

Exploring NIL Self-Marketing and Branding Strategies of NCAA Group of Five Collegiate Athletes: A Single-Site Qualitative Case Study

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This single-site qualitative case study examines how NCAA Division I Group of Five student-athletes engage in self-marketing and personal branding in the evolving name, image, and likeness (NIL) landscape. Guided by the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI), the study explores how student-athlete branding practices align with the framework's three dimensions (athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle). Fourteen student-athletes representing six distinct sports participated in semi-structured interviews. Findings indicate student-athletes' NIL efforts were largely self-directed, shaped by limited institutional resources typical of NCAA Division I Group of Five contexts. Participants relied heavily on direct outreach and inconsistent social media strategies, with most emphasizing performance and appearance over lifestyle branding. Despite these challenges, student-athletes identified NIL participation as beneficial for developing communication, professionalism, and financial literacy skills. This study contributes to the literature by applying MABI to a collegiate NIL environment, offering a theoretically grounded understanding of how student-athletes at resource-constrained institutions build personal brands in the absence of formalized support. Implications highlight the need for athletic departments to provide structured NIL education, branding guidance, and strategic support that better prepare student-athletes for the demands of NIL participation.

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In 2021, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) enacted its name, image, and likeness (NIL) policy, allowing student-athletes to earn compensation for promotional activities, endorsements, and personal branding (NCAA, 2021a). This policy shift introduced new entrepreneurial opportunities for student-athletes while simultaneously placing additional expectations on athletic departments to provide education, guidance, and compliance oversight. For many institutions, the NIL era has challenged existing support structures, especially where resources, staffing, and administrative priorities already differ markedly across NCAA subdivisions (Meares et al., 2024).

Although recent scholarship has begun to explore student-athletes' experiences navigating NIL, much of this research has approached the topic from broad or inductive perspectives that examine general challenges and opportunities (Bredikhina et al., 2026; Corr et al., 2023; Madden & O'Hallarn, 2024). Studies have increasingly examined the influence of institutional context and resource levels, noting that NIL is experienced differently at large, well-funded athletic departments than at smaller or NCAA Division I Group of Five programs (Gonzales & Short, 2025). However, far less attention has been given to how student-athletes at Group of Five institutions actively engage in personal branding and self-marketing considering their athletic departments often have fewer staff, reduced visibility, smaller local markets, and more constrained NIL infrastructures. Because NIL compensation for most college athletes is generated through local or regional networks, institutional resource disparities meaningfully shape how student-athletes identify opportunities and present themselves to potential partners (Meares et al., 2024).

While the NIL literature has contributed important insights into student-athlete experiences, most studies have used inductive coding without anchoring findings to a theoretical model of athlete branding. As a result, the field knows relatively little about the ways student-athletes' branding behaviors align with or diverge from established branding frameworks. Addressing this gap is critical, as theoretical lenses can help clarify not only what strategies student-athletes are using, but also how their practices compare with idealized branding processes and where targeted education or support may be beneficial.

To provide a theoretically grounded perspective, this study employs the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI; Arai et al., 2013, 2014), which conceptualizes athlete brands through three dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. Though originally developed to examine professional athletes, MABI offers a useful structure for analyzing student-athlete branding in the NIL era, particularly in contexts where formal branding education is limited. Applying the MABI to an NCAA Division I Group of Five environment enables a clearer understanding of how student-athletes construct their brands under resource constraints and how their practices align with theoretical expectations.

The purpose of this single-site qualitative case study is to examine how NCAA Division I Group of Five student-athletes engage in personal branding and self-marketing within the NIL landscape and to analyze how their branding practices align with the three dimensions of the MABI. This study also explores how the resource

limitations inherent to NCAA Division I Group of Five institutions influence student-athletes' capacity to develop and sustain effective branding strategies.

By centering the lived experiences of student-athletes and grounding the analysis in the MABI, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of NIL participation in NCAA Division I Group of Five athletic settings. It offers insights for scholars seeking to extend athlete branding theory and practical guidance for athletic departments working to support student-athletes in the NIL era.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do the personal branding practices of student-athletes at a NCAA Division I Group of Five institution reflect the three dimensions of the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI)?

RQ2: How do student-athletes' perceptions of important branding elements align with the dimensions of the MABI framework?

RQ3: How do institutional resource limitations at a NCAA Division I Group of Five university influence student-athletes' ability to develop personal brands consistent with MABI?

Theoretical Framework

The present study is guided by the MABI, a framework developed to conceptualize how athletes cultivate brand identities that resonate with audiences (Arai et al., 2013, 2014). The MABI proposes athlete brands are composed of three interrelated dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. Athletic performance encompasses on-field success, competitive accomplishments, and perceived expertise; attractive appearance includes physical aesthetics, style, and visual presentation; and marketable lifestyle captures off-field behaviors, personality traits, values, and social engagement of the athlete. Together, these dimensions describe how athletes create a coherent, appealing brand identity that appeals to fans and commercial partners.

Although the MABI was developed in the context of professional sport, several scholars have examined how its principles extend to collegiate athletes, particularly in the NIL era (Arai et al., 2014; Hawkins-Jedlicka et al., 2023). As student-athletes take on new responsibilities in constructing marketable identities, the branding elements described in the MABI offer a structured way to analyze how they present themselves and engage with external audiences. For example, Bredikhina et al. (2026) emphasize student-athletes must now manage both performance-based and lifestyle-driven components of their identities to succeed in NIL partnerships, even though many lack formal training or strategic support. Similarly, research examining student-athletes' experiences under NIL has shown brand-building often requires navigating pressures related to visibility, self-presentation, and audience expectations, demands that map closely onto the three dimensions of the MABI (Gonzales & Short, 2025; Madden & O'Hallarn, 2024).

Recent literature has also demonstrated that personal branding is influenced by institutional context. In particular, student-athletes at resource-constrained programs may face heightened challenges related to both lifestyle and appearance branding due to limited staff support, reduced exposure, and fewer educational opportunities regarding NIL participation. Madden and O'Hallarn (2024) illustrated institutional climates and support systems significantly shape how athletes perceive themselves and manage external expectations. These dynamics are especially relevant for NCAA Division I Group of Five athletes, whose NIL opportunities are often generated locally and without the branding infrastructure available at Power Four institutions. The MABI provides a useful framework for examining how these athletes navigate performance, appearance, and lifestyle branding amid constrained resources.

