



## **EXTENDING THE ATHLETE BRAND THROUGH NIL ENDORSEMENT FIT AND ROLE CONGRUITY**

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### **Abstract**

Name, image, and likeness (NIL) endorsements can shape how audiences evaluate the student-athlete's own brand. This project examined endorsement fit, the possibility of a gender double standard, and expectations associated with the student-athlete role. Three initial experiments consistently found stronger brand-equity evaluations for higher-fit endorsements, while athlete gender did not reliably change the fit effect. A related role-congruity experiment distinguished what audiences consider typical from what they consider acceptable for student-athletes. Higher-fit endorsements received more favorable evaluations on both dimensions, and injunctive role congruity helped explain the relationship between fit and brand equity. Together, the findings support incorporating brand management into NIL advising. ACC institutions can help athletes evaluate the connection between a proposed partnership, their public identity, and audience expectations while avoiding unsupported assumptions about gender-specific endorsement penalties.

### **Study Overview and Purpose**

Student-athletes possess commercial value through their identities and social media audiences, and their public brands encompass both athletic and influencer roles (Kunkel et al., 2021; Su et al., 2023). For ACC administrators, this raises a practical question: How can NIL advising help athletes evaluate the consequences of endorsements for their own brand?

We treat the student-athlete as the parent brand and the endorsement as an extension of that brand. Brand-extension research explains why alignment between an established brand and a new product category can shape consumer evaluations (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Peng et al., 2023). Here, brand equity concerns favorable associations and evaluations attached to the athlete, including perceived quality, respect, and willingness to follow the athlete (Keller, 1993).

The project's central question is whether endorsement fit influences student-athlete brand equity through expectations about the student-athlete role. The research developed from an initial test of gendered expectations into a more specific examination of descriptive and injunctive role congruity.

### **Study One: Endorsement Fit, Gender Schema, and Brand Equity**

Research question: Does endorsement fit affect student-athlete brand equity, does perceived endorsement appropriateness help explain this relationship, and are the effects different for male and female student-athletes? Gender schema theory suggests that learned gender associations could produce different evaluations of comparable endorsements (Bem, 1981).

Design: Three experiments (N = 42, 385, and 155) used mock Instagram endorsements. Participants evaluated higher-fit products, such as sports drinks and athletic apparel, and lower-fit products, such as fragrance and underwear. The latter two experiments also measured perceived endorsement appropriateness.

Below is a table featuring the hypotheses and key findings.

*Summary of Hypothesis Tests for the Initial Research*

| Hypothesis                                                           | Key finding                                                                                                                             | Conclusion    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| H1: Higher-fit endorsements produce stronger brand equity.           | Pooled difference = 0.76, 95% CI [0.56, 0.95], $p < .001$ .                                                                             | Supported     |
| H2: Appropriateness helps explain the fit–brand equity relationship. | Higher fit increased appropriateness; appropriateness differences predicted brand-equity differences (pooled $b = 0.45$ , $p < .001$ ). | Supported     |
| H3a: Gender moderates the fit effect on appropriateness.             | Pooled moderation was not significant, $p = .599$ .                                                                                     | Not supported |
| H3b: Gender moderates the fit effect on brand equity.                | Pooled moderation was not significant, $p = .740$ .                                                                                     | Not supported |

*Note.* CI = confidence interval;  $b$  = unstandardized regression coefficient. H1 and H3b summarize three experiments; H2 and H3a summarize the two experiments that measured appropriateness.

## Pivot to Role Congruity Theory

Initial evidence of fit and appropriateness effects, without the predicted gender moderation, prompted examination to further investigate why appropriateness was so significant in mediating this relationship. Role congruity theory links evaluations to the compatibility of social-role expectations (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Applying it to student-athletes responds to calls to examine roles beyond gender (del Carmen Triana et al., 2024). The follow-up distinguished descriptive role congruity, whether an endorsement seems typical for student-athletes, from injunctive role congruity, whether it seems acceptable or something student-athletes should undertake (del Carmen Triana et al., 2024).

## Role Congruity Investigation

Research question: Does endorsement fit influence student-athlete brand equity through judgments about what is typical and acceptable for the student-athlete role?

Design: A separate experiment ( $N = 400$ ) crossed endorsement fit, athlete gender, and role salience between participants. Participants viewed mock Instagram endorsements of sports drinks or sportswear versus fragrance or underwear. Role salience was exploratory.

Below is a table featuring the hypotheses and key findings from the second study.

*Summary of Hypothesis Tests for the Role Congruity Investigation*

| Hypothesis                                                                | Key finding                                                                                        | Conclusion    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| H1: Higher-fit endorsements produce stronger brand equity.                | Higher brand-equity ratings, $p = .0065$ .                                                         | Supported     |
| H2: Higher-fit endorsements produce higher descriptive role congruity.    | Higher descriptive role-congruity ratings, $p < .001$ .                                            | Supported     |
| H3: Higher-fit endorsements produce higher injunctive role congruity.     | Higher injunctive role-congruity ratings, $p < .001$ .                                             | Supported     |
| H4: Injunctive role congruity is positively associated with brand equity. | Positive association, $b = 0.416$ , $p < .001$ .                                                   | Supported     |
| H5: Injunctive role congruity mediates the fit–brand equity relationship. | Indirect effect: $b = 0.177$ , $p < .001$ .<br>Remaining direct effect: $b = 0.057$ , $p = .463$ . | Supported     |
| H6: Athlete gender moderates the fit effect on brand equity.              | Moderation was not significant, $p = .854$ .                                                       | Not supported |

*Note.* Higher-fit endorsements were compared with lower-fit endorsements.  $b$  = unstandardized regression coefficient. H5 indicates statistical support for an indirect effect; the measured mediator does not establish the mechanism causally. The not supported hypothesis of H6 provides evidence that role congruity theory may not be anchored in gendered norms as prior research has identified.

### Implications for Student Athletes and ACC Institutions

Through both investigations, higher-fit NIL endorsements produced stronger student-athlete brand equity, while athlete gender did not reliably moderate this relationship. The initial findings prompted a shift toward role congruity, with the follow-up showing that injunctive role congruity helped explain the fit to brand equity relationship. For researchers, these results support examining expectations attached to the student-athlete role as a mechanism underlying



endorsement evaluations. For ACC athletic departments, the findings support incorporating endorsement fit and audience approval into NIL advising, helping athletes assess how potential partnerships align with their public identities alongside financial benefits.

## References

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