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THE RISE OF NIL ATHLETES & THE IMPACT ON SOCIAL BRANDING

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Abstract

On June 1, 2021, a monumental change occurred in college athletics; for the first time student-athletes legally gained the right to profit from their name, image and likeness (NIL). The conversation surrounding paying student-athletes started to heat up in the early 2000's, with the NCAA wanting to keep student-athletes at amateur status by not allowing them to be paid for their athletic careers. New state legislation and rule changes within the NCAA took advantage of a loophole; players still are not paid for their in-game efforts, but off the field they now have the ability to strike brand deals, sponsor/ambassadorships, star in advertisements and more. Since obtaining this newfound freedom, college athletes have struck various partnerships, been the face of thousands of brands, and built up their personal brands on social platforms. With these new opportunities, student-athletes have quickly capitalized on their marketability, leveraging social media as a primary tool for brand partnerships and audience engagement.

Laws and regulations vary from state to state, athletes from across the country have taken initiatives to make their mark in the NIL world. In the 2024-25 season, we saw top earners across multiple sports: Shedeur Sanders at \$5.1 million, Olivia Dunne at \$4 million, Cooper Flagg at \$1.5 million, and Paige Bueckers at \$1.5 million (Cook, 2024). While Division I athletes dominate NIL headlines, the opportunities extend beyond the highest level of collegiate competition. Athletes in Division II and Division III are getting in the mix of deal making. From local businesses, endorsements, and individual deals, there is opportunity in DII and DIII. Take Jack Betts and Connor Printz for example: Former wide receiver for Amherst College, Betts has accumulated over 35 NIL deals notably with companies such as Allbirds, Body Armour, and

PBfit. Betts has made over \$10,000 from NIL (Nevin, 2024). Former Claremont McKenna College guard Printz has almost 1.5 million social media followers, he has done over 80 NIL deals with Reebok, Powerade, and more (Nevin, 2024). Athletes are projected to make \$1.67 billion in NIL deals for the 2024-25 season (Berg, 2024), social media has become an important tool for building connections, audiences and securing NIL deals.

Despite the financial potential of NIL, many athletes lack the strategic knowledge required to effectively navigate personal branding, platform selection, and ethical concerns. While social media has become a central tool for building NIL value, its fast-evolving landscape presents challenges for athletes seeking sustainable brand growth. Different social media platforms offer unique benefits for NIL athletes. TikTok's algorithm-driven content discovery allows for rapid follower growth, Instagram provides high-end brand partnerships through polished content, and YouTube enables long-form storytelling that deepens fan engagement. It is essential for these athletes to have a better understanding of the impact social media can make on their own NIL journey. Thilo Kunkel, associate professor at Temple's School of Sport, Tourism and Hospitality Management, weighed in on the NIL discussion notably pointing out how LSU gymnast Livvy Dunne's social media branding led to her NIL success: "Dunne has garnered an international following on social media, including more than 5 million Instagram followers, which is key to her NIL value. She's signed deals with brands like American Eagle and Motorola, and it is estimated that her NIL value is close to \$4 million." (Hart, 2024). With no formal guidebook, where are athletes relying on to teach them about personal branding? While there are some who may learn the business side to NIL in classes, only 33% of Division II and

32% of Division I are business majors (NCAA, 2022). Without formal business education, many student-athletes enter the NIL space without knowledge of contract negotiation, long-term financial planning, or the ethical implications of brand alignment. This knowledge gap raises concerns about potential exploitation and the long-term sustainability of their personal brands.

With the creation of Name, Image, and Likeness being so new, there is very minimal research and data into the application of the policy by student-athletes. There has been research on the impact NIL will have on institutions (Meares et al., 2024; Benedek et al., 2021), scholarships (Kian, Zimmerman, 2023; Sanderson, 2022), student-athletes and their mental well-being (Gulavani et al., 2023). Research has also been done on how NIL will impact content and intellectual property (Kumar, 2023), the ethical outlooks (Fortunato, 2021), as well as data transparency (Boston, 2023). When it comes to the research surrounding NIL and social media, we have only touched the surface looking at the potential value, the support athletes have received, and personal branding value (Kunkel, 2021; Corr et al., 2023; Cocco et al., 2023). While there is minimal information surrounding this empowering and groundbreaking rule, using the research that has gone into NIL, social media marketing (Teo et al., 2019; Goirizelaia et al., 2025; Çetintürk, 2024; Kumar and Kumar, 2025), and sports marketing (Abeza, 2023) can create a starting point for further research to come.