While previous NIL studies have identified broad themes related to opportunity, pressure, and self-promotion, few have explicitly evaluated student-athletes' branding practices in relation to a theoretical model. Using the MABI offers two advantages. First, it grounds the analysis in a widely recognized branding framework, enabling a systematic assessment of how student-athletes construct their identities. Second, it highlights specific areas, such as lifestyle branding, where student-athletes may require more support or strategic development. By applying the MABI to a single-site NCAA Division I Group of Five context, this study extends athlete branding theory into a unique and underexplored segment of collegiate athletics while responding directly to calls for more theoretically anchored NIL research.

Literature Review

NIL in Collegiate Athletics

Since the NCAA implemented its NIL policy in 2021, student-athletes have been permitted to engage in commercial activities ranging from sponsored social media posts to paid appearances and personal brand partnerships (NCAA, 2021a). Early NIL scholarship has documented the rapid expansion of athlete entrepreneurship, identifying both new opportunities and persistent challenges (Bredikhina et al., 2026; Corr et al., 2023). Much of this work emphasizes student-athletes' need to manage their online presence, develop branding competencies, and navigate compliance and financial responsibilities, tasks many feel unprepared to take on (Corr et al., 2023; Economou & Gamble, 2024; Hawkins-Jedlicka et al., 2023).

Recent research indicates NIL participation is also shaped by social, cultural, and demographic factors. Female athletes, for instance, often face competing pressures to maximize marketability while managing gendered expectations related to appearance and self-presentation, a tension described by Gonzales and Short (2025) as the female athlete dilemma. NIL has also introduced stressors related to constant visibility, public evaluation, and self-management, with student-athletes describing how the demands of branding and performing for an audience can affect both identity and well-being (Madden & O'Hallarn, 2024).

Together, extant scholarship suggests NIL has altered the collegiate sport experience by requiring student-athletes to assume professionalized branding roles for which institutional preparation varies widely.

Institutional Context and Resource Disparities

Although all NCAA student-athletes may pursue NIL opportunities, institutional resources play a significant role in shaping the level of support they receive. Larger, better-funded NCAA Division I Power Four institutions typically offer broader branding infrastructures, such as social media staff, NIL education programs, and department-endorsed third-party platforms, compared to NCAA Division I Group of Five programs (Gonzales & Short, 2025). These disparities influence both visibility and opportunity, as athletes at resource-constrained institutions often rely more heavily on local partnerships, direct outreach, and self-guided branding strategies.

Institutions and their personnel play a central role in shaping NIL engagement. Coaches, administrators, compliance staff, and donor or booster groups influence how athletes understand NIL expectations, gain access to opportunities, and manage the demands of personal branding (Gonzales & Short, 2025). Athletic departments with larger creative or marketing staffs can provide content creation, education, and brand development resources, while institutions with limited staffing often rely on athletes to navigate NIL independently (Corr et al., 2023; Meares et al., 2024). These structural differences are particularly evident in NCAA Division I Group of Five contexts, where institutions often have fewer resources to support student-athletes' NIL activities than their Power Four counterparts (Meares et al., 2024).

Scholars have highlighted how institutional climates and forms of support can affect athletes' perceptions of empowerment, pressure, and personal identity development (Madden & O'Hallarn, 2024). Within NCAA Division I Group of Five environments, student-athletes may experience fewer structured branding resources, but also greater autonomy in shaping their NIL activities. The unevenness of institutional support underscores the need for research that captures NIL experiences within distinct athletic department contexts rather than assuming uniformity across NCAA Division I. This study responds to that need by focusing specifically on student-athletes at an NCAA Division I Group of Five institution, where resource limitations shape both branding behaviors and the broader NIL landscape.

Student-Athlete Personal Branding in the NIL Era

Personal branding has become a central component of NIL participation, requiring student-athletes to strategically manage their public identity across social media, community interactions, and athletic performance. Prior research shows student-athletes often recognize the importance of developing a brand, but lack formal guidance on how to do so effectively (Bredikhina et al., 2026). Common strategies include consistent posting, showcasing athletic achievements, highlighting personality traits, and engaging with local businesses; however, execution varies widely depending on athletes' familiarity with branding concepts and digital marketing.

Work examining the lived experiences of student-athletes who engage in NIL suggests branding is shaped not only by performance and visibility, but also by the norms of online self-presentation, personal identity exploration, and perceived expectations from followers and commercial partners (Bredikhina et al., 2026; Madden & O'Hallarn, 2024). For female athletes, these expectations can be further complicated by gendered pressures around appearance and marketability (Gonzales & Short, 2025). Collectively, this research demonstrates student-athlete branding is a complex, multidimensional process that often evolves without structured institutional support.

Despite this growing body of literature, few studies have examined student-athlete branding using an established theoretical model. Much of the existing work relies on inductive thematic analysis, limiting opportunities to evaluate how student-athletes' branding strategies align with known dimensions of athlete branding theory. The present study addresses this gap by applying the MABI to assess how student-athletes conceptualize and enact their personal brands within an NCAA Division I Group of Five context.

Social Media and NIL Activation

Social media has emerged as the primary site of NIL activation, shaping both the visibility and marketability of collegiate athletes (Cocco et al., 2023; Hawkins-Jedlicka et al., 2023). Recent research demonstrates an athlete's social media following is the strongest predictor of NIL value, surpassing on-field performance, institutional prestige, or competitive success (Stokowski et al., 2024). Because most NIL partnerships rely on digital impressions and influencer-style promotion, athletes with consistent online engagement are better positioned to secure opportunities, regardless of competitive level. However, this shift also intensifies well-documented issues associated with social media participation, including heightened scrutiny, gendered appearance pressures, identity negotiation, and vulnerability to online harassment, dynamics that are further amplified when financial incentives become tied to digital visibility (Gonzales & Short, 2025; Madden & O'Hallarn, 2024). For athletes at NCAA Division I Group of Five institutions, who often have fewer institutional branding resources and rely more heavily on local partnerships, social media becomes an especially critical platform for reaching potential sponsors and cultivating the dimensions of personal brand described in the MABI. As a result, understanding NIL requires acknowledging the central role of social media as both a marketing mechanism and a source of psychosocial pressure for student-athletes.

Despite this emerging research, few studies have examined student-athlete branding using an established theoretical model.

Method

Research Design

This study used a single-site qualitative case study design to examine how student-athletes understand and engage in personal branding and NIL activities within

the context of one NCAA Division I Group of Five institution. A case study approach is appropriate for investigating contemporary phenomena within bounded, real-world settings where contextual conditions shape participant experiences (Yin, 2018). Although “Group of Five” was not used as a recruitment criterion, the institutional context remained central to the study’s purpose; therefore, the framing emphasizes that the study represents an exploratory case study conducted at an NCAA Division I Group of Five institution, rather than a comparative analysis across subdivisions.

