March 2024

Collegiate Female Athlete Experiences with Name, Image, and Likeness

Hailey A. Harris  
*Texas A&M University*, hailey2012@tamu.edu

Natasha T. Brison  
*Texas A&M University*, natasha.brison@tamu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/jade

Part of the Higher Education Commons, Sports Management Commons, and the Sports Studies Commons

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Recommended Citation


DOI: https://doi.org/10.25035/jade.06.01.04
Available at: https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/jade/vol6/iss1/4

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Athlete Development and Experience by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@BGSU.
Collegiate Female Athlete Experiences with Name, Image, and Likeness

Hailey A. Harris  
Texas A&M University

Natasha T. Brison  
Texas A&M University

A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this study is to examine experiences female collegiate athletes encountered with Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) legislation. Ten collegiate female athletes across multiple divisions and geographic regions were interviewed for this study. Participants discussed various facets of their experiences with NIL, such as team dynamics and personal branding. The results of this study suggest differences in (1) their institutional educational processes for NIL, (2) their attitudes toward NIL, (3) shifts (or lack thereof) in their team’s group cohesion and leadership, and (4) their experience with forming and managing their personal brand. This study adds to the current body of literature illuminating the ways in which NIL legislation has impacted team dynamics and athlete branding, an area of research previously unexplored.

Keywords: NIL, team dynamics, group cohesion, leadership, athlete branding

Introduction

For decades, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has prevented collegiate athletes from profiting off their Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) in an attempt to preserve amateurism in collegiate athletics (Jessop & Sabin, 2021). The passing of NIL legislation has afforded college athletes the ability to monetize their brand through endorsement and marketing efforts via various avenues, such as social media. Social media has given elite athletes the opportunity to control their own narrative (Su et al., 2020) due to the ability to control and dictate their chosen endorsement and marketing efforts, which now is symbolically extended to collegiate athletes. This can be seen as a positive and lucrative business opportunity for many athletes.

Previous literature has investigated NIL from multiple perspectives. From an individual athlete’s perspective, it has been suggested that an athlete’s NIL can vary by institution, with the value of their NIL being influenced by the level of institution they attend (Kunkel et al., 2021). For instance, athletes attending a top-tier Division I university have been found to have more followers than those attending a mid-tier Division I university, revealing that a university’s master brand can potentially impact the social media following of its student athletes (Kunkel et al., 2021). Researchers also have argued there is potential for NIL to cause a greater rift between men’s and women’s sports (Sorbe et al., 2021), while other scholars have maintained that NIL can further narrow the publicity gap between male and female sports (Jessop & Sabin, 2021).

Highlighting the earnings potential that historically has been left untouched by premiere female athletes (e.g., Katie Ledecky of Stanford University’s women’s swimming team), Jessop and Sabin (2021) contend that allowing athletes to benefit from NIL rights will increase publicity in women’s college athletics.

Although NIL has been reviewed in a variety of ways, little is known about athletes’ experiences when engaging with potential endorsement opportunities. For instance, Carron et al. (2007) note that teams may experience environmental, personal, and group factors that influence team cohesion. If an athlete secures an NIL endorsement (i.e., both an environmental and personal factor), the endorsement could cause a division among members of the team and affect team dynamics. Specifically with women athletes, the relationship with their teammates can be complex, where the athletes can acknowledge and encourage one another but also see their teammates as competition (Frentz et al., 2020). Moreover, due to NIL opportunities, collegiate female athletes also have an added responsibility of constructing and monetizing their personal
brand, a process that previously has been reserved for Olympic and professional athletes (Lobpries et al., 2018). Given this, research is needed to understand the experiences female collegiate athletes have when navigating the NIL landscape. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine female athlete experiences when engaging with the NIL from two components: team dynamics and personal branding.

**Team Dynamics**

Group dynamics has been defined as “the influential actions, processes, and changes that occur within and between groups” (Forsyth, 2018, p. 2). Extant literature focusing on group dynamics in sport (i.e., team dynamics) has examined the inner workings of teams and relationships in a multitude of ways; namely, group cohesion (Carron et al., 1998) and leadership (Loughead et al., 2006). Group cohesion, in particular, has been noted to potentially impact performance, an outcome relevant to the current study (Carron et al., 2002).

