

Personal Branding via Social Media in the NIL Era: A Content Analysis of Top Female College Athletes' Instagram Posts

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This study explores how prominent female college athletes utilize Instagram for personal branding in the name, image, and likeness (NIL) era, applying the model of athlete brand image (MABI) to analyze self-presentation patterns. Through qualitative content analysis of 300 Instagram posts from the top 10 NIL female earners, the study identifies key branding themes: relationship effort, competition style, physical attractiveness, and symbol. The findings reveal that while attractive appearance remains a dominant branding tool for female athletes, there is a notable shift toward integrating athletic performance and marketable personal lifestyle, indicating a more holistic and strategic approach to self-presentation on social media. This evolution challenges traditional gendered narratives of female athletes, fostering empowerment through greater control over their public personas. The study extends the MABI's applicability in the digital age and offers valuable insights for female athletes, marketing professionals, and intercollegiate athletic programs on navigating NIL opportunities while maintaining authenticity and agency.

Keywords: NIL, female athletes, athlete branding, social media self-presentation, NCAA, Instagram

Introduction

The introduction of name, image, and likeness (NIL) rights has redefined the collegiate sports landscape. NIL has not only shifted the conversation around student-athlete compensation but has also presented complex implications regarding athlete branding, equity, and digital self-presentation (Harris & Brison, 2024). NIL's turning point can be traced to Ed O'Bannon's lawsuit against the

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NCAA in the late 2000s, in which he contended that athletes were being unfairly excluded from profits generated by the use of their likeness in NCAA-branded video games. O'Bannon, a former UCLA basketball player, argued that his image was being used in video games without his consent or compensation. This case catalyzed a national debate that eventually led to substantial legislative and judicial actions.

In 2019, California enacted the Fair Pay to Play Act, which prohibited universities from penalizing athletes for monetizing their NIL, prompting other states to follow similar legislation (Van Horne, 2021). The NCAA introduced an interim NIL policy allowing college athletes to benefit financially from their personal brands. As of 2024, the NIL market has been valued at approximately \$1.67 billion (Berg, 2024), showcasing high-profile deals, such as Shedeur Sanders' \$6.2 million endorsements with Nike, Gatorade, BRADY, and Mercedes-Benz (Rudder, 2025), and Cooper Flagg's \$4.3 million valuation tied to Gatorade, Fanatics, and New Balance endorsements (Schultz, 2025). These figures highlight the growing economic stakes for collegiate athletes and present new pressures and dynamics, such as maintaining consistent performance, managing personal brand images, and utilizing customized self-presentation strategies on social media.

The rise of NIL has affected various stakeholders. University programs are now leveraging NIL opportunities in recruitment strategies, often favoring institutions with access to lucrative collectives and commercial networks. Notably, 73% of Football Bowl Subdivision athletic directors believe that NIL will reduce competitiveness across programs (Russo, 2023). Additionally, brand sponsors walk a fine line between targeting elite athletes in revenue-generating sports and ensuring equitable representation across genders and disciplines.

In particular, female college athletes are utilizing NIL to enhance not only their financial status but also visibility, advocacy, and gender equity in sports. Through social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, female college athletes can bypass traditional gatekeepers to cultivate individual brands and engage with wider audiences (Hawkins-Jedlicka et al., 2023). Understanding how female college athletes strategically use these platforms provides insights into both their self-presentation behaviors and the sociocultural norms that shape them. This study focuses on how the top 10 NIL-earning female college athletes present themselves on Instagram, applying the model of athlete brand image (MABI) to explore self-branding patterns and opportunities (Arai et al., 2014).

Literature Review

Athlete Branding and Social Media

The digital age has fundamentally reshaped how athletes develop and communicate their personal brands, with social media serving as a vital platform for image management, engagement, and commercial opportunity. Arai et al. (2014) laid the conceptual foundation for athlete branding by identifying its multidimensional components, including athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle, which are further divided into sub-dimensions. Athletic performance includes athletic expertise, competition style, sportsmanship, and rivalry; attractive appearance encompasses physical attractiveness, body fitness, and symbolic femininity; and marketable lifestyle covers life story, role model, and relationship effort. Previous studies have applied MABI and its sub-dimensions to better understand how athletes balance performance, appearance, and lifestyle in strategically constructing their personal brands within a commercially driven digital landscape (Hawkins-Jedlicka et al., 2023; Wanzer et al., 2024). Moreover, Carlson and Donovan (2013) introduced athlete brand personality, emphasizing traits like sincerity and excitement as drivers of fan loyalty and brand strength.

