	.322**	–

Notes: EI – emotional intelligence; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; – = predictor not entered into the model.

Table 3 presents the results of the hierarchical multiple regression analyses conducted to identify the predictors of autonomous and controlled motivation. The analyses were performed in two steps. In the first step, gender, age, and type of sport were entered as control variables. In the second step, EI and perceived coach support were entered simultaneously.

For autonomous motivation, the demographic variables explained 5.4% of the variance (R^2 = 0.054, $p = 0.002$). Among these variables, only gender was a significant predictor ($\beta = -0.215$, $p < 0.001$), whereas age and type of sport were not significant. The addition of EI and perceived coach support in the second step significantly improved the model ($\Delta R^2 = 0.234$, $p < 0.001$). EI emerged as the strongest positive predictor of autonomous motivation ($\beta = 0.345$, $p < 0.001$), followed by perceived coach support ($\beta = 0.268$, $p < 0.001$), while gender remained a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -0.214$, $p < 0.001$). The final model explained 28.8% of the variance in autonomous motivation ($R^2 = 0.288$).

For controlled motivation, the demographic variables explained 7.7% of the variance (R^2 = 0.077, $p < 0.001$). After EI and perceived coach support were added, the model explained an additional 23.4% of the variance ($\Delta R^2 = 0.234$, $p < 0.001$), resulting in a final explained variance of 31.1% (R^2 = 0.311). Gender remained a significant negative predictor in both the first ($\beta = -0.261$, $p < 0.001$) and second models ($\beta = -0.257$, $p < 0.001$), whereas age and type of sport were not significant predictors. EI was the strongest positive predictor of controlled motivation ($\beta = 0.332$, $p < 0.001$), followed

by perceived coach support (β = 0.284, $p < 0.001$). Overall, the hierarchical regression analyses demonstrated that EI and perceived coach support were significant positive predictors of both autonomous and controlled motivation, even after controlling for demographic variables. In both models, EI was a stronger predictor than perceived coach support.

Table 3. **Hierarchical regression analyses predicting autonomous and controlled motivation**

Predictor	Autonomous Motivation		Controlled Motivation	
	Model 1 β	Model 2 β	Model 1 β	Model 2 β
Gender	−0.215***	−0.214***	−0.261***	−0.257***
Age	−0.027	0.021	−0.019	0.031
Type of sport	0.118	0.048	0.129*	0.056
Coach support	–	0.268***	–	0.284***
EI	–	0.345***	–	0.332***
R^2	0.054	0.288	0.077	0.311
Adjusted R^2	0.044	0.275	0.066	0.298
ΔR^2		0.234		0.234

Notes: EI – emotional intelligence; β = standardised regression coefficients; *$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.001$; ΔR^2 for Model 2 was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$); – = predictor not entered into the model.

4. DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to examine how EI and perceived coach support predict adolescents' sport motivation. The principal finding was that both EI and perceived coach support were significant predictors of adolescents' sport motivation, independently predicting both autonomous and controlled motivation. Although EI emerged as the stronger predictor, perceived coach support also made a significant contribution to explaining motivation. These findings suggest that adolescents' sport motivation is shaped by both individual emotional resources and the social environment of sport, indicating that EI and perceived coach support may function as two complementary sources of motivational development. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that higher levels of athletes' EI are associated with greater coach–athlete trust, relationship closeness, and more effective communication (Jowett et al., 2024). Conversely, strengthening the coach–athlete relationship may enhance athletes' EI and their level of engagement in sport (Pan & Sui, 2025). Thus, our hypothesis was partially confirmed.

It is important to note that EI significantly predicted both forms of motivation, with a stronger association observed for autonomous motivation than for controlled motivation. Similar findings were reported by Rogaleva et al. (2024), who found positive associations between EI and autonomous motivation, whereas the relationship with controlled motivation was weaker. Likewise, Mercader-Rubio et al. (2023) demonstrated that the components of EI were positively associated with intrinsic motivation, which represents a component of autonomous motivation. This relationship may be explained by the fact that athletes with higher levels of EI are better able to regulate their emotions, cope more effectively with setbacks, and achieve superior sport performance, thereby increasing the likelihood of maintaining autonomous motivation (Laborde et al., 2016).