**Group Cohesion**

Cohesion historically has been difficult to define due to being a theoretical construct (Carron et al., 2007). Yet, Forsyth (2018) defines group cohesion as “the integrity, solidarity, social integration, unity, and groupness of a group” (p. 10), while other scholars have defined cohesion as the level of commitment of members have to a group task (Goodman et al., 1987). Cohesion is known to be a group property, assessed through both group and individual beliefs, and is widely considered to play an important role in team sports (Carron & Brawley, 2000; Shields et al., 1997). Four main characteristics of cohesion that form a foundation for scholarly measurement in the context of sport are multidimensional, dynamic, instrumental, and affective (Carron et al., 2007). Team cohesion has been widely reviewed in sport literature, as scholars have conceptualized models in an effort to establish an instrument to assess the construct. Carron et al.‘s (1985) conceptual model exploring group cohesion encompassed both group and individual aspects involving task and social orientations (Carron et al., 1985). The authors proposed that team members develop and hold perceptions of their team that relate to the group as a whole, in addition to how the group satisfies their personal needs and objectives (Carron et al., 1985; Carron et al., 2007). This conceptual model resulted in the development of the Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ) (Carron et al., 1985), which is a widely used measurement instrument within the field of group cohesion in sport. Using the GEQ, previous research has established four areas of cohesion in sport settings: environmental factors, personal factors, leadership factors, and group factors (Carron et al., 2007).

The size of a team and the level of competition are considered to be the two environmental factors that are related to team cohesion (Carron et al., 2007). In addition, demographic attributes, cognitions, affect, and behavior are personal factors that can influence cohesion, while a leader’s behavior and decision style can also have an impact (Carron et al., 2007). Lastly, roles, norms, collective efficacy, and performance are team-related factors that can influence cohesion. In addition to cohesion, leadership in sport has also been studied extensively regarding team dynamics.

**Leadership**

Leadership in sport has been explored from a coach and athlete perspective. From a coach’s perspective, scholarship has explored multiple areas of leadership, such as understanding the impact, and roles, of a coach or manager (Cotterill, 2013). However, due to the current study’s emphasis on athletes, researchers focused specifically on athlete leadership. Athlete leadership has been reviewed in a myriad of ways, focusing largely on formal and informal roles individual athletes can obtain throughout their career. Loughead et al. (2006) defined athlete leadership as “an athlete, occupying a formal or informal role with a team, who influences a group of team members to achieve a common goal” (p. 144). Athlete leaders have been found to positively influence team cohesion, team confidence, and motivational climate within the team (Fransen et al., 2014; Glenn et al., 2003; Loughead et al.,
Leaders have been categorized in a variety of ways, one of which is distinguishing the roles a leader can occupy, both formally and informally.

Bales and Slater (1955) and Slater (1955) are credited with exploring role differentiation, leading researchers to posit that athlete leaders have been distinguished based on instrumental function or expressive function. Leaders with instrumental function are said to be focused on task completion, while leaders with expressive function are concerned with interpersonal relationships (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). The definitions of leadership functions being formed was used as a guide by Fransen et al. (2014) to highlight four leadership roles, including: task leader, motivational leader, social leader, and external leader. Fransen et al. (2014) defines two on-field leadership roles: a task leader who is in charge on the field, helping the team focus on goals and tactical decision-making; and a motivational leader who is the team’s biggest motivator on the field, driving teammates to perform their best and channel emotions effectively. The two off-field leadership roles are: a social leader, who facilitates positive relationships within the team and promotes a good team atmosphere; and an external leader, who is an athlete that represents the team to external stakeholders, such as club management, and usually is called upon to interact with the media or sponsors. In addition to the types of leadership roles an athlete may assume, scholars also have found there is differentiation between roles, such as a formal or informal role.

Formal roles within a team are prescribed or awarded (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). Roles of this nature include appointments such as team captain or co-captains. Informal roles are not prescribed or awarded, and instead come to fruition as a result of team demands or interactions between teammates (Cotterill, 2013). Informal leaders have been referred to as cultural architects of a team (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016), and have been found to have significant authority and power within their team (Fransen et al., 2014). For example, Fransen et al. (2014) found that the majority of participants in their study did not think their named team captain was the best leader based on all four leadership roles (task, motivational, social, and external). Relevant to the current study, collegiate athletes now can take on an additional role previously defined as a “brand manager” (Lobpries et al., 2018), which can be seen as an informal role. A brand manager is said to be an athlete that takes on the role of conceptualizing and developing their personal brand, instead of outsourcing the work to an agent or marketing individual (Lobpries et al., 2018). Due to the passing of NIL, athletes now can create and monetize their personal brand through endorsement deals. Engaging with endorsement opportunities is optional, and the role of a brand manager is not a formal appointment. However, creating and maintaining an athlete’s brand is not a simple task.

Athlete Branding and Collegiate Athletes

Derived from the concept of a human brand (Thompson, 2006), the athlete brand image has been defined as the public persona and opinion of an athlete (Arai et al., 2013; Hasaan et al., 2019). Main tenets of an athlete’s brand consist of athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle (Arai et al., 2014). These elements allow fans to observe various aspects of an athlete’s life, aligning with previous literature positing the notion that the purpose of the athlete’s brand is to develop a unique bond between athletes and fans (Hasaan et al., 2018).