This paper examines the role of social media in NIL branding by analyzing platform effectiveness, fan engagement, and ethical considerations, offering insights into how college athletes can maximize their brand potential while navigating the challenges of digital

sponsorships. The first part discusses the challenges associated with Name, Image, and Likeness that the average collegiate level athlete faces during their NIL eligible years. The second part discusses online marketing insights, platform usage, and strategies for athletes. The overall goal for this research is to provide insights on social media practices that can be used as a starting point for students as well as institution administrators.

Literary Review:

Despite the unprecedented financial opportunities afforded by NIL rights, many student-athletes face a significant knowledge gap in strategically navigating personal branding, platform selection, and ethical considerations within the rapidly evolving social media landscape.

The goal of this literary review is to analyze the current landscape of knowledge surrounding NIL, specifically focusing on the approach to social media by the student athletes. At time of writing, NIL has not been researched for more then 4 years. The volume of work regarding NIL is tiny in comparison to the research regarding social media marketing and professional athletes. One of the most common reoccurring topics that came from this research is that student-athletes feel there is a lack of support and education about NIL from the institutions they are playing for (Corr et al., 2023; Kunkel et al., 2021; Coyle, 2022). Another common trend that had come from this compiled research is most athletes do not understand social media platforms and how to build their own personal brandings to increase NIL value (Corr et al., 2023; Kunkel et al., 2021; Cocco et al., 2023). The significant gap in this research pertains to not

having an understanding of what works for student-athletes when it comes to marketing themselves on social media. There is already research that covers what marketing does well on these social platforms for brands, influencers (Kepios & We Are Social, 2024, 2025; Goirizelaia et al., 2025; Kumar & Kumar, 2025; Teo et al., 2019; Smith, 2024), even professional athletes (Çetintürk, 2024; Doyle et al., 2020). There has not yet been research that dives into what works for NIL athletes in particular, while also considering the pressure that comes with being a student-athlete.

The scope of this research primarily studies student-athlete perceptions of NIL, institutional perceptions, sports marketing, social media marketing and platforms. In particular there is a focus on social media platforms that current student-athletes are familiar with, have been favored within the scope of online marketing, as well as being popular with the current target demographic, GenZ (Smith, 2024; De Witte, 2022). There is also a focus on including research that has been published since 2019, with a notable exception of the source *Institute for Advertising Ethics*. This parameter was put in place to keep the research as up to date as possible with the current media landscape. Without it there would be too many variables regarding social media practices, ethics, social norms, platform suggestions, and algorithm changes that would not be applicable to the current platforms we see now.

There were a few ethical challenges and considerations that had to be taken into account while compiling this research. As stated in the abstract as well as later on, there is a lack of business training within the NIL space for these athletes. With no formal education on contracts,

business ventures, or long-term financial planning, students were typically left in the dark (Corr et al., 2023). Mental health and the well-being of athletes have to be taken into careful consideration as the world learns about how to best navigate the road of NIL and social media marketing for these athletes. The continuous added pressure can cause student-athletes harm in their mental health, athletic standing, and within their education (Gulavani et al., 2023; Coyle, 2022; Sanderson, 2023). A good majority of these student athletes who are new to college will have blind trust within the administrators helping them within their NIL deals and negotiations. This could be cause for potential exploitation, backlash from fellow athletes and fans, and foster misinformed trust within teams (Fortunato, 2025; Corr et al., 2023). The social media landscape is ever changing and evolving, what would be considered industry standard as for procedures within social media marketing one day could do a 180 and be detrimental to a brand the following week. It can be very difficult to stay constantly up to date with these trends, and it can make long-term growth within these platforms (Kepios & We Are Social, 2024, 2025) difficult even with formal education in social marketing.