The selected institution is located in a mid-sized regional market and possesses limited branding, marketing, and NIL support infrastructure compared to NCAA Division I Power Four universities. This context provides a meaningful environment for examining how student-athletes navigate branding practices under typical NCAA Division I Group of Five resource constraints.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants included 14 NCAA Division I student-athletes (five males, nine females), all eligible for athletic participation and over the age of 18. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit athletes across a range of sports who had engaged in at least one NIL activity or expressed interest in NIL participation. Participants represented both revenue and non-revenue sports, as well as a range of academic standings and demographic backgrounds.

Following approval from the institution’s Institutional Review Board, recruitment began with eight interviews, followed by interviews with six additional participants. Saturation in this study was reached at the thematic level through open and axial coding. Four main themes were identified, and as interviews progressed, no new themes emerged. Additional data only refined existing themes, signaling further interviews would not provide new insights. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) describe saturation as when “no additional issues or insights are identified and data begin to repeat so that further data collection is redundant, signifying that an adequate sample size is reached” (p. 4). Their review found saturation in thematic analysis typically occurs between nine and 17 interviews, which aligns with the sample size in this study. Saturation was evaluated throughout the coding process to ensure all themes were fully developed. The sample included student-athletes from both revenue and non-revenue sports, such as men’s volleyball, women’s field hockey, women’s gymnastics, football, and women’s softball, with NCAA experience ranging from one to six years.

While participants represented a range of team and individual sports, the sample lacked representation of all sports. The sample was also skewed toward upperclassmen and fifth-year student-athletes, many of whom had been exposed to NIL policy since its inception in 2021. This concentration reflects the availability and willingness of certain student-athletes to discuss NIL, particularly those with more experience navigating branding and sponsorship opportunities. Participant demographics are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Sport	Year	Sex	Transfer	# of Deals
P1	Softball	Sophomore	Female	No	0
P2	Softball	Sophomore	Female	No	0
P3	Field Hockey	5th Year	Female	No	20
P4	Football	Senior	Male	No	2
P5	Football	6th Year	Male	No	24
P6	Field Hockey	Junior	Female	No	4
P7	Volleyball	5th Year	Male	No	0
P8	Gymnastics	5th Year	Female	No	5
P9	Volleyball	Junior	Male	Yes	5
P10	Field Hockey	Senior	Female	No	1
P11	Volleyball	5th Year	Male	No	5
P12	Field Hockey	Senior	Female	No	0
P13	Field Hockey	Senior	Female	No	4
P14	Softball	Junior	Female	No	15

Sampling Technique and Instrumentation

Recruitment began with a few initial participants selected for their varying demographics, including sport type, gender, and individual or team sport affiliation (Creswell, 2014). The lead researcher directly contacted initial participants to invite them to take part in the study. These participants referred others, helping to ensure a diverse pool. Potential participants were either referred to the lead researcher and then contacted directly or expressed interest following a referral and subsequently reached out to the lead researcher themselves. Interviews were scheduled at convenient times and locations for participants, all conducted face-to-face to ensure consistency and minimize bias.

Interviews lasted 20 to 35 minutes, averaging 29 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed in real time using Rev VoiceHub (Rev, n.d.). Transcriptions were reviewed and edited for accuracy. The interview guide, developed to align with the study's research questions, covered key themes such as personal branding, marketing strategies, NIL experiences, and institutional support (Doyle et al., 2022; Economou & Gamble, 2024; Hawkins-Jedlicka et al., 2023). The full interview guide is provid-

ed in Appendix A. It followed a semi-structured format. The interview protocol was developed using prior NIL and student-athlete branding scholarship and the MABI's three dimensions (athletic performance, attractive appearance, marketable lifestyle). The MABI was used deductively to ensure the protocol elicited participants' experiences with the components of athlete branding. For example, questions asked athletes how they presented themselves online (appearance), how they communicated their off-field identity (lifestyle), and how athletic performance shaped their public image (performance). Additional open-ended questions allowed for inductive insights related to institutional support, local market opportunities, and NIL barriers.

Rev VoiceHub technology was used to transcribe interviews, combining advanced speech recognition with human verification to ensure accurate transcriptions (Rev, n.d.). After transcription, the lead researcher reviewed each transcript by cross-referencing it with the original audio to correct discrepancies. Member checking was employed by providing participants with their transcripts to confirm accuracy and ensure their responses were represented appropriately.

Data Analysis

All data, including transcripts and recordings, were stored securely on password-protected devices and accounts in compliance with university data protection policies. Transcripts were first cleaned by correcting discrepancies between the audio recordings and the autogenerated transcripts, including adjustments to punctuation and formatting for clarity.

Data were analyzed using a hybrid deductive–inductive thematic analysis approach informed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). Analysis began with repeated readings of the interview transcripts to build familiarity with the dataset and to document initial impressions. Because the purpose of the study was to explore student-athlete personal branding through the lens of the MABI, the first cycle of coding incorporated several deductive codes aligned with the MABI's three dimensions (athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle). These deductive codes ensured the analysis systematically captured branding-related content tied to the theoretical framework. At the same time, the lead researcher engaged in inductive coding to identify emerging concepts outside of the MABI, such as institutional support, social media practices, NIL education barriers, resource constraints, and local market influences. As coding progressed, deductive and inductive codes were compared, refined, and consolidated to develop a coherent set of analytical categories that reflected both the structure of the theoretical framework and the nuances of participants' experiences.

Throughout this process, the lead researcher maintained reflective memos documenting analytic decisions, interpretation shifts, and connections to emerging themes. These memos, combined with member-checking feedback, supported the confirmability and trustworthiness of the final thematic structure. Member checking was conducted by sharing a summary of emergent themes with participants via email and inviting feedback on accuracy and resonance. Several athletes responded affirming the interpretations aligned with their experiences, and no contradictory feedback

was reported. The resulting themes represented both the theoretical grounding of the MABI and the contextual realities of NIL engagement within the case study.

Positionality Statement

The lead researcher identifies as a White woman from an upper middle-class background in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Her personal, academic, and professional experiences have shaped her perspective on collegiate athletics and informed her approach to this study. She competed as an NCAA Division I student-athlete and later completed a master's degree in sport administration at the institution where this research was conducted. Her experiences as both a student-athlete and an athletics department intern provided her with familiarity regarding institutional structures, athlete support systems, and the emerging landscape of NIL opportunities. She has also participated in NIL activities herself, using third-party platforms to secure partnerships and develop her personal brand.

These experiences offer valuable contextual understanding, but also present potential biases, including positive views of NIL and beliefs about the importance of personal branding for student-athletes. To mitigate these influences, the researcher engaged in ongoing reflexive journaling, documented her assumptions prior to data collection, and revisited these reflections throughout analysis. This reflexive process helped ensure that interpretations foregrounded participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's prior experiences or professional aspirations.