Scholars have found that athletes create and maintain their brand in a variety of ways. Research has explored the similarities and contrasts of how athletes of different genders create and present their brand online (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Smith and Sanderson, 2015), various branding barriers faced by elite female athletes (Lobpries et al., 2018), and how female athletes utilize new media (e.g., social media; Geurin, 2017). Within these studies, scholars found that professional female athletes show their audience both personal and professional aspects of their lives (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). In addition, elite female athletes have expressed that, when it comes to presenting their personal brand online, they are pressured to adhere to gender norms and expectations more than their male counterparts (Lobpries et al., 2018; Smith and Sanderson, 2015). However, little research has focused on collegiate athletes and their experience with developing their brand.

Athlete branding research predominantly has centered on professional and Olympic athletes (Brison & Geurin, 2021; Geurin & McNary, 2021). Researchers have established that female professional athletes have a different experience developing and showcasing their brand in
comparison to their male counterparts. For example, Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) found that female Olympic athletes in their study were more likely to post sexually suggestive photos than male the athletes, who predominantly focused on their sport. In addition, Lobpries et al. (2018) found that elite female athletes within their study were more likely to develop their brand according to societal pressures and gender norms versus an authentic representation of the athlete’s truest self. However, due to NIL legislation, athlete branding literature now can be expanded to incorporate collegiate athletes, a population that mostly has been excluded from the branding conversation. Collegiate athletes now can create a personal brand and monetize it, producing opportunities for brand development that were not previously in existence. To do this, college athletes may look to their professional or Olympic counterparts as mentors, or guides, to navigate their brand creation. Therefore, it is imperative that researchers seek to understand the experiences collegiate female athletes have when developing their brand, and whether or not these experiences align with their professional counterparts.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982) describes the workings of intergroup relations, as it begins with the assumption that a social identity is obtained by group membership. More specifically, the author identifies ingroup and outgroup dynamics within a given context (i.e., stereotyping, social categorization, and ethnocentrism; Tajfel, 1982). Tajfel (1982) defines a “group” to be on the basis of criteria, either internal or external. To meet the standards for an internal group (also known as “group identification”), there are two essential components: cognitive and evaluative. An individual must have a sense of awareness of their membership to the group, which is associated with the cognitive component. Next, there must be a sense of value in belonging to the group, which resides with the evaluative component. Lastly, there must be an emotional investment to awareness and evaluations.

Moreover, Tajfel (1982) discusses various intergroup attitudes and biases, such as stereotyping and ethnocentrism. These phenomena are largely attributed to cognitive processes and structures and determine specific aspects of intergroup attitudes (Tajfel, 1982). For example, when discussing stereotyping and ethnocentrism, Tajfel (1982) refers to evaluations and associations of ingroup members, as well as an order of relevant priorities established by members of the ingroup and outgroup. Ethnocentrism is largely fostered by an entire group, whereas intergroup conflict and competition are influenced by individual members when competing for scarce goods or resources (Tajfel, 1982). Scarce goods or resources can reflect garnering a higher rank or status, winning a competition, or achieving higher prestige (Turner & Brown, 1978).

Previous literature in sport management has utilized Social Identity Theory in a multitude of ways. Researchers have implemented Social Identity Theory when investigating sport fan community and sport socialization (Asada & Ko, 2019), as well as factors leading to team identification (Fink et al., 2002; Theodorakis et al., 2012). However, NIL presents an opportunity to examine constructs of social identity theory (i.e., ingroups or outgroups) in the context of shifting team dynamics due to legislation. Within the context of the current study, researchers utilized social identity theory to guide foundational understanding of any potential shifts in the dynamics of how the athletes are interacting with one another, due to perceptions they may acquire of fellow teammates engaging with, or not engaging with, NIL. Additionally, shifts in group leadership and athlete perceptions of those capitalizing on NIL endorsement opportunities are reviewed, calling on a core tenet of social identity theory regarding intergroup competition and conflict that can arise from these potential changes. Thus, guided by the literature, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: What changes in perceived team dynamics have occurred since the passing of NIL?
RQ2: What are the athletes’ perceptions of teammates who have signed endorsement deals?
RQ3: What types of experiences did the athletes have when engaging in NIL and developing their personal brand?
Method

To answer the proposed research questions, researchers utilized semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with current collegiate female athletes, along with the use of secondary sources. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, lasting an average of 45 minutes. Participants were asked about their collegiate athletics experience, which included how many years they had been competing, what sports they had competed in, and if they had competed at one, or multiple, schools. Further, the athletes were presented a range of questions surrounding the NIL resources their respective college or university had in place for athletes, their experience with signing endorsement deals, teammates engaging with potential endorsements, and personal branding and marketing. Secondary sources included documents relevant to each athlete, such as social media platforms and websites, to gain a better understanding of the athlete’s online presence.