A similar pattern was observed for perceived coach support, which also emerged as a significant predictor of both forms of motivation. These findings may be explained by the fact that the present study assessed athletes' perceived emotional and interpersonal coach support, rather than autonomy-supportive coaching behaviour. Therefore, it is reasonable that this broader form of perceived coach support was associated with both autonomous and controlled motivation. Previous research has likewise demonstrated positive associations between coach support and athletes' motivation. For example, Keegan et al. (2009) reported that coach support, expressed through positive feedback, positive emotional responses, encouraging pre-competition conversations, cooperation, and supportive behaviours, was consistently and positively associated with athletes' motivation. Moreover, supportive coaching behaviours have been linked to higher levels of athletes' psychological safety, self-efficacy, and resilience, all of which contribute to the development of motivation (Sakallı et al., 2026).

In addition to answering research questions, the levels of EI, perceived coach support, and different

types of sport motivation were also examined. The findings indicated that the participating athletes demonstrated a moderate level of EI, which is consistent with the results reported by Fernandes et al. (2024), who found that adolescents generally exhibited moderate levels of EI, although emotion regulation scores were below average. These findings may be explained by the developmental characteristics of adolescence, as emotional development and emotion regulation require advanced self-regulatory processes and competencies that are still developing during this period (McLaughlin et al., 2015). The results indicate that the participating adolescents demonstrated slightly higher levels of controlled motivation than autonomous motivation. Drawing on earlier findings, Jordalen et al. (2018) suggested that as the importance of competition increases in youth sport, intrinsic motivation may gradually shift towards more controlled forms of motivation.

Interestingly, although the athletes evaluated perceived coach support relatively positively, their levels of controlled motivation were still slightly higher than their levels of autonomous motivation. This finding suggests that perceived coach support alone may not be sufficient to fully foster autonomous motivation. Previous research indicates that athletes' motivation may also be influenced by other social factors, including parental support (Gaudreau et al., 2016) and the broader sport context (Standage, 2023).

A statistically significant effect of gender on sport motivation was observed, with female athletes reporting lower levels of both autonomous and controlled motivation than male athletes. These findings are partly consistent with previous studies showing that female athletes reported lower levels of external regulation than males (Viciana et al., 2017). However, the present findings should be interpreted with caution because the gender distribution in the sample was not fully balanced.

No significant associations were found between age or type of sport and EI or perceived coach support. It should be noted, however, that the existing literature provides inconsistent findings regarding these relationships. Some studies have reported that athletes participating in team sports demonstrate higher levels of EI than those involved in individual sports (Castro-Sánchez et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2025). These advantages have been attributed to the greater opportunities for social interaction inherent in team sports, including communication, cooperation, social acceptance, social support, collaborative problem solving, and more frequent opportunities to recognise, express, and regulate emotions (Huang et al., 2025). In contrast, other studies have suggested that EI is more highly developed among athletes participating in individual sports than in team sports, with the exception of football (Mon-López et al., 2023). Finally, some researchers have reported no significant differences between team and individual sport athletes with respect to EI (Fernandes et al., 2024).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the present study indicate that EI and perceived coach support are important factors in explaining both autonomous and controlled motivation among adolescent athletes. These results suggest that adolescents' sport motivation is influenced by both internal emotional resources and external social support. Therefore, interventions aimed at strengthening sport motivation should address both the development of athletes' emotional competencies and the enhancement of supportive coach–athlete relationships.

Limitations

The present study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences regarding the relationships among the study variables. Therefore, future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs and complement quantitative findings with qualitative approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying adolescents' sport motivation. Second, the study assessed only perceived coach support. Future studies should also examine autonomy-supportive coaching behaviour using well-validated measurement instruments. Finally, the present study did not consider other psychosocial factors that may influence sport motivation, such as parental and peer support, personality characteristics, self-confidence, and etc. Future research should therefore investigate more comprehensive models of sport motivation that incorporate a broader range of individual and social determinants.

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