NAVIGATING THE 'WILD WEST' OF NAME, IMAGE, AND LIKENESS (NIL): SUPPORTING WOMEN COLLEGE ATHLETES

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Study Overview and Purpose

Since the NCAA's adoption of NIL policy in 2021, college athletes have been able to earn income from their name, image, and likeness. While NIL offers new opportunities for athletes, institutions, and athletic departments, there is a lack of insight into best practices, leading to confusion for athletes, coaches, and administrators (Grambeau et al., 2020). To date, the NIL conversation has primarily focused on men's sports, particularly football and basketball. However, given the differences in social media engagement between men and women across various sports, there is a need for targeted research to develop specific protocols and practices for different athlete populations.

It has been previously established that women athletes have a distinct advantage in social media followings and engagement compared to their men counterparts (Darvin, 2024; Dosh, 2023). Further, women's elite sport sponsorship engagement outperforms men's in brand awareness, consideration, and customer conversion (Darvin, 2024; Dosh 2023). This suggests that securing visible and lucrative NIL deals for women athletes can benefit teams, athletic departments, and institutions through organic social media marketing and publicity. The potential for women athletes in the NIL space continues to grow. However, it is crucial for practitioners to better understand how women athletes navigate (or struggle to navigate) the process of securing NIL deals to maximize their opportunities as well as the perceptions of fellow practitioners regarding the opportunities and challenges for women student athletes at similar institutional levels. As a result, this project sought to address the lack of insight into women athletes' NIL experiences and identify best practices for supporting them through a qualitative analysis of the perceptions of two distinct populations: 1) women student athletes, and 2) NIL practitioners. Findings reveal both challenges and opportunities unique to women athletes in the NIL landscape. By considering these findings, institutions can create more effective, equitable, and sustainable NIL programs that leverage the unique strengths and address the specific needs of women student-athletes. Regular assessment and adaptation of these findings will be crucial as the NIL landscape continues to evolve, ensuring that women athletes can fully capitalize on their NIL potential.

Participants and Analysis

Interviews were conducted via Zoom using semi-structured interview guides consisting of eight questions. Interviews ranged from 35-65 minutes in length. Participants to date (through 9/30/2024) are listed in table 1. Data was analyzed using a thematic analysis procedure following a six-step approach: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes by using a debriefing process (4) reviewing the potential themes based on the

debriefing process; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing a final write-up with data points (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Table 1

Study Participants

Participant Number	Institution Division	Gender Identity	Years working in NIL	Position Type
NIL Practitioners				
P1	NCAA D1	Man	3	Development and Operations at University
P2	NCAA D1	Woman	3	Consulting at Private Company
P3	NCAA D1	Man	2	Athlete Development and Branding
P4	NCAA D1	Woman	2	Apparel Activations and Branding at Private Company
P5	NCAA D1	Woman	3	Social Media at University
P6	NCAA D1	Woman	3	NIL Director at University
P7	NCAA D1	Woman	4	NIL Director at University

Participant Number	Institution Division	Gender Identity	College Years Played	Sport
Student Athletes				
P8	NCAA D1	Woman	1	Track & Field
P9	NCAA D1	Woman	4	Track & Field
P10	NCAA D1	Woman	2	Basketball
P11	NCAA D1	Woman	1	Track & Field

Findings and Results

1. Varied Institutional Support

- Wide range in level of support provided by different institutions
- Some schools have dedicated NIL staff/departments, others have minimal resources
- Collectives play a major role at some institutions but not others
- Educational programming varies greatly between schools
- Apparent recruiting advantages for schools with greater NIL resourcing and staff

"I am the only person in a department of one. I actually am the first person to ever hold this position. This was a brand-new position last year." - Director of NIL Strategies

"I'm lucky enough that we have a department that's me, and then we have an NIL general manager. But then we have kind of three other positions that aren't necessarily under our department." - Assistant Athletic Director for Business Development and NIL Strategy

"I definitely handle all my social media myself, and I've never gotten any assistance." – Woman Student-Athlete

"I think it's just kind of like you get your own deals and then you're on your own. You got to make reels on CapCut or iMovie or whatever and make your own graphic design, have AI do it or something." – Woman Student Athlete

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2. Social Media as Key Driver
- Social media seen as critical for NIL success by most
- Women athletes often excel at social media engagement
- Authenticity viewed as important for building followings
- Time management challenges balancing social media with athletics/academics

"I mean, if we didn't have social media, there probably wouldn't even be NIL. NIL is heavily based on social media." – Woman Student Athlete