Researchers used purposive, criterion sampling (Creswell, 2012), in addition to a snowball sampling method. Through phone and email, researchers contacted athletes within their personal network that fit criteria to participate in the study. Upon completion of the interview, the athlete was asked to provide referrals for others who would potentially be willing to participate in the study. Adopting these methods provided researchers the opportunity to obtain a diverse sample of athletes, and afforded researchers the ability to garner in-depth knowledge pertaining to the athlete’s experience with NIL.

Sample

Investigators interviewed individual athletes from different universities, division levels (e.g., Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) and Football Championship Subdivision (FCS), conferences, and geographic regions until data saturation was reached. As a result, 10 athletes participated in this study (see Table 1). Of the 10 athletes, there were three track and field athletes, six softball athletes, and one basketball athlete. Additionally, six out of the 10 athletes identified as White, three identified as Black, and one identified as Latinx. Lastly, five athletes represented FBS conferences, and the remaining five athletes represented FCS conferences. This marked an even split between mid-major and Power 5 conference representation.

Table 1
Participant characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Division</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kristen</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Softball</td>
<td>Division 1 FCS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Softball</td>
<td>Division 1 FCS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alyssa</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Softball</td>
<td>Division 1 FCS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiffany</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Track and Field</td>
<td>Division 1 FBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasamine</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>Division 1 FCS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Track and Field</td>
<td>Division 1 FBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bailey</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Softball</td>
<td>Division 1 FBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Track and Field</td>
<td>Division 1 FBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashlyn</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Softball</td>
<td>Division 1 FBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelby</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Softball</td>
<td>Division 1 FCS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Athlete Selection

Athletes selected for this study met specific criteria set by the researchers. The women were required to have a minimum of one year of collegiate sport experience, in addition to being enrolled at their institution before NIL legislation had been enacted. These criteria allowed researchers to gauge the athletes’ seniority within the college sport landscape and discern whether the athlete possessed the capabilities to provide information regarding changes within their team’s dynamics. In addition, criteria directed toward enrollment after the passing of NIL ensured the
athlete would have experience with the legislation regarding university procedure, with the potential of garnering branding deals.

Data Analysis

Based on the responses from the semi-structured interviews, researchers identified emerging themes to determine how NIL may have impacted group cohesion or leadership within teams, in addition to learning more about athlete experiences with the legislation. To aid in this process, researchers used Otter AI transcription software to transcribe the interviews. However, rigor of qualitative analysis lies within trustworthiness measures. To ensure trustworthiness, the authors followed several steps. First, data was analyzed continuously throughout the data collection and analysis process (Patton, 1990). More specifically, researchers consistently analyzed the data to determine similar themes among the participants’ responses. Additionally, researchers also utilized reflective journals throughout the data collection process as a way to document findings and reflect on each interview (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the journals, researchers documented personal thoughts, emerging themes and categories, ideas, and any additional commonalities or thoughts pertaining to the interviews (Creswell, 2012). Lastly, peer debriefing between both researchers involved in the study was conducted after interviews had concluded to ensure the research team agreed on themes, categories, and other factors in the data analysis process.

Results

Two central categories with five broad themes emerged from the data stemming from the research questions. The two categories were (1) team dynamics and (2) experiences. Within the team dynamics category, emerging themes consisted of (1) group cohesion, and (2) leadership. Within the category of experiences, emerging themes consisted of (1) attitudes about NIL, (2) educational processes of NIL, and (3) personal branding (see Table 2).

Table 2
Emergent Categories and Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Descriptor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team Dynamics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group cohesion: Athletes speaking about their specific team’s cohesion with relation to NIL</td>
<td>“Even the girls who have had the small NIL deals, it's just ... it hasn't really changed our team dynamic. It's really just been like, oh, like, that's cool that you got that.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership: Athletes speaking about their specific team’s leadership roles or dynamics with relation to NIL</td>
<td>“We have very high standards in our team. We’re a very competitive team, and you know who the leaders are. They lead with their actions on and off the court, and we also have team captains, so nobody really changed.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes and perceptions about NIL: Athletes discussing their perceptions and attitudes of NIL</td>
<td>“There's these NIL deals, and I feel like it kind of furthers the disparity a little bit, you know, because we are in a generation of social media.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational processes of NIL: Athletes speaking about their education level, or their university’s education process, with relation to NIL</td>
<td>“They definitely already had stuff in place, because they could see this was coming.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions with marketers and agents: Athletes discussing their interactions, or lack thereof, with marketers and agents due to NIL and the ability to monetize their brand</td>
<td>“Why do we have to be controversial to get noticed [by brands or marketing agencies]?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Team Dynamics**

The following findings reflect perceptions held by the participants regarding team dynamics (RQ1 and RQ2). In this category, researchers identified two specific themes. These themes were identified as: (1) group cohesion and (2) leadership.