Professional athletes have increasingly adopted strategic branding practices on social media. Hodge and Walker (2015) emphasized the importance of authenticity and consistency, while Smith and Sanderson (2015) found that Instagram is used to create a balance between relatability and professionalism, thereby enhancing public perception through visual storytelling. Doyle et al. (2022) identified that Instagram posts showcasing athletic performance garnered the highest engagement rates for male professional athletes. At the collegiate level, Park et al. (2020) observed that student-athletes recognize the branding potential of social media despite concerns over unorganized content potentially harming their professional image. These athletes often face the challenge of aligning self-expression with NCAA regulations and their future career aspirations.

Recent literature has focused on quantifiable indicators of personal brand strength. Cocco et al. (2023) linked factors such as biography quality, content frequency, and verification status to NIL valuation, and highlighted that university affiliation and the level of competition amplify branding opportunities. Su et al. (2020) conceptualized athletes as digital influencers, noting that content accentuating athletic identity, interactive engagement, and performance success drives follower growth and brand visibility. These studies illustrate the evolving dynamics of athlete branding across competitive levels, emphasizing the growing necessity for social media literacy, strategic self-presentation strategies, and personal branding acumen in an environment where social media visibility directly influences both personal reputation and monetization potential.

Female Athletes' Personal Branding and Social Media

Previous research has consistently demonstrated that female athletes tend to stress physical attractiveness, sexually provocative imagery, and personal style more frequently than their male counterparts in social media content (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Shreffler et al., 2016). Often, this form of self-presentation aims at increasing visibility, engagement, and marketability, mirroring long-standing portrayals of women in traditional sports media, including television broadcasts, print advertisements, and magazine features (Clavio & Eagleman, 2011; Kane et al., 2013; Shreffler et al., 2016). While male athletes are predominantly highlighted for their athletic performance, skill, and competitiveness, their female counterparts have often been represented through a lens of femininity and sexual appeal. Despite gaining control over their personal narratives through platforms like Instagram, X, and TikTok, female athletes often perpetuate these gendered portrayals, consciously or unconsciously, to gain social media traction or attract sponsorships. This continued reliance on sexualized content supports the enduring influence of the “sex sells” marketing trope in sports branding (Fink, 2015). Scholars have argued that this trend reflects broader societal pressures and commercial imperatives, where market success is frequently tied to conforming to conventional beauty standards (Fink, 2015; Kane et al., 2013). As such, female athletes face complex tensions between leveraging their online presence for branding purposes and challenging reductive, appearance-based representations that have historically dominated sports media.

NIL and Female College Athletes' Personal Branding and Social Media

The emergence of NIL rights has transformed how college athletes, particularly women, navigate personal branding and social media. Harris and Brisson (2024) highlighted the uneven impact of NIL across institutional divisions, with disparities in access to branding education and resources. Their study identified two central concerns: favoritism toward athletes from high-profile programs and ethical tensions in sponsorship choices.

For female athletes, NIL presents both opportunities and contradictions. Sailofsky (2024) critiqued the reliance on feminine esthetics for marketability, warning that it may reinforce limiting stereotypes. Similarly, Wanzer et al. (2024) found that female athletes often post content focused on appearance and behind-the-scenes moments, garnering high engagement but also reinforcing objectification. In contrast, male athletes underline performance. Yet, Hawkins-Jedlicka et al. (2023) observed a growing shift, as some female athletes have begun prioritizing sports-centric branding. Prominent examples, such as Caitlin

Clark and Angel Reese, demonstrate how athletic achievement can anchor successful personal brands.

Audience influence also plays a pivotal role. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) argued that fans help shape athletes' online personas, a view echoed by Hawkins-Jedlicka et al. (2023), who underscored the importance of digital literacy and institutional support. Wanzer et al. (2024) further noted that platform-specific trends influence branding strategies, as Instagram favors performance highlights while TikTok rewards lifestyle content. These studies illustrate how female college athletes navigate and redefine personal branding under NIL, balancing market expectations with authenticity and athletic credibility.