While current research touches on parts regarding mental health (Coyle, 2022; Fortunato, 2025; Gulavani et al., 2023), student-athlete perceptions (Corr et al., 2023; Gulavani et al., 2023), value of NIL deals and branding (Berg, 2024; Boston, 2023; Cocco et al., 2023; Hart, 2024; Meares et al., 2024; Kunkle et al., 2021; Kian & Zimmerman, 2023), they all fall short. There is very limited comprehensive understanding around how student-athletes can properly navigate social media platforms while maximizing their NIL value and overcoming the additional challenges they will face.

Methodology:

The methods used in this research are a mixed-method study of qualitative and quantitative research. With the minimal research that exists surrounding this groundbreaking topic, this method was the best choice to offer the qualitative data alongside the reasonings, and quantitative research would be the best way for those newer to the topic to digest. It also allows the research to be seen in a broad understanding of the patterns and trends while providing in-depth insight into the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of the presented patterns. The deep insight is crucial to understand the complexities of branding while being a student-athlete. With that being said the target population for this research will be college-level student-athletes involved in NIL activities across various divisions.

Challenges Associated with Name, Image, and Likeness Marketing

The new NCAA policy change produced a remarkable rearrangement, so these athletes were now able to make a profit on the commercial use of their name, image, and likeness; something far different from the original amateur status once held. With these new opportunities and ventures, new challenges are unearthed for these athletes to face. Not only were these young students faced with balancing the average college responsibilities such as deciding what and where they will study, making friends, and leaving their family for the first time, but now they are asking themselves: *“How much is my game worth?” “Is this partnership worth it?” “Am I*

being compensated fairly?”. To understand why this research is so important to the longevity of NIL and collegiate athletics, we must first understand where current student athletes stand in regard to NIL deals and marketing.

A study from 2023 by Corr, Weiner and Stokowski interviewed athletes, specifically from the Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) level, to determine what understanding athletes had regarding their NIL value and discussed what support they had been offered or received regarding NIL deals and value. All participating athletes in the study stated that they had pursued NIL deals with only 51.8% securing deals. The study also suggested that most athletes did not have a grasp on their NIL value, with only 7.4% of athletes from the study indicating that they understood their perceived NIL value. Additionally, some athletes stated that they did not attempt to pursue more NIL deals because they had no understanding of their NIL worth. Lennard, a football player was quoted in the study stating *“I’ve never thought to look. Didn’t think I’d have any value”* (Corr et al., 2023, p. 340). We are left to wonder, *what deals and opportunities did he miss out on by not having the resources available?* Looking at the bigger picture, the research suggests that out of a reported total 520,000 student athletes, only 38,480 have an understanding of their NIL value. That is less than half of the total amount of athletes competing at the Division I level for the 2021-2022 academic year (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2022).

Athletes have an understanding that their social media presence has a direct effect on their NIL standings and influences how much they can earn. In fact, Opendorse’s Athlete Rate Card is directly affected by the social media presence of athletes. Corr et al (2023) stated in their

research that “While nearly every participant indicated social media following was of utmost importance in the NIL marketplace, many expressed frustrations with the lack of education provided by their institution regarding expanding their social media presence.” At the time of writing, the vast majority of NCAA athletes have been born from the year 1997 to 2008, (27 to 17 years) placing them in Generation Z. This generation has been coined ‘iGen’ as they grew up with digital technology and social media platform from a young age, they have seen the power of social media firsthand but understanding how to utilize that power is a completely different skillset (De Witte, 2022). As the understanding of social media power has grown in the mind of student-athletes, more have added ‘Influencer’ to their resume only adding further onto the responsibilities of these young adults (Kian & Zimmerman, 2023).

There is also a plethora of challenges that come with being a social media influencer. One study in particular showed that the well-being of athletes declined after the new NIL policy went into place. More notably, specifically their expressions of joy and anger had decreased significantly (Gulavani et al., 2023). While there are multiple factors that can be attributed to this decline, it would be ignorant to not consider that the expectations that are attributed with NIL deals and brand agreements have had a considerable impact on the emotions and overall well-being of these student athletes.