**Group Cohesion**

The participants in the study highlighted their willingness to share information and strategies for obtaining endorsement deals. The athletes essentially were giving their teammates the “tricks of the trade” to garner endorsement deals. Specifically, several of the women thought of NIL as a great way to help or encourage their teammates to monetize their personal brand, speaking about NIL in a more collaborative manner.

For example, Jasamine was actively encouraging her peers to pursue NIL deals, talking extensively about her perceptions of her teammates being positive if they chose to capitalize on endorsements. She also explained that her perceptions of her teammates did not change based on whether or not they choose to garner endorsement deals. She stated, “The people who have signed… I’m like, that’s amazing. You’re doing great things; you’re putting yourself out there. The people who don't have them, I don't think anything less of them, you know? Some people just don't care to get involved…” Speaking specifically about her perception of teammates who have not gotten involved with NIL opportunities, she stated that she does not think any less of them. She explained, “I don't think any less of someone who doesn't have them or any more highly of someone who does have it, you know?” Other participants held similar views. Ashlyn discussed how her team’s dynamics didn’t shift because certain teammates were garnering deals. She noted that issues within the team were not caused by NIL, but instead issues in other areas of her program’s culture. When asked about specifically NIL causing rifts within the team, she stated “Even the girls who have had the small NIL deals, it's just … it hasn't really changed our team dynamic. It's really just been like, oh, like, that's cool that you got that.”

Only two athletes communicated about situations where their own perceptions of teammates weren’t overwhelmingly positive. This was due to a participant’s teammate, who had received less playing time than the participant, garnering endorsement deals. Participants also discussed a situation where their teammates, who had received endorsement deals, were gravitating toward one another due to newly found social status as a result of their acquired endorsements.

For example, Bailey spoke about some of her teammates who received less playing time than she did, yet were landing endorsement deals. She stated candidly, “Sometimes it does suck. I will say … Maybe you're playing more than somebody else and they just signed a deal that's your whole savings account. And you're just like, dude.” This highlights the notion that athletes may receive endorsement deals due to reasons outside of playing time or athletic ability, such as physical attractiveness, or social media presence. In addition, Lauren commented on her teammates who have received endorsement deals gravitating toward one another more than they did before they received their endorsements. She said, “If anything, the biggest thing would probably be they tend to interact more with people who have a stronger social status just like them.” This perspective highlights how athletes, who have garnered endorsements, might align themselves more closely with others like them dependent upon their specific team’s pre-existing dynamic.

**Leadership**

Participants in the current study did not see changes to their leadership due to NIL. Eight athletes responded to questions about changes in leadership on the team by stating they did not think their team’s leadership had changed due to NIL, or they answered specifically that there had been no changes. In addition, athletes referred to their program’s excellent culture and pre-existing
leadership as reasons why their teams had not experienced a shift in leadership due to players signing NIL deals.

According to the athletes, their respective programs’ player-based leadership status did not revolve around social status, but instead focused on intangible qualities, in addition to talent. Players touted their programs’ culture as not allowing team members to conduct themselves in a manner that does not align with the team’s values. In addition, the seniority of the leaders played a factor in their leadership status and willingness to engage in NIL opportunities. Because of these factors, the perceptions of players who were seen as leaders before NIL did not change after NIL, nor did it change after athletes started garnering endorsement deals.

For example, Anne described a situation where not all the formal leaders on her team were receiving NIL deals and commented that it did not make a difference in leadership capabilities. She stated, “Our leaders of the team … They’re coming back for their fifth year, so I don’t think they’re working as hard to garner the deals.” Additionally, Jasamine described her team’s culture as competitive, with very high standards. Due to this, their team has very specific roles for each member, particularly with regard to leadership. She explained, “We have very high standards in our team. We’re a very competitive team, and you know who the leaders are. They lead with their actions on and off the court, and we also have team captains, so nobody really changed.”

In addition, participants who were viewed as leaders on their team spoke about their teammates’ potential perceptions of them. For example, Kristen explained her pre-existing leadership status on the team, stating that, “I think it was more expected [for me to get a deal]. [It was] like, okay, if anyone was going to do the first one, it was probably going to be her, and now we can all like, try and do it now.” Similarly, when asked about her specific leadership status on her team changing due to garnering endorsement deals, Jasamine was very candid, saying, “No, not at all. If you know me … I’m such a personable person and I don’t take life too seriously. My friends always joke around with me, like ‘you’re so big time,’ and I’m like ‘no, I’m literally not.’” Both Kristen and Jasamine’s experiences speak to how easy it would be for an athlete to think their leadership status on a team changes due to their social status increasing, yet their respective programs’ culture did not allow for it. Instead, the athletes stayed very humble, recognizing that their leadership currency is not directly tied to their NIL activities.