Previous studies have offered mixed insights into female athletes' self-presentation strategies on social media, with limited attention given to high-achieving female college athletes in the current NIL era. To address this gap, the present study analyzed Instagram content from the top 10 female NIL earners to better understand their self-presentation and personal branding behaviors. Adopting the MABI framework (Arai et al., 2014), which encompasses athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle, this study explored how these athletes have strategically built their brands in the evolving digital and commercial landscape. The research was guided by the following questions:

RQ1: How do top-earning female college athletes under NIL use Instagram to construct and communicate their personal brands?

RQ2: To what extent do these athletes' Instagram posts reflect the three dimensions of the MABI framework: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle?

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative content analysis to examine self-presentation strategies used by top-earning female college athletes under the NIL framework on Instagram. Qualitative content analysis was selected because it enables the systematic interpretation of patterns, meanings, and identity construction within visual and textual social media content, aligning with the study's goal of understanding how athletes strategically craft their digital personas in a commercialized digital environment (Krippendorff, 2018). This approach is particularly appropriate in NIL research, as prior scholarships emphasized the importance of examining how athletes actively enact branding strategies rather than solely relying on self-reported perceptions of NIL opportunities and constraints (Corr et al., 2023; Jimerson et al., 2025).

A deductive coding approach was used to categorize posts within pre-established themes drawn from MABI (Arai et al., 2014). MABI consists of three overarching dimensions—athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle—each containing several sub-dimensions that informed the coding process. Athletic performance includes athletic expertise, competition style, sportsmanship, and rivalry; attractive appearance encompasses physical attractiveness, symbolic features (such as distinctive personal style or trademark visual elements), and body fitness; and marketable lifestyle includes the athlete’s life story, role model qualities, and relationship effort. All operational definitions followed those outlined by Arai et al. (2014, p. 101). Applying MABI within an NIL context allows for a theoretically grounded assessment of how athletes translate brand attributes into monetizable social media content, extending its utility into athlete-controlled digital platforms where NIL value is increasingly generated (Stokowski et al., 2024).

Utilizing a qualitative approach supported nuanced interpretation of the subtleties embedded within Instagram content rather than relying solely on surface-level categorization, which is critical given the complex identity negotiations athletes must manage as competitors, students, and influencers in the NIL era (Fridley et al., 2024).

Sample

The sample consisted of the top 10 NIL-earning female college athletes as of September 1, 2024, identified using ON3.com’s valuation data. ON3 valuations incorporate multiple indicators including social media following, audience engagement, and existing endorsement contracts, which make them an appropriate and widely recognized metric for identifying athletes with significant NIL influence. Follower-based metrics and engagement indicators have been consistently identified as key drivers of NIL value, particularly for Division I athletes operating within influencer-style marketplaces (Stokowski et al., 2024).

Focusing on top earners enabled the study to examine advanced and high-impact branding practices among athletes who operate at the center of the NIL marketplace. Among the 10 athletes in the sample, seven competed in basketball and three in gymnastics, reflecting sports with the highest NIL earning potential for women at the time of data collection. Athletes represented diverse racial backgrounds and competed at institutions in major Power Five conferences (SEC, ACC, and Big Ten). Collectively, they maintained a combined Instagram following of more than 16 million users, underscoring both their public visibility and commercial relevance.

To obtain a dataset that was both analytically rich and manageable, and consistent with methodological recommendations for qualitative content analysis

(Krippendorff, 2018), the 30 most recent Instagram posts from each athlete were collected in reverse chronological order as of September 1, 2024. This process generated a total of 300 posts consisting of static images and videos. Although the nine-month timeframe (January–September 2024) was not predetermined, it emerged naturally from the sampling strategy and provided a current and seasonally balanced representation of athletes’ branding activities. This depth-oriented approach was particularly appropriate given evidence that elite athletes post less frequently but more strategically as NIL value increases (Corr et al., 2023).