The remaining authors also brought professional experiences that may have influenced their perspectives on the study and its interpretation. One author has 18 years of professional experience in intercollegiate athletics at an NCAA Division I institution without football and contributed extensively to manuscript development. This professional experience provided familiarity with the institutional structures, resource considerations, and student-athlete experiences relevant to the study, while also creating the potential for assumptions about how athletic departments and student-athletes navigate NIL opportunities. Another author contributed to manuscript development and previously worked in a university admissions role, providing experience with higher education administration and student-facing institutional processes. A fourth author also contributed to manuscript development and previously worked in academic support for student-athletes at the institution where the study was conducted, providing familiarity with student-athlete support structures and the collegiate athletics environment. Although these authors were not involved in data collection or analysis, their professional experiences may have influenced how they approached the development and interpretation of the manuscript.

The authors recognize that these collective experiences may shape how NIL, institutional support, and student-athlete development are understood. Accordingly, the authors sought to maintain transparency regarding their professional perspectives and to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the participants' accounts and the study's theoretical framework. Acknowledging the positionality of all authors supports the transparency, trustworthiness, and credibility of this qualitative case study.

Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine how student-athletes at an NCAA Division I Group of Five institution understand, engage with, and navigate self-branding and NIL participation. Through interviews with 14 student-athletes across six sports, four central themes emerged that collectively illustrate the opportunities, challenges, and learning processes associated with NIL engagement in an NCAA Division I Group of Five athletic environment. Because NIL activities inherently blend promotional actions with personal identity construction, the Findings and Discussion are merged to present both the athletes' experiences and the interpretive insights shaped by prior NIL and athlete-branding scholarship.

The four themes highlight the multifaceted nature of NIL participation: (a) *methods of communication and outreach*, which reflects the informal and inconsistent ways student-athletes initiate NIL relationships; (b) *social media presence and inconsistent brand strategy*, which reveals how athletes struggle to develop cohesive online identities; (c) *limited institutional support and education*, which underscores the role of resource disparities in shaping NIL readiness; and (d) *practical benefits and skill development from NIL*, which illustrates the personal and professional growth that emerges even from small-scale NIL activity. Together, these themes provide a nuanced understanding of how student-athletes build and express their personal brands within the constraints and opportunities of the NCAA Division I Group of Five context.

Theme 1: Methods of Communication and Outreach

Student-athletes described a range of strategies they used to pursue NIL opportunities, most of which relied on personal initiative rather than formalized institutional structures or third-party representation. Across sports, participants explained their communication and outreach efforts were primarily self-directed, reflecting the individualized and decentralized nature of NIL activity at a NCAA Division I Group of Five institution. Their accounts underscored how building relationships with potential partners required proactive, sometimes uncomfortable forms of engagement, from cold outreach messages to maintaining professional correspondence, behaviors that align with the "marketable lifestyle" dimension of the MABI yet often occurred without training or guidance.

Several athletes described direct outreach as the only viable avenue for securing deals in a localized market. As one volleyball player explained:

I've found success just directly messaging the company, whether that be by email or through Instagram . . . I also feel like the direct form of communication kind of makes you stand out a little bit in their eyes and shows a little bit more interest (Volleyball, P9).

His experience reflects recent NIL scholarship suggesting athletes at smaller institutions or in less-visible markets must rely more heavily on self-promotion and personal communication rather than being approached by brands (Stokowski et al., 2024).

Similarly, a gymnastics athlete emphasized the individualized nature of outreach: “So I genuinely just wrote a little template body introducing myself, saying how I was interested in this brand and how I’d love to promote it. And I’d send it to probably 20 different brands at a time” (Gymnastics, P8). These examples demonstrate that NIL activation at this institution depended less on institutional infrastructure and more on athletes’ personal willingness to engage in unmediated communication with businesses.

Importantly, athletes noted their outreach extended beyond initiating deals. It also involved maintaining relationships and ensuring fulfillment of deliverables. A softball participant described:

I mean, without posting, you’re not going to get anywhere. But start creating your own brand by yourself. So, whether that’s you love the outdoors and you love traveling, well then start accumulating collages so that you can post once a week (Softball, P14).

This highlights how NIL often requires professionalized communication skills typically associated with marketing or influencer work, yet athletes at this institution frequently learned these practices through trial and error. Given the limited institutional guidance discussed later, the responsibility to cultivate, negotiate, and manage communication remained squarely on the athletes.

Taken together, these narratives illustrate a NIL environment in which outreach and communication are essential, individualized skill sets athletes must self-develop to access market opportunities. Consistent with recent scholarship, athletes at NCAA Division I Group of Five institutions generally lack robust institutional support or access to major brands, making direct outreach a primary avenue for securing NIL partnerships. Within the MABI, these outreach behaviors reveal how athletes actively construct their brand through the lifestyle dimension, curating how they present themselves, how they communicate with businesses, and how they build ongoing professional relationships. The communication strategies reported by participants demonstrate both the entrepreneurial potential and emotional demands of NIL engagement, emphasizing the self-driven nature of branding work in a constrained institutional setting.

Theme 2: Social Media Presence and Inconsistent Brand Strategy

Across interviews, student-athletes consistently described social media as the primary platform for NIL activation, yet their accounts revealed substantial inconsistency in how they understood, curated, and strategically used their online presence. While most participants recognized social media visibility played a direct role in their NIL opportunities, they also expressed uncertainty about what constitutes a coherent personal brand and how to maintain one across platforms. These narratives reflect both the increasing centrality of social media to NIL (Stokowski et al., 2024) and the heightened pressures associated with curating an online persona, pressures that disproportionately affect athletes in smaller markets who rely heavily on digital visibility to reach potential partners.

Many athletes understood social media followings were critical to NIL success but admitted they lacked a clear strategy for leveraging their platforms. A football player explained, “I’ll say getting more active on social media. Not just posting, just like, ‘Hey, I’m here, I’m here,’ just doing more engaging things, making people want to click onto my profile” (Football, P5). His description reflects a common theme: although athletes were aware their online presence mattered, they had received little guidance on how to develop a consistent brand identity aligned with the dimensions of MABI, particularly “attractive appearance” and “marketable lifestyle.” Instead, their feeds tended to be informal, unstructured extensions of their personal lives, making it challenging to present a professional brand image appealing to sponsors.

Similarly, a field hockey participant described using social media inconsistently, noting:

I didn’t really care what I was posting. I didn’t care about my brand. I didn’t care what content they made me post. I didn’t care what I had to do to make the post look good...I’m doing it because I’m getting something for free and I’m getting paid to post (Field Hockey, P3).