Experiences

The following findings reflect perspectives held by the participants regarding their experiences in engaging with NIL legislation (RQ3). In this category, researchers identified three specific themes. These themes were identified as: (1) attitudes and perceptions about NIL, (2) educational processes of NIL, and (3) personal branding.

Attitudes about NIL

There were two prevalent attitudes among the athletes: brands are less likely to engage with a smaller school or lesser-known sport, and the type of brand deal (e.g., lucrative or small) will dictate whether or not the athlete agrees to the endorsement. A commonality among the athletes at the FCS level was that they believed brands are not interested in athletes at smaller schools. Moreover, they noted that NIL can potentially cause a bigger divide between the FBS and FCS levels. For example, Kristen stated, “There’s these NIL deals, and I feel like it kind of furthers the disparity a little bit, you know, because we are in a generation of social media.” Anne also shared this attitude, saying that, until mid-majors start showing they can compete with the Power 5 schools with regard to exposure of their athletes, the disparities between the two levels will only increase.

Whether or not an endorsement was significant enough for the athlete to devote their time and energy to the agreed upon stipulations was also a factor in the athlete’s attitude toward NIL. Many of the athletes knew about larger deals that occurred at bigger schools, but many of the deals the participants had received were smaller and may not be worth the athlete’s time and effort. Kristen explained that her former high school teammates, now at FBS schools, were garnering larger endorsements, versus her small endorsement deal. She linked this situation back to her FCS school not having the same exposure as the FBS schools her former teammates were playing at.
She stated, “We’re seeing all of these deals that these other girls have. So, as far as our team goes, we’re just kind of like, we could be [doing] all that stuff, it’s just we’re not really marketed like that.”

**Educational Processes of NIL**

Similar to the attitudes each athlete held about NIL, there was also a notable difference in the FBS and FCS divisions in the way universities were educating or preparing their athletes for NIL opportunities. FCS participants shared that their school did not give information prior to July 1, 2021, which was the date the NIL legislation was enacted. In contrast, FBS athletes said that their respective schools were proactive in developing NIL resources for athletes prior to the enactment of the legislation. Jessica stated, “They definitely already had stuff in place, because they could see this was coming.”

Both FCS and FBS athletes shared that their respective universities provided an app or an online portal and had compliance officers that were able to answer questions regarding NIL. In addition, athletes reported multiple meetings (either in-person or via Zoom) with compliance officers to review “do’s and don’ts” and the approval process for their brand deals. Regardless of timing in their athlete-education processes, both levels of Division I schools showed willingness to aid athletes in navigating potential endorsement deals.

**Personal Branding**

Participants in the current study shared varying sentiments about personal branding. There were challenges for some athletes when it came to “finding their brand” and how their brand is distinguishable from others. Kristen stated, “I don’t even think I have one.” Alyssa had a similar experience, finding it tough to define her brand saying, “My personal brand? That’s a hard question,” before continuing to describe various attributes of her brand, and the way she reflects it via her social media platforms. Additionally, many of the athletes lacked the knowledge regarding personal branding and what it meant to be a brand. Often, the comments were focused on the types of products they wanted to endorse rather than what characteristics make them who they are, and how they would add value to companies/marketers. For example, when asked about characterizing her personal brand, Lauren described attributes of brands she would want to partner with, such as types of fitness clothing she would want to be involved in making.

Additionally, multiple athletes had similarities in experiences of defining their personal brand. The athletes were adamant that personal brands should reflect who the individual is, using their social media platforms to highlight their interests outside of their given sport. Specifically, Jasamine, Tiffany, Anne, Shelby, and Alyssa shared similar experiences when it came to creating their brand to reflect who they are as people, in addition to their athlete identity. According to Alyssa, Tiffany, and Anne, if they were to evaluate their social media accounts from an outside perspective, they would assume that individuals visiting their pages would be under the impression that they were not athletes. Reasoning behind this assumption is due to the women not posting a lot of content about their sports, mainly focusing on their friends, families, and hobbies they enjoy. Jasamine echoed this mindset, sharing that her athlete identity was not the only part of who she is as a person, and “eventually, basketball will end.” Meaning, it was important to her to share other aspects of her life in order to achieve authenticity.

In addition to shared experiences with describing and defining their brand, the athletes also expressed similar experiences regarding their preferences when partnering with outside brands. The athletes were conscientious about the mission and goals of each company. The company’s brand and purpose influenced whether the athlete decided to pursue the partnership. For example, one of the athletes partnered with a female basketball shoe brand, and two others with a brand that gave a portion of their proceeds to send youth athletes who cannot financially afford to attend exposure tournaments. Ashlyn in particular was very passionate about partnering with brands that are a good fit for the athlete. Specifically, she stated that if the athlete engages with a partnership, it should be “something that you believe in, you’re passionate about, you follow, and … don’t just do it for the money.”
Discussion

Results from the current study provide several notable findings. First, this study expands previous literature regarding team dynamics by investigating shifts in group dynamics after the implementation of legislation. Moreover, the current study highlights notable findings in the areas of group cohesion, leadership, and social identity theory.

