



ASSESSING NIL's IMPACT ON STUDENT-ATHLETE MENTAL HEALTH: A MIXED METHODS APPROACH

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[Hyperlink to a video summarizing the results of the project](#)

This project investigates the impact of social media use, social pressure, and institutional factors on the mental health of student-athletes in the Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) era. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with student-athletes from an Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) institution, the research team developed a follow-up study to examine the causal relationships among social media engagement, perceived social pressure, and mental health outcomes. Preliminary findings indicate that many student-athletes experience heightened impression management pressure and difficulties stemming from ambiguous institutional guidelines and limited safeguards related to NIL policies. Amid this uncertainty and lack of clear direction, social media has emerged as a central platform for communication and self-presentation. Notably, athletes from non-revenue-generating sports reported greater stress related to maintaining their online presence. This pressure, coupled with a sense of isolation, often leads athletes to conceal personal difficulties such as social media addiction. The research team is now expanding the study to broader contexts to establish stronger causal inferences among these key variables.

Background

Since the NCAA's adoption of the NIL in July 2021, student-athletes have been permitted to profit from their personal brands by monetizing their name, image, and likeness. As of 2025, ongoing legal and policy developments have further relaxed restrictions on institutional involvement. Recent NCAA and state-level reforms now allow universities and athletic departments greater flexibility to facilitate NIL deals and, in some cases, to explore models of direct compensation and revenue sharing as part of recruitment and retention strategies. Although most NIL activities remain concentrated in major revenue-generating sports, student-athletes across all levels can, in principle, secure meaningful NIL opportunities through strategic self-presentation and social media engagement. Increasingly, student-athletes recognize these commercial opportunities and actively curate their online personas to enhance their individual brand value and marketability.

While social media engagement is essential for student-athletes seeking to maximize NIL potential, the detrimental effects of excessive social media use on mental health, particularly among younger populations, are well documented. However, there remains a significant research gap regarding how these effects manifest among student-athletes in the NIL era. Accordingly, the current study aims to examine patterns of social media use among student-athletes and their willingness to seek institutional support when experiencing psychological



distress. We hypothesize that many student-athletes may be reluctant to disclose mental health concerns due to fears that such disclosures could harm their public image and perceived marketability.

Data, Participants, and Results

Phase1 - Semi-Structured Interviews with Student-Athletes

We conducted semi-structured interviews with student-athletes at an ACC institution to better understand the unique stressors related to social media use and help-seeking behavior in the NIL era. A total of six student-athletes participated, representing both men's and women's sports, including two from the men's football team. Preliminary findings indicate that student-athletes perceive social media as a critical platform for leveraging NIL opportunities and approach it strategically to enhance their marketability. However, notable differences emerged between athletes from revenue-generating and non-revenue-generating sports in how they pursue NIL opportunities and engage with social media.

One female student-athlete explained:

"(I) often feel that there's almost no institutional-level support. I mean, the school does a great job promoting its programs to attract talent, but those efforts are mostly concentrated on major men's sports."

Another student-athlete echoed this sentiment:

"I understand that revenue-generating sports get more attention—it is what it is. While I'm interested in taking advantage of these new opportunities, I feel like I'm on my own without any clear guidelines or institutional support."

We also asked participants about self-censorship behaviors when using social media. Although most remained highly active online as a means of self-promotion, they reported being increasingly cautious about posting potentially negative or controversial content, curating their online presence to appeal to prospective sponsors. This strategic self-presentation often led to heightened stress and anxiety. One student remarked:

"I used to be very active on social media just for fun. If it weren't for NIL, I'd still use it that way. Now, I feel like I have to be extra careful about everything I post. I even reconsider when leaving comments on other people's posts."

Another student-athlete added:

"I feel like it's no longer my personal space. I've become the platform, and I have to be professional. It takes so much time and effort, making a three-minute video can take several hours because I want it to look cool and nice. But the bigger issue I have is that I actually have



no idea how to start professionally managing my accounts. There's no-one I can connect with, no support I can receive, even no clear guidelines on this stuff."

While individual experiences varied, nearly all participants described a significant shift in their social media behaviors since the introduction of NIL. Many reported spending considerably more time online to increase visibility and attract potential NIL deals. Student-athletes characterized NIL as both empowering and stressful—providing new opportunities for personal branding while intensifying the pressure of impression management.

Finally, we explored whether student-athletes perceived that potential NIL implications might discourage them from sharing or reporting their mental health concerns. Most participants acknowledged that this was a likely scenario, citing concerns about reputation and financial consequences. As one student-athlete explained:

"Well, what do you think? I believe most student-athletes wouldn't risk their reputation, especially if doing so could jeopardize their financial gains."

This sentiment reflects a broader tension between self-disclosure and image management, suggesting that NIL-related pressures may inadvertently create barriers to help-seeking and open communication about mental health among student-athletes.

Insights from these interviews informed the development of a survey instrument designed to examine how increased social media use affects the mental health of student-athletes. Given the sensitivity of the topic, we excluded direct questions about personal help-seeking behaviors. Prior research on mental health and help-seeking consistently shows that respondents often withhold or alter their answers due to social desirability pressures, particularly when addressing stigmatized issues such as psychological distress.