This sporadic, reactive approach demonstrates how athletes often shifted into “branding mode” only when obligated by a partnership agreement, rather than integrating branding into their everyday social media habits. This reactive pattern aligns with broader NIL research showing how many collegiate athletes lack long-term content planning and instead approach social media transactionally rather than strategically.

At the same time, several athletes acknowledged the emotional and psychological pressures of handling negativity as they curated an online presence. A softball athlete noted, “...staying true to myself and being okay and being happy with myself internally rather than looking for external validation” (Softball, P14) was challenging. Her comments mirror broader social media scholarship documenting the tension athletes feel between authenticity and marketability, especially when financial incentives intensify the stakes of audience judgment. For many participants, this tension contributed to inconsistent branding behaviors and a reluctance to position themselves as influencers or content creators, even though NIL often pushes athletes into those roles.

Finally, some athletes indicated inconsistent branding stemmed from a lack of knowledge rather than disinterest. A softball player described wishing she had clearer guidance, saying, “I definitely think there needs to be more education on how to get our names out there and how to use our image and likeness” (Softball, P1). This uncertainty reflects the institutional gap discussed in Theme 3. Without structured branding education or content creation support, athletes are left to independently navigate the complex expectations of influencer-style engagement. In NCAA Division I Group of Five programs, where creative staffing, marketing teams, and administrator availability are more limited, this struggle becomes even more pronounced.

Together, these findings highlight that while student-athletes understand the importance of social media for NIL opportunities, they lack the knowledge, confidence, and institutional support needed to maintain a consistent and compelling brand strat-

egy. This inconsistent approach often results in fragmented online identities and missed NIL opportunities, particularly in localized markets where digital visibility plays an outsized role. Within the MABI framework, these behaviors reveal both the potential and challenges of aligning the “appearance” and “lifestyle” dimensions with authentic self-presentation. The tension between authenticity, audience expectations, emotional labor, and strategic branding underscores the complex realities athletes face in building a coherent personal brand in the NIL era.

Theme 3: Limited Institutional Support and Education

Student-athletes across all sports emphasized that the most significant barrier to navigating NIL effectively was the lack of structured institutional support, education, and guidance. Despite being eligible for NIL opportunities, participants consistently described feeling unprepared to manage branding expectations, communication with businesses, content creation, and compliance requirements. The experiences shared by athletes reflected a broader pattern common in NCAA Division I Group of Five environments: NIL responsibilities are pushed to athletes individually because athletic departments often lack the staffing, resources, and infrastructure to provide robust support programs. This limited support shaped athletes’ ability to engage with the athlete branding process, especially the lifestyle and appearance dimensions of the MABI, and significantly influenced their NIL outcomes.

Many student-athletes described institutional messaging about NIL as vague, sporadic, or insufficient to meet their needs. A softball player expressed, “Opendorse, I believe, is the one that our school provides for us as student-athletes, but there’s no education on how to use it and how to get those deals or anything” (Softball, P2). Her description mirrors emerging research documenting how many NCAA Division I Group of Five athletic departments offer minimal operational guidance on NIL beyond basic compliance reminders. Without clear support, athletes are left to independently interpret and operationalize NIL expectations, often resulting in uncertainty and underutilization of opportunities.

Other athletes noted information provided by the institution tended to be compliance-focused rather than instructional. As a football player explained, “They’ll tell us to make sure we’re communicating with compliance with all our deals and whatnot” (Football, P5). However, as a field hockey player elaborated, “I feel like they introduced us to the app [Opendorse] and then kind of were like, okay, use that and then didn’t really support as much after that” (Field Hockey, P12). This emphasis on compliance reflects what scholars have described as a defensive administrative approach to NIL, where risk avoidance, rather than athlete development, drives educational priorities. For athletes attempting to build their brands, a compliance-only model offers little practical value and leaves them navigating the complexities of NIL without strategic support.

Participants also highlighted the absence of resources typically available at larger, NCAA Division I Power Four programs, such as in-house creative teams, branding workshops, or staff dedicated to helping athletes pursue opportunities. A field hockey player reflected, “I knew from the beginning that it was going to be difficult

coming from a mid-major school and a sport that no one really knows of” (Field Hockey, P13). Another field hockey athlete echoed:

I think there’s a huge lack of education and support with NIL deals. There could even be a whole course on it for student-athletes, how to promote it, how to use it to the best of your benefit. I think there should be a full-time position for student-athletes at every school that provides those resources (Field Hockey, P10).

At NCAA Division I Group of Five institutions, limited staffing and media infrastructure means athletes must self-manage activities that, at larger programs, are supported by professionalized marketing staff who help athletes build cohesive brands and pursue partnerships.

Even athletes who had secured multiple deals felt institutional support remained minimal. A field hockey athlete with significant NIL experience shared, “But for the most part, I was just like apply, apply, apply, and hope for the best” (Field Hockey, P3). This reliance on independent learning reflects a broader trend in NIL research indicating student-athletes often turn to peers, external content creators, or online guides rather than institutional personnel. Such self-directed learning can lead to inconsistent branding behaviors and uncertainty about how to best align personal identity with NIL goals.

Several participants described wanting more opportunities to learn or practice NIL-related skills, including negotiation, digital content creation, brand strategy, and public communication. A field hockey athlete explained, “I would like to see someone that would at least come and talk to teams about how to start building your brand or come to you with potential brands they think you could work with” (Field Hockey, P6). Her comments reinforce the idea that NIL engagement is not simply about opportunity but about developing competencies most athletes have never been formally taught. These competencies intersect with the MABI’s lifestyle and appearance dimensions, which require intentional cultivation rather than ad hoc or intuitive efforts.

The lack of structured support not only limited athletes’ branding skills but also contributed to unequal access to opportunities. Athletes from higher-visibility teams or those with prior social media experience found it easier to navigate NIL independently, while others, particularly those from non-revenue sports, felt disadvantaged. As one football player articulated, “I would say the level of school you’re at is definitely the biggest, and then probably your gender and the sport you play” (Football, P4). His reflection aligns with broader literature suggesting that NIL opportunities may reinforce existing inequalities between athletes, particularly when institutions do not actively scaffold support for those with less social media literacy, fewer personal networks, or lower sport-specific visibility (Cocco et al., 2023; Corr et al., 2023).