Group Dynamics and Social Identity Theory

Scholars have found that leaders on team sports tend to engage in task-related functions that assist the team and its needs, as well as serving other team members in various aspects to promote their teammate’s psycho-social needs (Loughead et al., 2006). Group cohesion literature also discusses how a group (team) as a whole satisfies the personal needs and objectives of its members (Carron et al., 2007). According to the data in this study, participants shared that their team environment was collaborative when it came to teammates pursuing endorsement opportunities. Thus, due to the athletes being supportive of one another when engaging in endorsement opportunities, their team members’ needs were preserved.

In addition, participants did not report any substantial changes to their teams’ leadership, highlighting that NIL was not affecting the images or perceptions of athletes in leadership positions. If an athlete leader is choosing not to seek out endorsement deals, that athlete does not have to worry about their teammates’ perceptions of their leadership role changing. However, leadership roles can be assigned formally or informally (Loughead et al., 2006). Athletes who decide to engage with endorsement opportunities have the potential to take on an informal leadership role. For example, in addition to developing their brands, the athletes in the current study also had to learn how to manage a brand, thus taking on the multifaceted role of a brand manager.

Given their decisions to not hire an agent or marketing representative, the athletes in the current study adopted the role of a brand manager by creating and managing their personal brand. However, the role of a brand manager is not a formal appointment, thus distinguishing the role as informal (Loughead et al., 2006). Interestingly, although the athletes did not see their personal brand as one that is lucrative, they assumed the responsibility of developing and maintaining their brand, resulting in an informal leadership role.

Additionally, according to Social Identity Theory, cognitive processes and emotional attachments provide a foundation for understanding ingroup/outgroup dynamics (Tajfel, 1982). This presented an opportunity for an athlete’s perceptions of various teammates capitalizing, or perhaps not capitalizing, on endorsement deals to change depending upon where the athlete falls in an ingroup or outgroup. However, due to teammate support, no ingroup or outgroup was created within the participants’ teams. Moreover, due to the collaborative nature of the team environment, it is plausible to assume that an ingroup was extended to athletes on the team that do not have endorsement deals. This could potentially make players without endorsement deals feel included and involved in the process and give them the confidence to pursue endorsement opportunities if given the chance to do so.

To Sign or Not to Sign: At What Cost?

Another notable finding to explore is the process in which the athletes went through before deciding whether or not to sign an endorsement deal. As previously mentioned, there were two predisposed attitudes the participants held toward NIL. Participants had to weigh whether or not the deal was lucrative enough for them to engage with a possible endorsement, and the athletes at the mid-major Division I level were less likely to land endorsements. The attitude held by the athletes regarding the lucrateness of potential endorsements resembles a complex thought process the athletes went through weighing their time and resources versus the potential outcome of the endorsement. This process resembles similarities to transaction cost theory (TCT), a theory widely regarded in management research. TCT (Coase, 1937, Williamson, 1975) has been used to shine light on organization phenomena, strategic alliances, supply chain relationships, and more (Cuypers et al., 2021).
TCT suggests that transactions are a costly endeavor, and different modes of transactions (e.g., within a market or a firm) entail different costs (Coase, 1937). The main aspect of TCT is figuring out whether a transaction is more efficiently performed within a firm or outside of it (Geyskens et al., 2006). Therefore, an individual must carefully examine the transaction costs of alternative methods to decide how a transaction must be conducted (Rindfleisch, 2020). Williamson (1985) argues that transactions are assigned to structures based on three attributes: asset specificity, uncertainty, and frequency, with asset specificity being the most important attribute. He defines asset specificity as the degree of which a specific investment is involved in a transaction (Cuypers et al., 2021; Williamson, 1985).

Relevant to the current study, a specific investment can be considered the athlete’s time, effort, and resources they put into executing the terms of their endorsement deal. Investments made into fulfilling the terms of a contract may not yield results a collegiate athlete deems worthy, and thus the athlete may not choose to pursue the endorsement. This attitude is prevalent among the athletes in the current study, as several athletes spoke on weighing certain investments (i.e., time and effort) against whether or not they would be fairly compensated by the endorsing company. For instance, when discussing whether or not it was worth her or her teammates’ time to try and seek out endorsement opportunities, Kristen stated, “I see why people are like, I'm already swamped. I have study hall, I have class, I have practice, like, I don't have time to also be doing my research, figuring out how I can get a partnership.” However, there is potential for a return on investment that is not solely financial. According to Kristen and Alyssa, the companies they partnered with were enticing because of the philanthropic nature of the company. Therefore, it is plausible athletes may sign an endorsement deal with a company due to the alignment in values between the athlete and company, even if the athlete does not deem the financial compensation as lucrative.