So, what is the return on investment for these athletes who are putting their limited free time into these ‘*new and exciting opportunities*’? The NIL industry has been projected to be earning about one billion annually and it is no secret that the revenue distribution has not been

even across the board with occasional high-school athletes out earning college athletes (Boston, 2023). Studies have shown that the median earning per NIL deal is 53 dollars (USD), two sports acquired 38% of NIL deals and 66% of the NIL financial compensation in the given year (Corr et al., 2023). The average American based student working an on-campus job during the school year cannot exceed 20 hours per week. At the average 12 dollars an hour this student would make a gross total of 480 dollars (USD) each bi-weekly paycheck. In order to reach that amount in NIL deals at the median rate of 53 dollars a deal, the athlete would have to secure 9 new deals every two weeks.

The pressure of school, their athletic career and own personal lives has, at times, been too much for the average student-athlete. Now the added pressure of having this ‘amazing opportunity’, having no knowledge, with little to no help from institutions and being in the shadow of previous high earning athletes; it is easy to see why some athletes cannot find the silver lining.

Social Media in Name, Image, and Likeness

When someone thinks of social media, what would be the first thing to pop into their head? Is it likes, shares, followers? Or is it Instagram, TikTok, maybe Facebook or YouTube? Reports have stated that as of 2024 there have been 5 billion social media users globally. Research from We Are Social also shows that social networking platforms have become the most

popular destinations with 97% of connected adults visiting minimum one social application monthly. They have also reported that adults have opted to visit social platforms over conventional TV, showing a massive shift in the average consumer's media consumption. This shift is key to uplifting smaller creators and accounts as the power is no longer in the hands of network producers and streaming services, now it is the consumer and creators who hold this power of popularity. Currently brands are struggling to stay current and consistent, so they are making strategic decisions to stay afloat. Meaning, many of them are making a noticeable shift in what they consider to be '*optimal demographics*' when it comes to their marketing efforts: targeting GenZ. This means if they are using Instagram and TikTok the most, those are the most important platforms to grow to be noticed by brands (Goirizelaia et al., 2025). This does not mean that Facebook, YouTube and X (formally known as Twitter) are now no longer considered valuable. They are just home to different, and less lucrative demographics in the sense of modern marketing. For this research we will be focusing on these two main platforms: Instagram and TikTok.

Meta's Instagram has been the most popular application globally since 2024. The platform has been experiencing a surge in popularity on a global level, reports in early 2025 stating that the platform sees 2 billion Monthly Active Users (MAU). It also has a potential advertising audience of 1.74 billion globally. Among younger populations, ages 11 to 23, Meta's other major platform, Facebook, has now been considered old-fashioned and outdated. The most popular platform among university-level students is Instagram. TikTok has experienced phenomenal growth as it has established itself as a powerhouse online. As of 2024 the platform

hosts 985.3 million MAU with estimations of the platform reaching 1,101.8 million by the year 2026. TikTok's ad reach is comparable to that of Instagram's reaching 1.59 billion as reported in 2025. It has become a household name within the lives of college-level students with an average rating of 7.5 out of 10 (Kepios & We Are Social, 2024, 2025; Goirizelaia et al., 2025).

The pull to these platforms can be contributed to the type of content being served as well as the turn to using social media platforms as a research tool. There is a growing trend within younger generations that they prioritize and prefer "audiovisual content over written text" (Goirizelaia et al., 2025, p. 90). Both Instagram and TikTok have made their platforms optimal for these shorter types of content. Instagram successfully shifted from an image sharing platform to showcasing and rewarding reels content. Instagram also ditched their chronological-based feed to something more personalized for the viewer, pushing ephemeral content closely mirroring TikTok. But just because they are similar does not mean they should be used the same way. TikTok has been positioned as the optimal platform choice for influencers to share marketing campaigns globally. In 2024 68.8% of influencers preferred TikTok over 46.7% for Instagram (Goirizelaia et al., 2025, p. 91). This result is mainly due to the higher engagement rates that are seen on TikTok rather than Instagram, especially as engagement rates are just as, if not more, lucrative as having a high follower count (Kepios & We Are Social, 2025).