"Video editing for sure. They're fearless these days. I feel like I can put a camera on anyone or ask anyone to be in a question of the day video on any of our women's teams, and they'll want to participate." – Director of Social Media

"It was Monday, Wednesday, Friday, I would go to CrossFit with my friends and we would just make little vlogs out of it and I would edit it and post it. And I did that all summer and I started to get a little bit more followers. And I was at 7,000 when I got to school a month ago. And then I started doing dances and just other things with one of my teammates and one of my videos blew up. And that's how I got to where I'm at now because that video got three and a half million views." – Woman student athlete

"I think just from a marketing standpoint, here's an example. We had an acrobatics and tumbling athlete who grew a really big social media following, and we had people watching acrobatics and tumbling for her. To where the WWE actually got interest in her very early on because that's how they found her by a TikTok reel that the Athletics page had posted, and that's where they first saw her." – Assistant Athletic Director of NIL

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3. Inequities in Opportunities
- Emphasis on football and men's basketball while women athletes may have greater influence over university/institution/athletic department brand
- Some women athletes feel NIL doesn't apply to them initially
- Fan bases and revenue generation influence available opportunities
- Transfer experiences highlight differences between programs

"I don't think [our athletic department and coaches] realize how it takes work. If I really want to make money off my TikToks, I really need to take the time to plan things. It takes time and effort. It seems so silly to post a one-minute-long video, but for example, I just made, I think, it's a two-minute-long video the other day of me going to [a store] that took an hour filming because I'd go there, film all of whatever. I had to sit down and edit it and it's not like I even do any special editing. I do the most basic things ever, and it takes time and effort and we have to work so much harder for it than [the men athletes] do, and I just wish [our institution] knew that if you want to get somewhere with it, most people work their butts off for it and it gets annoying seeing it handed to [men athletes] like it's a Christmas present." Woman Student Athlete

"Definitely unbalanced, for sure. I feel like that's anywhere. There's definitely more programs that universities invest more into, for sure." – Woman Student Athlete

"I know even here, our basketball team, they all get cars and I'm just like, no one else? We don't even have a little, I don't know, a small, local thing that we have connected with.'" – Woman Student Athlete

"Football players get the craziest NIL's I've ever seen in my whole life. They get Nike and Pumas in a Snap" - Director of NIL Strategies

"I think it varies based on the team and the individual athlete. It depends on the athlete, but a lot of our Olympic sport athletes, because there was no one here, they had no direction, they had a lot of questions. So, there's a lot of them that don't really know what to do, how to do it, where to even start." – Woman Student Athlete

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4. Evolving Student-Athlete Needs
- Desire for more education on brand building, financial management
- Interest in professional development and career preparation
- Mental health considerations as NIL adds pressure
- Need for better understanding of legal/compliance issues

"I wish we could know steps we need to take, people we need to meet with. What do they call them? Not managers… agencies, stuff like that, because we really just don't know how to even start." – Woman Student Athlete

"I think having that ability to give them more reoccurring education. Sometimes I wish there were four of me, because we have 430 student athletes roughly. They all can call and text me, and it's very hard sometimes to prioritize all of them when everybody wants to send a deal, everybody wants to do this." – Director NIL Strategy

"I think being able to increase the size of my department would be fantastic because it would allow me to give better support to everyone, whether that's in photo shoots or in just reaching out to brands or education and all those types of things." – Director Social Media

"I think if there were scripts or ideas or samplers that we could look at, so we know, oh, this is what [I should say/do]. It's very different for each company. But for an NIL [deal], am I talking too much? Am I talking too loud? Is this music appropriate? Is it copyright? I feel like maybe a template or script would've been so helpful." – Woman Student Athlete

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5. Women Student Athletes' Unique Advantages
- Often more engaged and authentic on social media
- Authenticity in Personal Branding
- Willingness to put effort into content creation
- Growing interest in women's sports creating new opportunities
- Potential for long-term brand building beyond college

"I think the female student athletes have a greater advantage when it comes to working directly with brands or things like that. So, traditionally, females are just better at social media, they're more engaging, they understand those types of things." – Director of Social Media

"I think specifically this past year with Angel Reese and Caitlin Clark drawing a lot more eyes to college basketball and women's college basketball, I think that has really drawn more attention to that. Then obviously, the rise of volleyball has been huge right now, and that's drawn a lot of more eyes to the sport of volleyball." – Assistant Athletic Director NIL