### Personal Branding

The challenging nature of describing their personal brand was a commonality amongst participants in this study. As previously noted, athletes either initially struggled naming brand attributes, or described products they wanted to endorse, when asked to describe or define their personal brand. The participants’ responses hint to the lack of knowledge of personal branding, or what it means to have a personal brand. Once the athletes were able to grasp the concept of a personal brand, the description of their brand centered around authenticity. According to the women, their personal brand had very little to do with their sport. Instead, the majority of the athletes utilized social media to show other aspects of their lives, such as their friends or their hobbies.

These findings are noteworthy for two reasons. First, researchers have found that elite female athletes have faced pressures of adhering to gender norms and societal pressures when presenting their brand online (Lobpries et al., 2018). Participants in the current study did not express this sentiment. Instead, the athletes simply posted aspects of their lives, including (and oftentimes, leaving out) their sport. For example, Alyssa stated, “I think my profile [on social media] shows [I go do] fun things with my friends and travel and experience other things outside of that athlete life.” In addition, the more senior athletes showed awareness that their time playing their sport was concluding soon. Due to this, they were using social media to showcase a more holistic version of themselves.

Moreover, previous athlete branding literature centered around Olympic and professional athletes has shown that athletes at the highest levels of their sport have the ability to successfully brand themselves on social media (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Harris & Brison, 2022). Researchers have found that Olympic and professional athletes consistently post about sponsorships, athletic performance, family and friends, and their personal lives (Doyle et al., 2020; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Harris & Brison, 2022). Comparatively, participants in the current study had difficulty defining and understanding their personal brand. Further, the collegiate athletes in the current study showed a dearth of knowledge when it came to their personal brand, signaling the need for more branding education at the college level. Due to opportunities for monetizing a personal brand, scholars have recommended college athletic
departments invest in branding education for their athletes (Harris et al., 2021), an action from which the participants in the current study would greatly benefit.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As with any study, this research has limitations. The first limitation is with the sample. The sample for the current study consisted of 10 collegiate female athletes. Garnering a larger sample will provide a more holistic view of any potential changes in team dynamics due to NIL. Additionally, interviews for the current study conclude approximately one year after NIL legislation had passed. Data collected one year after transformative legislation is implemented may be vastly different than data collected several years after the legislation is enacted, given that the college landscape has changed significantly since NIL legislation was passed (Johnson, 2022). For example, interviews conducted with female athletes more senior in their careers, who were classified as freshman at the time of NIL legislation being enacted, could potentially yield different results as shifts in team dynamics might have occurred slowly over time. Allowing time for the byproducts of NIL legislation to develop is imperative, as the ever-changing landscape presents a unique challenge to encapsulate a holistic view of the collegiate athletics environment.

The implications of this study are profound for athletes and coaches alike. Results from this study can help coaches understand the factors influencing their team’s group cohesion and leadership. Due to this, coaches can have a broader perspective of how team members view one another, and how the views the athletes hold may change. For athletes, the current study provides relevant information due to longevity of careers and playing seasons, as NIL opportunities for team members may ebb and flow due to exposure or playing time. Team members garnering, or not garnering, endorsement deals have the potential to influence a team’s dynamic dependent upon the group’s culture and attitudes. Additionally, the current study is useful to athletes from a personal branding perspective, as it highlights the importance of knowing and defining your personal brand.

However, this study lends new insights on team dynamics and personal branding of female collegiate athletes. It reveals a snapshot of how the women are responding to legislation that allows them to monetize their personal brand and shows how they are handling potential changes within their team due to this legislation. Group cohesion and leadership roles are particular areas of interest because of impacts that may happen due to athletes garnering more attention from outside sources. Outside sources can include companies wanting to partner with athletes, or marketing agencies wanting a particular athlete to make an appearance. Researchers should evaluate how athletes who lack formal leadership roles informally acquire leadership currency through endorsements and outside attention from the media. Further, researchers should consider investigating the personal branding and team dynamics in the context of male sports, to gain a more holistic understanding of collegiate athlete experiences with NIL.

In addition, as presented in previous literature, elite female athletes have been found to take on the role of brand managers, forcing the athletes to manage their own brand (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Lobpries et al, 2018). While this presents a challenge for women, it also presents an opportunity for them to have control over their public message. When women are in charge of their own narrative via social media, it has the potential to be inherently different than what could be portrayed in the mass media (Geurin, 2017; Su et al., 2020). Due to this, researchers should evaluate branding and messaging via collegiate female athletes’ social media, as the athletes may tell unique stories and brand themselves contradictory to mainstream media.
References