Collectively, athletes’ experiences demonstrate how limited institutional support created a fragmented NIL environment where athletes were motivated, but underprepared. This environment reinforces the individualized nature of NIL participation and shifts the burden of branding entirely onto student-athletes,

an issue especially salient in NCAA Division I Group of Five contexts where resource limitations restrict institutional intervention. Within the MABI framework, this lack of support affects athletes' ability to develop consistent appearance and lifestyle branding strategies and may limit their capacity to maximize performance-related brand signals. Ultimately, the absence of structured NIL education constrained athletes' readiness and confidence, contributing to the inconsistent branding behaviors and outreach challenges described in earlier themes.

Theme 4: Practical Benefits and Skill Development from NIL

Despite the challenges described in prior themes, student-athletes consistently emphasized participation in NIL provided tangible benefits and contributed to skill development that extended beyond financial gain. These benefits included professional competencies such as communication, content creation, time management, and confidence in self-presentation. While many athletes acknowledged NIL opportunities at their NCAA Division I Group of Five institution were modest, they also described NIL as instrumental in building skills that aligned with their future careers. These experiences reinforce emerging scholarship suggesting NIL offers developmental opportunities tied to personal branding, entrepreneurship, and identity management, areas closely connected to the "marketable lifestyle" and "attractive appearance" dimensions of the MABI (Bredikhina et al., 2026).

Several athletes highlighted how NIL engagements helped them cultivate professional communication and relationship-building skills. One football athlete noted, "I think it helped just with me being confident and networking myself... I feel like sometimes people forget that [NIL deals] can be a professional aspect because it's a partnership in a way" (Football, P5). His reflection illustrates how NIL participation teaches interpersonal competencies not traditionally embedded in collegiate athletics, but essential for personal branding and post-graduation career success. Even athletes who engaged in only one or two deals described these experiences as valuable professional practice.

Similarly, student-athletes recognized NIL as a vehicle for developing digital media and content creation skills. A field hockey player explained:

I think what I did with [company]... showed me a lot of what I want to do with my personal career... I learned that stuff and I learned my interest for it and that that's what I want to do (Field Hockey, P10).

Her description aligns with broader NIL scholarship noting how athletes increasingly engage in influencer-style promotion, requiring them to cultivate digital literacy and aesthetic awareness in alignment with the appearance and lifestyle dimensions of the MABI (Bredikhina et al., 2026; Stokowski et al., 2024). At a resource-constrained institution where professional content support was limited, athletes often taught themselves these skills, making NIL both a branding exercise and an informal media apprenticeship.

Athletes also described NIL as expanding their confidence and sense of agency. One football participant shared, "I'll say accepting denial... just learning from your failures and trying to build off things like that" (Football, P5). His reflection is par-

ticularly meaningful in the context of NCAA Division I Group of Five institutions, where athletes often internalize messages about being less visible or less marketable compared to peers at Power Four programs. NIL provided a mechanism for athletes to recognize and leverage their value, reinforcing the identity-building aspects of personal branding that extend beyond commercial partnerships.

For some athletes, NIL participation also offered unexpected professional clarity or opened doors to career-relevant experiences. A football participant described the experience of teammates discovering new interests: “I know for a fact that some NIL partnerships have gotten some of my old teammates jobs... it kind of gets you ready for the real world” (Football, P4). His experience reflects findings from recent sport management research suggesting that NIL may provide opportunities for athletes to explore professional and vocational identities alongside their athletic identities (Bredikhina et al., 2026). By experimenting with promotional activities, content creation, and partnership negotiation, athletes often encountered new forms of professional engagement that enriched their post-athletic aspirations.

Even modest NIL earnings were meaningful for athletes, particularly those in non-revenue sports who historically have received fewer material benefits. As one field hockey athlete explained, “We don’t have much time for a job or a steady income. So, I think a big part of NIL for college athletes is either free stuff or the money you can get from it” (Field Hockey, P3). A football athlete echoed, “It made the end of my college career a lot easier” (Football, P5). Their experience underscores how financial benefits, even when small, can carry symbolic value related to recognition, visibility, and validation, especially for athletes whose sports rarely attract commercial interest.

Collectively, these experiences demonstrate how NIL opportunities at NCAA Division I Group of Five institutions, while limited in scale, facilitated important forms of practical development. Athletes gained communication skills, digital literacy, self-presentation competence, and confidence navigating commercial spaces, skills that are increasingly valuable in both sport and non-sport careers. Within the MABI framework, these developmental outcomes reveal how NIL participation can strengthen athletes’ understanding and enactment of brand dimensions by encouraging more intentional lifestyle and appearance presentation. At the same time, these benefits highlight how NIL is not solely a financial enterprise; it functions as a meaningful developmental platform that empowers athletes to cultivate professional identities, articulate their value, and prepare for life beyond collegiate sport.

Summary

Taken together, these findings demonstrate how NIL participation is both a branding process and a developmental experience for student-athletes, shaped significantly by institutional resources, individual initiative, and social media fluency. While athletes at this NCAA Division I Group of Five institution engaged in NIL to varying degrees, their experiences consistently reflected the challenges of self-directed branding and the absence of structured institutional guidance. Simultaneously, NIL activities offered meaningful opportunities for skill-building, identity explora-

tion, and personal empowerment. These dual realities illustrate the ongoing tension between the promise of NIL and the uneven infrastructure supporting it, underscoring the need for more intentional educational programming and institution-driven support. Ultimately, the findings highlight the ways NIL can both constrain and enable student-athlete branding efforts within the MABI framework, offering important implications for athletic departments seeking to enhance NIL readiness and equity across sports.

Theoretical Implications

This study extends athlete branding theory by demonstrating how the three dimensions of the MABI (athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle) manifest within the NIL experiences of student-athletes at an NCAA Division I Group of Five institution. While the MABI has primarily been applied to professional athletes (Arai et al., 2013, 2014), these findings show how collegiate athletes construct and manage their brand identities in resource-constrained environments where institutional support is limited and NIL activity is individualized. By situating the MABI within the lived NIL experiences of student-athletes, this study offers several theoretical contributions that expand and contextualize existing athlete-branding frameworks.

First, the theme *methods of communication and outreach* theme aligns most closely with the MABI's "marketable lifestyle" dimension, which reflects personal characteristics and behaviors that enhance an athlete's market appeal (Arai et al., 2013). Participants' descriptions of cold-messaging local businesses, maintaining professional correspondence, and developing outreach strategies reveal lifestyle-driven branding labor that has not been emphasized in prior research. NIL scholarship has shown many student-athletes navigate NIL "on their own" without agency support (Corr et al., 2023), and our findings extend this by illustrating how behind-the-scenes communication work now constitutes a central component of student-athlete brand construction. This expands the marketable lifestyle dimension conceptually by demonstrating that private, administrative interactions, rather than only public-facing behaviors, play a critical role in collegiate brand-building.