"The perfect example of this is I had two photo shoots yesterday. One was with a guy, one was with a woman. The [woman athlete] was so invested in what she was doing. She wanted to make sure she looked good. She wanted to make sure the product looked good. She had ideas of how to pose, what to do. The [man athlete] had zero." – Director NIL Activations and Partnerships

"I think that's just why women typically do better on social media [authenticity]. And also I feel like we post a good mix of different content. We'll post sports, we'll post outside life, we'll post food, we'll post travel." – Woman Student Athlete

"At least on my TikTok, I don't care. I'm who I am, I show my personality, I just don't hold back. And I feel like people honestly enjoy to see [athletes'] authentic selves" – Woman Student Athlete

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Practical Recommendations

Based on the findings within this study, several practical recommendations have been developed for institutions and practitioners with a focus specifically on women student-athletes.

1. Develop Comprehensive Support Structures for Women Athletes
Institutions should establish clear support structures tailored to women athletes' NIL needs. This may involve creating dedicated NIL roles or departments with expertise in women's sports marketing to build additional local partnerships. Even with limited resources, ensure all women athletes have access to specialized NIL guidance given their unique experiences with social

media as well as their success with social media compared to men counterparts. Designate a point person familiar with the unique challenges and opportunities for women in NIL. Collaborate across departments to create a support network that understands and can capitalize on the strengths of women athletes in the NIL landscape as well as mental health services.

2. Prioritize Social Media Education Tailored to Women Athletes

Given women athletes' often superior engagement on social media, invest in robust social media education tailored to their strengths. Offer workshops on leveraging platforms popular among women athletes, such as Instagram and TikTok. Partner with marketing departments to provide hands-on training in content creation that resonates with women's sports fans. Partner with researchers to determine what will resonate in the future. Develop guidelines to help women athletes balance authentic personal branding with maintaining a professional image.

3. Leverage Women Athletes' Unique Strengths

Capitalize on the strengths women athletes often bring to NIL, such as authenticity, relatability, and strong engagement. Develop programming to help them leverage these assets in building their personal brands. Offer advanced sessions on storytelling and content creation that resonates with their target audiences. Create opportunities for women athletes to share their experiences, both to build their brands and to inspire younger athletes. Partner with women-focused brands to create tailored NIL opportunities that align with their values and interests.

4. Address Gender-Based Equity Concerns Proactively

Proactively develop strategies to promote NIL opportunities for women athletes. Showcase success stories from women's programs across all sports, not just high-profile ones. Actively seek partnerships and deals that specifically benefit women athletes (given depictions of how this has been highly successful at similar institutions), leveraging their unique appeal to certain brands and audiences. Implement a system to track NIL opportunities for women athletes, using this data to inform targeted support and outreach efforts to expand their opportunities. Conduct surveys or focus groups to understand their unique challenges and aspirations. Use this feedback to develop targeted workshops on topics like negotiating deals as a woman in sports, balancing NIL activities with academic and athletic commitments, and leveraging NIL for post-collegiate career opportunities. Be prepared to address emerging trends or challenges specific to women in the NIL space.

5. Engage and Educate Coaches of Women's Teams

Coaches of women's teams play a crucial role in shaping their athletes' NIL experiences. Provide these coaches with education on the unique opportunities and challenges for women in NIL, including mental health and social media stressors. Encourage them to integrate NIL considerations into their team culture in ways that empower their athletes, including offering filming during practice so women athletes can have robust content available to them. Offer guidance on how coaches can support their athletes' NIL endeavors while maintaining team dynamics and NCAA compliance. Create forums for coaches of women's teams to share best practices in supporting their athletes' NIL activities.

6. Foster Peer-to-Peer Learning Among Women Athletes

Create structured opportunities for women athletes to mentor and learn from each other in NIL activities such as facilitating roundtable discussions where they can share experiences and strategies specific to women athletes. Establish a formal mentorship program pairing experienced women athletes with those new to NIL, which could begin with high school recruits. By fostering collaboration, institutions can create a supportive environment that amplifies women athletes' collective success in NIL.

7. Emphasize Authentic Personal Branding for Women Athletes
Make authenticity a cornerstone of NIL education for women athletes. Provide guidance on showcasing their genuine personalities and interests while maintaining a professional image. Highlight successful examples of authentic brand building by current and former women athletes through outcomes such as follower growth and viewership numbers. Encourage them to think long-term about their personal brand, considering how their NIL activities can align with post-collegiate goals while emphasizing the power of their unique voices and experiences in creating compelling personal brands that resonate with audiences and potential partners.

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