Table 1. Athlete Information

	Athletes	Sport	NIL Valuations	IG Followers
1	Olivia Dunne	Gymnastics	\$4M	5.3M
2	Paige Bueckers	Basketball	\$1.4M	2M
3	Flau'jae Johnson	Basketball	\$1.3M	2M
4	Haley Cavinder	Basketball	\$889K	831K
5	Hanna Cavinder	Basketball	\$863K	785K
6	Hailey Van Lith	Basketball	\$770K	900K
7	Sydney Smith	Gymnastics	\$650K	650K
8	Juju Watkins	Basketball	\$630K	800K
9	Jada Williams	Basketball	\$620K	620K
10	Jade Carey	Gymnastics	\$600K	630K

Coding Protocol and Process

Each Instagram post received one dominant thematic code, aligning with the study’s objective of identifying the primary self-presentation strategy emphasized in each post. The decision to apply a single dominant code is supported by content analysis recommendations when posts may contain multiple cues but clearly emphasize one salient message (Krippendorff, 2018). The first image or video in a carousel was used for coding to ensure consistency and reflect typical user engagement patterns on Instagram.

To accurately capture commercial NIL activity, all sponsored posts promoting brands, products, collectives, or endorsement partners were categorized under the relationship effort sub-dimension. This decision reflects prior findings

that relationship-building and sponsorship alignment represent central mechanisms through which athletes create and sustain NIL value (Stokowski et al., 2024). Two trained coders independently analyzed all 300 posts using a detailed MABI-based codebook. Coders met on three occasions to resolve discrepancies and refine decision rules, achieving an intercoder reliability score of 0.90, exceeding established thresholds for qualitative content analysis and indicating strong coding consistency (Krippendorff, 2018).

Results

A total of 300 Instagram posts from the 10 top-earning female college athletes were analyzed. The analysis revealed clear patterns across the three MABI dimensions, with marketable lifestyle content emerging as the most dominant category. Of the 300 posts, 118 (39.3%) reflected marketable lifestyle themes, followed by attractive appearance in 92 posts (30.7%), and athletic performance in 67 posts (22.3%). Posts that did not align with any MABI sub-dimension were categorized as other, accounting for 23 posts (7.7%). The other category consisted primarily of casual backstage content, selfies taken in non-sport settings, or posts featuring athletes with friends or teammates in informal environments.

Marketable Lifestyle

Within the marketable lifestyle dimension, relationship effort was by far the most prevalent sub-dimension. Of the 118 posts categorized within this dimension, 102 posts (86%) featured relationship-building content, including sponsored product promotions, press conference photos, thank-you messages to fans, and community engagement. Notably, almost all posts within this sub-dimension ($n = 88$) were explicitly sponsored or contained visible brand promotions, underscoring the central role of NIL-related endorsements in athletes' self-presentation strategies. By contrast, life story appeared in 11 posts (10%), typically containing expressions of gratitude or personal reflections, while role model content appeared in only five posts (4%) and included activities such as volunteering or advocating for social causes. These findings indicate that NIL-driven commercial partnerships are the defining feature of athletes' lifestyle-oriented content.

Athletic Performance

The athletic performance dimension was less frequently represented but showed distinct sub-dimensional patterns. Competition style was the most prominent sub-dimension, appearing in 48 posts, and included images of athletes in action during games, meets, or competitions. Athletic expertise, represented in 17 posts, included highlight clips, medal celebrations, or team victory posts that emphasized skill or accomplishment. Rivalry appeared rarely ($n = 2$), and sportsmanship did not appear at all in the dataset. Compared to earlier literature suggesting minimal performance-oriented self-presentation among female athletes, the prominence of competition-related imagery reflects an emerging shift toward showcasing athletic identity.

Attractive Appearance

The attractive appearance dimension also featured strong representation across multiple sub-dimensions. Physical attractiveness was the most frequently coded sub-category ($n = 46$), evidenced by posts highlighting aesthetically focused visuals such as fitted or revealing clothing, swimwear, or beauty-oriented portrait shots. Symbol, the second most common sub-dimension ($n = 39$), included posts emphasizing personal style, signature fashion items, unique hairstyles, or athlete-specific brand aesthetics. Body fitness was the least represented sub-dimension, appearing in seven posts, typically featuring athletes in uniform or training attire that highlighted physical strength or conditioning. Taken together, these results suggest that attractive appearance, particularly physical appeal and stylized personal branding, continues to play a central role in how female athletes craft their online identities.

Overall, the findings demonstrate a strategic emphasis on lifestyle-driven and commercially oriented content, with athletes frequently integrating sponsorships into their personal branding strategies. Attractive appearance also remained a prominent branding tool, particularly through symbolic style choices and aesthetic presentation. Although athletic performance was the least represented of the three primary dimensions, the substantial number of competition style posts suggests an increasing effort among female athletes to highlight their athletic identity alongside appearance and commercial content. The distribution of themes reflects a multidimensional branding strategy in which athletes balance marketability, aesthetics, and performance to maximize visibility and NIL potential on Instagram.