Second, the theme *social media presence and inconsistent brand strategy* intersects with both the "attractive appearance" and "marketable lifestyle" dimensions of the MABI. Athletes' struggles with content consistency, aesthetic presentation, and authenticity reflect the expanding importance of digital identity in NIL valuation. Stokowski et al. (2024) show social media following is the strongest predictor of NIL potential, underscoring why participants felt pressure to curate their online persona despite lacking formal guidance. For female athletes, these pressures were compounded by gendered scrutiny noted by Gonzales and Short (2025), where appearance-based judgment increases the emotional labor of branding. Thus, this study broadens theoretical understanding by showing the MABI's appearance and lifestyle components are not static identity attributes, but ongoing, negotiated, and sometimes burdensome processes amplified by social media visibility and gender dynamics.

Third, the theme *limited institutional support and education* theme exposes structural boundaries within the MABI when applied to the collegiate context. The MABI implicitly assumes athletes have access to the knowledge, time, and resources required to intentionally cultivate their brand image (Arai et al., 2014). Yet student-athletes in this study consistently described a lack of NIL education, branding instruction, content creation support, and administrative guidance, patterns consistent with early NIL research documenting significant disparities in university-level support (Meares et al., 2024). These findings demonstrate that institutional capacity shapes whether and how student-athletes can activate each MABI dimension. In NCAA Division I Group of Five environments, limited staffing and smaller markets restrict both performance-based visibility and lifestyle/appearance-driven promotional opportunities. This contributes theoretically by situating the MABI within the institutional ecology of collegiate sport, emphasizing how brand-building is both an individual and structural process.

Finally, the theme *practical benefits and skill development from NIL* suggests a potential expansion of the MABI to account for branding competence. Student-athletes described gaining communication skills, digital content creation experience, negotiation abilities, and greater confidence in self-presentation through NIL, a finding echoed by Bredikhina et al. (2026), who emphasize person-environment fit and identity development in NIL engagement. NIL participation thus acts as a developmental mechanism through which athletes acquire competencies that enable them to more effectively enact the lifestyle and appearance dimensions of the MABI. This suggests athlete branding in the collegiate NIL era is not only expressive, but also developmental, meaningfully expanding the conceptual scope of the MABI beyond its original focus on consumer perceptions of athlete attributes.

Collectively, these findings position the MABI as a valuable framework for understanding student-athlete branding, while also demonstrating its limitations when applied to a context defined by structural inequality, gendered pressures, social media demands, and the developmental needs of young athletes. This study extends athlete branding theory by illustrating how the MABI operates within the constraints of institutional resources and by proposing branding competence and skill development be considered integral components of collegiate athlete brand formation in the NIL era.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study highlight several practical considerations for athletic departments, administrators, coaching staffs, and NIL-support personnel, particularly within NCAA Division I Group of Five institutions where resource constraints shape the NIL environment. The following section identifies three core areas where institutions can meaningfully enhance student-athletes' NIL readiness: (1) building structured and developmentally aligned NIL education, (2) strengthening social media and branding support for athletes, and (3) addressing institutional resource disparities through targeted partnerships and scalable programming.

Participants consistently described navigating NIL independently, often learning through trial-and-error rather than through institutional guidance. This mirrors broader research documenting gaps in NIL education across the NCAA landscape (Corr et al., 2023; Meares et al., 2024). Institutions can address these gaps by implementing multiphase, skill-based educational programming that emphasizes communication strategies, brand alignment, content creation, and basic contracting principles. Effective programming may include workshops on professional communication with businesses, training modules on negotiating expectations and deliverables, peer-led panels featuring athletes with successful NIL experience, or collaborations with business faculty or university marketing units. Such programming aligns with the NCAA's emphasis on athlete support during policy shifts (NCAA, 2021a, 2021b) and ensures student-athletes, especially those in non-revenue sports, acquire foundational competencies needed to participate confidently in NIL opportunities.

Given social media following is a key predictor of NIL value (Stokowski et al., 2024), and athletes in this study reported inconsistent posting habits and uncertainty about content strategy, institutions can improve NIL readiness by offering social media-focused branding support. This includes guidance on content consistency, analytics, platform selection, and audience engagement. Importantly, such support should account for gendered dynamics identified in recent NIL scholarship. Female athletes, in particular, navigate heightened scrutiny around appearance and self-presentation (Gonzales & Short, 2025), making social media training an equity-centered imperative rather than a marketing enhancement. Practical initiatives may include content creation workshops facilitated by athletics communications staff, access to basic photography, video, or design support, or assistance in aligning content choices with authentic athlete identities. These forms of support help athletes leverage the attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle components of the MABI more intentionally, while reducing the cognitive and emotional burdens associated with online visibility.

For NCAA Division I Group of Five institutions, resource limitations present significant structural barriers to equitable NIL participation. Participants in this study consistently noted the absence of creative staffing, branded content pipelines, or personnel devoted to NIL education, conditions that mirror broader disparities reported across NCAA divisions (Meares et al., 2024). To address these constraints, institutions can adopt scalable, partnership-driven models rather than attempting to replicate NCAA Division I Power Four infrastructures. Possibilities include partnering with local businesses, alumni entrepreneurs, or campus offices to provide NIL workshops at low cost, leveraging external NIL marketplaces or educational platforms already used by athletes, creating cross-campus collaborations with communications, business, graphic design, or digital media programs, or building small, sustainable NIL "micro-units" within athletics staffed by interns, graduate assistants, or shared personnel. Such approaches acknowledge the structural realities of NCAA Division I Group of Five athletics, while still expanding the institutional capacity to support student-athlete branding. In doing so, athletic departments help level the playing field for athletes in lower-resource environments.

Together, these practical implications emphasize how institutional support must move beyond compliance messaging to include developmental skill-building, digital branding support, and resource-conscious infrastructure. These steps position athletic departments to better prepare student-athletes for the demands of NIL participation, enhance brand-building opportunities across sports, and reduce inequities shaped by institutional size and visibility.

Limitations and Future Research

As with all qualitative research, the findings of this study should be interpreted within the context of several limitations. First, although the interview lengths ranged from approximately 20 to 35 minutes, which may appear shorter than ideal for in-depth qualitative inquiry, these durations were sufficient to address the research questions for several reasons. Student-athletes were relatively familiar with the topic of NIL and responded with clarity and specificity, resulting in rich, experience-focused data even within a shorter window. Prior methodological research suggests interview length alone is not the determinant of data adequacy; rather, sufficiency depends on the focus of the questions, participants' level of expertise, and the saturation of concepts across interviews (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Across the 14 interviews, participants consistently described similar patterns in communication behaviors, branding strategies, and institutional support, indicating thematic saturation was achieved for this single-site case (Bowen, 2019; Creswell, 2014). However, the relatively short interview durations remain a limitation, as longer or multiple interviews could have yielded deeper insights into nuanced aspects of athletes' branding identities, emotional experiences, and longitudinal NIL engagement.