What makes brands want to work with an athlete? That depends, it could be that the athlete is playing a highly followed sport like football or men's basketball. It could be that they

can reach a niche audience better, or it is an opportunity from a local business. But the most common reason athletes are receiving NIL deals is based on having a strong social media presence and authentic connection with various audiences. Having a solid social media profile provides these brands a chance to market themselves in a way that is far more lucrative than traditional marketing efforts (Fortunato, 2025). Having an extensive reach on social platforms has a direct effect on the amount of offers made and increases the overall compensation received (Kunkel et al., 2021). Athletes, especially newer to the limelight, tend to have more favorability by being seen as humbler and more relatable, making it easier for their audience to connect with them. This is something that a lot of brands want to achieve but can struggle to do. Athletes also tend to have higher engagement ratios than compared to the traditional influencer; this in particular is considered by companies when looking to make a deal.

So what is seen as more valuable: high follower count or high engagement rates? Having a larger social media following has been consistently cited as the most important component when trying to raise NIL value and securing deals. But if followers do not care about what someone is doing or the message they are sending out, then how successful will that marketing campaign be? When it comes to influencer status, they can be grouped and labeled as such:

Mega Influencers: 1 million or more followers. They offer widest reach, typically a disconnected relationship with followers.

Macro Influencers: Typically fall within the 100,000 to 1 million follower range.

Micro Influencers: 5,000 to 100,000 follower range. Seen as having a strong and authentic connection and parasocial relationship with their followers. Typically leading to higher purchase intentions to engagement ratio.

Nano Influencers: Ranging from 1,000 to 10,000 followers. Despite having the smallest following, nano influencers often have higher organic engagement rates compared to ‘bigger’ influencers (Çetintürk, 2024).

When looking at an athlete's personal branding, it is helpful to understand where one may lie so they can approach deals with an idea of what they are bringing to the table. This is not to diminish athletes that find themselves as a ‘nano’ or ‘micro’ influencer, but to highlight how they can shine in their own right. While it has been noted prior that sports like football and men’s basketball have higher viewership, it does not mean that female athletes or niche sports are or should be overlooked. As their own story, sport, or personality can resonate with people in its own unique way. We can use former Louisiana State University gymnast, Olivia Dunne’s NIL value and popularity as a prime example. As of writing she has 5.4 million followers on Instagram, and 8 million followers on TikTok. In this instance she would be classified as a ‘mega influencer’. In 2023 the projected NIL value for Dunne was said to be at 2.3 million dollars (USD). The majority of her earnings came directly from her social media presence (Kian & Zimmerman, 2023). We can then take a look at some of the athletes who participated in the research from Corr et al (2023) Madison having a following of 3,000 and Shanti having 63,000 followers. These athletes would be considered a ‘nano’ and a ‘micro’ influencer respectively, in the report it is stated that “they had made thousands of dollars through NIL-based financial

compensation. While Shanti acknowledges her social media following benefits her in securing NIL deals, Madison contended that any current college athlete could have success in the vast NIL marketplace” (Corr et al., 2023, p. 340). So, to answer the question of what is more important: high following or high engagement. The answer lies in where the athlete is now, understand what the selling point is. For those in the “nano/micro” sphere, they should foster that engagement. By taking the time to connect with their followers and know that is where their value lies. Those on the reverse end that find themselves as a “mega/macro” influencer, when it comes to deals understanding that they are not providing a deep connection or incredibly loyal audience, their account is a springboard for the brand to be heard and associated with them. No matter where an athlete may lie on the influencer spectrum, understanding their personal branding can be the guide on deciding if a deal is ‘worth it’.

What is considered *personal branding*? This is the strategic cultivation and monetization of one’s reputation and image. What would fall under that is photos, signature, voice, physical details, and one’s name, image and likeness (Kumar, 2023). Demonstrating and effectively communicating an athlete’s personal brand beyond their profile picture and Instagram biography was labeled the biggest struggle for athletes according to a study published by Journal of Sport Management. Their findings in regard to their first hypothesis was, “Over 90% of Instagram profiles included in this analysis were rated as a 3 or below on our 5-point scale regarding the ability to communicate a distinct and quality personal brand” (Cocco et al., 2023). So how can these athletes improve their overall personal branding for Instagram? Research by Doyle et al., (2020) suggests that having good quality photos and videos on their account will improve their

overall personal branding. Their research saw the ‘good quality’ category photos outperformed both the ‘poor quality’ and ‘professional quality’ photos. Along with that Cocco et al., (2023) suggests in their research that higher quality directly impacts the amount of engagement each post receives. Given what was found above, athletes should prioritize higher quality photos and videos when posting on their accounts.