Table 2. Results of Dimensions and Sub-Dimensions of MABI

Dimension	Sub-Dimension	Number of Content
<i>Athletic Performance</i>	Athletic Expertise	17
	Competition Style	48
	Sportsmanship	0
	Rivalry	2
	Total	67
<i>Attractive Appearance</i>	Physical Attractiveness	46
	Symbol	39
	Body Fitness	7
	Total	92
<i>Marketable Lifestyle</i>	Life Story	11
	Role Model	5
	Relationship Effort	102
	Total	118
<i>Other</i>	Other	23
Total		300

Discussion

This study contributes to the growing body of research on athlete branding by exploring how top-earning female college athletes use Instagram to build and cultivate their personal brands in the NIL era. Consistent with previous research, the findings affirm the enduring role of feminine attractiveness (e.g., physical appeal, symbolic femininity) as a key tool in female athlete branding (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Scovel, 2025; Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Wanzer et al., 2024). However, the prominence of attractiveness-based content does not signal stagnation in branding strategies. Instead, it coexists with a more diversified set of self-presentation tactics, which reflect changing cultural and commercial expectations within the NIL environment (Sailofsky, 2024; Stokowski et al., 2024). The results of this study show that female athletes are expanding their personal brand narratives beyond mere physical appeal, embracing a more holistic approach that incorporates their athletic performance, personal lifestyles, and off-field identities.

While the “sex sells” trope remains visible in female athlete branding (Fink, 2015; Wanzer et al., 2024), the current study reveals an important shift toward

content that emphasizes athletic performance and marketable lifestyle. This evolution challenges earlier studies that highlighted a disproportionate reliance on appearance-based content (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Shreffler et al., 2016; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Instead, female athletes appear to be adopting more balanced, multifaceted branding strategies that mirror those of their male counterparts (Doyle et al., 2022; Scovel, 2025). This shift aligns with the finding that NIL value is increasingly shaped by a combination of factors, including performance credibility, follower engagement, and lifestyle relatability, rather than just physical attractiveness (Stokowski et al., 2024).

The increasing prevalence of relationship-based posts and lifestyle-themed content further aligns with broader trends in influencer marketing, where authenticity, relatability, and emotional connection are paramount for engagement. These strategies mirror the findings of Corr et al. (2023), which reveal that many athletes, particularly in the NIL context, view themselves as self-managed brands navigating the complexities of digital media, often without sufficient institutional support. Similarly, the growing prominence of lifestyle and relationship-focused content supports role theory perspectives, suggesting that NIL has amplified athletes' efforts to negotiate their overlapping identities as athletes, students, and influencers (Fridley et al., 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, this study expands the applicability of the MABI framework to the digital and NIL contexts. The three core dimensions of MABI, attractive appearance, athletic expertise, and marketable lifestyle, are evident in the content strategies employed by the top-earning NIL female athletes. This supports the framework's adaptability to digital media landscapes, where athletes themselves take ownership of their personal brand narratives. As NIL shifts branding power from institutions and traditional media to athletes, the MABI framework offers a valuable lens for understanding how brand attributes are constructed, curated, and monetized on platforms like Instagram and TikTok (Hawkins-Jedlicka et al., 2023; Wanzer et al., 2024).

Practical Implications

The results of this study suggest that effective personal branding in the NIL era requires female college athletes to move beyond a singular, appearance-based brand and embrace a more strategic, multidimensional approach to content creation. Top-earning athletes appear to balance posts that highlight athletic performance, personal lifestyle, and relationship-building efforts, allowing them to maintain authenticity while enhancing their commercial appeal. This balanced branding strategy is essential in helping athletes navigate the increasingly complex role of athlete, student, and influencer in the NIL space, while also driving engagement and enhancing NIL value (Fridley et al., 2024; Su et al., 2020).

These findings underscore the growing need for institutional support in helping athletes develop effective personal branding strategies. Previous research indicates that many athletes still feel uncertain about NIL opportunities and lack adequate institutional guidance (Corr et al., 2023; Jimerson et al., 2025). In light of this, athletic departments should consider integrating social media literacy, digital branding, and audience engagement workshops into their athlete development programs, especially for female athletes who face unique gendered challenges in digital spaces (Sailofsky, 2024; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Providing structured resources around NIL would reduce confusion and empower athletes to build sustainable, authentic personal brands that align with their long-term professional goals.