Second, this study was conducted at a single NCAA Division I Group of Five institution, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other NCAA contexts. Institutional support structures, NIL education, and local market opportunities vary widely across divisions and conferences. As Yin (2018) notes, case study research provides depth, but not statistical generalizability; thus, the findings should be interpreted as reflective of this specific institutional environment rather than representative of all collegiate athletics settings.

Third, all participants were drawn from sports with varying levels of visibility, gender representation, and NIL engagement. Although this diversity strengthened the depth of perspectives, it also means certain NIL experiences within the Group of Five context, such as those of athletes in higher-profile revenue-generating sports, are not captured in this dataset.

Future research should explore NIL engagement across multiple institutional types, including high-resource and low-resource athletic departments, to better understand how structural contexts influence the enactment of the MABI dimensions and branding competencies. Longitudinal studies would also provide insight into how athletes' branding behaviors evolve over time and how NIL participation contributes to identity development, skill acquisition, and post-graduation outcomes. Finally, future work could examine institutional strategies that effectively support NIL

readiness and compare models across conferences or divisions to identify scalable, evidence-based approaches.

Conclusion

This study examined how student-athletes at an NCAA Division I Group of Five institution understand, approach, and activate their personal brands within the evolving NIL landscape. Through interviews with 14 athletes across six sports, four interconnected themes emerged: *methods of communication and outreach*, *social media presence and inconsistent branding strategies*, *limited institutional support and education*, and *the practical benefits and skill development gained through NIL engagement*. Collectively, these findings reveal student-athletes recognize the growing importance of personal branding, but often lack the structured guidance, resources, and confidence needed to engage with NIL opportunities strategically.

Theoretically, the study extends applications of the MABI by demonstrating how its three dimensions (athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle) manifest in the collegiate NIL context. While student-athletes naturally emphasized performance-based identity, many expressed uncertainty about how to intentionally cultivate lifestyle or appearance elements, underscoring an important misalignment between branding expectations and athlete readiness. The findings also show how institutional structures shape how the MABI can be enacted; without education, feedback, or support, student-athletes' brand activation remains fragmented and inconsistent. These insights advance understanding of athlete branding by illustrating how NIL's unique opportunities and constraints reshape the branding process for non-professional athletes.

Practically, the study highlights an urgent need for institutions to develop more systematic, equitable, and actionable NIL education. Student-athletes clearly benefit from NIL participation, gaining communication skills, confidence, financial literacy, and professional experience, yet these benefits are not guaranteed and vary widely across sports, genders, and institutional resources. Targeted programming that integrates brand development, social media training, and hands-on support would help reduce disparities and better prepare athletes for both NIL participation and future careers. Given NIL has become embedded in the student-athlete experience, institutions have a responsibility to equip their athletes with the tools necessary to navigate this environment effectively and ethically.

Although limited to a single site, the study contributes meaningful insight into how student-athletes conceptualize NIL and their own branding practices. Future research should continue to explore variation across institutional types, examine longitudinal identity development within NIL ecosystems, and evaluate institutional strategies for supporting branding literacy and participation. As the NIL landscape continues to evolve, research that centers athletes' lived experiences will remain essential for understanding not only how they engage with branding opportunities, but also how colleges and universities can better support them in doing so.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Interview Questions:

Background

1. I want to confirm that you have read the consent form in full and agree to participate in this study?
2. Please provide a brief overview of your background, including your name, age, year in school, self-identified gender, and whether or not you are a transfer student-athlete.
3. In which sport do you participate?
4. How would you describe your level of engagement with social media platforms?
 - (e.g., active user, occasional user, not on social media)
 - What social media platforms do you most regularly use? Why?
5. Describe any experience you have had with NIL during your college athletic career?
6. Do you have any NIL deals?
 - What is the size of the deals?
 - What are the brands?

Strategies Used for NIL Deals

1. Tell me about any strategies that you have used in trying to get NIL deals during your collegiate athletic career.
 - a. What strategies were successful? What strategies weren't?
 - b. What strategies have your peers reported using?
2. Do you use social media in seeking out partners and carrying out NIL deals?
 - a. Of the social media platforms you use, which do you utilize most frequently for NIL deals?
 - b. Are there any particular tactics relating to social media that you found to be effective in securing NIL deals?
3. What is your personal brand that you post on social media?
 - a. How much time do you spend working on creating your brand to seek NIL partnerships?
 - b. Do you look for alignment between your personal brand and potential NIL endorsers?

Driving Factors in NIL Opportunities (Physical appearance, social media engagement, field success, unique story, or other)

1. What do you believe are the most significant factors driving NIL opportunities for college athletes?

2. Do you think the success factors are different from sport to sport?
 - a. Does this influence your approach to NIL?
3. What is the role of athletic performance in either creating your online brand or securing NIL deals?
 - a. How important is your individual achievement and athletic capability?
 - b. How important is your specific style of play?
 - c. How important is being perceived as having respect for the game and integrity?
 - d. How important is your rivalry with other teams and athletes?
4. What is the role of attractive appearance in either creating your online brand or securing NIL deals?
 - a. Do you find that you post content related to your physical qualities and appearance that your audience may find appealing?
 - b. Do you highlight your personal style or some type of trademark that is unique to your brand?
 - c. Do you highlight your level of fitness within your sport?
5. Do you promote your lifestyle in creating your online brand or securing NIL deals?
 - a. What is unique about your lifestyle that resonates with followers and with sponsors?
 - b. Do you present yourself as a role model for future athletes?
 - c. Do you have a positive attitude toward interacting with fans, sponsors, and the media?
6. How do these driving factors vary among athletes from different sports, and how does this impact NIL pursuits?

Dynamics and Institutional Support

1. Has the introduction of NIL opportunities impacted the culture within your team or athletic program?
 - a. What about team dynamics?
2. How would you describe the level of support provided by your university or athletic department in navigating the NIL landscape?
 - a. Have you sought assistance from university officials or staff regarding NIL deals?
 - b. What was your experience?
3. What resources should universities offer to better support student-athletes in managing NIL opportunities?
4. Are there specific areas where you feel the university could improve its support for athletes in this regard?
5. Are there any skills or lessons from your NIL experience that you plan to apply to your professional career?
 - a. What advice would you give to future student-athletes navigating NIL opportunities?
6. Are there any additional comments you would like to share?