Phase 2 – Quantitative Analysis: Pilot Study

Preliminary results from the semi-structured interviews led us to refine the questions pertaining to the social media behaviors measuring both positive and negative impacts. We also measure the current state of physiological conditions (e.g., sleep patterns, eating disorder) help-seeking behaviors/intentions, mental moods as measures of perceptual/behavioral outcomes. Thus, we set the causal link between the social media usage and the mental health as a conceptual framework, while we include the social pressure as a mediator between the two variables in our study. Specifically, we hypothesize that the student-athletes would conceal their mental health problems when they feel a social pressure of disclosure due to potential loss of NIL deals or harming their brand images at public sphere.

We obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and conducted a pilot study ($n = 37$) to establish the internal reliability and validity of the survey items and the manipulation check. Participants were current student-athletes at NCAA Division I institutions (52% female; 48% White; $M_{age} = 21$, $SD_{age} = 1.19$). As an experimental stimulus, participants were randomly

assigned to conditions designed to test the moderating effect of social pressure arising from fear of exposure, which could potentially compromise their NIL opportunities. Specifically, the treatment group received the instruction: *“Aggregate results will be shared with the athletic department to inform services,”* which was intended to evoke a sense of social pressure. In contrast, the control group received the instruction: *“Aggregate results will NOT be shared with the athletic department for privacy protection.”* The manipulation check measured participants’ perceived likelihood that their responses would be viewed by the institution, using a 7-point *Likert* scale. A *t*-test comparing perceived exposure scores between the treatment group ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.59$) and the control group ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.62$) revealed a statistically significant difference, $t(28) = 2.98$, $p = .006$.

Following the successful implementation of the experimental manipulation, preliminary analyses were conducted on the pilot sample. The primary outcome variables assessed help-seeking behaviors related to mental health concerns using two binary items: (1) *“I have withheld mental health symptoms from the athletic department in the past month,”* and (2) *“I avoided seeking help because of potential NIL impact.”*

As presented in Table 1, 48% of participants reported withholding mental health symptoms from the athletic department within the past month, and 24% reported avoiding help-seeking due to potential NIL implications. Notably, participants in the treatment condition were less likely to endorse these behaviors. Specifically, individuals exposed to the social-pressure manipulation were **2.2 times less likely** to report withholding mental health symptoms in the past month compared with those in the control group. Moreover, participants in the treatment group **underreported help-seeking avoidance due to NIL concerns by approximately 39.3%** relative to their control-group counterparts.

Table 1. Patterns of Help-Seeking Behavior Across Experimental Conditions

SDB	Help Seeking 1				Help Seeking 2		
	No	Yes	Total		No	Yes	Total
Control	8 (24%)	11 (33%)	19 (58%)		14 (42%)	5 (15%)	19 (58%)
Treatment	9 (27%)	5 (15%)	14 (42%)		11 (33 %)	3 (9.1 %)	25 (42%)
Total	17 (52%)	16 (48%)	33 (100%)		25 (76%)	8 (24%)	33 (100%)

We also measured whether NIL opportunities have a direct detrimental effect on athletic performance, using a 5-point *Likert* scale ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.96$), indicating a moderate perceived decline in performance. In accordance with our hypothesis, however, this pattern varied across experimental conditions: participants in the treatment condition underreported the detrimental effects of NIL on their performance ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.04$) compared to those in the control group ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.86$).

To further mitigate potential bias arising from fear of exposure in the treatment condition, we employed an indirect measure and compared response patterns with those from a direct self-

report item. This approach aimed to identify whether participants engaged in underreporting the negative effects of NIL. The indirect question was worded as: *“Out of every 100 student-athletes, approximately ____ student-athletes would consider NIL to be a significant source of stress.”* In contrast, the direct item was worded as: *“Out of every 100 student-athletes, I believe ____ student-athletes would consider NIL to be a significant source of stress.”* Although the difference in phrasing appears subtle (i.e., the inclusion of *“I believe”*), this modification produced notable variation in responses between the two conditions.

As shown in Table 1, no systematic pattern emerged in the control group in terms of mean estimates, whereas participants in the treatment condition tended to underreport the perceived negative effects of NIL to a much greater extent. Overall, these descriptive analyses from the pilot study provide preliminary evidence that participants may underreport negative attitudes, perceptions, or symptoms associated with the growing influence of NIL.

Table 2. Cross-tabulation of Responses Between Direct and Indirect Measures of NIL Stressors

	Direct		Indirect	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Treat	52.5	34.7	51.8	25.6
Control	41.6	27.7	48.7	18.8

Due to the small sample size in each condition, we were unable to conduct inferential analyses such as ANCOVA. Our research team is currently working to scale up the survey study across peer NCAA Division I institutions—primarily within the ACC—to cross-validate our findings. In the next phase, we will employ multivariate statistical modeling to test the causal relationships among the key study variables.

Practical Implications

The NCAA and athletic departments have increasingly recognized the importance of supporting student-athletes’ mental health and well-being. Although institutions are dedicating more resources to address these concerns, evidence consistently shows that student-athletes remain less likely to disclose mental health challenges or seek help. In the NIL era, this tendency toward self-concealment may be even stronger, as athletes worry that acknowledging mental health concerns could harm their public image or jeopardize endorsement opportunities. Findings from our preliminary mixed-methods analyses indicate that while student-athletes are more engaged than ever on social media to promote their personal brands, many lack access to clear institutional guidance. Building on these insights, the next quantitative phase will examine the pressures surrounding mental health disclosure and help-seeking behaviors, employing experimental techniques designed to minimize social desirability bias in survey responses. Ultimately, the results of this project will shed light on the impact of NIL-related dynamics on student-athletes’ mental health and inform the design of accessible, evidence-based interventions that encourage greater engagement with institutional resources and timely support-seeking.