For brands and sport marketing professionals, this study highlights the importance of evaluating athletes holistically, rather than focusing solely on physical appearance or follower count. Athlete-generated Instagram content allows for greater narrative control and emotional connection than traditional media exposure, making it a more valuable tool for brand partnerships. By focusing on athletes whose content reflects a consistent identity, credible performance, and relatable lifestyle, brands can cultivate more authentic and impactful partnerships that resonate with audiences. The rise of these more sophisticated branding strategies indicates a growing recognition that female athletes, like their male counterparts, are not just objects of visual appeal but dynamic, multifaceted influencers with meaningful and marketable identities (Doyle et al., 2022; Jimerson et al., 2025).

This study also has important implications for equity and representation within the sports and marketing industries. While physical attractiveness continues to yield commercial value for female athletes, the increased visibility of performance-based and lifestyle content suggests that female athletes are finding ways to resist reductive portrayals and take control of their own narrative (Fink, 2015; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Sailofsky, 2024). By showcasing their athletic competence and multidimensional lives, these athletes challenge the historical sexualization of women in sports and assert more empowering and authentic identities. This shift not only benefits the athletes themselves but also encourages a broader cultural redefinition of how female athletes are perceived and valued, both by audiences and brands (Cocco et al., 2023; Sailofsky, 2024).

Finally, this study addresses a gap in the literature by focusing specifically on how female college athletes use social media for personal branding in the NIL era. As more athletes across the United States engage in monetizing their NIL rights, it is critical to understand the patterns and strategies employed by the most successful among them. The findings presented here provide a roadmap for emerging athletes to develop their own branding strategies, while also offering valuable insights for agents, marketing consultants, and institutional support

staff (Jimerson et al., 2025). Tailored guidance in navigating the complex world of social media and NIL can empower athletes to capitalize on opportunities without sacrificing authenticity or agency. While athletic performance remains the foundation for securing NIL deals, effective personal branding relies on a combination of factors, including physical attractiveness, athletic skill, and the ability to craft a compelling, marketable lifestyle and relatable digital identity (Hawkins-Jedlicka et al., 2023; Stokowski et al., 2024; Wanzer et al., 2024).

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. Most notably, the sample was limited to the top 10 female NIL earners, offering insight into advanced and high-impact branding practices but restricting the generalizability of the findings. These elite athletes often benefit from heightened visibility, professional branding support, and institutional resources that may not be available to the broader population of collegiate female athletes. Female athletes competing in non-revenue sports, lower-profile programs, or less visible institutional contexts may encounter substantially different constraints and opportunities when attempting to develop and promote their personal brands. As a result, the branding strategies identified in this study may not fully reflect the experiences of female athletes navigating NIL opportunities with fewer resources or limited media exposure.

A methodological limitation also stems from the decision to assign a single dominant code to each Instagram post. While this approach enhanced analytical clarity and intercoder reliability, it may have oversimplified the complex and layered nature of social media content. Many posts likely conveyed multiple overlapping themes, such as personal identity, athletic performance, and commercial promotion, that could not be fully captured through a singular coding strategy. Future research may benefit from multi-code or weighted coding approaches that better reflect the multifaceted nature of athlete self-presentation.

To address these limitations, future studies should adopt more inclusive sampling strategies that encompass athletes across a wider range of sports, competitive divisions, and institutional settings. Expanding beyond top NIL earners could reveal alternative branding strategies, barriers, and adaptive practices that remain obscured in elite-focused samples. Platform-specific research is also warranted, as branding strategies may differ substantially across social media environments (Wanzer et al., 2024). For example, TikTok emphasizes entertainment-driven, short-form content, while Instagram supports visual storytelling and influencer marketing, each presenting distinct branding affordances.

Longitudinal designs would further enhance understanding of how athlete branding evolves over time, particularly as athletes progress through their collegiate careers and as NIL policies and institutional support structures continue to develop. Finally, future research should examine the effectiveness of NIL education and training initiatives, as such programs may play a critical role in equipping athletes with the skills necessary to cultivate sustainable, authentic, and marketable personal brands in an increasingly competitive digital ecosystem.

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