Authenticity is also directly tied into personal branding. If an athlete has a strong or specific stance, they should stick with it to earn more credibility not only with their audience but with the brands they will attract as well. For instance, if an athlete is openly against fast-fashion and overproduction, it would be going against their personal brand to have a deal with SHEIN due to how they are perceived in the media. Staying true to core values will give the audience an impression of credibility and a reputation of brand congruence. Athletes that establish themselves as trustworthy and credible will find far more success than those who do not (Kian & Zimmerman, 2023). Regarding credibility, brands typically look to see if a profile is verified with the social platform, proving the identity of who is running the account. This directly impacts the NIL value with a notable study showing a 293% higher social media NIL value when verified (Cocco, Kunkel, & Baker, 2023). Verification acts almost as a digital version of a signature across the posts made by an athlete. This type of transparent authenticity should also be shown to the audience that an athlete is connecting with. Clearly communicating when posts contain free materials or are paid endorsements can build stronger trust between the poster and audience. This transparency is the fourth principle within ethical advertising, “Advertisers should clearly disclose all material conditions, such as payment or receipt of a free product, affecting

endorsements in social and traditional channels, as well as the identity of endorsers, all in the interest of full disclosure and transparency” (Institute for Advertising Ethics, n.d.). Without this clear communication audiences may mistake the post to be a genuine and authentic representation of the athlete’s beliefs, creating a false narrative. This misinformed trust could lead to backlash and being associated with unethical marketing practices, harming the personal branding that was created (Fortunato, 2025). Having transparency surrounding marketing posts along with verification status on accounts will improve favor not only with brands but equally the audience.

When it comes to looking at how an athlete should think about posting on their accounts, there is no one-size-fits-all strategy. It will depend on many factors such as the sport they play, where they are located, and their own boundaries to posting. However, as collegiate athletes are seen as emerging brands, research suggests that continuous posting has a positive impact on the intended audience. This is extremely applicable to newer athletes as the research from Cocco et al. (2023) says “consumers may be more receptive to frequent content from athletes who are still in the process of defining and developing their brand compared to athletes with an established brand.” Regular posting and higher posts counts have also been linked to raising NIL value by establishing credibility and loyalty within their brand. There was a link between a 1% raise in post count contributed to a 0.07% increase in social media NIL value for all athletes. For Division I athletes there was a stronger association with a 0.10% NIL value increase when there was a 1% post increase. (Cocco et al., 2023; Corr et al., 2023).

While frequent posting can improve the overall NIL value of an athlete. It is important to balance scripted or paid content with glimpses into the life an athlete is leading. Having a social strategy that is heavily focused on branded content can be detrimental to the overall branding and authenticity to an athlete. This type of content can appear overly “scripted” and feels disconnected from the audience, in turn creating a transactional relationship. Athletes should feel encouraged to post a diverse array of content. Athletic performance content has been shown to attract the highest levels of engagement rates when compared to appearance, lifestyle, and other non-athletic content (Fortunato, 2025; Doyle et al., 2020). Having a mix of athletic content and glimpses into the personal life and interests of an athlete have been shown to resonate and better display the values of an athlete, again building on authenticity creating a more loyal connection to the audience (Cianfrone, 2023). The mundane “behind-the-scenes” content along with storytelling is essential to creating and maintaining a personal brand. This could be an athlete recording what an average day might look like for them, or what they do during their offseason. There is also a clear association with posts including teammates and an increase in engagement and trust. The inclusion of at least one teammate encourages more engagement on the post such as likes. This “co-branding” or crossover seeing more engagement is partially due to the extended reach from another brand (teammate). More established teammates can help boost newer or less known teammates by collaborating on posts to improve engagement and additionally improve follower counts for both athletes (Doyle et al., 2020). Not surprisingly, data shows that there is no significant relation between sponsored content and high rates of engagement. Consumers have identified this behavior as being overly ‘scripted’ and disconnected from the athlete. To counteract this when posting sponsors athletes should integrate

the sponsor related content into a post about athletic performance to facilitate increased engagement (Fortunato, 2025; Doyle et al., 2020).

Taking the previous research into consideration, posting mostly branded content (both sponsorships related or personal branding) can have negative effects on an athlete's mental health. Since the growing success of TikTok, social media has been seen as an online haven where individuals are encouraged to be themselves and true to their own beliefs. This is mainly due to the unique algorithm and content funnels that TikTok has created. That may not be the case entirely, when considering their personal online image as a job there are certain topics and ideas that athletes have been pushing away from sharing everything for the sake of self-preservation. While the majority of data and research pushes the narrative to "be smart, and be yourself" online, anyone who has consistently interacted with social platforms knows that there is always, to a degree, negative push back. This push back, or "cancel culture" is quite prevalent with hot topics like religion or politics, leading athletes to suppress parts of their daily life to reduce the negativity. As we discussed prior, the pressure for these student athletes to succeed on the field, in the classroom and now online is intense. "However, self-[presentation] has, for many athletes, become significant labor. That is, it is a lot of work to document both athletic and non-athletic activities, in an effort to drive followers and enhance revenue" (Sanderson, 2023). Athletes that are considering taking NIL and their online marketing seriously, need to have a complete understanding regarding the workload that they are taking on.

The institutions that are part of the NCAA should also be aware of their role in NIL on the side of social media. Personal branding of athletes directly affects the institution that players are a part of. Having a team with strong online presences can help enhance the appeal to a university and play a big role in the recruitment process. Some institution marketers have been trying to angle the perception of their respective football programs to highlight their organizations and messages to make it the best it can be, as having a strong football image is considered more desirable with recruits (Benedek et al., 2021).

Conclusion:

What we can conclude from the data collected is that NIL has become a gift and a curse for these athletes. Yes, they have the ability to earn from their personal branding, but with no real guidelines or efforts to help lead the way, navigating NIL can cause more stress for these athletes effecting their overall performance, mental health, and their education. In the research regarding the NIL effects on mental health, Coyle (2022) stated about the findings, “Ultimately, the findings support potential shortcomings of NIL policy on student-athletes, forcing them to function in a business capacity and therefore inevitably leading to losing their focus on getting an education and playing at a high-level”. While this research alone cannot guarantee that a student-athlete will reach the earnings of others like Dunne, Sanders or Flagg; it can be seen as a guide to navigating a social presence and marketing tactics. It is believed that even without the support of their institution, a student is capable of directly influencing their own NIL value purely based on their social media accounts. While easier said than done, the mental wellbeing, educational

standing, and desires of an athlete must be taken into consideration before making any decisions on NIL deals. This is supported by the research by Cocco et al. (2023) where they state, “This finding supports claims that athletes are in the position to directly influence their personal social media brand value”. The power lies directly in the hands of those athletes, while Name, Image, and Likeness is widely considered an amazing once-in-a-lifetime opportunity by the general public as well as many researchers and professionals (Berg, 2024; Kunkel et al., 2021). One must have the complete understanding of the responsibilities that are equated with NIL prior to making any decisions. Student-athletes deserve to have more education, and free will on their personal branding and when it comes to their NIL negotiations, for the best possible outcome.

Limitations and Future Research:

The most apparent limitation experienced is that this research exists in a nascent field. It was challenging to build a body of work based from four years (one average college experience) without affecting the depth of the comparable data. In this work there is a clear limitation stated that this research is heavily guided towards two specific platforms: Instagram and TikTok. While this helped create a clear focus for the research to flow properly, it does limit the amount of generalized data and findings that could be applied to all platforms. Along with that, staying generalized regarding sports, age, and gender means that findings specific to one demographic were not included as they would not be applicable to the entire target population of college level student-athletes that are participating in NCAA activities.

Within continued research of this topic, there are multiple avenues that this could continue down. Highlighting the differences between sports, division levels, as well as athlete demographics (age, gender, geo-location) could provide further and more distinct strategies that future student-athletes could implement in their personal brandings. With the continue implementation of artificial intelligence (AI) within social media platforms, this could become a defining factor and helpful tool that was not mentioned within this specific study. This could help decide if/why a student-athlete should take an NIL deal, providing insight such as return on investment, what to post based off of previous engagement rates, or even predict who else is coming up in the NIL world with predictive analytics.

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